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—
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30123 Venezia

Happily ever after...till the
Suburbs do us part:
*Revolutionary Road, The Hours,
The Stepford Wives.*

Relatore

Chiar.ma Prof.ssa Francesca Bisutti

Correlatore

Chiar.mo Prof. Gregory Dowling

Laureando

Elena Stoppa
Matricola 845624

Anno Accademico

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Abstract

The smiling pictures of the perfect 1950's suburban housewives have always wielded a special power on me. I have often asked myself if that sensation of order and happiness they conveyed to whoever approached them was real or if, in fact, it was just a shining covering over a darker reality. Being the result of the intense advertising campaign of the time, whose purpose was that of pushing women back into their original domestic role, they had to be as smiling and convincing as possible in order to lure women to spontaneously go back to building their lives around concepts like getting married and having children.

Starting from this premise, the purpose of this dissertation is that of taking a journey in the suburban environment in order to see how the illusions of the American Dream mirrored themselves in the white picket fences of the suburban houses. The utopian vision of happy suburban marital life shared by the character of Molly in *The man with the golden arm*, is the example of how the young girls of that generation grew up with the idea that they could desire nothing better than to find a husband and give him a lot of children. In order to show how far away reality was from that romantic idea, the stories of April Wheeler and Laura Brown, protagonists of *Revolutionary Road* and *The Hours*, have been taken as an example of what could be defined, borrowing the words of Townsend, an "affective realism". What has been analyzed is actually the emotional impact of the suburban life and of the housewife role on the two women, and how this influenced their marriage. The last chapter of the dissertation wants to be a sort of last link in the suburban chain. Following a logical structure that starts from an historical introduction to the birth of the suburbs and their link with the American Dream and passes from the utopian view of a woman's happiness in the suburbs to a more realistic picture of her dissatisfaction, the analysis ends with a rather dystopian version of the suburban woman. Through the use of technology, women are turned by their husbands into perfect robot housewives and attractive, sexual objects. The ironic choice of

the title wants to be the confirmation, as far as the stories analyzed are concerned, that no matter the promises of a quiet, happy life totally devoted to the familiar and the marital sphere, the suburbs became in many cases the reason why many couples suffered from a heavy crisis which slowly brought the marriage to fall apart piece after piece.

Chapter 1

1.1 A suburban American Dream

The years after World War Two were characterized by a massive movement of people into new areas outside the big cities of both the eastern and the western coast of America which were to become known as the suburbs. These new residential areas were born as a consequence of many factors among which the demobilization of soldiers was the most relevant. The return of men from the war and the general need for peace and quiet after the atrocities of the global conflict gave birth to an unstoppable “quest for marriage” whose direct consequence was the so called baby-boom. As families increased in numbers and people needed and wanted to leave the difficult years they had gone through behind them, the idea of a nice little single-family house outside the hustle and bustle of the city, where it was possible to enjoy green areas and breathe good air in a warm familiar environment, was so appealing to them that suburbia became an outright phenomenon, if not an “obsession”.

Although they became popular (to some extent fashionable) only in the postwar years, these suburban areas were not something unknown to the American population. Their birth actually dates back to the early 1800s. As Choldin underlines: “historically suburbs took different forms, depending upon the predominant technology of their times”(356). The author registers four periods in suburban history that go hand in hand with the evolution of the technological world: the first one developed during the walking and horse-car era and went more or less from pre-1850s to the late 1880s. In that period suburbia was not a habit for all, on the contrary it was a way for wealthy people to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. The second period went from the late 1880s to 1920; this was the era of electric streetcars and railroads which “brought a new kind of suburb, further from the city center, arranged in “strings” running along the tracks” (Choldin, 357). In spite of its new dislocation, the suburb remained mainly a privilege granted only to the upper-classes. In order to start

talking about middle-class suburbs we need to wait a little bit longer. As a matter of fact, it is only in the very late nineteenth century that they arose. Unlike the railroad suburbs these streetcar ones were built right outside the cities, “toward the ends of the new electric trolley lines” (Choldin, 357). They represented the first taste of what would later become a phenomenon but they depended on cities basically for everything, from shopping to entertainment, from jobs to schools. But the period in which the ground for the postwar ‘suburban mania’ started to be prepared, is the one that went from 1920 to 1945. It was in these years that a series of economic and cultural elements led to the enrichment of the middle class; a middle class that before choosing suburbia as its ideal place to live and express itself, populated in the city in increasing numbers. That is why before going on to talk about suburbs it is necessary to give a summary of what happened during these crucial years both culturally and historically, as it is here that the spark of the suburban myth is to be found.

So let’s start from the 1920s; the new middle class was ‘responsible’ for what Baxandall and Ewen called “the democratization of the good life in America” (14). As the writers underline, in those years the economy turned from a production-based to a consumption-based one and an ever-raising amount of goods, electric appliances, clothes, furniture, cars were produced to answer the new needs. Social life became rich in leisure activities also thanks to the automobile, which permitted people to move more easily and reach practically any place. If in the past this mean of transportation was considered a luxury, in the 1920s Henry Ford’s Model T turned it into a mass-production good. “In 1920 over nine million cars were registered; by 1925 nearly twenty million; by 1930 over 26.5 million [...] Seen another way, in 1919 the number of families owning cars was less than seven million; by 1923 it was twenty-three million” (Baxandall and Ewen, 15).

The growing number of cars and consumerism items, of leisure time and social life but above all of economic enterprises meant a growing number of people in the cities. America was living a period of general development and growth; its economy was soaring, its industries were expanding and this meant more work for everyone. “The scale of economic enterprises expanded during the century, starting with small, locally owned business and by 1990 adding large firms [...] . Growing industries required many laborers; the companies provided numerous jobs” (Choldin, 157). It is in this flourishing context that the city becomes synonymous with entertainment, welfare, possibility. The city is the place where anyone is given a chance to do something great in life, where the lights and the amusements make it impossible to feel lonely, where two poor country people who are facing a moment of matrimonial crisis, as the protagonists of Murnau’s *Sunrise, a song of two people* are, can rediscover the strength and the truth of their feeling.¹ The city amuses, consoles, promises, relieves, enriches. It seems to be the perfect “shining” place for the perfect “shining” middle class. The image it conveys is that of a glorious America; the land of possibility, the place where prosperity is granted. So what went wrong? What was it that made people run as fast as they could away from the cities? What did the suburbs have that the cities lacked? If I were to summarize the causes that led to the massive suburbanization of America in a few words I think I would probably choose: Depression and World War Two. These two important events played a crucial role not only from a historical point of view but especially because of the cultural impact they had on the Americans. The Wall Street crash of October 1929 marked a terrible decade of economic stagnation that caused unemployment, poverty, low profits and deflation throughout the entire country. As Bernard Vincent underlines it was in these difficult years that the expression ‘American Dream’ was first

¹ 1927 American silent film. I mentioned the protagonists because of the symbolism of their universal nature. What happened to this couple because of the city, in the city, though the city and thanks to the city could be adapted to any other couple.

coined and used by the historian James Truslow Adams in his volume *The Epic of America*, published in 1931, where he refers to the American dream as the hope for a better, richer, happier life for all. (Bisutti De Riz, Rigobon, Vincent, 29). Vincent finds it particularly interesting that the expression was coined right in that particular historical time when America was struggling to survive the Depression. In his opinion the weakness of that moment was the key to bring back to life the original American spirit of perseverance and endurance that has characterized the country ever since its foundation and that in that moment seemed to be missing. In other words, coining an expression like that in a situation where the population no longer believed in the “shining city upon a hill” so deliberately exalted by John Winthrop at the dawn of the independence, was not only strategic but also necessary for everybody’s sake. Having something to believe in, having a dream to protect and fulfill gave them a reason not to give up as it reminded them of the important role the people of America was given by divine providence. The depression was unfortunately followed by the war and in that period more than ever the rhetoric of the American dream had to be cherished and safeguarded to be applied later on, once the war was finished and won.

1945 was a glorious year for the United States; it came out victorious from the war and since the conflict had been fought mostly in Europe and the Pacific, the country was basically intact. In spite of the atrocities innate in a conflict the war had given the American economy a chance to wake up after the Great Depression. Many sectors of the American industries, especially those centered on the defense production, experienced a huge increase and the technological nature of the war meant more work for engineers and scientists; the atomic energy, already used to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, would become in the Cold War years an outright obsession. To sum up in a few words, the war contributed significantly to the economic recovery of America, so much so that no country (with the exception of Russia) was able to compete with it in the postwar years; America was declaring itself the

most prosperous and powerful country in the world. It is here, in this general euphoria, in this renewed faith in its abilities and possibilities that the American dream can finally find its expression in the suburbs.

As far as history is concerned these new suburban areas contributed significantly to the national economic growth. Investing in their building caused what Beauregard called “a large multiplier effect” (110). It meant a lot of work for many people: architects, electricians, plumbers, bricklayers, as well as lawyers and notaries. And once the houses were built and sold they had to be furnished with electrical appliances, carpets, accessorized kitchens, drapes, curtains and many other domestic effects. The government developed new mortgage arrangements with small payments and loans over years in order to render the purchase of a house accessible to more and more families. Another “major item of consumption was the automobile” (Beauregard 111). If a family could afford a house in the suburbs, it was necessary for it to have a car. “Automobile ownership increased dramatically from 1950 to the mid 1970s” (Beauregard 111). The suburbs were relatively far from the cities and the people who lived there had to drive everywhere, from drugstores to libraries, from doctor’s offices to schools. As a consequence gas stations became ubiquitous and a thick network of highways to connect these areas with the cities was constructed. With the increase in the offering of new occupations people worked more, earned more and as a consequence spent more. Suburbanization went hand in hand with consumerism: “Suburbanization and economic growth completed each other. The suburban lifestyle required massive new investments and unending household purchases ranging from automobiles and refrigerators to backyard barbecue grills” (Beauregard 6).

It was not just history that was changing by then, it was American culture above all. It was not only the economic decline of the cities which enabled the growth of the suburbs, it was above all the idea of a social “revolution”. Moving to the suburbs meant putting into

practice the new ideas about the family and its lifestyle, about social life and gender role, about public and private, façade and truth, conformity and personal identity. It meant being part of the new flourishing postwar America, the country of possibility and freedom that so energetically juxtaposed its exceptionalism to the communist Russia. But was this exceptionalism “for all” or was it reserved for a specific elite of people? And what exactly was the new ideal family which was supposed to enjoy this revived American dream? First of all it found its fulfillment in the white middle and upper classes. The suburbs were not for black people, not even for poor people. “Of course, suburban prosperity was not available to all people; African Americans in particular were denied the access” (Beauregard 6). Those admitted had to represent the ‘best’ category of the population, those who could afford a consumerist lifestyle, who could offer the perfect picture of America to the world. But what about the cities? What is their role in all of this? The answer is easy to find; on the one hand, as Beauregard underlines,

[i]ndustrial cities were undergoing precipitous decline. Urban economies were collapsing and people were leaving for the suburbs in ever-rising numbers. Once-robust manufacturing firms closed their operations or moved to more favorable locations[...].The consequences were devastating. The remaining residents suffered, businesses from department stores to textile factories closed their doors, slums spread, and city governments were burdened with shrinking revenues and an unrelenting demand for services. Metropolitan economics dependent on these cities stagnated and demands for federal assistance increased in intensity” (Beauregard, 2)

In other words the city, which prior to World War Two was the pride of America, always full of people emigrating from the country, the symbol of welfare, entertainment, work, and

the place offering the chance to become “somebody big”² was now a matter of embarrassment and shame. On the other hand the city was no longer a place to live in because it no longer fitted the image of itself that America wanted to show to the world. On the contrary the dream-like, utopian, almost pastoral location of suburbia seemed to promise a peaceful, happy, satisfactory life.

This contrast between the city and suburbia is perfectly pictured in the documentary film about housing in America titled *The City*, dated 1939, adapted by Lewis Mumford from the story by Pare Lorentz and directed by Ralph Steiner and William Van Dyke with music by Aaron Copland. The film is a direct critique of urban growth and we understand it from the first introductory written commentary: “Year by year our cities grow more complex and less fit for living. The age of rebuilding is here. We must remold our cities and build new communities better suited to our needs”. The documentary then goes on by showing contrasting shots of rural settings and urban ones. The focus is not just on the different landscapes but rather on the different social activities; images of boys running in the open air and men working in the fields are followed by the voice over announcing: “We have let our cities grow too fast to live in”. Right after the “idyllic settings” (Filipcevic 82) of rural America, the camera moves to shots of industrial areas “showing pollution, ailing bodies, degradation, and outright exploitation” (Filipcevic 82). The economic and industrial growth of the cities has reached such a high speed that people have been dragged into the vortex of machines, they have lost their human side in order to enter the world of never ending

² The way John Sims wanted to become “Somebody big” in King Vidor’s *The Crowd*. John represents the general sense of trust a country boy put in the possibilities promised by the city. As far as he and many other young adults are concerned having the chance to work and live there turns people into “Big people”. When he reaches New York John is full of expectations but while going to work on the ferry boat a cynic and more realistic passenger warns him about the pitfalls of the city: “You’ve gotta be good in that town if you want to beat the crowd”. These bitter words suggest that the promises of the city are not always respected; if you want to become somebody big you have to beat the crowd and distinguish yourself but if you do it you are likely to not being admitted to the benefits of the “good life”. You basically have two choices: conform with the crowd and deceive yourself you are living according to your own necessities and ambitions and not according to those of society or distinguish yourself running the risk of becoming an “outcast”. In both cases you are not allowed to become “somebody big”.

technological capitalism where the key words to keep in mind were: progress, production and consumption. To live and to work in the city meant being part of what King Vidor, in his classic film, defined as the crowd; a confused mass of people who do the same things, believe in the same things and as a consequence lose their personal taste and identity to conform with society no matter how hard they try to struggle against it. As Filipcevic underlines, “the metropolis is over-determined by economic conditions, the division of labor, and mechanization. Sameness, alienation, routinization, a ‘misapplied investment’ of modernity leave virtually no space for decent living” (84). The city means conformity but it also means pollution and danger as shown by the shots of “children playing on the street, accidents [...] toddlers going through rubbish or playing with fire [...] drunk men sleeping on empty streets” (Filipcevic 84). The high speed of life is then perfectly portrayed through the use of a montage of different superimposed images of the city; street signs, faces, fast food and street after street in a crescendo of anxiety that seems to echo the unease one is destined to feel once one has joined the metropolitan world. The alternative to this inhuman, technological world finds its perfect representation in the garden suburb. A quiet place right outside the city where one doesn’t have to run around all day, where it is possible to live without having the sensation of not keeping in step with the all too rapidly changing society, “an abstracted oasis” (Filipcevic 86) made for nuclear families where one is finally in control of one’s life and can live according to the harmonious traditional values of a fulfilled life under the protection of the “American dream”.

As Filipcevic points out, the film depicts a wonderful alternative to the dark world of the city without giving any specific coordinates about “who would develop the garden suburb or for whom such housing would be available, and treating as unproblematic social exclusion of races” (87). This very last consideration says it all about how propaganda, by willfully overlooking some important pieces of information about suburbia, contributed to make it not

only a national phenomenon but also a kind of heaven on earth, a “possible, practical utopia”, to use an oxymoron.

The second chapter of this dissertation will be dedicated to the investigation of cultural and social life in suburbia in order to demonstrate how propaganda and reality were far from being similar; but for now this first chapter wants to be a celebration as well as an historical profile of the suburbs.

Since I have mentioned history, it is not possible to talk about suburbia without devoting some space to William Levitt, one of the main architects in postwar suburbia. His work actually contributed significantly to the mass housing market and the Levitt model house became as popular and affordable as Henry Ford's Model T. Before the war, owning a house was not an easy process; there were far more lenders than owners. Between 1900 and the end of World War One cities like New York underwent a fast development that led to the birth of a new ruling class made of wealthy industrials and financiers. Those were the years in which the North Shore of Long Island began to be seen as the perfect place to build a suburban area where the rich could enjoy the beauty of the landscape without getting too far away from the commercial center of New York. Owning a house in the suburbs was therefore a synonym for being wealthy. It was a privilege. It was only after World War Two that architects like Levitt began to consider the possibility of transforming suburbia into the 'kingdom of the middle class'. As I was stressing at the beginning of the chapter, the demobilization of soldiers and the subsequent baby-boom raised the issue of giving a house to all the new American families. As Choldin underlines, “In the late 1940s there was enormous pent-up demand for family housing; it has been estimated that in 1947 between 2,750,000 and 4,400,000 families were living with other families and 500,000 more were occupying nonfamily or transient quarters”(357). Unfortunately the cities could not give the open space necessary to the construction of new residential buildings. “The cities themselves

lacked large tracts of open space for residential development, so the developers looked to the open areas at the urban periphery” (Choldin, 358). The time had come for suburbia to transform its luxurious and exclusive image into a middle class paradise. The Levitt Company was able to build three suburbs, each called Levittown: one in Long Island, one in Pennsylvania and one in New Jersey, which would be considered from then on quintessentially American.

Before entering the world of Levittown we should start by saying something about the important role the federal government played as far as housing is concerned. As Dolores Hayden reports in her *Building the American way: public subsidy, private space*, an unpublished paper delivered at the International Planning History Society conference held in Barcelona on July 17, 2004 and contained in *The suburb reader*, Herbert Hoover was the first president who focused his attention on this issue during the 1920s. In the Depression years President Franklin Delano Roosevelt followed his predecessor and launched a number of New Deal programs. In 1934 the National Housing Act created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). After the War the housing issue became increasingly compelling and once again the federal government promptly intervened. “FHA remained dominant in the housing area, and the Title I of the 1949 housing legislation opened the way to land clearance in big cities for the benefit of private developers, later called ‘urban renewal’” (Nicolaidis, Wiese, 275). President McCarthy was firmly convinced that “only federal aid to large private builders could solve the postwar housing shortage” (Nicolaidis, Wiese, 275). This made it possible for builders like Levitt to buy large acres of land they would use consecutively to build the suburbs. “In these suburbs, the federal government provided massive aid directed at

developers (whose 90% production advances were insured by the FHA). They also subsidized veterans and white male homeowners”³ (Nicolaidis, Wiese, 275).

The skillfulness of the Levitt brothers together with the federal government aids contributed to the creation of the Levitt Company during the Depression and to its strengthening in the post war years until it became the most emergent housing company in America. What is interesting about Levittown is the way in which it was built. The Levitt followed the same principle as industrial production; their houses were built in ‘stocks’, the faster their team produced them the sooner they would be for sale. In order to build houses in huge quantities the Levitt had to produce standardized pieces that could be easily assembled. Particular attention was paid to the division of labor and efficiency; as Crystal Galyean points out in her article *Levittown: The Imperfect Rise of the American Suburbs*, the Levitt “divided the construction of each home into twenty-seven steps starting with the laying of a concrete base. Construction workers were trained to do one step at each house instead of building each house from scratch individually”.

This mass production of houses, which were affordable for both the white and the blue collars, contributed significantly to the construction of the suburban utopia or myth; the possibility of owning a house was no longer reserved to the upper classes, anyone was given a chance to “pursuit his happiness” by having two children, and a house with a yard and a barbecue. As historian Kenneth Jackson underlined in his *Crabgrass frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* , the single-family tract house “offered growing families a private heaven in a heartless world”(244). It was the sense of safety and protection conveyed by the American Dream and expressed in the suburbs that enabled their growth.

³ Black people were not allowed in the suburbs but I will talk about this and other social and cultural negative aspects of suburbia in the next chapter.

They seemed to fit the fundamental idea expressed in the American declaration of independence; they guaranteed those unalienable rights of “Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”.

Chapter 2

2.1 The deferred African American dream

Who were the suburbs for? What was life in the suburbs like? Did families really live happily ever after there? Did this refreshed importance given to the family and the home change the gender roles inside and outside the domestic sphere? Was the American Dream for all? And for those admitted in the Dream, was it enough? I will try to give an answer to these and other questions in this chapter dedicated to a cultural investigation of the suburbs.

As I was stressing in chapter one, the postwar suburbs were not for all. They were born as the fulfillment of the American Dream, as a way to show how America really was the land of possibility for all; they were born to demonstrate that those inalienable rights of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, written in the American Declaration of Independence and intended to embrace the entire population of America, really were guaranteed to anyone; they were born to give more importance to the familiar sphere and to assure more safety to the children. This was what they were supposed to be or rather what they would have been in a perfect, utopian world. But reality was far more complicated than that and what went wrong about those inalienable rights in the past kept getting worse. Ever since its foundation there has been a contradiction between what American society had written in its political and official documents and what it had done once it had to put into practice the prescriptions it had fought for. In other words there has been always a contradiction between the very idea of the American Dream of possibility and freedom for anyone and the objectification of this idea into a tangible reality. And of course the most striking example of dissonance is to be found in the always delayed application of those inalienable rights, which somehow represent the American Dream, as far as the African Americans are concerned. That of the “African American Dream” is a long and troubled story. If for the whites the Dream was one and many in the sense that it meant different things in different historical periods, for the blacks it had a

much more restricted connotation; the Dream was a synonym for liberty. Ever since their arrival in America they have been slaves, they have never had the freedom to make their choices, to live their lives according to their own concept of happiness. They have been made slaves by the same country which promised them a chance in life, they have been treated as beasts and defined as inferiors because of their skin and culture, they have been denied the freedom and the life they had an inalienable right to have. What else could they want if not the freedom to be men? In 1865 with the abolition of slavery, they obtained the craved liberty and began to hope for a better future where they could sit with their white brothers and enjoy the promises of the American Dream all together. But of course this was not to happen; in spite of their freedom they continued to be seen by the whites as inferior and the general attitude towards them did not change significantly. Their Dream was not yet accomplished, after having fought for liberty they had to fight to be accepted as equal. Equality was much more difficult to obtain, so much so that not even today can we say they have entirely reached it. The social pathology of racism, unfortunately, is still settled in America and in the world in general. What is extraordinary, at least in my opinion, is the strength that has always characterized these people. They have never given up, not even when they were slaves, they have always fought for their rights, to make everybody hear their voice. A voice which has been hopeful, bitter, ruthless towards the white domineer, accusative, desperate, doubtful. Everybody remembers the famous "I have a Dream" speech of August 28, 1963 given by Martin Luther King in which he affirmed:

"I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal."

After all the atrocities they had been subjected to, the African Americans still have a Dream; a Dream that one day the blacks and the whites will live together in harmony, that one day the African American Dream could align with the white American Dream until they become one.

If this is the hopeful message of Martin Luther King, the approach of Malcolm X, an African American Muslim minister and human rights activist who was born in the same period as King, was much more ruthless. Unlike him, in his speech held in June 1963, Malcolm talked about a Black Revolution and asked himself and his black brothers a series of rhetorical questions through which he affirmed his position: that the black people should not join the world of the whites, which after all they had been subjected to. It was not the time, not anymore, to find a compromise, that for the first time the blacks had to refuse to be part of the same cultural and political and social white world. Here are a few of his questions:

“Since the black masses here in America are now in open revolt against the American system of segregation, will these same black masses turn toward integration or will they turn toward complete separation? Will these awakened black masses demand integration into the white society that enslaved them or will they demand complete separation from that cruel white society that has enslaved them? Will the exploited and oppressed black masses seek integration with their white exploiters and white oppressors or will these awakened black masses truly revolt and separate themselves completely from this wicked race that has enslaved us?”

In between these two approaches towards the Dream there is the beautiful poem written by James Langston Hughes and titled *Harlem*, published in 1951 in a collection of Hughes's poetry *Montage of Dream Deferred* that recites:

“What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?”

While King and Malcolm were much more ‘unrealistic’ in their speeches, the former for his blind hopefulness in a brilliant future of sharing and brotherhood with the whites, the latter for his reckless revolutionary plan of a total separation between the blacks and the whites, Hughes kind of put himself in a realistic position from which he simply certifies the condition of his race through a series of questions or rather through the use of an initial question, “What happens to a dream deferred?”, he then tries to answer with other questions.

The “dream deferred” of which he talks is of course the African American Dream, a dream always promised but never fulfilled, always quite close but never close enough to grasp. A dream deferred, delayed, postponed and yet always alive in the black conscience. A sort of endless waiting, as desperate and empty and tragic and nevertheless hopeful as the absurd waiting of Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*⁴. A desperate ‘theatre of the absurd’ where men are forever destined to live waiting for something

⁴ By saying that the idea of holding on to the waiting as far as the African American Dream is concerned is similar to that of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* I am not asserting that the African American Dream and the world in which the blacks live is as absurd and senseless as that of Vladimir and Estragon. Of course the holding on as far as Beckett’s characters are concerned is due to the fact that they live in a world where nothing else matters, where the only sense is to be found in the nonsense of waiting for someone who deep down they know won’t come and who probably won’t change things that much even if he came. On the contrary the holding on to the waiting of the blacks does have a sense because they know the fulfillment of the dream means freedom and happiness. So in a way their condition is even worse because they know out there exists a tangible happiness they are never admitted to but always promised they can join.

that was promised to them and in which they put their trust in so blindly that the only way to go on living is to never let that hope go.

So “what happens to a dream deferred?”. It is there; sometimes it is more feeble, sometimes it is even desperate, sometimes it ceases to shine and becomes dark and senseless but it never totally fades away, it rather swings slowly between hopelessness and hopefulness and in this way it torments the mind of those who dream it. And I think the best rhetorical questions in the poem, those which convey this swinging from despair to hope are: “Or fester like a sore – and then run?” and “or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?”. The former question uses the metaphor of a sore festering through the body; a sore is an infection, something that starts from a specific point and then expands. It seems as if the poet wanted to make a comparison between the way an infection or a cancer easily festers through a body and the way a deferred dream turns the initial hope in its fulfillment into despair. The latter on the contrary seems to give a sense of hope even though the idea of the dream as a “syrupy sweet” is only superficially hopeful. A syrupy sweet is something so sweet that it becomes nauseating; in the same way to put too much trust into a dream that is never fulfilled but always delayed can make people feel sick. Here comes the explanation for the swinging: the hope is not strong enough to beat the despair because it has been restored, reshaped so many times that its original sweetness has now a syrupy taste but it is neither so weak to simply give up.

As I was stressing before, the suburbs were part of the “dream deferred”. When the Levitt Company started the advertising campaign of its houses, William Levitt set the records straight: no blacks in the suburbs. But one of the main shocking episodes of black exclusion from the suburbs is contained in Andrew Wiese’s *Places of their own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* where he reports the case of Eddie Strickland:

“In August 1946 officials of Woodmere, Ohio, approached black Clevelander Eddie Strickland on the site of a new home he was building in the suburb and arrested him for the "illegal use of used lumber." [...] Threatened not only with arrest but with the loss of his labor and investment, Strickland was exasperated. [...] Finally, Strickland appealed to his rights as a property owner—and implicitly to his rights as an American. Standing amidst his half-finished home in the dusty overalls of a black workingman, Strickland's emotions welled up inside him. "This is my lot and my property," he fumed, "and I'm going to build a home on it or die in the attempt." Strickland never got the chance to keep his promise. After an eighteen-month court battle, Woodmere officials triumphed, blocking Strickland and several other black property owners from building or completing homes on land they owned in the suburb.” (Wiese, 94)

By reading this extract I think we should focus our attention on this sentence “Finally Strickland appealed to his right as a property owner—and implicitly to his rights as an American.” The rights of which he talks about are once again tied with the necessity of being admitted to the American Dream of owning a land, building a house of your own and, with it, symbolically build your happiness. Unfortunately the American Dream of the postwar years was entirely built around the idea of the suburbs not only as new residential areas but especially as the fulfillment of the white consumerist members of the society. As Wiese underlines:

“As a number of historians have pointed out, suburbanization was closely related to the making of race and class identities in the postwar period. Federal entitlements such as the GI Bill and mortgage insurance programs made it possible for millions of Americans to attain key symbols of middle-class status, such as a college education, proprietorship of small businesses, and ownership of a new home. Moreover, they encouraged families to measure their class status in terms of their position as consumers rather than as workers”. (96)

Living among the blacks did not allow the white members of the middle classes to rise in status. And yet the blacks, especially black women, became part of the suburban background but not as the beneficiaries of the American Dream, rather as the proof that the Dream existed and the whites were living it at the expense of the blacks. In *The Help*, a 2011 film set in the early 1960s, directed and written by Tate Taylor and adapted from Kathryn Stockett's novel of the same name, the young newly graduated Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan who dreams of becoming a journalist decides to write a book from the point of view of her friends Aibileen and Minny, two black maids who work for white suburban families. Here she registers their personal experiences as domestic servants and exposes the episodes of racism they are subjected to. For example they are not allowed to use the bathroom of the whites although they raise their children and cook daily for them and keep their suburban houses clean.

As I said before, that of the blacks is a long and winding road; their path has always been insidious, their fight exhausting, their Dream "deferred" but their commitment has always been dedicated, their strength extraordinary, their certainties impossible to demolish, the truth of their battle incontrovertible.

2.2 The White American Dream

If on the one hand we find the desperate, bitter, sometimes hopeful sometimes hopeless condition of the blacks struggling for their right to be admitted to the American Dream, what about the condition of those, the white middle classes, who were never denied the possibility of joining it? What about the relationship between their ambitions and purposes, their desires and personal fulfillment and the American Dream?

Before trying to give an answer to this questions through the analysis of *Revolutionary Road*, a 2008 film directed by Sam Mendes and based on the 1961 novel of the same name written by Richard Yeats, I think it is essential to focus our attention on three

important aspects of the suburban lifestyle, which will help to contextualize not only the suburban culture in general but the analysis of the film as well: the concept of private and public, the separation of gender roles and the conflict between individuality and homogeneity. Since suburbia was built around the idea of having a house of one's own where families could live happily and quietly ever after, the concepts of home and privacy were closely connected. As Gwendolyn Wright underlines:

“[w]ith the expansion of the suburbs, concepts of the home as a private refuge, a place of peace and inspiration, a reward for diligence and thrift, became something more than abstract images. [...] Home was to be a setting of luxury and comfort, softness and frivolity, at once a place of refinement and exotica. It was to be private, contrasting with the frenzied activity of the skyscraper, which now symbolized the business environment.” (Nicolaidis, Wiese, 61)

The suburban home was born to be the graceful, perfect wrapping for the ideal American family; it was born to be the perfect shelter for the American Dream. Under its walls thousands and thousands of middle class families would gather in front of the television, the new technological device that would chance the destiny of the worldwide culture, or by the fireplace; under its walls plenty of new electrical appliances would wait to be used by excited housewives in their modern kitchens; under its walls women would go back to their original role of “angel of the house” while their husbands would commute everyday to reach their jobs in the city. The 1950s suburban American house set the records straight: men were made to dominate the world of the outside, the insidious and dangerous city, while women's role was that of being a housewife and a mother and last but not least of being a woman able to satisfy her husband's sexual and non-sexual needs.⁵

⁵ A part of this second chapter will be dedicated to the 1950's American housewife and chapter three and four will be entirely built around stories of suburban women taken from two famous films: *The Hours* and *The Stepford Wives*.

This strict separation between men and women admitted no exceptions; it was as if people had to follow a religion, a specific dogma that would define the admission or the exclusion from the dream. Since the conditions were not negotiable, many young families conformed with this new trend and moved to the suburbs; where a large group of all alike single-family, white graceful houses would follow one another alongside the road; where the gardens would be well-groomed and the neighbors would be young, friendly and smiling; where there would be no social disparity and people would believe in the same lifestyle. Although the image promoted in the documentary film *The City* and in many other advertising campaigns promised an exciting life in the suburbs, the password for living there was “conformity”. Conformity meant, in the deepest, most overwhelming and I would say most tragic of the senses, a cancer spreading from the all-alike kitchens, to the all-alike families, which had the same expectations and opinions and ambitions. A conformity that, just like a cancer, consumed slowly but relentlessly all the promises of the American Dream and turned it in many cases into a nightmare.

2.3 The fakeness of the American Dream: Revolutionary Road

This American Dream is
not what it seems.

Maybe we're still breathing
but we're all asleep [...]

Don't let the suburbs kill my heart and soul

Ben Rector, “Song for the suburbs”

Ideas like gender roles and conformity are fundamental when it comes to *Revolutionary Road*, the 2008 film directed by Sam Mendes, taken from the novel of the

same name written by Richard Yeats in 1961 and starring Leonardo Di Caprio and Kate Winslet. The tragic story of Frank and April Wheeler seems to be a scrupulous picture of how the suburban air instead of nourishing the American Dream ended up with suffocating it. The quotation I put at the beginning of this section is taken from a song written and sang by Ben Rector. As soon as I read and listened to the lyrics I couldn't help but thinking about its connection with the film; Rector sings of a desperate awareness, a tough return to the real world after having dreamed the sweetest of the dreams. He sings of the anesthetic effect the suburbs had on the Dream and on the 1950's young adult generation who believed in it; an effect that would slowly and tragically kill the "heart and soul" of men, and metaphorically of the American dream, without even having them realizing it. And once the anesthetic was gone and lucidity was back again, all men were left with was a sense of failure, inutility, emptiness, void, guilt, pain. That "Don't let the suburbs kill my heart and soul" seems to be an emergency call, it seems as if the protagonist wanted to say: "Now that I woke up from my dull existence and I realized how far the American white middle class is from the promises of the Dream, and how far away those promises were and are from the lies that had always been implicit in that same Dream, I don't want to let this 'national lie' kill me, I don't want to find shelter in a place (the suburbs) that was born to be just another pawn in the "American Dream game".

This very one attitude of awareness and at the same time of defy against "the system" is comparable with the initial attitude of Frank and April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*. The couple meet, get married, have children and move to the suburbs in order to let them grow in a safer, healthier, greener place where April takes care of the house and Frank commutes everyday to work, following the postwar fashion. They have all the right stuff to be admitted to the American Dream: they are young, white, middle class. Indeed they are admitted to it. And yet right from the first scenes it is not difficult for the audience to

understand that under the surface of the well behaving, happy, satisfied couple who live a happy, satisfactory life, there is something wrong with them, a dissatisfaction, a sense of incompleteness that are directly connected with the Dream.

Unlike their neighbors, who do not seem to notice they all have been fooled by the empty promises of the Dream, and keep on living their uneventful life without asking themselves any questions or doing a bit of soul searching, the Wheelers have come lucidly to terms with the sad reality; they are totally aware of the void that surrounds them and they try as much as they can to escape from it, to fight it. It is this lucid attitude towards the Dream that eventually causes the tragedy. Unable to fight against their condition, they have two alternatives and neither of them is exciting; they can either go on living their lives forever trapped in the suburban lie, as Frank will do, or kill themselves. This second path is chosen by April. If on the one hand it is true to say that April does not kill herself intentionally but rather accidentally while trying to cause herself an abortion, on the other hand the woman has reached such a state of desperation that she knows she will not survive the suburbs, so it is not wrong to say she wanted to commit suicide. Considering what I just said, one question may rise spontaneously: why didn't the woman try to find the strength to survive by holding on to her husband and children? There are no right or wrong answers to this question but I think the dynamics of the couple, the way they communicate and relate with each other, the way Frank acts not only with her but in life in general, are a good starting point at least as far as my personal answer is concerned. Actually I think Frank is the main reason why she kills herself. While watching the film I noticed how this man does not have a direction; he lives under the protection of the American Dream even though he is totally aware of its emptiness; he is proud of his lucid approach to the dull life he and all his colleagues and friends are living because he is confident of the fact that he will be the only one who will have the intelligence and the courage to escape from that suffocating reality and start a new life,

finally free from the burden of the Dream; he hates his ordinary job in the same company his father had worked for years in, and together with his wife dreams of a romantic move to Paris where she will work as a secretary and let him have the time he needs to think about who he wants to be and what he wants to do, but when everything is scheduled and the idea of Paris is about to be put into effect, an unexpected promotion stops him from leaving what he has and yet hates, for what he may have and has always desired. I think this choice in particular shows the many contradictions of Frank and above his 'ineptitude' in life. Frank is the example of what happens when we let our fears decide for us; he longs for something better in life and when he has the chance to grasp the opportunity of a lifetime he is too cowardly, too scared to leave the unhappy but still safe harbor he is in for a new, unexplored and consequently uncertain one.⁶

It is probably not just the fear of the unknown in general that stops him, but above all the fear of looking real life in the face and finding his true, genuine self. Leaving for Paris, in order to escape the routine and dedicate some time to think about what his ambitions are and how he can put them into practice, on the one hand means releasing himself from the

⁶While writing about this idea of men's fear of the unknown I couldn't help but thinking about Shakespeare's Hamlet. I know it may sound a little bit risky to make such delicate a comparison but in his famous monologue "To be or not to be" Hamlet lived a similar paralyzing condition while declaiming:

But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all (3.1 vv. 79, 241)

If we forget just for a second that Hamlet was talking about the possibility to commit suicide and we adapt this piece of monologue to Frank's situation, we will easily find the comparison: men are afraid of the unknown (be it death or an important change or a new challenge), they tolerate only what they know because they mislead themselves by thinking they can control it more easily. It is the 'fear to fly', to make a jump in the empty space that keeps them from chasing their dreams until the very end. They are convinced it is better to stick to a sad but safe reality than to take a risk in the unknown in order to earn, eventually, the desired happiness. The saddest thing is that Frank knows the unknown future he is so afraid of, will never be as meaningless as the void he is surrounded by and sucked in and still does not do anything.

imposed identity he had to acquire to be admitted to the dream, on the other hand means being thrown in the middle of an ocean without having any specific information about where to find the closest piece of land. The conversation he and April have when she decides to suggest the possibility to move to Paris is very interesting and useful for the analysis of both the characters. Here are some pieces of it.

[...]

April: Why don't we go there?

Frank: You're serious?

April: What's stopping us?

Frank: What's stopping us? I can think of a number of different things, for example, what kind of a job could I possibly get? [...] what exactly am I supposed to be doing when you're out there earning all this money?

April: Don't you see it? That's the whole idea. You'll be doing what you should have been allowed to do seven years ago. You'll have time. For the first time in your life you'll have time to find out what it is that you wanna do and when you figure it out, you'll have the time and the freedom to start doing it.

Frank: Sweetheart, it's just not very realist this all.

April: No Frank. This is unrealistic. It's unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working year after year at a job he can't stand [...]

Frank: We decided to move out here. No one forced me to take the job at Knox. I mean whoever said I was meant to be a big deal anywhere. [...] Ok, ok so I'll have the time and God knows that's appealing, it's very appealing and everything you're saying makes sense if a Had a definite talent, if I were a writer or an artist.

There are two elements that above the others come to light; the first one is Frank's fear of finally coming to terms with his real self, of finding a direction eventually. Leaving for Paris means giving up the protection of the American Dream, it means giving up the fake, fixed, conformed, wrapped identity that makes all suburban men equal, not only in their houses but in their thoughts and dreams and ambitions, and suddenly laying one's soul bare. Having to

face his true identity scares him because he is afraid he might find out he does not have the ability and the capacity to do anything different from his ordinary job. His youthful dreams have been muffled by the illusion of a national dream and now he is lost. At the very beginning of the film, he refers to Paris by saying: "I'm going back first chance I get. People are alive there. All I know now is that I want to feel things. Really feel them". This initial sense of "feeling things" is now gone, forever crushed and beaten by suburbia. And the saddest part of this all is that Frank does not give it up because he now believes in this life he is leading but rather because he has not enough strength to fight against it.

The second element that emerges is that Frank has a much more realistic approach to life than April. If on the one hand it is justifiable to blame him for his lack of courage that stops him from pursuing his dreams and escaping from the unexciting environment he lives in, on the other hand he is likewise justifiable for his pragmatism. Leaving the place he works and lives in to chase a youthful dream, without thinking about the possible risks implicit in the gamble (like example not being able to find a job or not earning enough money to support his family) would be an imprudent attitude for a grown up man.

But this dialogue tells us much also about April. Unlike Frank, she does not seem to have a lucid approach to this idea of moving to Paris, she thinks everything is going to be perfect there, she is confident she will find a job as soon as she gets there and that she will be paid enough to let Frank have the time and the freedom to basically do nothing. If Frank appears resigned to this life they are living, April is still hopeful about the possibility to turn it upside down and start from scratch, she is still confident that it is never too late to pursue their own, personal idea of happiness. She is still confident it is possible to fight and defeat the American lie, to show their dull neighbors that life is not what they believe it is, that outside the borders of the suburbs and of America, there is a whole world, there is a whole new life that is just waiting to be lived. Here are some pieces of the same dialogue I reported

above that are important to understand the power of April's firm opposition to the suburban lifestyle:

April: [...] Do you wanna know the worst part? Our whole existence here is based on this great premise that we're special and superior to the whole thing, but we're not. We're just like everyone else. Look at us, we're bound into the same, ridiculous delusion, this idea that you have to resign from life and settle down the moment you children, and we've been punishing each other for it. [...] Listen, listen to me. It's what you are that's been stifled here. It's what you are that's been denied and denied in this kind of life.

Frank: What's that?

April: Don't you know? You're the most beautiful, wonderful thing in the world, you're a man.

Living in the suburbs does not allow people to express themselves, it imposes specific codes and ways of behaving that eventually lead to the denial of the real self and to the sponsorship of a suburban identity. An identity denuded of any personal detail, any tiny little piece of individuality and filled with conformed ideas, ambitions, certainties, ways of living and dressing. The scene shot in the train station where dozens of men dressed in suits and ties are waiting for the train to commute to work, is an incisive picture of the conformity of those years. They all look exactly alike, their faces, their way of talking, walking, of even smoking is the same.

Once again the promises of the American Dream are unmasked; the great advertising campaign that, through the use of posters and documentaries, promoted the suburbs as a place where anyone would be able to rediscover the old, traditional, true values of the family, where the essence would count more than the appearance, where anyone would be free to live without having to conform with the requests of the society, turned out to be fake. The suburbs

were not better or less predisposed to conformity than the city. How could it be? If we think about it carefully, isn't it a sign of inclination towards conformity, the fact that the main reason why the majority of the people who decided to move to the suburbs did it because it was the fashion of the time?

Going back for a second to the conversation, there is another aspect that should be underlined: the delicate subject of the children. Generally speaking, and throughout the entire conversation in particular, Frank and April's children are the big absentees. The lack of attention towards them is total, complete, absolute, I would say overwhelming. During the entire conversation there is not a single moment dedicated to them. The Wheelers talk about the possibilities they may have if they leave for Paris, about the new, exciting life that is waiting for them, about the stifling and uneventful lifestyle they are leading in the suburbs, but everything is about them. Who cares if their children may not be enthusiastic about the idea of leaving their country, their friends, their lives? Who cares if they should put their children's needs before their egoistic ambitions and make sure their decisions do not damage them? The Wheelers apparently do not. As Roger Ebert underlines in his review of the film: "[t]heir children are like a car you never think about when you're not driving somewhere." (online review) And it is not a matter of not loving them or treating them badly. Now that they have them, they try as hard as they can to look after them the way they should be looked after and loved. But how are they supposed to be good parents, how could they guarantee their children a happy life if they are not happy themselves? I think this is the big issue of the film. This young couple is so tempted by the promises of the American Dream, that it excitedly follows the traditional steps of the postwar race for marriage, but when April unexpectedly announces she is pregnant and they decide to move to the suburbs, they realize year after year that what they have is not what they were promised, they find themselves stuck in a world they do not belong with and begin to feel unsatisfied. During one of the most

significant quarrels they have, the one that comes right after the moment when April finds out she is pregnant, the woman says something very strong as she refers to her children. Here are her words:

April: Tell me we can have the baby in Paris Frank, tell me we can have a different life but don't make me stay here please.

Frank: We can't have the baby in Paris.

April: Why not? I don't need everything we have here, I don't care where we live, I mean who made these rules anyway? The only reason we moved out here was because I got pregnant, then we had another baby to prove the first one wasn't a mistake, I mean how long does it go on? Frank did you actually want another child? Or do you? Come on, tell me, tell me the truth Frank. Remember that? We used to live by it. And you know what's so good about the truth? Everyone knows what it is however long they've lived without it. No one forgets the truth Frank, they just get better at lying. So tell me do you really want another child?

Frank: All I know is what I feel and anyone else in a right mind would feel the same April.

April: But I've had two children. Doesn't that count into my favor.

Frank: Christ April. The fact that you even put it that way. You make it seem as if having children is a sort of Goddamn punishment.

April: I love my children Frank.

Frank: Are you sure about it?

A careful analysis of the story of the Wheelers makes one thing clear: every time April gets pregnant is an unexpected one and every time she gets pregnant, there is a decision to be made that totally overturns the original plans they had. Although it may sound weird and unnatural to say so, it is predictable that April, who is the one that suffers the most in this trapped life she is leading, reaches a sort of state of intolerance, however unconscious, towards her children. She sees them as the concrete and insurmountable obstacle to her

happiness . When she says: “[b]ut I’ve had two children. Doesn’t that count into my favor” , Frank answers her in the most natural and realistic and I would say correct way by saying: “Christ April. The fact that you even put it that way. You make it seem as if having children is a sort of Goddamn punishment.” She has reached such a state of desperation that she now refers to her children as if they really were a punishment. She sincerely loves them and she says it herself at the end of the quarrel I reported above but her mind is still tied to the plans she had when she was younger and the dreams she dreamed when she was not a wife and a mother, when her life was still in front of her, waiting to be planned , when she still had a choice, an alternative. I think the main problem with April is that she keeps on living in the past, she is not willing to resign herself to the idea that she is not in the position to radically change her life because it has taken a direction she now has to respect, for the sake of her children in particular. Being a dreamer, April can only be happy if she has the chance to constantly nourish her dreams; she knows that the best part of dreaming something is not achieving it but rather imagining the moment when you achieve it. As you dream something you desperately want, you can give that dream the shape you want it to have. You are the master of your thoughts, you are free to desire whatever you want to desire; there are no rules apart from yours, there are no social conventions or restrictions, no judgments or frustrations. Your mind is completely free to express itself and that freedom is what makes you feel like you are going to reach that happiness you have been longing for, soon. Unfortunately, once the dream is planned and you are ready to achieve it, there is an important constant that you should never forget to take into consideration: reality. A dream is achievable only if it becomes concrete, if it is taken from its abstract world and put into reality, otherwise it is destined to remain just a dream. The problem is that the reality is not as perfect and open to personal interpretations as the imagination so as you pull your dream out of your safe mind and throw it into the cruel real world, you should know it will never be as perfect as you

imagined it. This implicit imperfection in the concretization of the dream is not dangerous for those who are able to have a lucid approach to this idea, on the contrary it surely becomes not only dangerous but tragic as well, for those 'dreamers' like April whose rational perception is totally blurred by the expectations of their imagination. I think a clarification is needed here: by saying so I do not mean it is absolutely wrong to dream, on the contrary I do believe in the power of dreams and I consider them to be the fuel of life, but it is likewise true to say that dreaming in an unwary way can drive to tragic consequences. As far as April is concerned being an insatiable dreamer is not the only reason why her story ends up in tragedy; the fakeness of the promises of the American Dream, on which she had based her personal dream of happiness is probably one of the most important factors as well.

As Lisa Keys suggests in her review of *Revolutionary Road*, April's condition could be compared to the fatal story of Willy Loman, the protagonist of *Death of a salesman*, a masterpiece of the American Theatre. Their stories are opposite and yet complementary. They are both insatiable dreamers and they seem to develop the same sense of dissatisfaction and rejection towards the reality that surrounds them; April is disappointed by the dissonance between her dream-like idea of life before achieving the dream and the real life she ended up to live after its achievement, while Willy is blinded until the very end by the hope he will finally be able to achieve the dream although it is clear to anyone else he will not. As keys writes: "April and Frank Wheeler have everything that *Death of a Salesman's* Willy Loman strives for. [...] They are living the American Dream, and yet they are trying to escape from it as desperately as Willy was trying to achieve it".

The lack of adherence to the real world drives them to find shelter in their vivid imagination; as far as April is concerned this means building another dream (leaving for Paris) that will inevitably turn out to be another illusion, while in the case of Willy this means continuing to believe recklessly and blindingly in an illusion until it drives you totally crazy.

The only solution left for both of them is suicide. Killing themselves is an act of freedom; they are finally relieved from their burden and probably able to reach that happiness they could not conquer in life.

April is a very complicated character, full of shades, lights and shadows. She is woman who keeps making irreparable mistakes out of love, desperation, disillusion. This and many other aspects of her personality and of her story relate her with that of another woman: Laura Brown, one of the female protagonists of *The Hours*. The third chapter of this dissertation will be entirely dedicated to a comparative analysis of the two women, as they are them both American 1950's housewives and they have to walk along a similar path of pain.

Coming back to the above dialogue, there is another important aspect that deserves to be discussed: the moment when April talks about the importance of the truth. As she sharply admits, she and Frank do not live by it anymore. They have been dragged by the suburban vortex of lies and now they do not know who they are anymore. April says something very important about the truth, she says it is unforgettable; everybody knows it but no one has the courage to live by it. It is easier to hide in the world of illusions and lie to yourself about who you are and what your place and your role in the show of life are. Living by the truth means not letting the conventions decide what you are going to wear or who you are going to spend your time with or what position you are going to reach in the social pyramid. Living by the truth means having the courage to be who you are even though this may lead to social exclusion or to being the object of nasty looks and ruthless gossip just because you do not conform with the general attitude.

This few lines dedicated to the importance of the truth made me think about one of the secondary characters of the story: John Givings, son of Mr and Mrs Givings, temporarily admitted to the psychiatry department because of his mental illness. The scenes that see John

interacting with the Wheelers are not much but during those few meetings he seems to be the only one who is sincerely, truly and I would say cleverly able to understand the Wheelers malaise. John the crazy boy, the mentally and emotionally unstable guy seems to be the clearest headed of all when it comes the Wheelers. Here I report some parts of his first dialogue with Frank and April. John is asking Frank some questions about his job and when Frank answers him by saying it really is not an interesting one, John says:

John: What do you do it for then? [...] I know the answer. You want to play house, you got to have a job. You want to play very nice house, very sweet house, then you've got to have a job you don't like.

Frank: Actually, John, I agree with everything you said. We both do. That's why I'm quitting the job in the fall. We're taking off. We're moving to Paris.

Above I wrote that John seems to be the only one who is able to understand the Wheelers but he actually does more than that; his speeches are very often addressed to the suburban mentality in general. For example in the above dialogue when he refers to the fact that in order to have a nice house it is necessary to have a job as well, he chooses the verb "to play" to define the entire process, a verb that may sound unusual and that certainly is ironic. "Playing the house" does not seem to have a positive connotation, John uses the expression to describe the lack of essence implicit in the 'suburban game'. The whole idea of getting married, building a family and watching it growing up in a comfortable house is just a covering; all that really matters is the race. The entire suburban lifestyle is a competition, a game, a ruthless fight between neighbors on who is going to have the nicest garden or the newest model of kitchen or what family is going to be chosen as the most respectable one. By comparing the suburbs to a game John is denouncing rather explicitly their fakeness.

Once he has the occasion of finding himself alone with the Wheelers for a walking through the woods, John becomes even more explicit and the couple as well seem to finally

be free to talk about their malaise openly. Here is the brief but meaningful dialogue they have:

John: [...] . So, what do a couple of people like you have to run away from?

April: We're not running.

John: So what's in Paris?

Frank: A different way of life.

April: Maybe we are running. We're running from the hopeless emptiness of the whole life here, right?

John: The hopeless emptiness? Now you've said it. Plenty of people are on to the emptiness, but it takes real guts to see the hopelessness.

I would define this dialogue a detailed summary of the suburban 'problem'. In these few lines are gathered two of the most incisive and significant terms that define the real face of suburbia: emptiness and hopelessness. Once again John is the one who dares to unmask the illusions and to reveal the truth, no matter how cruel and despairing it is. The "hopeless emptiness" is unfortunately a common condition in the suburbs, it is actually a distinguishing feature of its lifestyle and, as April underlines, everybody knows it, but "having the guts to see it" is only for those few brave, special, 'revolutionary' people who do not dread the truth.

The fact that the only person who is not afraid to tell the truth is a mentally unstable guy while people who are considered "normal" prefer, to quote April, to "get better at lying" says it all about the suburban mentality and about mankind in general. It is easier to hide behind the lies and let a crazy person tell the truth; he is crazy, no one will take him seriously. If the truth is expressed by an insane person it is still possible to pretend that it does not exist, it still can be considered a lie, and if a person in his right mind dares to even hint at the truth, he is automatically declared insane.

As John is the only person who understands the Wheelers' condition, and he is a crazy person, Frank asks himself if his wife and he are about to become as crazy as John is but

April cleverly points out that if living life in its fullness and trying to be as true as possible to their dreams and their personalities is considered by the social conventions to be a folly, then being crazy is the only way to be happy. Here is the dialogue the couple has right after the meeting with John:

April: Wow. You know, he's the first person who seemed to know what we were talking about.

Frank: Yeah. That's true, isn't it? Maybe we are just as crazy as he is.

April: If being crazy means living life as if it matters, then I don't care if we are completely insane.

When April finds out she is pregnant, she begs Frank not to abandon the idea of moving to Paris but the arrival of another baby 'forces' him to make the definite decision of staying in the suburbs and keeping his job at Knox and the advancement he was promised. As the couple discloses this changing of plan to the Givings by using the baby as the main reason for their decision to stay in America, John is once again the one who reveals that truth no one would dare to reveal. Here is what he says:

John: I don't get this. I mean, what's so obvious about it? I mean, okay, she's pregnant, so what? Don't people have babies in Europe?

Mrs Givings: John, suppose we just say that people anywhere aren't very well advised to have babies unless they can afford them.

John: Okay. Okay, it's a question of money. Money's a good reason. But it's hardly ever the real reason. What's the real reason? Wife talk you out of it or what? Little woman decide she isn't quite ready to quit playing house? No, no, that's not it. I can tell. She looks too tough and adequate as hell. Okay, then. It must've been you. What happened? What happened, Frank? You get cold feet? You decide you're better off here after all? You figure it's more comfy here in the old hopeless emptiness after all, huh? Oh, wow,

that did it. Look at his face. What's the matter, Wheeler? Am I getting warm? You know something?

I wouldn't be surprised if he knocked her up on purpose just so he could spend the rest of his life hiding behind a maternity dress. That way he'd never have to find out what he's really made of. Now look, I think that's just about enough out of you.

His words are a strong accusation towards Frank. John has a specific idea and the audience know his hypothesis is correct; at first he tries to blame April by saying she probably realized she is not ready to 'quit the game', that after all "playing the house" is not that bad, but he immediately corrects himself as he knows she is not the weakest link of the couple. John is aware of the fact that April is quite definite on the subject of what she wants from life and who she is and wants to be, just as he is aware of the fact that Frank, on the contrary, is not. His accusations are very strong, he basically points out that Frank is a coward, that he does not have the courage to dare to leave America because he is too scared to find out who he really is and what his talents are but above all because he fears he does not have any.

I think that John, despite his mental illness, is a bright character. Some could say it is ironic that the audience has to become aware of the truth right through his words but after all it is not the first time in the history of literature that an author decides to have a crazy person safeguard the real meaning of things. Let's think about authors like Pirandello or Shakespeare or Erasmus of Rotterdam who wrote an ironic praise of folly.

Going back to the difficult marriage of the Wheelers, I think there is a final issue that should be discussed: the inability to communicate with each other as a couple is supposed and expected to do. The Wheelers hate their lives, and they both know that their partner is feeling exactly the same sense of anguish, suffocation and dissatisfaction and yet they commit the terrible mistake of not talking to each other about all of this. They go on living their empty lives pretending that everything is fine, they naïvely believe that as long as they

do not raise the problem, it simply does not exist. This keeping everything inside functions like a bomb that is waiting to explode. The dialogue I report below is an example of how the lack of communication in a couple is destined to lead to catastrophic consequences that cause irreparable damage. Both Frank and April seem to display an aggressive attitude towards the other; they insult each other with such a verbal violence that they do not even look like a married couple. This is the very first quarrel we see right at the beginning of the film and I think maybe it is the most intense one as well, because it gives an idea of what is going to happen later on in the story and it also highlights some important aspects of the suburban mentality, as for example when Frank accuses April of having given him the role of the “dumb, insensitive suburban husband” or when April admits she feels trapped in the suburbs. The theory of gender roles imposed by the suburban fashion, that sees the men as too lost in their jobs to deal with the domestic problems and the women as too frustrated in their domestic prison to enjoy life without feeling trapped and depressed, seems to be ostensibly pictured in this quarrel. Here are the most significant pieces of the quarrel:

Frank: It strikes me that there's a considerable amount of bullshit going on here. And there's just a few things that I'd like to clear up. All right? Number one: it's not my fault that the play was lousy. Number two, it sure as hell isn't my fault that you didn't turn out to be an actress, and the sooner you get over that little piece of soap opera, the better off for both going to be. Number three, I don't happen to fit the role of dumb, insensitive suburban husband, you've been trying to lay that crap on me ever since we moved out here. And I'm damned if I'll wear it. [...] I mean Jesus I'm trying to be nice about this thing here for God sake's.

April: How kind of you. How terribly, terribly kind of you.

Frank: Wait a minute. I don't deserve this.

April: You're always so wonderfully definite on the subject of what you do and don't deserve. [...]

Frank: April can you listen to me? This is one time you're not get away with twisting everything I say April. This just happens to be one goddamn time I know I'm not in the wrong here. [...] you know what you are when you're like this April? You're sick, I really mean it that you're sick.

April: And do you know what you are? You're disgusting. You don't fool me Frank, just because you got me safely in this little trap you think you can bully me into feeling whatever you want me to feel?

Frank: You in a trap? You in a trap?

April: Yes Frank, me, me.

Frank: Don't make me laugh.

April: You pathetic, self-deluded little boy. Look at you! Look at you and tell me how by any stretch of the imagination you can call yourself a man? (Frank is about to punch her but then he punches the car)

The verbal violence is so powerful that in the end it almost results in a physical one. The level of non-communication reached by the couple is so high that when they decide to open the Pandora's box they do not even try to understand each other, they simply curse each other out. They scream and shout and then they go back home, they go back to lying in their role of happy suburban husband and wife.

They become so good at pretending to be living the time of their lives that they appear to be the perfect couple to anyone. They are defined as "special" and "superior" and they probably convince themselves they are. I think they are basically convinced, April in particular, that they can sneak out of their lives and start from scratch as easily as the sun rises. The first dialogue I discussed about is the moment when April becomes aware of the fact they are not at all special. Ironically they are even more miserable than the others because they have to live everyday in this lie knowing it is just a lie.

Thinking about it carefully, the choice of the adjective "revolutionary", which is both the title of the novel and the film and the name of the road they will move to as a married couple, could be seen as equally ironic. The term actually suggests the idea of a revolution, of

something different, unexpected, something that distinguishes itself from the previous situation and possibly changes it by trying to better it. If thought in this particular context of the film, it could also suggest the idea of the Wheelers being a 'revolutionary couple' because of their special and superior nature. John as well will play on this concept through the use of a meaningful and 'funny' wordplay that recites: "the nice young Wheelers on Revolutionary Road, the nice young Revolutionaries on Wheeler Road". Unfortunately, despite the promises implicit in the title, despite their naïve belief they will eventually escape from the suburbs, there will be no revolution, they will not be able to fight the 'system' and above all they will not distinguish themselves from their neighbors. As Lisa keys points out:

"Yates suggests that couples like the Wheelers are disruptive storms that upset the happy balance before departing and leaving everything exactly as it was before. They are transient revolutionaries, full of hope and promise, but with too little commitment to their cause to be able to change anything".

After all the road is called revolutionary but this does not mean it is any different from the others. It is just as long and boring and filled with lots of similar white little houses as all the other roads. This contrast between the initial sense of hope and excitement for the new life Frank and April are going to lead in the suburbs and the later feeling of suffocation, stagnation, impossibility and void is shown in one of the initial scenes where April carries out the trashcan and looks at the deserted road she lives in. Her face speaks for her, she does not say a single word but it is very easy to imagine her thoughts; that sequence of all alike houses and the total absence of people, make her feel both miserable and trapped. She looks at that deserted street and realizes if she stays there she will never be happy. That road, that house, that life will never give her that thrill she felt when she first met Frank or when he promised

her he would take her to Paris or when she started to think about a life with him. And while she thinks about all of this, while she regrets that thrill that once made her feel alive, her mind goes back in time and she remembers the last time she probably felt the sense of excitement and hope and expectation that thrill was able to give her. She remembers a car, her seated in the back, Mrs Givings driving, Frank seated in the front passenger seat. It was their first time as a married couple, it was the suburbs and then suddenly it was revolutionary road, it was her face shining as she saw a perfect white beautiful house, it was home, it was happiness. I think the director's decision of putting this flashback exactly in this moment is one of the best choices in the film because it beautifully pictures the contrast between the sense of suffocation and sterility April now feels and the sense of expectation and possibility she once felt.

I am sure there are plenty of other things to say about *Revolutionary Road* and some of them, those regarding April in particular, will be discussed and furthered explored in the next chapter. Until now I have built my analysis around a specific purpose: that of showing how the alluring promises of the American Dream did not always correspond with the reality. The achievement of the Dream, which is said to be available to everybody, in fact is denied to most of the population, especially to the black percentage of it, and for those who possess the right qualifications to be admitted to the Dream life is not as shining as they expected it to be. Suburbia is the main reason why the Dream soon turns out to be a nightmare where there is no "life" apart from that imposed by the social conventions, there is no "liberty" apart from that of choosing between continuing to live unhappily ever after or committing suicide, there is no concrete "pursuit of happiness" apart from the one that people like April try to shape in their minds.

2.4 A bitter deceit: women and the illusions of the war years

In order to understand what happened in the 1950s as far as women were concerned we need to step back to the 1920's, the achievements of feminism and the War years. It was during the “roaring” twenties that women, after many years of feminist campaigns and intense fights, obtained the right to vote. It was also in those years that they started to become increasingly part of what, ever since that moment, had always been considered the men's world of work. Of course the phenomenon did not involve married women who were for the most part housewives, but many American single ladies started to be interested in having a career before expressing the desire to get married. As Dan Bryan points out women could choose between the old traditional jobs they were always assigned, like teachers, social workers, nurses or librarians and a whole new selection of occupations that were born together with the rise of the corporate office, like typists, filing clerks, stenographers and secretaries. These were all exciting jobs but the greatest possibility for advancement in the career was circumscribed only to the creative occupations. As Bryan underlines:

[t]he department stores hired women in large numbers, and with skill and intelligence they could work their way up to being designers or buyers. The latter group was entrusted with securing apparel and supply for the major stores, which could include traveling to London or Paris to build connections and fashion knowledge. (www.americanhistoryusa.com)

There were also chances to build up a career in the artistic field by becoming a poet, a dancer, an actress or in the scientific field by attending college. Of course we need to contextualize all these opportunities into a world that by then, no matter the achievements of feminism, was still entirely considered to be of men. So we should not think about women as

entirely free to express their personal skills and obtaining the rise to power, we should rather consider those years as a starting point, a hope for more opportunities in the future.

If during the 1920s and 1930s a huge quantity of men kept on considering women as the angels of the house and did not look kindly upon their desire to express themselves, not only at home, but also and especially in the outside world, the War changed it all. Perspectives needed to be reconsidered and adjusted; the needs of the nation had to come in first place. Facts could not be ignored; after the attack on Pearl Harbor on the morning of December 7, 1941, America could no longer back out of the conflict and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared war on Japan. Men left for the war and this meant a lot of job roles empty which consequently meant economic problems for everyone. Moreover now that America was at war it had to produce all the needed items to fight it. It was in this situation that women became the ‘magic’ solution to America’s emergency problems. Someone had to fill those empty jobs in order to save the economic destiny of the country, someone had to produce at home planes, bombs, weapons and other war items that would be used to fight and possibly win the war. The government had no other alternatives apart from entrusting this role to women. In order to attract as many women as possible to the labour world, the government promoted many advertising campaigns and articles whose titles had to convince women that their contribution was vital for the victory. Some of the poster slogans recited: “Do the Job He Left Behind” or “Longing Won’t Bring Him Back Sooner, Get a War Job” and again “Women There is Work to Be Done and a War to Be Won”.

Here is an example of an original poster I found on www.about.com in the section dedicated to the 20th Century History:



These and other dozens of slogans and titles and ads were created to lure women and make them feel useful for the nation. For the first time in American history they were told they could easily take the jobs once held by their husbands, they were assigned important roles and their talents were exploited and celebrated by the government. Perhaps, the most iconic image of women working in the factories in the War years is that

of Rosie the Riveter who, with her emblematic slogan “We Can Do It”, suggested the idea that women had all the required abilities to replace men at work. Rosie became the symbol of all the working women who showed a sense of pragmatism and independence; she had to represent the idea of a strong woman



who had what it took to make the difference in the world. The famous poster of Rosie was thought and created in 1942 by artist J. Howard Miller and it was not initially created with the intent of making it an iconic figure. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that it became known as “Rosie the Riveter poster” and reached such a popularity that eventually it was used by women to support their fight for those civil rights they were still denied. But the name of Rosie the Riveter appeared for the first time in a song of the same name written by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb. By reading the lyrics it is quite clear the song had two specific

aims: on the one hand this first part, wanted to celebrate the working women by comparing them with those few ones that did not join the job world;

“While other girls attend their fav’rite
cocktail bar
Sipping Martinis, munching caviar,
there’s a girl who’s really putting them to shame,
Rosie is her name”

On the other hand, these other lines, wanted to underline the great contribution of women in the war and the fact that , by working in the factories producing weapons for the war, women were actually protecting their men;

“She’s making history,
working for victory.
Rosie’s got a boyfriend, Charlie
Charlie, he’s a Marine
Rosie is protecting Charlie
Working overtime on the
riveting machine”

The campaign to move women into work was so huge that it involved many different means of communications, from the traditional newspapers to the radio but also the motion pictures, and it was so appealing that the percentage of women working rose from 27% to 35%. The imperative needs of the specific circumstance of the War turned out to be a major phenomenon that would change America and its women forever.

After the end of the War both the men who survived it and the government knew that it was just a matter of time before they would go back to their jobs and send their women back home. On the contrary women from their point of view were not sure they were willing to go back to their domestic role without making any complaint. The time had

come for the government to build up another campaign, another alluring illusion that would make sure everything went back to its original balance. It was in this particular circumstance that the suburbs were chosen as the perfect means that would attract thousands of women into their 'golden trap' by enchanting them with the promise of a fairytale-like life built around the idea that the best achievement a woman could desire was to become a good wife and a loving mother. All of a sudden it was no longer admissible for a woman to long for a career; all of a sudden it was no longer tolerable to have a woman occupy the place that was due to a man.

Although a significant segment of women found it difficult to step back home, a considerable percentage of them gave way to the suburbs and yielded to their beautifully



designed temptation. As for Rosie the Riveter and all other war slogans, the postwar persuasion aiming at sending women back to their domestic sphere, was matched with an intense advertising campaign. Thousands of posters, like the one on the left, picturing happy families, beautiful modern kitchens, smiling housewives proud of totally consecrating themselves to the cleaning of the house, the cooking and the caring of their husbands and children, were printed. Posters like Rosie the Riveter, which were born to show that even women could be tough and strong were soon replaced by domestic images. I think it is interesting to notice how if on the one hand Rosie was pictured all alone in the foreground, this rediscovered housewife on the other hand is surrounded by her family and compared with her husband and children she remains almost in the background, as if to underline the fact that she has to "work" for them. Furthermore, Rosie does not look exactly like a conventional woman is supposed to look: her hair is almost covered, she wears a masculine shirt, her arm looks like that of a man as it is big and muscular and the way she exhibits her strength seems to mimic a man as well. The housewife on the above

poster on the contrary is very feminine, she wears a pink dress and high heels even though she is cooking, her hair is blonde and well-groomed, she looks sweet and loving. This brief comparison between the war and after war posters shows how, within a few decades, the chauvinist society had overturned the role of the woman by deceiving her she would become finally part of the real world and then putting her back again in her original corner.

As the advertisement promoted images of happy housewives, at ease in their elegant 1950s clothes while doing the dishes, preparing a cake or cleaning the house, many real women felt themselves trapped in that same house they had so deeply dreamt of. The promise of a simple and yet happy life spent behind the roof of their modern houses, where they could totally devote themselves to their husband and children, was always incomplete; yes, it was a simple life but what about happiness? Could they say they were truly, deeply, completely happy? Could they say they didn't want anything more from life? Could they say it was enough looking after the children and the house and waiting for their husbands to come home after work? Many women, after having played the role of the happy wife in public, found themselves in the dark of their bedroom, asking themselves if what they had was really what they had always dreamt of, many of them cried over their suburban lifestyle because they felt unfulfilled as women. The philosophy of the time asserted that nothing was more fulfilling for a woman than being a mother and a wife. It certainly was and is true to say that being a mother changes a woman's life forever by giving it a new, profound meaning and by making it better, complete, worth living. It certainly was and is true to say that being the wife of the man she loves changes a woman's life forever as she becomes part of a couple, she becomes part of someone else and shares with him all the joy and all the pain of her life, knowing she will no longer be lonely. But it is just as true to say that before being a mother and a wife, before devoting her life to her child or sharing her deepest soul with a man, a woman is a woman. A woman endowed with personal qualities and talents,

desires and ambitions, dreams and ideas. A woman who does not necessarily want to get married at an early age and have children soon after because she has other projects and priorities; priorities like expressing her talents in a job that could make her feel complete and fulfilled even without depending upon someone.

In her brilliant *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1960 , Betty Friedan describes in detail the “problem that has no name”, that feeling of uselessness and emptiness that bonded many women in the same painful condition of being housewives. In the next chapter of this dissertation I will try to make a comparative analysis of April and Laura’s personalities, experiences and of their level of depression, especially through the use of Friedan’s book.

Chapter 3

3.1 Laura Brown, April Wheeler and the suburban hell

Although this chapter is totally dedicated to two women who feel themselves suffocate in their housewives role, I decided to open it with a dialogue based on *The man with golden arm*, a 1955 film starring Frank Sinatra, that shows how many women, especially those who lived in the city, were lured by the kind of lifestyle the suburbs promised. Molly, the feminine protagonist of this dialogue, is one of those that could be defined as the victims of the chauvinist ‘campaign’ of the time. As Friedan underlines in her *Feminine Mystique*, for over fifteen years, after the World War II women were told:

“they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity[...] they were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights [...]. All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children”. (15,16)

If the premise of the time was that women compulsorily had to have but one ambition; that of being a wife and a mother, if a woman, in order to be considered fulfilled and respected had to worry only about satisfying her husband’s requests and needs and looking after the house he bought for her and making sure to educate her children in the best of the ways, it is not unexpected that a young, beautiful and intelligent woman like Molly, who could potentially have a brilliant career, finds herself in front of a shop window of a suburban kitchen, daydreaming about how romantic life could be when you live in a quiet place outside the city and you simply become someone’s wife.

I chose this dialogue as I find it not only interesting to understand how the psychological pressure towards women brought them to completely convince themselves it was not worth fighting for their rights or claiming to deserve the same opportunities that were guaranteed to men, but also because I think the unusual, nonconformist answers given by Frankie, the masculine protagonist, are even more worth analyzing. Frankie does not seem to conform with the general chauvinist, old fashioned idea of women being the angels of house, or rather he may agree with them being housewives but what he cannot understand is the general attitude of 'indifference' that the husbands usually have towards their wives. The most interesting cross talk of the entire dialogue is when Frankie notices how the husband, who is seated in his chair with his newspaper, is not going to help his wife with the cooking or the cleaning or at least to have a conversation with her. The man says if he were the husband he would treat his wife differently; he would take her out after dinner to have a nice evening together, he would talk to her and above all he would be glad to listen to her; he would console and help her if she had any problem and would make her feel loved and cherished. Frankie also states that it is likely that the alleged husband did not even marry the woman as she is not wearing her wedding ring. At this point Molly promptly steps in by saying the couple is certainly married and she justifies the absence of the ring on the woman's finger with the excuse of the cooking. Despite Frankie's attempt to show her the emptiness of the misleading promises of the suburban lifestyle, Molly keeps believing in the romantic illusion. She justifies the husband's silence by saying he must be tired after a day of work and when she and Frankie pretend to be for a moment that mannequin couple, she plays the role of the perfect wife who cooks steak for her husband and prefers to stay at home listening to some music instead of going out to have a distraction after an entire day spent alone at home. Here is the dialogue:

Molly: Where are we going?

Frankie: I don't know, but I want to buy you somethin'

Molly: Oh, no.

Frankie: I gotta' spend some money or I'll bust. How about one of those in green?

Molly: Frankie.

Frankie: Maybe a colour TV set.

Molly: Go on.

Frankie: Would you look at this production? And only for cookin'. Now who would want a thing like that? Boy, it's goofy, huh?

Molly: It's pretty, huh? I wonder what he does for a living?

Frankie: Him?

Molly: Well, must make a nice dollar. Look the way he dresses her. - A kitchen like that.

Frankie: I notice he don't help her none though. I bet he didn't even marry the girl. Look at that she ain't even wearing a ring on her finger.

Molly: She takes it off when she cooks, maybe. And he's tired after a hard day's work.

Frankie: Alright, so let him sit there, but at least he could talk to her once in a while. He doesn't have to sit there with his nose buried in a magazine. I would talk to her.

Molly: What would you say?

Frankie: Oh, I'd say how you been? How did it go today? What's for supper?

Molly: Steak. Steak's for supper and everything went fine today.

Frankie: Steak? Good. Now how about you and me stepping out tonight, after we eat?

Molly: Why don't we just stay home? Turn on some music?

Frankie: Yeah. I like that better. We'll just stay home and turn on some music.

Molly seems to be quite naïve about the entire issue of getting married and moving to the suburbs. It is quite clear she is not totally aware of the facts and that she is basing her thoughts on what the chauvinist society of the time wants her to think. She is one of those thousands of women that began to feel attracted by the public images of happy housewives promoted by women's magazines of the time. As Friedan points out, the heroine-like woman sponsored and exalted in 1939 magazines, the "new woman", independent, power-hungry, determined to trace her own destiny simply counting on her own strength, full of personal ideas and goals, is cunningly replaced, few years later, (by male editors) by the young, remissive housewife. If the career woman of the war years is not necessarily young and beautiful but rather intelligent and with a strong personality, the housewife on the contrary must necessarily rely on her beauty. If the former is "less aggressive in pursuit of a man" (Friedan, 25) as "her own sense of herself as an individual, her self-reliance, g[i]ve a different flavour to her relationship with the man" (Friedan, 25), the latter, being deprived of any personal, independent thoughts and attitudes, cannot help but obsessively search for a husband who could complete her by giving her a direction, a sense of belonging. If the career woman does not build her existence around the idea of having children, the 1950's woman is told she was born to be a mother and that she cannot desire nothing better than to honor her femininity with the fulfillment of her motherhood. But the housewife is not only a mother, she is also a wife and it is important for her to take care of her physical appearance so that she can always look charming in the eyes of her husband.

In order to show to what extent the magazines for women pushed themselves, I report here some of the tasks inserted in the *Good wife guide* published in a famous 1950's magazine called *Housekeeping Monthly* on 13 may 1955. The entire guide is built around the idea that once her husband comes back home after a day of work, the one and only thought a woman is allowed to have is to look after him and make sure to satisfy his needs. The first

thing she should do after having prepared the dinner is to rest. The guide recites: “ take 15 minutes to rest so you’ll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch-up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking”. Resting is important in order to look more attractive; a husband should be satisfied under every aspect whether it be the cooking, the education of the children, the care taken over one’s aspect, sex. Another fundamental thing a woman must remember if she wants to become a perfect wife is to be able to listen to her husband, always. By quoting the guide, a woman should: “listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first-remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours”. She must be aware of the fact that her husband is the master of the house and the one who runs the family so everything he says is always more important than any other thing said or thought by anyone, her included. A woman must also make sure to “make the evening his. Never complain if he comes home late or goes out to dinner, or other places of entertainment without you. The guide is even very clear on the subject of what a woman’s purpose is, as it says: “your goal: try to make sure your home is a place for peace, order and tranquility where your husband can renew himself in body and spirit”. But perhaps the clearest sentence, the one that includes all the others, is the one that recites: “ a good wife always knows her place”.

I guess at this point a series of questions may rise spontaneously: what is a good wife’s place? Is there just one right way to be a perfect wife? Does this mean in order to be considered by the others and by herself a “good wife” a woman has to respect the rules written in a guide? Can a guide tell a woman how to behave, how to feel, how to live her life? Does this specific guide really teach a woman how to become a good wife or rather how to become a perfect slave in her own house?

As far as Molly is concerned, if she knew the guide, she would probably consider it a miraculous manual to follow to the letter. She is not yet a wife and she certainly speaks

with carelessness, basing on the illusions she has pictured in her mind, but from what she says it is likely she will become one of those wives who live only to please their husbands.

I wonder if Laura Brown, the protagonist of one of the three feminine stories of *The Hours*, a novel written in 1998 by Michael Cunningham, winner of the Pulitzer award in 1999 and transposed into a film by Stephen Daldry in 2002, has ever felt the same burning desire to become someone's wife and devote her life to this someone, or if April Wheeler, the protagonist of *Revolutionary Road* has ever felt comfortable in her role of housewife.

We already know the tragic story of April; her disastrous marriage, her broken dreams, her sense of non belonging to the reality that surrounds her. But what about Laura? Laura is a typical 1950's young white suburban housewife, she is a mother and a wife. She and April lead the same lifestyle, they come from the same place, they have to face the same routine but above all they share the same sense of suffocation and uselessness, the same inability to live within the boundaries of a reality they did not choose. Or at least that Laura did not chose. In effect, although the two women share the same "problem that has no name", to quote Friedan, April in the beginning of the film is shown as optimistic and excited about the life she and Frank are going to have in the suburbs. No matter the thousands of problems they will face throughout the story, April seems to sincerely love her husband, their relationship is complicated and full of misunderstandings because of a heavy lack of communication, but the couple looks real. Laura, on the contrary has never wanted the life she is leading. Throughout the entire film, and the novel as well, there is not a single moment where the woman seems to show even just a tiny piece of enthusiasm for something, apart from reading. In the beginning of the novel, in order to describe what the reading means to her, Cunningham uses a very incisive sentence that recites: " Laura Brown is trying to lose herself. No that's not exactly- she is trying to keep herself by gaining entry into a parallel world" (37). I think the choice of the verbs here is worth analyzing. Generally

speaking people use the reading as a way to relax and take a break but also to forget an annoying boss, an economic problem, a difficult familiar situation. For that hour they know they are 'safe' from the outside world as they lose themselves in another reality. Laura Brown is different; she does not lose herself, she rather keeps herself. If the others know that that hour they spend reading is just a way to recharge their batteries and go back to their lives, Laura knows the moment she stops reading she is lost. She knows reading is the only situation in which she does not feel unsuitable as it is the only place where she is not someone's wife or mother but simply herself, Laura. In that parallel world she does not have to pretend to always rise to the occasion, or to be able to cook wonderfully, or to be a perfect wife and a loving mother. In that parallel world there are neither frameworks nor social roles to respect, there are just her and the thousands of lives she reads about. The moment she stops reading, the agony increasingly expands. Although she does not have an annoying boss or a serious family problem, her life bothers her, and it does it precisely for the fact that she has nothing to do. It does it because she knows her days are as flat as a table. The simple acts of preparing breakfast or making a cake, which are so natural in the eyes of other mothers and wives, panic her because she knows she will have to repeat them hour after hour, day after day, year after year, in a dreadful, obsessive, identical continuity.

In the film version thanks to the mastery of actress Julianne Moore the audience is given a clear picture of the sensation of unsuitableness Laura constantly feels. Cunningham as well says it in an incisive way when he writes sentences like "as if reading were the singular and obvious task of the day, the only viable way to negotiate the transit from sleep to obligation (38) or "[i]n another world, she might have spent her whole life reading" (39). The first one is particularly interesting and once again the author chooses a specific term to describe her day; he does not say that to her reading is like a transit from sleep to life, but from sleep to obligation. Laura's life is not described as easy or difficult, as good or bad but

rather as an obligation. She sees it the way a schoolchild sees the school or an employee sees his job and maybe her view is even worse. If the time a schoolchild spends studying is rewarded with the personal enrichment of culture and the hard work of an employee is rewarded with the salary, what is Laura's compensation? Does she have one? Furthermore, a schoolchild or an employee have their duties but they also have their pleasures. What about Laura? If her whole life is nothing but an obligation, therefore she is not allowed to feel any pleasure. No compensations, no pleasures and yet a whole life to live. A whole series of empty, endless hours she has to fill with all the duties a suburban housewife is expected to accomplish. It is therefore possible to see her obsession for "the perfect cake" she fails to bake as the metaphor for the "perfect life" she would like to lead but fails to have. The cake is the symbol of her duties as a wife; it is her husband's birthday and she is going to bake the most beautiful of cakes because that is what a good wife is supposed to do. In the film she murmurs to herself: "I'm gonna make a cake, that's all I'm gonna do" as if she wanted to convince herself that this is her place in the world, that there is nothing she would rather do right now, that her life is wonderful the way it is and that this perfect housewife with a beautiful family is not just the picture of herself, is not just what her husband and her neighbors wants her to be, but is actually herself. And while baking the cake she speculates on her condition and for a moment, for a single fleeting moment "she is precisely what she appears to be: a pregnant woman kneeling in a kitchen with her three-year-old son [...]. She is herself and she is the perfect picture of herself; there is no difference."(Cunningham, 76). Her whole existence is in fact a huge speculation, an operation of self conviction that the life she is leading is enough for her, that "it is almost perfect, it is almost enough, to be a young mother in a yellow kitchen[...]"(Cunningham, 44). She has a specific idea in mind of how the cake is going to look like, she thinks of it being "glossy and resplendent as any photograph in any magazine; [...]. She imagines making a cake with all the balance and

authority of an urn or a house. The cake will speak of bounty and delight the way a good house speaks of comfort and safety.” (Cunningham, 76). It could almost be said the cake is in fact the metaphor for herself; she would like to be as perfect as those images of happy housewives in the magazines, she would like to possess that sense of comfort and safety that they instill but in fact she is as incomplete and wrong as a cake kneaded without following the right proportions. Despite her efforts to be a perfect wife and mother, despite her desperate attempt to fill comfortable in her life, despite her caution in baking a remarkable cake for her husband’s birthday, the dessert is not as wonderful as she thought it would be. As she looks at it, she notices that:

“the cake is less than she hoped it would be. [...] There’s nothing really wrong with it, but she’d imagined something more. She’d imagined it larger, more remarkable. She’d hoped it would look more lush and beautiful, more wonderful. This cake she’s produced feels small, not just in the physical sense but as an entity. [...] She tells herself, it’s fine. It’s a fine cake, everyone will love it. It’s clumsy aspects [...] are part of its charm.” (Cunningham, 99)

While reading this passage it seemed to me she was once again using the cake as a tool to talk about herself. Sentences like: “ there’s nothing really wrong with it, but she’d imagined something more” or “this cake she’s produced feels small, not just in the physical sense but as an entity” could be easily adapted to her own condition. Laura is actually aware of the fact that the life she is leading and the role she has in it are what many other women dream of, she knows there is nothing really wrong with them; she has a beautiful house, a husband, a son, she has good health and economic stability, she is basically living the American dream. The problem is “she’d imagined something more” than a long sequence of all alike days, something more exciting, more remarkable, something that did not make her feel “small in entity”. Laura is part of that huge crowd of women who shared the so called “problem the

has no name". As the majority of them, "[a]s she ma[k]es the beds, shop[s] for groceries, [...] lay[s] beside her husband at night" (Friedan 5), she finds herself thinking about the "silent question" (Friedan, 5) that everybody is afraid to think and no one dares to speak: "is this all?" (Friedan, 5). The same question that had haunted all the American white suburban women at least once in their lives, the same question they were so afraid to ask themselves because they all indiscriminately knew the answer was and would always be: 'no, not at all'.

Every single woman who asked herself that question and gave herself that answer "knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself" (Friedan, 8). Laura seems to be perfectly in line with this attitude. She also blames herself for the constant sense of uneasiness and the overwhelming unhappiness she feels. In the novel, whenever that feeling of incompleteness appears, she tells herself something must be wrong with her. Blaming herself is a way to deny the problem by convincing herself it is just a temporary condition that will soon fade away in order to leave space to the desired happiness. The hotel scene of which I will discuss later on in the chapter, is the moment where she surrenders to this emotion and she finally admits that "she is overtaken by a sensation of unbeing" (Cunningham, 188) and that, unless she finds the strength to leave the suburbs, she is destined to feel that way forever. That dreadful feeling of being nothing is given by the fact that by choosing to marry her husband she has stopped being a person and has automatically become someone's wife and mother. As Friedan underlines: "the truth is [...] an American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be" (53). Having said this, one question may rise spontaneously: why did she marry Dan? What was it that convinced her it was the right thing to do? Betty Friedan would probably answer by saying it was the "feminine mystique" of the time. Laura seems to share this thought, as every time she asks herself that question she answers by saying she:

“consented to perform simple and essentially foolish tasks [...] because it is her art and her duty. Because the war is over, the world has survived, and we are here, all of us, making homes, having and raising children, creating not just books or paintings but a whole world- a world of order and harmony where children are safe, where men who have seen horrors beyond imagining, who have acted bravely and well, come home to delighted windows, to perfume, to plates and napkins” (Cunningham, 42)

I think this is perhaps the most meaningful of the passages in the chapters dedicated to Laura Brown. Cunningham is actually able to sum up in a single sentence what it meant to be a woman in the 1950s suburban America. By saying so Laura admits she had no choice: it was “her art and her duty”. She was taught, by a society that wanted to muffle the New Woman spirit, that that of being an housewife was the only, true talent she possessed and that it was her duty to honor it, she was taught no other job in the world would guarantee her the same satisfaction and fulfillment she would benefit from being a mother and wife. She was taught she was not allowed to “mourn her lost possibilities, her unexplored talents” (Cunningham, 79) as she did not have any.

This few things I have written about Laura make the comparison with April quite easy to do. If Laura finds shelter in the reading as it is the only way for her to keep herself, April as well hides behind in her romantic dreams, as they are the only way out of the suffocating reality that surrounds her. And yet, although both of them seek refuge in a parallel world, when it comes to dealing with their suburban reality they have a quite different attitude. April, who once believed in the promises of the Dream, whose eyes had shined at the sight of that beautiful little house in revolutionary road, is not willing to give up. She fights against the suburban prejudices and her husband’s fears in order to be able to live that happiness she was promised, and although she will not manage to fulfill her dreams, although her life will fall apart and she will come undone to the point of dying, April is a fighter. She looks life in the face, she struggles until the very end against a society that is

trying to take control of her ideas and dreams. Laura on the contrary could be said to be many things but certainly not a fighter: throughout the entire film her look is passive, melancholic, absent-minded, it always seems as if she is there with her body while her mind is floating miles and miles away. There is not a single moment where we see her fighting with her husband or screaming with her child. There is not a single moment of sharing with her family, not a single spontaneous big laugh, not a thrill of excitement in her look. Sometimes she cracks a smile but it is a crooked, sad one; the melancholic smile of a woman who has accepted her life years before and is apparently determined to go on living in that passive limbo for the rest of it. Laura is a woman who has lost any kind of interest, who loves nothing and cares for nothing.

Let's concentrate for a moment on April and Laura's husbands. I already have analyzed the character of Frank and it is right to say that regardless of his shortcomings and his mistakes in the management of his relationship with April, he tries to always be there for her, he understands when she has a problem and helps her to solve it. For sure he is not perfect but he certainly does not feel part of the infinite crowd of "dumb, insensitive suburban husband[s]" that surrounds him. He loves his wife and seems to be quite open minded on the subject of what she is and is not allowed to do. What about Dan? Dan on the contrary seems to possess all the required staff to enter that infinite crowd of suburban husbands. What particularly struck me as I was reading the book and even more as I was watching the film is his total, absolute lack of attention towards his wife's feelings. Laura wanders around the house with her melancholic look as if she was a ghost, as if she was a stranger in someone else's world, as if that house was a place of sorrow and desperation and he simply does not notice it. He does not notice her obvious agony, her concern whenever she has to spend some time alone with her child, her constant, overwhelming unhappiness. After all Laura still kisses him goodbye as he leaves for work; isn't it enough for him to

sleep soundly at night? April and Frank suffer from an heavy lack of communication, but this of Dan and Laura in my opinion is even worse as it is combined with a substantial lack of interest too. Dan is the typical suburban husband, for some aspects he looks like the mannequin in *The man with golden arm*; as long as he finds a hot meal when he comes back from work and an attractive woman to hold at night, he does not worry about anything. It is not that he does not love her, he simply cannot understand her sorrow.

From her point of view Laura, does not even try to change her husband or to remind him of the man he used to be or how they used to be happy together, as April does with Frank. What for? From what the audience is allowed to know about their past, the couple does not seem to be supported by a strong feeling of love, at least not as far as Laura is concerned. During a conversation with her friend Kitty, Laura refers to her conjugal life as something her husband and all the other surviving soldiers “deserved”. By saying so she means they deserved that kind of suburban life, that decorative package that included a nice house, a nice car, a beautifully submitted wife and a respectable name to praise to the world. By saying so she also means she, Laura Zielski, “the solitary girl, the incessant reader” (Cunningham, 40) , the “strange, fragile looking girl”, to quote Dan, did not have an alternative; she could not go against the tide and refuse that man. She could not refuse the life any other young woman of her generation, as Molly for example, desired so passionately.

According to the mentality of the time a woman could not be happier if a man directed his glance on her and gave her the privilege of becoming his wife. Dan shows to totally agree with this postwar attitude as he says: [...] [I] used to think about this girl. I used to think about bringing her to a house, to a life. Pretty much like this. And it was the thought of the happiness, the thought of this woman, the thought of this life. That’s what kept me going. I had an idea of our happiness”. The man does not have many lines in the

film but the very few things he says are fundamental to analyze deeper the suburban way of thinking and living. Every single word chosen by the screenwriter has its own specific weight and is there to convey a specific message: men have the power to “bring women to life” by ‘putting’ them in a nice house and giving them a family and a purpose in life. Dan says he “had an idea” of their happiness. Once again he underlines how he is the only one who is allowed to “have an idea” about something. So what about the inalienable rights of the Declaration of Independence? What about the pursuit of happiness? Laura is not admitted to this privilege; someone else has decided for her without even asking her opinion. Dan sees himself as a sort of savior who took the fragile, strange girl away from her solitary destiny and brought her to a new, shining life.

No matter the importance of the marital life, *The hours* is a novel that explores the worlds of femininity and motherhood above all. One of the most important achievements of a woman in the postwar years, the one “held sacred down the ages” (Friedan,41) was becoming a mother. The “feminine mystique” of the time taught her that “careers and higher education were leading to the masculinization of women with enormously dangerous consequences to the home and the children dependent on it” (Friedan, 28). It reminded her that “the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity”(28). And of course the crowning element of a woman’s femininity is her fertility. “I don’t think you can call yourself a woman until you’re a mother”; these are the words Kitty says as she is talking with Laura about her gynecologic problems. Kitty, who is the perfect picture of the typical suburban housewife, “young, frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home” (Friedan, 23) cannot conceive. This heavy ‘handicap’ disheartens her as she truly believes in the “feminine mystique” of the time and she is certain that a woman is not totally complete if she does not achieve that stage. Laura represents everything she would like to be,

she has everything she would like to have. She and her husband Ray lead a life which is in line with all the suburban principles; she stays home, he commutes to work, she can cook and take care of the house, they also attend the Country Club and drink a significant dose of Martinis, but there is a huge but in their lives. Paradoxically Kitty, who would like so passionately to be a mother, is not able to give Ray a baby while Laura, who seems to be living a life that does not belong with her, who never explicitly expressed the wish to have children, who is already mother of a little boy, is pregnant again. Destiny seems to be playing in a sadistic way with the lives of these two women by giving the chance to build a family to the one who feels trapped in her own house and by denying it to the one who, on the contrary, would finally feel free. Kitty says it herself as she declares: “ [t]he joke is...all my life I could do everything [...] except the one thing I wanted”.

This last sentence could be overturned and adapted to Laura’s condition, but as far as she is concerned it would sound more like this: “ the joke is...all my life I was not allowed to do anything, except the one thing I did not want”. So what is it that Laura wants? Why does she find it so difficult to manage her relationship with her child? Ever since the first chapter dedicated to her story, Cunningham describes her as particularly nervous, even afraid when it comes to being alone with Richie. Here are his words: “ with her husband present, she is nervous but less afraid. She knows how to act. Alone with Richie, she sometimes feels unmoored- he is so entirely, persuasively himself” (47). This last concept of “ persuasively being himself” is particularly interesting. Once again the choice of the adjective is extremely useful for the analysis. Richie is a child and this is what makes him spontaneous and natural; children do not have filters, nor prejudices or social conventions that stop them from being naively themselves, they do not pretend to be happy or sad, instead they simply follow what they feel. This freedom to be himself without hiding behind someone else’s mask is something Laura is not allowed to have and the way her son ‘waves’

it in front of her is such a persuasive temptation that it is difficult for her to stand his presence. It may be possible to say she feels an unconscious envy towards Richie as he constantly reminds her what it means to be free from etiquettes, social roles, people's judgments. But envy is not the only reason why she is not at ease with her son. Cunningham suggests other possible lectures as, referring to Richie, he writes: " [h]e seems, almost always, to be waiting to see what she will do next" (47). Laura is 'afraid' of her child because he seems to be the only one who is able to understand her unease. Every time they are alone she feels bared in front of him, as if he could, for some inexplicable reason, read her soul. One of the most significant scenes of the film in this respect is the one where she leaves Richie at a neighbor's house and drives to a hotel with the intention of killing herself. Even though he is certainly not aware of her plans, he looks upset at the idea of separating from her and he desperately chases her car around as if he sensed that that could be the last time ever he saw her. Later on in the scene, his initial sensation that the mother is going to abandon him seems to turn into a certainty. Through the use of the symbolic addition of his playing with the building blocks with which he first builds and then destroys a house, the director wants to place the emphasis on the child's intuitive approach towards her mother's problems. The demolition of the house is a metaphor that symbolizes the failure of the familiar and domestic idyll. Richie is aware of the fact that this episode will change his family forever and that he will no longer feel that sense of safety and belonging any child should be guaranteed to feel.

As I was stressing in the previous chapter, April as well has a complicated relationship with her children as she unconsciously sees them as the physical obstacle to her happiness. The main difference is that while Laura decides to 'ignore' Dan and shifts her frustrations to Richie, April manages to safeguard her sons and prefers to unload her unease on her husband Frank. I guess this different approach is also due to the fact that the three

children are very different from each other. If April's ones seem to possess the candidness and naivety typical of their age, Richie is described and represented as a special child because of his maturity and the extraordinary insightfulness he shows whenever he deals with his mother. His questions are never trivial and his look is always deep and careful. While April's children are not aware of their mother's depressive state of mind, Richie seems to be perfectly conscious of the fact that the time he is allowed to spend with his mom is somehow running by and that he will soon be left alone.

As we already know Richie's intuition is going to become a certainty as, by the end of their stories, both April and Laura will abandon their children. April will choose the most tragic way to leave her sorrows behind by killing herself while Laura will opt for an escape to Canada where she will totally forget about her family and start a new life. As I was analyzing the two finales I was particularly impressed by their choices as I expected Laura to make April's decision and vice versa.

Throughout the entire story there is not a single moment, not even in her darkest periods, where we see April talking or even thinking about the possibility to commit suicide. How could it be? The woman is a fighter. Her strong personality leads her to act instead of passively watch her life passing her by. Standing in the corner and crying her delusional, miserable life is unlikely of her. She is not afraid of the social conventions or the judgments of her suburban neighbors, she courageously protest against that world of fakeness she finds herself in. She faces her husband's cowardice with the sharpest weapon: the truth. While everybody around her is sucked by the vicious cycle of falsehood, she proudly carries the torch of the truth, she screams it as hard as she can, hoping someone will finally listen to her.

So why does a fighter like her make such a tragic decision? What is it that leads her to give up? I think April starts to waver the moment she finds out she is pregnant again. The

arrival of a small, vulnerable creature is about to shatter what is left of her hope into a thousand pieces she will not be able, not this time, to glue back together. The thought that her whole future, her whole happiness depend on a child who is not even born yet is unbearable to her. This baby to come represents another obstacle, maybe the most difficult to ride over as it comes to remind her that she will never be totally free to decide by herself what is the best for her. On the one hand, considering the level of depression and frustration she is submitted to, it would be very easy for her to put an end to her suffering through the suicide, it would be somehow comforting to know that she will never have to feel all that pain anymore. On the other hand, as I was stressing in the previous chapter there are two possible lectures of her death. Her attempt to cause herself an abortion can either be seen as an accident or as a final act of desperation. I personally think the first option is more in line with the analysis of the character I have developed until now. I mean, the tenacity with which April has been able to face all the problems she has run into, brought me to consider her final action as a way to show to herself and to the world that she could still be the master of her life. If she really wanted to commit suicide, she could have found thousands of other ways to kill herself. The decision of causing herself an abortion instead sounds more like the last, unlucky attempt to fight. Although the suicide option is supported by the logic of the frustrated mother and housewife who cannot bear the suburban vortex of void, boredom and desperation I do not think April would ever let it stop her from pursuing her dreams.

Unlike April, Laura is constantly haunted by the idea of death and suicide. She reads about them, she thinks of them, she contemplates them. She does not seem to be afraid of them, she rather puts herself in the position of analyzing those options in order to develop her personal observations. In the novel she does not seriously take the idea of suicide into account, she simply speculate on its existence like a poet or a philosopher would do. The hotel room chapter is perhaps the most meaningful example at this regard. As she spends a

few hours alone in that hotel reading the story of *Mrs Dalloway*, temporarily free from her oppressive role of mother and wife, she finds herself contemplating the possibility to die.

Here are her thoughts:

“It is possible to die. [...]. She could decide to die. [...]. It could, she thinks, be deeply comforting; it might feel so free: to simply go away. To say to them all, I couldn't manage, you had no idea; I didn't want to try anymore. There might, she thinks, be a dreadful beauty in it, like an ice field or a desert in the early morning. She could go, as it were, into that other landscape; she could leave them behind- her child, her husband and Kitty, her parents, everybody [...]”. (Cunningham, 151)

But the moment she tries to materialize that thought she realizes she is not ready to put it into effect and in order to shoo it as far as she can from her mind she says out loud: “ I would never”.

If she killed herself she would also metaphorically kill her husband and her son and the other child she is carrying in her womb, but above all she would be disrespectful towards her own life, that life she now barely tolerate but that ,nevertheless, she is not able to separate from as “she loves [it], loves it hopelessly” (Cunningham, 152). The film version of this scene is built in a more tragic way. The decision of the director to film Laura in the action of putting a considerable amount of pills in her bag before driving to the hotel, makes her intentions darker than in the novel. The woman is obviously about to kill herself. As she enters the room and sits on the bedroom, as she slowly takes her shoes off and gently strokes her belly, as she watches those pills, she toys with the idea of suicide, she somehow prepares herself for it. And then she falls asleep. And as she sleeps she dreams of dying, as the protagonist of *Mrs Dalloway* had thought to do, she dreams of drowning, as Virginia Woolf,

its author, had actually did. And as she finds herself in a hotel room of the 1950's California, Virginia Woolf is in her 1920's country house near London. The director builds a sequence of scenes alternating from 1920 to 1950, from London to Los Angeles and the moment Virginia decides she will not kill her heroine, Laura sharply wakes up saying: "I can't". For a moment it is as if Laura is Mrs Dalloway and Virginia at the same time. This decision to cross the lives of these women through the use of a fast alternation of sequences is perfectly in line with the structure of the novel which switches chapter after chapter from one woman to another in order to show how the three of them are fatally tied to each other.

So the decision is made; Laura, the woman who has been constantly haunted by the thought of suicide, who has been charmed by this tragic option her whole life, who has passively survived laying her mental balance on the line, will not die. On the contrary she will give birth to her second child and then she will run far away from her ordinary life into an unknown, exciting future where she would be finally free to find out who she really is.

If in the story of April we are not allowed to know how her children are going to grow up without their mother and whether this tragic event will influence their mental stability or not, in the case of Laura, Cunningham builds a story that starts in the 1950s with her being the absolute protagonist and ends in our days, with her son Richie (now Richard) being the co-protagonist of the story of another woman, Clarissa Vaughan, to whom he is tied by a special friendship. Richie, the extraordinary insightful child is now a grown up man. His intuitive mind brought him to become a writer who has recently won an important award. The reader is brought to realize that Richard is in fact Laura's little boy only in the second part of the chapters dedicated to Clarissa where it becomes clear that the complicated book he has written is overwhelmingly haunted by and built around the thought of his mother. As a little child, he felt a sort of morbid devotion towards her and he was never truly able to forgive her for her decision to leave him behind. This childish trauma, the obsession

for having failed to write a book “about everything” (Cunningham, 67), the stubborn certainty of having won the prize “for having AIDS and going nuts and being brave about it” (Cunningham, 63) the complicated relationship with Clarissa and the painful thought of his mother, bring him to commit suicide. It is in this sad occasion that Laura Brown, “the woman who tried to die and failed at it, the woman who fled her family” (Cunningham, 222) and Clarissa Vaughan meet. Both the novel and the film version are worth being analyzed as they are complementary. If it was possible to put them together we would have a clear idea of both Laura and Clarissa’s thoughts. If the novel centers more around the character of Clarissa, the film focuses more carefully on Laura’s feelings. It is possible to say that the director follows two fundamental processes: the implication of Clarissa’s thoughts and the clarification of Laura’s point of view. It is actually true to say that in the novel the conversation between the two women is made of long silences that Clarissa fills with her personal consideration, silences in which she tries to figure out who Laura really is. Despite her physical absence in Richard’s life, Laura has always been there, in his life, in his mind, in his poetry, and Clarissa, who has loved Richard in all the possible ways a woman can love a man, who has been there for him in his darkest and happiest moments, who has heard and read about this mysterious woman who was able to abandon her son without ever looking back, finally finds herself in front of her. And as she looks at her, as she tries to decipher her mind, she think to herself: “ [h]ere she is [...]; here is the woman from Richard’s poetry. Here is the lost mother, the thwarted suicide; here is the woman who walked away” (Cunningham, 221). Laura Brown, “the lost mother”, the woman who has been “the ghost and the goddess” (Cunningham, 221) in Richard’s life is right there, alive. She is “alive when all the others, all those who struggled to survive in her wake, have passed away. She is alive now after her ex-husband has been carried off by liver cancer, after her daughter has

been killed by a drunk driver. She is alive after Richard has jumped from a window onto a bed of broken glass” (Cunningham, 222).

As I was stressing before, the film version is basically built around Laura. It is possible to say it gives her the chance to explain to Clarissa, to the audience, to herself as well the reason why she walked away. The director seems to let Laura give an answer to all the questions Clarissa thinks to herself in the novel. Here is their conversation:

Laura: He had me die in the novel. I know why he did that. It hurt of course. I can't pretend it didn't hurt but I... I know why he did it

Clarissa: You left Richard when he was a child

Laura: I left both my children. I abandoned them. They say it's the worst thing a mother can do. You have a daughter.

Clarissa: Yes...but I never met Julia's father.

Laura: You so wanted a child

Clarissa: That's right

Laura: You're a lucky woman. There are times when you don't belong and you think you're going to kill yourself. [...]. It would be wonderful to say you regretted it. It would be easy. But what does it mean? What does it mean to regret when you have no choice? It's what you can bear. There it is. No one's going to forgive me. It was death, I chose life.

The dialogue could not be more eloquent. The acting could not be more moving. This is the moment where Laura lets all her walls fall down, the moment where the audience is finally allowed to know the secret truth of the scandalous mother; the “monster”; the woman who had damaged her family by bringing it to a tragic end; the woman who survived them all.

The way she speaks, the look upon her face as she lays her soul bare with Clarissa, who is a stranger to her but with whom she also feels connected, because of Richard, is

disarming. She does not seem to be afraid to tell the truth, she does not try to hide behind a series of explanations, she does not try to defend herself from people's accusations, on the contrary she courageously admits she abandoned her children. She tells the truth because the day she left the suburbs in search of a new life, she promised herself she would never betray her feelings the way she did before. She is perfectly aware of the fact that there is nothing worse, nothing crueler than a mother who abandons her children. She knows it, and yet she cannot say she regrets it because "what does it mean to regret when you have no choice?". This last question seems to leave no space to the imagination; even if the "world" expects her to feel guilty for her heartless decision to leave her family behind, even if admitting her guilt would mean being absolved from her sins, she intends to be honest. Her look is peaceful as she confesses, with an extraordinary simplicity, that the moment she realized that living in the suburbs was about to kill her, she chose life.

Laura is not the only one in the novel that finds herself in front of a crossroads, the whole story is actually built around the dichotomy of life and death. Laura, Virginia, Richard, they all find themselves somehow caught between those two extremes. Although they will make different decisions the three of them seem to agree about one thing: it is better to die than to live a life you did not choose to live. It is better to die than to survive. As far as Laura is concerned, living in the suburbs would mean surviving with difficulty; pretending to feel comfortable in her role of mother and wife would mean betraying herself; the quietness of the suburban environment would trigger her internal chaos and her agony instead of appeasing them. Virginia, forced by her husband to live in the suburbs of London, feels the same anguish, the same sense of unbeing, the same unbearable rejection of the tranquility of that place as she declares: " I choose not the suffocating anesthetic of the suburbs but the violent jilt of the capital, that is my choice. [...]. I wish, for your sake

Leonard, I could be happy in this quietness but if it is a choice between Richmond and death, I choose death”.

What Virginia means to say, is that the suburban environment anesthetizes you to the point of depriving you of any true emotion; you do not live there, you simply exist. In that disarming quietness you simply stop fighting; nothing worries you, nothing matters to you, you live because you keep breathing but everything inside of you tells you you are not breathing, you are only suffocating.

Chapter 4

4.1 The Cybo-feminine mystique in *The Stepford Wives*

With *The Stepford Wives* (1972) we leave the 1950's suburban world to explore a new, modern (but it would be more appropriate to say dystopian) idea of the suburbs and of the role women must play there. Considering its date of publication, it would be impossible to analyze the novel and its 2004 film version without mentioning the birth of Second Wave feminism in the 1960s. Ten years after the end of World War Two the condition of women showed no significant changing, they were still largely considered the angels of the house and their entrance in the world of job was still denied and pushed in a corner by the dominant presence of men. Despite the fact that they still found themselves asking the same questions that had haunted their mothers a decade before, what is new now is their awareness of the problem and their different approach towards a possible solution. In the 1920s women had asked for equality in legal issues and for this reason they had fought for things like women's suffrage, somehow deceiving themselves that through that important achievement they would manage to be considered equal to men. In the 1960s their demand would be centered more on a broader concept of equality that would include social issues, like putting a stop to workplace and salary inequality, but also political and public ones. In the 1960s, women would fight for the freedom to discover their talents and putting them into practice, they would fight for the freedom to be women before being mothers and wives.

The Stepford Wives is a 1972 novel written by Ira Levin. It was transposed into a film twice: in 1975 and in 2004. The first version is more faithful to the original suspense structure of the novel and maintains its scary nature while the recent remake (which I will analyze later on in the chapter) seems to rely more on the hidden humor of the story. The original plot is built around the character of Joanna Eberhart, a young mother who moves

from New York City with her husband and her children in the idyllic Stepford, a suburban town in Connecticut. As soon as she gets there she notices something very bizarre about the wives of Stepford: they all look quintessentially feminine. As the traditional mystique suggests, they are blonde and beautiful, their bodies are perfect, their smiles are beaming, their houses always clean and tidy, they can cook delicious dishes and they seem to be so overwhelmingly subjected to their husbands. While all around America women fight for their equality and strive to be admitted to the workplace, the Stepford wives could not be happier to spend their lives among washing machines and kitchens. As America is subjected to the tensions of the Cold War and the entire world is hanging by a thread, the wives of Stepford seem to be concerned only about their domestic issues. The only topics of conversation they are interested in are how to decorate the house for Christmas or how to prepare the perfect meal. Joanna who is an intelligent woman, full of talents and ambitions, suspects there is something wrong with them and become convinced that they have been brainwashed into submission by their husbands during their meetings at the men's club. As she investigates in these women's past with the help of her friend Bobbie, a successful writer who is the right opposite of those perfect housewives, she finds out that the majority of them were once feminist activists and that they used to perform important professional roles. She also discovers that the leader of the men's club is a Disney engineer and that many husbands of Stepford are scientists and experts of technological tools who know how to create a robot. When Bobbie, the lively, messy Bobbie is transformed into another of the thousand copies of docile housewives of Stepford, Joanna is left alone and realizes the only thing she can do is ran away. The final scene sees Joanna having a direct discussion with the members of the men's club where she accuses them of killing their wives in order to create a robot version of them that they can totally control and submit. Despite her attempt to rebel against the illegal

and malevolent plan of the husbands, the tragic epilogue informs the reader that Joanna has become another of the all alike, perfect, beautiful, smiling Stepford wives.

Unlike the previous stories of Laura Brown and April Wheeler where the core of the drama was the sense of frustration and imprisonment these women felt as they were forced, not only to live in the suburbs but also to give up their personal and professional ambitions to become perfect wives and mothers, *The Stepford Wives* is built around a female character who has chosen to move in a suburban town of her own free will. Joanna is not unhappy and desperate, she does not dream about a romantic escape to Paris and she certainly does not spend her time speculating on the possibility to die or commit suicide. She has her family and her passion for the photography, which she would like to turn into a career; she can call herself a satisfied woman even if she is a housewife. Her life is not a huge drama; she enjoys it. If up until now the focus has been on investigating the condition of two frustrated suburban housewives in order to show how the suburban environment could suck a woman's lifeblood to the point of making her feel like a nothing, with Joanna we will explore totally different shores. The suburbs, although important, remain in the background. What is investigated is rather the way Joanna tries to defend her own independence and fails at it. The way in which she takes position against the men's club and her attempt to create a women's group of discussion where she could "wake [the wives] to the more active role they could play in the town's life" (Levin,22) make her a feminist activist. Unfortunately the problem with her group is that none of the wives who are invited in is still interested in the feminist movement. None of them is aware of its existence either. When Joanna and Bobbie decide to go from house to house to ask them if they would like to participate to the get together, they receive the same answers again and again. Some of the wives say things like: "[t]hat doesn't sound like the sort of thing that would interest me" (Levin, 23) or "I'm sorry but I just don't have much time for that sort of thing" (Levin, 23) and again "I honestly don't

think I'd be interested in that" (Levin, 24) or "[n]o I don't think I'd have time for anything like that. There's so much to do around the house. You know" (Levin,25). Incredulous up against the total apathy of the wives towards the issue of their liberation, Joanna has an interesting conversation with Carol Van Sant where she asks her:

Joanna: Doesn't it bother you that the central organization here in Stepford, the only organization that does anything significant as far as community projects are concerned, is off limits to women? Doesn't that seem a little archaic to you?

Carol: Ar-kay-ic?

Joanna: Out of date, old-fashioned.

Carol: No, it doesn't seem archaic to me. [...].Ted's better equipped for that sort of thing than I am. [...]. And men need a place where they can relax and have a drink or two.

Joanna: Don't women?

Carol: No, not as much.

The same woman that not so many years before had been the officer in the Stepford women's club, the same woman that together with the other wives had fought against the "feminine mystique" and that had been addressed and applauded by Betty Friedan in person, has now turned into a dutiful housewife who no longer has the time and the interest to think about women's rights.

This sudden change of priority is due to the husbands' horrific plan to program these women's minds (or would it be more appropriate to say their software?) so that they lose any kind of awareness: of themselves, of their rights and needs, of the world around them. It is no longer possible to ask them what their plans for the future are and if they have any as

they would probably answer by saying: “[w]e don’t like to be asked what we want to do. None of us know. None of us even like to think about it” (Friedan, 52). The loss of cohesion towards anything that does not concern the domestic sphere and the care of their physical aspect (which is most likely done to please their husbands than themselves) is also responsible for the loss of any kind of ‘sentimental awareness’. In other words, by programming women to be submissive, men also deprived them of their emotional sphere. As Susanna Paasonen underlines, “ [s]ince the women have limited vocabularies, they never argue and express their sentiments mainly by quoting commercials” (37). The limited range of terms the wives of Stepford are allowed to say and of topics they are allowed to be interested in, has been carefully selected by their men so that they could no longer complain or manifest an opinion which was not in line with the ‘Stepford mentality’. The loss of the emotional sphere is actually a distinctive sign of robots; you can program them to do whatever you want, you can make them look like the exact copy of a human, you can even make them say anything you want to hear but you can never program them to have feelings. You can have them repeat things like “I love you” or “I hate you” but the tone of their voices, the look upon their faces as they say it is going to be always the same. To love, to hate, to be happy, upset, confused, tired, excited, are just names to them, empty names which mean nothing and that they keep repeating automatically. In the 2004 film version starring Nicole Kidman as Joanna, during the final confrontation in the men’s club there is a meaningful cross talk between the woman and her husband where she raises the issue of the emotions by asking:

Joanna: Let me ask you something, these machines, these Stepford wives, can
they say “ I love you?”

Walter: Mike?

Mike: Of course. Fifty-eight languages.

Joanna: But do they mean it?

The question is given no answer, but after all it is unnecessary, of course they do not mean it. Nothing of what these robots possess is real, neither their feelings, nor their intelligence. Their minds and so their ideas, their personal culture and their knowledge have been replaced by a software which gives them the possibility to both talk and think but only within a limited set of topics. Everything that goes beyond those topics is not admitted and is immediately recognized as a virus or as an operation temporarily impossible to accomplish because in order to be absorbed by the software it needs the installation of a specific program.

The selection of the topics and the vocabulary the wives are allowed to know is followed by another important element: the selection of their physical appearance. The husbands create a robot version of their wives that could satisfy them under every point of view. A woman must be submissive, so that she will always accept her husband's decisions and she will gladly keep to it, she must be devoted to the domestic environment so that men could 'dominate' the outside world with no interference, she must be attractive and sexy so that she can sexually satisfy her man. Betty Friedan underlines how by the end of the fifties, "across America, three out of every ten women dyed their hair blonde. They ate a chalk called Metrecal, instead of food, to shrink the size of the thin young models" (7). The robot wives are designed exactly on this model; they are blonde and thin, they always wear elegant and feminine dresses and above all they can make good sex. In the 2004 film version there is a meaningful scene in this regard where we see Joanna, Bobbie and their gay friend Roger sneaking in the house of the Sundersons to find out the couple is having sex. Once they are back home, Joanna comments by saying: "she's having incredible sex in the middle of the day". With the astonishment of her exclamation Joanna means to say that the sexual activity

of a normal married couple is more likely to be done by the end of the day and it is not always going to be incredible because of many different factors like stress, tiredness or professional worries. On the contrary these Stepford wives are able to satisfy their husbands whenever they ask for it: they basically have the same function of a blown-up doll. Despite the incredible sexual activity registered in the imaginary Stepford, the real couples seem to be living a total different situation. As Friedan underlines, many doctors in those years noticed “evidence of new sexual problems between men and wife- sexual hunger in wives so great their husbands cannot satisfy it” (18). After having spent another day alone at home asking themselves who they really were, the wives were only waiting for their husbands to come home and make them feel like real women. Their arrival actually meant the possibility to talk with someone who was not a three-year old child. Unfortunately the problem with the husbands was that they were too tired, not only to keep up a good sex activity but also to discuss anything, and preferred to spend the night watching the television or reading the newspaper. Day after day, this led women to feel increasingly more useless and empty.

Stepping back to the idyllic Stepford, there is another important aspect that is worth analyzing, also considering its direct connection with sex: the theme of motherhood. The first question that may rise spontaneously is: how could these robot wives conceive a child? They cannot of course. The husbands wait for them to be pregnant, and then, after the delivery they kill them and create their robot version. They basically use their women as a sort of human incubator and then they eliminate them and design a better version of them. What about their children? Does this bother them? Do they notice it? Considering the apparent indifference of the children towards the different attitude, physical appearance and behavior of their mothers, Susanna Paasonen develops an interesting theory as far as the theme of motherhood and the mother-son relationship are concerned. She defines the “representation of the maternal in *The Stepford Wives*” [...] as evasive, cynical or both”

(40). The lack of attention towards the radical transformation of their mothers “implies that the mother is primarily instrumental not only to her husband but also to her children” (40). As Paasonen notices, after the transformation of Bobbie, one of her son gladly declares: “[s]he doesn’t shout any more, she makes hot breakfasts. [...]. I hope it lasts” (Levin, 103). The intuitive approach that Richie had towards his mother Laura is here replaced by a substantial apathy. The mom is almost seen like a slave: her task is not that of scolding her children, or teaching them something, but rather of cooking, cleaning and ironing for them.

In light of the observations developed until now, there is one thing that emerges clearly: the technology is used to implement what could be defined as a jump into the past. As the science and the high-tech world make great strides towards a brilliant future, these Stepford husbands use them to step back to a old-fashioned, unfair reality. Since men “see women ideally as obedient passive servants with a passion for homemaking and no interest beyond” (Paasonen, 40) and women “are unwilling to comply with these ideals” (Paasonen, 40), technology becomes the magic solution to the problem. The threat of the emancipated, intelligent, independent woman who is now able to compete within the workplace is too dangerous to be ignored, the possibility to be deposed by their everlasting role of heads of the professional world is too likely to be bypassed, the need for a permanent solution is so imperative that it requires a drastic change. As Paasonen stresses: “[i]n *The Stepford Wives*, high tech is used as a tool for backlash, for “restoring” the idealized power relations of the nineteenth-century bourgeois family [...] as the wives are turned into proud “angels of the house”, the threat of feminism is solved for good” (41).⁷

⁷ But this return to the past through the restoration of the power of men over women is achieved in a way which goes beyond men’s competences. In the 2004 film version Mike Wellington declares: “while you were trying to become men, we decided to become gods”. The whole idea of ‘defying’ God by trying to reach its level of power is not new in the history of literature. If we think about Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or the myth of Prometheus, the comparison is easy to find. As Doctor Frankenstein, who created a creature out of pieces of corpses, and Prometheus, who stole the fire against the willingness of Zeus, the Stepford husbands

The 2004 film version, which was directed by Frank Oz from a screenplay by Paul Rudnick and starred Nicole Kidman, Christopher Walken and Glenn Close, is built in a completely different way as the entire meaning of the story is reconsidered. There are three main differences as far as the plot and the general tone of the story are concerned: the evil plan of turning women into robots is not devised by the head of the men's club but by his wife, the relationship between husband and wife (and between Joanna and Walter in particular) is better explored and does not preserve the original "dystopian view of marital love" (Paasonen, 42) and the finale is turned from a tragic hopeless dystopia of the suburban world into a happy ending. Joanna herself is described in a slightly different way. Although she maintains the main features of her personality as for example a strong sense of independence, vitality and intelligence, she is not a housewife but a successful reality television executive producer. In other words she is the embodiment of the emancipated woman who has reached power and success because of her strong professional abilities. Right from the first scene of the film the director and screenwriter play with the idea of women's emancipation and feminist activism. They actually create a version of Joanna who could be considered a sort of caricature of the original one. Not only is she a successful woman but also a reality producer who is the responsible for the invention of a rather bizarre show called "I can do better" where married couples have the chance to spend some time with some singles and test their devotion towards their partner: if by the end of the show one of the two declares he or she "can do better" it will mean they will have chosen to break up with the partner to stay with one of the singles. Of course the story that she shows in front of a whole public in occasion of her award ceremony is that of a woman who, after having spent some

do something that goes beyond their human power as they create this robot wives. Wellington justifies himself for the crazy plan by blaming the women and their desire to "become men", or in other words to become equal to men. Unable to bear the equality, men had no chance apart from trying to turn themselves into gods.

time with a muscular single decides “she can do better”. The husband is so desperate that he shoots Joanna (without hitting her) in front of millions of TV viewers. The feminist trace of Joanna seems to be taken to the extreme, so much so that it almost becomes hilarious. As she is a successful woman, the decision to move to the suburbs is not spontaneous but is imposed on her by her husband after the nervous breakdown she has because of the shooting.

As she arrives in Stepford she finds the same scenario of the novel: an idyllic place where the husbands seem to do nothing apart from meeting at the men’s club and the wives are all concerned about cleaning the house and taking care of their men. There is an interesting dialogue between Joanna and Claire Wellington (Carol Van Sant in the novel) where the latter refers to Stepford as Connecticut family’s paradise as it has “no crime, no poverty, no pushing”. Later on in the film while the town is about to celebrate the fourth of July, Bobbie makes an interesting comment as she says: “[a]m I the only one who finds all of this more than a little disturbing? We are celebrating our nation’s birthday but there are almost no African-Americans, no native Americans, no Asian Americans”. Both Claire and Bobbie’s comments make one thing clear: Stepford is not a place for everyone. Its welcoming façade is in fact a covering and if we overlook for a second the fact that the story is a sci-fi, fantasy dystopia of the suburban environment it becomes quite easy to notice how the mentality of its citizens is in line with the real suburban mentality. History tells us that none of the above mentioned races were accepted in the suburbs as they were almost entirely populated by white families who belonged to the middle class. Poverty and race were two important factors as far as the exclusion from the suburbs was concerned. The fact that Bobbie underlines how the celebration of the fourth of July should be shared with the entire range of different races that belong to the American nation is fundamental to show how the majority of the white American population celebrated that day without respecting its meaning and without holding its “self-evident truth that all men are created equal”. The citizens of

Stepford know the meaning of the word “equality” but they intend it more as a synonym for “homogeneity” and “conformity”: those who possess the right features to be part of the town, and for this reason are more likely to follow its rules, are gladly accepted while those “outsiders”, those “rebels” who neither possess the qualification nor the willingness to submit to an absurd set of customs, are either invited to leave or more likely transformed into better versions of themselves. This is not just the case of the wives, but also of gays. Joanna and Bobbie’s friend is a gay architect. His feminine attitude, his extravagant way of talking, moving and above all dressing cannot be admitted in Stepford so he is subjected to the same kind of ‘technological treatment’ dedicated to the wives. He is not modified because he is gay, it is rather his useless (as far as the husbands of Stepford are concerned) attempt to display it to the world that must be eliminated. It is enough to put a micro chip in his mind and the old, womanish man who used to wear flowered shirts becomes a model for elegance and sobriety who says things like: “ now I know that being gay doesn’t mean a guy has to be effeminate or flamboyant or sensitive”. This sentence is followed by the excited screams of the citizens of Stepford who proudly repeat: “you can’t stop Stepford”. More than an expression of civic pride, the refrain sounds like a threat: whoever tries to set himself against Stepford is only waisting his time and is going to pay sinister consequences for it.

Going back to the micro chips, there is another important difference between the novel and the film, a difference that will become fundamental for the finale of the story. If in the novel the horrific plan of the husbands leaves no room for a possible way out from technology, as they kill their wives and create a non-human version of them, in the film the decision is not so drastic. It is true the wives are subjected through the use of high-technology but they are not killed, on the contrary their minds are controlled by a micro chip which ‘temporarily’ turns them into robot. These micro chips are directly connected with a radio-control and each radio-control has a name engraved on it. The scene I discussed above,

where Joanna, Bobbie and Roger sneak into the house of the Sundersons and find out they are having “incredible sex in the middle of the day”, to quote Joanna, is also interesting as far as the matter of radio-controls is concerned. The moment where Sarah Sunderson goes downstairs to get something to eat for her husband, Roger finds out by chance a radio-control with her name engraved on it. The sight of that odd tool puzzles the three friends, who by this point of the story do not suspect the possible involvement of technology in the bizarre attitude of the wives. As they speculate on its utility they push some of the buttons one after the other without knowing their functions and Sarah starts to move like a robot, according to the order. She takes one step up and then one step down, she stops and then she moves again but Joanna and her friends are too amused by the radio-control to notice her. This is the first scene where the audience is allowed to be aware of the creepy truth. There is actually another significant scene that precedes this one where Joanna starts to be suspicious about the wives of Stepford. On the occasion of the celebration of the fourth of July, during a dancing party that involves the entire town, Sarah Sunderson is the protagonist of a rather curious episode: something in her micro chip stops working and she starts to repeat nonsense sounds the way an electronic tool does when it is broken or temporally damaged. Joanna opportunely intervenes by suggesting to call a doctor that could take care of the woman but Mike Wellington, the chief of the men’s club, proposes instead to bring her to his hummer and tries to reassure a rather restless Joanna by saying it is just a problem of dehydration. The episode still does not convince Joanna who is determined to investigate the issue more carefully but her husband scolds her by accusing her of being bad-tempered and rude towards a group of people who so generously and warmly admitted their family into the community.

After the discussion with her husband, Joanna decides it is worth saving her marriage and the first step to take in order to do it, is to become a good housewife, so she gives up her black clothes and opts for a colorful set of dresses and she tries to accomplish all the tasks she

is required to do. The film puts the accent on the relationship between Joanna and Walter, it analyzes it more deeply and gives it a completely different connotation compared with the novel. The general impression that the reader is left with as he approaches the novel is that of a total dystopian view of both the women and the couple life. The submission of the women, as well as the ‘madness’ of the men are pushed to the extreme so much so that “the threat of technology [...] lies less in the machines, the fembots, than it does in the designers, developers, and the aggressive male homosocial networks behind them” (Paasonen, 44). The inappropriate use of technology brings these husbands to take a fundamental, modern instrument of progress and turn it into a dystopian hell-like return to the past. On the contrary, as Paasonen underlines, although the film explores both the issue of technology and of marriage, it definitely leaves behind the dystopian climax of the story. If in the novel Walter is just another of the insensible, cruel, mad husbands of Stepford who become so fascinated by the idea of living with a subdued robot that they are even willing to kill their wives, in the film the character is given a chance to prove he is a good man. There are many scenes in which we see his wife and him spending some quality time, talking about their relationship and trying to find a compromise in their marriage. At the beginning of the film, when Joanna is fired, he decides to quit his job as a lawyer for the same channel in which she works to show her both his professional and personal support. Considering the total different tone of the finale, Walter had to be represented as a loving and caring husband. His contribution will be fundamental to save all the wives of Stepford. During the final confrontation between Joanna and the husbands at the men’s club, the audience is led to think that Walter has agreed to transform his wife into a Stepford wife. The couple has an intense dialogue where Walter expresses how hard it is for him to always have to compete with Joanna. Here is the dialogue:

Walter: Ever since we met, you've beaten me at everything. You're better educated. You're stronger. You're faster. You're a better dancer, a better tennis player. You've always learned at least six figures more than I could ever dream of. You're a better speaker, a better executive. You even better at sex. Don't deny it.

Joanna: I wasn't going to.

Walter: Well, don't I get anything?

Joanna: You got me.

Walter: No, I got to hold your purse.[...]. I got to work for you.

Joanna: With me.

Walter: Under you.

Living with a wife who is better than him from every point of view is very frustrating for Walter; and for the other husbands as well, considering the fact that they all married career women and then, unable to bear the competition, they decided to turn them into submissive domestic robots. Where Joanna sees the collaboration, Walter sees that subordination. A subordination which is, so to speak, against nature, considering the fact that ever since the civil world exists (and maybe even before) women have always been submitted to me and not vice versa. The image that shines through is that of a whole crowd of weak, feeble men who prefer to stay with doll-like women "who never challenge [them] in any way", to quote Joanna, instead of going with intelligent, brilliant women with whom there could be an equal exchange of opinions and knowledge.

The dialogue is followed by a rather resigned Joanna who seems to accept her husband's decision to turn her into a Stepford robot. The last scene at the men's club sees Joanna and Walter on a moving platform that slowly lowers them into the laboratory where

Joanna will be subjected to the transformation. The scene that comes right after, that of the supermarket, is perhaps the most famous one. It is present both in the novel and the film but it as a completely different function. In the novel Levin inserts it in the epilogue in order to show how Joanna was not able to survive the meeting at the men's club. The scene is basically built around a dialogue between Joanna and Ruthanne, a new arrived in town. Ruthanne notices how the old Joanna who used to wear black clothes is now "looking terrific in a tightly belted pale blue coat. [...]. [With] her dark hair gleaming in a graceful drawn-back wings" (Levin, 136). What is interesting about the cross-talk are that the things Joanna says, as for example: " I'm sorry I haven't called you. [...]. I meant to, but there's been so much to do around the house, you know" (Levin, 137). This sentence is not new in the story, the reader has read it again and again as he followed Joanna and Bobbie in their "crazy" plan to create a group for women. Every single housewife of Stepford has been programmed to say it, from Sarah Sunderson to Carol Van Sant, from Joanna to Bobbie.

In the film the scene is built in a completely different way, there is no dialogue and all the wives of Stepford are present. The women are filmed in the action of doing the shopping, they all have their perfect make up on and they are dressed in their pastel elegant clothes. They slowly, almost mechanically walk through the departments of the supermarket with their smiles always printed on their mouths and their shopping cart full of foodstuffs. The song played in the background, as well as the use of the lights, become the absolute protagonist of the scene. The combination of the harmonic sound of the music with the bright, clear, almost celestial lights is fundamental to intensify the atmosphere of quietness and happiness that the scene wants to convey, in order to make the entire town of Stepford look like a heaven on earth. It is also very interesting to notice how the music changes and become almost triumphant the moment Joanna appears on the scene. For a second the scene is left empty to prepare to audience for the great entrance of the protagonist who, from what

they know, has been turned into a Stepford wife, and then she appears. Her short, dark, messy hair has been replaced by long, well-combed, blonde hair; her makeup is flawless, her smile is bright and enchanting, her walk is as mechanic and measured as that of the other “robots” around her.

What makes the scene work is the double meaning it holds. The contrast between the general sense of harmony and quietness spread by the music, the light and the sweet smile of the wives and the mechanical way in which they move is so palpable that it almost becomes creepy. The audience is therefore given a confirmation of the fact that there is a hidden hell-like nightmare behind the heaven façade of Stepford.

On the contrary what the audience is not yet allowed to know is the surprising finale of the film. Unbeknown to everybody, moved by the courageous speech of his wife at the men’s club, Walter decides not to transform her. His experience at the club gave him the chance to become aware of the whole set of technological processes the husbands accomplished on their wives and as a consequence he now knows how to stop them. The plan is that of fooling everybody with the story of the transformation of Joanna (which is of course fake) and then to act against the men’s club during a party given right in honor of themselves. While Joanna distracts Mike, Walter deactivates the whole system of micro chips. The wives of Stepford, and Roger as well, are eventually free.

But the surprising effect of the finale is not yet finished as the entire town of Stepford becomes aware of a shocking piece of news: the architect of the whole conspiracy is not Mike, who is not himself a human but a robot, but his wife Claire. The woman, a genius in technological issues, has killed her husband after having found him in bed with her young assistant, and created a better version of him that she programmed so that he would become the master of the entire horrific plan while she could educate the wives to “revive a nostalgic

family fantasy of nuclear harmony” (Paasonen, 42). The reasons why she did it are perfectly listed by Claire herself as she declares to Joanna:

Claire: All I wanted was a better world. A world where men were men and women were cherished and lovely. A world of romance and beauty, of tuxedos and chiffon, a perfect world.

Joanna: But you were married to a robot.

Claire: The perfect man. And all I wanted was to make you, all of you...into perfect women.

Joanna: We don't need to be perfect. How could you do it to us?

Claire: Because I was just like you. Overstressed, overbooked, under-loved. I was the world's foremost brain surgeon and genetic engineer. I had top-secret contracts with the Pentagon, Apple and Mattel. I was driven. Exhausted.

The ‘invention’ of a perfect place where “men were men and women were cherished and lovely” is therefore the result of the fragile mind of a woman who has fought for her career, has worked hard to get her professional position and then has been cheated by her husband because her concern for her job was out of proportion compared with that for him.

The choice to overturn the original situation, which saw the husbands as the diabolic villains, by electing a woman as the only responsible for the shocking plan, totally changes the meaning of the story. As Paasonen underlines: “ the film makes use of the grotesque fantasy of female robots acting like 1950s domestic angels, but it cannot accommodate the dystopian climax of the original story” (42). A dystopian climax which, in the novel, includes both the bizarre conception the husbands have of their wives and of their marital situation and that, in the remake, cannot find any place. The cruel husband who by the end of the novel is willing to kill his Joanna in order to turn her into an emotionless robot, is turned into the

ultimate hero who goes against the Stepford system and fights for his wife and for all the other wives of that suburban creepy town. As the micro chips are cancelled and Claire and Mike are dead, the women can go back to their careers. What about their husbands? The last scene sees them doing the shopping at the supermarket.

As Passonen notices: “[i]n its emphasis of power feminism and retroparody, the remake is definitely a product of the early 2000s and its gender discourses that [...] depict feminism as something that ‘happened’ some decades ago” (42).

If we stick to the original story of *The Stepford Wives* there is therefore one thing that emerges from the analysis of the three novels: the suburb is not an idyllic paradise where couples can live “happily ever after”. On the contrary it is often a place where isolation, lack of communication, indifference and lies cause the splitting of the marriage and the depression of the woman who feels trapped in a role she no longer perceives as hers.

Conclusions

One of the main elements that emerge from the above analysis is that suburbia is the perfect place to hide things. April and Frank Wheeler keep lying to each other about their feelings towards the life they are leading, Laura pretends she loves her life but secretly thinks about death and suicide and the husbands of *Stepford* choose a small suburban town in Connecticut as the place to keep their huge, criminal secret. Directly connected with the idea of the suburbs being a sort of hiding place, is the issue of identity. In the suburban stories analyzed above, covering the truth or simply overlooking pieces of it is equivalent to find shelter, in the case of Frank, or being forced to find it, in the case of April and Laura, behind the mask of social respectability and homologation and as a consequence behind a fake identity already established by society in order to fit a certain model and be admitted in a certain environment.

If this was true in the 1950s' universe, what about modern representations of the suburbs? What are we supposed to find as we approach the contemporary suburban space? A good example to take could be that of *Desperate Housewives*, a TV show broadcast from 2004 to 2012 that not only is set in contemporary suburbs but is also built around the lives of four women who are indeed housewives. Although the achievements of women as far as their emancipation is concerned have reached a satisfactory level of equality with men and as a consequence these women, apart from Lynette, have spontaneously chosen to dedicate themselves to the family, there are certain things that have remained exactly the same. The suburban town where these women live is once again the perfect place to hide a secret and together with it to hide an identity. The apparent calm of the neighborhood is in fact a covering for the thick web of mysteries and intrigues. The show actually opens with the big mystery behind the suicide of Mary Alice Young, a loving mother and caring wife who kills

herself on a ordinary morning of an ordinary day after having accomplished her usual domestic tasks.

That of Mary Alice is just one of the many secrets the town is destined to keep. The relationship between Gaby, Lynette, Bree and Susan, although based on a sincere friendship, is itself full of unspoken words and secrets as if to suggest the idea that it is never possible to totally be yourself in the suburbs, not even when you relate with your closest friends. The safeguarding of the façade, especially as far as the character of Bree is concerned, is still considered very important and it is because of it that there are things that cannot be said, things that must be kept hidden. It is not surprising then that by the finale of the last season the four women decide to leave the suburbs to start a new life somewhere else. It is not even surprising that their choice of the place to live in falls on the city.

This last consideration opens the road to another important issue connected with the suburbs, an issue that was not examined deeply in the dissertation but that represents an interesting topic of debate: the relationship between “Suburb” and “City” and their influence on women. Following the line of modern TV shows, if on the one hand *Desperate Housewives* is representative for the relationship between women and the suburbs, *Sex and the City*, broadcasted from 1998 to 2004 and set in New York City, could easily be identified as representative of the relationship between women and the city. In this case as well we enter the lives of four feminine protagonists called Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte. Although they are daughters of the same historical period of their suburban counterparts, they seem to come from a totally different universe. If the suburb is identified as a place of intrigues and lies, where certain things are considered taboos and it is often necessary if not imperative to hide the truth, the city is on the contrary a place of freedom for a woman. Walking through its streets, she does not have to pretend to be perfect, or happy or devoted to her family. All of the girls of *Sex and the City* are independent women, from Miranda, the

career lawyer, to Charlotte, the romantic dreamer who wishes to find the perfect man and have a family. The city keeps no secrets because there is no reason to have them; there is space for everything and everyone. That is also why the four friends always speak openly with each other, because they are not afraid of being politically incorrect. The different management of the friendship between the two groups of girls is underlined by Gymnich as he writes: “Unlike the female protagonists of *Sex*, the woman in Wisteria lane do not tell each other everything; instead they hide private matters from each other, conceal their ulterior motives and sometimes lie” (94).

The open attitude of the city towards its heterogeneous citizens makes it easy, especially for Carrie, to establish a sort of ‘sentimental relationship’⁸ with it, which is destined to last forever. New York never disappoints her as it is there whenever she feels lonely, excited, happy, confused, upset. No matter her inner chaos, she looks at the busy streets of the city and she feels like she is home. For this reason, every single episode of the show is somehow connected with the city: finding an apartment in New York, finding love, sex and friendship in New York, finding labels in New York. The protagonist’s feelings mirror themselves in the city, which becomes a loyal ally; no matter how ruthless and cynical its citizens could be, New York is always there to remind Carrie there is no better place in the world to be herself.

⁸In his famous film *Manhattan*, Woody Allen establishes a similar kind of relationship with the city. The opening scene is totally based on a monologue where the protagonist, talking in third person, sings the praises of the city and stresses his unconditional love for it. Sentences like “he adored New York City. He idolised it all out of proportion”, or “he thrived on the hustle, bustle of the crowds and the traffic” or “to him, it was a metaphor for the decay of contemporary culture”, are all synonyms for energy. The city is a place that never stops. As you live in it you have the impression of constantly moving, changing, evolving. The city, with its incentives and its distractions is the perfect place to loose and find oneself. Its dynamism is what makes love, hate, and all the other feelings real, because it gives them such a powerful energy that they become overwhelming.

Nothing of what has been written about *Sex and the City* happens in *Desperate Housewives*. The suburban environment seems to inspire only feelings of envy and prejudice. There is no complicity between the environment and the four protagonists who live there. Carrie and her friends could never live away from New York City because that place represents their freedom, their possibility, their home, their life. On the contrary the girls of Wisteria lane finds it very easy to leave their suburban town and ,as they are doing it, the voice over let the audience know the four friends will never see each other again even though they promised they would. This consideration could be commented by saying true friendships are only possible in the city but I do not think the purpose of *Desperate Housewives* was this. What the girls shared was real friendship but after having spent years worrying about someone else's mysteries, after having focused their lives on someone else's problems and secrets, the time had come for them to concentrate on themselves. As soon as they leave the suburbs they sort of take the lead on their lives and eventually become who they want to be.

Compared with the city or not, the effect of the suburb in the life of a woman seems to always be that of stopping her from finding out who she really is by withdrawing her into a world of fakeness, lies and solitude. A world that seems to leave no alternative apart from running away, as Laura and the girls of Wisteria do, or killing herself, as April accidentally or intentionally does.

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