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**AMERICAN SUBURBIA FROM THE 1950s TO THE 1980s:  
The Development of the Image of Suburbia in the Short  
Stories of John Cheever, John Updike,  
and Raymond Carver**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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V Praze dne

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## Abstrakt

Diplomová práce se zabývá americkým předměstím, které je zde pojmuto jako významný sociální a kulturní koncept, který hraje zásadní roli v americké kulturní historii. Práce definuje základní charakteristiky a prvky utopického mýtu moderního předměstí, jako jsou ideál pastoralismu, motiv cílené odloučenosti od městských prostředí, role komunity nebo důraz na rodinnou soudržnost, a nachází jejich kořeny v americké kulturní historii, především v idealizovaném odkazu prvních osadníků a puritánských komunit. Vývoj zobrazení a použití těchto prvků je poté analyzován v období od 50. do 80. let minulého století v textech tří významných amerických kronikářů života na předměstí – Johna Cheevera, Johna Updikea a Raymonda Carvera. V analýze je promítnut i sociální kontext a historický vývoj amerických předměstí v daném období.

Klíčová slova: americké předměstí, mýtus předměstí, utopie, Puritáni, americká povídka, John Cheever, John Updike, Raymond Carver

## Abstract

The thesis paper focuses on the American suburbia, which is understood as an important social and cultural concept which plays a key role in the cultural history of America. The paper defines the basic characteristics and components of the utopian myth of the modern suburbs, such as the pastoral ideal, the notion of deliberate withdrawal from the urban areas, the role of the community or the focus on family togetherness. These concepts are traced in the American cultural history, especially in the idealized legacy of the early settlers and early Puritan communities. The development of the usage and depiction of these cultural concepts in the literary fiction of the period between the 1950s and 80s is then traced in the texts of three major American chroniclers of the suburban life – John Cheever, John Updike, and Raymond Carver. The social context and the historical development of the suburbs are also taken into consideration.

Keywords: American suburbia, suburban myth, utopia, Puritans, American short story, John Cheever, John Updike, Raymond Carver

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## 1. Introduction

The myth of suburbia plays a key role in American culture. Its importance did not go unnoticed by many scholars of various academic fields. Catherine Jurca writes that "the dispersal of population to the suburbs in the twentieth century has been one of the most significant social and political facts of modern American life".<sup>1</sup> With no exaggeration, Sharpe and Wallock note by 1994 that "the United States has become a suburban nation".<sup>2</sup> The myths, utopian ideals, traditions and cultural concepts attached to the notion of suburbia have left their mark on the American culture, while also being rooted in it at the same time. As Judy Giles writes, "suburbia has never been understood simply as a geographical solution to the upheaval in living arrangements caused by industrialisation and urbanisation", but also as an "architectural and social space, an ideal, a producer of cultural meanings and a psychic and emotional landscape".<sup>3</sup> As such, "the suburb is the exemplary location"<sup>4</sup> of America.

In this thesis, I will focus on the development of the suburban ideal from the 1950s to the early 1980s. Using works of historians, social scientists, cultural critics and city planning experts, I will first trace the roots of the suburban myth in the American cultural history, namely in the Puritan heritage, and I will describe how the myth shifted in the period from the 1950s to the 1980s. In this way, I will justify Paul L. Knox's statement that the cultural concept of "the arcadian suburban setting" was that of "an ideal, a manifest destiny of American society".<sup>5</sup> In the 1950s, the suburban concept became part of the popular American culture as a somewhat utopian ideal which promised physical separation from the evil of the urban areas and which promoted communal utopianism of voluntary associations. The following decades, 1960s through 80s (and the experience with suburbia within this time period) then witnessed a growing disillusionment with such suburban

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1 Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 5.

2 Sharpe and Wallock. "Bold New City or Built-Up 'Burb? Redefining Contemporary Suburbia", *American Quarterly* 46.1 (1994): 1.

3 Judy Giles, *Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2004) 30.

4 Jurca 4.

5 Paul Knox, *Metroburbia, USA* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008) 13.

ideal, connected (among other things) to the rapidly changing demographics of suburbia. As the number of suburban residents tripled between 1950 and 1980<sup>6</sup>, the bourgeois exclusivity of the 1950s, with a rich stay-at-home housewife as a typical image, gradually gave way to general availability, represented by middle-class families living in the world of shopping malls and cinema complexes. Social problems emerged, such as social stratification, crime, and poverty. By the end of the 1970s, suburbia turned into a fallen American dream.

I will trace this development in the fiction of three chroniclers of the suburban life – John Cheever, John Updike, and Raymond Carver. These authors (and their texts) have been chosen so that each of them represents one decade (John Cheever the 1950s, John Updike the 1960s, and Raymond Carver the 1970s and the early 1980s). The analyzed primary texts consist mainly of collections of short stories (Cheever's Pulitzer price-winning *The Stories of John Cheever*, Updike's *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*, and Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*), one exception being Updike's novel *Couples*, which has been chosen because it provides convenient material for the analysis. Despite being very different in terms of literary style, all of the three authors incorporate the suburban myth in their works, and together serve as ideal material for the examination of how the concept of the suburban ideal shifted in the world of literary fiction: the initial exclusivity and homogeneity of suburbia in Cheever are severely disrupted by the turbulent social and cultural changes of the 1960s projected in the works of Updike, and finally are completely shattered in Carver's dystopian depiction of the suburbs in the 1970s.

The thesis is structured so that it describes the development of the suburban myth more or less chronologically. First, the roots of the suburban ideal are traced in the American cultural history. The utopian dream of suburbia is understood as a logical result of long-standing trends detectable throughout the evolution of the American culture, and suburbia is presented as a microcosm of the ideals of the mainstream WASP American society. A lot of space is devoted to the Puritan heritage, which interweaves the American culture like an endless thread, and the suburban vision is recognized as corresponding to the concepts pivotal to the utopian vision of the

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<sup>6</sup> Sharpe and Wallock 1.

early puritan settlers, e.g. the pastoral ideal, the sense of a common quest, the significance of communal togetherness, or the motif of collective escape (special attention is paid to the evolution of the notion of wilderness in the American culture). Subsequent chapters then present the ways in which these concepts are integrated in modern suburbia and the ways in which they change in the course of the analyzed time period. Each of the chapters deals with a corresponding decade separately in the following way: firstly, the demographic, cultural and sociological changes that characterize the decade, as well as their impact on suburbia, are presented, using works of various sociologists, cultural critics, historians, city planning theorists, and other scholars. These changes are then traced and further examined in the works of the individual writers, using secondary materials, mostly literary criticism and commentaries on the authors. In this way, I will analyze the growing disillusionment stemming from the discrepancy between suburbia as a promise of Puritan pastoralism and the actual suburban experience.

I do not intend the thesis to be exhaustive or to cover the issue of suburbia completely. The texts representing the individual decades are rather exemplary – indeed, there were authors that diverged significantly from the development which I outline in this work. Similarly, other texts written by the analyzed authors later in their careers do not necessarily correspond to those examined in this thesis. The purpose of this thesis is to sketch a general development in the conception of the suburban myth, using exemplary primary texts of those who chronicled life in suburbia. Moreover, the thesis is limited in that it only offers the point of view of the WASP part of the American society – the suburbs, from the very beginning, were a dream of the affluent white upper middle class, who thought themselves a social elite that did not deserve to be subjected to the maladies of the urban areas. The original suburban design did not include non-whites or the socially disadvantaged, and the suburbs therefore were, as it is later explained in this thesis, a utopia of the white bourgeois. And it is from the perspective of the dominant WASP majority that the suburban vision was seen as resulting in failure. The story of suburbia would be indeed very different if it was conceived in terms of, for instance, the African-American civil rights movement. All of the authors analyzed in this essay are white males; it would be interesting to compare their perspective with that of female authors or authors of various ethnic minorities. However, such

ambitions go beyond the scope of this thesis.

## 2. Evolution of the Suburbs and of the Suburban Ideal

### 2.1. A Brief History of American Suburbia: From the Beginnings to the 1950s

The beginnings of what we today call suburbia go back to the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the industrial revolution, the outskirts of large cities were sought as an alternative to the increasingly congested urban areas. Avi Friedman writes that the "North American suburb" is the end result of an "ideological evolution whose beginnings can be traced to the overpopulated and inhospitable cities of the North American and European Industrial Revolution".<sup>7</sup> As urban areas experienced an influx of people and industry, the "suburban aspiration" came to life and urban residents sought to avoid "city-centre living" for they "experienced them as overcrowded, insanitary, peopled with undesirables and lacking in both privacy and wide open spaces".<sup>8</sup> The early suburban vision functions in accordance with the romantic and transcendentalist traditions, as transcendentalist were "explicitly anti-urban, viewing cities as diseased, dangerous and even infernal".<sup>9</sup> The tranquil, rural environs of cities were becoming popular among the rich elite who were not directly dependent on jobs offered within the cities, as at those times the state of transportation did not make daily commuting possible. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "expensive and limited steam railroad lines provided a means of travel between the city and wealthy enclaves, which were developed at the periphery of city limits".<sup>10</sup> By then, these first suburbs "had gently curving streets that conformed to natural topography and created idyllic settings"<sup>11</sup> and their further development was closely connected to the development in transportation technologies. Introduction of car and its general availability, especially to the American upper class who mostly comprised the suburban population in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, helped to integrate living in suburbia into the lives of those who still worked in city centers.

The American government directly supported the suburban development by building

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7 Avi Friedman, *Planning the New Suburbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001) 3.

8 Andres Duany et al., *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000) 4.

9 Paul Knox, *Metroburbia, USA* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008) 14.

10 Friedman 26.

11 Duany et al. 26.

highways and other infrastructure that made it possible for suburbanites to commute to the city. By the 1920s, the car became a frequently owned means of transportation that enabled commuters to go to cities and back on the daily basis. "The American government" introduced "new policies, technology, and taxes to implement a highway system. The new highways quickly became the arteries of American life"<sup>12</sup> and "the motor car became essential to the pursuit of the suburban aspiration".<sup>13</sup> Both the governmental authorities and private investors realized how convenient it was to support families to take the strain off the congested city centers and move to the outskirts to enjoy peaceful family lives. The suburban stimulus came "both from governmental and private interests".<sup>14</sup> Among the direct governmental efforts to support suburban home ownership was The National Housing Act, put into effect in 1934 as a part of the New Deal policy, which made mortgages more affordable to American families and which is one of the reasons the suburban sprawl is believed to be a "direct result of a number of policies that conspired powerfully to encourage urban dispersal".<sup>15</sup>

A great wave of suburban sprawl came after World War II. Veterans, coming home from the war, caused a shortage in housing, and the government answered with further development of the road network and a number of supportive policies, such as "assurances and financing programs that would make it profitable for developers to build mass-produced developments on vast tracts of land".<sup>16</sup> At the same time, there were "Federal Housing Administration and Veteran Administration loan programs", and the so-called GI Bill, which "provided mortgages for over million new homes".<sup>17</sup> The suburban ideal and the corresponding lifestyle have become important cultural concepts, set firmly in the national culture. The image of suburbia as a pastoral haven, providing clean and safe environment fit for raising children, was further supported by the government and developers alike and it was promoted in the light of the American dream. In this way, the modern suburbia, represented by such developments like Levittown or Park Forest, was born.

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12 Friedman 28.

13 Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the U. S. A.* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2003) 59.

14 Friedman 25.

15 Duany et al. 7.

16 Friedman 29.

17 Duany et al. 8.

## 2.2. The Puritan Roots of the Suburban Ideal

There are reasons that make it fully justifiable to claim that there is a strong connection between the suburban myth and one of the most American and long-standing of all ideals, i.e. the ideal of the early Puritan settlers to America. The motif of escape from the corrupted, increasingly dangerous urban areas; the ambition to create new, safe and de-centralized settlements based on communal fraternity and local government; a certain sense of exclusiveness; the emphasis on house and land ownership; a quest to re-establish traditional moral values and have the community live by them – these are only some of attributes pivotal to the ideal of the early American (particularly Puritan) settlement incorporated in the suburban myth. As the primary reason for the establishment of suburbia were the corrupted, impacted cities, the suburban development is closely connected to movement from city centers to the unspoiled, pastoral areas beyond the city walls. Up until the 1960s, suburbia did not have any "aboriginal" residents – it was populated by incomers who emigrated from the city. In connection to such notion of migration, many have seen the suburban migrant as the modern frontiersman, and the early suburbia as the new Frontier. The connection has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Mark Clapson notes that the 1950s suburban spirit works with "the idea of suburbanites as 'pioneers', moving into virgin territory and settling down into homes and communities there"<sup>18</sup>, adding that this notion has still pervaded in the modern suburban myth. Suburbia "became America's new frontier", and a new, expanding opportunity "for voluntary association".<sup>19</sup> The simile was used even by the suburbanites themselves – as Clapson writes, during the early 1950s, movers to Park Forest, one of the largest post-war suburban developments, "likened their experience to that of earlier settlers on the Frontier, and referred to themselves as pioneers".<sup>20</sup>

## 2.3. The Pastoral Ideal

One of the crucial features of the suburban myth, oftentimes exploited by marketers, is its embrace of the pastoral ideal. As the suburban spirit has been, from the very beginning, based on

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18 Clapson 145.

19 Clapson 145.

20 Clapson 145.

the city-suburbia dichotomy, the emphasis is on the advantages of rural living contrasted to the smoggy, unhealthy city. Taking one form or another over time, the pastoral ideal has had a long tradition in the American cultural history. It was central to the Puritan philosophy of the early American settlement. Puritans, who generally engaged in "removal from the original settlements into adjacent areas",<sup>21</sup> employed villages as the type of settlement that enabled them to "convert wilderness and establish a Jeffersonian middle landscape of rugged-individual formed into self-governing communities".<sup>22</sup> As Joseph S. Wood writes, the Puritan village "expressed the Protestant ethic and the Enlightenment ideal of the noble yeoman." It was a fitting setting for the "embattled farmers striking first blows for American independence, making it as well an expression of the geographical iconography of American nationalism".<sup>23</sup> Emphasizing the significance of their journey from the Old World to the new paradise, Puritans saw themselves as pilgrims. William Haller notes that Puritan writers and preachers made "every man see himself under the eternal images of the pilgrim and the warrior".<sup>24</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch writes that for the Puritan man, "the venture into the wilderness [...] was a journey of the soul to God, the believer's pilgrimage through the world's wilderness to redemption".<sup>25</sup> The Puritan mission was a "wayfaring and warfaring pilgrimage".<sup>26</sup>

Since the early Puritan settlement, the pastoral ideal embedded in the symbolic purity of the American landscape has been an integral part of the national culture. As a long-standing myth, it interweaves the American cultural history like an unending thread. From the early Puritan settlement, through the notion of the noble frontiersman to transcendentalism, this notion of wilderness, i.e. wilderness as a place of escape and retreat for those who are dissatisfied with the state of things in the civilized areas, remained a cultural evergreen. As Sacvan Bercovitch writes, the early Puritan settlers worked with the biblical "desert-paradise *allegoria*",<sup>27</sup> seeing themselves

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21 Alan Heimert, "Puritanism, the Wilderness, and the Frontier," *The New England Quarterly* 26.3 (1953): 362.

22 Joseph S Wood, "'Build, Therefore, Your Own World': The New England Village as Settlement Ideal," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81.1 (1991): 34.

23 Wood "Build, Therefore, Your Own World" 34.

24 William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957) 25.

25 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 33.

26 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) 13-14.

27 Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins* 186.

as the Western pilgrims seeking the earthly paradise in the American wilderness. Subsequently, the Frontier "became a synonym for progress [...], a host of self-made entrepreneurs. [...] It issued in a religious identity that was as open-ended [...] as was the concept of pilgrimage, migration, or progress".<sup>28</sup> The "New England Way" was an ideology which "evolved from its own origins into the American Way" as the early colonies were "knit together, rhetorically, by a cultural 'errand' into the wilderness".<sup>29</sup> Drawing on the key part it played in the Puritan philosophy, the American landscape has turned into an elastic symbol of spiritual redemption that would shape itself parallel to the changing national and cultural needs:

What for Mather had been the purifying wilderness, and for Edwards the theocratic garden of God, became for Emerson's generation the redemptive West, as frontier or agrarian settlement or virgin land. Every stage of this long development bespeaks the astonishing tenacity of the myth [of the American landscape as a symbol of redemption and new possibilities].<sup>30</sup>

As Milena Coufalova writes, the vast American landscape has played a crucial role in the national culture, inviting those in search for the lost paradise to relocate to less civilized parts of the country.<sup>31</sup> Bercovitch further argues that the heritage of the New England Puritans "contributes significantly to the link between the New England and the American Way", pointing out that the Puritan impact is visible in cultural concepts pivotal to the American identity, such as the "American dream, manifest destiny, redeemer nation, and, fundamentally, the American self as representative of universal rebirth".<sup>32</sup>

The purity of the virgin American landscape and the wonders it works for those who seek re-birth in its wild nature is described by Jean de Crevecoeur in 1782 in his third letter from *Letters From an American Farmer*, entitled "What Is an American". De Crevecoeur claims in it that

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28 Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 53.

29 Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 32.

30 Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins* 186.

31 Milena Coufalová, *K poválečnému vývoji americké povídky: Truman Capote, Irving Shaw, John Updike* (Prague: FF UK, 1991) 5.

32 Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins* 108.

"Americans are the western pilgrims"<sup>33</sup> and he demonstrates the positive impact the wild landscape has on the settlers and frontiersmen by comparing them to plants that absorb the nutrients and substances of the soil they are planted in:

We [Americans] are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment. Here you will find but few crimes; these have acquired as yet no root among us".<sup>34</sup>

De Crevecoeur's account may serve as a model of the ideal of purity of the American wilderness and its significance in shaping of the American people. The pure, rural, pastoral American landscape, together with purity of thought, produces the great American people, unsullied by corruption, criminality and inequality.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century suburban spirit, in a way, draws on the Puritan tradition and attempts to revive the pure pastoral ideal. Fleeing the corrupted urban areas, the suburbanites, in their quest to re-establish order and moral values, seek the relative wilderness of the areas outside of cities where their communities may flourish. As Laura J. Miller writes, "the suburban ideal encompasses a view about the morally and physically healthful influences of rural living".<sup>35</sup> While Sharp and Wallock claim that the image of the suburb is that of a "pastoral haven from the harsh realities of the city",<sup>36</sup> Judy Giles speaks of the suburban spirit as characterized by "nostalgia for a lost Eden, imagined as a pre-industrial community under threat from the forces of modernisation".<sup>37</sup> Joel Garreau calls the early suburbia the "edge cities" and pronounces it "the New Frontier", describing it as "the vigorous world of pioneers and immigrants, rising far from the old downtowns".<sup>38</sup>

Cultural geographer Joseph S. Wood of University of Baltimore sees the trends in the

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33 Jean de Crevecoeur, "What Is an American," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol.1, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York : Norton, 1989) 561.

34 De Crevecoeur 562.

35 Laura J. Miller, "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal," *Sociological Forum* 10.3 (1995): 396.

36 Sharp and Wallock 2.

37 Judy Giles, *Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2004) 30.

38 Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Random House, 1991) 4.

1950s suburban city planning as drawing on the pastoral ideal of the Puritan New England village. In his *The New England Village*, Wood argues that a Puritan village was a form of settlement whose overall arrangement encompassed in itself the pastoral ideal on the one hand and the Puritan emphasis on individual self-reliance in the form of private home ownership on the other: "Puritans employed villages to convert wilderness and establish a Jeffersonian middle landscape of rugged-individual yeomen formed into self-governing communities".<sup>39</sup> Attributes of the New England village, such as "living in harmony with nature" and yet being the "harbinger of civilization",<sup>40</sup> or the combination of the desire for communal togetherness with the emphasis on the privacy of one's own house, are then transferred to the 20<sup>th</sup> century suburban development. As Wood writes, the New England village landscapes are interpreted in the "settlement ideal" of the "suburban vision".<sup>41</sup> Modern "landscape architects and social reformers [...] employed center villages as experiential models and contrived places to reform habits of human interaction, affirming the settlement ideal and suggesting a suburban vision".<sup>42</sup>

The stress on house ownership is an integral part of the suburban myth and yet another cultural concept inherited from the puritan notion of self-reliance, traceable throughout American cultural history. As Duany et al. write,

today's suburban reality finds its origins in the pastoral dream of the autonomous homestead in the countryside. Articulated throughout U.S. history, from Jefferson through Limbaugh, this vision has been equated with a democratic economy, in which home ownership equals participation.<sup>43</sup>

Contrasted with renting of flats and dwelling in apartment buildings associated with the city centers, the "suburban house ownership and the independence it seemed to promise" became an essential part of the motivation of the suburbanites. Thus, "the American Dream became more closely

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39 Joseph S. Wood, *The New England Village* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 33.

40 Bercovitch, *The Rights of Assent* 7-8.

41 Wood, *The New England* 153.

42 Wood, *The New England* 32.

43 Duany et al. 40.

associated with the chance to 'own your own home,' rather than 'your own' business or the means of production".<sup>44</sup> Emphasizing the familial life and the role the suburban house played in the accommodation of the ideal of the nuclear family, the early suburbs "strove to represent a new domestic ideal" in their combination of "careful treatment of outdoor spaces" with houses that serve as "retreats".<sup>45</sup> Suburbanites may sometimes appear, similarly to the Puritans, as "isolationists"<sup>46</sup> who nurse their exclusive morality in seclusion from the wrongs of the corrupted world. With the promise of independence on renters of apartments, "the desire for a house, preferably with a garden",<sup>47</sup> typical for the suburban spirit, became the embodiment of the demand of freedom, self-reliance, privacy and safety.

#### 2.4. The Sense of Community

Another attribute of the suburban spirit that has been transferred within the Puritan heritage is its emphasis on communal togetherness. The spirit of brotherhood, unity and togetherness played a crucial role in the philosophy of the New England Puritan communities. Regarding itself as a moral and religious elite, the puritan community was characterized by the "communal myth".<sup>48</sup> Charity and solidarity were seen as essentials without which the community could not survive. A reappearing parallel is that of a living body whose parts move differently but together aim at the same goal; the ideal of the Puritan society was that its individual members worked and cooperated in a way that was beneficial to the community as a whole. As Heimert writes, the sense of unity is a "crucial element in New England thought" and it was "that part of the New England mind which partook of an inheritance from the Middle Ages, from Aristotle and scholasticism" and which held that "society was an organism and not an aggregate of individuals and that the public good was to be achieved by cohesiveness and cooperation, by being 'knitt together in this worke as one man'".<sup>49</sup> In his famous 1630 sermon "A Model of Christian Charity", the wealthy Puritan lawyer

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44 Jurca 12.

45 Friedman 26.

46 Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 32.

47 Clapson 52.

48 Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 41.

49 Heimert 363.

John Winthrop states the following:

There is no body but consists of parts and that which knits these parts together, gives the body its perfection, because it makes each part so contiguous to others as thereby they do mutually participate with each other, both in strength and infirmity, in pleasure and pain. [...] All the parts of this body being thus united are made so contiguous in a special relation as they must needs partake of each other's strength and infirmity; joy and sorrow, weal and woe. If one member suffers, all suffer with it, if one be in honor, all rejoice with it.<sup>50</sup>

The puritan community is yet again compared to a living body. The parallel has significant consequences for the Puritan sense of the role of the individual in society and his or her relationship to the community. It is clear from the excerpt from Winthrop's sermon that if individuals work together in unison, the body-society benefits the most. However, the body may achieve its perfection only if all its parts are healthy and fully functional – if one component languishes, the whole organism is affected and consequently becomes weakened. Therefore, on the one hand, the quest of establishing the Puritan society in New England was "built upon a series of free and voluntary commitments" to a "community grounded not in tradition or class status, but in private acts of will" which were part of the "communal venture".<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, unquestioning commitment of the individual to the community was not only desired, but also demanded. As Bercovitch writes, "to assert oneself in the right way, here in the American wilderness, was to embody the goals of New England".<sup>52</sup> If they wished to benefit from the thriving of the society, its individual members were to follow the rules of the community and the Puritan moral code.

In his book *The New England Conscience* from 1915, James Phinney Munroe argues that regular town-meetings served as a tool of regulation of individual, short-sighted whims and as a form of strengthening the communal spirit in the Puritan New England. In a quite idyllic way,

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50 Baym 156.

51 Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 33.

52 Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 33.

Munroe describes town-meetings as the ultimate manifestation of people taking charge over their lives, of a community breaking free from the corrupted, non-functional rule, and establishing its own moral code. The town-meetings gave Puritans the possibility "to manage their own affairs through the most perfect form of democratic government ever devised" as these meetings "were practically free from all supervision by the British government." The gatherings, which dealt not only with "the affairs of daily life" but also with "great moral questions",<sup>53</sup> served to unify the philosophy of the community and to instruct individuals on their behavior.

The spiritual quest that suburbanites set on themselves is similar to that of New Englanders in that it creates certain demands on the individual members of the newly established community. From the very beginning, "the 'suburban ideal' described a model of white middle-class community"<sup>54</sup> with strong "community ties" that have always characterized the "American suburbs".<sup>55</sup> The common goal of suburban refugees, as well as the fact that their background, desires and social status were virtually identical, strengthened the emphasis on the togetherness of suburban neighborhoods. The homogeneity of suburbs was desired by the residents themselves, for as Mark Clapson notes, "for the majority of suburbanites, the social tone of the neighborhood was inextricably related to the quality of the residential environment. People wanted to live with people of similar social class and status similar to themselves".<sup>56</sup> Later he writes, "similarity of age and income, when allied to proximity by suburban residence, were encouraging contexts for neighbourliness".<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the 1950s suburban neighborhoods were closely-knit communities of "people of the same class, the same income, the same age-group".<sup>58</sup>

As "the suburban ideal is about finding a homogenous community of like-minded people",<sup>59</sup> the suburbs became notoriously infamous for the social pressure the environment creates and for the conformity demanded from its residents. In being accepted as a member of the social elite, the suburban dweller is required to meet certain standards and to conform to the unofficial code of the

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53 James P. Munroe, *The New England Conscience: With Typical Examples* (Boston: R. G. Badger, 1915) 21.

54 Jurca 5.

55 Jurca 5.

56 Clapson 52.

57 Clapson 23.

58 Giles 30.

59 Miller 395.

suburban ideal. The consequent tension between the social pressure and the individual desire which necessarily arises from such arrangement quickly became (and has since then remained) the favorite topic of writers whose focus is on suburbia, such as Richard Yates, Rick Moody or John Updike (I will deal with the tension between the society and the individual in detail in the chapter devoted to the writings of John Cheever).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, the suburban experience is portrayed as ambiguous - being a white, middle-class, WASP suburbanite is desirable and empowering (for it provides the individual with a certain elite status), but it is simultaneously also entrapping and conforming in that the individual spirit gets suppressed by the social conventions of the community. In other words, "being white and middle class is imagined to have as much or more to do with subjugation as with social dominance".<sup>60</sup> As Judy Giles writes, "the connections between environment and spiritual and moral bankruptcy, between uniform houses and roads and the loss of individuality, between lack of aesthetic value [...] and loss of creative imagination have featured in one form or another in twentieth-century critiques of suburbia".<sup>61</sup> The stress on the need to conform is so strong that Catherine Jurca speaks of the suburban experience as of "experience of victimization".<sup>62</sup>

## 2.5. Eliteness

The emphasis on the common good is, indeed, closely connected to the Puritan idea of eliteness. The reason the individuals were to conform to the society was that the Puritan quest was seen as of utmost moral value. Bercovitch writes about the standards for the Puritan church membership that from the very start, "the colonial leaders surpassed the federal covenanters in their demands for outward conformity, as befit visible saints. Their legal code astonished English jurists for its 'judaical' severity".<sup>63</sup> These demands stemmed from the sense of a "historical mission"<sup>64</sup> that played a crucial role in the Puritan settlement. Puritans saw themselves as a unique, exceptional elite, charged with "mission",<sup>65</sup> superior to other religious groups of the period.

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60 Jurca 4.

61 Giles 30.

62 Jurca 6.

63 Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins* 91.

64 Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins* 91.

65 Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins* 109.

The idea of Puritans as religious and moral pioneers was especially promoted by John Winthrop, the father of the concept of American exceptionalism, which has pervaded the American culture ever since. "We must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill," says Winthrop. "The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world".<sup>66</sup>

In its very essence, the suburban myth fully embraces the notion of exceptionalism. Much like the New England Puritans, suburbanites regarded themselves as charged with mission. Seeing themselves as the bearers of traditional moral values and intending to implement them in the newly established safe environment, the suburbanites explicitly dissociated themselves from the "sinful" urban areas that provided "temptations that can lure individuals away"<sup>67</sup> from familial and communal pursuits. Family, responsibility, charity, safety – these were the main pillars of the suburban ideal that the cities lacked and that those who left the urban areas planned to put into practice in the neighborhoods of suburbia. Halfway through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, suburbia really was inhabited by the social elite of the American society. According to Sharpe and Wallock, "suburbia has remained an essentially exclusive domain".<sup>68</sup> Racially homogenous and uncompromisingly selective, the 1950s suburbia became the WASP haven of whites fleeing the increasingly racially mixed urban areas. For these reasons, the suburban settlement is oftentimes referred to as the "White Flight"<sup>69</sup> or the "White Diaspora".<sup>70</sup> This "racial segregation of suburbia"<sup>71</sup> was intentionally supported not only by developers and real-estate brokers, but also by the governmental authorities as well. Sharpe and Wallock note that the 1950s and 60s suburbia was harshly criticized for its "racial discrimination, patriarchal familism and political separatism". Among the most vigorous critics were Betty Friedan, Anthony Downs, Richard Babcock or Fred Bosselman.<sup>72</sup> "Minorities and

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66 Baym 121.

67 Miller 397.

68 Sharpe and Wallock 7.

69 Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press) 2004.

70 Jurca 9.

71 Friedman 29.

72 Sharpe wallock 2.

the poor" have been continuously "excluded from most suburbs".<sup>73</sup> For instance, throughout the 1950s, black people were not allowed to purchase or rent a house in one of the most iconic, well-known and largest of mass-produced post-war suburban developments, i.e. Levittown, New York.<sup>74</sup> Suburbia was understood as the asylum for the elite; the overall suburban spirit (as well as concrete, official legal regulations) was characterized by the effort to keep the undesired outside of these gated communities. Sharpe and Wallock proclaim "suburbia's accessibility to all Americans" a mere "myth" and call the suburban vision, quite aptly, a "bourgeois utopia".<sup>75</sup> To a large extent, the suburban spirit depends on dissociation and on suburban WASPs distinguishing themselves from other parts of the society. There is "the long-standing desire of suburbanites to segregate themselves from the lower classes and people of different ethnicities and race", which manifests itself in a "mixture of racism, economic calculation, the hope for a community of like-minded people, and the attempt to find an environment good for family life".<sup>76</sup>

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73 Sharpe and Wallock 7.

74 Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, Vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2006) 818.

75 Sharpe and Wallock 3.

76 Miller 407.

### 3. The 1950s: John Cheever

#### 3.1. Cheever the Chronicler of Suburbia

The fiction of John Cheever (1912-1982) in many ways reflects and works with the suburbanites-as-puritans notion. As Cheever is oftentimes referred to as the "Chekhov of the Suburbs" or the "chronicler of suburban life",<sup>77</sup> the subject matter of this Pulitzer-prize winning author is chiefly in suburbia and the conflicting nature of the relationship between his characters' inner desires and their public social image. Cheever sees suburbia as a modern hub of frustration and tension, and uses it as a setting fit for the examination of human nature under the rule of a "controlled environment".<sup>78</sup> As Justin Quinn writes in *Lectures in American Literature*, for John Cheever "American suburbia is a place of frustrated desires, with wives imprisoned in gleaming kitchens and husbands choked by their respectable neck-ties, as they set out on their daily commute"; Cheever's role is then in recording the "gestures and sounds of this controlled environment".<sup>79</sup> However, reducing Cheever to a mere observer of suburban affairs would mean severe undermining of his ability to generalize the American suburban experience into an all-embracing account on the state of the American culture. Cheever's fiction is not just a record of the suburban ennui - reappearing undercurrents of many of the stories included in the National Book Award-winning collection *The Stories of John Cheever* ("Cheever's opus"<sup>80</sup>) are nostalgia for the pre-industrial society, disillusionment with the suburban ideal contrasted to the actual corruption and alienation of the suburbs, desire for a sense of community, or the persistence of traditions. According to Scott Donaldson, Cheever insisted that his stories "were not about suburbia", but "about men and women and children and dogs who happened to live there" and about "the contrast between their disorderly lives and their handsomely burnished surroundings" which "aimed to shut out the ugly, eschew the unseemly, bar the criminal".<sup>81</sup>

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77 Charles W. Bevis, "John Cheever: The Making of the Cheeveresque Writing Style in the 1950s," *Rivier Academic Journal* 3.1 (2007): 1.

78 Justin Quinn, ed., *Lectures on American Literature* (Praha: Karolinum, 2011) 265.

79 Quinn 265.

80 Bevis 2.

81 Scott Donaldson, *John Cheever: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1987) 141.

### 3.2. Cheever's Suburbanites and the Puritan Conscience

On the surface, the characters in Cheever's fiction are typical representatives of the 1950s suburban ideal – they are usually young or middle-aged males with wives and kids, respectable jobs and corresponding above-average incomes that make them members of the upper middle class. They usually live in separate households and commute to their daily jobs by the means of train. However, at the same time, the conformity of the suburban society induces confusion in Cheever's characters. Vlachova writes that "living in the suburban areas and being part of the middle-class society," Cheever's suburbanites "are caught in the net of social conventions, expectations and beliefs and thus, sooner or later, find themselves struggling to find their way out".<sup>82</sup> The simultaneous duality of the suburban life is manifested in "Cheever's vision of suburbia" in which "it is the surface that matters and reality is often hidden under this glossy cover".<sup>83</sup> The tension between the inner life and social conventions does not go without repercussion and the protagonists of Cheever's stories eventually "come to imaginary life crossroads",<sup>84</sup> grappling with the fierce collision of the personal and social aspects of their lives. "This ability," writes John Dyer, "to capture this human dilemma and to combine it with one of the newest [...] manifestations of the American landscape, suburbia, shows the power and insight of Cheever's art".<sup>85</sup>

For the symbolic nature of his writing, and especially for his focus on the dual nature of the human character and the ways in which the thoughts of the members of a community are shaped by the community, John Cheever has been compared to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Keith Wilhite states that the writing of the two authors certainly deserves a "comparison between Hawthorne and Cheever", highlighting the literary heritage that "links Cheever to Hawthorne's American romance".<sup>86</sup> The tension between suppressed individual desires and communal morals and the consequent schizophrenic nature of the suburban experience connect Cheever's suburbanites to

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82 Barbora Vlachová, *A Kind Critique: The Depiction of Suburbia in John Cheever's Short Stories: BA Diploma Thesis* (Brno: Masaryk University, 2013) 6.

83 Vlachová 14.

84 Vlachová 40.

85 John Dyer, "John Cheever: Parody and The Suburban Aesthetic," *American Studies at the University of Virginia* <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma95/dyer/cheever4.html>> 13 Nov. 2012.

86 Keith Wilhite, "John Cheever's Shady Hill: or how I learned to stop worrying and love the suburbs," *Studies in American Fiction* 34.2 (2006): 234.

Hawthorne's New England Puritans and Cheever's Shady Hill to Hawthorne's Salem. As John W. Crowley states, "Cheever's fiction always reflected his New England origins in its concern with traditional morals and manners and with the permanence of the Puritan sensibility".<sup>87</sup> Connected to these topics is the self-scrutiny and moral perplexity we frequently find in Cheever's characters. A crucial statement, which I will analyze more closely, is made by John Dyer, who states that Cheever's suburbanites "exhibit an awareness of themselves and their environment that is congruent with [...] [one] of the major ideological traditions of American literature", i.e. "the New England, or Puritan, conscience".<sup>88</sup>

The New England conscience is one that has Puritan ideology and moral code embedded in itself. Munroe understands aversion to idleness, refraining from sin and general support of the community's good as the keystones of the New England conscience.<sup>89</sup> In its essence, the mental dilemma that takes place in both Cheever and Hawthorne is caused by the disparity between one's New England conscience and personal, corrupted desires incompatible with the Puritan ideology. Therefore, in this case the dual nature of the human character does not take the form of a discrepancy between one's conscience and the outer social environment; rather, it results from the tension between two parts of one's mind – one that is loyal to the Puritan moral code and the other which is more animalistic and egoistic. William Haller writes that the Puritan ideal was to conduct one's life "and spiritual ministrations according to [...] a purer and more godly plan", which meant "living according to a self-imposed discipline [...] derived from Paul, Augustine, and John Calvin".<sup>90</sup> At the core of the Puritan code was the demand on the individual that he or she must somehow tame his or her selfish desires and to act according to the New England conscience. For as Kvasnickova explains, "puritanism condemned not man's desires but his enslavement to them; not the pleasures found in the satisfaction of appetites, but the tricks devised to prod satiated appetites into further concupiscence".<sup>91</sup> Much of the Puritan preaching was then done on "self-control".<sup>92</sup>

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87 John W. Crowley, "John Cheever and the Ancient Light of New England: A Review," *The New England Quarterly* 56.2 (1983): 267.

88 Dyer, John Cheever.

89 James P. Munroe, *The New England Conscience: With Typical Examples* (Boston: R. G. Badger, 1915) 15-17.

90 Haller 25.

91 Marta Kvasničková, *The New England Puritanism: MA Thesis* (Praha: FF UK, 1950) 18-19.

92 Kvasničková 23.

In my analysis of what John Dyer calls "the root of the conflicts in Cheever's stories", i.e. "the confluence of [...] enlightened individualism and the Puritanical conscience"<sup>93</sup>, the 1958 short-story entitled "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" is the most useful of the items found in Cheever's oeuvre. Included in the eponymous short-story collection, "The Housebreaker" tells the story of Johnny Hake (also the first-person narrator), a resident of the fictional affluent suburban community called Shady Hill, who decides to start his own business upon being fired from his job in a manufacturer's office. However, his business fails to work out well and Hake finds himself in serious financial troubles. He does not confess his difficulties to his wife and kids and for a while he pretends that everything is going well. One night, upon waking up all of a sudden, Hake steals away from his bed and sneaks into the house of the rich Warburtons, who are known to carry around large sums of money. Hake steals Mr. Warbuton's wallet from the sleeping couple's bedroom. The story then follows Hake in subsequent days, fighting a sense of guilt and failure and wondering about what this crime says about his personality. His own view of himself becomes altered, he considers himself a thief, and his social and familial life gets affected by this change - he becomes easily irritable and fights with his wife. Towards the end of the story, Hake's ex-boss calls and wonders whether Hake would be interested in taking his job back. Hake agrees, gets a 900 dollar pay in advance, sneaks into Warburtons' house at night and returns the stolen money on their kitchen table. The story ends with Hake walking on the street home in the middle of the night, whistling happily.

"The Housebreaker" is an ideal example of the tension between two parts of the human psyche – Hake's distress stems from the conflict between his outer social persona and his inner moral conscience which he feels he betrayed. At the beginning, Hake gives us a description of himself that is congruent with the 1950s suburban ideal – he grew up in New York, "played football and baseball in Central Park", "served four years in the Navy",<sup>94</sup> married his wife Christina with whom he has four kids, and moved to Shady Hill. There seems nothing that can ruin the suburban idyll:

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93 Dyer, John Cheever.

94 John Cheever, *The Stories of John Cheever* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985) 300.

We have a nice house with a garden and a place outside for cooking meat, and on summer nights, sitting there with the kids and looking into the front of Christina's dress as she bends over to salt the steaks, or just gazing at the lights in heaven, I am as thrilled as I am thrilled by more hardy and dangerous pursuits, and I guess this is what is meant by the pain and sweetness of life.<sup>95</sup>

Hake embraces the patriarchal role of a breadwinner to an extent that makes him keep all financial issues a secret from his wife. He is "reluctant to speak about"<sup>96</sup> money as it is purely his job to provide for his family. That is why he "hadn't painted anything like an adequate picture"<sup>97</sup> regarding his money problem to Christina, whose "ignorance of financial necessity is complete".<sup>98</sup> "The truth would make her cry and ruin her make-up".<sup>99</sup> Christina serves merely as a decorative jewel to the suburban flawlessness in which he lives.

Though the money issue severely damages this idyll, it is the extreme solution Hake executes that really shatters his own image of himself and his life. Despite the fact that it is clear from the beginning that the theft will go unpunished, Hake states: "I was safe [...] —safe from everything but myself".<sup>100</sup> Hake is shocked by having done what he never thought he was capable of doing. His main concern is not with the legal aspect of his crime - upon realizing that his actions went against the communal togetherness (manifested also in the fact that his neighbors do not lock their doors at night), he understands that he seriously violated the Puritan moral code: "I was a common thief and an impostor, [...] I had done something so reprehensible that it violated the tenets of every known religion. [...] I had criminally entered the house of a friend and broken all the unwritten laws that held the community together".<sup>101</sup> For his wrong-doing against the community, Hake despises himself and calls himself "a miserable creature",<sup>102</sup> stating "I never knew that a man could be so miserable and that the mind could open up so many chambers and fill them with self-

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95 Cheever 300.

96 Cheever 302.

97 Cheever 307

98 Cheever 312.

99 Cheever 309.

100 Cheever 306.

101 Cheever 308.

102 Cheever 308.

reproach!"<sup>103</sup>

Similarly to, for example, Arthur Dimmesdale of *The Scarlet Letter*, the constant tension between the New England conscience and the rest of the psyche has an impact on Hake's physical state – an impact which is visible and obvious to those around him: "My left eye began to twitch, and again I seemed on the brink of a general nervous collapse".<sup>104</sup> The psychosomatic nature of his experience is observed by his friend who sees him in a restaurant: "I wasn't going to mention it, but now that you've been sick, I may as well tell you that you look awful. I mean, from the minute I saw you I knew something was wrong".<sup>105</sup> The difference, however, is that instead of just letting the reader observe the character from the outside, Cheever lets his reader probe into Hake's mental processes.

Hake tries to find out what went wrong with him and how come he was able to violate the New England code so severely. In his attempt to analyze his own actions, Hake turns to "the Puritan concept of self-scrutiny",<sup>106</sup> in which he attempts to deconstruct his own self and find out what made him turn to the "dark side". The key technique of his self-analysis is comparing himself with other thieves. Hake surrounds himself with the criminal culture and attempts to analyze it from within. On the daily basis, Hake goes through newspapers, looking for articles about criminals: "I looked at the paper. There had been a thirty-thousand-dollar payroll robbery in the Bronx. A White Plains matron had come home from a party to find her furs and jewelry gone. Sixty thousand dollars' worth of medicine had been taken from a warehouse in Brooklyn".<sup>107</sup> Later, he writes: "At home, I looked through the Sunday paper for other thefts, and there were plenty. Banks had been looted, hotel safes had been emptied of jewelry, maids and butlers had been tied to kitchen chairs".<sup>108</sup> Generally, Hake becomes much more sensitive to wrong-doings and crimes happening around him, stating: "What frightened me was that by becoming a thief I seemed to have surrounded myself with thieves and operators".<sup>109</sup>

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103 Cheever 308.

104 Cheever 314.

105 Cheever 311.

106 Dyer, John Cheever.

107 Cheever 310.

108 Cheever 314.

109 Cheever 315.

Hake's clinging to his fellow criminals invites a comparison between Cheever and Hawthorne. Under the motto "birds of a feather flock together", Hawthorne's characters who have somehow broken the Puritan code find themselves in demand of other fellow violators - Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter* is said to believe that her role of a publicly confessed sinner "gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts"<sup>110</sup> and an ability to identify a "companion" upon detecting "the eyes of a young maiden glancing at the scarlet letter, shyly and aside, and quickly averted, with a faint, chill crimson in her cheek".<sup>111</sup> Occasionally, she goes for a visit "not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble; as if its gloomy twilight were a medium in which she was entitled to hold intercourse with her fellow-creatures".<sup>112</sup> The protagonist of "The Minister's Black Veil", minister Hooper, who decides to wear a black veil over his face as an act of penance for an unknown sin, experiences a similar shift in his relationship with sinners – he becomes "a man of awful power over souls that were in agony for sin", his black veil enables him to "sympathize with all dark affections", and "dying sinners cried aloud for Mr. Hooper".<sup>113</sup>

In his embrace of the role of a criminal and violator, Hake's view of the Shady Hill suburban reality gets altered and he sees corruption and flaws in the alleged suburban ideal which he was not able to notice before (as a regular, non-criminal resident). In a restaurant, he sees a "stranger pocket the thirty-five-cent tip"<sup>114</sup> left there from an earlier customer. At church, while the rest of the congregation engage themselves in communion, Hake cannot get his mind off the sound of a rat gnawing on wood he keeps hearing. "I heard, in the baseboard on my right, a rat's tooth working like an auger in the hard oak. [...] The small congregation muttered its amens with a sound like a footstep, and the rat went on scraping away at the baseboard".<sup>115</sup> The fact that others do not pay any attention to the rat and that Hake is the only one who is able to hear it exemplifies how differently his frame of mind is tuned. Hake starts to go out at night while everybody else is asleep,

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110 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, vol. 1*, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York : Norton, 1989) 1208.

111 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet* 1208.

112 Hawthorne, *The Scarlet* 1247-1248.

113 Hawthorne, "The Minister's Black Veil," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, vol. 1*, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York : Norton, 1989) 1139.

114 Cheever 307.

115 Cheever 316.

further cultivating his role of a social outcast and night wanderer. Experiencing Shady Hill at night gives him another opportunity to see it differently: "I walked through back gardens to the corner. [...] I did not sleep any more that night but sat in the dark thinking about [...] my own sordid destiny, and how different Shady Hill looked at night than in the light of day".<sup>116</sup> The disparity between Hake's behavior by daylight and at night is a perfect symbolic illustration of Hake's schizophrenic character, one part of which is publicly exposed and visible during the day and the other which is corrupted, concealed and closed to the public by being covered by the dark. The introduction of the story begins with "My name is Johnny Hake. I'm thirty-six years old, stand five feet eleven in my socks, weigh one hundred and forty-two pounds stripped, and am, so to speak, naked at the moment and talking into the dark",<sup>117</sup> where nakedness and darkness refer to the genuineness and sincerity of the confession Hake is about to make. The dark-light distinction also corresponds to the Puritan notion of darkness, seen as a Devil's setting where the individual may get tempted to engage in heretic activity incompatible with the Puritan code.

In his self-scrutiny, Hake seeks to uncover objectively valid causes for his actions. He searches in his memory and tries to identify the experience that would later turn him into a criminal. Quite funnily, Hake uses suburban middle-class stereotypes in his own self-assessment. For instance, Hake states that he "read often enough in the papers that divorce sometimes led to crime", concluding that since his "parents were divorced" when he was "about five", the divorce is a "good clue"<sup>118</sup> in finding the cause of his criminal behavior.

### 3.3. The Private and the Public

The abovementioned duality of the suburban character is parallel to the tension between the private and the public spaces in Cheever's fiction. What we find in the 1950s American suburbia is the simultaneous emphasis on the communal ideal of neighbourly togetherness on the one hand and on the sacredness and familial intimacy of privately owned households on the other.

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116 Cheever 317.

117 Cheever 300.

118 Cheever 308.

Andres Duany et al. write that this duality results in a "disjunction between the private and public realm" which results in "a uniquely American form of schizophrenia".<sup>119</sup> Keith M. Wilhite notes that such distribution gives way to a "specifically suburban [...], pervasive sense of spatial ambiguity between Cheever's fictional residents and the places they live".<sup>120</sup> In Cheever, the tension between the private and the public space is parallel to the private-public dichotomy manifested in the disparity between one's private life and one's conformed social persona.

Spatial symbolism plays a key role in a brilliant short-story entitled "The Five-Forty-Eight", published in *The New Yorker* in 1954. The main character, Blake, is a suburban dweller with a stay-at-home wife. As most males in Shady Hill, he commutes every day by train to his office in the city. On the day the story takes place he spots his former secretary, Mrs. Dent, following him on his way from his office to the train station. The narrator then gives an account of what happened between the two – Blake hired Mrs. Dent as a secretary and after finding out that she is quite insecure, naïve and emotionally unstable, Blake seduced her, had sex with her and fired her the next day through personnel. After Blake shakes Mrs. Dent off at the train station and enters his five-forty-eight train home, he is shocked to see Mrs. Dent sit next to him with a gun hidden in her pocketbook, demanding that they talk. Fearing for his life and worrying that Mrs. Dent will make a scene in front of the passengers in the train, consisting mainly of his neighbors from Shady Hill, Blake sits and listens to Mrs. Dent quietly blaming him and accusing him of ruining her life. They eventually get off in Shady Hill and after all the other passengers have left for their homes, Mrs. Dent makes Blake put his face into a pile of dirt and then finally leaves him.

"The Five-Forty-Eight" is exceptional in its symbolism of space. Before the interference of Mrs. Dent, Blake's private and public spaces are impenetrably separate – while at home in Shady Hill, he puts on his mask of an ideal suburban dweller, conformed to social conventions and caring about his public image; when in the city, he behaves according to the egoistic, corrupted part of his character. The city provides Blake with urban anonymity in which he can hide. In the city, Blake is an inconspicuous man, "undistinguished in every way, unless you could have divined in his pallor or

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119 Andres Duany et al., *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000) 42.

120 Wilhite, "John Cheever's" 144.

his gray eyes his unpleasant tastes".<sup>121</sup> Due to his indistinctive style of clothing, "there was a scrupulous lack of color in his clothing that seemed protective". City is portrayed as dirty, packed, rainy and full of noises: "traffic was tied up, and horns were blowing urgently"; "the sidewalk was crowded".<sup>122</sup> Hastiness and anonymity enable Blake to blend in with the city – when Blake is trying to shake off Mrs. Dent, the narrator notes "the maze of street-level and underground passages, elevator banks, and crowded lobbies made it easy for a man to lose a pursuer".<sup>123</sup> He becomes an "insignificant man" who is temporarily free of the obligation to follow the moral code of the suburbs. There are hints in the story that the affair with Mrs. Dent is not his first adulterous experience, as it is said that "most of the many women he had known had been picked for their lack of self-esteem".<sup>124</sup>

The train serves not only as a means of transportation between Blake's home and workplace, but also as a symbolic crossing between two separate parts of Blake's life – his public image and his secret life. By joining him on his ride home instead of staying tucked away in the city, Mrs. Dent, a real-life skeleton in Blake's closet, disrupts the impenetrability of Blake's dual worlds as she both literally and symbolically brings the urban corruption and Blake's wrong-doings to Shady Hill. Blake can no longer be safe in his pastoral haven of his suburban neighborhood due to Mrs. Dent's violent disturbance of the strict division of the city and Shady Hill. While the rush of the city seems to promise that Mrs. Dent will be "easy to shake", once she enters the car she steps out of urban anonymity and Blake has to face her concrete definiteness that has an ability to destroy his public image, which is why Blake turns "his head to see if anyone in the car was looking"<sup>125</sup> when she starts weeping in the seat in front of him.

That the privacy of Shady Hill is ruined by Mrs. Dent's actions is also represented in weather. Cheever uses weather symbolism as a parallel to the development of the plot – a technique of the so-called pathetic fallacy typical of pastoral literature. The nastiness and corruption of the city, as well as Blake's frame of mind, are supported by the fact that it is raining: at

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121 Cheever 284.

122 Cheever 282.

123 Cheever 282.

124 Cheever 286.

125 Cheever 287.

the beginning, he steps out of his office and sees that "it was still raining",<sup>126</sup> the weather in the city is described as "wet dusk".<sup>127</sup> When he gets into the train, the city is still "industrial, and, at that hour, sad".<sup>128</sup> Once the train sets off and Blake is nearing Shady Hill, he notices the pastoral scenery along the way through the window: he sees "the river and the sky"<sup>129</sup> and "some men fishing on the nearly dark river".<sup>130</sup> Clouds give way to sun: "while he watched, a streak of orange light on the horizon became brilliant". However, as Mrs. Dent joins him on the ride, the sun "was put out"<sup>131</sup> and once they get to Shady Hill, "It was raining again; it was pouring".<sup>132</sup> Much like Blake's secret life, urban corruption, Blake's adultery and Mrs. Dent herself, weather trespasses the distance between the city and the suburbs and is brought to Shady Hill. In this way, it makes an irreversible connection between the two parts of Blake's life.

#### 3.4. The Pastoral Ideal

In many of his stories, John Cheever works with the notion of the pastoral ideal. John Dyer writes that the ideological tradition of pastoralism pervades Cheever's fiction.<sup>133</sup> (The heritage of the Puritan tradition of pastoralism and its rendering in the suburban ideal have already been discussed in the previous chapter.) Cheever shows us that the the suburban ideal is closely connected to "the dream of recreating the world into an Eden", "the promise of pastoralism" and to the idea of suburbia as the "haven from the vices of the city".<sup>134</sup> As it is mostly the case with this writer, Cheever's application of the concept of pastoralism to the suburban experience is carried out through the method of binary oppositions; in this case, the pastoral ideal and its alleged purity is often implicitly or explicitly contrasted to the city and the corruption the urban environment produces.

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126 Cheever 280.

127 Cheever 280.

128 Cheever 286.

129 Cheever 289.

130 Cheever 288.

131 Cheever 288.

132 Cheever 292.

133 Dyer, John Cheever.

134 Dyer, John Cheever.

The characters usually turn to the promise of pastoralism if they need to overcome problems in their lives. They understand the pastoral ideal as a dream they can focus on when they feel lost in suburban complexity. As John Dyer writes, the pastoral ideal "is a delusion the characters use to avoid the reality that exists around them everyday" and in their "most intense bouts of guilt, or when their world seems most bereft", the characters "imagine pastoral landscapes, escaping the temporal world in favor of a make-believe one".<sup>135</sup> Pastoral landscapes and wild nature are often understood in terms of purity, innocence and unsullied rural lifestyle. The image of the pastoral idyll comes into minds of Cheever's characters especially if they are faced with the dirtiness, deprivation and corruption associated with the urban areas. Especially the notion of the idyllic, pure pastoral morning is used as an image of newness and purity, and it often reminds the characters of innocence they have been deprived of in their lives. Such is the role of the image of the country morning in the short-story "The Common Day":

When Jim woke at seven in the morning, he got up and made a tour of the bedroom windows. He was so accustomed to the noise and congestion of the city that after six days in New Hampshire he still found the beauty of the country morning violent and alien. The hills seemed to come straight out of the northern sky. From the western windows, he saw the strong sun lighting the trees on the mountains, pouring its light onto the flat water of the lake, and striking at the outbuildings of the big, old-fashioned place as commandingly as the ringing of iron bells.<sup>136</sup>

The city is described as noisy and congested, while the country is vast, open and beautiful. While Jim's concern with the pastoral landscape is primarily spatial and practical – in the citation above he mainly compares the geographical features of countryside with those of the city - for most Cheever's characters the pastoral ideal is, above all, allegorical and connected not to the physical attributes of the actual landscape, but rather to a more abstract vision of a traditional, purer,

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<sup>135</sup> Dyer, John Cheever.

<sup>136</sup> Cheever 23.

unsullied way of life of high moral value. Characters usually retreat to such an image if they experience (or themselves do) something indecent or corrupted – something which is not in accordance with their New England conscience. Such is the case of Maria in "Just Tell Me Who It Was" - Maria is a young wife of an older, protective, loving husband – Will - who adores and cherishes (possibly overly) his younger spouse. One night, they go together to the annual costume ball attended by many Shady Hill residents – Maria's husband is nervous because his wife's costume is very tight and provocative and he feels that she will be an object of stares of many „voracious, youthful, bestial, and lewd“ young men.<sup>137</sup> At the event, Will does not see much of his wife, and eventually leaves early. It is not until dawn that Maria goes back home, wine spilled on her clothes and her stocking torn. As she approaches her house through the country morning, she is suddenly ashamed of herself:

She had lost her pocketbook. Her tights had been torn by the scales of a dragon. The smell of spilled wine came from her clothes. The sweetness of the air and the fineness of the light touched her. The party seemed like gibberish. She had had all the partners she wanted, but she had not had all the right ones. [...] The trees of Shady Hill were filled with birds—larks, thrushes, robins, crows—and now the air began to ring with their song. The pristine light and the loud singing reminded her of some ideal—some simple way of life, in which she dried her hands on an apron and Will came home from the sea—that she had betrayed. She did not know where she had failed, but the gentle morning light illuminated her failure pitilessly. She began to cry.<sup>138</sup>

The pastoral scenery around Maria accentuates her failure in self-control. Upon getting confronted face to face with the images of pastoralism, she suddenly feels she has betrayed a certain moral code which the images represent. She has seriously damaged the idea her husband had of her, that is the image of an innocent country girl. The beautiful morning reminds her of a "simple way of

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137 Cheever 444.

138 Cheever 445-446.

life" connected with the rural, pastoral ideal.

The provincial landscape is being repeatedly associated with innocence, particularly a child's innocence and youth. In "The Common Day", a maid named Agnes "had never been as happy as she was that summer" when she took care of a young girl, Carlotta, in the rural area of New Hampshire. "She loved the mountains, the lake, and the sky" and "the irascible and unhappy child", who "overpowered her with a sense of recaptured youth", served as a "link with the morning, with the sun, with everything beautiful and exciting".<sup>139</sup> In "The Summer Farmer", a family's breadwinner, who works in the city over the week and who over weekend goes back to the farm where he lives with his family, describes the following idyll when coming back from the city:

His business suit bound at the shoulders when he left the car, as if he had taken on height, for the place told him that he was ten years younger; the maples, the house, the simple mountains all told him this. His two small children stormed around the edge of the barn and collided against his legs.<sup>140</sup>

In "Torch Song", the protagonist, who lives in New York, meets his female friend, with whom he grew up in the suburbs: "When she came into the bar, she seemed as wholesome and calm as ever. Her voice was sweet, and reminded him of elms, of lawns, of those glass arrangements that used to be hung from porch ceilings to tinkle in the summer wind".<sup>141</sup> The image of a provincial, pastoral morning provides some of the characters with a sense of recaptured youth and of a new beginning, as in the following extract from "The Common Day": "Jim [...] kissed" his wife "and thought how young, slender, and pretty she looked. They had spent very little of their married life in the country, and to be together on a bright, still morning made them both feel as if they had recaptured the excitement of their first meetings".<sup>142</sup>

### 3.5. The Corruption of Urban Areas

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139 Cheever 25.

140 Cheever 95.

141 Cheever 109.

142 Cheever 23.

In Cheever, the image of the pastoral idyll is often contrasted to the idea of urban corruption. The pastoral-urban dichotomy can also be understood in other opposing pairs, such as traditional and modern, pure and sullied, clean and dirty, or rising and declining. All of these oppositions are used in the rhetoric of the suburban myth, and Cheever's suburban characters show that they have successfully embraced this rhetoric. Much like purity and innocence are associated with the pastoral ideal, criminality and lack of moral values are associated with the city environment. In "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill", Hake, a suburbanite turned criminal who has stolen his own neighbor's money, ponders the morning after he commits the crime about how beautiful and clean the suburban landscape of Shady Hill is and how an urban environment would better suit his criminal activity: "Had I looked, the next morning, from my bathroom window into the evil-smelling ruin of some great city, the shock of recalling what I had done might not have been so violent".<sup>143</sup> In "The Common Day", the character of Elen loves the idea of a country life and her disfavor of the city is seen in her fear of "traffic, of poverty, and particularly, of war". The "remote, improbable houses" of the country represent "safety and security to her".<sup>144</sup> The city is generally depicted as corrupted and full of drugs and violence in Cheever's stories. "A City of Broken Dreams" tells the story of a couple from Wentworth, Indiana who go to New York City but quickly lose all their illusions about the bright lights due to exploitation, corruption and poverty which they find in the city. The protagonist of "The Season of Divorce" voices the idea that "the city is full of accidental revelation, half-heard cries for help, and strangers who will tell you everything at the first suspicion of sympathy".<sup>145</sup> The "Torch Song" tells the story of Joan, who comes from a small city in Ohio to New York City and gets absorbed by its criminal and drug culture – she begins to "deal with those doctors and druggists who peddle dope", later goes "down to the bottom of the city", while her friends are afraid "she would be found some morning stuffed in a drain".<sup>146</sup>

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143 Cheever 258.

144 Cheever 26.

145 Cheever 140.

146 Cheever 91.

### 3.6. The Community of Shady Hill

While incorporating in his stories the historical development, traditions and ideals which are connected to the suburban myth, John Cheever also, at the same time, points out deviations from the ideal. Moral corruption, general human inclination to shenanigans and disobedience of unwritten moral codes make putting the suburban ideal into practice virtually impossible. At first glance, the community of Shady Hill fulfills perfectly its role of a provider of a haven of safety, reason and solidarity. The protagonist of "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" describes the society of Shady Hill in the following way:

Shady Hill, as I say, a *banlieue* and open to criticism by city planners, adventurers, and lyric poets, but if you work in the city and have children to raise, I can't think of a better place. My neighbors are rich, it is true, but riches in this case mean leisure, and they use their time wisely. They travel around the world, listen to good music, and given a choice of paper books at an airport, will pick Thucydides, and sometimes Aquinas. [...] They plant trees and roses, and their gardens are splendid and bright.<sup>147</sup>

The quote above may serve as a manifesto of what the 1950s suburbia seems like at first sight. Without the ambition to please adventurous pleasure-seekers and "lyric poets", suburbia is essentially a thoughtful arrangement based on conservative values whose aim is to provide families with a safe place for their children, as well as to make it possible for the residents to enjoy the fine leisure activities befitting the upper middle class. Moreover, the community of Shady Hill fulfills its role in that it is a truly elitist, WASP society - there are but a few ethnic (non-white) characters featured in Cheever's stories set in Shady Hill. Regarding themselves as a social elite who have been granted the privileges of the suburban lifestyle, Cheever's suburbanites feel obliged to provide for the less fortunate. Thus, the sense of self-importance typical of the suburban upper middle class is manifested in Shady Hill in various charitable societies, fund-raising

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147 Cheever 306.

campaigns and various committees. It is especially women who think it necessary to provide their financial resources, time and organizational skills in pursue of some generous aim. It is not only a question of the responsibility that comes with financial and social superiority, but also a question of prestige. The heads of the ladies of Shady Hill whirl "with civic zeal"<sup>148</sup>, they organize themselves and "attend a League of Women Voters"<sup>149</sup>, "P.T.A. Meetings"<sup>150</sup> and various charitable "committee meetings".<sup>151</sup> They establish committees "in charge of decorations for the Apple Blossom Fete, a costume ball given for charity"<sup>152</sup> and they organize "fund-raising campaigns".<sup>153</sup> The Shady Hill housewives solicit "funds for cancer, heart trouble, lameness, deafness, and mental health",<sup>154</sup> while still managing to attend the "Current Events Committee" meetings.<sup>155</sup> In this way, they perfectly fulfill their role of the members of a privileged social elite.

At first glance, the suburban idyll seems nearly flawless. However, after he introduces the formal image of Shady Hill, Cheever lets the reader penetrate through the polished surface and observe the initially hidden defects. In this way, Cheever uncovers the "illusory nature of the suburban ideal".<sup>156</sup> As John Dyer writes, Cheever's suburbanites find themselves unable to "avoid all the impulses within themselves that might tarnish their community".<sup>157</sup> One of these flaws is the residents' inclination to alcohol. As Quinn states, in Cheever, "alcoholism" serves as an „escape“ from the imprisonment caused by "frustrated desires".<sup>158</sup> The narrator of "The Trouble of Marcy Flint" states that there are "two aspects" of life in Shady Hill – there are "political discussion groups, recorder groups, dancing schools, confirmation classes, committee meetings, and lectures on literature, philosophy, city planning, and pest control", and then there are "the parties, of course".<sup>159</sup> As we have seen in "Just Tell Me Who It Was", where a female character goes through a walk of shame of pastoral images after a night of drinking, alcohol can spoil people's illusions

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148 Cheever 289.

149 Cheever 263.

150 Cheever 289.

151 Cheever 290.

152 Cheever 373.

153 Cheever 380.

154 Cheever 383.

155 Cheever 378.

156 Keith Wilhite, *Framing Suburbia: U.S. Literature and the Postwar Suburban Region, 1945-2002: A Thesis* (Iowa City: The University of Iowa, 2007) 155.

157 Dyer, John Cheever.

158 Quinn 265.

159 Cheever 290.

about the purity of the suburban ideal. Many of Cheever's characters live double life – one in which they act like decorous citizens, and the other in which they drink heavily (a duality which has an autobiographical foundation in Cheever's life). Such is also the case in "The Sorrows of Gin", in which alcohol plays a key role in increasing misunderstanding and alienation in the Lawton family. Drinking alcohol is depicted in Cheever's stories as a serious flaw in the suburban ideal, not only because it mostly adds to estrangement of couples and family members, but also because it goes, in its essence, against the Puritan code, in which "sobriety and self-control" play a key role.<sup>160</sup>

There are also other defects that pose a serious threat to the rendering of the ideal suburban community. There is "a natural proneness to gossip"<sup>161</sup> in Shady Hill, which can at times become even "tireless and aggressive".<sup>162</sup> In "Just Tell Me Who It Was", the scandalous ball gives way to "a lot of gossip about the dance".<sup>163</sup> Moreover, gossip and insincerity cause confusion in the community's relations and often lead to uncertainty, distrust, suspicion and jealousy. All these tensions happening beneath the nice decorous facade cause a lot of emotional perplexity and psychological pressure, which may sometimes manifest themselves in irrational, often unsubstantiated bursts of emotions. In many cases, confused and upset characters, who grapple with orienting themselves in uncertain and complex social relationships, accuse a wrong person of causing their troubles. In "The Cure", the protagonist randomly accuses his neighbor of being the person who repeatedly roves about his house at night and peeps into his windows, though there is no direct evidence that would lead the protagonist to this particular person. In "Summer Farmer", Paul Hollis, the protagonist, accuses a neighboring farmer from putting poison into his shed and killing his kids' rabbits, though it eventually turns out that Hollis's wife was the one who accidentally left the rat poison in the shed. In "Just Tell Me Who It Was", gossip that his wife is unfaithful to him reaches Will Pym, who, driven by jealousy and groping in the dark for truth, eventually punches the man who he believes is his wife's lover, though the legitimacy of the accusation is at least considerably arguable. All these actions stem from the artificial nature of suburban relations, which are marked with a tension between the official, formal behavior of the residents and the unofficial,

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160 Kvasničková 23.

161 Cheever 384.

162 Cheever 139.

163 Cheever 379.

undercurrent manners, characterized by gossip, insincerity and undercover grudge.

The whole community is generally negatively affected by artifice. In "The Season of Divorce", the protagonist admits that he and his wife, out of "practical considerations" go to see their neighbors, the Newsomes, who throw "large and confusing" parties where "the arbitrary impulses of friendship are given a free play".<sup>164</sup> People pretend to like one another and the whole community engages in the collective pretense that everything and everybody is just splendid. It is only in moments of lost self-control, usually caused by alcohol, that people are willing to admit that there is something wrong. In "Just Tell Me Who It Was", Ethel Worden, who has been "drinking Martinis for tow hours", says to the protagonist: "We're poor, Will. [...] Did you know that we're poor? Nobody realizes that there are people like us in a community like this. We can't afford eggs for breakfast. We can't afford a cleaning woman. We can't afford a washing machine".<sup>165</sup>

Cheever works with the notion of duality on many levels – duality of the private and the public, the inner and the outer, the suppressed and the enforced, the ideal and the real. What is important to note before moving on to the 1960s and John Updike is that the troubles and defects of modern suburbia we find in Cheever come from within – from the nature of the suburban ideal, from the arrangement of suburbia, and, most importantly, from the imperfect human nature.

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164 Cheever 137.

165 Cheever 375.

## 4. The 1960s: John Updike

### 4.1. Updike's Account of Suburbia in the 1960s

In the 1960s, the American suburbs were necessarily affected by the vast changes that were happening in the society. In contrast to the prevalent conformity of the 1950s, the 1960s generally sees a boom of relativism, multiplicity and liberation. The rigid hierarchy of objective values gets disrupted, giving way to increased individualism. As Milena Coufalova writes in connection to the writing of the 1960s, morality is relativized and objective dichotomy of good and wrong is turned into a maze of individual experience.<sup>166</sup> On the one hand, dissent and counter-culture become national phenomena; on the other hand the unprecedented availability of commodities and cultural products, combined with the middle class desire for comfort, leads to a significant increase of consumerism.<sup>167</sup> Ensuing the McCarthist 1950s defined by silent paranoia, the 1960s are characterized by the demand for openness. Liberation of individual freedom opens questions of racism and leads to the African-American civil rights movement and liberal reforms that provide healthcare for the poor and the elderly. At the same time, the on-going Cold War still serves as an omnipresent threat to the American idyll.

The 1960s saw a "redefinition of female familial role"<sup>168</sup> and a progress in the emancipation of women. The introduction of the contraceptive pill on the American market in 1960 and the fact that sexual topics ceased to be a social taboo gave way to the sexual revolution. As Cas Wouters writes, "the sexual revolution was a breakthrough in the emancipation of female sexuality". Moreover, "the dangers and fears connected with sex decreased to such a degree that there was an acceleration in the emancipation of sexual emotions and impulses" which allowed the subject of sex "into consciousness and public debate" of the American society.<sup>169</sup> Consequently, "in a relatively short period of time, the relatively autonomous strength of carnal desire became

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166 Milena Coufalová, *K poválečnému vývoji americké povídky: Truman Capote, Irving Shaw, John Updike* (Praha: FF UK, 1991) 3.

167 Justin Quinn, ed., *Lectures on American Literature* (Praha: Karolinum, 2011) 239.

168 William Douglas, *Television Families: Is Something Wrong in Suburbia?* (Mahwah/London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003) 95.

169 Cas Wouters, *Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West, 1890-2000* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004) 24.

acknowledged and respected."<sup>170</sup>

All the abovementioned changes in the American society are reflected in the works of John Updike. Born in 1932, this author of numerous novels and collections of short-stories and double winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction is considered one of the most recognized explorers of the small-town American middle class.<sup>171</sup> In my analysis of how suburbia is portrayed in Updike's fiction, I will focus primarily on the 1962 collection *Pigeon Feathers* and on *Couples*, a novel published in 1968. While the somewhat moderate *Pigeon Feathers* features various short-stories that deal with anxiety of the American middle class, family relations, kids' place in society, infidelity, nostalgia, etc, *Couples*, an instant best-seller, is a controversial novel that caused a significant uproar upon its publishing for its portrayal of adultery. Exploring the tension between the Puritan attitude to carnal issues and the loosened sexual mores resulting from the emerging sexual revolution, the novel depicts ten bored, promiscuous couples living in the fictional suburban community of Tarbox. I will use *Couples* to describe how Updike depicts the attempt of the 1960s suburban society to balance traditional values with the new liberal philosophy of the swinging sixties.

Dealing with such themes like "family relationships, individual moral responsibility and guilt, sexuality and romantic love, materialism, and social mores in general",<sup>172</sup> John Updike chooses the environment of the American suburbs as an ideal setting for the majority of his literary pieces. Updike finds meaning in the everyday experience of the common members of the American middle class. As Kristiaan Versluys writes, "nothing much happens in an Updike story except for the slow unraveling of feeling and circumstance". Stories "meander luxuriously and with a looseness and lassitude that provides, not for slackness, but, on the contrary, for probing and infinitely varied contemplation".<sup>173</sup> Similarly, Eva Borovickova states that Updike does not base his short-stories on a shocking revelation or point, but rather on ordinariness and subtle paradox.<sup>174</sup> She further writes

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170 Wouters 127.

171 Jack De Bellis, *John Updike Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000) 25.

172 George J. Searles. *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985) 3.

173 Stacey Olster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 30.

174 Eva Borovičková. *Muž a žena: téma partnerských vztahů v díle Johna Updikea: MA Thesis* (Praha: FF UK, 1989) 1.

that the New England suburbia that serves as the typical setting of Updike's novels is inhabited by people who may be understood as archetypal representatives of the 1960s American society, which is unprecedentedly prosperous but grapples with traumas and dilemmas that stem from the fluidity of the national cultural environment and increasing consumerism.<sup>175</sup> According to Quinn, Updike in his literary oeuvre successfully opposes "the prejudice that [...] life of the middle class in the suburbs and small towns of America is inherently boring and unfit as subject for great literature". Updike gives "the mundane its beautiful due" and writes stories about "marital infidelity, and the implications of religious faith"; however, "on occasions the view from the small town could take in the US in general".<sup>176</sup> As George J. Searles points out, despite the fact that his stories take place in remote, separate suburbs, John Updike embraces "the novelist's customary role of social historian and commentator" as he convincingly captures "the collective American personality and the dilemmas with which it grapples".<sup>177</sup> For these reasons, Updike has been described as the chronicler of "contemporary America",<sup>178</sup> "the chronicler of the American middle class"<sup>179</sup> or "a resident chronicler of the suburban milieu".<sup>180</sup>

#### 4.2. Invasion to Suburbia

In contrast to John Cheever, John Updike's suburbia ceases to be a separate, reclusive, remote haven where the WASP upper middle class hides from the realities of the rest of the world and cultivates its own lifestyle in a form of seclusion in which any contact with other areas (particularly urban areas) is undesirable. While there are essentially no reflections on the politics or any national events in Cheever's Shady Hill, the life of the residents of Updike's Tarbox is affected by the nation-wide changes in the society and other major events. Updike's suburban communities

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175 Borovičková 3.

176 Justin Quinn ed., *Lectures on American Literature* (Praha: Karolinum, 2011) 264-265.

177 Searles 2.

178 Olster 162.

179 Jay Prosser, "Under the Skin of John Updike: Self-consciousness and the Racial Unconscious," *PMLA* 116.3 (2001): 579.

180 T. K. Meier, "Review: John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction (Twayne's Studies in Short Fiction) by Robert M. Luscher" *Studies in Short Fiction* 31.3 (1994): 530.

are forced to face all the sudden cultural and political shifts that mark the 1960s and to somehow cope with them. As the pace of living increased due to the availability of modern technology and as mass media became an inseparable part of people's lives in even the most remote of areas (the number of homes with television sets in the US increased from 5 million in 1950 to 45 million by 1960),<sup>181</sup> the formerly self-sufficient suburban utopia was invaded by the modern world and suburbanites could no longer go on ignoring the rest of the world. As James A. Schiff writes,

Updike, whose novels are often set in small towns in Pennsylvania and New England, demonstrates how national news, stories, songs, television shows, movies, ideas and trends are relayed and distributed, entering the lives and thoughts of individuals who are far removed from the heights of Hollywood, Washington, or Manhattan.<sup>182</sup>

While the community of Cheever's Shady Hill is an isolated one and most of its tensions and complications come from within (i.e. from the interaction of the individual members of the community), Updike's suburbanites are mainly pressured by the society from the outside. Their major concern is to balance their decorous suburban lives with the rapid, often tempting changes in the American society. Face to face with the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement, feminism and general attack on conformity, the suburban ideal gets re-defined and re-shaped, and media and mass culture break into the everyday lives of the suburban middle class. As Schiff further states, Updike focuses on the "surfaces of daily life, particularly the small domestic moments and events", but he draws attention not only to the "gestures, dress, manners, observations, moods and hopes" of suburban residents, but also to the ways in which they "receive news, hear songs, make purchases, and watch television and movies". In this way, Updike demonstrates that "film and popular culture" have worked their way into people's "everyday lives".<sup>183</sup>

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181 Postwar Suburbia Statistics, *Shmoop* <<http://www.shmoop.com/postwar-suburbia/statistics.html>> Jan 4 2014.

182 Olster 140.

183 Olster 147.

In *Couples*, watching television is a phenomenon so widespread that it is becoming a problem: one of the characters, Janet, asks: "What *can* we do about our children watching?", adding that her son is "becoming an absolute zombie".<sup>184</sup> National-level events get frequently reflected in the novel. The death of the prematurely born child of Jackie Kennedy,<sup>185</sup> Kennedy's assassination<sup>186</sup>, the sinking of the USS Thresher<sup>187</sup>, the Civil Rights movement – these are some of the events that are mentioned or discussed among the Tarbox residents. People sometimes quarrel because they have different opinions on what is going on in the world. However, while it is true that national and world affairs are being acknowledged in Tarbox, they actually fail to have any significant impact on the community. Upon finding out that J. F. Kennedy got assassinated, the residents of Tarbox discuss whether it is appropriate to go through with a huge party they have planned on the following day. Though some think that it is inappropriate and that the party should be canceled, the fact that the alcohol for the party has already been bought eventually makes the hosts decide "to have their party after all".<sup>188</sup> In the middle of heavy drinking, dancing and eating, one of the attendees asks in connection to Kennedy: "Don't you think [...] we should be fasting or something?", getting "fasting of fucking" in answer from the host.<sup>189</sup> Rachael C. Burchard writes that several members of the Tarbox community "feel certain responsibilities toward society in general [...] but none allows truly serious social or political problems to disturb his peace of mind", which means that Updike's characters are still "comfortably detached from the world".<sup>190</sup>

Another change that distinguishes Updike's Tarbox from Cheever's Shady Hill is the emergence of racial minorities in the suburbs. As I have discussed in connection to the 1950s suburbia and John Cheever, "the mass exodus to the suburbs left minority families behind" and the "homogeneous suburban picture was not adventitious but was an outgrowth of direct and intentional government policies and private discrimination".<sup>191</sup> In the 1960s, however, as a more or

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184 John Updike, *Couples* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987) 38.

185 Updike, *Couples* 290.

186 Updike, *Couples* 353.

187 Updike, *Couples* 21.

188 Updike, *Couples* 366.

189 Updike, *Couples* 387.

190 Rachael C. Burchard, *John Updike: Yea Sayings* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971) 108.

191 Marc Seitles, "The Perpetuation of Residential Racial Segregation in America: Historical Discrimination,

less inevitable result of the ongoing social changes, the number of non-white suburbanites increased and the ethnic composition of suburbia began its reshaping that would later disturb the impenetrable white exclusivity of the American suburbs. Though the proportion of blacks in suburbia was still nowhere near the national average, the suburbs did partially open up to ethnic minorities in the 1960s.<sup>192</sup> And the social changes that induced this development had to be somehow reflected by white suburbanites as well. While there are virtually no ethnic characters in Cheever, there are the Ongs who are Korean and the Saltzs who are Jewish in Tarbox. Both families are generally accepted and they are included in the social politics of the community. There are also black people who work for the construction company of the main character, Piet Hanema.<sup>193</sup> Racial issues are reflected on several occasions; there is a Tarbox Fair Housing Committee mentioned by one of the characters. It seems that racial, ethnic and religious minorities enjoy full equality in Tarbox. However, we progressively learn that indeed racism, discrimination and segregation are still present, and that even full embrace of the white suburban ideal cannot save a non-WASP from discrimination. When a black bulldozer operator says something his boss Piet dislikes, he gets "pardon me, Dr. King" as a reaction.<sup>194</sup> There are other hints that show that despite their hip, progressive nature, the Tarbox residents are not yet completely ready to accept non-whites as absolute equals in their WASP sanctuary. John Ong, a Tarbox suburbanite of Korean decent who speaks with a strong accent, is accepted so far as he is a fully adequate neighbor who is willing to adapt himself to the community. But when he gets seriously ill and needs to be hospitalized, for several months nobody visits him.<sup>195</sup> When a Tarbox couple decide that they want to adopt a baby, they find out that white babies for adoption are scarce, but that hospitals "have so many more Negroes".<sup>196</sup> There is anti-semitism as well – in relation to the Saltz, a Jewish couple, it is said that "local anti-semitism, even in their tiny enlightened circle of couples" is a

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Modern Forms of Exclusion, and Inclusionary Remedies," *Journal of Land Use & Environmental Law* <<http://dev.law.fsu.edu/journals/landuse/Vol141/seit.htm>> Jan 13 2014.

192 Andres Duany et al., *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (North Point Press: New York, 2000) 33.

193 Updike, *Couples* 95.

194 Updike, *Couples* 99.

195 Updike, *Couples* 471.

196 Updike, *Couples* 466.

fact.<sup>197</sup> The "preponderance of Jewish Communists" is being discussed and "Jewish jokes" are being told; the worst offenders being Carol Constantine who was "raised [...] in a very Presbyterian small-town atmosphere".<sup>198</sup> Some of the white residents of Tarbox regard the activities of the Tarbox Fair Housing Committee in a very racist way:

I said to her, 'But there isn't a single Negro in town,' and she said, 'That's the point. We're culturally deprived, our children don't know what a Negro looks like,' and I said, 'Don't they watch television?' and then I said, getting really mad, 'It seems to me awfully hard on the Negro, to bring him out here just so your children can look at him. Why don't they instead look at the Ongs on a dark day?'<sup>199</sup>

All the abovementioned citations suggest that though liberalism and the demands for equality have somehow affected the lives of 1960s American suburbanites, the traditional view that the WASP suburban middle class is somewhat superior still prevails in Tarbox. The turbulent changes of the decade did alter the suburban ideal significantly, but the exclusivity of the white population and its claim to the suburban idyll remained.

Some critics did not understand the white one-sidedness present in Updike's fiction as an attribute of the white middle class he describes, but they used it as a proof of the author's own ignorance; Jay Posser writes that "if Updike was ever America's literary consciousness, it was a white consciousness. His fictional work has consistently made of blackness an other". According to her, "Updike has represented blackness" only in "antithesis to whiteness".<sup>200</sup>

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197 Updike, *Couples* 463.

198 Updike, *Couples* 464.

199 Updike, *Couple* 243.

200 Posser 579.

### 4.3. The Loss of Traditional Values and their Restoration

As I have stated, the 1960s suburbia ceases to be an isolated WASP haven and the suburban ideal gets severely challenged by the swift changes and cultural shifts that take place in the American society. Face to face with the attacks on conformity and traditional values, suburbia experiences a clash between new modernity and the values that are pivotal to the suburban ideal, such as conformity, moderation, or piety. Together with the onset of the culture of dissent, of relativism and of formerly cornered minorities on the rise, the very exclusivity of the white social elite gets seriously threatened. These topics find their way to Updike's fiction; as George J. Searles writes, "Updike repeatedly writes of the embattled W.A.S.P., the threatened species whose former cultural preeminence has been challenged - and now practically attenuated - by inexorable social change". Suburbia becomes "a climate of adjustment" and the characters must find "their own ways" of confronting their "various identity crises".<sup>201</sup> Suburban conservatism gets attacked and one of the overriding themes of John Updike is that of "cultural disintegration" and "breakdown of the established order".<sup>202</sup> The Puritan moral order that still lingered in Cheever's *Shady Hill* gets shattered and Updike's "questing"<sup>203</sup> characters find themselves lost halfway between lost tradition and tentative modernity. In Searles's words, Updike's suburbia becomes "a moral wasteland unredeemed by the traditional pieties and received wisdom that sustained earlier generations".<sup>204</sup>

Many of the traditional values have been lost in the Tarbox community presented in *Couples*. Religion is superficial and the sense of religious community has practically dissolved. Piet Hanema, the protagonist, caustically comments on the local congregation gathered in the Tarbox church, saying to himself that they are "Yankees trying to sing like slaves".<sup>205</sup> The Tarbox minister is a failed businessman who imagines that everybody in the audience secretly mocks him. In order to bring religious issues nearer to the townspeople, the minister "sought to transpose the desiccated forms of Christianity into financial terms".<sup>206</sup> In his preaching, he uses business terminology and

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201 Searles 5.

202 Searles 5.

203 Searles 5.

204 Searles 5.

205 Updike, *Couples* 28.

206 *Couples* 28.

numerous similes to the world of finances. In this way, Updike sarcastically suggests that communal religion has been subordinated to the self-interested philosophy of *homo economicus*.

The stress on the nuclear family, one of the major attributes of the suburban ideal, gets weakened. Familial relations are loosened, Tarbox couples are frequently unfaithful, marriages get divorced and the suburban house ceases to be a shrine of intimacy and emotional support. As Searles writes, Updike depicts "the difficulties [...] of familial continuity".<sup>207</sup> The sense of national pride has decreased as well. The Tarbox community make fun of some of the beliefs pivotal to the American patriotism. In April 1963, 129 soldiers died when the Thresher submarine sank.<sup>208</sup> This historical event is mentioned in *Couples*, but it is not portrayed in heroic terms. Freddy Thorne, the unofficial spiritual guru of the Tarbox community, says about the Thresher soldiers: "They enlisted. We've all been through it, Harry boy. We took our chances honeymooning with Uncle, and so did they. Che sara sara, as Dodo Day so shrewdly puts it".<sup>209</sup>

With the traditional order lost and the old hierarchy of values dissolved, Updike's characters become constant seekers who aim to restore some sort of stability. They are "bereft of the spiritual fortification that sustained earlier generations"<sup>210</sup> and they experience the confusion of being torn between the traditional and the modern – a dichotomy they attempt to balance. As it is said in *Couples*, Tarbox families, "having suffered under their parents' rigid marriages and formalized evasions, [...] sought to substitute an essential fidelity set in a matrix of easy and open companionship among couples".<sup>211</sup> That they are stuck halfway between the old and the new is suggested by the fact that the young Tarbox families do rebel against the old "confinement and discipline", but they do so only "mildly".<sup>212</sup>

Having discarded the values of the previous generation, Updike's characters are looking for substitutes. It is especially the disintegration of the Christian morales that creates a gap that they seek to fill. As Searles writes, "Updike perceives in contemporary America a widespread loss of

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207 Searles 42.

208 "Thresher: Going Quietly," *National Geographic*

<[http://www.nationalgeographic.com/k19/disasters\\_detail2.html](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/k19/disasters_detail2.html)> Jan 14 2014.

209 Updike, *Couples* 39.

210 Searles 20-21.

211 Updike, *Couples* 120.

212 Updike, *Couples* 120.

spiritual substance".<sup>213</sup> This "breakdown of Christian religion"<sup>214</sup> is manifested in the tendency "to gradually replace traditional religion with secular surrogates".<sup>215</sup> As Searles further states, "Updike's people seem to be seeking an external rationale for a traditional 'leap of faith' that will somehow restore a sense of stability and Christian community to that world".<sup>216</sup> In the case of *Couples*, the community finds substitution for the lost religious communal togetherness in sex. The focus on sexual relations in Tarbox is not only a sign of loosened sexual mores – sex serves as a "substitute for conventional belief and practice"<sup>217</sup> of the church in that it resembles organized religion. There are rituals, rules, congregations, and even a minister – being one of the 20 residents who comprise the Tarbox self-declared sex community, Freddy Thorne serves as a spiritual leader and minister. In *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*, James Plath writes: "By the time of *Couples*, [...] religion has lost its preeminence, while sexual liberation has brought intercourse into the public discourse. Sex and a small circle of like-minded friends have become so central that the couples have made a church of each other".<sup>218</sup> Updike himself said: *Couples* "is not about sex really: it's about sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left. I don't present the people in the book as a set of villains; I see them as people caught in a historical moment".<sup>219</sup>

*Couples* characters see the sexual revolution as a new religious phase in which the society enters. The most promiscuous of the Tarbox residents, Piet Hanema, has an affair with Gorgene: "When he worried about contraception, she laughed. Didn't Angela use Enovid yet? *Welcome*, she said, *to the post-pill paradise*, a lighthearted blasphemy that immensely relieved him".<sup>220</sup> This welcoming serves as a greeting of the new mentality that characterizes the 1960s and, quite typically, is voiced by a woman – a gender that engages in a "flight from the spotless kitchen [...] toward an Amazonian paradise of self-sufficient women".<sup>221</sup> Sexual experience is seen as a way of gaining knowledge. In the words of Piet, adultery is "a way of giving yourself adventures. Of getting

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213 Searles 20.

214 Searles 22.

215 Searles 20.

216 Searles 6.

217 Searles 67.

218 Olster 127.

219 James Plath, *Conversations With John Updike*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi press, 1994) 52.

220 Updike, *Couples* 62.

221 Olster 70.

out in the world and seeking knowledge".<sup>222</sup> However, the transition from the old order to the post-pill paradise is not complete nor satisfying. Characters are often confused because they find themselves repeatedly stuck between two approaches – the traditional Puritan moral code and the modern liberalism. Tarbox residents dangle between two opposing sets of beliefs and oftentimes get lost – Piet, once welcomed to the post-pill paradise, is genuinely surprised when another of his mistresses gets pregnant: "'I assumed you used pills. Everybody else does.' 'Oh, *does*, everybody else? You've taken a poll'".<sup>223</sup> James Plath says that "despite the casual attitude in Tarbox toward sex and adultery, [...] guilt is still prevalent", mostly because "the gates to the '*post-pill paradise*' have only recently been opened and the idea of sexual liberation is still new".<sup>224</sup> The much sought-after stability that the characters need in lieu of the lost sense of religious togetherness is not achieved. Moreover, Updike shows that infidelity and adultery not only do not provide escape from confusion and chaos, but even enhance the characters' desire for stability. In the end, all the main protagonists are unhappy, divorced and lost. One of the characters, Janet, who engages in complex adulterous behavior, eventually requires treatment of a psychologist. Sing Sukhbir writes that Updike shows in *Couples* that "sex alone is not an adequate remedy for modern Christians' miseries".<sup>225</sup> Burchard believes it is because "since sex is an appetite ever renewed and varied, there is no fulfillment".<sup>226</sup>

Loss of the sense of communal togetherness, dissolution of a certain stability provided by religious piety, and weakened reliance on the traditional hierarchy of values turn Updike's suburbanites into constant seekers of anything they can hold on to. According to Burchard, the circle of ten Tarbox couples illustrates "man's perpetual longing which is not satisfied by arrival in utopia".<sup>227</sup> Tarbox residents enjoy all the luxuries and privileges of elite WASP suburbanites, each couple has "an adequate or a luxurious home, a secure income, freedom from financial worries".<sup>228</sup> Altogether, "their way of life approaches a modern utopia".<sup>229</sup> However, somehow all the luxuries

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222 Updike, *Couples* 380.

223 Updike, *Couples* 375.

224 Olster 126.

225 Sukhbir Singh, "Updike's *Couples*," *The Explicator* 52.2 (1994): 128.

226 Burchard 106.

227 Burchard 107.

228 Burchard 108.

229 Burchard 107.

that Updike's characters enjoy are just not enough to them. Spiritual emptiness and futility of chasing materialistic goods make Updike's characters restless. As Judy Giles writes, "suburban domesticity offered millions of people the opportunity to realize their aspirations for material betterment. [...] However, these prudent aspirations [...] could very easily conflict with the desire for excitement and adventure".<sup>230</sup> Boredom makes suburbanites create artificial social issues and get themselves voluntarily into trouble. This notorious problem, typical of American suburbia, is a recurrent theme in Updike's writing. It is best voiced by Clyde, a protagonist of "The Persistence of Desire", who returns temporarily to his hometown and tries to seduce his former sweetheart: "'Clyde, I thought you were successful. I thought you had beautiful children. Aren't you happy?' 'I am, I am; but' the rest was so purely inspired its utterance only grazed his lips - 'happiness isn't everything'".<sup>231</sup> Overall, Updike shows us that the 1960s suburbia produces "perplexed, wounded seekers"<sup>232</sup> without giving us any definite answer to what might be the solution for these victims of suburban moral complexity.

#### 4.4. The Pastoral Ideal

One of the ways in which Updike's characters attempt to achieve peace is turning to the pastoral ideal. Increased consumerism, attack of modernity and mass culture, the focus on materialistic property – these are only some of the maladies of the emerging consumerist culture that make protagonists of Updike's fiction often seek refuge in the ideal of pastoralism. Tarbox residents "settled the year round in unthought-of places, in pastoral mill towns like Tarbox, and tried to improvise here a fresh way of life".<sup>233</sup> Kathleen Verduin states that "the myth of Mother Earth dominates the whole of Updike's fiction".<sup>234</sup> Similarly to Cheever's suburbanites, Updike's characters turn to the traditional promise of pastoral purity and integrity especially if they are

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<sup>230</sup> Judy Giles, *Parlour and the Suburb : Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2004) 31.

<sup>231</sup> John Updike, *Pigeon Feathers* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991) 24.

<sup>232</sup> Searles, 68.

<sup>233</sup> Updike, *Couples*, 121.

<sup>234</sup> Olster 71.

challenged with morally complex issues. When Piet is about to commit adultery with Georgene in *Couples*, he is reluctant to do so outside: "'Would you like to go inside?' [...] She surprised him by answering, 'Let's make it outdoors for a change.' Piet felt he was still being chastised".<sup>235</sup> Feeling guilty engaging in an immoral behavior, Piet feels that the pastoral images that surround them accentuate his transgression:

Sensing and fearing a witness, Piet looked upward and was awed as if by something inexplicable by the unperturbed onward motion of the fleet of bluebellied clouds, ships with a single destination. The little eclipsing cloud burned gold in its tendrilous masts and stern. A cannon discharge of iridescence, and it passed. Passed on safely above him. Sun was renewed in bold shafts on the cracked April earth, the sodden autumnal leaves, the new shoots coral in the birches and mustard on the larch boughs, the dropped needles drying, the tarpaper, their discarded clothes. Between the frilled holes her underpants wore a tender honey stain. Between her breasts the sweat was scintillant and salt.<sup>236</sup>

Similarly, Piet feels guilt for sullyng the pure pastoral landscape – he is a constructor who builds new houses. In this way, he represents the ongoing suburban development that got out of control, devastating vast areas of land. When looking at an ongoing construction, Piet feels responsible for the devastation, as he is the one who "helped cause this man and machine to be roaring and churning and chuffing and throttling here, where birds and children used to hide".<sup>237</sup> The "profit [...] suddenly didn't seem enough, [...] enough to justify this raging and rending close at his back, this rape of a haven precious to ornamental shy creatures who needed no house. Builders burying the world God made".<sup>238</sup> The increasingly encroached countryside is a symbolic parallel to the modern society's abandoning of the traditional values that comprise the suburban ideal. Characters'

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235 Updike, *Couples* 63-64.

236 Updike, *Couples*, 64.

237 Updike, *Couples* 95.

238 Updike, *Couples* 95.

inclination to turn to the pastoral ideal at times of emotional strain and moral doubts is manifested in frequent "nostalgia for pre-urban America"<sup>239</sup> we see in Updike's short-stories. "Pidgeon Feathers" is a story that depicts a family that moves from the city to a suburban house – the idea came from the mother who delights in the ideal of rural purity. When she is challenged by her husband who mocks the intelligence of the average farmer, she replies "What makes you think farmers are unintelligent? This country was made by farmers. George Washington was a farmer".<sup>240</sup> In paying homage to the American rural heritage, Updike revives pastoralism as a vital part of the suburban ideal.

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239 Charles T. Samuels, *John Updike: American Writers 79* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969) 27.

240 Updike, Pigeon 93.

## 5. The 1970s: Raymond Carver

### 5.1. Urbanization of the Suburbs

The 1970s saw a further continuation of some of the trends visible in the 1960s – the number of residents in American suburbia increased significantly, city centers were being abandoned and left to poverty and crime, the previously homogenous white social structure of the suburbs was increasingly disrupted and maladies typical of the urban areas, such as poverty, crime and social segregation, started to find their way into the suburban haven. Deprived of their exclusivity, suburban residents ceased to be a social elite. With suburbia becoming increasingly socially diverse, previous formal closeness of a suburban community, typical of the 1950s, disappears and gets replaced with atomization and isolation. The elite minority turned into a heterogeneous majority and suburbia became a standard, not a privilege. The WASP suburban dream is broken - with almost half of Americans living in the suburbs, which sprawl endlessly, and with the suburban areas getting increasingly packed and congested, we cannot really talk about the pastoral ideal in connection to suburbia in the 1970s anymore. The heterogeneous structure of the suburban population, as well as crime and collective isolation take the communal aspect away from the suburban myth as well.

The 1970s saw a serious disillusionment with suburbia, from social scientists, across cultural critics, to city planners. The latter are represented by Duany et al. who write that the suburban ideal "seems to have its limits", as only a "small number of people can achieve" the suburban dream "without compromising it for all involved". They further write, "as the middle class rushes to build its countryside cottages at the same time on the same land, the resulting environment is inevitably unsatisfying, its objective self-contradictory: isolation en masse".<sup>241</sup> The most frequently mentioned problems in voicing of the "disenchantment" with suburbia become "sprawl, placelessness, punishing commutes, loss of community, fear, and mean-spirited, neoliberal political economy".<sup>242</sup> The traditional hallmarks of suburban residence survive only in the

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<sup>241</sup> Andres Duany et al., *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (North Point Press: New York, 2000) 40.

<sup>242</sup> Paul Knox, *Metroburbia, USA* (Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, 2008) 14.

vocabulary of the marketers, who "have co-opted much of the original vocabulary of traditional town planning in their efforts" with the result of "subdivisions that advertise 'the feeling of a great hometown'".<sup>243</sup>

As the number of suburban residents increased substantially, the newcomers and the change they made on the face of suburbia meant that maladies typical of urban areas started to appear in suburbia. "Between 1950 and 1980 the number of people living in suburbia nearly tripled"<sup>244</sup> and "between 1950 and 1970 [...] 83% of the United States' growth took place in suburbia".<sup>245</sup> Increased density of the suburban population and general availability of car resulted in "the traffic congestion" typical of modern suburbia.<sup>246</sup> Not only people moved to suburbs, but also utilities and conveniences – commuting to city malls and offices characteristic of the 1950s suburbia was transformed to commuting within the suburban region. While in the 1950s, "workers traveled from the suburbs into the center", "by the 1970s, many corporations were moving their offices closer to the workforce", thus "completing the migration of each of life's components into the suburbs".<sup>247</sup> As Sharpe and Wallock write, "the massive decentralization of metropolitan areas that has occurred caused the suburb to augment its original meaning as a composite of urban and rural life. Arguably, it is now a new form of city".<sup>248</sup> However, this gaining of independence certainly had its drawbacks – with suburbia becoming less dependent on the city, the urban maladies were relocated to the suburbs. By the 1970s, suburbs can no longer be an isolated asylum and problems can no longer be left at the city center. Suburbia cannot distinguish itself against the urban background anymore. The traditional dichotomy of the city and suburbia, previously a pivotal notion of the suburban myth, becomes non-functional in the 1970s.

The suburbs start to resemble the city in the unprecedented heterogeneity of their social, racial and ethnic structure. "From the 1970s on [...] a new wave of immigration, especially from Latin America and Asia, increasingly complicated the racial picture" of America. "Well-to-do

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243 Duany et al. 102.

244 Sharpe and Wallock. "Bold New City or Built-Up 'Burb? Redefining Contemporary Suburbia", *American Quarterly* 46.1 (1994): 1.

245 Avi Friedman, *Planning the New Suburbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001) 35.

246 Duany et al. 22.

247 Duany et al. 9.

248 Sharpe and Wallock 35.

Chinese newcomers 'invaded' suburban areas" and "Asian American physicians, scientists, and engineers joined their European American counterparts in prestigious outlying subdivisions", thus creating an ethnic diversity "at odds with long-standing stereotypes of suburbia".<sup>249</sup> While in the 1950s "the traditional bedroom suburb [...] was the home of young, white, middle-class families", "by the 1970s [...] a single suburban type no longer predominated".<sup>250</sup> The WASP dominance of the suburban area got severely disrupted, the picture of suburbia as the utopia of the white upper middle class became altered. Higher crime rates and gang activity undermine the suburbs' role of a safe environment. Though "many families relocate to suburbia precisely to find a safer environment", suburbs have become "dangerous".<sup>251</sup>

The pastoral ideal is no longer functional in the 1970s as well. Large malls, hideous highways, vast parking lots and sprawling suburbia modify countryside into something different than the rural landscape typical of the pastoral ideal. Sharpe and Wallock voice this fact in the following way:

Cultural centers, sports arenas, and multiplex cinemas have proliferated across an increasingly built-up terrain. Meanwhile, the image of the suburb as a pastoral haven from the harsh realities of the city has been shattered by the spread of homelessness, drug addiction, and crime. Relentlessly, the countryside appears to be urbanizing. The city, with its attendant problems and pleasures, seems to be coming to the suburbs.<sup>252</sup>

All the abovementioned changes are defined by Sharpe and Wallock as the "urbanization of the suburbs".<sup>253</sup> Problems, formerly unknown to suburbs and reserved only to the city, start to emerge – density, congestion, social conflict, crime, political tensions, and the so-called "growth revolt",

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249 J. C. Teaford, *Metropolitan Revolution - The Rise of Post-Urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 5.

250 Sharpe and Wallock 7.

251 Duany et al. 119.

252 Sharpe and Wallock 2.

253 Sharpe Wallock 2.

within which many suburban residents opposed further growth and development of the suburbs. These tensions and complications further undermine the utopian principle of the suburbia.

## 5.2. The Spread of Consumerism

One of the maladies with which suburbia was forced to grapple from the beginning of its existence, but which came into prominence in the second half of the 1960s and especially in the 1970s, is consumerism. The arrival of shopping malls from the city is what prepared a fertile ground for burdening the suburbs with "the weight of relentless consumption" in the 1970s.<sup>254</sup> The residential expansion suburbia experienced between the 1950s and 70s brought commercial and industrial interests from the urban to the suburban areas. While in the 1950s, "the shops stayed in the city", "it did not take long for merchants to realize that their customers had relocated"<sup>255</sup> and to follow "the paths of ample consumers into suburbia".<sup>256</sup> In the 1970s, suburbia-located "*shopping centers*, also called *strip centers*, *shopping malls*, and *big-box retail*"<sup>257</sup> started to serve as "palace[s] of consumption".<sup>258</sup> Many have seen shopping malls, these "aluminium and glass flat-topped buildings bathed in fluorescent light",<sup>259</sup> as both ambassadors and triggers of the ruthless culture of consumption. According to Jean Baudrillard, the shopping center "achieves a synthesis of consumer activities, not the least of which are shopping, flirting with objects, playful wandering and all the permutational possibilities of these", and in this way the mall "is more representative of modern consumption than the department stores".<sup>260</sup> The mall is in fact incongruent with the original suburban ideal in that it does not correspond to the vision of a suburban community as a small rural town, for which separate corner shops are more typical – rather, the mall accumulates multiple stores at one place, creating what Baudrillard sarcastically calls a "marriage of comfort, beauty and efficiency".<sup>261</sup>

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254 Saunders and Fishman, *Sprawl and Suburbia: A Harvard Design Magazine Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 74.

255 Duany et al. 8-9.

256 Friedman 35.

257 Duany et al. 6.

258 Sharpe Wallock 12.

259 Friedman 26.

260 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage, London, 1998) 27.

261 Baudrillard 29.

Consumerism may be seen as a suburban *mal-du-siecle*. In Sharpe and Wallock's terms, the suburban culture gets "fully commodified" and becomes a "culture of consumption".<sup>262</sup> The suburban vision of a communal utopia in which the society functions according to the Puritan moral code turns into a consumption-driven dystopia. Already in 1967 does Guy Debord criticize the suburban sprawl as a manifestation of consumerism: "The explosion of cities into the countryside, covering it with what Mumford calls 'formless masses' of urban debris, is presided over in unmediated fashion by the requirements of consumption".<sup>263</sup> In a dystopian vision of suburbia, strong communal relationships are replaced with isolated individuals who surround themselves with objects rather than people. According to Baudrillard, the tendency to separate oneself from others with materialistic objects is typical of "the age of affluence".<sup>264</sup> Quite notorious is the suburban trend of letting materialistic objects define one's social status. In the name of the infamous "commodity fetishism" and "domination of society by things",<sup>265</sup> to use Debord's words, a person is defined by what he owns rather than by what he does or knows. In suburbia, this tendency is manifested in neighborly wars over who owns more cars or who has more spectacular house decorations. The matter is complicated in case of suburbia in that some of the material objects owned by suburbanites are sheer necessities. For instance, the car, a typical suburban means of transportation which Debord calls "the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance",<sup>266</sup> is a must-have due to the essential nature of the suburban environment. In suburbia, houses, offices, shopping centers and schools are scattered over a large area of land with no public transportation, and a car is a necessity that enables its owner to function properly; suburbia experiences what Debord names "the dictatorship of the automobile".<sup>267</sup> Whoever wants to become a member of the suburban population must conform and make certain purchases to be able to exist. In other words, the very design of suburbia has consumerism inherently attached to it. It seems that rather than being formed according to the ideology or vision of its residents, suburbia is

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262 Sharpe and Wallock 11.

263 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 123.

264 Baudrillard 27.

265 Debord 26.

266 Debord 123.

267 Debord 123.

designed to promote consumption.

The materialist and consumerist nature of modern suburbia undermines the communal spirit – an important concept of the original suburban ideal. According to Baudrillard, in a materialist society "happiness is even further removed from any collective 'feast' or exaltation since, fuelled by an egalitarian exigency, it is based on *individualistic* principles".<sup>268</sup> Diversity, poverty and consequent social tensions deprive the suburban experience of the sense of a community. Spiritual homogeneity stemming from a common goal of a suburban community is replaced with segregation, individualism and separate households. As Mark A. Clapson writes, "concern about the non-existent social life of the suburbs remained central to the anti-suburban critique. [...] Writers feared that the tide of history was flooding toward a future of atomization".<sup>269</sup> This results in "residential 'communities' utterly lacking in communal life".<sup>270</sup> As Debord writes, in a consumerist society, the communal ideal is replaced with "a pseudo-community" in which individuals become "isolated together".<sup>271</sup> Such is the picture of the 1970s suburbia depicted by Raymond Carver, later analyzed in this thesis paper.

In the case of the suburban environment, such collective isolation results in a loss of emotional stability in individual households and consequent weakening of the role of the family. Catherine Jurca notes that as "the suburban house becomes the primary locus and object of consumption", "the home's emotional texture" is jeopardized.<sup>272</sup> Suburbia experiences a "systematic erosion of the suburban house as a privileged site of emotional connection and stability".<sup>273</sup> Miller comments on "family togetherness" which still is a large part of the modern suburban myth. However, due to the geography of suburbia, it becomes "relatively difficult, during non-work hours, to associate with people who are not members of one's household".<sup>274</sup> According to Miller, "suburbia isolates families, and consequently promotes togetherness",<sup>275</sup> however, with

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268 Baudrillard 49-50.

269 Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the U. S. A.* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2003) 143.

270 Duany et al. x.

271 Debord 122.

272 Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 5.

273 Jurca 4.

274 Laura J. Miller, "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal," *Sociological Forum* 10.3 (1995): 395.

275 Miller 405.

the isolation of the individual families also comes the "emotional overloading" of the family.<sup>276</sup> In terms of literary fiction, suburbia becomes an ideal place for the examination of the frustration connected to the modern suburban lifestyle and of the tense interpersonal and family relations.

The crisis in interpersonal relations is partially caused by non-functional communication. In a consumerist culture, mass media, advertisements and abuse of language for marketing and business purposes have emptied out words of their meaning and deprived individuals of the possibility to express themselves properly. As Debord writes, "the language of real communication has been lost" and "a new common language has yet to be found".<sup>277</sup> Superficiality and lack of communication become typical suburban maladies. The fiction that portrays the suburban experience is full of lonely individuals, often dangling between the shallowness of human interaction characteristic of the public social life and the lack of genuine connection that defines the private, personal life. The consumerist culture has invaded private households and altered meanings of words, which become insufficient in genuine communication. This negative phenomenon is especially visible in the suburban environment, for which the sense of community, brotherhood, openness and clarity are essential.

### 5.3. Raymond Carver and Dirty Realism

The abovementioned shift in the suburban experience is very much apparent in the fiction of Raymond Carver. This chronicler of suburbia in decline, who was described as "one of the twentieth century's most important American practitioners" of short story,<sup>278</sup> gives us a picture of the 1970s suburbia, which is very much different from the versions presented by both John Cheever and John Updike. Carver's characters are often lonely individuals, lost in suburban superficiality, who struggle to find genuine, honest connection with another human being. In contrast to Cheever's suburbanites who live on stock market speculations and financial business, Carver's characters have blue-collar jobs, or have none; they are not affluent and they often drink (unlike the

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276 Miller 411.

277 Debord 133.

278 Kaufman and Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 37.

characters of John Cheever, who drink on the parties and separate their drinking time from the rest of the day, those who people Carver's fiction drink all the time, day and night, in between utterances and whenever they feel distressed). Large families living in colonial mansions are replaced with childless couples or divorced individuals in row houses. In Paul March-Russell's words, "Carver's characters [...] tend to be blue-collar families, the community hardest hit during the recession of the 1970s".<sup>279</sup> Carver's characters have jobs "at Roby's Mart",<sup>280</sup> at "plants",<sup>281</sup> they are often waitresses or salesmen ("Earl Ober was between jobs as a salesman",<sup>282</sup> , "Jim was a salesman for a machine-parts firm".)<sup>283</sup> Their stories of suburban ennui frequently feature cheap restaurants, fast-food chains, bingo, cinema complexes, alcohol, and morning coffees with cigarettes. There is a significant lack of genuine, productive communication between Carver's characters, which often leads to misunderstandings, silence and fights.

Carver's minimalist short-stories became, for their detail-oriented description of the 1970s suburban lower middle-class, a groundwork for the so-called "dirty realism".<sup>284</sup> The term was first coined by Bill Buford and it describes a new style of writing, which emerged in US literature in the 1970s, and which is typical of authors such as Raymond Carver, Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Tobias Wolff, Amy Hempel, or Bobbie Ann Mason. Their short fiction is "neither heroic or grand nor self-consciously experimental" and it is as "unadorned and unfurnished as the cheap hotels or roadside cafés of its setting". The texts, mostly short-stories, serve as "glimpses of the belly-side of contemporary life".<sup>285</sup> Since these authors, lead by Raymond Carver, came to prominence, literary critics have described their style in numerous terms – besides "dirty realism" it has been "minimalism", "new realism", "neo-realism", "K-Mart realism", or "Hick Chic".<sup>286</sup>

During his lifetime, Carver published several short-story and poetry collections. In my analysis, I will focus on the stories featured in the collections *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (published in 1976) and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981).

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279 Paul March-Russell, *Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 240.

280 Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (London: Harvill Press, 1996) 48.

281 Carver, *What* 49.

282 Raymond Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (London: Harvill Press, 1999) 16.

283 Carver, *Will* 6.

284 Kaufmann and Halliwell 37.

285 Kasia Boddy, *American Short Story Since 1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 85.

286 March-Russell 235.

#### 5.4. The Loss of Community and Collective Loneliness

Regarding the original suburban ideal, the environment depicted in Carver's stories is truly dystopian on numerous levels. One of them is a communal one. The sense of community is severely disrupted in Carver, and his characters, isolated in their own houses, often do not even know their neighbors. No organized social events that strengthen the ties within a community (like cocktail parties or fund-raising campaigns in Cheever's *Shady Hill*) take place. Each suburbanite pursues his or her own private goals and there is no concern for the common good. One of the reasons why the characters do not have much connection with their fellow citizens is because they move a lot. As Michelle Pacht writes, there is a "lack of stable setting" in Carver as his "characters wander from city to city in search of happiness and fulfillment".<sup>287</sup> In such environment, communities cannot develop. Moreover, many of the characters were already born in suburbs and belong to a second generation of suburbanites. Lacking the necessary experience of moving from the city to the suburbs, they cannot form a community on the basis of collective conquering of the wilderness the way the 1950s suburbanites did. Rather, they focus on their own problems and do not feel any responsibility for others.

As a result, Carver's characters do not have excessive social lives. They are usually quite isolated, either alone or in couples. There is "absent connection"<sup>288</sup> in Carver's short stories, as well as general disconnection from society, and protagonists operate in a fractured, openly egocentric environment, seeking some sort of sense of belonging. As Michelle Pacht puts it, in Carver's stories the only community that the lonely characters achieve is a one defined by collective loneliness - "they are joined together by the loneliness and isolation that define them".<sup>289</sup> Carver creates an archetype of the 1970s suburbia – a person who suffers from social isolation and who suffers alone, but who unknowingly shares this experience with others. In this way, Carver puts Guy Debord's notion of "individuals isolated together" and Duany's concept of "isolation en masse"<sup>290</sup> into practice in American suburbia.

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287 Michelle Pacht, *Subversive Storyteller: The Short Story Cycle and the Politics of Identity in America* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 101.

288 Erin Fallon et al., *Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000) 99.

289 Fallon et al. 103.

290 Duany et al. 40.

Even one's private household does not provide emotional stability and security. Carver's characters are often unfaithful, they have drinking problems and frequently fight with one another. Lacking the ability to communicate properly, they do not find the necessary emotional connection even with their closest family. Sometimes, people (even married couples) call the police: "'Call the police,' Maxine said. 'He's violent. Get out of the kitchen before he hurts you. Call the police,'"<sup>291</sup> "'That's it! I'm going to get a restraining order. [...] I'm going next door to call the police if you don't get out of here now!'"<sup>292</sup> Throughout his career, Carver "famously portrays [...] desolation" of both the suburban communal spirit and family togetherness.<sup>293</sup>

### 5.5. The Suburban Rut and the Epiphanies

In the light of the abovementioned facts, it is clear that Carver's unhappy characters often find themselves in unsolvable dead-ends. Suburbia is depicted as a place where people live in stultifying ruts, unable to find any meaningful connection in their lives or their social interactions. The stories usually do not depict any resolution of this state. As Ayala Amir notes, Carver's writing "generates the impression of stasis"<sup>294</sup> as his characters often find themselves "facing dead-end lives without real choices"<sup>295</sup> as they "have dead-end jobs, are in dead-end relationships, and have been lulled into lethargy by drinking too much booze and watching too much television".<sup>296</sup> Kasia Boddy notes that Carver's characters seem to be "ready for 'the next thing', [...] yet the abiding feeling is that if that 'thing' does happen, nothing will ever really be any different".<sup>297</sup>

In the tedious, melancholic monotony that defines their lives, Carver's suburbanites occasionally awake from their lethargy. This temporal awakening, which somehow disrupts the everyday experience, may be triggered in various ways – usually it is encountering someone unusual or experiencing something extraordinary. In most of his stories, Carver first introduces a

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291 Carver, *What* 131.

292 Carver, *What* 95.

293 Pacht 100.

294 Ayala Amir, *The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010) 18.

295 Amir 20.

296 Pacht 102.

297 Boddy 94.

character and his or her everyday life, and then follows a strange experience that somehow disturbs the monotonous stereotype of the character's life. However, these almost Joycean epiphanies, which James Kurtzleben calls "moments of revelation" of Carver's "ordinary Americans",<sup>298</sup> mostly fail to have any genuine impact on the character that experiences them – they merely serve as reminders of the roads not taken. They bring insight into characters' life in that they diverge the character from his or her rut and let them look at their lives from a different point of view. The epiphanies temporarily enable the characters to liberate themselves from their keyhole perspective and see themselves in a larger context, but that is usually all.

Carver's revelatory moments are closely connected to his "reliance on encounters with strangers".<sup>299</sup> In "Fat", the opening story of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, an unnamed 1<sup>st</sup> person narrator, who works as a waitress, tries to tell the strange experience she had encountering an extremely obese customer who talked about himself in the plural. As she kept bringing his orders, they got into a small-talk conversation about food, and the way the man expressed himself made her believe that this man was strange and unusual. Quite typically for Carver's characters, the waitress sees how significant the encounter is, but cannot put her finger on why: "I know now I was after something. But I don't know what".<sup>300</sup> She knows it is not just the man's physical appearance that makes the experience extraordinary ("Rudy, he is fat, I say, but that is not the whole story"),<sup>301</sup> but in the end the narrator does not know what the implications of the whole thing are, and nor do the listeners: "That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn't know what to make of it".<sup>302</sup> The narrator eventually gives up making some sort of sense of the experience: "I feel depressed. But I won't go into it with her. I've already told her too much".<sup>303</sup> The encounter in "Fat" is a typical example of Carver's epiphany – one that is significant, but in an unfathomable way. This is also the case of the two characters in the opening story of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, "Why Don't You Dance?", in which a young couple driving in a car see a yard sale – there is a full bedroom arranged in a front yard of a house. They stop and while they look at

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298 Fallon et al. 96.

299 Boddy 95.

300 Carver, Will 3.

301 Carver, Will 3.

302 Carver, Will 5.

303 Carver, Will 5.

the things, a solitary man comes out of the house and offers them whiskey. As the couple bargain over the price of the items of furniture, he keeps pouring them alcohol and selling them everything they want for very low prices. When they all are somewhat drunk, the man puts on some music and asks: "Why don't you dance?".<sup>304</sup> Then all three of them dance in the driveway while neighbors and passers by look at them with curiosity. We never learn the man's exact motives for behaving the way he does. At the very end of the story, the girl is trying to convey the meaning and the significance of the encounter to her friends, but fails: "Weeks later, she said: 'The guy was about middle-aged. All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don't laugh'".<sup>305</sup> The last line of the story is: "There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying".<sup>306</sup> Carver's characters often attempt to explain the importance of their strange experiences to others, but as they themselves do not know what to make of the epiphanies, they necessarily fail to do so. If the encounter has a genuine impact on the character, we do not see it as the story ends before it is realized. In the end, the characters are in the same old rut. Among other strange figures that Carver's protagonists meet are a blind man ("Cathedral"), an armless photographer ("Viewfinder"), or a mentally ill, suicidal stalker ("What We Talk About When We Talk About Love").

Another form that the epiphanies may take is that of sudden, unexpected, temporal strong connection with another human being. In their visionless wandering through life, characters may suddenly experience unforeseen understanding and connection with another individual. Similarly to other epiphanies in Carver's fiction, even in this case, "insight does not clearly pace the way to a future; it is often limited to the stark fact that [...] life has not turned out right".<sup>307</sup> In "The Student's Wife", a woman wakes up her husband in the middle of the night and they talk about their past. It is implicitly hinted towards the end of the story that the woman is concerned about the way they live and about the money available to them (she says: "I'd like us both just to live a good honest life without having to worry about money and bills and things like that"),<sup>308</sup> and it is also hinted that

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304 Carver, What 8.

305 Carver, What 8.

306 Carver, What 9.

307 Fallon et al. 102.

308 Carver, Will 94.

things are unlikely to change for them (despite the fact that it is sunrise at the end of the story – a symbol of a new beginning – she prays for help: "'God.' she said. 'God, will you help us, God?' she said.").<sup>309</sup> In her night conversation with her husband, she finds temporal relief in talking about what she likes and what they used to do when they were younger: "Do you remember that time we stayed overnight on the Tilton River, Mike? When you caught that big fish the next morning?"<sup>310</sup> Their conversation is one of the rare occasions in Carver when two people find mutual connection, though the husband eventually falls asleep and leaves the wife to her own thoughts. It is typical that the epiphany happens at night, in bed, which serves as a shelter from the daily haste. This is also the case of Nancy, the protagonist of "I Could See the Smallest Things", who has an unexpected heart-to-heart talk with her neighbor in front of her house in the middle of the night. Again, she realizes that the experience is extraordinary and worth remembering: "It felt funny walking around outside in my nightgown and my robe. I thought to myself that I should try to remember this, walking around outside like this".<sup>311</sup> As she goes to bed again, she ponders over what this strange experience means to her; however, she eventually gives up trying to make sense of it: "I don't know. It made me think [...]. I thought for a minute of the world outside my house, and then I didn't have any more thoughts except the thought that I had to hurry up and sleep".<sup>312</sup>

Carver's epiphanies are usually so easily forgotten and have such little impact on the lives of those who experience them that some of the critics have called them "anti-epiphanies". Scofield writes that "in Carver we are often left with 'anti-epiphanies', where (as is usually the case) it [= the epiphany] is not achieved, its absence is felt and registered as the central element of the story".<sup>313</sup> Similarly, March-Russell writes that in Carver "the expected epiphany fails to arrive".<sup>314</sup>

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309 Carver, Will 96.

310 Carver, Will 91.

311 Carver, What 27.

312 Carver, What 30.

313 Martin Scofield, *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 228.

314 March-Russell 236.

## 5.6. The Failure of Communication In Carver

Restlessness, confusion and sense of hopelessness typical of most of Carver's characters are partially rooted in the consumerist culture that surrounds them and that they are forced to be part of. As Paul March-Russell writes, the nature of hyper-realist literature is derived "from the unreality of consumer culture".<sup>315</sup> The loneliness and the feeling of being lost we see in Carver are direct outcomes of the confusing nature of the modern consumerist lifestyle. Jams Kurtzleben notes that Carver's characters are confused by the "incoherence of contemporary American life".<sup>316</sup> Carver's minimalism and the fragmentary style of his short-stories mirror the almost post-modern, consumer, artificial environment in which his characters operate. Critics valued Carver's short stories of "isolation and non-communication"<sup>317</sup> for their "postmodern discontinuity".<sup>318</sup> Television and language of advertisement invade the everyday lives of the 1970s suburban characters, whose ability to communicate is severely damaged by exploitation of language by mass culture and marketing. How the language has been emptied out of its meaning by the rhetoric of advertising is depicted in "Collectors", featured in the *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* collection. In this story, a desperate vacuum cleaner salesman knocks on the door of an unemployed, penniless, lonely man. Despite its obvious absurdity and pointlessness, the salesman goes through the routine of his sales presentation, even though both of the characters know that the man cannot afford the product. The absurdity of the story lies in the tension between the fancy marketing rhetoric used by the salesman and the harsh reality of poverty and despair that the two sad men face in their lives.

Emptiness of language and insufficiency of verbal communication play a key role in the fiction of Raymond Carver. Advertisement rhetoric have invaded the personal lives of Carver's characters to such an extent that they are no longer able to express themselves properly. As Jeremy R. Bailey states, characters in Carver's stories are "people struggling to both speak and act", who often "appear to have important things to say, but they regularly choose not to talk, or when they do attempt to speak, their message is unheard, misinterpreted, or even ignored by other

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315 March-Russell 243.

316 Fallon et al. 97.

317 March-Russell 236.

318 Fallon et al. 98.

characters".<sup>319</sup> The insufficiency of human communication manifests itself in the lack of connection between Carver's characters and further contributes to their sense of constant loneliness and confusion. Carver's dialogues are, in the tradition of minimalism, full of omission, interruptions and unfinished sentences; it is often a lack of dialogue that characterizes Carver's dialogues. The characters usually fail to produce meaning through talking. Their utterances are often vague, they do not say anything specific or do not produce any resolution to the problem they are facing. People in Carver's short-stories beat around the bush, use idioms, clichés ("that's life"<sup>320</sup>, "it's a free country"<sup>321</sup>) and imprecise, general expressions that are not fit to convey any unique, individual ideas and experiences of the characters. I have already mentioned the inability of the protagonists of "Why Don't You Dance" and "Fat" to explain the significance of their strange epiphanies to others ("There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying";<sup>322</sup> "I can see she doesn't know what to make of it. I feel depressed. But I won't go into it with her. I've already told her too much".<sup>323</sup>) Similarly, people often do not know what to say to what other characters tell them, as in the heart-to-heart talk between a man and his son in "Sacks": "He took off his glasses and shut his eyes. 'I haven't told this to nobody.' There was nothing to say to that. I looked out at the field and then at my watch".<sup>324</sup>

There is a recurring tension between what characters want to say and what they eventually end up saying. Often, they do not say anything: "There were things he wanted to say, grieving things, consoling things, things like that";<sup>325</sup> "She stood in the doorway and turned the knob. She looked as if she wanted to say something else";<sup>326</sup> "I couldn't think of anything more to say. I looked out the window and sucked my cheeks";<sup>327</sup> "I can't say anything just yet";<sup>328</sup> , "There is nothing I can say to him";<sup>329</sup>. Struggling to find the right words to express what they think or experience, Carver's

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319 Jeremy R. Bailey, *Mining for Meaning: A Study of Minimalism In American Literature – A Dissertation in English* (Texas Tech University, December 2010) 25.

320 Carver, *What* 182.

321 Carver, *What* 182.

322 Carver, *What* 8-9.

323 Carver, *Will* 5.

324 Carver, *What* 37.

325 Carver, *What* 94.

326 Carver, *Will* 34.

327 Carver, *Will* 36.

328 Carver, *What* 24.

329 Carver, *What* 71.

characters often start a sentence but in the end do not finish it and give up trying to express themselves: "'Wouldn't it be funny if,' the girl said and grinned but didn't finish";<sup>330</sup> "'Yes, that's true, only," but she does not finish what she started.";<sup>331</sup> "'Good-bye. Thanks. Maybe next summer,' but I couldn't finish";<sup>332</sup> "'Mr. Hamilton,' the woman began nervously but did not finish";<sup>333</sup> "'Or maybe they'll come back and...' but she did not finish";<sup>334</sup> In Bailey's words, Carver is "silencing the characters during important and climactic moments".<sup>335</sup> Carver hints that there is basically no help for the characters and that they are forever doomed in their inability to express themselves by having the following two sentences as the very last paragraph of the whole *What We Talk About* collection: "He said: 'I just want to say one more thing.' But then he could not think what it could possibly be".<sup>336</sup>

### 5.7. Suburbia as Dystopia

All the abovementioned problems in communication complete Carver's image of suburbia as a heterogeneous environment characterized by post-modern confusion and loneliness, and inhabited by isolated individuals with no sense of community or belonging whatsoever, who drift on their solitary ice floes through the sea of incomprehension and disconnection, their only hope being momentary proximity of strangers who happen to pass by. Concepts pivotal to the original suburban ideal are shattered in the 1970s, e.g. the promise of pastoralism, sense of community, or the sense of a common goal. Carver's characters do not find peace, safety, nor happiness in the outskirts, and they suffer from all the maladies formerly attributed to big cities, such as anonymity, poverty, alcoholism, lack of determination, weakened family relations – ills that the earlier suburban pioneers sought to escape. The suburban myth, in which the suburbs are understood as a refuge from these problems, fails. The utopian image of suburbia is shattered in the increasing

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330 Carver, *What* 5.

331 Carver, *Will* 54.

332 Carver, *Will* 37.

333 Carver, *Will* 146.

334 Carver, *Will* 11.

335 Bailey 90.

336 Carver, *What* 134.

disillusionment we may witness in the 1970s.

## 6. Conclusion

The current thesis examined how the portrayal of American suburbia in selected fiction changed in between the 1950s and the early 1980s. First, I have analyzed the suburban myth and singled out some of the essential characteristics of the utopian vision of suburbia, which I have traced in the American cultural history. Cultural concepts pivotal to the suburban myth, such as the pastoral ideal, the sense of community or the sense of exceptionalism are reflected in the works of all of the selected authors in one way or another. All three authors are, to a certain extent, critical of the suburban environment – while John Cheever examines the superficiality of the cultural myths connected to suburbia and their inefficiency in the process of creation of a utopian community, John Updike points out the fact that they become non-functional when they are confronted with the inevitable social change that comes with modernity, and that in combination with the desire for liberal openness these rigid traditions and myths become sources of much confusion of the modern man. Raymond Carver's dystopian portrayal of suburbia is that of a crowded, compromised place where all the promises and myths of the suburban utopian vision have been shattered, and where the prospect of creating a pastoral, suburban idyll is generally no longer considered possible.

As I have stated in the introductory chapter, the perception of the development of the suburban dream is largely dependent on what point of view we choose. The dystopian version presented in this paper, in which the story of suburbia is a story of a decline of a utopian dream, uses the point of view of the WASP part of the society. It was the white bourgeois who initially sought the suburban areas as a place of refuge and who established the modern suburbia with the intention to create an asylum for the privileged ones who wanted to escape the problems and inconveniences of the increasingly corrupted urban areas. In their perspective, the story of suburbia, which gradually became less and less elitist and which was eventually taken over by the same problems that urban areas had to face, is a story of failure. However, if the story was to be told from the perspective of, for instance, racial minorities, it would be a story of success – while in

the early 1950s, virtually no non-white families were allowed to purchase a house in suburbia, by 2000 43% of African-Americans lived in the suburbs.<sup>337</sup> In this sense, later suburbia may be understood as more open and as more accessible to those who used to be deprived of the right to seek its unarguable conveniences, such as better schools and safer environment. It would be an interesting quest to examine the depiction of American suburbia in the texts of authors of racial and ethnic minorities. As the vision of suburbia presented in this thesis is based on the cultural heritage of the forefathers of the WASP culture, the Puritans, the concept of the suburban myth itself may be vastly different in case of those who do not have the Puritan ideals inherently attached to their culture – the suburban experience presented in their works may be conceived differently. The task of analyzing ethnic depictions of suburbia goes beyond the scope of this thesis – however, I believe that critical studies on this topic will appear in the near future.

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337 "The Changing Colour of Cities: Black Flight." *The Economist*, 31 Mar 2011  
<<http://www.economist.com/node/18486343>> 22 Mar 2014.

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