

Philipps-Universität Marburg

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Postwar America and the Suburban Housewife

in Revolutionary Road and Mad Men

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“Some women marry houses.
It’s another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day
Faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman is her mother.
That’s the main thing.”
(Anne Sexton)

1 Introduction

In the course of North American literary as well as cinematic history, novels and movies have always been dealing with family lives and gender roles. However, the concept of suburbia as deeply tied to the American family has been established as a genre of its own not until the end of the Second World War, when the suburban boom and the propagation of the constructed suburban family started to provide material for cultural historians and writers. Apart from the initial emergence of suburban literature after World War II that automatically implied a portrayal of the family's inherent distribution of gender roles, suburbia seems to remain a popular and appealing concept for today's readers, writers and viewers alike.

Apparently, it is the image of the American housewife that has become the object of interest as far as today's popular culture is concerned. Thereby, the portrayal of women varies to a great extent, illustrating both traditional homemakers in the suburbs such as in WB's 7th *Heaven*, or, as in the TV series *The Good Wife*, completely perverts the original meaning of the subordinate housewife, displaying the woman's goodness not through domestic contribution, but via her use of professional skills as a lawyer to get her husband out of prison. Considering the successful TV series *Desperate Housewives*, which satirically illustrates the housewives' lives that primarily revolve around gossip, scheming and the burdens of raising children, while, at the same time, exposing some sort of female bonding, it becomes clear that, despite the show's satirical tone, the interconnectedness of the suburban sphere with the role of women still is a point of interest for today's society. Other TV productions such as Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* or the adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenide's *The Virgin Suicides* have succeeded in exposing suburbia's destructive and illusive side, while Mendes also displays the reversal of constructed gender roles, portraying the wife as an ambitious realtor, whereby her husband fails at embodying the prototypical suburban patriarch.

However, the portrayal of the suburban housewife and the alleged family patriarch have not just been exposed as unsustainable constructs in today's literature and film, but were already contested right at the time when it was said to be most celebrated, the 1950s and early 1960s. Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* from 1962, for instance, illuminates the falsehood of postwar suburban promises on the one hand, while, on the other hand, revealing to what extent the prefabricated gender roles of the Cold-War nuclear family indeed remain mere roles that provide space for desperation and destruction. His work,

amongst others, has thus functioned as a sort of cradle for suburban literature, while Sam Mendes' adaptation in 2008 has given proof to what extent the topic of distorted role patterns, the exposition of people's, particularly women's disillusionment, as well as the situation of the American housewife in general, remain timeless phenomena that justifiably keep being examined in American Studies.

The current popularity of AMC's *Mad Men* highlights people's fascination with the 1950s and 1960s even today, while the TV series' success is probably rooted in its highly critical portrayal of the Cold-War years. Providing the viewer with a wide range of female characters that all contribute to the perception of the decade's complexity and upcoming turmoil, *Mad Men*, despite its primary purpose of entertaining its audience, thus deserves to be classified as a genuine mirror of the 1960s and to be examined as far as its exposition of women's situation is concerned. The TV series portrays the prototypical suburban housewife on the one hand, while, on the other hand, illustrating the situation of workingwomen in New York City. Questions arise as to how the different female representatives of both home- and working sphere cope with their existence in a male-dominated world and to what extent they develop in favor of their independence in the course of the first two seasons.

This paper investigates the role of the suburban housewife as primarily mediated through film and fiction during the time right after World War II up to the early 1960s. In doing so, an overview of the Cold-War phenomena will precede a close examination of the representation of women as both housewives and workingwomen. Hereby, this paper primarily focuses on Yates' *Revolutionary Road* on the one hand, and a media analysis of AMC's *Mad Men* on the other hand, while particularly dealing with the Cold-War era's complexities as far as women's realities are concerned.

2 Cold - War Phenomena

When investigating postwar American society, it is the Cold War that emerges as the prevailing motif for any kind of analysis. After the Second World War, the United States found themselves in steady conflict with the communist Soviet Union. National rehabilitation and a booming economy were constantly overshadowed by "the destructive power of the Soviet Union," (Lichtman 40) since "communism represented the ultimate threat to peace, prosperity, and the American 'way of life'" (Matthews 9).

Due to the American fear of an atomic attack on the part of its enemy, the government "embarked on a series of civil defense initiatives", including the building of

so-called bomb shelters that did not just “promise [] protection and the comforts of home, but also marked its owners as patriotic” (Lichtman 40). Yet, as Tony Shaw points out, cold wars “are fought in part through words and images,” (59) which explains and simultaneously emphasizes the ubiquitous propaganda as the central part of American politics during the Cold War decades. Following Shaw’s statement, the essential conflict of the Cold War was not solely based on an external enemy in the form of an atomic threat, but rather on “perceived internal dangers,” (May, Homeward 10) referring to the predominant belief that the spirit of the Soviet Union “could be anywhere and anyone” (Matthews 9). The Cold War was to a great extent an ideological war and, therefore, in order to maintain national stability, politics incessantly tried to undermine the ever-present insecurity evoked from outside by systematically strengthening American society from within. From this angle, the one institution that was capable of not just acting out, but also overtly exhibiting the particular American values that could foster and demonstrate the nation’s stability to the opposing side, was “the ideological heart of America,” (Lichtman 42) the family.

The idea of the intact American family was accompanied by the home the family inhabited, which functioned as a “psychological fortress against the uncertainties and anxieties of the age” (42-43). This matches Elaine Tyler May’s observation of the American nation, especially the young generation that was about to settle down to family life, as not just being “homeward bound, but [] also bound to the home]” (Homeward 15). The so-called politics of “domestic containment” thus referred to “the way in which public policy, personal behavior, and even political values were focused on the home” (Homeward 14). Essentially, the family functioned as a realm in which all members of society could feel comfortable and satisfied with their current situations, so that “domestic containment [...] undermined the potential for political activism and reinforced the chilling effects of anticommunism and the cold war consensus” (Homeward 14).

Taking into account the concurrent emergence of the mass media throughout the 1950s, “it seemed almost impossible not to be touched in some way by the barrage of the official and unofficial Cold War publicity [...] [meaning that] virtually everything [...] assumed political significance and hence potentially could be deployed as a weapon both to shape opinion at home and to subvert societies abroad” (Shaw 59). What Tony Shaw tries to underline is the undeniable propagandistic nature of Cold-War politics during the postwar decades. Under Senator Joseph McCarthy’s guidance, the government conceived a great amount of measures that were to foster family stability and thus the American values

as immune to the destructive force of communism. For instance, the building of the aforementioned bomb-shelters was only one out of many “do-it-yourself”- activities that were supported by all kinds of media. Displaying the construction of those bomb shelters as a sort of family adventure that did not just function as a life saver but also as a supporter of family togetherness (cf. Lichtman 41) reveals to what extent government tried to transfer political issues on the family. As far as the propagation of bomb shelters is concerned, Lichtman talks about their sole “symbolic security [...] and [the shelters’] paradoxical space that domesticated war by militarizing the family home” (51).

A similar philosophy was advocated by the evolving trend of barbecuing that was supposed to bring “families, neighborhoods, and communities together and give[] each individual a distinct job [which made it] another weapon in the battle against dangerous elements seeking to undermine national stability” (Matthews 11-12). In fact, barbecue was probably the most generic leisure activity in postwar America, as it fostered people’s “potential for creative authority and territorial mastery – traits markedly not communist” (12).

Although the government tried to propagate the bomb shelter by any means, less than three percent of Americans actually constructed one in their yards. Barbecue on the other hand certainly has been a more successful campaign during Cold-War years, whereby Kristin Matthews points out that “while barbecue culture promoted itself as a weapon against communism, its insistence on this ‘necessary’ function also worked to reinforce the anxiety it was attempting to ameliorate in the first place” (14).

When trying to give a brief but precise overview of what American Cold-War Culture was like, two specific elements ought to stand in the center of analysis. No matter if the so-called “McCarthyism” as “the most obvious form of domestic manifestation of the Cold War,” (Hartman 85) or the ‘kitchen debate’ between then Vice-President Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, where “Nixon insisted that American superiority in the Cold War rested not on weapons, but on the secure, abundant family life of modern suburban homes,” (May, Homeward 17-18) it becomes obvious which concepts of that era play a key role in gaining knowledge on how postwar society behaved: The suburban space and the role of the suburban housewife.

2.1 Suburbia

As a key concept of American history, suburbia has received much attention ever since its evolvement in the late 18th century. Even today the notion of American suburbia

“still evokes a specific and culturally powerful idea” (Hebel 187). TV series such as “Desperate Housewives” or “Weeds” reveal the currency of the concept and the thorough and complex reception it has undergone so far. Watching these series or other productions such as “American Beauty” or Sofia Coppola’s adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenide’s “The Virgin Suicides”, it also becomes evident that suburbia was and is not just the familial haven it pretends to be, but rather embodies a wide range of somewhat contradictory notions that do illuminate its idyllic site, while, at the same time, unfolding its illusive character. However, as Margaret Marsh rightly claims, “living in the suburbs meant something different in each period of suburban growth” (188). Therefore, the seeming simplicity of the suburban idea deserves to be unsealed according to the specific periods it was and is situated in. In this chapter, a brief description about how suburban territories started to develop in the United States precedes the attempt to unfold the core ideas behind the emergence of what Scott Thomas calls “The United States of Suburbia” (Thomas qtd. in Hebel 184). Here, the focus shall primarily lie on the suburban sprawl following World War II and its related construction of the American family during the Cold War era.

2.1.1 Origins and Development

The reason for the emergence of suburban areas in the United States is rooted in the nineteenth century. Following the European example of the suburbanization of London, Americans figured that with “the increasing complexities [...] of city life, together with the introduction of new transportation technologies such as the railroad and the steam ferry,” (Hebel 183) the foundation for a “commuter society” (183) was laid. Besides the development of rather random suburban areas next to railroad lines, reputable architects of the mid-nineteenth century such as Frederick Law Olmstead envisioned an “aesthetic impetus of the purposeful construction of picturesque houses and the conscious design of idealized landscapes” (184).

The essential thought behind the expansion and the usage of suburban territories was probably the aim of separating people’s professional sphere from their private, regenerating space. Suburbs were supposed to provide people with “the restful quiet of the country” as opposed to the “dirt-laden, smoke-laden and evil-smelling” air of the urban areas (Bouton qtd. in Fogelson 119). At the time following the Civil War, Olmstead tried to put his plan of an ideal suburb into action by planning one of the most famous suburbs in history: Riverside, Illinois. Functioning as a sort of model suburb for those that were yet to come, Riverside offered “spacious lots for single-family residences with gardens and

lawns surrounding them, communal recreational sites, and convenient commuter connections [which] made Riverside [...] the desired space for upper middle class families“ (Hebel 184). The idyll the suburb was supposed to provide its inhabitants with also entailed the guarantee of “desirable companions” (Bouton qtd. in Fogelson 119). According to Olmstead, undesirable people defined themselves through misbehavior, i.e. “how they used (or, more precisely, misused) the land” (124). However, this definition of “undesirable people” should change in the course of the 20th century.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a great number of Americans considered the city to be occupied by a radical working-class culture, which made it appear dangerous to peaceful family life (cf. Marsh 68). To middle-class Americans it became more and more obvious that “the optimism of the past, that the great city could be reshaped to conform to domestic and small town ideals, had come to seem misplaced” (69). The notion of a peaceful, almost pastoral landscape contradicted the common picture of the city as the home of “feminists, radicals, and immigrants” (69). Thus, in order to prevent the new suburban sphere from any kinds of annoyances, government inserted so-called restrictive covenants (cf. Fogelson 4). While these restrictions tended to be euphemized as protective measures (cf. 120), they also illuminate what Robert Fogelson calls a “deep-seated fear that permeated much of American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century” (24). What is striking is Fogelson’s observation not just of the “fear of others,” (123) but also of the “fear of one another” (137). Those restrictions were developed in order to keep the status quo and exclude undesirable groups of people and even activities from the community. What becomes fairly obvious here is the idea of homogeneity which underlies the whole ideology of a suburban collective that deliberately chooses to live apart from others and to ban those who seem inappropriate to its idea of a good life. Thus, “at the heart of [people’s mindset] was the assumption that heterogeneity was incompatible with permanence, that a mix of races and classes was incompatible with a ‘bourgeois utopia’” (Fogelson 136). In general, there were two kinds of restrictions that helped to foster the homogeneous character of suburbia. Charles H. Cheney summed them up, claiming that “the racial restrictions prohibit[ed] occupation of land by Negroes or Asiatics [and] the minimum cost of house restrictions tend[ed] to group the people of more or less like income together [...]” (qtd. in Fogelson 136). As a consequence, subdividers prevented Non-Caucasians from entering the suburbs by simply not selling houses to them and excluded people with a lower status by making the residential objects unaffordable for them (cf. Fogelson 132).

The time after World War I produced a “suburban boom outdistancing anything that went before it” (Marsh 129). Associated with this expansion was the idea that owning a home on American ground implied being a good citizen and a servant of American values that needed to be strengthened once again (cf. 129). Undoubtedly, the housing shortage prevalent during the years of war promoted the idea of a housing sprawl after the war was over. During war years, the urban areas were related to increasing racial tensions, leading to “white residents [trying] to stem the influx of blacks” (130). However, when the war ended, the United States underwent a construction boom, so that those who enjoyed a respective income could move into the suburban areas (cf. 130). Besides the housing boom, one could observe a slight shift of emphasis within American family structures, meaning that “before the war, there was genuine [stress] on marital togetherness” (137), while now the focus was much more on rearing the children. And the best environment for rearing one’s children, propagated by magazines and newspapers, was the suburb (cf. 137). The evolving suburban domestic ideal in the 1920s thus put special emphasis on so-called “familism”, a key term that has stuck to suburbia ever since, and anything that threatened this suburban ideal of familism was to be eliminated right away.

2.1.2 Suburbia in the 1950s

Despite the fact that the suburban boom in the 1920s has had a lasting effect on the development and the essential nature of suburbia – both architecturally and ideologically –, the years after the Second World War are doubtlessly what comes to people’s minds when talking about suburban sprawl. While the Great Depression during the 1930s and the following World War stopped suburbia from expanding, the 1950s with its “increasing spread of cars and automania [...] ultimately turned Americans into a commuter nation and further supported the suburban lifestyle” (Hebel 184). Cold-War politics played a very important role in shaping national ideas about suburbia, urging people to strive for the American dream through homeownership and simultaneously fostering traditional gender roles in the home. The post-World War II era marked the beginning and rise of standardized properties, which resulted from prefabricated “house plans and [the] mass production of low-cost family homes” (Hebel 185). Particularly Levittown, Long Island, served as the model suburb and quickly became the synonym for suburbia. The huge difference between the beginnings of suburbia in the 19th century and the suburban sprawl after World War II was rooted in the attempt to provide suburban space for the whole

middle class, while access to the suburbs in earlier decades was more limited in terms of income and thus restricted to the “bourgeois elite alone” (Fishman 28).

By 1950, over 37 million suburban residences had been produced due to “inexpensive homes and financing after the war” (G. Matthews 212). It seemed people were rushing into suburban neighborhoods as if something very promising, very fulfilling would wait for them. And indeed, this was the underlying idea of suburbia’s promotion during post-World War II years. The increasing trend among Americans to start a family supported the success of suburbia, as an increased number of couples needed space that the city couldn’t provide them with – at least not with those features that young families strived for: a big yard, a garage and a safe, homogeneous neighborhood. The Second World War had “brought thousands of women into the paid labor force when men left to enter the armed forces” (May, *Homeward* 8). Now the men came back, returning to or searching for wives to start a family and have children with. During their husbands’ absence, the American industry fed women with images of “dream houses [] to fantasize about until after the war when their husbands would return and they could start living again” (Kenney). Accordingly, the majority of young Americans belonged to a “cohort [] who lowered the age of marriage for both men and women, and quickly brought the birthrate to a twentieth-century high after more than a hundred years of steady decline, producing the ‘baby boom’” (May, *Homeward* 3). This is even more astonishing when considering that the early Cold-War years were a time of evolving contraceptive devices which “enabled couples to delay, space and limit the arrival of offspring to suit their particular needs” (*Homeward* 20). Still, even if May states that these birthrates were the result of couples’ own free will, it remains questionable if all pregnancies were based on deliberate choices rather than societal pressure.

The government supported young veterans with the so-called “GI bill” that offered low-interest loans and supported the building of new homes for the returned men and their families in the suburban realm (cf. Hebel 184). As Elaine Tyler May points out, the decade’s “baby boom” concerned all social and ethnic groups in the United States, yet it was the white middle-class whose “values [...] shaped the dominant political and economic institutions [...]” (*Homeward* 13).

During Cold War years, suburbia symbolized both the regained prosperity that had been lost to the Great Depression and World War II and a piece of the American Dream that would at the same time “serve as a bulwark against communism” (*Homeward* 20). Yet, suburbia was not as accessible as universally asserted. The aforementioned restrictive

covenants that were characteristic for the early twentieth century suburbs reached an even new dimension after World War II. People moving to suburbia were striving for “stable communities and [] a wholesome community spirit [...] [whose] homogeneity [] allow[ed] for common interests and ma[de] sure that all residents and neighbors ha[d] the financial means to pursue these interests together” (Hebel 188). Supporting a homogeneous environment was particularly relevant to the white American middle-class, as only homogeneity could prevent the nation from becoming vulnerable to chaotic and communist-like influences that might destroy the experienced recovery after years of misery. Considering this widespread belief, it doesn’t come as a surprise that the majority of white Americans favored to keep racism (cf. Goodwin). When in the 1950s the Supreme Court officially repealed the segregation of schools, the white population “fled in the hopes of maintaining homogeneous neighborhoods and schools,” which eventually led to what Clinton called “chocolate cities and its vanilla suburbs” (Goodwin), clearly unfolding the vast change of demographics as opposed to the war years. The white middle-class’ flight to the suburbs overtly illuminated the eager attempt to reach one slice of the American Dream, a goal that was made unavailable for minority groups throughout that era (cf. Goodwin). In this context, the aforementioned arrangement of fully standardized and identically looking properties clearly mirrored the suburbanites’ ideology of ‘sameness’, while ironically it also foreshadowed its artificial bigotry that was doomed to fail later on.

When focusing on the white middle-class that settled in the suburban areas throughout the Cold-War decades, several factors have to be taken into consideration. Apart from many people’s personal desire to approach the American Dream by establishing a protected environment for their families, distant from all evil that the city generated, it was not just a matter of personal satisfaction, but rather a whole societal movement that triggered people’s behavioral patterns. As Kim Kenney rightly points out, suburbia has been highly glamorized in popular culture, which made it the “central part of the campaign to create the ideal American family”. This glamorization took shape in various ways. For instance, in her essay “One Nation Over Coals,” Kristin Matthews refers to the special status of barbecuing during the 1950s and 1960s that was directly connected to suburban homeownership. Strictly speaking, barbecue was the typical American leisure activity “for it was located at and celebrated home” (15). Thus, people clearly saw the suburban home as the one and only place connected to leisure activities that combined being with fellow neighbors while simultaneously “promoting consumption as one’s patriotic duty” (15). In fact, barbecue was seen as stimulating the Americans’ feelings

about the home, or as the American Home Journal put it: “Home is home no longer sans a barbecue” (Home Journal qtd. in Matthews 6). All in all, the image of the whole family posing happily at the barbecue, where every member gains a certain role that fills him or her with pride and a sense of belonging could be decoded as “American values, aspirations, and fears as [it] influenced ideas of self, nation, and other during this time of sociopolitical and cultural change” (6). The advertising industry quite obviously took advantage of those human values that concerned or even touched people’s American identity and thus their patriotic awareness. Hence, as barbecue was “as old as men and a couple of dry twigs,” it could “provide a sense of continuity and comfort to 1950s Americans searching for a feeling of rootedness, or ‘at homeness’” (7).

Taking a closer look at Cold-War America, it gets obvious that American reality wasn’t as unilateral and simple as asserted in the perfect barbecue photography. The one ideology that glamorized suburban lifestyle was based on and which was further conveyed through the mass media, was the preservation of traditional gender roles in the home. As mentioned before, each member of the family was depicted as occupying a specific place both within the family and in the whole suburban community. The prototypical suburban husband and his wife were standardized through the advert of any kind of media. For instance, *Reader’s Digest*, a very popular magazine throughout Cold War years, claimed that the typical white middle-class American suburban family consisted of an

average American male [who stands five feet nine inches tall, weighs 158 pounds, prefers brunettes, baseball, beefsteak and French fried potatoes, and thinks the ability to run a home smoothly and efficiently is the most important quality in a wife [while] the average American female [] is five feet four, weighs 132, can’t stand an unshaven face, thinks husbands drink too much, prefers marriage to a career, but wants the word ‘obey’ taken out of the wedding ceremony (Matthews 8).

Minimal sanity allows people to recognize that this type of gender standardization has been a desolate attempt to create the one American family people could identify with. One could even go one step further, claiming that this absurd description rather had the effect of parodying the allegedly common picture of the American family. Still, this portrayal of the prototypical suburban idyll, consisting of a masculine husband, a caring wife and mother and adorable children playing in the yard was not exclusively, yet to a great extent being mirrored in the propagandistic Cold-War mass media.

However, particularly in the 1950s, this simply conceived idea led to what Hebel refers to as the “epitome of architectural, social, and individual boredom – twentieth century ennui in wood and stone” (189). The exclusionary character and the ‘deindividualizing’ architecture of the houses, the “little boxes made of ticky tacky” that songwriter Malvina Reynolds claimed would “all look just the same,” justified the

evolving critique on the suburbs. The main point of criticism has certainly been the revelation of the suburbs' conformity, which Reynolds also extols quite appropriately. Writing her song "Little Boxes" in the 1960s, Reynolds was very aware of the daily lives of Cold-War suburbanites in the 1950s. Her lyrics contain just a few very banal and almost childlike, naïve lines, yet these phrases get to the heart of suburban criticism, displaying in a very simple manner the artifice and predictability of the suburbanites' lifestyle:

And the people in the houses
All went to the university,
Where they were put in boxes
And they came out all the same,
And there's doctors and lawyers,
And business executives,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.

And they all play on the golf course
And drink their martinis dry,
And they all have pretty children
And the children go to school,
And the children go to summer camp
And then to the university,
Where they are put in boxes
And they come out all the same.

And the boys go into business
And marry and raise a family
In boxes made of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same (Reynolds).

What Reynolds unfolds here is the process of deindividualization made visible through various factors. First and foremost, the sameness of architecture, namely the houses that are all made of "ticky tacky", even though there seem to be some slight variations in color, which makes it appear even more absurd. Secondly, the predictable professional path the suburbanites will find themselves on, which starts in university, traverses a process of "equalization" and ends with the people either being doctors, lawyers or business executives – at least something that identifies them as middle-class Americans. In addition, Reynolds addresses the common leisure activities that were shared by the suburban community, like the aforementioned barbecue. Here, she is talking about the golf course the people are attending together, while having a drink and watching their pretty children who will eventually attend college together. Thus, Reynolds not only refers to the predominant culture of abundance after the Great Depression and World War II in Cold War America, but also highlights the self-evident and automatized course the children will

adopt, just to end up exactly where their parents had been before them: Entering a job, marrying and raising a family in the suburbs. Thus, what Kristin Matthews labeled as Americans' belief in the "manifestation of the American Dream [through] having a yard of one's own [...]" (18) and the expression of "safe sameness" (29) was being criticized right at the time it was being promoted.

Investigating the research made on suburbia in the postwar years, a great number of scholars have tried to illuminate this artifice that characterized it to such an extent. Robert Fishman argues that suburbia, quite paradoxically, promoted people's "alienation [...]" from the urban-industrial world they themselves were creating," (22) thus putting emphasis on people's very deliberate self-estrangement. Lynn Spigel mentions a similar aspect, stating that postwar Americans themselves must have been aware of the illusory character of the suburbs: For people who had lived through the Depression and the hardships of the Second World War, the new consumer dreams must have seemed somewhat pretentious. Leaving ethnic and working class areas for mass-produced suburbs, these people must have been aware of the new roles they were asked to play in a prefabricated social setting (220). Regarding the emphasis on "the role they were asked to play", Spigel also reveals the suburban home as a sort of arena of performance, a "stage on which to play out a set of bourgeois social conventions" (219). In the context of suburbia as theatre, sociologist Nelson Foote used the notion of performance as a cipher for constellations within the family, thus unfolding the mutual relationship between husband, wife and children (cf. Foote qtd. in Spigel 220-21). The other important part of the "play" was the role of the neighbors, who the suburbanites "transformed their homes into showcases for [...]" (221). The whole neighborhood was subtly fighting over who had consumed the newest kitchen supplies or the newest piece of furniture, as even the furniture served as a kind of "approval insurance" (Henderson qtd. in Spigel 221). In suburbia, everything seemed to revolve around appearances, the exterior and not around individual values and self-realization that it actually had promised to provide room for.

However, the end of the 1950s marked a shifting point for glamorized suburbia, as its public critique had become a distinct genre that overtly revealed the failure of suburbia's "utopian dreams for consumer prosperity and domestic bliss" (Spigel 226). Addressing topics such as suburban monotony, conformity and homogeneity, literary works such as William Whyte's *The Organization Man* or John Keats' *A Crack in the Picture Window*, both published in 1956, contributed to the disillusionment of an increased number of people who now started to evaluate suburbia as an "inauthentic space where the

social conventions of gender roles turned humans into artifacts” (227). However, it would be wrong to generalize the critique and to apply it to all Americans during the 1950s: Some people were convinced that their living in a suburban setting affirmed their ‘American way of life’, while for the others, suburbia had always been a vulnerable concept that eventually justified an overt attack on “a wide variety of national problems, from excessive conformity to ecological destruction” (Jackson 4). Already during the Cold-War era, many voices started to evaluate the suburban housing sphere as “reinforce[ing] a woman’s isolation from most of the worlds of adults” (G. Matthews 212). Hence, even if people have continued to live in the suburbs and to partly stick to the prefabricated gender roles up until today, a wave of backlashes started to pioneer at the dawn of the 1950s.

2.2 The Suburban Housewife

Katherine Watson: Pre-law? Well... have you decided which law school you're going to?

Joan Brandwyn: Well, I haven't really thought much about it. After Wellesley, I plan on getting married.

Katherine Watson: And then what?

Joan Brandwyn: [*confused*] And then... I'll be married.

(Extract taken from *Mona Lisa Smile*)

As already indicated, the housewife played a central role in keeping the family together, not just as her husband’s wife, but also as the major caretaker of children and household. In the Cold-War era, the housewife was seen as powerful enough to “shore up the family against liberalism, socialism, and communism,” so that the ordinary suburban homemaker was collectively upgraded to “Mrs. America” (Ogden 171). Over the century, the nature of the American housewife changed from being a “domestic scientist” at the dawn of industrialization, to being “the cooperative housewife” who, apart from being a homemaker, was supposed to contribute to society through “more worthwhile pursuits,” (139-43) whereby this cooperative image remained a sole model for most women. Another attempt was to equate household and business work by claiming that the household could be “scheduled, broken down, and described, just as work in a factory might be” (154). Thus, the household was disposed as some kind of industrial automatism, probably aiming at women’s feeling of satisfaction and benefit for society through evoking the notion of having an “industry-like” job besides childrearing.

The 1920s then served as a starting point for what was to recur partly in Cold-War America, namely the housewife as “Mrs. Consumer” (158). Christine Frederick published an almost same-titled book, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, in 1929 that described housewives as economy’s main target and thus indispensable for national prosperity. Frederick created a

female stereotype that was said to be a “creature of instinct and practicality, not logic and mechanics” and, therefore, “susceptible to manipulation by advertising” (158). Glenna Matthews illuminates to what extent Frederick described the average “Mrs. Consumer,” and the outcome was anything but esteeming: “With little education and a limited vocabulary, she is more illogical than a man” (187).

However, this image of the prosperous and almost spoiled housewife underwent a change during the times of the Great Depression, when housework was no longer seen as a leisure activity but even became an official occupation for the purpose of acknowledging women’s contribution at home. In the course of the 1950s, this reestablishment of the original sense of the housewife as hard-working out of necessity did eventually change, as “the American home [...] was [seen as] a hothouse in which the thermostat was fixed permanently on family happiness,” (167) which in turn was said to be further fostered by a distinctive consumer behavior. Even if this idea occurred as early as the 1920s, when experts were determined that the family and particularly the housewife as the major troubleshooter “would ensure the health of society,” (G. Matthews 182) the 1950s denoted a whole new dimension as far as family togetherness was concerned.

As the marriage rate increased and the suburbs started to sprawl after World War II, many women’s realities revolved around the suburban home and the domestic duties it entailed. No matter how fair their chances were, more and more women were dropping their college careers in order to get married (cf. Coontz, *Stirring* 109). The initial dialogue taken from the motion picture *Mona Lisa Smile* from 2003 adequately illustrates young women’s trend to thoroughly devote their lives to marriage in the 1950s. As Joan’s answer underlines, the choice for marriage almost always meant “all or nothing”, i.e. completely neglecting professional ambitions they might have been trained for in college in favor of a domestic, suburban life. This celebration of domesticity lay rooted in the nation’s opinion that women could “defeat totalitarian, authoritarian ideas” (Stevenson qtd. in Hartman 86), by functioning as the necessary “ammunition in the ideological Cold War” (Hartman 86). However, the aforementioned critique on suburbia was directly accompanied by a rising consciousness about women’s situation in post-World War II America that eventually led to the second-wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s (cf. Mohl 13). The mass media in the 1950s conveyed pictures of the American housewife that were as standardized as the suburban homes of Levittown. The portrayal of the monotonous daily chores and the major responsibilities of housewives in the 1950s did indeed match the realities of many women during that time. Yet, the public image of the “happy housewife” was at constant

battle with many women's own perception of their domestic realities. However, there were also women who openly defied the common image of the apron-wearing cookie-maker, but who tended to be rather neglected in a great amount of studies.

In 1963, Betty Friedan published a literary landmark that would change the lives of dozens of American women forever. By overtly voicing what many women had been swallowing for years, Friedan provoked a wide range of responses to her investigation of America's suburban housewives. This chapter illuminates the content of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, while a critical presentation of Friedan's major ideas precedes a closer look on people's reactions to her work. The focus shall primarily lie on Friedan's remarks about "the problem that has no name" and "the happy housewife heroine". Finally, the last part unfolds to what extent the 1950s represented a rather contradictory stage in women's history as opposed to the assumed unilateral images of the Cold-War housewife.

2.2.1 Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*

In a time when the United States was struggling with fears and anxieties caused by the nuclear threat, when intact families were seen as the nation's necessary weapon against communism and women were considered happy and satisfied only in the role of a homemaker, Betty Friedan dared to contradict the widespread notion of the supposedly happy housewife. Arguing that "postwar American culture promoted a repressive form of domesticity that trapped middle-class women in the home, subordinated them to the demands of marriage and family, and denied them the opportunity for personal or career fulfillment," (Mohl 13) Friedan caught considerable attention, not just among her female target audience, but also among critics and contemporary historians.

When opening Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the reader is addressed with a dedication to "all the new women, and the new men". Here, the reference to the notion of the "New Woman" that arose as a counteraction to the Victorian "Cult of True Womanhood" that promoted women's "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 152) is almost undeniable. Hence, before even starting to read the book, this initial dedication calls for the replacement of a somewhat "old", subordinate picture of a woman through a "new" and autonomous one.

Friedan opens her book's section called "The Problem that Has No Name" with the following words:

The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her

children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – ‘Is this all?’ (15)

This quotation gives a first overview of what Friedan was observing in the lives of the middle-class suburban housewife, namely the indescribable feeling of emptiness while pursuing the daily duties of housework, child-rearing and being a caring wife to her husband. What becomes obvious here is women’s overall timidity to utter dissatisfaction, not least because society and the mass media were constantly preaching undisputed happiness and fulfillment when it came to the “occupation housewife”. This quotation does also fit to the message of “The Ballad of Lucy Jordan”, a song recorded by Shel Silverstein in 1975, and rerecorded by Marianne Faithfull in 1979. In the corresponding lyrics, Faithfull describes the daily routine of Lucy Jordan, an ordinary and probably middle-class white housewife, who finds herself “in a white suburban bedroom in a white suburban town”. While “her husband [[is] off to work and the kids are off to school,” Lucy Jordan considers the options left for her at home, which are restricted to “clean[ing] the house for hours or rearrang[ing] the flowers”. Thus, the monotony and the missing feeling of contribution and richness lead her to a personal longing for riding “through Paris in a sports car with the warm wind in her hair”. Productions like this song underline the currency of all the things that especially Friedan referred to up until the late 1970s or probably even up until today.

What Friedan claimed was that women’s potential was downgraded to the sole purpose of “finding a husband and bearing children” (16), thus criticizing the widespread notion of women as “baby producers” only. The noticeable decrease of women’s college careers from 47 per cent in 1920 to 35 per cent in 1958 prompted Friedan to worry about women’s professional contribution, since “a century earlier, women had fought for higher education [while] now girls went to college to get a husband” (16). Apparently, everything in the life of a 1950s and 1960s woman seemed to revolve around finding a husband, marrying and conceiving children, always trying to stick to the required role a woman was supposed to play in Cold-War America. According to Friedan, this omnipresent picture implied the promotion of femininity, which was in immediate danger whenever a woman considered using her brainpower (cf. 17). The only thing a woman was supposed to long for was “to get married, have four children and live in a nice house in a nice suburb” (18). The striking thing was that in Friedan’s eyes the suburban housewife became stylized to such an extent that she was the “dream image of the young American woman and the envy,

it was said, of women all over the world, [as] [...] she had found true feminine fulfillment” (18).

Talking about a majority of women that lived “in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window,” (18) Friedan gave a very generalized picture of the 1950s housewife, an argument that she would later be heavily criticized for. Yet, she certainly got to the heart of many women’s problems, such as the constant blame that women put on themselves if they weren’t feeling the kind of satisfaction that was supposed to arise in a suburban marriage. This self-accusation also occurred whenever a marriage was crumbling: Even if her husband’s misbehavior had led to the crisis, a woman was constantly made believe it was her duty to change in order to “bring out her husband’s better side” (Coontz, *Stirring* 76). Besides, Friedan pointed to all the women out there wondering about “what kind of [women they were] if [they] did not feel this mysterious fulfillment of waxing the kitchen floor” (19). Thus, housewives were steadily plagued by a guilty conscience, evaluating their potential dissatisfaction as some kind of abnormality.

The aforesaid “problem that had no name” was circumscribed by a couple of women in Friedan’s book, while a huge amount specifically pointed to the feeling of having no distinct personality (cf. 21). The continuous question of identity was felt by such a great number of housewives that the problem they all shared could no longer be ignored. Yet, according to Friedan, the report of the problem was immediately followed by an attempt of its denial or dismissal. This denial took place in the form of society “telling the housewife she [didn’t] realize how lucky she [was],” (24) or even accusing her of being ungrateful for a role that was supposed to be played gracefully (cf. 24). The striking thing about the collectively felt problem that could not be explained properly was that “it was not caused by lack of material advantages,” (26) so that it could not be solved with the aid of “money, a bigger house, a second car [or] moving to a better suburb” (26). Quite the contrary, the nature of the suburban housewives’ problem was not rooted in the women’s need for a material upgrade, but was instead fostered and, therefore, even made worse by Cold-War materialism. Some people may claim that the respective housewives should have been grateful and happy for being able to enjoy such living standards, however, those critics did not get to the heart of those women’s problem: The complaint was not aimed at what they had in material terms, but at a “hunger that food [could not] fill” (26) in idealistic terms.

However, Friedan did not overtly attack the husbands for their wives' desolate situations, but did certainly point to the meaning of being a 'good wife' and all the sacrifices it entailed. Friedan quoted one psychiatrist who claimed that they "ha[d] made woman a sex creature [...] who ha[d] no identity except as a wife and mother [...] [and] wait[ed] all day for her husband to come home at night to make her feel alive" (29). This marital constellation with the husband being the only force capable of animating his wife illuminates not just the perceived physical inferiority, but also the housewife's mental dependence on her husband. However, the widespread assumption was that the core conflict could be rooted in monotony, as women who were supposed to describe the problem "often merely describe[d] the daily [lives they led]" (29). Glenna Matthews justifiably exposes the development of the housewives' isolation from the twenties "in their homes via isolation in their cars to the relatively impersonal supermarket, with its hygienically packaged good" (192) in the 1950s, an era in which running errands was supposed to be satisfactory, when in fact it just pretended to provide women with power by deciding which kind of cheese or chocolate bar to buy.

Doctors of the 1950s were gaining more and more female patients with the symptoms of "tiredness", yet finding out that all those women were getting more sleep than necessary. Thus, their diagnosis was quite simple: The housewives had to be bored in some way (cf. Friedan 30-31). Very common types of "remedy" throughout the Cold-War decades were tranquilizers, which "housewives were taking [] like cough drops" (31). Whenever women complained of suffering from fatigue or feeling trapped in their homes, "this was taken as a symptom rather than a potential cause of their disturbance, something to be treated by analysis, medication, and even electroshock therapy" (Coontz, Stirling 73). Friedan interviewed many women, whereby some of them described a vicious circle of futility their daily routine brought them, so that taking tranquilizers even in their own eyes was the only way to bear this "pointlessness" (cf. Friedan 31- 32). Thus, the common tenor among Cold-War housewives was that their everyday life was "something to be endured rather than enjoyed" (G. Matthews 209). When referring back to "The Ballad of Lucy Jordan", one possible explanation for Lucy "singing pretty nursery rhymes she'd memorized in her daddy's easy chair" while she "let the phone keep ringing" could be the dreamy effects of taking such tranquilizers that were commonly prescribed when housewives showed symptoms of some kind of "nervous breakdown" (cf. Parker). This is quite striking, as the aforementioned medical diagnosis proofed that many women did not suffer from nervous breakdowns due to a physical excessive demand, but rather, as Friedan

tried to reveal, from some sort of “meaninglessness”, which doctors then tried to cure with medicine that even exacerbated the patient’s tranquil state of mind. As a final remark, however, Friedan rejected the widely held belief that “the problem” suburban housewives were dealing with was a feared “loss of femininity, or too much education, or the demands of domesticity” (32), but instead spoke for the relentless and by all means justified longing for “something more than [their] husband[s] and [their] children and [their] home” (32).

Besides the investigation of the women’s “problem that has no name,” Friedan also pointed to contemporary magazines, which featured women as “only interested in the family and the home [and not in] politics, unless it’s related to an immediate need in the home, like the price of coffee” (37). In the same breath, Friedan revealed most editors’ view that humor should be completely neglected in those magazines or at least had “to be gentle, [as] [women] [would not] get satire” (37). By unfolding this point of view mostly shared by male editors, Friedan shed light on the common picture of housewives being stupid and naïve, functioning solely as passive consumers of material goods within their domestic bubble that did not provide space for any form of critical examination. Eventually, the magazines’ contents solely revolved around consumer goods, which benefited the advertising industry, but fostered some sort of “mental enfeeblement” (cf. 51-52). Additionally, *The Feminine Mystique* contained a comparison between magazines’ display of women in 1939 and in 1960, coming to the conclusion that back then, career women or “New Women” were perceived as attractive and “loved by men” (38), whereas in 1960, women striving for a career outside the home were considered unfeminine. This observation illustrates the women’s cycle from the Victorian notion of “True Womanhood” to an emancipated era of “New Womanhood” up to the recurrence of “True Womanhood” again, thus revealing the downward trend of the housewife’s condition in Cold-War America.

When trying to find the origins of the “feminine mystique”, Friedan referred to the publication of a book called *The Lost Sex* in 1942, which warned all its readers that “careers and higher education were leading to the ‘masculinization of women with enormously dangerous consequences to the home, the children dependent on it and to the ability of the woman, as well as her husband, to obtain sexual gratification’,” (42-43) so that the emergence of a corresponding “feminine mystique” seemed inevitable. As a consequence, the “mystique” reached a dimension that transformed it “into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity” (43).

Besides the restriction to the suburban “home sphere”, Friedan pointed to the Cold-War concept of familial bonding, which resulted in women having no “independent self to hide even in guilt” (47). Hence, women solely experienced the right to exist through their husbands and children, which clearly accentuates the process of deindividualization that women underwent, losing their autonomous selves in favor of a patriarchal and confining family constellation. Friedan criticized the “cozy walls of home” as being the only possible space of women’s self-realization after 1949, as the search for a woman’s own identity was “forgotten in the rush for the security of togetherness” (44). Therefore, it was even more difficult for women to admit to dissatisfaction and unhappiness not just in their married life but also in their whole suburban setting, as “most women could not identify another arena in which they might seek personal fulfillment” (Ogden 167). Being trapped in their placid pseudo-idyll, there were no real other options left. Since the accepted concept of the housewife did not imply work outside the home, any woman who actually had a job was either portrayed only in her role as a housewife, or her professional side was immediately connected to failure. For instance, “when you wrote about an actress [...] you never showed her doing or enjoying her work as an actress, unless she eventually paid for it by losing her husband or her child, or otherwise admitting failure as a woman” (Friedan 53). One issue of *Life* magazine in 1956 stated that women who just strived for a career were even worse than those who actually worked, as the dissatisfaction they experienced at home would cause such a thing as the “suburban syndrome” (cf. G. Matthews 211). According to *Life*, this syndrome concerned wives who were depressed about being restricted to the domestic role, so that they would try to compensate their depression through “destructive gossip [or] [...] becoming a dominating mother” (211). Such distorted coverage demonstrates to what extent career-oriented women were classified as a danger to the gender-specific 1950s.

Considering all the aforementioned aspects, Friedan overtly criticized the organized degradation of women in the name of the nuclear family. She revealed the absurdity of reducing women’s potential to “inspire in her home a vision of meaning [and] to help her husband find values that will give purpose to his specialized daily chores [while teaching] her children the uniqueness of each individual human being” (Stevenson qtd. in Friedan 60-61). What is most absurd is the way women were to support their husbands’ and children’s ambitions for self-discovery, while concurrently forfeiting their own individuality and professional achievements. What Friedan aimed to reveal was the huge discrepancy between the conveyed image of the happy, consuming housewife and the

actual reality of women's everyday lives. Eventually and apart from all criticism that was to come, Friedan did succeed in directing people's attention to the long despised suffering of many American housewives.

2.2.2 Contradictory Images of the 1950s Housewife

The publication of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in the 1960s was revolutionary beyond any doubt. The book's ideas that the previous chapter presented were certainly not completely new, yet no other work had attracted such a broad audience's attention before. The said audience was not restricted to the white middle-class housewives Friedan was chiefly aiming at, but also aroused historians', scholars' and working women's interest. People from various professional fields wondered: What was this ominous book about that should go down in history as one of the most influential and well-known works of the 20th century? Apart from all the attention *The Feminine Mystique* caught, the reactions and responses towards Friedan's bestseller were anything but unanimous.

The lives of women in the Cold-War Era, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, have been thoroughly investigated by scholars and historians over the last decades. Drawing on Friedan's account of the 1950s housewife, people's voices range from total approval up to plenary objection. Interestingly, many women disagreed with Friedan, felt offended and advised her not to "marry until [she could] feel like and be a real woman" (Coontz, *Stirring* 31). No matter how stereotypical this woman's statement might sound, apparently some women felt comfortable in their sole role as wives and mothers and did not long for more meaningful work outside the home – be it due to a lack of intellect or indeed a lack of interest.

The critique on Friedan's expositions mainly revolves around her generalizations of the 1950s housewife and her apparent neglect of the decade's complexities. For instance, Stephanie Coontz, a major reviewer of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, criticizes Friedan for portraying "all women in that era as passive and preoccupied with their homes [, neglecting] the African-American women who had led civil rights demonstrations and organized community actions throughout the 1950s and early '60s" (*Stirring* xix). Besides, by pointing to the merits of white middle-class women who identified themselves as "labor organizers," Coontz at least touched upon Friedan's rather unilateral view of the suburban housewife and her primary focus on white women with a secure economic situation. On the other hand, Coontz unfolds the achievement of *The Feminine Mystique* as the rise of women's awareness "that an ordinary woman could be a

person in her own right, in addition to being a wife and mother” (Stirring xxi), which seemed to be a whole new insight for many women back then.

Elaine Tyler May also refers to the other side of domesticity as not being the scapegoat of women’s dissatisfaction, but as an actual goal for “black women [for whom] [it] meant ‘freedom and independence in her own home’” (Ambivalent Dreams 152). Hence, especially for Blacks, homeownership in a suburban setting, as Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* also illustrates, was indeed a dream worth striving for, not in order to show off one’s social rank, but to “live as a black family with dignity, independence, and comfort” (cf. 152). May gets to the heart of what many critics pointed to as well: People who were excluded from living the suburban life by force could not do anything but sneer at Friedan’s statements on the miserable state of the suburban housewives. Even though the aforementioned chapter tried to reveal the psychological and not material nature of the wives’ problem, one cannot deny that underprivileged women felt slightly offended by the housewives’ seeming “luxury problems”.

The trend of women working, including middle-class housewives, was probably the most striking contradiction with regard to Friedan’s remarks on women’s alleged suburban traps. The statement that after the Second World War all women left the labor force again in order to become full homemakers has been revealed as not completely valid. Ironically, in the same year that Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, another book called *The Employed Mother in America* was published. Nowhere near the success and prominence of Friedan’s publication, yet the book already pointed to this “relatively optimistic diagnosis: There was nothing wrong with a mother who worked for wages. Her marriage and her children prospered to the same degree as those of full-time homemakers” (Ogden 187).

Particularly Joanne Meyerowitz contributed to the exposure of women’s daily realities far from the suburban kitchen sink. Although Friedan has had a huge impact on historiography, Meyerowitz claims that Friedan’s “widely accepted version of the ‘feminine mystique’ [...] is only one piece of the postwar cultural puzzle [...] [as] all of the magazines [] advocated both the domestic and the nondomestic, sometimes in the same sentence” (Beyond 231). Whereas Friedan focused on the content of four magazines only, Meyerowitz investigated a considerable number of magazines, ranging from “middlebrow magazines” to those aimed particularly at African Americans, right up to the ones primarily focusing on white middle-class women (cf. Beyond 230). Thereby, Meyerowitz wanted to “incorporate more of the diversity in American society” (Beyond 231) while not rejecting the tentativeness even of her comparatively profound research. Meyerowitz

claims that a convincing number of magazines covered themes of “nondomestic success”, which therefore was “no hidden subtext” but sometimes even “the first, and [] only, narrative concern” (Beyond 234). Her research revealed that “more than one third of the articles on individual women featured unmarried women, divorced women, or women of unmentioned marital status [...] [while] only 15 percent of the articles on individual women focused primarily on women as mothers and wives” (Beyond 234). Thus, Meyerowitz argues, those articles were able to function as an inspiration for all women who were striving for a career and tried to overcome the seeming obstacles (cf. Beyond 236). Yet, besides all these investigations, one has to keep in mind that just because women were striving for a career, they did not necessarily succeed in gaining the achievements they were aiming at. This is what even Joanne Meyerowitz takes into account, spotlighting some magazines’ glorification of women’s professional opportunities that “offered false promises” (Beyond 236), while still pointing to the merits of that kind of coverage, which had the power to “subvert[] the notion that women belonged at home” (Beyond 237). No matter if realistically displayed or overstated, those magazine stories acknowledged any form of women’s working ambitions that could be seen as a considerable opposition to Friedan’s description of the desperate and imprisoned housewife. Additionally, Meyerowitz unfolds the sole marginality of what Friedan referred to as a partial trigger for the ‘feminine mystique’, namely the publication of *The Lost Sex* in 1947: “Although [the book] had some influence, [...] it did not represent the mainstream in the mass culture” (Beyond 247). Essentially, Meyerowitz’s most important contribution to the critical reception of *The Feminine Mystique* is the revelation of Friedan’s rather reduced and selective investigations, at least as far as the 1950 magazines’ contents were concerned: “For the prewar era, she seems to have chosen the stories that most embraced public achievement [while] for the postwar era, she seems to have chosen the stories that most embodied domestic ideals” (Beyond 250). Thus, through opportunistically omitting media coverage that illustrated another female image away from the domestic territory, Friedan’s “forceful protest against a restrictive domestic ideal neglected the extent to which that ideal was already undermined” (Beyond 250). Essentially, Meyerowitz has been trying to illuminate Friedan’s fatal reduction of the decade’s “multidimensional complexity [...] to a snapshot of middle-class women in suburban homes” (Introduction 2).

Now, the actual contradiction of the 1950’s image of the housewife was probably based on the ubiquitous concurrence of two kinds of promotion. The most important aspect to mention here is that despite Cold-War propaganda of family life and the housewife as

the nation's troubleshooter, "by the mid-1950s, rates of women's employment matched the artificially high levels attained during World War II, [while] [the rising employment of married women] was most striking [...]" (Hartman 86). Suburban housewives entered jobs in the peripheral areas, as "banks [, for instance,] had been among the first to recognize the untapped resource of housewives willing to work [...]" (Marsh 186). In fact, during the 1950s, there was a steady battle between ideas about how women should contribute to society: While the already elucidated role of the woman as homemaker, caretaker and the nation's "domestic goddess" was to foster national security through familism, the other idea urged women, including housewives, to enter all kinds of professions for the purpose of meeting the international crisis of the Cold War (cf. Hartman 97-98). Susan Hartman concludes that with these two trends co-existing, the 1950s marked a "transition period for American women, promoting undercurrents that would emerge as dominant trends in the 1960s and 1970s" (98). Despite the simultaneous promotion of joining the labor force, women were not told to completely abjure their motherhood and housewifely existence. Quite the contrary: No matter if housewives went working during the day or not, employers still considered childrearing and being a good wife a woman's central role (cf. 90).

For the housewife, some kind of "model solution" arose out of those varying statements and attitudes. Many contemporary politicians and experts adapted the idea of what Friedan referred to as the "life plan" for women. The ideal working cycle, which resembles much of what is still valid in today's society, suggested: "work outside the home before childbearing, preoccup[y] with domestic responsibilities at least until children reach[] school age, and thereafter [] return to employment" (Hartman 90). This approach tried to accommodate women's need of a meaningful life for the "empty nest" period, yet it contradicted the aforementioned diagnosis that a woman's family life would not suffer from, but rather be enriched by her employment outside the home. Referring to the rising employment of women, "researchers found that between ages twenty-seven and forty-three, 'large increases in independence and assertiveness' took place among all the women who went on to work outside the home, married and unmarried alike, [while] the only women who did not experience such increases were full-time homemakers" (Coontz, Stirling 116). Quite obviously, those co-existing ideals could not do anything but disconcert women, who found themselves stuck between encouraging professional offers and the omnipresent Cold-War propaganda of the suburban haven as the only spot on earth capable to keep the promise of women's happiness.

Another very important response towards Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* worth mentioning was the investigation of Daniel Horowitz, who published his "account of Friedan's intellectual and political history, which was much closer to that of activist Gerda Lerner than to the suburban housewives Friedan targeted in her book" (Coontz, *Stirring* 103). Horowitz rejects Friedan's assertion that the book's popularity rooted in "an average housewife's suburban discontent" (Disler 873). In his remarks, Horowitz tried to unfold what Friedan historically neglected and why she did so. The basic assumption is that Friedan rejected her past as an activist during her labor union time and tried to incorporate a new identity as an ordinary, suburban housewife for the sake of her book's popularity (cf. Horowitz 2). While Friedan's connection to the labor movement of the 1940s "gave her a sustained education in issues of sexual discrimination and shaped her emergence as a feminist" (16), she still tried to erase her past and remained rather silent about her time as an activist and actual labor journalist. Horowitz explains the neglect of her former activism with the historical context of the Cold-War era, namely the time of "anti-communist crusade, which [Friedan] experienced at close quarters" (17). Yet, it was not just her fear of falling victim to the decade's redbaiting, but rather her concern that identifying with and thus reaching the middle-class suburban housewife would "enable her to talk about alienation and discrimination in a new setting and in less radical terms" (29). Still, her portrait's neglect of race, ethnicity, religion and class and thus sole focus on the "white, middle-class, Christian woman as the norm," (Diner 1) led to contempt on behalf of not just Blacks or working-class people, but also the Jewish population. Jews must have considered Friedan's homogenization of the housewife even worse, since Friedan herself was Jewish, too (cf. 1).

However, apart from the censorious voices that criticized Friedan for her unilateral view of the decade, her overgeneralization of the 1950s housewife and her lack of historicity, the positive achievements of *The Feminine Mystique* should be equally paid attention to. For instance, Stephanie Coontz claims that many readers "experienced a shock of recognition and an overwhelming sense of relief to learn that they were not alone in their feelings" (*Stirring* 20). Many women Coontz had interviewed stated that although during the 1950s and 1960s there had been a huge amount of advice books trying to provide help for a housewife's problem – no matter if in psychological or physical terms – only *The Feminine Mystique* had such an impact and spoke with such a conviction that all of these women can recall its content even today, over 50 years later (cf. *Stirring* 20-21). And although Joanne Meyerowitz claims that Friedan was talking about stereotypes "that

portrayed all postwar women as middle-class, domestic, and suburban” (Introduction 3) and which were already at change even before her publication, the wide range of reactions towards *The Feminine Mystique*, fostering indignation as well as relief, prove how many American women still needed this type of ‘awakening’ (cf., Stirling 33) Hence, despite the impossibility of applying Friedan’s observations to all the women in 1950 America, *The Feminine Mystique* certainly and authentically reflected the lives of a vast number of housewives and led to their collective gasp of relief. Besides her critique that Friedan did underrate women’s contribution during the Cold-War Era, Glenna Matthews points out that the undeniable benefit of *The Feminine Mystique* was its capacity to unleash the “appreciation that [not women themselves, but] social arrangements could receive some of the blame for female unhappiness” (219). Many women that actually dared to acquire new working skills or just returned to their old jobs reported that it was Friedan’s impact that provided them with the required courage and self-assurance (cf. Coontz, Stirling 116).

Taking all those aspects into consideration, it becomes obvious that women’s realities after World War II by far exceeded the widespread image of the ‘happy housewife’. Instead, what Stephanie Coontz refers to as “the contradictions of womanhood in the 1950s,” (Stirling 59) gives indication of how complex the Cold-War era and with it the role of women really was. Celebrating domesticity, promoting job opportunities, working out of necessity and housewives trying to find a way to incorporate both, the working and the private sector, all these trends seemed to be incompatible at first sight, but were actually co-existing in an era which tended to be undeservingly homogenized.

3 “The Important Thing Is to Keep from Being Contaminated” – Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*

Over the last decades, suburban literature has been established as a genre of its own, while especially after World War II, a bunch of novels that provide insight into the mechanics of suburbia and suburbanization experienced some sort of renaissance (cf. Hebel 203). According to Adelle Waldman, people have been fascinated by the “suburban malaise [...] for as long as [they] have been commuting from leafy pastures just beyond the city limits”. Among those novels that illuminate the complexities of postwar suburbia is Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*, which was published in 1961 and “has become a kind of cultish standard” (Ford). Although Yates’ debut didn’t receive much attention during his lifetime, in 2005, the *Time Magazine* nominated *Revolutionary Road* as one of the 100 best English-language novels since 1923 (cf. Lacayo), while Sam Mendes’

adaptation in 2008, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, promoted the novel to become an all-time bestseller.

According to Udo Hebel, the merit of suburban literature is its critical voice towards “traditional gender roles and role expectations, the often desperate attempts of bored and frustrated suburbanites to escape from their own lives of preference, and [] rebellion against the confining complacency and conformity of suburban affluence” (204-205). And indeed, the story of Frank and April Wheeler, a young couple that has settled down in one of Connecticut’s suburbs, the “Revolutionary Hill Estates”, emphatically reflects “the contradictions about gender roles and relationships” (Charlton Jones 496) in the complex decade of the 1950s. Frank is constantly ridiculing their suburban surrounding, while his wife April is already one step ahead, planning to leave the United States for the sake of the extraordinary life they are supposed to live in Europe’s intellectual heartland, Paris. But reality looks differently: April, who despises her role as a housewife and mother and desires to work as a secretary in Paris, becomes pregnant once again, while her husband Frank even seems to prefer the idea of staying in Connecticut, being offered a new job and enjoying an affair with his secretary that provides him with the manliness he is denied by his wife. However, April intends to abort their child, which Frank wants to prevent her from doing by any means. Although on the surface everything seems to be sorted out and both partners contribute to their roles as the perfect husband and wife, April still decides to have her abortion and eventually dies during the procedure.

This chapter will unfold the impact of the suburban setting on the protagonists of *Revolutionary Road*, while concurrently it tries to illuminate to what extent the Wheelers reject yet inevitably attend the prototypical Cold-War family ideal. Therefore, a brief analysis of suburbia as a symbolic terrain precedes a thorough investigation of the prevalent Cold-War gender roles represented by April and Frank Wheeler, which in turn is followed by a critical examination of the destructive perception of the “Revolutionary Hill Estates” as responsible for the Wheelers’ tragic fate.

3.1 Suburbia as Symbolic Space

Throughout *Revolutionary Road*, the suburban setting is constantly and deliberately staged and profoundly reflects the protagonists’ complex insights. Thus, the description of the suburban territory does not just create a certain narrative atmosphere, but metaphorically refers to the suburbanites’ mental condition, especially to that of Frank and April Wheeler. At the beginning of the novel, the suburban homes are described as looking

“weightless and impermanent, as foolishly misplaced as a great many bright new toys that had been left outdoors overnight and rained on [while] [t]heir automobiles didn’t look right either – unnecessarily wide and gleaming in the colors of candy and ice cream [...]. Once [on Route Twelve,] the cars seemed able to relax in an environment all their own [...].” (5). This initial quotation already reveals the suburban artifice that is made obvious through comparing the setting with a kind of playground that consists of toy-like houses and their likewise toy-cars. Yet, the reader is rather tempted to imagine a sort of Fitzgerald-like ‘wasteland’ than an actual Toyland, as its respective equipment looks ‘rained on’ and used up, while also the cars that look like dessert rather than vehicles don’t ‘look right either’. Only when the suburbanites are heading on the highway and leave their homes behind, the cars regain the freedom they require and supposedly so do the drivers. Another very striking and ironic aspect is the mentioned “impermanence”, which opposes the idea of the suburban theory of permanence that only homogeneity can guarantee. As it turns out, even homogeneity is revealed to be a mere concept that fails at creating at least an illusion of perfection. Thus, the setting creates “an impression not of freedom or congruency, but rather containment and violation” (Moreno). Regarding this powerful spatial description, the novel’s first pages already foreshadow the illusive character of the idyllic suburban “Revolutionary Hill Estates,” where the Wheeler family has settled down.

When Frank and April Wheeler decide to move into the suburbs, they are confronted with their new environment by Mrs. Givings, their realtor and future pseudo-friend. She introduces them to the suburban setting, starting with the rather undesirable realm, that contains “mostly [those] cinder-blocky, pickup-trucky places – plumbers, carpenters, little local people of that sort” just to finally get to their actual destination, “a perfectly dreadful new development called Revolutionary Hill Estates” (30). Thus, the characteristic homogeneity that underlies the idea of a likeminded community that excludes everyone who does not fit in becomes clear, be it in financial or in ethnic matters. In this case, the condescending comment of Mrs. Givings that this part “isn’t a very desirable [one],” (30) illuminates the almost bourgeois, opposing image the “Revolutionary Hill Estates” convey.

Yet, the house that the Wheelers will find themselves living in has a somewhat special status. Although it is situated in the Revolutionary Hill area, it “has absolutely no connection with that” (30). Mrs. Givings almost finds herself in a state of trance when she introduces it to its future inhabitants: “See the little white one? Sweet, isn’t it? The perky way it sits there on its little slope?” (30). The fact that the house is being personified and

concurrently trivialized does not just highlight the realtor's obvious obsession for suburban houses, but ironically foreshadows the deep and somewhat destructive impact the suburban home will have on the Wheelers in the course of the novel – at least from their point of view. When at first the house does appear to be 'sweet' and almost 'innocent', its perkiness and the proximity to the hillside will eventually prevail over its charm, thus symbolically hinting at suburbia's lack of humanity that "turned human into artifacts" (Spigel 227). After April has approved of Mrs. Givings' observations, the process of personification is further fostered when "the house emerge[s] through the spindly trunks of second-growth oak and slowly turn[s] toward them, small and wooden, riding high on its naked concrete foundation, its outsized central window staring like a big black mirror" (31). The image of the house emerging does seem like a sort of threat, which is even enhanced by the house's eye-like windows that are compared to the paradoxical notion of a 'black mirror' that does not just look at its future inhabitants, but 'stares' at them. Apparently, the house exudes a very threatening and almost inscrutable atmosphere, which functions as the exact opposite of what a suburban home should ideally provide its residents with. In fact, the image of the house as a cipher for hazard and discomfort is further developed in the course of the novel. When Frank returns from the city one day, "the house [is] dark and the sight of it [...] [makes] him think of death" (33).

Besides the very obvious symbols of suburban destruction, the text also provides the reader with rather subtle yet peculiar indications. For instance, April notes that "of course [the house] does have the picture window; [] there's no escaping that," (31) while Frank ironically negates what will actually turn out to be their bitter self-awareness later on, namely that "one picture window is necessarily going to destroy [their] personalities" (31). Thus, Frank and April are very well aware of the suburban trap that is already at hand, seeming to know that the picture window in itself symbolizes the life they both do not want to strive for. However, they consider themselves sufficiently superior to the petty idea of suburbia that they eventually decide to move into the little white house on Revolutionary Road. Actually, the picture window remains a very strong symbol of suburban density and conformity throughout the novel, while both Frank and April knowing about the conveyed meaning of it is the probably most interesting aspect here. The fact that Yates endowed the novel's protagonists with this insight also sheds light on how far suburbia was already being investigated and criticized right in its heyday. Finally, when the Wheelers are planning their new home's interior look, April decides that "their solid wall of books would take the curse off the picture window, [so that] a sparse, skillful

arrangement of furniture would counteract the prim suburban look of this too-symmetrical living room” (31). Hence, April is constantly trying to erase anything that radiates some kind of ‘suburbanity’ that she rejects to identify with. Ironically, whilst attempting to virtually ‘exorcise’ the picture window with a bookshelf, she has to admit that “the very symmetry of the place [is] undeniably appealing – [...] it [does] have possibilities” (31). Thus, the complainant herself simultaneously perverts the aforesaid disgust, which not just underlines April’s apparent inconstancy, but also evokes the feeling that the condemned and pejorative suburban home might not be the main culprit for everything bad yet to come.

Another striking observation is the description of the furniture as somewhat animated: It “had never settled down and never would, the shelves on shelves of unread or half-read or read-and-forgotten books that had always been supposed to make such a difference and never had [...]” (233). Obviously, the equipment is expected to play a role in the “home theater” of the Wheelers, just like a normal family member. What Lynn Spigel referred to as “approval insurance” (221) is illuminated here through the furniture’s major responsibility to show off the Wheelers’ allegedly intellectual superiority and ‘savoir vivre’. However, the furniture fails at reflecting the protagonists’ pretentious transcendence, so that the façade of the Wheelers’ wannabe urbane lifestyle slowly starts to crumble. Hence, the prior certainty that a respective arrangement of the furniture would “counteract the prim suburban look” (Yates 31) of their home turns out to be rather reversed into its opposite, thus revealing the Wheelers’ vulnerability that they’ve been trying to hide all along. Besides the living room furniture, the kitchen is depicted as “gleam[ing] to an industrial perfection of cleanliness” (41). What seems to be an advertisement-like description of an exemplary suburban domestic kitchen, is interrupted by “a small stain of drying milk and cereal on the table,” (41) which immediately mitigates the apparent impeccability. The fact that the almost meticulous neatness of the kitchen is referred to as ‘industrial’ perverts the original sense of the suburban home as “a place where people lived” (298). Comparing the sphere of family togetherness to industry does probably not apply to what Annegret Ogden called the “domestic scientist” (139) during industrialization, but rather unfolds the artifice and abundance of the suburban interior. However, the small stain could be seen as a little hint for the denouncement of the mock-perfection, since the Wheeler family itself is anything but a representative of a “perfection of cleanliness”. The idea of the suburban interior as opposing the actual lives of the protagonists comes to a climax at the end of the novel. After Frank and April have fought

the night before, the next morning is being described in almost divine terms, as “the kitchen [is] filled with sunlight and with the aromas of coffee and bacon. April [is] at the stove, wearing a fresh maternity dress and she look[s] up at him with a shy smile” (Yates 311). Yet, Frank reflects “it would be better to join her in playing of this game, this strange, elaborate pretense that nothing had happened yesterday” (311). Comparing the initial description of a perfect morning breakfast with the subsequent remark on behalf of Frank, it becomes clear that the suburban home can only provide happiness and harmony on the surface, while the reality of the Wheelers ironically contains ‘playing a game’ that in turn reveals their prevalent pretense. Although suburban domesticity is indeed able to mock happiness, its provision for artifice is being exposed to the audience by the ‘theater players’ April and Frank themselves.

The widespread notion that the suburban home at least seems capable of providing its inhabitants with comfort and satisfaction is brought forward in the novel as Mrs. Givings, the Wheelers’ realtor, reflects about her own home in a very expressive and thus revealing way:

She loved the last few hundred yards of shady road that meant she was almost there, and the brittle hiss of well-raked gravel under her tires, and the switching-off of the ignition in her neat garage, and the brave, tired walk past flagrant flowerbeds to her fine old Colonial door. And the first clean scent of cedar and floorwax inside, the first glimpse of the Currier and Ives print that hung above the charming old umbrella stand, never failed to fill her with the sentimental tenderness of the word ‘home’ (162).

Obviously, Mrs. Givings does consider her home being more than just a place to live. The particular feeling the thoughts about her home evoke in her, unfolds to what extent the home functions as a kind of intimate and secure haven that carries ideological rather than material value. The typical suburban features such as the “neat garage” and the “walk past flagrant flowerbeds” towards the door accompany the interior, whose “clean scent of cedar and floorwax” almost seem to be a stimulating force for Mrs. Givings. Thus, although all these things are material pieces of the suburban home, in this context the atmosphere of belonging and the emotional security actually trigger the character’s “sentimental tenderness”. According to Frank Wheelers’ considerations, the suburban home can function as a location for both “incredible harmonies of happiness and sometimes near-tragic disorder, as well as ludicrous minor interludes [...] but where everything, in the final analysis, [is] going to be all right” (289). Thus, it symbolizes a very contradictory sphere that provides room for happiness and tragedy.

However, this image of suburbia proves to be invalid in the course of the novel, as, in the end, after April Wheeler has died, the narrator must admit that “[t]he Revolutionary

Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy” (340). When Frank Wheeler runs back home after he lost his wife, he passes “a toyland of white and pastel houses [...] [and their] ice-cream colored automobiles,” while the protagonist, who is “in desperate grief [,is] indecently out of place” (340). The extremely illustrative description of the somewhat suburban playground thoroughly reminds one of what Nathanael West termed a “dream dump” in *The day of the Locust*, which is described as a “gigantic pile of sets, flats and props” (106). The reference to West is justified, as the suburban “toyland” appears to be just like Malvina Reynolds used to sing: artificial, “made of ticky tacky” and thus lacking any kind of natural continuance. Apparently, on this huge suburban stage people who are no longer able to play “dollhouse”, like Frank Wheeler, are relentlessly excluded from its hypocritical community, while the rest of it continues to exist without the slightest touch of mourning. In the end, Frank Wheeler sees his house “long and milk-white in the moonlight, with black windows, the only darkened house on the road,” (340) which eventually symbolizes the quintessential incompatibility of suburbia’s outer idea with the Wheelers’ tragic reality inside the suburban home.

3.2 Shifting Gender Roles

April and Frank Wheeler seem to be an ordinary couple living an ordinary suburban life with the ordinary ambitions of a nuclear family in 1950 America. However, the image of this suburban ordinariness that entails the notion of prefabricated gender roles turns out to be a deceptive façade in the course of the novel: “No matter how much he wants to, Frank can’t talk himself out of the absolute stranglehold April has on his sense of self” (Waldman). As Waldman’s observation already indicates, the relationship between April and Frank is not based on female subordination and male superiority. Throughout the novel, the images of both, husband and wife, are constantly shifting, portraying April as a determined, almost egocentric force that is yet vulnerable to Frank’s performance, while Frank is depicted as suffering from April’s stubbornness and therefore struggling with maintaining his masculinity. This chapter sheds light on April Wheeler as the opposite of the ideological ‘happy housewife’ on the one hand, while on the other hand it portrays Frank Wheeler as a kind of antihero who attempts to overcome any obstacle that could potentially threaten his virility. The focus shall lie on the reversion of the traditional notion of Cold-War gender roles as presented in the first part of this paper.

3.2.1 “The Good Wife?” – The Struggles of April Wheeler

In the beginning of the novel, April and Frank Wheeler are fighting right after the rather poor performance of the local theater group, in which April participated as one of the leading actresses. During the fight, April says something very revealing not just about their mutual discontent, but also about the psychological notions that underlie their suburban marriage: “Oh, I’ve always known I had to be your conscience and your guts – and your punching bag. Just because you’ve got me safely in a trap you think you-“ (Yates 28). Although Frank is highly amused about April feeling caught in a trap, she affirms her felt condition once more, while concurrently wondering “how by any stretch of the imagination [Frank] can call [himself] a man!” (29). The reference to the ‘suburban trap’ might seem as a quite obvious complaint of a 1950s suburban housewife who is tired of being caught in the home sphere, yet in the case of the Wheelers there seems to be much more to it. April is not portrayed as a victim here, but rather takes the role of a clairvoyant who confronts Frank with the fact that she is not the type of woman to be kept in a ‘cage’, while he is not the type of man who would even have the strength and potential to do so.

The impression that April rejects the traditional feminine role of the suburban housewife who wears dresses and aprons is further fostered when in one scene, “April herself [] stolidly push[es] and haul[s] the old machine, wearing a man’s shirt and a pair of loose, flapping slacks, while both children romp[] behind her with handfuls of cut grass“ (36). Apparently, April’s domestic realm is not restricted to the kitchen sink, but even implies prototypical man’s work. In this case, she manages to mow the lawn, a job that normally Frank is responsible for. Through deliberately accomplishing her husband’s tasks in her boyish outfit, it becomes evident that April does not care at all about the prefabricated gender roles the rest of the neighborhood seems to stick to. The reversion of roles within the Wheeler family especially unfolds when April talks about her plan to emigrate to Paris. When Frank asks what kind of job he could possibly get in Europe, April gives a very determined and well conceived answer: ““No kind of job. Oh, I know you could get a job anywhere in the world if you had to, but that’s the point. The point is you won’t be getting any kind of job, because I will.’ [...] She had it all figured out” (113-14). The interesting aspect in this scene is that April appears to be very determined and self-assured about her goal to provide for her family instead of Frank, yet still she plays the role of the “good wife”, who sees a need in reassuring her husband and maintaining his self-esteem. Claiming that Frank could get a job anywhere in the world does not mirror her admiration for Frank, but probably reveals how April would like Frank to be. Besides,

considering the already difficult marital relationship between Frank and April, her praise towards Frank is rather perceived like a white lie in order to conceal her plan's underlying shift of authority. Ironically, "Frank has that very American belief in the possible and in his own untapped potential, [while] April is all too aware of his pretensions" (O'Nan). Hence, as O'Nan also observes, April's act of reassuring her husband of his qualities is not rooted in real and authentic estimation of his potentials, but should rather be analyzed as flattery to the benefit of her personal goal without losing her disguise of the "good wife". The striking thing is that Frank seems to fall directly into her trap as she continues to claim that she thinks it is "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 [suburbanites]" (115). As this quotation exposes, April seems to project her disgust for the current life they are living in the suburbs onto Frank, whose job she considers too low a level. Although Frank himself does constantly talk about the dullness of the suburbs and the ridiculousness of the suburbanites' rituals, April finally and overtly accuses him of considering their lives "somehow very special and superior to the whole thing, [while she keeps wanting] to say 'But we're not! [...] We're just like the people you are talking about! We are the people you are talking about' [, so that in effect she] sort of ha[s] [...] contempt for [Frank], because [he] [cannot] see the terrific fallacy of the thing" (116). Thus, it is April who is very serious and determined about the plan to leave the suburbs and to live a very different life in Paris, whereas Frank seems to solely perform the role of an anti-suburbanite that makes him seem intellectual and superior, when in fact he is just like the people he keeps judging. According to Kate Charlton-Jones, April's dissatisfaction is rooted in "the construction of Frank she has made in her mind" rather than in her feeling of being "domestically imprisoned [...] in their neat little home" (500). April is the only one who truly sees through their discontenting life and Frank's annoying pretensions and wants to intervene, while her wishful change implies the replacement of her role as a suburban housewife through being a working woman in a city. However, although "April's unhappiness is real, [] Yates [...] doesn't applaud her daring - her willingness to buck convention and propose escape. Instead, he exposes the foolishness and the self - delusion behind her Paris plan" (Waldman). Yet, even though her plan seems to be slightly romantic and certainly naive, the urgency and sobriety on behalf of April cannot be denied and lead to the reader's empathy and also sympathy towards her character (cf. Charlton-Jones 501).

In the course of the novel, there are many scenes that reveal up to what extent April displaces Frank as a sort of family leader with regard to the male-specific tasks that revolve around garden work and their planned trip to Europe. For instance, April apologizes for “taking charge of everything [...] like when [she] mow[s] the lawn, or something [...]”, while she “pucker[s] her face into what look[s] distressingly like the understanding simper of the wife in a television comedy” (Yates 141). Following this statement, the shifting gender roles and April’s and Frank’s awareness of that can no longer be neglected. Still, April pretends to stick to her role as a “good wife”, apologizing for having threatened Frank’s manliness, when in fact the skillful application of her performance virtually triggers her matriarchal position. April Wheeler obviously refuses to be the passive housewife that depends on her husband and has no profound ideas of her own, yet she constantly tries to at least partly act out what is expected from her. What should have been made clear by now is that April strives for pursuing a profession, a wish that is also justified by what Mrs. Givings thinks about the importance of her profession as a realtor: “Deep down, what she loved and needed was work itself. ‘Hard work,’ her father had always said, ‘is the best medicine yet devised for all the ills of man – and woman,’ and she’d always believed it. [...] It was all that fortified her against the pressures of marriage and parenthood. Without it, as she often said, she would have gone out of her mind” (164). This insightful consideration of Mrs. Givings exactly fits to what April Wheeler is striving for as well. At least intellectually rejecting her sole responsibility for household and children, April aims at gaining fulfillment through entering a real profession as a secretary in Paris. As opposed to the widespread belief that only a shrink can deal with a housewife’s problem, this quotation reveals the significance of work outside the home for many women during the 1950s, which can function as a kind of “therapy” or, as Mr. Givings says, “medicine”. For April’s plan to be successful, she even accepts her children’s alleged afflictions that moving away could possibly entail: “I’m afraid I don’t see any point in holding our heads and moaning about how miserable [the children are] going to be, or talking about tripping them up and breaking their arms. Frankly, I think that’s a lot of emotionalistic nonsense [...]” (191). Following this statement, the image of April as retaining her composure slowly starts to crumble. She is no longer capable of performing the role of the “good wife” because she has been looking through Frank’s gutlessness for a long time and cannot pretend to care about anything else other than her own needs and aspirations. Quite logically, this even implies putting her own children in second position.

April is portrayed as a very strong and almost stubborn character, which eventually defies the picture of the yielding and selfless wife. Instead, she starts to expose her autonomy and her volition, which finds its subtle starting point when she announces her third undesired pregnancy: “Then the perfection of her curtain-call smile began to blur and moisten into a wrinkled grimace of despair and her breathing became as loud as the boiling vegetables on the stove. ‘[...] I’m pregnant, that’s all’” (218-19). This visualization of April’s facial expression and the ironic comparison of her breath to the prototypical suburban food on the kitchen stove, illustrate the final resignation of April to stick to her “curtain-call” performance of the perfect suburban housewife. Instead, after she went to the doctor, she herself must admit “that [she] can’t even pretend it’s not true any more” (219). Even though on the outside she only seems to refer to her pregnancy, her neglection of any kind of pretension can be applied to everything in her life. Although she knows exactly that the bitter reality of not being able to go to Europe and bearing another child has the power to destroy her, living in pretension is not an option any longer. She knows for a fact that what she has stated before, namely that she and Frank are not better than or superior to the rest of the neighborhood, is confirmed once again. Knowing that the pregnancy will by any means prevent them from going to Europe, April’s last resort is her plan to abort the baby.

When Frank finds the required equipment for the abortion, he immediately confronts April, while she “is backing away through the vegetable steam, not in retreat but in a defiant readiness [, asking:] ‘Do you think you’re going to stop me?’” (222). It is very striking and significant to observe no sign of regret in her reaction. The fact that Frank has found out about her destructive plan does not seem to bother her at all or to cause a reaction of remorse. April’s autonomous attitude is clearly manifesting itself here, still it is sort of satirized, as April chooses the vegetable steam as her ‘comfort zone’ while bringing forward her “defiant readiness”. Thus, she remains in her domestic sphere instead of fully emancipating from it, which sheds light on April’s very complex and almost contradictory character as doubtlessly strong and determined, while still partly insecure and disrupted. Eventually, April’s attempt to abort their child lead to more than sole tension between Frank and her. One time, when Frank keeps appealing to her conscience, April replies: “But I’ve had two children [...] [, doesn’t that count in my favor?” while Frank indignantly responds that “the very fact [she] put it this way is kind of significant, [...] as if having children were a kind of punishment []” (238). And here Frank is right in claiming that April’s statement is extremely revealing as far as her contentment as a mother is

concerned. Yet, the fact that — apart from the moral aspect that an abortion entails — April just does not want to have another baby is legitimate without question, so that Frank's immediate advice to "have [her] see a psychoanalyst" (239) seems to ground in his own vulnerability rather than in his concern about his wife. Sending wives who displayed any kind of dissatisfaction to a psychoanalyst was extremely common throughout the 1950s. When at first glance this seems to be a benevolent act of Frank, he rather uses this as a means to keep control in his position as a patriarch.

The time following this incident illuminates April's profound self-reflection and her inevitable struggle with the life she is and has always been living. Although she finds herself in dialogues with either Frank or her neighbor Shep Campbell, it seems as if she is solely talking to herself and investigating both the reasons for and effects of her own discontentment. When her neighbor Shep Campbell carefully observes her, he records that "there was nothing in her gray eyes to suggest complicity: they were the eyes of a pleasant, tired young suburban matron who'd been kept up past her bedtime, that was all" (268). Ironically, this ordinary and almost pitiful description is the exact opposite of what April wanted to be like, so that apparently her desired escape from suburbia did not just fail spatially, but also as far as her appearance and charisma towards others is concerned. During a long conversation with Shep, April reveals what kinds of thoughts and ambitions she had when she lived in New York City right before moving to the suburbs:

I still had this idea that there was a whole world of marvelous golden people somewhere [...], people who knew everything instinctively, who made their lives work out the way they wanted without even trying [...]. I always imagined that [...] I belonged among them, that I'd been meant to be one of them all along, and everything in the meantime had been a mistake [...] (272).

April refers to her earnest belief in the capacity to reach the American Dream, but just as all the people in West's *The Day of the Locust*, she has to face the bitter reality of failure and disappointment. The suburbs quite apparently killed off her idea of fame, which she thought would wait for her somewhere along the way. Instead, she ended up being a housewife in suburban America, while the only thing even getting close to her imagined success is the ridiculous performance of the communal theater group, the "Laurel Players". After this talk, April and Shep eventually sleep together in the back of his car, while he confesses his love for her. The following conversation illuminates, in how far April is struggling with her own identity and her perceived loss of individuality: "It's just that I don't know who you are.' [...] And even if I did, [...] I'm afraid it wouldn't help, because you see I don't know who I am, either'" (276). This "over-familiar line, a line that by all rights should land like a cliché, instead, becomes a heartbreaking moment" (Siegel). The

question of women's identity is also a topic Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* deals with. As already explained, a lot of housewives, particularly in the 1950s, felt like their lives were pointless, day after day, and that those potentials and features that marked them as individual and unique got lost in their daily domestic chores as housewives and mothers. And although April tries to constantly fight the fact that she belongs to the group of those women, she slowly starts to realize that although she might not be the prototypical Cold-War homemaker, she certainly is not anything more important or more marvelous, either.

A significant kind of turning point can be discerned towards the end of the novel, where April finishes up the dishes and then "move[s] away from the sink to turn and look at [Frank], for the first time [, while] he smile[s] at her like a patient psychiatrist (290-91). Although Frank seems to be the superior part, since he is portrayed as her shrink here, it is April who awakens in a new light, leaving the sphere of domesticity and directly confronting her husband not as a housewife behind the sink, but as an individual with her own voice. She deliberately perverts the image of the "happy housewife", when she declares that she does not love Frank and never has, while "pick[ing] up a dust of cloth [...] [like] a tired, competent housewife with chores to do" (293). Through acting out like a housewife, yet claiming something that completely contradicts the notion of a "good wife", April fully illustrates her ability to switch and pervert different roles. She thus gains psychological power over her husband, who cannot be anything but annoyed and overwhelmed by her arbitrary performance. The turning point is further underlined by a change of perspective in the second chapter of the novel's final part. The point of view shifts from Frank Wheeler to April Wheeler and thus reveals more than ever in the novel before how she actually feels and evaluates her situation as the reader finally perceives April's own voice and not just her filtered and reduced description through Frank's eyes.

For April, the only logical consequence that arises out of her bleak situation is to stick to her former plan to abort. When she is writing a potential goodbye-letter to Frank, she is taking a bath, while "lying very still under the still water for a long time, like a patient in therapy" (319). In this moment, April is sort of admitting her desolate state of mind. Yet, she is obviously able to undergo self-therapy and does not depend on an exterior psychiatrist as suggested before. The image of April lying calmly in the water already foreshadows the tragic outcome of her abortion that is about to calm her forever. Still, her self-therapy and consistency let April appear as virtually strong and self-reliant, despite her own confession of failure that includes the following thoughts:

Then you discovered you were working at life the way the Laurel Players worked at. The Petrified Forest, or the way Steve Kovick worked at his drums – earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and

all wrong; you found you were saying yes when you meant no, [...] and then you were face to face, in total darkness, with the knowledge that you didn't know who you were (320-21).

In this passage, April somehow reconstructs her course of self-deception and the deindividualization it entails. Eventually, even though she is able to see through and thus reveal her own delusion, April must admit her loss of identity while facing “total darkness”. The very interesting thing is that April does not blame her husband for her perceived failure, but really tries to trace back every stage of her life she decided upon, which ultimately has led to her current condition accompanied by an admission of guilt. A short time later, the reader sort of hears her saying: “From a distance, all children’s voices sound the same” (321). This observation might not just refer to April’s aversion against having another baby and the burden she associates with her major role as a mother, but also echoes the prevalent Cold-War sameness of the “toyland suburbia”, in which children are part of the life April feels disgusted by. As a matter of fact, it is not a coincidence that even “in the light of the relatively sympathetic treatment of [April], we hardly see [her] in the role of a mother” (Charlton-Jones 502).

When April prepares the abortion, the description of her procedure is almost prosaic. She describes the procedure like an ordinary domestic routine and therefore not just exposes her lack of emotions, but also perverts the original idea of a housewife’s domestic chores in the home. Replacing house_chores with dropping the abortion equipment in the stewing pot seems rather grotesque:

By the time she’d made the other preparations, putting a supply of fresh towels in the bathroom, writing down the number of the hospital and propping it by the telephone, the water was boiling nicely. [...] It was nine-thirty. In another ten minutes she would turn off the heat; then it would take a while for the water to cool. In the meantime there was nothing to do but wait (Yates 327).

Even in a situation like this, April is described as rejecting the “emotionalistic nonsense” she accused Frank for earlier and instead remains rational and well-organized. Ironically, if one would not know that she is preparing an abortion, it could equally be a description of an elaborate and very well-structured housewife who meticulously sticks to her daily domestic schedule.

The final denouement takes place right before April performs the abortion and dies: “She was calm and quiet now with knowing what she had always known, what neither her parents [...] nor Frank or anyone else had ever had to teach her: that if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone” (327). What this quotation reveals is April’s final reception of independence through death. In this context, death carries two different meanings. First of, through aborting her child, April simultaneously aborts the life she does not want to live

anymore, so that the act of abortion can be referred to as a very strong and distinctive metaphor here. The second meaning quite obviously is April's own death, which tragically functions as her only possible seeming release. Hence, April's abortion and her subsequent death should not be dismissed as a cowardly escape from reality, but as a final act of recapturing self-determination.

3.2.2 Patriarch or “She-Man”? – Frank Wheeler

The one observation that applies both to April and Frank is that they “consider themselves superior to [the] world” (Siegel) of 1950 suburban ordinariness. Yet it is the character of Frank Wheeler which, not at least due to the filtered point of view through his eyes, is tracked and revealed as “a deluded, dissipated bore who imagines himself ‘as an intense, nicotinstained Jean-Paul-Sartre sort of man,’ but is merely an adulterer spicing his talk with literary references [...]” (Ford). Throughout the novel, Frank is constantly expressing the fear of losing his masculinity to his wife, while his anxieties are expressed in very different ways, including direct articulation of his feelings and the subtle cry for help through engaging in an affair with a girl from his office. As a consequence, Frank steadily attempts to recapture his Cold-War masculinity (cf. Moreno). During the fight with April, right after her poor performance in the local theater group, he insists that he does not “happen to fit the role of a dumb, insensitive suburban husband [that she has] been trying to hang [on him] ever since [they] moved out [there]” (Yates 26). His resistance to identify with the notion of the suburban husband could be referred to men's widespread belief that Cold-War suburbia was “the landscape of imminent death for the American male” which turned the “olive-drab, gun-toting war hero into a gray flannelled, paper-pushing cold warrior whose new superior officers were no longer John Wayne-esque figures in the popular imagination, but rather faceless CEOs of the rising service corporations of mass production” (Moreno). Thus, just as April feels being caught in a suburban trap by Frank, he in turn feels caught in his role by her, even though his accusation is quite comical, as “dumb, insensitive suburban husband” is certainly the very last thing April wants Frank to be like. As already indicated, Frank feels his masculinity and authority incessantly endangered by April's behavior and her attitudes. When he wakes up one morning, noticing that she is mowing the lawn, a domestic job actually reserved for the family patriarch, he plans “to get dressed and go out and take the lawnmower away from her, by force if necessary, in order to restore as much balance to the morning as possible, [although] he [is] still in his bathrobe, unshaven and fumbling at

the knobs of the electric stove” [...]” (Yates 41). Quite apparently, Frank feels his responsibility to reestablish the nuclear family ideal that allows no shifting gender roles and therefore evaluates April’s act of mowing the lawn as a defiant and offensive threat towards his virility. On the other hand, he is still in his bathrobe and appears unkempt and almost ridiculous as opposed to his vital and energetic wife April. Hence, the contradictory and somewhat weak character of Frank Wheeler already becomes obvious, as first he does reject the role of the suburban husband, when actually he cannot bear to see this very role replaced by April, either. It seems as if his actions as a suburban husband are the only chance for him to prove his manliness, so that “he cannot allow that role, however ridiculed and demeaning, to be usurped from him as well” (Moreno).

However, Frank’s reflection about if it is “any wonder [that] all the men end up emasculated [...] [due to] ‘adjustment’ and ‘security’ and ‘togetherness’” (Yates 136), the very components of Cold-War familism, finds a final solution in engaging in an affair with a secretary called Maureen Grube in the city. This affair functions as a desperate attempt to gain self-assurance again, since after leaving Maureen, “he [feels] like a man” (107), while “the face he [sees] in passing mirrors [...] [gives] him back a level, unembarrassed glance”(263). The feeling of superiority that he receives when he is with Maureen seems to provide him with the required masculinity that April refuses to provide him with. Yet, Frank does not only earn self-esteem through Maureen’s admiration for him, but also uses the affair to exercise his desired power and control over a woman who, unlike April, subordinates to Frank’s needs. Supporting his somewhat “flight of fancy” that results from feeling masculine again, Frank muses about the way he handles Maureen with such an ease, which makes him want “to laugh aloud at [] so perfectly fulfill[ing] the standard daydream of the married man. No fuss, no complications, everything left behind in a tumbled room under somebody else’s name [...]” (264).

Frank’s seeming self-assurance through sleeping with his secretary only provides temporary satisfaction and still is no solution to Frank’s constant struggle maintaining his male authority at home. Adelle Waldman’s observation of the stranglehold April has on Frank’s self-perception is emphatically illustrated when she “takes his denunciations of [the suburbs] and his diatribes about conformity [...] at face value,” (Waldman) as actually Frank never thought that April would really consider leaving the suburbs. While Frank “is pretending to be the nonconformist he - and April - want him to be [,] the truth is [that] Frank is relatively content in [Connecticut’s suburbs]” (Waldman). Still, after April’s suggestion to leave for Paris, he keeps playing the nonconformist intellectual, just to make

himself and April believe that he is “the most interesting person [she’s] ever met” (Yates 320). However, April knows exactly that Frank is not that type of man and “is all too aware of his pretensions, [while still] she tries to go along with him in seeing themselves as somehow special or better than their neighbors [....]” (O’Nan). Hence, not just April keeps performing her role as the “good wife”, but also Frank sticks to the image April created of him, while ironically they both know exactly that the other one is solely pretending.

The very obvious reversion of gender roles that Frank is afraid of finds further expression when focusing on the professional plan April has created for their life in Paris. While she will work as a secretary, she suggests that Frank should “be doing what [he] should’ve been allowed to seven years [earlier]. [He should] be reading and studying and taking long walks and thinking” (114). Thus, when at first Frank is questioning “what [he is] exactly supposed to be doing while [she is] out earning all [that] dough” (114), April’s intellectual image of him as a man who can just fully flourish when he has time to muse about the essentials of life seems to please him. This drawback sheds light on how inferior Frank must feel, when his wife’s daydream of him wandering through the streets of Paris indeed makes him feel somewhat special and distinctive. The only one who does remind him of the plan’s absurdity is his boss, who asks: “What exactly will you be doing? I don’t see you languishing indefinitely at sidewalk cafés while your good frau commutes to the embassy or whatever – but that’s the point, you see. I don’t quite know what I do see you doing. Writing a book?” (178-79). This cynical comment makes Frank realize how April has manipulated him again in using the image of the “Jean-Paul-Sartre sort of man” (23) he so longs to be like. Thus, he keeps trying to recapture the expected “balance” through talking against the plan to move to Europe. Cowardly as one? can be, Frank uses the children as a pretext to prevent the family from going, claiming that leaving “does seem a pretty inconsiderate thing to be doing, when you think about it, from the kids’ point of view [as] [...] it’s going to be pretty rough on them”, while April dryly replies that “they’ll get over it” (190). Of course, April figures that Frank is trying to cop out of the plan, which has nothing to do with the children’s welfare. Therefore, she remains very cool and determined, showing Frank up as some sort of softy.

One day, Frank is offered a better position in the company he works for. Quite ironically, his boss makes the following suggestion: “Sleep on it a while, talk it over with your wife – and that’s always the best thing, isn’t it? Talking it over with your wife? Where the hell would any of us be without ‘em?” (217). Regarding the marital discord and the Wheelers’ lack of communication, which almost exclusively takes place in Frank’s

imagination, (cf. Mullan, *Left unsaid*) this quotation seems almost sarcastic. As a matter of fact, Frank's imagined conversations are a very striking and revealing element in *Revolutionary Road*, which indicate Frank's desire for recognition. For instance, he imagines a talk with the psychiatrist he plans to line up, while "he [can] already foresee his preliminary discussions with the man, whom he picture[s] as owlish and slow-spoken, possibly Viennese ("I think your own evaluation of the difficulty is essentially correct, Mr. Wheeler [...]") (280). Hence, his daydream about receiving recognition of April's fictive analyst reveals that he does not plan on consulting a specialist for the sake of April's alleged well-being, but rather in order to gain admiration and control over his wife as a true patriarch. The specifically intellectual touch that "talking shop" with a psychoanalyst conveys, also illustrates Frank's illusive and almost ridiculous desire to "become this other, more accomplished person" (O'Nan). His intention to follow his boss' offer and climb up the ladder in his company, contributes to his reestablishment of manliness: "He was richer by three thousand a year after shaking [his boss'] hand that morning – a sound, satisfactory amount that would provide, among other things, a comfortable fund against which to draw for the costs of obstetrics and psychoanalysis" (278). Thus, the pregnancy which April curses to such an extent, seems to be convenient for Frank, as for him having a baby is a sign for his virility and – opposing his wife's contrary vision – an opportunity to make her dependent on him. Overall, the incident that can certainly be seen as the most acute threat to Frank's masculine self-esteem is April's plan to abort their baby. Through rejecting her pregnancy April would automatically reject Frank's virility to a certain extent. Although one time Frank utters that ending the pregnancy would be the best for everyone, "April's unwillingness to bear his child [seems] to bespeak an intolerable lack of love" (Waldman) and certainly a lack of respect from his point of view. Hence, as for April her planned abortion symbolizes some sort of relief from her discontenting life, for Frank aborting the baby ultimately means aborting his post-war masculinity.

What should have become clear by now is that Frank Wheeler is far from being the intellectual and nonchalant "Jean-Paul-Sartre sort of man" (Yates 23) he tries to adorn himself with, not just in order to stick to April's erstwhile statement of him being "the most interesting person [she has] ever met", but also to vainly cover up his inferiority complexes. Thus, the "oscillation between pioneer spirit and suburbanite comfort marks the center of Frank's identity crisis" (Moreno) and leads to his inability to cope with his wife's strength and persistence. Quite obviously, Frank does not fulfill the role of the Cold-War patriarch, but rather personifies the "deep anxiety about masculinity after the

Second World War [that] was closely linked with fears of female strength” (Breines qtd. in Charlton-Jones 504).

3.3 Suburbia as Scapegoat

Throughout *Revolutionary Road*, there is a great amount of scenes that illuminate the thorough impact the concept of suburbia has on the reader’s perception of the text. Every now and then, one is confronted with pretentious and almost nightmarish descriptions (cf. Waldman) of Connecticut’s “Revolutionary Hill Estates”, so that the premise of suburbia’s destructive power becomes more and more apparent. Yet, in the case of Frank and April Wheeler, Yates’ work should not be marked down as a mere “antisuburban novel,” but rather as “a novel about people who blame their unhappiness on the suburbs” (Waldman). Hence, Adelle Waldman’s observation refers to the interesting view that the Wheelers do not actually suffer from the typical “suburban malaise,” but from an incurable seeming dissatisfaction they gain from “pretending to be something they’re not because life is lonely and dull and disappointing” (Bailey). However, the Wheelers are constantly using the very dark side of the suburban model as a means to justify their perpetual unhappiness.

Right at the beginning of the novel’s first chapter, the narrator describes the Wheelers’ imaginary escape from suburbia, when he claims that they “looked and moved as if a calm and orderly escape from this place had become the one great necessity of their lives; as if [] they wouldn’t be able to begin to live at all until they were [...] out where the black sky went up forever and there were hundreds of thousand of stars” (11). And indeed, Frank and April are actually losing no opportunity to peddle around their flamboyance and superiority to that world by “read[ing] better books and think[ing] of higher things than their neighbors” (Mullan, Great by association): “I mean it is bad enough having to live among these damn little suburban types – and I’m including the Campbells in that, let’s be honest” (Yates 25).

This observation is further supported when Frank loftily muses about “deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs” and, more importantly, about the fact that “economic circumstances might force you to live in this environment, but [that] the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were” (Yates 21). This quotation not only exposes how discontent and alienated the Wheelers must feel, maintaining that suburbia is the trigger for some sort of contamination and estrangement in their self-chosen home, but above all it

reveals Frank's device to stick to your personal identity as highly ironical. As already pointed out, towards the end of the novel, April admits that she has no idea who she is, while Frank tries to stick to his self-constructed role for a longer period of time. However, "none of the characters glimpsed in 'Revolutionary Road' have much of a clue about who it is they are. [...] All are walking paths laid out by forces and authorities other than their own personal senses of right and wrong: Convention. Habit. Disengagement. Mammon. Escape "(Ford).

The notion of suburbia functioning as the Wheelers' scapegoat does not only become evident through their actual thoughts and dialogues, but also through some strong metaphors and symbols in the course the novel. For instance, one time Frank feels the desire to just "pick[] up a chair and throw[] it through the picture window [, wondering] what the hell kind of life [this is]" (Yates 59). Apparently, the picture window functions as a sort of *pars pro toto* here, comprising everything negative there is in the Wheelers' suburban life. Frank overtly punishes suburbia by eagerly longing to destroy the picture window, the very motif that symbolizes safety and sameness in a suburban community. Yet, as the previous chapter brought forward, Frank's problem rather lies in his inability to feel like the extraordinary type of man he wants to be than in being one of Connecticut's suburbanites.

The Wheelers' constant derision about the suburbs comes into full effect when they meet with their neighbors, the Campbells, while their conversations almost solely revolve around the narrow-mindedness of their banal suburban surrounding, including the typical Cold-War leisure activities and their fellow suburbanites' pointless talk about Cold-War politics:

And even after politics had palled there had still been the elusive but endlessly absorbing subject of Conformity, or The Suburbs, or Madison Avenue, or American Society Today. "Oh Jesus," Shep might begin, "you know this character next door to us? Donaldson? The one that's always out fooling with his power mower and talking about the rat race and the soft cell? Well, listen: did I tell you what he said about his barbecue pit?" And there would follow an anecdote of extreme suburban smugness that left them weak with laughter (62).

This passage reveals the undeniable irony that underlies the portray of the pseudo-intellectual couples that try to erase their suburban identity by rigorously pointing their fingers at their oh so small-minded neighbors. What John Mullan observes here is the author's "merciless [revelation] [of] these exchanges as endlessly repeatable performances – conversations contrived only to reassure the participants" (Great by association). Frank continues with his anti-suburban sermon, claiming that "it's a disease [,] nobody thinks or feels or cares any more, nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own

comfortable little God damn mediocrity,” (62) Ironically, his despised mediocrity is exactly what the Wheelers themselves can be related to as well. As a matter of fact, Frank and April are “unremarkable, except that Yates has made us understand their desires [...]” and strive for the “same bland successes” (O’Nan) of the culture they show such a contempt for.

The very striking observation throughout the novel is the protagonists’ steady comparison of suburbia with some kind of disease or contamination, as if suburbia was an exterior force that is ubiquitous yet evitable. Just like people’s fear of being affected by soviet communism in Cold-War America, April and Frank Wheeler feel constantly threatened by “the whole idea of suburbia being to keep reality at bay” (Yates 115). Thus, where there is no reality, there must be some sort of delusion, “because that’s what it is,” April points out, “an enormous delusion – this idea that people have to resign from real life and ‘settle down’ when they have families [,] it’s the great sentimental lie of the suburbs” (117). When they are thinking about “how close [they] came to settling into that kind of existence” just to conclude that “[they] didn’t [...] That’s the important thing” (136), it almost evokes the impression of the Wheelers somewhat parodying themselves, considering the inevitable truth that as opposed to the “idea of themselves as special people [...] the reality [is that they are] like everyone else” (O’Nan). Thus, from the reader’s point of view, especially Frank is making a fool of himself by talking too much about the suburbs that he actually does not hate at all, but even furtively prefers when it comes to April’s suggestion to leave for Paris.

However, their anti-suburban and cosmopolitan pretension is unmasked and illuminates the Wheelers’ “widening gap” between who they long to be and who they really are, which “makes them take drastic steps, with tragic results” (O’Nan) at the end of the novel. The first real hint that all the characters are slowly starting to get tired of the everlasting and essentially unprofitable denunciation of suburbia is, when Frank very expressively lectures on the pointlessness and prefabrication of people’s lives, while none of his listeners, neither the Campbells, nor his wife, do applaud his sermon as they used to do each time before:

It’s as if everybody’d made this tacit agreement to live in a state of total self-deception. The hell with reality! Let’s have a whole bunch of cute little winding roads and cute little houses painted with white and pink and baby blue; let’s all be good consumers and have a lot of Togetherness and bring our children up in a bath of sentimentality – daddy’s a great man because he makes a living, Mummy’s a great woman because she’s stuck by Daddy all these years [...] (69).

Apart from the indifference of his audience, Frank’s speech does cover all the aspects that suburbia has been criticized for over the years and, evidently, right at its heyday. Just like

Malvina Reynolds satirized about one year after the publication of *Revolutionary Road*, Yates' protagonist cynically refers to the standardized homes that all look like cute dollhouses with their different colors. In general, Frank summarizes the political agenda of the Cold-War era, including consumption, family togetherness and fostering traditional gender roles, that all were to be embraced by those who considered themselves as good citizens. Frank accuses only those people as self-deceptive and passive, pointing to the complete illusion and thus falsehood of their existence as prototypical, naïve suburbanites. Now, if the reader did not know that he himself is actually living in some kind of self-deception as said before, this sermon on behalf of Frank could be taken as a very serious and critical judgment about the dark side of suburbia. However, the fact that Frank "doesn't do much of anything sincerely," (Waldman) degrades his actually very substantial observation as ineffective to both his fictive audience and the reader. Towards the end of the book, when Frank explains the reason for staying in the US to John Givings, their realtor's son, he blames anything but himself or April, but states that their minds were "forcibly changed for [them]," thus referring to some kind of suburban determination that leaves no space for a man's or a woman's free will. Pretending that suburbia's social conventions and rules leave them no choice but staying where they are only supports the obvious truth, namely that Frank actually does want to stay in Connecticut, while suburbia functions as a perfect scapegoat for him.

In fact, Yates does depict the suburban life as "nightmarish" and "unremittingly bleak" (Waldman). For instance, when the atmosphere right after the disastrous premiere of the communal theater group is described, the reader is confronted with people who "read the promise of failure in each other's eyes, in the apologetic nods and smiles of their parting and the spastic haste with which the [break] for their cars and [drive] home to whatever older, less explicit promise of failure might lie in wait for them there" (Yates 6). Hence, the notion of suburbia is closely connected to the notion of failure, which indicates that there must have been some kind of promise people have been clinging to ever since. The concept of the American Dream that suburbia is also tightly associated with, obviously turns into some sort of American Nightmare, a concept that deserves to be equally investigated, particularly in the postwar decade of economic boom and boundless seeming opportunities. As Richard Ford justifiably assumes, "in 1961, 'Revolutionary Road' must have seemed an especially corrosive indictment of the postwar suburban 'solution,' and of the hopeful souls who followed its call out of the city in search of some acceptable balance between rough rural essentials and urban opportunity and buzz". The promise of the

“marvelous golden people” April has dreamt about, people “who ma[k]e their lives work out the way they want[] without even trying,” (272) cannot be found in the world of the Revolutionary Hill Estates. Instead, the Wheelers find themselves in the “Log Cabin,” where at first they “had come only once in a while, as a kind of comic relief from more ambitious forms of entertainment; but by the following summer [] had fallen into it like a cheap, bad habit [while being aware of] this particular degeneration” (262). Obviously, when first the Wheelers and the Campbells came there in order to ridicule the lives of their fellow suburbanites they so try to set themselves apart from, both couples have to acknowledge that they do live according to a prefabricated schedule. Thus, April’s former “dream has soured, given way to disappointment” (O’Nan).

Regarding the inhuman and destructive image of suburbia, the one scene that might be called the most striking one, is when April Wheeler has died after performing her abortion. Right after this tragic incidence, the suburban setting is described in similar terms as in the beginning of the novel, which makes it appear unfathomably absurd. The very first sentence of that passage thereby implies the core idea and literally the core tragedy of the Wheelers’ fate:

The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy [...]. It was invincibly cheerful, a toyland of white and pastel houses whose bright, uncurtained windows winked blandly through a dappling of green and yellow lawns, on some of the neat front doors and on the hips of some of the berthed, ice-cream colored automobiles. A man running down these streets in desperate grief was indecently out of place (Yates 340).

That an almost identical description can be found at the very beginning of the novel does not just illuminate the satirical and undeniably cynical tone of the narrator, but is also important in terms of the analysis of permanence and stability, two aspects that are supposed to be linked to a suburban community. Obviously, in suburbia there is no space for a catastrophe like the Wheelers’, which automatically stigmatizes Frank as “out of place” and leads to gossip about the dead April. Quite interestingly, the concept of permanence gains a completely new meaning here, namely that the suburban community continues to exist right as before, without any sign of mourning or grief. Paradoxically, the community that is praised for providing its inhabitants with stability and comfort is not able to “hold the weak should they falter, or console the despairing when they sound a plea” (Ford) and is thus revealed to be a community without community spirit, or, simply put, a fake-community. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Givings, who used to be so fond of Frank and April, has already found a new couple that she considers “delightful young people” as opposed to the Wheelers, who “always were a bit – a bit whimsical, for [her] taste,” (Yates 354) which clearly exposes that “the catastrophe has been absorbed easily enough”

(Mullan, Sweet sorrow). Thus, for the sake of keeping the suburban façade of perfection alive, the Wheelers are replaced like an old toy, whereby the suburban toyland is exposed to be cruel and merciless, representing inhumanity at a time when it should provide room for consolation and humanity.

After April's death, the neighbors, including the Campbells, start to spread rumors about the Wheelers, while Milly Campbell seems to gain particular satisfaction out of telling their tragic story: "But mostly it was Milly's voice that had taken on a little too much of a voluptuous narrative pleasure. She's enjoying this, [Shep] thought [...]. By God, she's really getting a kick out of it" (Yates 344). As this quotation reveals, the tragic outcome of Frank's and especially April's unhappiness provides material for suburban gossip, which exposes to what extent the neighbors find themselves in steady combat with each other, even when one of the "competitors" is dead. Absurdly, Milly Campbell and her fellow suburbanites seem to be somewhat pleased and satisfied, as this incident provides them with something actually "interesting" as opposed to their monotonous daily lives that solely revolve around house chores and children. Thus, the Wheelers' tragedy "shrinks to a slightly delicious neighborhood horror story and her banal summary" (Mullan, Sweet sorrow). The obvious form of sadism behind this "voluptuous narrative pleasure" (Yates 344) does clearly unfold suburbia as a space of alienation, perversion and artifice, no matter if "much of what goes bad in the Wheelers' lives is their own doing, a result of their selfishness, their weakness and their inability to admit the truth" (O'Nan).

4 "Who Could Not Be Happy with All This?" – AMC's *Mad Men*

Mad Men, first aired in 2007, is a TV series that seems to revolve around the daily challenges and excessive lifestyles of the advertising executives of New York's Madison Avenue. Mostly set in the fictive advertising agency "Sterling Cooper", the audience becomes witness of a working place full of contested hierarchies, individual's expectations and the contemporary working ethic of Cold-War America. Yet, Will Dean most justifiably refers to "the advertising [] solely as a prism through which we can look at the world, in this case the axis-shifting period of the early 1960s" (Foreword vii). Supporting this statement, the show is far more than a series about American advertising in its heyday, but rather mirrors our impression of a whole decade, or rather the prevalent spirit of the time at the dawn of the 1960s. As opposed to the fictional world of *Revolutionary Road*, which is set in the mid-1950s, *Mad Men* heralds the start for the new decade that is about to lead to significant changes not just for women through the emergence of the Second

Wave Feminism, but also for ethnic minorities through the Civil Rights Movement (cf. White 153). However, one should keep in mind that “ ‘The Fifties’ lasted longer than the decade from 1950 to 1959, and are not bound by those end-dates [...] [while] indeed it is the fifties’ [...] cultural ephemera we rely on to date a specific period [] that play such a large part in creating the feeling of authenticity in *Mad Men* [...]” (McDonald 117).

Starting in 1960, the series illustrates not just the inside of the agency, but also the flourishing suburbs and the overall picture of the United States as a prospering and technologically developing force. A very striking theme of the highly celebrated TV show is the situation of women, both in the domestic and the working sphere. Fictionally set exactly three years before Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* and “six years before [she] helps found NOW (National Organization of Women),” (Davidson 137) *Mad Men* provides its audience with the portrayal of very different types of women and their diverse reactions towards their treatment in the patriarchal society of the 1960s. It is important to acknowledge that “*Mad Men* should not be mistaken as a show that fulfills stereotypes, but rather seen as one that presents implicit critique to enlighten viewers” (Rogers 156). Hence, the series unfolds to what extent women are torn between the potential roles they are supposed to play, i.e. either being a “traditional housewife” in the suburbs or a “workingwoman who is gaining independence financially and emotionally but is simultaneously repressed by the continuing social prevalence of patriarchal values” (White 551).

In order to shed light on women’s lives and their constant battle with male hypocrisy and domination throughout the Cold-War decades, this chapter will first examine to what extent the series’ working sphere in New York on the one hand and the domestic realm in the suburbs on the other hand, are two incompatible units, while subsequently investigating the three characters of Betty Draper, Joan Holloway and Peggy Olson. While Betty represents the prototypical suburban housewife, the latter impersonate two different kinds of working women within the dynamics of “Sterling Cooper”. The analysis of the female characters aims at unfolding their different responses to male oppression as well as their individual development, whereby exclusively focusing on the first two seasons.

4.1 Disparate Worlds - Urban Workplace and Suburban Sphere

“Everyday’s an endless stream
Of cigarettes and magazines
And each town looks the same to me
The movies and the factories

And every stranger's face I see
Reminds me that I long to be
Homeward Bound” (Simon and Garfunkel).

Just like Simon and Garfunkel sing about a man’s daily railway ride from the city towards his familiar suburban surrounding, the advertising executives from *Mad Men* experience the same procedure every single day. Funnily enough, even the “cigarettes and magazines” are indeed indispensable goods throughout their daily routine, which does not just take place in the agency, but also in the commuting train that leads away from the urban working place back to the private suburban terrain. Focusing on the short excerpt from Simon and Garfunkel’s prominent piece of music, the duality of suburbia and the city is illuminated through prevalent urban anonymity and rush, while the person’s home probably provides tranquility and regeneration from working in the city and the commuting process it entails.

Throughout *Mad Men*, the audience perceives the commuting train as a somewhat “space of transition”, in which the business executives find themselves in a more or less neutral realm, away from both their working and yet their private spheres. When tuning in to the first episode, one can observe a single woman in her downtown apartment, who is obviously having sexual intercourse with the series’ protagonist, Don Draper (*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, 3:10). The urban apartment embodies seduction as well as vice and guilt in contrast to the episode’s end, when Don commutes home to Ossining. As soon as he enters the train, the music changes to a tranquil and calming melody and thereby introduces the apparent suburban idyll that awaits him after his ride (42:56). Thus, during the train ride, Don Draper somewhat transforms from the busy womanizer, who uses his lunch break to visit his mistress, into the picture-perfect suburban husband that hovers over his children’s beds like the good shepherd and kisses his wife goodnight (45:26). Of course, as the audience already knows about his affair and is therefore one step ahead of his trustful wife Betty, the final scene already evokes a feeling of masquerade on the suburban theater stage.

The aforementioned transformation of the suburban husbands, who – as opposed to the housewives that remain in the domestic realm – are switching between city life and suburbia, is even recognized by the housewives themselves. In one scene, when Betty Draper and her neighbor friend Francine are talking about how uncomfortable they both feel when showing up at their husbands’ offices, Betty claims that every time she enters Don’s working place, it is like “visiting a foreign country without knowing the language” (5G, 29:08). Hence, from the housewives’ point of view, the city is considered to be a

terrain of alienation, estrangement and the unknown, “a dangerous place where [Betty] does not know how to behave” (Davidson 138). This feeling of discomfort leads Betty to maintaining that their husbands “are better out here, aren’t they?” (5G, 29:22). Quite ironically, without being really aware of it, Betty’s statement is indeed true, since in the city Don is constantly cheating on his wife, while at home he plays his role of the perfect and reliable husband. The metaphor of the agency and the city as “a foreign country” is indeed justified, as each time the camera switches to the suburban sphere, the whole mood utterly changes, including musical background, light and, above all, the appearance of the women. In the third episode of the first season, Betty is shown in her cherubic white dress, her hair curled and her pale hands busy with folding the linens. Don is still lying in bed, while Betty tenderly lets him know that “there is a bacon sandwich and eggs for [him] on the range” (Marriage of Figaro, 23:50). Betty’s innocent, angel-like appearance matches with the image of the suburban haven as a pastoral realm, which in turn significantly opposes the urban terrain Don is mostly associated with. As a matter of fact, Betty is the exact contrary to the women Don is having an affair with while his wife is at home fixing dinner for the children. Ironically, right before Betty is exposed in her white dress, the audience observes Don kissing Rachel Menken, a well-known businesswoman, on top of one of Manhattan’s skyscrapers (19:50). Compared to the Madonna-like appearance of Betty Draper, Rachel Menken rather personifies the “femme fatale”, as she is dressed in dark colors, has dark hair and overtly makes use of her coquetry and savoir vivre as a sophisticated, independent woman. Thus, besides the opposing aspects of “familiar” versus “foreign”, the accompanying contradiction is apparently the “black and sinful” city as a contrast to “white and innocent” suburbia.

In the course of the episode, Betty and Francine are having a conversation that could be labeled as typically “suburban”, when for instance they talk about a female neighbor who recently got divorced and is raising her two kids on her own, declaring it as a kind of scandal (25:18). Helen Bishop, the single-mother, is treated and talked about like an “outcast” in Betty’s and Francine’s little world that apparently does not accommodate a “poor thing” (31:30) like Helen, who chose to emancipate herself from her cheating husband and is judged by the housewives because she likes to walk through the neighborhood. Apparently there is nothing else to talk about than Helen Bishop’s relish for taking a walk, which obviously is not part of the other women’s schedule and already sheds light on the limited world those housewives find themselves in. Nevertheless, Betty invites her to her daughter Sally’s birthday party due to a somewhat communal pressure.

When she enumerates all the families she has invited, including Helen Bishop, Francine utters a skeptical “You didn’t”, while Betty explains: “I had to, she saw me buying balloons at the market, it didn’t seem right” (26:25). Thus, it becomes obvious that the invitation is based on sole suburban sanctimony in order to preserve the bubble of love, peace and harmony. Helen Bishop happens to be a workingwoman, which in turn partly explains her outcast state. When some female guests gossip about Helen while she’s outside talking to some men, Betty claims that “she works, it has to be hard to run a house, too” (36:20). Therefore, Helen also seems to belong to the “foreign country”, while being a woman and having two kids makes it even harder for her to be integrated into the suburban housewives’ community and gain its approval.

When Don is supposed to fix the new playhouse for his daughter in the backyard, he embodies the prototypical suburban male, who takes part in a typical suburban leisure activity that functions as a regenerating variation to his office life in the noisy and hectic city (25:55). As opposed to his black suit, Don wears a white shirt and brown pants, which again illustrates the contrast between the two spheres. After the do-it-yourself activity, the Drapers receive their guests and celebrate Sally’s birthday, which seems to be just a pretext to drink alcohol and enjoy the suburban culture of abundance (27:14). Everything seems perfect: All the couples bring their kids, the adults are drinking and smoking together while concurrently sharing the latest news. Except for Helen Bishop, the community couldn’t seem more likeminded.

However, when Don is supposed to fetch the birthday cake for Sally, he does not come back, which leaves Betty to take Helen Bishop’s offer to go get her frozen cake for Sally. Ironically, as Betty and the other housewives gossiped about Helen, “eventually [], it’s the woman with the frozen cake in her freezer who saves the day after Don goes [missing]” (Dean, *The Ultimate* 19). When the party is over and Betty does no longer have to play the perfect wife, the audience perceives a close-up of her face, which clearly expresses disappointment, embarrassment and anger (40:32). When Don returns with a dog as Sally’s belated birthday present, Betty leaves the room. Here, one notices the first really obvious indication of suburbia’s dark side and the masquerade that underlies the seeming pastoral idyll. Nonetheless, for now husband and wife keep playing their roles, which becomes obvious when Don enters the house and Betty tells Helen that “he needs to go up and have a quiet for a while, he works so hard!” (New Amsterdam, 08:35). Thus, suburbia remains a haven for regeneration, in which Don is provided rest not just from his work in the office, but cynically also from sexual intercourses with his mistresses in the city. This

means that he constantly switches between two sectors that provide him with both urban wickedness and suburban family togetherness. On the other hand, the shielded suburban terrain, or more specifically, the Draper's residence, "becomes synonymous and entwined with Betty [...] so that [her] identity is determined by the boundaries of the domestic space" (Davidson 138). Following this statement, the subsequent chapter aims at further investigating Betty's life as a suburban housewife in Ossining and her role as a "wife, mother, house, car, and garage all in one" (139).

4.2 The Limits of Being a Housewife – Betty Draper

As a full-time housewife with two kids and a husband commuting from the suburbs to the big city and vice versa, Betty Draper "has become a product of her time, the prosperous post-war/pre-feminist era, where [many] middle-class [women's] worth was in [their] ability to produce children, raise children, keep house, and entertain" (Davidson 138). When one recalls how Betty Friedan described "the problem that has no name" in the context of *The Feminine Mystique*, the character of Betty Draper "could have been created from Betty Friedan's opening passage" (137). As the TV series clearly portrays distinct gender roles at work and at home, Betty Draper represents the prototypical suburban housewife, whose image supports "patriarchal fantasies of the submissive housewife" (French 550). Suffering from a psychological condition accompanied by unpredictable handshaking and the suburban home being the only realm the audience perceives her in, Stephanie Coontz refers to Betty's character as the "dependent housewife that Betty Friedan critiqued so vividly" (Why 'Mad Men'). However, the subsequent analysis of Betty during the first and later on throughout the second season, shall illuminate to what extent Stephanie Coontz' assertion that Betty "is a woman who thinks a redecorated living room [...] might fill the emptiness inside her" (Why 'Mad Men') does not do justice to the noticeable development within her role as a housewife.

The beginning of the second episode shows Betty Draper driving with her children on the backseat. All of a sudden, her hands start to shake and she loses control over the car, which in turn results in her driving into a stranger's front yard (Ladies Room, 14:30). What the audience can clearly perceive in a close-up of Betty's facial expression, is a mixture of desperation, shock and collapse of strength. This is one of the key moments that influences how the audience will continue perceiving the character of Betty Draper, namely as "afflicted with the quintessential nineteenth-century female disorder, hysteria; for no apparent reason, she suffers temporary paralysis in her hands" (White 149). And indeed,

Betty portrays the typical 1950s housewife that corresponds to what Friedan critically observed in *The Feminine Mystique*, as the audience learns that Betty has already consulted a doctor who reassured her that “there [is] nothing physically wrong with [her]” (18:57). Rather, her doctor suggests her to see a psychiatrist, as it could be a nervous condition. Don’s reaction to this whole handshaking business is anything but sympathetic. In a strikingly harsh tone, he solely asks: “Nervous about what? Driving? I always thought people just need a psychiatrist when they are unhappy! Are you unhappy?” (21:15- 21:24). Apparently, Don, like so many other husbands during that time, does not grasp the essential reason for his wife’s condition. He equates happiness with material goods and social status, which becomes most obvious when he and his boss Roger Sterling ask themselves “what women want”, while wondering about “who could not be happy with all this” (29:48). Striking and very typical for the prototypical image of the submissive suburban housewife, is Betty’s answer to Don’s question whether she is happy or not: “Of course I’m happy” (21:30). Here, the audience can clearly notice to what extent her answer contradicts her facial expression and thus her inner feelings, as a close-up reveals her ubiquitous insecurity and discontent.

Don’s solution to his wife’s problem is triggered by Roger Sterling’s philosophy as far as women’s wishes are concerned. While Don apprehends that there seems to be “some mysterious wish inside [women] that [they] are ignoring,” (24:00) Roger claims that women just want everything, thus “reduc[ing] women’s unhappiness to competitiveness with other women [, while even] [downgrading] [psychological] therapy to a product that he might advertise – ‘this year’s candy pink stove’” (Krouse 190). Following Roger’s assertion that “happiness [] is a commodity,” (190) Don solemnly hands a splendid piece of jewelry to Betty, almost selflessly confessing that “when [he] told [her she] had everything, [he] was wrong” (Ladies Room, 30:40). Just when Betty starts to worry about a permanent scar in her daughter’s face due to the accident, as “a girl’s face is so much work” and Sally would be condemned to live “a sad and lonely life,” (31:25) Don realizes what the audience has already recognized from the first moment on: Betty’s condition is not to be cured with material wealth. However, Betty herself cannot really express what is wrong with her either, which exactly reflects Betty Friedan’s observation of the “problem that has no name”. Eventually, Don agrees to consult a psychiatrist, whom Betty is subsequently telling the following: “I don’t know why I’m here. I mean, I do, I’m nervous, I guess. Anxious. I don’t sleep that well. And my hands. They’re fine now, it’s like when you have a problem with your car and you go to a mechanic and it’s not doing it anymore.

Not that you're a mechanic" (38:12). The fact that Betty herself just guesses about the diagnosis others have already put upon her, namely "nervousness and anxiety", exposes to what extent she is incapable of entirely expressing where her problems are rooted. Sarah French argues that Betty's "numb hands [function] as a psychosomatic response to the repressed emotions that she is unable to consciously register" (552). Betty is not a housewife who could possibly feel overburdened with domestic tasks, as she even has an additional housekeeper, the young African-American Carla, who takes care of the Draper's children whenever they are not told to watch television. This in turn provides Betty "with an overabundance of leisure time [and] [...] lack of activity [, which] leaves her in a state of boredom and loneliness" (553). It is ironic that Betty's psychiatrist tells Don, who secretly keeps in touch with the doctor, that Betty "has the emotions of a child" and is "overwhelmed with everyday activities" (Red in the Face, 1:00).

The very striking and significant thing to observe is that even though the Draper residence and the domestic home is seen as an equivalent to Betty herself, she is not even completely in charge of her one and only realm and "maintains limited authority and control within the home" (French 552). For instance, when Don is inviting his boss Roger Sterling for dinner, Roger obviously tries to seduce Betty when Don leaves the room in order to get some beer in the garage, while Betty does repel Roger's attempts. When Don returns, he notices that something has happened during his absence and later, when Roger has left, accuses Betty of having "thrown herself at Roger" (Red in the Face, 15:50). As soon as Betty insists on the truth, Don even gets rough on her, grabbing her arm and claiming: "I know what I saw, I don't want to be treated that way in my own home! [...] Sometimes I feel like I'm living with a little girl" (16:19-16:40). No matter what the accusations or prohibitions look like, Betty does not raise her voice, but rather blames herself for being stupid and naïve. This becomes most obvious when Betty, with a shy look on her face, lets a good-looking salesman into her home, although, as soon as he wants to go upstairs to measure something in Betty's and Don's bedroom, she feels intimidated and wants him to leave immediately (Indian Summer, 11:38). Still, when Betty and Don are lying in bed later on, she tells him about the salesman right after her husband refuses to have sex with her. Obviously, Betty aims at making Don jealous of a potential "other man", especially as he does not seem interested in sexual intercourse, probably because he just returned from one of his mistresses. However, her confession of letting the salesman in leads to her being "heavily chastised by her husband" (French 552). Nevertheless, when Francine asks Betty about Don's reaction to that incident, Betty naively and

euphemistically states that “he lost his temper, he is very protective” (Indian Summer, 23:48). Some time later, Betty even apologizes for letting the salesman in, giving Don the acknowledgement he needs as the family patriarch. Thus, Betty neither has the freedom to choose whom she trusts and wants to let into her home, nor is she allowed to utter any kind of melancholy due to the recent death of her mother, as this is immediately undermined by Don: “Bet’s, don’t! No melancholy! [...] Mourning is just extended self-pity” (Babylon, 5:03-5:50). Hence, the home is indeed synonymous to Betty, yet it also functions as a prison, fostering Betty’s “sheltered existence” and consequently her self-perception of being “insubstantial, incomplete and unstable without the strength and validation of her husband” (French 552). The domestic terrain therefore is space for both, Betty’s safety and her simultaneous entrapment (cf. Davidson 138).

The image of Betty as being the “lonely housewife, devoid of any self identity,” (Rogers 165) is further supported when in one scene, Betty reassures her husband that the sexual intercourse with him that awaits her in the evening is all she can look forward to during the day: “I want you so much. I’ve thought about it all day. I mean it, it’s all I think about. Your car coming down the driveway. I put the kids to bed early, I make the grocery list, but I can’t stop thinking about this. I want you so badly” (Babylon, 7:12). This statement of hers exactly reflects what one of the psychiatrists that Betty Friedan quoted in *The Feminine Mystique*, and which this paper has already brought forward, has observed as well: the image of a woman “who has no identity except as a wife and mother [...] [and] waits all day for her husband to come home at night to make her feel alive” (qtd. in Friedan 29). As a consequence, the audience perceives Betty as a housewife who defines herself solely through her husband, while neglecting any individual personality. Her routine of “watching the kitchen clock, chain-smoking as the children eat fish sticks [and] counting the minutes until Don returns from his Manhattan office” (Davidson 138) is the only thing she actually clings to in her monotonous life as “Don’s wife” and “Sally and Bobby’s mother”.

However, these scenes concurrently illuminate that Betty is not the innocent, childlike housewife she appears to be, but really longs for the satisfaction of her sexual needs. The audience can grasp that these needs are voiced from a grown-up woman with individual desires and not from a housewife who just wants to please her husband. As Tamar Jeffers McDonald points out, “it is not Don per se that Betty desires so much as his recognition that she has strong sexual feelings demanding fulfillment” (119). Unfortunately, Don is not able to differentiate between her “maternal identity [and her]

beauty/sexual desirability” (Davidson 139). From Don’s point of view, Betty is supposed to play just one role, as he “likes to keep women in his life firmly placed in either the wife or the mistress role. [...] Wives can’t be sexy, and mistresses can’t be mothers” (Krouse 195). Apart from Don’s frequent refusal to sleep with his wife when she would like to (“Honey, it’s hot and I have to read this book!” [Babylon, 21:14]), he also dislikes when she is walking through the home in her new swimsuit, which hardly seems over-revealing. However, to Don, “Betty’s choice of swimwear, and the fact that she looks attractive and sexy in it, poses a threat [...] to upset his binary opposition between virgin and whore, angel and monster, with which Don [...] seem[s] most comfortable” (Krouse 195). When Betty defends herself, claiming that “everyone bought one at the auction”, Don just harshly replies: “It’s desperate” (Maidenform, 33:40). This response fosters Betty’s lack of self-security, pride and psychological as well as physical contentment. Her reaction to his rough assertion, “I didn’t know that”, illustrates her incapability to stand up for her personal needs and preferences, while instead choosing the path of subordination and humility.

However, the image of Betty as the submissive, “Family Circle”-reading, picture-perfect housewife lacking in identity starts to crumble already throughout the first season. For the first time, this becomes evident when Betty walks out into the garden and fires a shotgun at her neighbor’s pigeons, who had threatened her children before (Shoot, 46:15). This episode is constructed in quite an expressive way, as it commences with a close-up of Betty in the yard, accompanied by nostalgic music and a sudden shift to a flock of pigeons that her neighbor has just released into the air. The fact that her husband Don tends to call her “birdy”, attributes a very powerful and emphatic symbolism to this almost bucolic scene. As soon as the pigeons start to fly, Betty’s facial expression reveals her awareness of being trapped in her suburban cage and simultaneously her probable desire to just fly away like those pigeons (1:00). Still, in the first scene she does appear like the perfect housewife, rearranging the flowerbeds and greeting her neighbor with a timid smile, whereas the very last scene functions as a kind of transformer, exposing Betty as anything but the domestic angel she is used to embody. Ironically accompanied by Bobby Vinton singing “you are my angel for eternity,” this scene reveals the façade that underlies Betty’s existence in her role as a housewife that is slowly starting to be contested. However, at this point of the series, this “image of Betty in a masculine stance firing a shotgun with a cigarette hanging from her mouth as an empowered one” is still “a manifestation of Betty’s repressed emotions” (French 553) and not an act of overt emancipation.

Yet, in the exact episode, the audience learns that Betty used to do modeling before she met her husband, while in a talk with her psychiatrist she finally articulates her dissatisfaction. With a sigh, she explains that after she met Don, she had to quit modeling, got engaged and then became pregnant, which resulted in their relocation to the suburbs. Then, Betty utters something very revealing both in terms of her own self-reflection and the audience's perception of her character: "Suddenly I felt so old [...] My mother wanted me to be beautiful so I could find a man. There's nothing wrong with that [...] But then what? You sit and smoke and let it go until you're in a box?" (Shoot, 11:00-13:40). Here, the viewer can grasp that Betty is fundamentally unhappy, feeling like an old, retired person and watching the days go by while smoking her cigarettes. Due to this realization and the courage to admit her discontent as a housewife, she tells Don that she would love to work as a model again: "I miss modeling. I'd get paid and the nanny could watch the kids. It's just something that I want to do" (16:10). Eventually, Betty is offered a job as a Coca-Cola model, yet loses it again. What she does not know is that Don is in contact with her model agency and refuses to take a job offer from them, which finally leads to his wife's dismissal. When she learns that she can no longer work for the company, she cries, while at the end of the day, she pretends that she does not want to work anymore, thus trying to hide her perceived failure as a workingwoman (42:58). Don tries to console her by stating that she already has a job, being a wonderful mother and fulfilling her role as a caring wife (44:00).

What has already started to loom towards the end of the first season, develops into rebellion on behalf of Betty, which at first seems to remain rather subtle, but eventually turns into an explicit emancipation from the role she despises. Betty starts to further display her sexual awareness and attractiveness not as means to subordination, but for the sake of her independence and strength. When she has a breakdown in the middle of the street, she uses her feminine appearance to convince a mechanic to take just three dollars instead of the required sum of nine dollars and seems to enjoy her power (For Those Who Think Young, 44:00). Thus, for the first time, she is aware of the positive effect her body has on other men and eventually perceives satisfactory feedback from strangers as opposed to her own husband. Some time later, when Betty meets a young guy who had tried to kiss her before, she initially seems to feel uncomfortable, glancing anxiously in Don's direction. Yet, like a sudden inspiration, Betty gains her self-determination and starts to enjoy the admiration from her young interlocutor. However, when her children interrupt

the scene, the young man leaves and a close-up of Betty shows her discontent and disappointment of being a mother (Maidenform 9:00).

In “A Night to Remember,” the initial scene shows Betty riding her horse over-ambitiously, evoking the feeling that riding functions as some sort of therapy for her. When she comes home, the audience can perceive a clear change in the conversational tone between Don and Betty. One episode earlier, Betty has learned that Don is cheating on her, yet she has decided to not confront him with her knowledge yet. Instead, she plays perfect housewife, receiving business partners in her home and fixing a wonderful dinner. Still, Don’s “birdy” does no longer produce any effect on behalf of Betty, who starts to “react against Don’s infidelity and becomes increasingly active in making her own choices” (French 554). One very striking and significant scene is when she destroys one of the chairs in the dining room in front of her kids, which seems to give her temporary satisfaction and release (A Night to Remember, 08:25). As soon as the guests are gone, Betty finishes the dishes and determinedly heads towards Don, accusing him of having embarrassed her in front of his colleagues during a discussion about what kind of beer housewives tend to buy. In an unfamiliarly harsh and self-secure tone, she claims: “You just do whatever you want, and I put up with it, because nobody knows [...] I’m not going to bed, not until you tell me why you insist on humiliating me. I know about you and that woman. Damn it, Don, I know you are having an affair” (22:40 – 24:00). At the end of the episode, Betty calls Don in his office, telling him to not come home: “I don’t care what you do, I just don’t want you here” (43:18). Apparently, Betty’s development is fostered by Don’s affairs, while the audience cannot know if Betty would have turned into that self-conscious woman if she had not found out about his liaisons. Still, one could argue that Don’s cheating just functions as a trigger for what Betty has been carrying inside of her for a long time. In the last episode of the second season, there is an incident that resembles what April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road* has gone through as well. Betty waits in the doctor’s room, staring trance-like at a picture of two deer (Meditations in an Emergency, 00:47), which leaves the audience guessing if Betty does identify with those innocent-looking creatures or if her look rather expresses distance from her former “deer-like” role. However, considering the circumstances, the latter seems to be far more plausible. The doctor, who announces that Betty is pregnant again, yet interrupts this nostalgic moment. Her reaction towards this news is anything but joyful: “I can’t believe this [...] I can’t have a baby right now” (1:11-1:58). The thought of becoming a mother again makes Betty feel desperate and almost angry, while it seems that her marital discord is not the only reason

for her aversion against having another child. Ironically, the doctor's response to Betty's discomfort lies in telling her to "take it easy, that's what husbands are for" (1:11). Similar to April Wheeler, "Betty inquires about the possibility of abortion without saying the actual word," (Davidson 142) while the other parallel that can be drawn between April's and Betty's situation is that "instead of feeling that this plot development offers a potential rebirth [] for the couple, we are left feeling that this unwanted pregnancy primarily signifies loss" (142). Indeed, although Betty and Don seem to reunite due to her pregnancy, in season three Betty "actively seeks her own happiness which culminates in her [divorcing] Don" (French 554). In the last episode of the second season, a complete reversal of roles takes place, when Betty leaves the children with Don, while she enters a bar on her own, ending up having a one-night-stand with a total stranger in the restroom. Thus, during that night, Betty enjoys the independent life that her husband plays out every single day, whereby Don is forced to take care of the kids. Even though Sarah French argues that Betty's development remains superficial, since she eventually replaces Don "in the patriarchal role of [a] successful and protective husband" (554) through a new partner, Betty's personal progress throughout the second season should not be underrated. Being introduced as a submissive and frustrated housewife who seems to be specially geared to Friedan's description of the "problem that has no name," she develops into a more or less self-assertive woman who "takes control of the house [,when she wants Don to leave,] and [the] car [,when she handles the breakdown on her own,] and, in doing so, changes the boundaries of her identity" (Davidson 139). Thus, as already indicated, Don's infidelity is not the sole reason, but rather "the catalyst Betty needs to redraw the terms of her marriage" (140) and her role as a mother. As a consequence, the picture-perfect constellation of the showpiece-nuclear family is revealed to be a façade, while especially the patriarchal structure with Don as "the head of the house or the father who knows best" (140) is dissolved through Betty's gained autonomy and courage. Still, the aforementioned critique by Sarah French deserves to be taken into account as well, as in the course of the third season, after Betty remarries, she does not pursue her former wish to become a model again and rather continues to live a life similar to that with Don. Therefore, questions arise as to "whether Betty has undergone any real transformation or liberation or simply substituted one life of dependence for another" (554).

4.3 Working Women's Situation on Madison Avenue

Besides the chauvinistic and well-played characters of the scheming and almost epicurean male advertising executives of Madison Avenue, one of the major reasons why *Mad Men* attracts such a great number of viewers is probably its variable display of women within the circle of "Sterling Cooper". Apart from the portrayal of the suburban housewife, the professional situation of women at the dawn of the 1960s plays a central role in *Mad Men*, while there are two characters that deserve to be particularly and thoroughly examined: Joan Holloway and Peggy Olson. Unlike the standard and over-generalized assumption that all women during that era strived for the same thing, namely "a house, husband and children," (McDonald 121) the characters of Joan and Peggy signify "the millions of women of that era competing for a seat at the table in a male-dominated world" (De La Torre 121). However, both women choose very different approaches for asserting their autonomy: While Joan's strategy is based on overtly performing her "femininity and curvaceous body at work," (O'Barr) Peggy "tries to keep her distance from these circuits of looking and (erotic) desire, wanting to behave differently and change the script" (Akass and McCabe 187). Due to the extremely sexist environment Joan and Peggy find themselves in, questions arise as to how both characters develop with regard to the arising feminist movement at the end of the 1960s. Therefore, this chapter focuses on two very different types of working women, their mutual relationship and their behavior within a male-dominated working sphere, while particularly investigating whether both women actually perceive the autonomy and respect they are striving for.

4.3.1 Joan Holloway

Joan is introduced as a very self-secure, self-conscious executive secretary within Sterling Cooper, who tells the other secretaries what to do, while constantly trying to contribute to the male executives' contentment. In the very first episode, the audience can already grasp to what extent Joan functions as some sort of manager or chief of the other secretaries, when she instructs the new girl Peggy Olson as to how the typing pool of the agency works. As she strides through the office, showing Peggy around, one can notice how she "commands the space with her 'to-be-looked-at-ness,'" (Mulvey qtd. in Akass and McCabe 181) attracting not just the male executives' passionate views, but also marking her territory as the woman that "all the other secretaries look [up] to" (Rogers 162). When she gives advice on how to behave and how to dress in the office, the camera significantly displays Joan from a low-angle perspective, so that Peggy seems to be inferior to her. At

least for that moment, Joan occupies a higher position in the working hierarchy of Sterling Cooper. Both for her male and her female colleagues, Joan keeps “things running efficiently [...] [and] fills in when a job becomes vacant” (O’Barr). When claiming that she knows how the agency works, her knowledge is not restricted to the paperwork that is required, but also or primarily to the unofficial premises a secretary is supposed to fulfill in terms of the male bosses’ sexual needs and preferences. Telling Peggy that the male executives “may act like they need a secretary, but most of the time [] are looking for something between a mother and a waitress [,] and the rest of the time...well,” (Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, 08:46) it becomes obvious that Joan is aware of “the power that her sexuality wields [, using] it intelligently to gain power over the other women in the office and even to control and use the men in the office to her benefit” (Rogers 162). Her remark, however, does clearly refer to the role she and the other secretaries play in favor of the men, which is completely unfolded when Joan gives her second advice to Peggy: “Go home, take a paper bag and cut some eyeholes out of it. Put it on your head, get undressed, look at yourself in the mirror and really evaluate where your strengths and weaknesses are – and be honest” (Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, 08:58). This direct instruction to find out about her sexual appeal and how Peggy might use it as a tool to get along in the office, accompanied by her advice to never “yell, be sarcastic [but rather be] subordinate,” (Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, 24:40) reveals, to what extent Joan “values herself predominantly on the basis of her appearance and [] maintains deeply entrenched patriarchal values” (French 554). Later, in the seventh episode, the viewer learns that Joan has an affair with one of the agency’s partners, Roger Sterling and when Peggy tells her that Donald Draper has an affair, the only reaction Joan can expose is that she has “always wondered why he ignored [her]” (5G, 32:40). After an irritated view from Peggy, Joan gives her a lesson once again, stating: “That is how these men are and that’s why we love them” (33:08). In adopting the role of Peggy’s mentor, Joan constantly criticizes her choice of clothes, telling her to exhibit more of her legs and to leave dresses at home that are “not helping [her] silhouette” (Shoot, 17:30). She seems to be extremely experienced in the men’s world – both physically and business-wise, so that the only advice she can give when Peggy is complaining about her exclusion from many business decisions after she was promoted, is: “You are in their [the males’] country. Learn to speak their language. You want to be taken seriously? Stop dressing like a little girl” (Maidenform, 34:40).

However, the apparent female power that underlies Joan’s self-assertion “and her palpable confidence [as] a source of self-esteem“ (Rogers 162) is overshadowed by her

obvious acceptance of inferiority in many situations, even when internally she totally defies her subordination. The “limitation of Joan’s access to female empowerment” (French 555) becomes most apparent when she is denied to continue her job as a script reader and is instead replaced by a less capable man (*A Night to Remember*, 38:03). When she is asked to help out with reading some scripts in the television department, Joan immediately “embraces the new responsibility” (Rogers 163). Being exceptionally adept, she is of tremendous help to the department and even takes her work back home, where her husband downgrades her contribution and with it his wife in person, claiming that she “should be watching those shows, not reading them” (21:30). For the first time in the series, Joan seems to undergo some sort of “awakening”, displaying a desire for a more fulfilling work that lives up to her creative skills she did not even know she had. However, although Joan, combining her outer appearance and her cleverness, convinces the agency’s client in a meeting who admits that he “love[s] what she says and [he] love[s] the way she says it,” (32:00) she eventually has to hand over her job to an incompetent newcomer. When she is told to return to her old job as a secretary, Joan apparently tries to keep her composure, while the audience can notice an undeniable mixture of anger, disappointment and embarrassment in her face. Still, instead of fighting against or at least contesting the transfer of her job, Joan keeps covering her humiliation and continues to arrange telephone calls instead. Kim Akass refers to this specific scene as “herald[ing] Joan’s return to silent spectacle, only able to speak through those verbose looks, pregnant pauses and loquacious gestures” (187). Ironically, it is Joan who tells Peggy some episodes earlier, after the latter is promoted to be a junior copywriter, that “when people get what they want, they realize how limited their goals [really] were” (*The Wheel*, 44:15). Obviously, although “Joan may be a crack secretary and office manager, [] she is never going to be taken seriously beyond the clerical level. To the men at Sterling Cooper, she will never fit the part, no matter her ability” (White 151). Without certainly knowing if her sexualized image has thwarted her ambition to work as a script reader, one cannot help but suspect that it played an important role in her being withheld the appreciation and respect she deserves to receive from her male colleagues (cf. McDonald 128). As opposed to Peggy Olson, whom the subsequent chapter will thoroughly focus on, Joan “conforms to the patriarchal fantasy of femininity and becomes trapped within that fantasy” (French 556). It becomes obvious that Joan actually has the capacity of slipping into another role, a role that defies that aforementioned “fantasy” of the sole sexual object that happens to be able to operate a typewriter, yet she is not fully capable of determinedly expressing her desires and,

therefore, fails at “transfer[ing] across the line between secretary and executive” (McDonald 128).

Joan’s radiated self-security through a calculated use of her body and wit does not necessarily entail her success as an equally respected colleague, but in her case rather supports the image of her being a smart yet too voluptuous secretary. Although Sarah Roger argues that “Joan uses her sexuality in much the same way Peggy owns and uses her brain,” (162) the distinctive step to emancipate herself from rather than contributing to men’s unilateral, i.e. sexual perception of her, remains missing. Therefore, it is questionable if Joan is to be equated with Peggy in sending a message of being “autonomous, [...] us[ing] [her] individual skills in the office to gain power and climb the corporate ladder” (Rogers 164). Considering her lack of combative spirit when it comes to the job she really enjoys doing and the almost depreciating lectures about how to subordinate to the male executives’ wishes, she rather represents one of the “least progressive” (French 554) female characters in the first two seasons, since, despite her awareness of professional alternatives, she deliberately sticks to the permanent condition of subordination and obedience.

4.3.2 Peggy Olson

It is an ordinary day on New York’s Madison Avenue, when Peggy Olson enters “Sterling Cooper” for the first time. As the “new girl” that has recently finished secretarial school, Peggy is immediately plunged in at the deep end, when Office Manager Joan advises her to make an appointment with a doctor in order receive the pill. Peggy appears to be very conscientious and willing to learn from the first minute on, yet one can instantly tell that she is highly intimidated by the sexist environment of Sterling Cooper. This already starts during her first elevator ride up to the office, when two advertising executives and her future colleagues are sexually harassing her (Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, 06:30). When at first, Peggy considers this kind of behavior an inappropriate exception, she soon has to learn that, in her job as a secretary, radiating sexual availability is common courtesy. When Joan introduces her to her future boss, Don Draper, another male executive, Pete Campbell, scans Peggy conspicuously, asking her if she was an Amish (16:50). Apparently, wearing a skirt that fully covers Peggy’s thighs is considered prudish and inadequate within the advertising agency. When the male executives take Peggy and Joan out for lunch, they keep uttering indecent comments on Peggy’s appearance and what they would like to do with her. As Joan seems to feel comfortable in the role of the men’s

sexual object of desire, Peggy feels constrained to swallow their condescending utterances and tries to play the game just like Joan. However, right after lunch, she disgustedly asks Joan: “Why is it that every time a man takes you out to lunch, you’re the dessert?” (Ladies Room, 36:00). Although she seems to separate herself from these kinds of encounters, in the first episode Peggy eventually ends up taking the pill and fulfilling Pete Campbell’s wish to sleep with him one night before his wedding.

However, the perception of Peggy as being delicate and vulnerable to her sexist male surroundings, tremendously changes throughout the subsequent episodes. This becomes most evident when the agency is doing a “lipstick brainstorming” with the secretaries in a special room, while “the men observe from behind a one-way mirror and eavesdrop on the conversations, [taking] note of what the women are doing and saying, but not without denigrating them, judging their sexiness, and ignoring those they do not consider attractive” (O’Barr). Throughout the executives’ “male gaze,” (O’Barr) it is Peggy who attracts attention, not due to a sensual pose in front of the mirror, but because she is the only woman who does not participate in testing the “Belle Jolie lipsticks”. During the whole procedure, Peggy clearly keeps her distance from the other women, while almost sympathetically watching their exaggerated girlish euphoria over the different colors and nuances. When after the session, one executive asks her why she did not choose any lipstick, Peggy claims: “I’m very particular [...] I don’t think anyone wants to be one of a hundred colors in a box” (Babylon, 32:23). Thus, it becomes fairly obvious that Peggy “is not just another color in the box [, as her] answer bespeaks of a different attitude towards female subjectivity: The ‘Mad Men’ may busy themselves constructing identities and telling women what they want, but it is how women like Peggy struggle for identity in and through those representations that is at stake here” (Akass and McCabe 187). As opposed to Joan, who uses her body as a means to gain power, Peggy “sees her brain as the only power tool she needs” (Rogers 159). As a matter of fact, when she is told to collect the trash, so that the executives can analyze the women’s used tissues and which color they most frequently chose, Peggy hands it to Freddy Rumsen, one of her male colleagues, while modestly saying: “Here is your basket of kisses” (Babylon, 31:58). Actually, this witty utterance is the starting point for her career as a copywriter, as Rumsen shares her thoughts with the other executives, who instantly grasp Peggy’s potential and her way of looking at things. With a slightly cynical tone, Joan announces the good news to Peggy and two episodes later, the copy with her slogan on it is sold to the agency’s client. When she celebrates her subtle but important success in a bar, it becomes obvious to what extent her

image of a workingwoman full of ideas contradicts Pete Campbell's ideal of her, when he almost disgustedly states: "I don't like you like this" (The Hobo Code, 30:56). Obviously, the emergence of her autonomy within the agency does not match Pete's preferences, namely maintaining a superior position over an inferior and submissive woman. Just as Don feels anxious about the display of Betty's attractiveness in her swimsuit that contradicts his maternal image of her, Pete feels threatened by Peggy's evolving self-confidence that defies any kind of subordination. Although this is the start of Peggy's journey towards self-realization and emancipation, she yet has to overcome a great number of obstacles amidst the male-dominated agency, being excluded from meetings and subjected to sexist talk within the male executives' circle.

However, towards the end of the first season, Peggy is able to earn her second credit as a creative copywriter, although she is still employed as a secretary. When she exposes her ideas to the group of men, Ken Cosgrove, one of her colleagues, claps her on the shoulder and confirms her success: "God job, Pegs!" (Indian Summer, 37:09). In this context, the clapping on her shoulder should probably not be confused with any kind of degradation, but rather signifies her capacity to be treated as an equal from the men's point of view. At the end of the episode, Peggy even has the strength to ask for her own desk that she urgently needs for copywriting, while also requesting a pay raise of five dollars per week. The immediate answer she gets from Don and his changing mind at the very end of the episode, illustrates, to what extent Peggy is still a victim of male arbitrariness and despotism. When first, Don claims that she presented herself like a man and now she should act like one, he later states, with a powerful smile on his face: "Peggy, we have both had a very good day. You're going to have your raise and I'll talk to Ms. Holloway about your desk" (42:30). This second step that fosters her autonomy in the office's circle finally culminates in Don declaring her "a junior copywriter," who is in immediate charge of the "Clearasil"- account (The Wheel, 43:25). Despite the obvious dependence on male decisions, Peggy seems to have received what she deserves, so that "her pathway is becoming cleared for career advancement" (Haralovich 170). When there is a casting for the advertisement that she created, Peggy even gives orders to her male coworker, Ken Cosgrove, in a very determined and self-secure way. Thus, as opposed to the first episode, Peggy has transformed from a "girl" struggling with her role as a secretary into an autonomous and competent copywriter who knows what she wants. Her superiority to the other secretaries, which all seem to accept the omnipresent sexual harassment, becomes evident when she deliberately leaves the election party, after observing Ken Cosgrove

undressing one of the secretaries to see if he was right about her underpants' color. Hence, Peggy is the only female character so far who “[.] with calm confidence and perhaps willing denial, [] ignores the sexism and is vigilant about positioning herself inside the agency process [instead]” (Haralovich 171).

Still, Peggy's wave of success is coming to a sudden close, when at the end of the episode, after complaining about a supposedly spoiled sandwich, the doctor tells her that she is pregnant (The Wheel, 45:25). As soon as the doctor puts her hand on her belly so that she can bond with the human being starting to grow inside of her, Peggy pushes his hand away and wants to leave. Her refusal to accept her pregnancy is deeply tied to her new career ambitions, which seem inevitable with being a mother. Eventually, Peggy abandons her child, which results in the State of New York declaring her incapability of keeping the baby. It is no coincidence that the first season ends with her pregnancy and the second season commences with Peggy's life “seemingly unaltered [,as it] indicates that whatever her suffering over giving the baby up for adoption, it is not for us to witness. [Instead, one can perceive that] she successfully managed to move forward without letting the baby impact on her career [....]” (McDonald 130). Besides the rather positive perception of Peggy after rehabilitating from her childbearing and the adoption, the elision of the pregnancy “dramatically indicates the stigma attendant on unmarried motherhood in this period” (130).

Yet, with the new season, Peggy returns to the office with new strength and ambition, walking through the agency in a very self-secure and determined way, while beating the men around her once more in earning credit for the advertisement of “Mohawk Airlines” (For Those Who Think Young, 39:48). One of the most significant and revealing scenes is the encounter between Peggy and Bobby Barrett, a successful New York businesswoman. When she asks Peggy if she likes Don, Peggy replies that “he made [her] a copywriter”, while Barrett immediately reacts, claiming: “I bet you made yourself a copywriter” (The New Girl, 27:13). Apparently, Bobby aims to point out how much potential Peggy actually has and how she should keep using it. Hereby, the following advice should be evaluated as fundamental for the course of Peggy's further development: “You have to start living the life of the person you want to be. You're never going to get that corner office until you start treating Don as an equal. And, no one will tell you this: you can't be a man, so don't even try. Be a woman. It's powerful business when done correctly. Do you understand what I'm saying, dear?” (35:35). Taking Bobbie's advice to heart, Peggy's interaction with her male colleagues changes from that moment on, which

eventually leads to Peggy not just being the “first female copywriter at Sterling Cooper but also the first woman to have her own office” (Davidson 146). Peggy knows where her strengths lie and she uses her brain as means to climb the ladder of success. When the male executives state that “every woman is a Jackie [Kennedy] or a Marilyn [Monroe],” Peggy contradicts them, pointing out that “not all women are a Jackie or Marilyn, maybe men just see them that way” (Maidenform, 20:10- 20:53). Defying the role of either being a “Jackie” or a “Marilyn” “, Peggy does not fit the fantasy dichotomy of ‘woman’ in postwar/pre-feminist America” (Davidson 147). At the end of the second season, Peggy has her own office and admits her pregnancy to the baby’s father, Pete Campbell, whom she dumps, while telling him that “[she] could have shamed [him] into being with [her]. [...] But [she] wanted other things” (Meditations in an Emergency, 42:40).

Taking all these aspects into consideration, it becomes obvious that despite the ubiquitous hierarchical structure in favor of men, Peggy embodies a tremendously significant character as far as “female empowerment within an oppressive patriarchal order” (French 556) is concerned. Bringing forward values that are deeply tied to the emerging wave of feminism in the 1960s, Peggy overtly contests the patriarchal dynamics and thereby largely gains control over them. Thus, whereas Betty and Joan relate to contemporary submissive images of the 1950s and 1960s female ideal, Peggy represents a strong, autonomous image of a woman, who gains her personal success by standing up for her own rights.

5 Conclusion

This paper investigated the role of women within the framework of the so-called “nuclear family” during the Cold-War era, whereby particular focus was laid on the concept of suburbia and its relatedness to the perception and propagation of the prototypical suburban housewife. As the first section of this paper pointed out, Cold-War politics and the propagandistic mass media played a significant role in shaping people’s perception of what the ideal American family should look like. In this context, the reception of the 1950s has been highly influenced by constructed images of the pastoral idylls of suburbia and its inherent “happy housewife” being content with her domestic duties for the sake of familial harmony.

However, chapters 2.1 and 2.2 have tried to reveal both the concept of suburbia and the image of the suburban housewife as exceeding the unilateral Cold-War classification of the satisfied housewife within an idyllic peripheral terrain. Firstly, chapter 2.1 exposed that

suburbia was evaluated as the one and only place to be right after World War II, yet it actually entailed drawbacks such as isolation and monotony and provided room for artifice that in turn was supposed to overshadow the suburbanites' alleged discontent for the sake of the community's glow of perfection and like-mindedness. Subsequently, chapter 2.2 focused on the image of the suburban housewife, while unfolding the common perception of her natural happiness through a voluntary restriction to the domestic sphere as invalid.

In this context, the examination of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* from 1963 tried to burst the common image of the "happy housewife," as Friedan's observations and remarks obviously contradicted the long-held ideal of what women's contentment and self-awareness was based on. Considering the suburban home as a domestic trap that denied any chances for self-fulfillment, Friedan, despite her over-generalized picture of the 1950s housewife which she was criticized for, overcame contemporary conventional ideals and, therefore, has changed the course of women's situations in the United States up until today.

In *Revolutionary Road*, the prevalent gender roles that are promoted by Cold-War politics are revealed to be a sole illusion and are completely reversed throughout the novel. Through the character of April Wheeler, the reader does gain insight into the discontent of a 1950s housewife and her desperate attempt to receive personal fulfillment, which her children and her husband are not able to provide her with. April's desire to work outside the home mirrors what a great amount of women had been striving for in their roles as mothers and homemakers during the Cold-War era. Here, the female protagonist's final abortion of her child that results in her death, metaphorically underlines the pointlessness many women were facing day in, day out, while in April's case, it yet represents the most extreme form of defying the heteronomous life in the suburbs that she cannot bear to live. Therefore, Yates' novel does not just work as a mirror of 1950s suburban artifice, but also reflects the highly complex image of the suburban housewife through the character of April Wheeler, who finds herself stuck between the role as a housewife and the courage to break the boundaries and live the life she is longing for.

As the last section of this paper brought forward, the female characters of the TV series *Mad Men* vary in different directions, thus embodying the complex and very different kinds of women during the early 1960s. While Betty Draper is solely connected to the suburban home, Joan Holloway and Peggy Olson personify two kinds of working women within a sexist working environment. Betty, functioning as the equivalent to the subordinate housewife Friedan described in *The Feminine Mystique*, is first displayed as

content and only worries about her family's well-being, while precociously she starts to reflect her condition as a housewife, feeling lonely, bored and dissatisfied with her life, which solely depends on her husband's homecoming at night. Although she eventually rebels against her dissatisfaction, she is not able to completely emancipate from her only role as a housewife. While Joan endures the sexist treatment on behalf of the male executives and does not defy her image of a subordinate secretary, even functioning as the men's sex object, Peggy, however, is able to develop from a timid and humble secretary to a self-confident and autonomous copywriter, who does not define herself through her body but defies any kind of female stereotype. Standing up for her own rights, Peggy thus personifies the changing mood that already foreshadows the Second Wave Feminist Movement in the late 1960s.

Taking everything into consideration, the frequently occurring image of the 1950s suburban housewife contradicted many women's realities throughout that complex and heterogeneous era. The 1950s and 1960s contained a wide range of women's lifestyles, reaching from housewife to activist, from secretary to copywriter. Despite the huge gender-specific obstacles that both housewives and workingwomen had to face, women started to reach for their professional fulfillment particularly at the dawn of the Women's Rights Movement in the 1960s. However, the work-life balance of combining profession and family successfully has remained a contested terrain up until the 21st century. As for today, the situation of women has reached a new dimension as far as contradictory images are concerned. The fact that a concept like the "female quota" is even needed, does clearly unfold to what extent women are still underrepresented in today's upper professional positions, while, interestingly, the concept of "staying-home-dads" seems to gain popularity. The contradictory messages of the 1950s, urging women to stay at home while at the same time recruiting them, are still sent out today, as more and more politicians fight, on the one hand, for the importance of mother-child bonding, while, on the other hand, pressing for a necessary female quota.

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