FROM INDISTINCTION TO IRONY: THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN SUBURBAN FICTION, 1830-1970

By

ANDREW REYNOLDS

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2010
© 2010 Andrew Stuart Reynolds
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To say that I could not have completed this project without David Leverenz would be an understatement. I could not imagine a better dissertation director. His unwavering enthusiasm and prompt, incisive responses to innumerable drafts kept me from quitting and helped me to overcome my worst writing habits. Any portion of this dissertation that manages to be distilled and cogent—two of David’s favorite terms of praise—is a result of his mentoring, if not his direct assistance. In the past year, I have felt rejuvenated about this project, and it is no coincidence that during that same period I have increasingly noticed the ways in which David has helped me to improve as a writer, ranging from my general approach to literary scholarship down to the structuring of sentences. I cannot thank him enough, and I aspire to his patience and generosity as a teacher.

I am also indebted to the members of my committee for their instruction and support. Susan Hegeman introduced me to the idea of approaching literature through setting in her stimulating seminar “The City and the Country.” My seminar paper for Susan was the first thing I wrote on the topic of suburbia, and her prompting me to be more rigorous in defining my subject effectively led to this dissertation. Phil Wegner similarly sparked my interests in genre and the theory of space, both through his own scholarship and also by introducing me to writers including Fredric Jameson and Henri Lefebvre. Phil’s dynamic ability to periodize and historicize cultural phenomena inspired my own attempts at theorization in this work. Trysh Travis shared her knowledge of suburban history with characteristic frankness, and she boosted my confidence by inviting me to visit her class “Masculinity in Suburbia” as a guest lecturer. Each of them offered me valuable feedback on various parts of the dissertation, and my defense was truly enjoyable and enlightening thanks to all their efforts.
I would like to thank the Department of English at the University of Florida for providing me with an Alumni Fellowship as well as a congenial intellectual atmosphere. Among the many wonderful professors, graduate students, and undergraduates I have met here, four of my Ph.D. colleagues require special mention. Aaron Shaheen and Jessica Livingston were my best friends during the first half of my graduate program. We shared an intellectual camaraderie but also a common desire for fun and adventure, a combination that I have never really experienced before or since, and I miss the meetings of our little “coterie” more than I can express. Ariel Gunn and Aron Pease were the two friends who sustained me through the second half of my graduate career. I enjoyed evaluating pedagogy and playing board games with Ariel, while Aron and I debated theory and played guitars. All four of these people helped me with the dissertation at various stages, and I am tremendously appreciative and lucky to have found such good friends.

I should also thank Graduate Assistants United at UF and in particular Todd Reynolds, who was co-president during the time I was a member. Because of their struggles with the UF administration, all of us graduate assistants enjoyed health insurance and many other benefits. Todd was also part of my Ph.D. cohort; a devoted friend with a mischievous laugh that I miss hearing; and a tireless organizer who worked to make me a better union member. Our common last name is a happy coincidence, since I consider him a brother.

My family has been a great support during this process. My mother and father, Diane and Allen Reynolds, encouraged my interest in reading when I was young, pushed me to attend college, and have done their best to understand this strange career I have chosen. I hope to have made them proud with this accomplishment, and to be as loving and selfless a parent to my son as they have been to me. Lois and Dick Midwood, my aunt and uncle, were surrogate parents to me in the summers growing up and during my Master’s degree program at SUNY Buffalo as
well. Dick died during the time I was writing this dissertation, and I miss him greatly. His love of Boston’s history, where he led us on walking tours, undoubtedly influenced my interest in American culture. If there is anyone who truly understands me (for better or worse), it is my brother Doug Reynolds. He has always been there for me, laconic yet amenable to any sort of nonsense I proposed, and I am not sure what I would do without his friendship or technical support. I am also thankful to Jack and Kitty Churchill, my outstanding parents-in-law. They graciously tolerated me doing academic work during almost every holiday and visit, and did all they could to make it easier for me to finish this project.

The most important thing that happened to me during my doctoral program was falling in love with Candi Churchill. She changed my life in predictable ways—we got married and had the kid—that brought me happiness I never imagined. She may have slowed down my actual writing progress with all the dates and “little getaways” she demanded we go on, but she enriched my life and supported my work in so many ways that I cannot begin to count. I love her addictive passion for fun, her courageous sense of justice, and her emotional honesty. My final push to complete the dissertation, combined with her work and caring for our new baby, certainly put a strain on our marriage, but in that time I discovered just how strong a partnership we have built. I am also appreciative of the work she does as a faculty union organizer and feminist activist. People like her make it possible for people like me to do things like study literature, and I am in awe of her and the other activists I have met in Gainesville who volunteer their time and energy to fight so that we can enjoy a more peaceful, democratic, fair, and leisurely world. I dedicate this dissertation to Candi.
My son Max Reynolds-Churchill was born near the end of my long journey to the doctorate. Being his father will constitute the next stage in my education and my next interminable project. I thank Max for his inspiration, joy, and love.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .................................................................................. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT .......................................................................................... 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................... 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Review of Nonliterary Suburban Studies .................................... 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Review of Suburban Literary Studies ....................................... 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theorizing the Subgenre ................................................................. 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Account of Suburban Literature ........................................... 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 THE INDISTINCTION OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY SUBURBAN FICTION .... 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Contrary Aesthetic ....................................................................... 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Early Middle-Class Suburbia ............................. 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Model of the Purest Simplicity”: Hentz and Cary ...................... 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It Is a Good Thing to Live in the Country”: Cozzens and Coffin ...... 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It Wanted the Atmosphere of Sentimental Association”: Howells ...... 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Without Glory of Any Kind”: Beers, Bunner, and Cutting ............. 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 BABBITT AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SUBURBAN INTIMATE SPHERE ................................................................. 115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Don’t Know that I’m Entirely Satisfied!”: The Emergent Discontent of the Twentieth-Century Suburban Novel .......................................................... 115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Old Comforts of Home: The Decline of Bourgeois Intimacy ....... 120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Business of Home Making ......................................................... 139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Away from Home ................................................................... 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 LOLITA’S UNDISCIPLINED SUBURBS .............................................. 159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Foreigner and an Anarchist”: Humbert Humbert in Postwar Suburbia ................................................. 159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Lighted House of Glass”: Humbert under Surveillance ............. 162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Our Middle-Class Nosy Era”: The Disciplinary Society ............... 165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Merciless Glare of the Common Law”: Humbert and Disciplinarity ....................................................... 169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Humbert the Terrible Deliberated with Humbert the Small”: Power and Avoidance ......................... 179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Feeling Was Good”: Humbert’s Moral Apotheosis .................... 188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A SPRAWL NARRATIVE: THE DETERRITORIALIZATION OF SUBURBIA IN JOYCE CAROL OATES’S *EXPENSIVE PEOPLE* ................................................................. 197

The Second Corpse ................................................................................................................... 197
Allusive Violence ..................................................................................................................... 200
Deterritorialization and Sprawl .............................................................................................. 208
Detroit and Vietnam ................................................................................................................ 214
Expensive Sprawl .................................................................................................................... 219

LIST OF REFERENCES ................................................................................................................. 229

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ......................................................................................................... 238
This study develops a two-part definition of the suburban subgenre of American literature, based upon the perception of a break between nineteenth- and twentieth-century suburban texts. Unlike previous studies, mine surveys nineteenth-century fiction, discovering a general tendency to evaluate the emergent suburban space and culture as potentially inadequate for promoting white middle-class identity and social status. This concern can be traced back to the Victorian period’s rapid urban growth, industrialization, foreign immigration, and proletarianization—factors that resulted in a destabilized class structure and increased economic as well as social competition. In suburban fiction of this era, a typical character, recently arrived from the city, is dismayed by the difficulties of suburban housekeeping, the lack of genteel society and urban conveniences, the opportunity that rural leisure provides for misadventures, and the potential for shame through interactions with the rural working class. I propose that the subgenre’s first phase is characterized by a theme of indistinction, signifying an inscrutability as well as an inability to provide the desired social status.

The second phase, in contrast, is distinguished by a dominant theme of irony, which evolves in response to the increasingly tight association of twentieth-century suburbia with white middle-class identity. No longer is discontent principally oriented toward the suburbs’ perceived
failures. Instead, the problems portrayed in many twentieth-century suburban novels can be interpreted as the unintended consequences or side effects of suburbia’s very success at creating an exclusive, respectable, thoroughly middle-class social geography. These problems include the collapse of the bourgeois intimate sphere, the emergence of a minimalistic social order characterized by conflict avoidance and disengaged tolerance, and the spread of suburban sprawl. The irony structuring these texts is the most distinguishing and provocative characteristic of the twentieth-century suburban novel. My multidisciplinary dissertation thus provides a new account of the development of a literary genre and, in doing so, also reconfigures established ideas about the American suburbs.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The American suburbs are readily stereotyped. Unlike “the city” or “the country,” which might bring to mind cosmopolitan diversity or some distinctive regional identity, “suburbia” evokes the idea of a homogeneous, national culture through a series of familiar images: picture windows and manicured lawns, cul-de-sacs and car garages, swimming pools and barbecues, and at the heart of it all the white, middle-class, nuclear family. Suburban literature also seems rather easy to identify. Based on conversations and teaching experiences I have had in the course of writing this dissertation, I have found that casual readers believe this subgenre began in the 1950s and is best represented by John Updike’s “Rabbit” novels and the short stories of John Cheever. The convention of this body of literature, it might be added, is to expose the discontent and domestic conflict hiding behind the material signs of success and public displays of conformity. In other words, the literary suburbs are inevitably home to a disgruntled “organization man” and his dysfunctional family. This mundane subject matter along with the recognizability of this subgenre consigns it to an inferior literary status, as a popular branch of realism lacking the aesthetic originality, social significance, or political engagement of high modernism, postmodern metafiction, and magical realism.

These beliefs certainly exist for a reason, yet they are overly simplistic and even misleading. As the title of this dissertation suggests, the suburbs and the subgenre have relatively long histories in the context of U.S. culture. Even a brief survey of their histories reveals some fundamental conflicts. Over the last fifty years, observers have questioned whether the post-WWII suburbs are truly suburbs or not, considering that these development have progressively drifted away from their traditional urban centers to create a new type of built environment, one that William H. Whyte, Jr., was already in the late 1950s calling “sprawl.”¹ Some have argued
that a term such as sprawl, “technoburb,” or “edge city” better recognizes the shift away from the old pattern of bedroom communities built along rail lines for white, middle-class, male commuters and their families. The new suburbs, in this view, are independent, automobile-oriented, mixed-use developments that reintegrate residence and workplace, provide nearly urban-quality services, support the needs of professional women, and house an increasing diversity of economic, racial, and ethnic groups. Others counter that the postwar developments carry on the old suburban ways. They point to the perpetuation of racial and class segregation at the neighborhood level despite more overall diversity, the lack of genuine public space and urban culture despite the proliferation of consumer venues, the perpetuation of gender norms encapsulated in the “traditional” suburban family despite dual wage-earners, and the negative environmental impact of leapfrog development despite the allure of a “natural” setting.2

More than terminology is at stake in these disputes. Competing images of suburbia continue to weigh heavily in debates about urban growth patterns, the national economy (especially in the context of the petroleum crisis and the volatile housing industry), the “American Dream” of home ownership, and the persistence of racism and segregation. Though the suburban novel has only very recently come up for extended academic discussion, it has quickly engendered similar disagreements about the nature of the subject in question, and for much the same reasons. Some literary critics have proposed that the subgenre can be characterized by its unflinching documentation of the social, aesthetic, and spiritual shortcomings of the suburbs. Others contend that the literature’s true defining quality is instead the way it duplicitously presents the social and economic privileges of suburbia as a form of privation. Still others suggest that the suburbs in fiction mainly function as symbols, standing in for the nation, utopia, or dystopia. The disagreement is not merely over proper literary
classification, of course, but also about what message the subgenre provides about the suburbs, whether the fiction offers an accurate representation of reality, and how this set of narratives collectively influences cultural perceptions and beliefs.

Surprisingly, this strand of literary criticism has rarely acknowledged the definitional struggles that have occurred among historians of the suburbs, as exemplified by the debate over sprawl. Indeed, the foundational idea of “suburbia” that underpins academic discussions of the subgenre has been developed more or less independently from the fields of urban history, community sociology, domestic architecture, and so on. To some extent, this freedom is valuable, because it has allowed literary studies to make original contributions to the conceptualization of suburbia, by exploring the suburb as a metaphor, a set of symbols, or the basis of a cultural narrative (e.g., the American Dream), rather than only as a building style, a geography, or a social organization. Yet this autonomy comes with a price. Because the literary studies construct their versions of the subgenre around some common formal feature (often a different one in each account) discerned in a set of narratives, and not necessarily with reference to actual suburbs, literary critics come to hold divergent and often contradictory views, particularly about the boundaries of the subgenre. In addition, they end up giving a different picture of the suburban phenomenon from that found in nonliterary suburban studies. Where one study considers the early-twentieth-century suburban novel to be definitive, for instance, another favors the late-twentieth-century works as representative of the mature form. Most indicatively, none of the published accounts of the subgenre addresses the nineteenth century in any depth, although historians concur that the years 1870-1890 marked the classic period of the modern American suburb. They have even catalogued a stock of early suburban literature, mostly sketches and short stories.
Is consensus about the suburbs and the subgenre possible? I think so, if we are willing to adjust our way of thinking about categorization. Dolores Hayden’s *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* demonstrates a new approach for suburban studies that could be applied to literature as well. Instead of fighting over what constitutes the authentic suburb, as scholars did through the 1980s and 90s, Hayden offers an inclusive typology of historical patterns that acknowledges the mutability and multiplicity of the suburbs. She respects the common-sense meaning behind the usage of the term “suburbs” in popular speech across nearly two centuries, while at the same time incorporating many of her colleagues’ ideas, including the work of revisionist historians who have emphasized the presence of working-class and racial/ethnic minority suburbs. This sort of approach, applied to the subgenre, could help correct the tendency of literary critics to write static, monolithic accounts of suburban fiction that privilege one feature of narratives (such as the theme of alienation) to the exclusion of others (the theme of pastoralism, for instance).

Literary scholars could also profit from an engagement with modern genre theory when considering ways to avoid reductive definitions of the subgenre. The theories of Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette, and Fredric Jameson, among others, provide a means through which to rethink the concept of suburban literature as a more complex, historically evolving phenomenon. Indeed, I find it shocking that no one researching the subgenre has made substantial reference to this branch of literary theory when writing what are essentially genre studies. Suburban scholars have never explicitly raised such fundamental questions as what qualities make a piece of fiction “suburban,” and they have only very rarely attempted to position this corpus in relation to the rest of American letters.
I am by no means suggesting that the previous academic studies all lack merit. This work has been groundbreaking and has produced many fascinating analyses and insightful readings. My hope for this dissertation is to contribute to this effort, beginning in this introduction by drawing from the existing scholarship a few basic principles for theorizing the subgenre. My chapters will then put this theoretical framework into practice, as I bring some overlooked texts into the classification and draw comparisons between suburban literature and other genres or aesthetics such as local color and postmodernism. My ambition is to produce a new, two-part model of the subgenre, based upon a break I perceive between nineteenth- and twentieth-century suburban texts.

The first phase is characterized by a theme of “indistinction.” Playing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of distinction, I argue that nineteenth-century fictions tend to evaluate suburban space and culture as potentially inadequate for promoting white middle-class identity. The inability of the suburbs to produce the desired social status leads to an inscrutability, which is further emphasized by the fiction’s use of the picturesque aesthetic as well as the sketch form. The second phase, in contrast, is distinguished by a turn to novels and a new dominant theme: an irony that emerges due to the increasingly tight association of twentieth-century suburbia with white middle-class identity. The new literary discontent targets some of the unintended consequences of suburbia’s success at producing distinction.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will first consider the question of how the suburbs are defined by briefly surveying the efforts of nonliterary suburban studies. I will then examine the emerging field of suburban literary studies and assess the various definitions of the subgenre that have been put forth. I will offer my own model within that context.
A Review of Nonliterary Suburban Studies

Producing a technical definition of the American suburb has long been an aspiration of suburban studies, a multidisciplinary academic research endeavor dominated by historians and sociologists. One of the first such attempts can be found in Harlan Paul Douglass’s *The Suburban Trend* (1925). He describes suburbia as “the belt of population which lives under distinctly roomier conditions than is the average lot of city people, but under distinctively more crowded conditions than those of the adjoining open country.”3 Douglass’s language remains imprecise and subjective, perhaps because the notion that housing density is an essential distinguishing feature of suburbia was already so commonplace. This approach would continue to have its proponents, including Jane Jacobs, who offers a more quantitative version in her *The Death and Life of Great Cities* (1961). “Very low densities, six dwellings or fewer to the net acre,” says Jacobs, “make out well in suburbs.”4 (209). In contrast, she believes that successful cities have at least twenty per acre and work best with at least one hundred.5 While Jacobs’s numbers give her account an air of precision, these definitions are clearly also prescriptions drawn from her idiosyncratic analysis of urban life.

A similar but more influential way to define settlement spaces is via population density, a measure used by the United States Census Bureau. The census has been recording “non-central-city metropolitan data” since 1910.6 The Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) currently serves as the federal government’s standard for gathering information on “urban places.” An MSA can roughly be defined as a county or series of counties containing a central city of at least 50,000 persons and a total metropolitan population of 100,000 or more.7 The census does not use the term “suburb,” yet it is tempting to consider the area designated “outside the central city” as effectively the same thing. As J. John Palen points out, this “residual category” is a catch-all for any outlying population deemed to have a significant social and economic relationship to the
central city as determined by commuting patterns, per capita income changes, and other factors. Census data have been used to make pronouncements about suburban trends, yet this practice is questionable. The census could mislabel people who might otherwise be considered city dwellers, as Palen explains, “simply because they live in a smaller city that lies near an even larger central city.” Similarly, because the outer limits of the metropolis must correspond to county (or county equivalent) boundaries, rather than counting only incorporated suburban communities, the rural parts of counties deemed “outside the central city” are lumped together with the suburbs.

Additional problems with measures of density appear in comparative analyses. “Although the federal census of 1920 revealed that for the first time more Americans resided in cities (51.4 percent) than in rural locales,” writes Michael H. Ebner, “the category of city as a place with 2,500 or more inhabitants was very loosely defined and obscured what was taking place in the suburbs.” Needless to say, the “city” of 1920 and the “central city” of the contemporary MSA are vastly different entities. A longer and broader view further adds to the imprecision, as Kenneth T. Jackson notes:

Low density, for example, means one thing for the nineteenth century, when urban densities normally ranged between 50,000 and 100,000 per square mile and newer areas often had 30,000, and another for the late twentieth century, when many inner cities have been developed at fewer than 15,000 per square mile and many suburban areas often count fewer than 1,000 people in the same physical space. Similarly, some countries have productive agricultural lands which feature higher population densities than the public and unproductive suburbs of the United States.

Without a consistent universal standard, housing and population densities can tell us little about the suburbs.

In the past thirty years, historians of suburbia have put forward a wide range of definitional parameters that conceptualize the suburb in terms beyond density. Perhaps the most influential
work on the subject is Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (1985). He begins by noting that the suburb, “the site of scattered dwellings and businesses outside city walls, is as old as civilization.”\(^{12}\) Yet suburbs “were socially and economically inferior to cities when wind, muscle, and water were the prime movers of civilization. . . . Even the word suburb suggested inferior manners, narrowness of view, and physical squalor.”\(^{13}\) The American suburbs, however, represent a new kind of space that was produced by a “spatial inversion” that first occurred in London, England, as the suburbs began to compete with the central city in matters such as population growth, social status, and economic investment. Jackson establishes his “working definition of suburbs” based upon “four components: function (non-farm residential), class (middle and upper status), separation (a daily journey-to-work), and density (low relative to older sections).”\(^{14}\)

Jackson’s outline captures the essence of suburbia for many readers. Even such complex definitions fail to account for significant portions of suburban history and reality. In the years following *Crabgrass Frontier*’s publication, researchers have emphasized the existence of suburban diversity in terms of class composition, land usage, and commuting patterns. Although the notion of working-class suburbs goes against the grain, Dolores Hayden reveals that self-built shacks on the urban periphery and inexpensive mail-order bungalows were as much a product of the spatial revolution as the country houses of well-to-do Victorians.\(^ {15}\) Substantial suburban development occurred not only in planned communities but also in industrial suburbs and unincorporated areas. According to Richard Harris, one statistical survey of data from 1940 revealed almost as many industrial suburbs as conventional ones.\(^ {16}\)

Divergence from Jackson’s norm becomes more visible in later eras. Several researchers have remarked, for instance, on the change in journey-to-work patterns in the late-twentieth-
century metropolis. Critical of Jackson’s account, Robert Fishman argues that by the 1970s “the new city had evolved its own pattern of transportation in which a multitude of relatively short automobile journeys in a multitude of different directions substitutes for that great tidal wash in and out of a single urban core which had previously defined commuting.” According to Fishman, the contemporary suburb has broken with its old residential identity to become a significant commercial location in its own right. Peter O. Muller agrees, contending that the suburb “has now evolved into a self-sufficient urban entity, containing its own major economic and cultural activities.” In 1994, summing up the findings of these revisionists, William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock write:

> today’s suburbs feature corporate headquarters, high-tech industries, and superregional malls. Consequently, about twice as many people now commute to work within suburbs as commute between them and cities. Rapidly expanding suburbs contain more office space than downtowns and most of the new jobs. As a result, suburbs are in the forefront of American economic development and are far less dependent upon cities than before.

These recent transformations, when added to the historic record of diversity, throw doubt upon the possibility of defining the American suburb—unless one changes strategies, as Fishman and others began to do in the early 1980s.

Rather than struggle to develop a set of qualitative markers broad enough to encompass places as unalike as Boston during the Gilded Age, Long Island during the Jazz Age, post-WWII Levittown, and contemporary Orange County, California, Fishman simply restricts the term suburbia to a specific late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century development that he calls “bourgeois utopias.” These are residential areas for middle-class commuters, oriented around a central city and containing single-family houses distributed in a “parklike setting.” Fishman adds another element to this definition, insisting that genuine suburbs “depended on a highly specific piece of industrial technology: the railroad. Although to the late twentieth century mind
suburbia is inevitably associated with the automobile, this association is a mistake. The automobile, when it came, helped to destroy the basic conditions for classic suburbanization.”

Contrary to conventional wisdom, WWII marks for Fishman “the end of suburbia.”

In the wake of this obituary, historians, sociologists, and journalists competed to answer the question “what replaces the suburb?” Among the many neologisms and labels proposed were “technoburb” (Fishman), “multicentered metropolis” (Muller), “edge city,” and—inevitably—“postsurbia.” Only “urban sprawl,” coined by William H. Whyte, Jr., has become part of the vernacular. The other appellations are particularly unsuitable, in the opinion of Sharpe and Wallock, because they misleadingly suggest discontinuity, and because they purport that suburbs have appropriated the role of cities. “In our view,” Sharpe and Wallock write, echoing earlier intellectuals such as Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs, “equating suburbs with cities implies that suburbs possess a diversity, cosmopolitanism, political culture, and public life that most of them still lack and that most cities still afford.” Strongly critical of the renaming trend, Sharpe and Wallock maintain that “suburbia has remained an essentially exclusive domain. For example, in 1980, blacks constituted just 6.1 percent of suburbanites, as compared to 23.4 percent of city dwellers. That same year, only 8.2 percent of suburbanites reported incomes below the federal poverty line, as compared to 17.2 percent of city residents.” Sharpe and Wallock perceive similar continuities in terms of gender norms, and thus would disagree with statements such as Margaret Marsh’s that “[t]he middle-class residential suburb, the physical expression of a set of ideas about the nature of marriage and family life, has become an historical artifact.”

Sharpe and Wallock accuse their opponents of a “preoccupation with functional rather than social measure of urbanity,” raising the possibility of a comprehensive, qualitative definition of suburbia based upon “social” or cultural characteristics. Actually, this methodology has
informed sociological and anthropological discussions of the suburb since at least WWII. Among the most well-known of these studies are David Riesman et al.’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte, Jr.’s *The Organization Man* (1956). These two works deeply influenced academic and popular understanding of postwar American society, describing the rise of a new professional, middle-class, suburban “personality” based on “other-directedness,” “adjustment,” “belongingness,” and “group thinking.” The impulse to describe suburbia through patterns of social behavior persists in contemporary ethnographic research, such as M. P. Baumgartner’s *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (1988) and Setha M. Low’s *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (2003).

The reaction against such a definition of suburbia also began to take shape during the post-WWII years. As Herbert J. Gans recounts:

> I watched the growth of this mythology with misgivings, for my observations in various new suburbs persuaded me neither that there was much change in people when they moved to the suburbs nor that the change which took place could be traced to the new environment. And if suburban life was as undesirable and unhealthy as the critics charged, the suburbanites themselves were blissfully unaware of it: they were happy in their new homes and communities, much happier than they had been in the city.28

Following in the footsteps of Bennett M. Berger and William Dobriner, Gans contested the suburban “myth” by analyzing the suburb of Levittown, New Jersey. He discovered persistent subcultures rooted in educational, religious, and ethnic differences. These writers not only refute the environmental determinism that underlies the notion of an archetypical suburban mentality or personality, but in doing so they also throw doubt on the very possibility of a qualitative definition of the suburb. Revisionist scholarship during the following decades has further fragmented suburban sociology. For example, Laura J. Miller questions whether the dominant perception of suburbia as a family-oriented environment is not somewhat misleading. While agreeing that suburban space encourages familial “togetherness” and privacy in a variety of
ways, Miller suggests that such behavior may be more the result of external interests than suburbanites’ inherent desires. As she concludes: “to maintain that this [togetherness] is a pure expression of internal urges ignores how this preference may be shaped by social forces,” which include developers, builders, financiers, and all those marketing to the suburban consumer’s needs.29

Another means to define the suburb could be through attention to these economic processes, a perspective taken by the so-called “new urban sociology” associated with David Harvey, Manuel Castells, and Mark Gottdiener. Rather than count those who live in the suburbs or analyze their way of life, these scholars explain how such places come to exist. These authors emphasize how capitalist institutions and agents such as developers, banks, the construction industry, real-estate agents, and the automobile industry steer the course of metropolitan land development based on profitability. Palen expresses the findings of this school of thought concisely: “Suburbia is not a consequence of individual homeowner choice, but a consequence of a deliberate decision by elites to disinvest in the cities.”30 While many researchers have gathered compelling evidence of a long-running capitalist conspiracy motivating suburbanization, this mode of explanation cannot provide a comprehensive definition of the American suburb. Investment does not inexorably press outward, as witnessed in recent phenomena such as urban renewal or gentrification and the appearance of suburban “rust belts.” Moreover, such a perspective represents the suburbs in somewhat abstract terms as a system of legal conventions and business practices, far removed from the everyday experiences of the people who inhabit such places.

One final way to consider the matter is by examining the ideology of suburbia, or its representations in culture. Although this ideology could be understood as a mystification of
economic, social, and even physical reality, it nevertheless demonstrates a remarkable persistence. The early development of the “suburban ideal” has been well documented by historians, notably Kenneth T. Jackson. Recently, Dolores Hayden has put forward a concise and memorable statement of this ideal, referring to it as “a triple dream, house plus land plus community.”

The desire to live in a detached residence in a park-like setting among a group of one’s social equals—this ideal binds many seemingly contradictory forms according to Hayden, who traces its materialization through seven historic patterns of suburbanization. Yet her typology is most interesting methodologically because it offers an example of how to imagine identity without absolute continuity. Even the suburban ideal changes across time on her account, as the community and land components disappear and reappear. As I hope to have demonstrated through this review of suburban studies, no single architectural design, social organization, economic system, or cultural code can hope to continuously define such a complex, changing phenomena. Therefore, we should refer to the suburbs in the plural as a reminder of their multiplicity. We should also be open to understanding the suburbs through such a variety of perspectives.

I would now like to return to my main subject, the suburban literary subgenre, and examine the elaborations on the suburban ideal to be found there. According to one literary critic, “[n]o account of a novel would be complete without a careful interpretation of the function of landscape (or cityscape) within it.” Conversely, I would propose that the study of suburbia remains incomplete without a study of its literature.

**A Review of Suburban Literary Studies**

Five book-length critical studies of suburban literature have been written to date. I will briefly examine how the subgenre has been defined in each case, beginning with Edward Christopher Hudson’s dissertation, “From Nowhere to Everywhere: Suburban Discourse and the
Suburb in North American Literature” (1998). Surprisingly, Hudson does not emphasize setting, which one would presume to be the most straightforward, literal way to categorize texts under this heading. Instead, he traces the development of “suburban discourse,” considering the suburb primarily as a trope or metaphor. He begins with the inventive argument that More’s *Utopia* and Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* are precursors or perhaps the earliest examples of suburban discourse, even though neither book actually depicts suburbs of the modern American type. His provocative claim is based upon the observation that these narratives’ settings contain several “parallels” to real suburbs, including their geographical and social organizations. More importantly, he believes these narratives demonstrate the twin themes of artificiality and ambiguity that fundamentally define suburban discourse. He points out that both More and Hawthorne express reservations about the socialistic communities they portray, particularly about the excessive rationalism and regimentation of these planned societies. For instance, Hudson says that the very name Utopia “suggests More had fears, not only that such a society could not exist but also that its existence, in and of itself, might create a nation of ‘no ones,’” because of the “standardization of Utopian life” imposed on the individual by coercive neighbors and family. Artificiality and ambiguity provide continuity for the entire subgenre in Hudson’s eyes, since these themes are repeated in practically all the texts he considers, from William Dean Howells’s *Suburban Sketches* to Carlos Fuentes’s *Christopher Unborn*.

Hudson’s work clearly differs from nonliterary discussions of suburban culture, especially in his allegorical readings of *Utopia* and *Blithedale*. Each of his two master themes raises problems. His idea of artificiality remains hazy, implying the existence of a natural community or natural environment that Hudson never addresses. The concept could certainly be more rigorously developed, perhaps with reference to Tönnies’s Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft,
Durkheim’s mechanical and organic social solidarities, or even the Enlightenment notions of state of nature and state of society. Instead, Hudson considers “the artificiality of the community’s aspirations” in *Blithedale*, though later he describes “the artificial imposition of houses and streets” as part of “a destructive leveling of the natural landscape” in Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*. At yet another moment, Hudson analyzes the imitative suburban architecture in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* in order to reveal “the artificiality of Gatsby’s West Egg,” and he even considers the green electric light in that novel to represent suburban artificiality. Any form of social organization or built environment could be labeled artificial in this broad sense, rendering Hudson’s interpretations a bit banal at times. I have not found this notion of artificiality raised in other suburban studies.

Similarly, his discovery of ambiguity in all suburban narratives tends to gloss over the particular differences underlying their praise or condemnation of the suburbs. To put my criticisms in the terms of genre theory, Hudson takes a formalist approach, focusing upon the purely literary features of narrative such as theme and figure of speech. Of all the literary critics I will discuss, he remains the least interested in the element of setting or the issue of mimesis, both of which would be foregrounded by a more historicist approach. This preference is most apparent in his opening chapter’s lengthy and well-informed review of nonliterary suburban studies, which unfortunately is segregated from all his literary readings. This approach leads to his insightful yet too static and monolithic definition of the subgenre.

Catherine Jurca published the first book on the topic, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (2001). Her provocative work makes the case that suburban literature is best defined as an utterly fraudulent narrative of discontent with suburbia. She observes that although “house ownership has provided white residents with substantial
material benefits that have continued to place them at an economic and social advantage over nonwhites,” novelists have scandalously portrayed this material privilege as a form of victimization, so that in fiction “white middle-class suburbanites begin to see themselves as spiritually and culturally impoverished by prosperity.” According to Jurca, these characters’ bogus feelings of discontentment and self-pity actually serve to screen and protect their material privileges. She sarcastically names this story of spurious alienation and displacement the “white diaspora.”

Although Jurca only covers the early twentieth century in any depth, her readings are also more historicist than Hudson’s, because she must necessarily contrast fiction with reality in order to support her thesis. As she says, the suburban novel “is worth examining, not as it records the experience of actual suburban Americans, but, on the contrary, because it seems to diverge so palpably from that experience.” She positions the fictional suburbs within the context of actual suburban trends, as in her discussion of how the Depression-era emergence of “functionalist,” mass-produced architecture influences James M. Cain’s *Mildred Pierce*. Like Hudson, though, Jurca is ultimately most interested in performing a formalist analysis of how suburban fiction works as literary language. What she discovers are repeated themes, motifs, and other rhetorical characteristics, such as the semantic differentiation that several novelists make between “house” and “home” to signify their antagonism to mass-produced architecture. Jurca’s tendency to define the subgenre via these literary qualities, rather than through the verisimilitude of the setting, is most apparent in her allegorical reading of Edgar Rice Burrough’s *Tarzan of the Apes*, which she considers to be a suburban narrative because of its fantasy of white nativism and African invasion.
Despite the ingenuity of Jurca’s arguments, some of the conclusions she draws are questionable. While I agree with Jurca’s demand that we recognize economic privilege when reading this subgenre, to suggest that white middle-class suburbanites have nothing to complain about, since their neighborhoods are spaces of relative wealth, goes too far. The argument becomes noticeably strained when Jurca attempts to move beyond the early twentieth century, as in her brief “Epilogue,” where she sweepingly dismisses the entire subgenre from the 1960s onward as “same as it ever was (more or less)” despite major changes to suburbia such as sprawl and increasing numbers of minority residents. For example, Jurca’s brief discussion of Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* ends with a curious equation: “the experience of black homelessness is identical to what I have called the white diaspora, insofar as the suburb as such effectively makes the black middle class indistinguishable from white.” In other words, blacks affect the same “spiritually and culturally impoverished” condition that Jurca denied as groundless in the case of whites? I doubt Jurca would wish to call fraudulent the African-American religious and cultural experiences that Naylor depicts as disappearing from the suburbs, yet such is the implication. Jurca also passes too quickly over nineteenth-century suburban fictions, not determining whether their complaints about “the inconveniences of the suburbs” are spurious, nor explaining how these older works fit into her narrative pattern. While the white diaspora thesis is psychologically perceptive, Jurca refuses to accept any criticisms of suburban life or the capitalist system that supports it, leading her to produce perhaps the most static, monolithic definition of the subgenre.

Rachel Pagano’s “Depictions of Suburbia in American Fiction” (2001) is another unpublished dissertation on the subject. Pagano starts by rejecting “the consensus among most scholars of suburban fiction” that suburban fictions “unilaterally hold that suburbia is
conservative, tacky, stifling, and petty.” Of course, in making this claim Pagano ignores Hudson’s theme of ambiguity and his discussion of pro-suburbia novels by “suburban evangelicals” such as B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* or Eric Hodgins’s *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*. Nevertheless, Pagano finds instead of a uniform genre message that “American writers take vastly different positions on suburbia, positions that are deeply rooted in notions of class, gender, and ethnicity.” Actually, the four basic positions her chapters explore are all uniformly negative, although they differ significantly in other respects. Rather than constructing the subgenre around one or two master themes, Pagano in effect delineates several phases of the suburban narrative. Each chapter groups texts based upon historical period, theme, and other formal characteristics. Her first chapter discusses the early suburbs through the dominant theme of pastoralism and the motif of transportation technology. When she turns to the WWII era, the theme changes to existential angst about the absence of tradition in the suburbs, and the motifs are drawn from Christianity. In the sixties and seventies, the theme shifts to suburban sexism and the dominant style is humor, while the themes for the end of the century are suburban racism and ethnic assimilation.

Though Pagano shares the same formalist, thematic approach as Hudson and Jurca, she implicitly comes to theorize the subgenre as mutable and historically evolving, not monolithic and static. One could imagine inserting the white diaspora or artificiality into Pagano’s account without difficulty. Unfortunately, she fails to provide much of an explanation for why certain complaints emerge at specific times or how the phases of the subgenre relate to each other. The only exception is her excellent first chapter, which provides a fine historicist account of suburban literature. The chapter links transformations in the literary use of the pastoral to changes in suburban transportation technology, and Pagano makes substantial reference to nonliterary
suburban studies as she plots a trajectory from Frederick S. Cozzens’s *The Sparrowgrass Papers* through Howells’s *Suburban Sketches* to Lewis’s *Babbitt*. This practice of connecting literature to suburban history is much closer to Fredric Jameson’s idea of “mediation,” for instance, than to the testing for verisimilitude that drove Jurca’s argument. Pagano demonstrates a different way in which formalist and historicist interests could be coordinated.

Another published book on the topic is Robert Beuka’s *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (2004). Although he cites Jurca’s work approvingly, Beuka takes an opposite view of the subgenre, accepting at face value the fictionalized complaints about the suburbs that she debunks. Through his close readings, he seeks to demonstrate the universality of suburban alienation (his title might be a play on these words) in twentieth-century suburban fiction and film. Where Jurca dismisses the late-twentieth-century novels as not worthy of serious examination, Beuka devotes the majority of his study to works from this period. He discovers that fictional suburbanites across the decades—no matter their class, age, gender, or race—always experience discontent with suburbia. As evidence, he points to a handful of causes for complaint that perennially crop up in the fiction and film, including geographical mobility (i.e., “dislocation”), competition for social status, social control (i.e., “surveillance”), and normative gender roles (i.e., “imperiled masculinity”). He defines the subgenre through its “consistent focus on suburbia as an American dystopia.”

Like the previous critics, Beuka takes a predominantly formalist approach to the subgenre. He develops his principal theme of alienation through the subthemes of mobility and surveillance, which are comparable to Pagano’s multiple themes though without as much historicization or textual exemplification. His analysis of the subgenre’s recurrent symbolism, including swimming pools and picture windows, is particularly insightful. The issue of mimesis
repeatedly creeps into Beuka’s discussion, however, pulling him away from formalism and making his work again most similar—though diametrically opposed—to Jurca’s. Where she understands suburban literature as mystification, Beuka perceives verisimilitude, as evidenced by his basic willingness to take the fictional complaints seriously and also by a mirror motif that runs throughout his commentary. He announces, for example, “I am looking toward fictive and cinematic images of the suburbs as reflections of our larger sense of suburban place, reflections of the place-specific social dynamics of the landscape.” On the other hand, he tends to leave criticisms of the suburbs in the mouths of writers and filmmakers, and he rarely consults nonliterary suburban studies, making his book a relatively weak example of historicism.

Another important theoretical difference between Beuka and Jurca arises from their common concern about mimesis. Since so many types of fictional suburbanites seem discontented, and since Beuka accuses no group of profiting from this situation (as Jurca does), the logical alternative is to blame the suburbs themselves. Beuka’s style of writing promotes this way of thinking. He regularly ascribes power to the “landscape,” referring to it for instance as “dispiriting, alienating” as well as “entrapping and debilitating.” This perspective, reminiscent of Michel Foucault (whom Beuka cites) and his antihumanist fascination with institutions and social structures, contrasts sharply with Jurca’s insistence upon the agency and responsibility borne by middle-class suburbanites. Each of these viewpoints produces a monolithic definition of the subgenre, as a narrative of suburbanites either alienated by or else gaining privileges from their suburbs. Instead of choosing one or the other, we can choose to read suburban fiction for both agency and structure, recognizing both benefits and problems—as well as the irony that emerges in some twentieth-century novels from their coexistence.
The last study of suburban literature I will discuss is Amy Maria Kenyon’s *Dreaming Suburbia: Detroit and the Production of Postwar Space and Culture* (2004). Of all the critics I have discussed, Kenyon offers the most systematic theorization of suburban geography and literature. She begins by asserting that suburbia’s primary function is disinvestment, “the redistribution of resources, rights, and cultural-political authority away from the city and along racist and spatially exclusive lines.”49 The means to achieve this end is detachment, a complex term that has geographical, social, and psychological dimensions. Put simply, the suburbs are divided from the city in ways that not only promote disinvestment but also allow a willful ignorance on the part of suburbanites, a self-delusion that Kenyon metaphorically terms “dreaming.” When detachment breaks down, suburban characters (and readers too) experience estrangement. This state of mind is usually occasioned—in fiction at least—by out-of-the-ordinary events, change, conflict, or violence. The suburban dream stands revealed as an unreal fantasy, and a new, unbidden perception of the suburbs emerges. In Philip K. Dick’s allegorical science fiction novel *Time Out of Joint*, for instance, suburbia is exposed as a government conspiracy deluding suburbanites about the conflicted state of the world. She does not let suburbanites completely off the hook: “Suburban estrangement is in part the guilt of the conspirator,” says Kenyon, “the nagging awareness that the city is at the heart of our retreat.”50

The trio of disinvestment, detachment, and estrangement allows her to convincingly cross the disciplinary boundaries between urban studies and cultural studies, as she discusses suburbia, Detroit, literature, and film.

Disinvestment is nearly identical to Jurca’s conception of the suburbs as accumulators of material privileges, while estrangement sounds very close to Beuka’s idea of alienation. Detachment bridges the gap between agency and structure that divided those critics. Kenyon
recognizes the determining power of space and its contribution to the suburban dream state. The ignorance of suburbanites cannot be completely conscious and intentional. Otherwise, why would guilt be disturbing or “nagging”? On the other hand, Kenyon delves into the history of suburbanization to show how detachment was promoted by specific government agencies and corporate interests, as well as suburbanites of course, for a variety of reasons that include profit and racial segregation. Revealing these multiple interests at work more concretely explains how suburbanites could become discontented or disillusioned with suburban life and the detachment it imposes, even as they obviously enjoy many more privileges than some other groups. In effect, Kenyon’s three-part theory begins to complicate the schema of agency and structure, fragmenting the monolithic suburban subject as well as the institution of suburbia.\(^{51}\)

Kenyon provides an excellent theoretical framework, well substantiated through nonliterary suburban studies, but she has less to offer as a literary critic. Her book focuses on accounting for the suburbs, not the subgenre. Literature and film do not feature in several chapters, and she uses them only to exemplify the concepts of detachment and estrangement. Furthermore, estrangement as a literary theme suffers from something of the same problem as Hudson’s artificiality and ambiguity. Instead of being too indefinite, estrangement is rather too broad, because it does not exclusively define suburban literature. Estrangement is considered by Darko Suvin to be an essential characteristic of the utopian and science fiction genres, for instance. One could make the case that estrangement defines the entire modern novel, as Michael McKeon implies when he argues that the fundamental “instability” of novelistic form and content reflects the epistemological and social uncertainty of modernity.\(^{52}\) The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky even proposes estrangement or defamiliarization as the basic activity of
culture. Kenyon’s idea of detachment seems more specifically suburban, and is a significant contribution to our list of characteristics that define the subgenre.

Theorizing the Subgenre

The five studies discussed above provide a wealth of ideas about suburban literature. I now want to derive from them a few basic principles for theorizing the subgenre, before I introduce my own conception of it. First, the proper role of literary setting must be considered. All five of the studies rely upon the element of setting to some degree in order to categorize texts, even though they tend to prioritize theme as the defining quality. Their usage of setting sometimes reveals underexamined beliefs about what the real suburbs are, and such assumptions potentially overdetermine their definition of the subgenre. To take an example mentioned earlier, Hudson considers *Utopia* and *The Blithedale Romance* part of suburban discourse not only because they demonstrate his key themes, but also because these narratives’ settings contain several parallels to the modern American suburbs. More specifically, the land of Utopia is rationally planned and laid out with tasteful, enclosed gardens, while “the rather ‘counter-cultural’ beliefs of the Brook Farm (and Blithedale) inhabitants compare favorably with an early example of picturesque, suburban development,” namely the real-life suburb of Llewellyn Park. Hudson’s assumption, that the antebellum American suburbs were geographically and socially planned communities for a wealthy cultural elite, almost predetermines his discovery of the theme of artificiality in early suburban fiction. It also suggests a reason for his overlooking early- and mid-nineteenth-century texts that feature middle-class suburban communities of a more spontaneous, individualistic, rural character—books such as Caroline Lee Hentz’s *Lovell’s Folly*, Frederick S. Cozzens’s *The Sparrowgrass Papers*, and Robert Barry Coffin’s *Out of Town*.

Because comparisons and contrasts between suburban settings and the real suburbs seem unavoidable, literary scholars should explicitly define and theorize what they mean by
“suburbia.” Setting can be fruitfully used in other ways for this process of classification. In researching this dissertation, I have looked for literary texts that describe themselves as suburban—Howells’s *Suburban Sketches* and Henry Cuyler Bunner’s *The Suburban Sage* for instance—or that employ that term in descriptions of their settings and characters. I do not take an author’s word as the stamp certifying a text as suburban fiction, of course. Instead, setting offers a place to begin questioning why the term is used and whether the text might fit the classification somehow.

This approach has led me to consider several texts not previously discussed under this rubric, including Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. In the case of the former, the suburban setting is ultimately incidental to the character-driven moral drama staged by Alcott’s domestic fiction, despite the elements of suburban ideology that infrequently crop up (e.g., the March girls’ fantasy of living farther away from the city, out beyond their “Delectable Mountain”). Nabokov’s story seems very different from conventional postwar suburban fiction in both style and theme, since it is often read as a late modernist or postmodernist allegory about the relationship between decadent Europe and vulgar America. Nevertheless, I think we should include *Lolita* in the subgenre because of its surprisingly conventional portrayal of the postwar suburban landscape in relation to the novel’s themes of social control, surveillance, and obscenity.

The sheer number of credible themes found by the five critics demonstrates my second principle, namely, that it is productive and necessary to define subgenre in multiple ways, whether understood as comprised of sequential phases or coexisting, overlapping features. Even a single work can demonstrate multiple genre characteristics. For instance, Beuka finds in Updike’s “Rabbit” novels that the entrapping suburbs cause a crisis of masculinity, whereas
Pagano discovers in those same books that suburban sexuality expresses religious angst, and Jurca takes the idea of suburban entrapment in Updike’s fiction as further evidence for her white diaspora thesis. I see no need to decide upon one correct way of reading. We should avoid defining the subgenre based upon a single, unchanging characteristic. We should consider the whole range of formal literary elements including theme, symbol, and of course setting, as well as transliterary qualities such as the text’s verisimilitude and function (i.e., cultural work). We should be open to allegorical as well as literal representations of suburbia.

This inclusive approach suggests that we should also consider the broadest possible historical scope, trying to address the entire phenomenon as Hudson and Pagano do, rather than taking a more synchronic view like Jurca’s and Kenyon’s. At the same time, we must try to avoid Pagano’s problem of disjointedness, not letting a diachronic perspective lead us into making a series of unrelated observations. Thus, a third principle emerges: while accepting multiple genre characteristics and the discontinuities (cf. Michel Foucault) they might introduce into any theorization, we need to attempt some articulations between the different moments. In other words, we need to produce a narrative about suburban literature as a whole. Here is the reason to historicize, or consider how the subgenre transforms over time, and we should look to the extraliterary realm to help explain such transformations.

Testing fiction for its verisimilitude, however, seems unproductive. The purpose of this activity, so far as I can tell, is either to naively endorse some fiction because of its mimetic quality (Beuka’s tendency), or else to expose false representations as ideological mystifications (Jurca’s intention). All fiction is fictional and ideological, a fact Jurca fails to remember when she surprisingly uses Richard Wright’s *Native Son* “as a kind of reality check, to gauge through Wright the real injuries inflicted on those who are denied the opportunity to become upwardly
mobile in the suburbs.” She is much better at hypothesizing about the cultural work performed by the suburban novel, particularly through her memorable concept of the white diaspora. Speculating about this cultural work, or what I have called the function (as opposed to the form) of literature, is perhaps the terminal point for all genre-oriented criticism. We must explain what the greater significance of the suburban subgenre is and why we have invented such a categorization. Fredric Jameson makes the point this way: “all generic categories, even the most time-hallowed and traditional, are ultimately to be understood (or ‘estranged’) as mere ad hoc, experimental constructs, devised for a specific textual occasion and abandoned like so much scaffolding when the analysis has done its work.”

A New Account of Suburban Literature

This study takes as its point of departure the conventional wisdom that suburban literature disparages suburban life. Discontent with the suburbs, as voiced by self-critical suburbanite characters, is by almost all scholarly accounts a primary defining quality of the subgenre. I want to complicate this commonplace by looking more closely at nineteenth-century fiction. In the texts from this period that I believe belong in the subgenre—the majority of which happen to be sketchbooks—discontent with the nascent suburban environment certainly appears, but its causes differ from the sources of such feelings in twentieth-century novels. The typical suburbanite character, newly arrived from the city, is dismayed by the difficulties of housekeeping, horticulture, and recreation. Middle-class expectations are challenged by the lack of genteel “society,” the trouble of importing urban conveniences, the boredom endemic to the borderlands, the opportunity that rural leisure provides for “misadventures,” and the potential for shame through interactions with the rural working class.

That is to say, nineteenth-century texts portray the early suburbs as potentially failing at their basic function: the social reproduction of the existing white middle class through various
practices of “distinction,” to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term. These practices usually operate through physical exclusions rooted in classism, racism, or anti-urbanism. They also work by making exceptions to the dominant rules governing capitalist space. Suburbs become such alternative spaces when local governments impose restrictive covenants on land use, for instance, or when residents imagine their suburb as “private” space, an ideological extension of the home as “haven in a heartless world.” In most nineteenth-century fictions, the suburbs are portrayed as insufficiently exclusive or exceptional. In keeping with this representation, the most notable formal characteristic shared by these texts is a theme of “indistinction.”

Fiction writers articulate their concerns about the disorganizing effects of suburban life upon middle-class identity through other literary features as well. The picturesque aesthetic offers a way to convert rustic nature into a source of social status, but the satirical treatment of the picturesque aesthetic by some authors subverts the pastoral image of suburbia. The amateurish, unfinished quality of the sketchbook form can indicate the leisureliness of suburban life and an ability to make light of misfortune, yet sketching also connotes the ill-defined, fragmentary quality of suburban life. The appearance of characters and settings that are not restricted to the white middle class and their suburbs, finally, offers an opportunity for flattering social contrasts or alternatively decries the instability of social boundaries. These formal and stylistic similarities demarcate a first phase of the subgenre. My notion that nineteenth-century suburban fiction displays its own type of discontent differs from the view of previous literary critics, who tend to read all suburban fiction as condemning the suburbia for the very qualities that make it suburban (e.g., artificiality, an absence of tradition, detachment). By contrast, I find in nineteenth-century fiction a concern about the lack of suburban-ness of the suburbs, or what I
am calling their indistinction, signifying an inscrutability as well as an inability to provide the
desired social status.

If the cultural work of nineteenth-century suburban fiction is to some degree the
“settlement,” to use Amy Kaplan’s term, or “making familiar,” to use Philip Fisher’s phrase, of
an emerging social environment, then the “symbolic landscape” produced is not totally
hospitable to suburbanites.57 Rather than allowing newcomers to make an effortless transition,
the fictional suburbs pressure middle-class residents to adjust their expectations and attitudes
about their social distinctiveness. Suburban discontent gets resolved in three ways. In the
antebellum texts by Caroline Lee Hentz and Alice Cary, suburbanites forego fashionable urban
culture and genteel society in order to construct their group identity around the suburban house,
the nuclear family, and rustic nature—or else they suffer the consequences. In the mid-century
writings of Frederick S. Cozzens and Robert Barry Coffin, an accommodation with suburban life
is reached by assuming a humorous, sarcastic, self-deprecating attitude about the suburbanites’
various misadventures and foiled expectations. An increasing appreciation of rural nature and
particularly the seasons is also common, whether serving in the women’s fiction as a sign of
virtue, or else as a consolation for lessened social status in the men’s.

The best-known author of the group, William Dean Howells, introduces a third narrative
pattern for the Gilded Age. His middle-class suburban narrator attempts to romanticize and
aestheticize nearby racial and ethnic minorities as well as the homeless. The goal is to interpolate
these figures into a narrative that flatters the suburbanite’s sense of himself and of the
metropolitan social order. The result is often frustration and pessimism, because he discovers
disturbing signs of social change and gritty realities that hinder his imagination. Finally, three
turn-of-the-century authors—Mary Stewart Cutting, Henry Cuyler Bunner, and Henry A.
Beers—each replicate one of the established narrative patterns. The first writes a morally didactic tale opposing suburban materialism and fashionability, the second produces a Horatian satire of suburban inexperience and pretense, and the third mocks suburban romanticism and gentility in the mode of Juvenalian satire. The theme of indistinction determines each of the nineteenth-century subgenre’s three narrative patterns.

Many traits of the subgenre change with the turn of the century, as sketches give way to novels that focus more and more exclusively upon the white middle-class suburbs and their residents. Indeed, this restricting field of vision has undoubtedly contributed to the ideological linkage of “the suburbs” on the whole with this one demographic group, despite the existence of other types of suburbs and suburbanites throughout American history, as revisionist scholars have recently re-emphasized. Forging a link between suburbia and this group has possibly been the most successful act of cultural work performed by the suburban novel. I speculate that the literary change occurred partially in response to the increasing success of the real suburbs at resolving their previous shortcomings. Developments in transportation and domestic technology, for instance, allowed middle-class suburbanites to enjoy a “respectable” standard of living while actually increasing their distance and separation from urban centers. Legalized racial covenants, zoning regulations, the racist policies of government agencies such as the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC), and other such legislation further ensured the exclusivity, stability, and distinction of the white suburbs. In light of these changes, it seems unsurprising that in the twentieth-century novels, the suburban boundary appears less permeable and the qualities distinguishing suburban life become more obvious. The novelistic changes in both setting and field of vision seem to reflect an increasing belief in the suburbs as foundational—rather than threatening—to white middle-class identity and distinction.
Despite the apparent success of the early-twentieth-century suburbs at performing their original function, the characteristic discontentment persists in suburban fiction, though not without significant changes too. The loose, anticlimactic narrative structure of the sketches gives way to a new “suburban” plot centered upon a white, middle-class man’s dissatisfaction with his marriage, home, and career, leading to an adulterous affair and a family crisis that is resolved by accidental violence or death. I take the emergence of this dominant plot—not found in every novel to be sure—as symptomatic of a general shift in the subgenre’s perception of the suburbs. No longer is discontent principally oriented toward the suburbs’ perceived failure at consolidating middle-class identity, its inability to create a distinctively middle-class way of life or to ward off threats from outside the suburb. Instead, the problems portrayed in many twentieth-century suburban novels seem to be caused, ironically, by the suburbs’ very success at creating an exclusive, respectable, thoroughly middle-class social geography. Some of these problems include the collapse of the bourgeois intimate sphere, the emergence of a minimalistic social order characterized by conflict avoidance and disengaged tolerance, and the growth of suburban sprawl—as I will elaborate through my discussions of Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, and Joyce Carol Oates’s *Expensive People*, respectively. I explain this turnabout by proposing that the suburbs’ success leads to their transformation, as additional capitalist functions such as consumerism and deterritorialization are introduced and incite conflicts over the suburbs’ previous exceptions to the rules governing capitalist space. Therefore, the new problems presented in literary treatments of the suburbs can often be interpreted as representing the unintended consequences or side effects of suburbia’s success at providing distinction.
This irony is the most distinguishing and provocative characteristic of the twentieth-century suburban novel. Discontent in the face of apparent success becomes the new dominant theme, replacing the nineteenth-century one of concern about indistinction. Indeed, the beginning of the twentieth century marks a wholesale “transformation of genre,” as the setting and field of vision are restricted, a new master plot materializes, the symbolism changes, and ultimately the very image or “symbolic landscape” of suburbia changes. Nineteenth-century suburban fiction remains either guardedly optimistic or disconcertedly resigned about the future of suburbia. By contrast, the twentieth-century subgenre provides an almost uninterrupted chronicle of the contradictoriness, defectiveness, and intolerability of the suburban way of life. Marking this change in attitude is the newly ubiquitous motif of the collapse of a suburban family, often through a death, the opposite of nineteenth-century domestic fiction’s comic ending with marriage (Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*) or family reunited (Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). Indeed, I would consider another name for the twentieth-century subgenre to be “anti-domestic fiction,” because of its orientation toward male characters as well as its reversal of the earlier tendency to “glorify the home” (to borrow a phrase from Nabokov).

In making these generalizations, I do not want to imply that the irony I have described appears in every single twentieth-century suburban novel, nor do I intend my way of reading to completely discount those of previous critics. I would like to believe that my narrative could subsume these other accounts, putting their ideas into a new framework. In the end, though, mine is as partial—in other words, as incomplete and biased—as any other attempt at genre criticism. As Bourdieu observes:

> Attribution is always implicitly based on reference to “typical works,” consciously or unconsciously selected because they present to a particularly high degree the qualities more or less explicitly recognized as pertinent in a given system of classification. Everything suggests that, even among specialists, the criteria of
pertinence which define the stylistic properties of “typical works” generally remain implicit and that the aesthetic taxonomies implicitly mobilized to distinguish, classify and order works of art never have the rigour which aesthetic theories sometimes try to lend them.62

Notes


5 Ibid., 210, 212.


9 Ibid., 12.


12 Ibid., 13.

13 Ibid., 19.

14 Ibid., 11.


18 Muller, Contemporary Suburban America, 4.

19 Sharpe and Wallock, “Bold New City,” 2.

20 Fishman, Bourgeois Utopias, 5.

21 Ibid., 135.
22 Ibid., 17.


25 Ibid., 7.


34 Ibid., 69, 97-8.

35 Ibid., 103.


37 Ibid., 5.

38 Ibid., 161.

39 Ibid., 169.

40 Ibid., 28.


42 Ibid., 2.


45 Ibid., 16.

46 Beuka does acknowledge in his reading of the film *The Stepford Wives* that men are the beneficiaries of women’s domestic oppression. Nevertheless, he does not disclose who is responsible for men’s “embattled place within a confining, alienating suburban milieu” in John Updike’s *Rabbit Redux* or the film *The Graduate* (*SuburbiaNation*,
114), or explain “the alienating effects of bourgeois life on African American identity and community” in *Linden Hills* (214).

47 Ibid., 228.

48 My suggestion draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who promotes a “relational” sociology able to recognize “the two-way relationship between objective structures (those of social fields) and incorporated structures (those of the habitus),” or what he calls using less technical language institutions and agents (*Practical Reason* [Stanford, C.A.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998], vii). This vision drives Bourdieu’s critique of rationalism, which overestimates the “autonomous individual, fully conscious of his or her motivations,” and of structuralism, which tends to reduce agents “to simple epiphenomena of structure” (viii).


50 Ibid., 173.

51 The geographer Mark Gottdiener stresses the need to acknowledge such complexity in theorizing urban processes. Aligning himself with Bourdieu and the structurationist school of social theory, Gottdiener faults urban ecologists, functionalists, and Marxist geographers for various reductive ideas such as demand-driven development and the unity of capitalist class interests. He instead emphasizes “the dialectical relation between structure and agency” in order to explain the uneven, uncoordinated, and often irrational process of urban growth (*The Social Production of Urban Space*, 2nd ed. [Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1985], 206).


53 Hudson, “From Nowhere to Everywhere,” 8, 65.


56 I would like to acknowledge my debt to John R. Stilgoe’s *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988) as the source for most of the early suburban literature I have located.


59 In keeping with this realignment, I have noticed a repeated trope of minor characters owning expensive houses that are rumored to contain no interior furnishings. This trope demonstrates the absolute centrality of the house as a marker of status—and the symbolic “emptiness” of suburban aspirations. For an example, see Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People* (1968; reprint, Princeton, N.J.: Ontario Review Press, 1990), 44.


61 Compare this with Jurca’s similar suggestion (*White Diaspora*, 11).

CHAPTER 2
THE INDISTINCTION OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY SUBURBAN FICTION

A Contrary Aesthetic

The thesis of this chapter can be stated negatively: nineteenth-century suburban fiction is not a premature anticipation of the properly twentieth-century subgenre. By locating the origins of the suburban subgenre in the antebellum period, I am beginning earlier than most accounts do. Two of the three published books about suburban literature, Amy Maria Kenyon’s and Robert Beuka’s, do not mention any nineteenth-century texts, an absence potentially reinforcing the popular misconception that suburbia and its literature are twentieth-century phenomena.¹ Furthermore, I propose that the nineteenth-century texts I will discuss in this chapter constitute a discrete phase within the larger subgenre. Unlike Catherine Jurca, Edward Christopher Hudson, and Rachel Pagano, I do not consider them as offering early and perhaps less-developed iterations of twentieth-century fiction’s themes.² My account emphasizes discontinuity, theorizing a break within the subgenre occurring between the turn of the century and the publication of the definitive twentieth-century suburban novel, Sinclair Lewis’s Babbitt (1922). Indeed, a larger argument of my dissertation is that we can better understand twentieth-century suburban novels by contrasting them with their nineteenth-century predecessors.

The eight primary texts I am considering under this rubric are: Caroline Lee Hentz’s Lovell’s Folly: A Novel (1833); Alice Cary’s Clovernook, or, Recollections of Our Neighborhood in the West (1852), a short story collection; Frederick S. Cozzens’s The Sparrowgrass Papers, or Living in the Country (1856), a sketchbook; Robert Barry Coffin’s Out of Town: A Rural Episode (1866), a sketchbook; William Dean Howells’s Suburban Sketches (1871); Henry A. Beers’s short story “A Suburban Pastoral” (1894); Henry Cuyler Bunner’s The Suburban Sage:
Stray Notes and Comments on His Simple Life (1896), a sketchbook; and Mary Stewart Cutting’s short story “The Suburban Whirl” (1907).

The primary way that I identify nineteenth-century suburban fiction is through a theme of “indistinction.” Playing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of distinction, which refers to a process of class stratification through cultural mechanisms such as taste, I argue that my nineteenth-century texts tend to evaluate suburban space and culture as potentially inadequate for delineating and promoting middle-class identity. The typical suburbanite character, newly arrived from the city, is dismayed by the difficulties of housekeeping, horticulture, and recreation. Middle-class expectations are challenged by the lack of genteel “society,” the trouble of importing urban conveniences, the boredom endemic to the borderlands, the opportunity that rural leisure provides for “misadventures,” and the potential of being shamed through interactions with the rural working class. This contrariness to middle-class expectations leads to suburbia’s “indistinction,” signifying a sort of inscrutability as well as an inability to provide the desired social status.

The two other major defining features of nineteenth-century suburban fiction are the picturesque aesthetic and the sketch form. Both have an unquestionable affinity to middle-class suburbia; indeed, all three concepts first developed in British bourgeois culture at nearly the same time. Adapted to American literary purposes, the picturesque and the sketch are used to articulate—and sometimes alleviate—suburban indistinction. The picturesque, with its celebration of mixture and irregularity, provides a way to turn the unfamiliar new space into a proper literary setting, and specifically to convert rustic nature into a source of middle-class social status by virtue of its aestheticization as a “landscape.” Similarly, the amateurish, unfinished quality of the verbal sketch, a literary form well suited to narrating unexplored spaces,
can signify the genteel leisure characteristic of suburban life. During the Gilded Age, however, 
the satirical treatment of the picturesque aesthetic by a few American authors subverts the 
pastoral ideal of suburbia, while the ephemerality of the sketch comes to signify the ill-defined, 
fragmentary quality of suburban life and its failure to sustain literary narration.

In the introduction to my dissertation, I faulted previous critics of the subgenre for not 
always sufficiently demonstrating the specifically “suburban” quality of fiction. While 
verisimilitude should not be the determining qualification for inclusion in the subgenre, literary 
scholars must avoid writing about “suburbia” as an ahistorical abstraction or classifying texts 
through formal literary characteristics alone, when the subgenre’s name and many of its texts’ 
titles reference a geographical place. This subgenre is both fascinating and frustrating because of 
the difficult necessity of negotiating the fiction-reality relationship. My chapter begins with a 
brief history of the early suburbs, in order to demonstrate how the literary theme of indistinction 
corresponds to a specific period and type of suburbanization: middle-class residential 
communities circa 1830-1900. These suburbs, along with the fiction that depicted them, 
functioned as part of a broader cultural effort to redefine the middle class. Without claiming that 
nineteenth-century suburban fiction is or is not mimetic, I want to suggest an affinity or 
“mediation” between this literature and reality.³

A Brief History of Early Middle-Class Suburbia

Through the first decades of the nineteenth century, American cities still conformed to a 
pattern that had dominated in Europe and the Near East since ancient times. The premodern 
suburb functioned as a distinct zone for commercial uses that were deemed inappropriate for the 
city—noxious industries and nuisances such as animal slaughtering, soapmaking, and 
prostitution. As a result, residence on the periphery was less desirable; as Kenneth T. Jackson 
notes, “Even the word suburb suggested inferior manners, narrowness of view, and physical
squalor.” These conditions were replicated in the United States. “The new homes of the wealthy in Georgian London were built cheek to jowl, and the eastern seaboard cities of the United States followed the London fashion,” writes John J. Palen; “Even small towns built housing side by side while surrounded by mile upon mile of vacant land.”

America’s urban fringe, according to Henry C. Binford’s study of antebellum Boston, was most distinguishable by the economy particular to its liminal space. He observes that “opportunity lay in roads, taverns, teaming, and the brokerage or processing of farm goods” for the urban market. Suburban entrepreneurs attempted to turn a profit by speculating on land along future transportation routes, building toll roads and bridges, and establishing “specialized, city-oriented” industries such as brickworks. The majority of residents were people whose business took place on the fringe. They were neither farmers nor commuters traveling to urban workplaces—regular mass transportation by omnibus or rail was not established in Boston until the 1850s. The suburbs did provide residences for a small number of individuals looking for an alternative to city life, people either wealthy enough to afford private transportation to a country estate or else physically able to walk long distances. Despite the bucolic appearance of the suburbs, their role as a “retreat” from the city or the world of work was hardly dominant at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

By the 1820s, America’s cities began to seem oppressive and uninhabitable to the middle class for several well-recognized reasons: rapid urban growth, industrialization, foreign immigration, and proletarianization. Although U.S. cities were not as crowded or polluted as European ones, the American bourgeoisie had reasonable fears about class conflict and social revolution, fears embodied by the urban poor and foreign-born workers. Ironically, the very same capitalist system that allowed the rise of the middle class also threatened its survival. The
coupling of social status to economic wealth, the myth of democratic “classlessness,” the figure of the “self-made man,” and the belief in the possibility of upward mobility through seizing “the main chance” all contributed to migration into the cities, a destabilized class structure, and increased economic as well as social competition. In other words, the changes wrought by industrial capitalism to society, culture, and space threatened the existing mechanisms of middle-class “distinction,” Pierre Bourdieu’s term for the process of creating social classes. In the face of this threat, the American middle class developed several new strategies for their own self-preservation and social reproduction as a class, including sentiment and sincerity, domesticity, and suburbia.

Sentiment and sincerity provide an instructive example for understanding how these new strategies of distinction functioned. A cult of sentiment and sincerity emerged in the 1830s, according to Karen Halttunen, and its code of conduct functioned as “a barrier to be surmounted by those who wished to enter the ranks of the genteel.” Proper etiquette and “natural” feeling helped to shore up middle-class identity against the threat presented by a growing number of urban strangers and social climbers—including the confidence man, the painted woman, and the vulgar nouveau riche. Sincerity and sentiment, like the character and virtue that they revealed, were formerly religious concepts, invoked as substitute means of distinction, because qualities such as economic success (or the semblance of it) were not by themselves sufficient to perpetuate the existing middle class. As Halttunen observes, “sincerity was not an economic category, it was a matter of morality.” Sentiment and sincerity thus served as an exception to the culture of capitalism, an external means to prop up the internally unstable system.

To produce distinction through sentiment and sincerity required not only a social code but also “the social production of space,” namely the creation of a new social geography centered
upon the parlor. Halttunen theorizes this room as a liminal zone “between the urban street
where strangers freely mingled and the back regions of the house where only family members
were permitted to enter uninvited.” The parlor provided the space in which genteel behavior
was tested through the display of polite manners and heart-felt sentiment, and the convention of
making social calls allowed for rude, pretentious, and hypocritical individuals to be excluded. I
would therefore describe sincerity and sentiment as a strategy for distinction through practices of
exception and exclusion. (By contrast, taste—the subject of Bourdieu’s Distinction—operates
through naturalization and consumption.)

Domesticity and suburbia have a surprising amount in common with sincerity and
sentiment. All are strategies for distinction through exception and exclusion. The cult of
domesticity, for instance, barred certain elements of capitalist production and labor from the
private home, in order to provide an alternate means of stability for middle-class individuals in
the face of an unpredictable economy and a transforming social order. The “true” middle-class
woman, as the “Angel of the House,” was responsible for creating a “respectable” home
environment that would exert a moral influence upon the family—without her performing visible
work, particularly waged labor. The privatized, domesticated family, in turn, provided for “the
smooth reproduction of class differences” in the absence of other social mechanisms that could
reliably transmit middle-class values. All three strategies for distinction, it should be
emphasized, involve the social production of space. Indeed, we can imagine their spaces as
nested, the parlor inside the house within the suburb.

America’s middle-class residential suburbs, which emerged in the 1820s and 30s and came
into vogue by the 1870s, were not only the most geographically extensive of these strategies, but
also arguably the most socially transformative and enduring. The new suburban pattern was
another invention imported from England, where this type of settlement space first developed in response to the conditions of mid-eighteenth-century London. “By the beginning of the nineteenth century London was surrounded by a ring of [bourgeois] suburbs,” says Robert Fishman, though “language lagged behind reality. It was not until the 1840s that the word ‘suburb’ lost its older, primarily plebian associations and became firmly attached to the middle-class residential neighborhood.”14 To achieve the same result, the American version deployed a complex set of exceptions and exclusions, which I will discuss under the headings of anti-capitalism, classism, and anti-urbanism.

Similar to domesticity, middle-class suburbia attempted to expel most forms of capitalist production and exchange, these being the root of so many urban problems. The new residential communities attempted to displace the fringe economy and also repel larger industrial operations that sought cheap, spacious locations outside the city. Suburban space, Dolores Hayden observes, became the site of a “conflict between those who viewed the landscape as a place to rest from profiting elsewhere and those who viewed it as a place to make a profit,” a conflict that persists to this day.15 One ironic danger in this regard came from the new residents themselves, who were habituated by their class position to understand land as a commodity and investment. If the price was right, most were all too willing to sell their homes and move elsewhere, no matter the impact that the sale would have on their neighbors’ property if a nuisance such as a tenement or business establishment was erected. To prevent the deterioration of property values and the recreation of urban conditions, legal instruments such as covenants—which date back to the late eighteenth century in America—and deed restrictions began to be adopted in more expensive, planned communities.16 These conditions governing the use of land were the forerunners of modern zoning, and by submitting to them, suburbanites sacrificed some of their property rights in order
to safeguard their class position against the inherent risks of capitalism. In other words, they subordinated the principles of private ownership and exchange to the alternate values of permanence, community, unspoiled nature, and quiet. We might therefore consider suburbia as a “state of exception”—or contradiction, to use the more conventional Marxist term—within capitalist society.\textsuperscript{17} Suburbanites did not relinquish their property rights without resistance. Fogelson records that “as late as the 1880s, the imposition of restrictive covenants was very much the exception,” and the use of such devices only caught on around the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{18}

Excluding capitalist production and exchange had the additional benefit of excluding capitalist labor, the class of workers that was the focal point of bourgeois anxiety about distinction. Covenants, for instance, disadvantaged those who were most likely to be engaged in “noxious” industries, who often desired to raise livestock or lodge other “nuisances” on their property, and who were less able to separate work from home. Commuting by omnibus, train, or horsecar remained relatively expensive and time-consuming, and only with the introduction of the electric trolley in the 1890s did the working class begin to adopt the “riding habit.”\textsuperscript{19} The cost of suburban houses was another indirect means to achieve exclusivity, a fact that partially explains the increasing popularity of middle-class community building. Whereas the solitary villa or “gentleman’s estate” was the dominant type of middle-class residence constructed on the antebellum borderlands, after the Civil War the trend in suburbanization favored designed communities, or what Jackson calls “romantic suburbs” and Hayden terms “picturesque enclaves.” The working class was not the only group excluded by design. For example, suburb builders would establish Protestant churches within their developments in order to attract people of those faiths, rather than Catholics and Jews.\textsuperscript{20} In addition, Jews, African-Americans, and
Asian-Americans were simply refused as buyers—although legalized racial covenants did not come into common use until around 1910-1920.\footnote{21}

These examples give a broad outline of the postbellum effort to associate a particular type of space—planned residential suburbs—with the middle class and the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) identity, by excluding “undesirables” of other classes, races, ethnicities, national origins, and religions. The strategy was largely a success. “By the 1870s,” claims Jackson, “the word \textit{suburb} no longer implied inferiority or derision” to Americans.\footnote{22} Of course, the increasing fashionability of suburbia meant that it became an aspiration of the petty bourgeoisie and even the working class, one that a new breed of real-estate developer sought to satisfy. “From the 1870s on,” Hayden writes, “subdividers of land near city centers provided a cut-rate version of the verdant residential ideal expressed in the picturesque enclaves.”\footnote{23} These “streetcar suburbs” employed mass-production techniques and other innovations in transportation, construction, financing, and marketing to build “affordable homes for the common man” (Jackson’s phrase) in the image of bourgeois suburbia. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., considers the streetcar suburbs as “the attempt by a mass of people, each with but one small house and a lot, to achieve what previously had been the pattern of life of a few rich families with two large houses and ample land.”\footnote{24} Again, the expansive logic of the capitalist system threatened the stability of the social distinctions it originated.

Teasing out these elements of anti-capitalism and classism is not sufficient to explain the rise of the Anglo-American middle-class suburb as a strategy for distinction. The French bourgeoisie shared the same Victorian ideals of domesticity, privacy, and class segregation, according to Robert Fishman, “but, lacking the Puritan tradition of the Evangelicals, they saw no contradiction between family life and the pleasures of urban culture.”\footnote{25} Haussmann rebuilt Paris
with bourgeois apartment houses along the central boulevards, pushing industry and the poor out to the periphery. Americans, by contrast, were more inclined to anti-urbanism, due to the Puritan tradition that juxtaposed nature against the evils of the city, but much more so because of a revival of Jeffersonian republican ideology. Moving to the suburbs to be a “gentleman farmer”—or at least live in a rural-looking landscape—allowed the WASP middle-class man to tap into the mythic power of the yeoman, a potent symbol for the political nativism that developed at mid-century in reaction to industrial capitalism and the urban crisis. To construct “true” American identity through such imagery required a disingenuous slight-of-hand, of course, since almost all middle-class suburbanites remained bound to an urban economy—as evidenced by the commuter phenomenon. Nevertheless, social barriers could be shored up through such anti-urban gestures: hence, the exclusion from suburbia of saloons, tenements, gambling dens, and prostitution houses. These institutions of urban culture were associated by the bourgeoisie with lower-class immorality and vice. Banning them not only kept away the undesirables but also kept out of reach temptations that might cause the middle class to abandon its distinctive values of thrift, temperance, and industry.

The suburbs provided a space for the regeneration of middle-class manhood as well. Describing the mid-nineteenth-century crisis in male identity, Michael Kimmel writes: “Manhood had meant autonomy and self-control, but now fewer and fewer American men owned their own shops, controlled their own labor, owned their own farms.” Suburban residence could potentially restore manhood through its semblance of rural life. In the words of Margaret Marsh: “If a man could not be a farmer, he could at least be close to nature, on his own plot of ground, in his own house.” The yeoman of republican ideology thus served as a masculine as well as nationalist figure. The same Jeffersonian rhetoric meanwhile denigrated
urban life through accusations of luxury and decadence, both gendered as feminine qualities. The role of gender in the genesis of American middle-class suburbia is often overlooked, according to Marsh. Men were its first pioneers and promoters, she observes, while Victorian middle-class women generally remained hopeful about reforming the city in line with the ideology of domesticity. Marsh contends that suburbia and domesticity “developed independently, from different political needs and from different sources.” Not until the turn of the century did these two ideologies begin to merge, producing a “new suburban domestic ideal” that she identifies with “companionate marriages, ‘expert’ mothers, and masculine domesticity.” The reactionary agenda of middle-class white men helps to explain the emergence of this anti-urban space.

The suburban opposition to city life involved not only exclusion but also exception, or an alternative set of values, practices, and symbols such as the yeoman. As Hayden recognizes, “Middle-class families who sought out the borderland needed to define the material culture appropriate to new settings.” This culture was greatly influenced by the earliest suburban architects and pattern book writers, including Andrew Jackson Downing, Catharine Beecher, and Frederick Law Olmsted. Their attention concentrated on two areas, the landscape and the house, each of which was densely encoded. The ideal middle-class suburban yard featured decorative plantings in asymmetrical groupings on an irregular plot of land along a curvilinear road in a parklike setting—the antithesis of the urban gridiron lot. The values embedded in such a landscape—and indeed, the now commonplace idea of “landscape” as an arranged yet natural environment, experienced visually—were drawn from the picturesque aesthetic.

Lying between the sublime and the beautiful, the picturesque is a principle of mixture, irregularity, naturalness, and artistic arrangement. According to John Conron, “the term ‘picturesque’ (‘like a picture’) itself valorizes visual arrangements that look like paintings.”
“The Picturesque,” as Sidney K. Robinson explains, “tried to occupy a shifting position that mixed an obvious and conventionally geometric artifice with an irregular, less apparent artifice derived from nature.” Robinson adds that the picturesque also dictates “the use of less power than is available to compose the parts in an arrangement that does not press for a conclusion. To tolerate some irregularity, to risk withholding complete control means that the Picturesque depends on a preexisting condition of plenitude.” The theory, formulated in the late eighteenth century by British intellectuals, has a bourgeois and aristocratic origin (implied by the reserved power and comfortable plenitude), and the partisanship of the picturesque toward those classes would persist when put into practice creating the American suburbs.

Understanding the suburban yard as a picturesque landscape, a space organized for aesthetic pleasure similar to a work of art, exposes the class affiliations and values of the residents. For instance, the newly popular mid-century practices of “botanizing” and “horticulture” advertised the time and money suburbanites could afford to spend finding, identifying, acquiring, and growing ornamental flowers, shrubs, and trees. The suburban yard characterized by unproductiveness and irregularity contrasts with rural agricultural land featuring “square houses on square farms beautified by few trees and many straight furrows.” The yard’s bucolic expansiveness, furthermore, intentionally disregards the urgency of more intensively developing and occupying space in urban areas. In opposition to both the city and the country, the suburb and its yard proclaim the luxury of aestheticized real estate. Although the city remained almost completely antithetical because of its unavoidable associations with industrial capitalism, certain aspects of rural life could be “mixed” into the suburban picturesque. Old farmhouses, country churches, haystacks, and other artifacts, when viewed from an appropriate distance, could appear “quaint” and “rustic,” providing suburbanites with material for aesthetic
enjoyment. The security of distance kept suburbanites from experiencing the actual conditions of rural life. John R. Stilgoe puts the matter concisely: “picturesqueness masked poverty.”

My retelling of nineteenth-century suburban history has stressed the role played by distinction. By foregrounding social competition, I have tended to ignore other factors that contributed to suburbanization, such as transportation technology, housing costs, government policies, or real estate entrepreneurs, factors that suburban historians have considered at least as determinate. My choice might also seem to condemn nineteenth-century middle-class suburbanites as conservative, status-obsessed bigots who looked to maintain their privilege through their every action. Suburbanization could certainly be understood in more flattering ways. The goal of inhabiting a more sanitary environment than the polluted Victorian city seems laudable, for instance, as does the desire to incorporate the experience of undeveloped “natural” space into everyday life. Indeed, the suburban ethos of aestheticized space seems closer to the romantic view of nature than to the vulgar utilitarianism of Victorian capitalism. Suburbia has an affinity to the various practices that Jackson Lears analyzes under the rubric of “antimodernism,” not the least of which being that all resist aspects of modern industrial capitalist life, even as they simultaneously struggle to retain cultural hegemony for fractions of the upper- and middle classes. Suburbia cannot be explained or evaluated through reference to distinction alone, but distinction has the benefit of further illuminating the most prominent feature I find in nineteenth-century suburban fiction, the theme of indistinction.

“A Model of the Purest Simplicity”: Hentz and Cary

The oldest work of fiction I have located that addresses American suburbia is Caroline Lee Hentz’s Lovell’s Folly: A Novel (1833). The book is unusual for being the only novel in its category and for being relatively optimistic about suburbia’s effect on the middle class—related qualities, I will later argue. Hentz presents two archetypes for suburbanites, one to avoid and the
other to emulate. She begins with the former, exemplified by the titular Lovell, “a rich old bachelor, whose affections having no legitimate channels, diverged into many eccentric courses. Architecture became his ruling passion, and having no children to transmit his name to posterity, he determined to leave a monument” in the form of “a stately mansion.”\textsuperscript{41} This villa “he at first intended to be a model of the purest simplicity, but his taste luxuriating as the work went on,” Lovell’s house ultimately exhibited a garish assortment of architectural styles, further accentuated by lifelike statues of Generals Washington and Bonaparte, “party colored nymphs, and Adonises, and last, not least, his own figure” (\textit{LF} 8-9). When the construction costs exceeded his means, Lovell fell into debt. Going mad from public ridicule, he haunts the village of Cloverdale as a vagabond.\textsuperscript{42} 

The notoriety of this monument to pride, known locally as Lovell’s Folly, attracted Mr. Marriwood, a widower, who left the city and moved himself and his adult daughter Penitence into the mansion. Marriwood envisions himself becoming the “honored nabob of the country” by restoring the house, renamed La Grange, “in a style which was intended to dazzle the untried gaze of the villagers” (\textit{LF} 10, 12). All these events occurred in the novel’s recent past; the Marriwoods have been residents of Cloverdale for a few years, and the village is “gradually becoming a favorite summer retreat of some of the metropolitans” (\textit{LF} 6). This influx of city folk has led to a transformation: “Cloverdale, like a rustic beauty, inflated by the consciousness of her charms, began to assume the refinements and graces of the metropolitan belle” (\textit{LF} 8). The moral coding of Hentz’s language reveals the tensions within antebellum suburbia: rustic simplicity and beauty are opposed to metropolitan luxury and refinement.

Penitence, who becomes a principal antagonist, represents everything that troubles Hentz about the new middle-class suburb. Penitence is fashionable and vain, yet physically unattractive
and no longer young. She shares her father’s ambition of cultivating a select society in their
drawing room. As she tells a newcomer, “there are really some very genteel and even stylish
families here; and as to the rest, you are not obliged to be so very particular in the country as in
the city. One can afford to be condescending you know, and then there is so much pleasure in
imparting pleasure!” (LF 46). Further demonstrating the Marriwood’s lack of domestic virtue is
the symbolic absence of a mother/wife in their home. Despite the allusive last name, Penitence
risks spinsterhood and producing no heir to inherit the sizeable family fortune—reprising
Lovell’s fate. Lovell and the Marriwoods demonstrate how suburban life potentially threatens
middle-class distinction by leading them into such follies.

The Rovington family, by contrast, are Hentz’s model suburbanites. The late patriarch was
an early experimenter of the type that Binford describes, providing a “country seat” for his
family while he worked in “an office of high public trust” part of each year, most likely in
Boston (LF 28, 38). The Rovington house, “designated by the modest appellation of the English
cottage, was a direct opposite to the stately pile” built by Lovell (LF 39), not least because its
principal ornamentation consisted of some carefully cultivated vines, symbolic of domesticity,
simplicity, and leisure. These vines cling to the “pure, virgin white” house in such a way that “it
was somewhat difficult to separate the work of nature and art” (LF 39), a fusion suggesting the
mixture or tension characteristic of the picturesque aesthetic and the pastoral ideal. Mr.
Rovington himself also demonstrates proper middle-class suburban values: “he wished his
resting place from the turmoil of business to be somewhat aloof from the gay and encroaching
many” (LF 28). In other words, he preferred rural retirement to urban society. He considered
Cloverdale “an Eden,” and there he enjoyed the respect of farmers and locals—a republican sort
of respect, as opposed to the awe that Mr. Marriwood seeks to inspire (LF 28). Mr. Rovington’s
survivors are firmly middle class as well: the son Russel goes to Harvard University and studies law, while the older daughter Catharine teaches grade school in the village. The family upholds the father’s values: they display simplicity, sincerity, sentiment, privacy, and an appreciation of their rural environment, often to an exaggerated degree. Penitence Marriwood declares that the family—headed, significantly, by the widowed Mrs. Rovington—is “too shockingly domestic” \((LF \ 18)\). This criticism should be understood as high praise from Hentz.

After Mr. Rovington’s death, Russel discovers that his father owed money, and when the lender comes to collect, the Rovingtons are faced with the prospect of eviction from their beloved cottage. Penitence Marriwood intervenes, offering Russel the financial means to clear the debt and rescue his family’s home, in exchange for his hand in marriage. The unscrupulous Penitence looks upon the much-admired young man as a social trophy, particularly valuable because through him she can spite his true love, the beautiful and impeccably virtuous Lorelly Sutherland. Russel submits to his “filial obligations” and becomes engaged to Penitence, taking her money in order to dismiss his family’s creditor. Russel thus risks becoming the new master of the cursed house of Lovell, becoming further enmeshed in its loveless, immoral economy of debt. As the novel’s title suggests, the intertwined fates of these suburban houses provide the focus for Hentz’s story, one reason why this work qualifies as a “suburban” fiction.

Russel eventually finds an escape through a plot twist that heavy-handedly recapitulates Hentz’s themes. Lorelly Sutherland is reunited with her long-lost father, Mr. Savage, who she discovers was forced by his own childless relative to separate from Lorelly’s mother and to adopt the relative’s name in order to inherit a fortune. After her parents’ separation, Lorelly’s mother was compelled to marry Mr. Sutherland, because Lorelly’s grandfather had a secret obligation to Mr. Sutherland’s father. These revelations reinforce the lesson taught by Lovell, the Marriwoods,
and Mr. Rovington—that virtue, love, and the conventional transmission of property are threatened by vanity, financial irresponsibility, and secrecy. To put it another way, patriarchs endanger the house, whereas true middle-class domesticity is feminine. Russel’s salvation finally comes when the madman Lovell sets fire to La Grange, intending to die in its flames, and accidentally kills Penitence Marriwood in the process. Mr. Savage then offers to loan the young man enough money to pay back Mr. Marriwood the amount Russel took from Penitence, so that Russel would finally be able to marry Lorelly. Although Russel resists out of a sense of responsibility to meet his own obligations (and perhaps a prudent caution about founding a marriage upon another debt), he eventually accepts.

Through Hentz’s two archetypes, Lovell’s Folly maps out the possibilities for suburbia. The cautionary characters are overly attracted to luxury, society, and fashion, and suffer the consequences of debt and death. They remain too closely involved with the capitalist city, Hentz’s ultimate antagonist. The model suburbanites, on the other hand, create a distinctive middle-class identity based upon republican virtue, familial domesticity, and rustic nature, with love and marriage as their reward. Hentz appears optimistic about the new experiment, though with serious concerns and reservations—her novel’s title is not Rovington’s Prudence, after all. The Rovington men both stand on the edge, unable to extract themselves from debt and their reliance upon urban jobs despite having a desire for suburban domestic life. Information about middle-class men’s work and the cause of their debts is for the most part lacking, a telling omission at the heart of Hentz’s narrative. The urban economy must—yet cannot—be excluded from suburbia.

The country around Cloverdale also receives little attention from Hentz, probably because it poses little threat to suburban distinction, as demonstrated in her unusual seventh chapter. The
young people picnic near a wooded lake, where Hentz has them enthuse about rustic beauty in her typically sincere manner. When two of the picnickers fall in the water and are forced to borrow dry garments from a farmer and his wife, their suburban companions cannot withhold their “merry cachinations . . . in admiration of the extraordinary figures” (C 135). The suburbanites’ uncharacteristic, patronizing laughter is directed at the old-fashioned clothes of the rural folk, but also at the absurd unlikelihood of this transgression of class boundaries. In contrast to urban debts, borrowing from country people poses little danger. The country provides the middle class with pleasure and amusement, not social anxiety.

The episode at the lake might also help us to assess the relationship between Hentz’s text, the pastoral, and the picturesque aesthetic. She repeatedly uses the term “pastoral” to describe the suburban setting of Cloverdale, yet she invokes the picturesque very rarely, perhaps because the latter was a quite recent invention. *Lovell’s Folly* does demonstrate an affiliation with the traditional literary pastoral, which Leo Marx traces back to the poet Virgil. Hentz’s fictional bourgeois suburb can be understood as a “middle landscape” poised between the city and the country. More specifically, her novel appears to be an example of the modern, “sentimental” variant that, according to Marx, narrates a “withdrawal from society into an idealized landscape” and expresses “an inchoate longing for a more ‘natural’ environment.” Marx disparages the sentimental pastoral as “a simple pleasure fantasy,” and Hentz’s writing does have a saccharine quality to it. However, the patronizing laughter at the clothing of the farmers seems out of place with the ethos of the sentimental pastoral, which tends to embrace the imagery of rural life as signs of its superior authenticity and so forth. *Lovell’s Folly* does not fit Marx’s “complex” pastoral very well either, since no industrial technology appears in the novel.
I believe the picturesque aesthetic better identifies Hentz’s novel and nineteenth-century suburban fiction in general. Whereas the sentimental pastoral seems to demand the resolution or erasure of social conflicts, the picturesque “does not press for a conclusion” and can “tolerate some irregularity.” Indeed, the picturesque often reveals its bourgeois origins and uses social disparities to produce its aesthetic contrasts and mixtures, creating humor in Hentz’s case. To return to my main idea, the picturesque is better suited to address suburban indistinction. Later nineteenth-century suburban fictions will in fact demonstrate increasingly tighter connections to the picturesque through their more elaborate setting descriptions, their characters’ artistic vocations, their sketchbook form, and their adaptations of the picturesque tour genre. More unambiguously than any other nineteenth-century fiction writer, Hentz endorses the early suburban ideal associated with Andrew Jackson Downing and Catharine Beecher, whose important writings Lovell’s Folly actually predates by several years.

The next work of suburban fiction to appear is Alice Cary’s Clovernook, or, Recollections of Our Neighborhood in the West (1852). John R. Stilgoe considers Cary the originator of the suburban subgenre, yet her work is less representative than Hentz’s. Only about one seventh of Clovernook concerns suburbanization, while the majority of the stories are about the farming families and other country folk that inhabit the eponymous rural community. While Cary does demonstrate an awareness of the ideology of suburbia, her opinion of the phenomenon is not as coherent or intelligible as Hentz’s. One similarity is immediately obvious: they share a common aversion to society and fashion, which are associated with the city, though Cary’s Christian morality is more severe and punitive than Hentz’s republicanism. In fact, Clovernook’s characters often come to grief because they express ambitions that conflict with the hardships associated with farm life, whether they show dissatisfaction with the intellectual
limitations of rural society, allow themselves to experience romance and love, or simply desire new clothes and novels.

“The Moods of Seth Milford and His Sisters” is an exemplary story. The taciturn young farmer suffers an unfortunate “fate”:

Born and bred on the farm which he now inherited, and having never been beyond the shadows of his native hills, he had nevertheless “immortal longings in him.” Naturally diffident and shy, and very imperfectly educated, he grew up to manhood, dissatisfied, restless, wretched—despising and scorning the circle to which by habit and manner he belonged, and consciously fitted for no other, though gifted with a mind superior to that of thousands occupying high places in society, and looking down upon him. He was not loved—even by his two sisters, with whom he lived in the old homestead, and whom he supported, not very elegantly, indeed, but according to his best ability. 51

When we first meet him, Seth is “listlessly leaning against the fence” in a moody reverie (C 58). His sisters, who are more educated and socially accomplished, complain to each other that Seth is “improvident and thriftless” (C 60). Their homestead “originally had pretensions to gentility” (C 60), but now “[t]he paint was beaten from the weatherboards, some of the chimneys were toppling, the shutters broken, and the railings about the piazza half gone” (C 61). The sisters’ persistent desire for distinction is visible in the flowerbeds and “snowy curtains” that contrast with the structural decay (C 61). The incompatible siblings pass their days in a “silent unsympathizing manner” that aptly describes most of Cary’s farm families, until “a kind word” from one sister breaks Seth’s perpetual foul mood (C 61). Transformed in a moment, Seth gains an appetite, engages in lively talk, resolves to repair the gate hinge, and discusses “plans for future improvements” to the farm, including hiring hands so that he will “have more time for books and thought” (C 63).

The next day, Seth works plowing the fields, but he also reads a book as his horse rests. That same night, Seth gets caught in a cold rain while completing his farm duties. Returning late, he finds the kitchen fire extinguished and his requested supper unprepared. “The dining-room
was in the same desolate and cheerless state,” writes Cary, “but the parlor was a-glow with light
and warmth, and the gay chattering of voices announced the presence of strangers. Seth’s brow
clouded—unhappily, the friends of his sisters were not his friends. Belonging for the most part to
a different grade of society, he neither knew them nor cared to know them; and, in the present
instance, he was certainly in no guise to present himself” (C 64). His failure to manage the
transformation from rude farmer to gentleman proves his downfall. Unable to prepare himself
food or find a change of clothes, he goes to bed hungry and wet, develops a fever, and dies. At
his deathbed, his sister regrets her behavior, weeping and begging forgiveness, “exaggerating her
own faults, and magnifying all his kindness” (C 67). Seth “smiled faintly, and said his own faults
were much greater than hers; but if he were well, he might not do any better, and his life had
been long enough” (C 67). According to the logic of Clovernook, Seth must pay for fancying for
himself a life in any way genteel, as he seems to recognize when he does not reciprocate her
sentimentality (cf. Halttunen).

Sickness and death are the typical results of entertaining ambitions to be middle class in
Cary’s stories. “The Pride of Sarah Worthington,” for instance, begins with the narrator reading
an obituary for her friend, the title character, who died “after a painful illness, aged nineteen
years” (C 39). Sarah, described as having been “silent, unsocial,” demonstrated in life the
emotional reserve common among Cary’s rural characters: “Mother nor brother nor any human
being seemed ever to have found the way to her heart” (C 43). A beautiful young woman, Sarah
had many male admirers who were fascinated by her “indifference” and “queen-like manner” (C
44). The narrator pointedly remarks, “I could never learn that she even felt pride in anything,
unless perhaps in the scorn she bestowed on her fellow creatures” (C 44). The narrator goes on to
reminisce about a conversation she had with Sarah. The narrator had offered to introduce Sarah
to a young admirer who worked for a lawyer, but when Sarah heard the lawyer’s name, she became unusually agitated. The narrator only realizes after Sarah’s death that she must have been romantically involved with the lawyer, who “is forty, or nearly so, handsome, wealthy, influential, . . . unmarried and a universal favorite” (C 46). I would guess the “painful illness” had something to do with a pregnancy, since beforehand Sarah “seemed to possess a constitution that would resist the chances and changes of many years” (C 44). As in Seth Milford’s case, Sarah Worthington’s initial unsociability and fatalistic resignation, far from being character defects, were virtues that could have protected her from the desire for a middle-class romance.

Cary’s stark moral vision of rigid class boundaries becomes less clear in her final six stories, when she introduces suburbanites into Clovernook. The Harmsteads move from the city with three servant girls and a black man, though even the wealthier farmers refuse to take servants. Equally unheard of is the Harmsteads’ practice of paying cash to their neighbors for food. One Clovernook resident, dismayed by such behavior, predicts, “they won’t have much to do with plain farmer folks like us, for Mrs. Hamstid, they say, keeps dressed up all the time reading books, and don’t even nuss her own baby” (C 293). The confusion of the locals about their last name is probably Cary’s way of drawing attention to her play on “homestead”: the Harmsteads represent a dangerously middle-class domesticity. They also demonstrate several familiar qualities of nineteenth-century bourgeois suburbanites. They hire “a good many” workmen to “transform Mr. Hinton’s brier-smothered farm into Willow Dale” (C 310), the Harmstead’s new “country seat.” Indeed, the Harmsteads begin to change all of Clovernook into a bourgeois suburb. Despite the prediction of exclusivity, Mr. Harmstead takes an interest in his neighbors’ property, designing cottages and picturesque gardens for them as if he were an apostle of Andrew Jackson Downing: “Chiefly through his instrumentality, in the course of a few
years, the neighborhood of Clovernook had been changed from a thinly inhabited and ill-cultivated district, to one abounding with green lawns and spotted with vineyards and orchards, ridged with clipt hedges, and sparkling with public edifices” (C 320). Furthermore, his efforts have induced his wealthy friends to build houses in Clovernook, so that the original members of the village gentry “now find so many equals that they rarely think of going in to town in search of society” (C 320).

One would expect the locals might resent Mr. Harmstead’s influence upon Clovernook (or risk fever and sudden death!). Surprisingly he is widely esteemed as “an example of goodness,” though not his wife:

He had earned a distinction by being the pioneer of elegance and refinement among the people, for his predecessors of the same rank had lived in selfish isolation; and no follower in his path could ever attain to the same popularity. Mrs. Harmstead had never been so much a favorite; her neighbors never felt really at home with her, though sometimes they pretended to be so; she never loved the green lane so well as the paved street, nor our kindly but coarse hospitalities so well as the more soulless civilities to which she had been accustomed; and before any better phase of things was perceptible, the fretfulness induced by her ungenial transition wore away her life. (C 320)

In other words, her unregenerate connection to the city guarantees her demise. Mr. Harmstead is preserved, apparently, because he tries harder to be at home in the country, “adopting what he supposed to be western manners” and striving to put himself “on a level” with his neighbors (C 310). Furthermore, Mr. Harmstead is already middle class, and thus fated to be free from the discipline of farming; reading books and wearing fine clothes do not portend his doom. Although sophisticated, he demonstrates an appropriate regard for rural nature, and rather than expressing the deadly desire for upward mobility, “he exercised constantly on those about him a refining and elevating influence” (C 320). Mr. Harmstead’s success might imply that suburbia, understood as an improvement of the country rather than an extension of urban society, could be safe and even redemptive for ex-urbanites.
For country folks, suburbia remains as problematic as urban society. Some years after Mr. Harmstead’s wife dies, he makes a “decided overture” toward Ellie Hadly, a farmer’s daughter, by sending her some books of his that she admired (C 321). “Ellie had had but small educational advantages—less even than her younger sisters; but her intellectual endowments were naturally superior. She read what chance and opportunity afforded. . . . She was modest, diffident even, and had passed her life in the greatest retirement, for the wealthy and fashionable society of the neighborhood found no attractions in her, nor had she ever made any overtures for its recognition” (C 304). This is not to say that she lacked consciousness of class. She recalls first meeting Mr. Harmstead: “I had never seen any one before who was so well bred, so refined, so gentlemanly as he; and I remember well how mortified I was for our bare feet, and our rustic appearance altogether. . . . In short, my idea of perfection was realized, when I saw him” (C 310). Mr. Harmstead’s interest in her dissipates when her awkward performance at a party proves that she is “not fitted for society,” even for the coarser hospitalities of suburbia (C 324). He leaves Clovernook soon after, moving to the city to marry a woman there. Although Ellie feels anguish, that she survives to tell her tale seems indicative of the author’s approval of Ellie’s failure.

In the end, Cary appears to reconsider her optimism about suburbia, as her attention and sympathy shift from Mr. Harmstead to Ellie. Not only does this “perfect gentleman” behave callously toward Ellie when they meet after his marriage, but he has abandoned the community he helped to improve, reclaiming his place in urban society. In the final analysis, Cary seems skeptical of any social space between the city and the country. Despite the brutality of some of her patriarchal farmers, and despite the initial pity we might feel for aspiring characters such as Seth Milford and Sarah Worthington, Cary seems to favor the rigor of rural life, imagining its
discipline as a source of moral virtue rather than an unjust repression of the desire for self-improvement. Cary’s descriptions of the setting support this interpretation. Typically very detailed and seemingly superfluous or unrelated to the narrative, her periodic commentary regarding the natural environment of Clovernook—focusing on its native plants, crops, and seasons—is quite different from Hentz’s aestheticized, sentimentalized description of Cloverdale. Because Cary’s narrator maintains dutiful attention to the rural setting, the reader is regularly reminded of what many of her characters ignore at their peril. Whereas natural beauty merely reflects the harmony of human relations in Hentz’s writing, nature functions for Cary as an aspect of the divine, to which human desire and ambition must submit. This explicitly Christian belief permeates the long descriptive passage that concludes Clovernook, in which Cary uses the annual cycle as a metaphor to contrast the fleeting season of Ellie’s grief with eternity. The narrator begins this passage by remarking, “It has always seemed to me one of the most beautiful provisions of Providence, that circumstances, however averse we be to them at first, close about us presently like waves, and we would hardly unwind ourselves from their foldings, and standing out alone, say, let it be thus or thus, if it were possible” (C 340-1). The humility and morbid resignation exhorted by Cary’s conclusion—the book ends with the quotation “Thou art nothing—all are nothing now”—is a far cry from the suburban impulse for worldly distinction.

“It Is a Good Thing to Live in the Country”: Cozzens and Coffin

The next pair of suburban fictions, Frederick S. Cozzens’s The Sparrowgrass Papers, or Living in the Country (1856) and Robert Barry Coffin’s Out of Town: A Rural Episode (1866), are remarkably similar. Contrasting them with the two women’s texts, I notice three major shifts in the subgenre. First, the men’s suburbanites display discontent more prominently. In Lovell’s Folly, the only character to express such sentiments is Florence Fairchild, Mr. Marriwood’s
young niece who lives with the Marriwoods. A reader of romantic novels, Fairchild complains to
her cousin Penitence about the “monotony” of suburban life (LF 15). Even Penitence, who says
“it was with almost unconquerable reluctance I accompanied Papa into the country—I feared I
should die with ennui, and that I should find no society,” comes to appreciate the benefits of
suburbia, particularly her ability to condescend to the locals (LF 45). In Clovernook, the “fretful”
Mrs. Harmstead is the only dissatisfied suburbanite. The experiences of these minor characters
are not central to their respective narratives and remain undeveloped. In the men’s texts, by
contrast, dismay with the unexpectedly rural quality of suburban life, expressed by the
suburbanite narrator-protagonists, creates the rhetorical situation.

Second, these works evaluate suburbia differently. Its effect on middle-class distinction
remains a dominant concern, but the republican values and Christian morality that Hentz and
Cary rely on to make their judgments do not appear in Cozzens’s and Coffin’s writings. Possibly
as a result, the men express concern about the negative effect of the country, rather than the city,
on suburban identity. In the end, the men reach an accommodation with suburbia by turning its
faults into virtues and adopting a humorous, sarcastic attitude about their suburbanites’ many
misadventures. Third, the men’s texts demonstrate a different kind of storytelling. In contrast to
the dramatic eventfulness that characterizes Hentz’s novel and Cary’s interconnected short
stories, Cozzens’s and Coffin’s sketches present everyday suburban life episodically and without
“artistic” finish. The picturesque is more than a trait of the setting in their fiction; it influences
the form of the narrative as well.

The very brief first chapter of The Sparrowgrass Papers encapsulates all of these new
developments. The narrative begins, “It is a good thing to live in the country,” yet each of the
chapter’s five vignettes immediately contradicts this statement.52 The narrator, Mr.
Sparrowgrass, remarks by way of further introduction, “when Mrs. Sparrowgrass and I moved into the country, we found some preconceived notions had to be abandoned, and some departures made from the plans we had laid down in the little back-parlor in Avenue G” (SP 14). He recounts their initial setbacks growing potatoes (Mrs. Sparrowgrass accidentally cooks the ones they intended to plant), raising chickens to get eggs (they buy all roosters), and protecting their garden and fruit trees from the neighbors’ grazing cows. Chasing one of the cows, Mr. Sparrowgrass tramples his own flowerbeds and trellises, and he notes to conclude the chapter, “her owner has sued me for damages. I believe I shall move in town” (SP 18). His droll response is typical of the narrative’s tone.

_The Sparrowgrass Papers_ continues in this vein, many times beginning a new topic with the ironic sentence “It is a good thing to [insert topic] in the country” before lightheartedly expressing the narrator’s discontent and thwarted expectations about that topic. For instance, Mr. Sparrowgrass buys a boat, but when he offers to take visitors on the water, he inevitably spends so much energy on its preparation and repair that he becomes too exhausted to handle the oars: “Meanwhile, the poor guests sit on stones around the beach, with woe-begone faces” (SP 21). Similarly, an invitation to a country party causes the Sparrowgrasses to reminisce about the difficulty of entertainments in town. However, their frenzied preparations for this “simple, old-fashioned entertainment” meet with a variety of impediments, climaxing when they finally are ready and waiting but the hired carriage never arrives (SP 45). Mr. Sparrowgrass’s home improvements—a kitchen drainpipe, a dumb waiter, and a mechanical bedstead—also lead to more trouble than convenience (SP 51, 72, 215). Horticulture proves as difficult and unrewarding as suburban leisure. Mr. Sparrowgrass remains in continual conflict with his neighbors about their respective animals and crops. The locals often deceive the inexperienced city man, as when
a neighbor argues that letting his cows eat most of the leaves off of Mr. Sparrowgrass’s young fruit trees is helpful: “the only way to have good trees is to have ‘em chawed” (SP 26). The new suburbanite is sold a watchdog and a horse of guaranteed quality; both animals prove to be defective, causing him annoyance and further expenditures (SP 17, 131).

Mr. Sparrowgrass’s discontent becomes most intense when these fiascos diminish his social standing. For instance, he overhears the village teamster spreading news of the horse’s faults around the village, telling the neighbors, “Sparrygrass—got a hos—got the heaves—got ’em real bad” (SP 125-6). The narrator admits, “I was so much ashamed, that I took a roundabout road to the stable, and instead of coming home like a fresh and gallant cavalier, on a hand gallop, I walked my purchase to the stable” (SP 126). He is equally irked by the teamster’s failure to recognize the boundary of class between them: “I must say, I have always disliked old Dockweed’s familiarity; he presumes too much upon my good nature, when he calls me Sparrygrass before ladies at the depot, and by my Christian name always on the Sabbath, when he is dressed up” (SP 125-6). After all, even the duplicitous man who sold Mr. Sparrowgrass the deficient horse addressed him as “squire.” The teamster’s insult is later repeated, says the narrator, when “old Dockweed laid his mitten upon my elbow, with a familiarity that might be excusable in a small village, but which was by no means as respectful in a village so extensive as our village” (SP 199). This imprecision indicates Mr. Sparrowgrass’s difficulty differentiating the genteel suburb from the rough-mannered country. He feels shame again, for instance, when visitors arrive from the city and the pitiful reality of his garden does not live up to his “bragging” (SP 40). Far from meeting the suburban ideal, living in the country threatens his sense of distinction.
Despite the negative impression the narrator gives of his new home and social position, Mr. Sparrowgrass is undoubtedly a bourgeois suburbanite. Prior to building his suburban house, he consulted Andrew Jackson Downing’s work on rural architecture (SP 240). The Sparrowgrasses moved to Yonkers, and the husband commutes by train to New York City, leaving early and arriving home at dusk (SP 27, 76, 183, 187). Mr. Sparrowgrass appears to live a life of leisure and retirement because he is a professional writer, and his current project is *The Sparrowgrass Papers*. He has financial means, since they retain a servant girl (SP 69), and more significantly, he expresses a certain lack of concern about material goods and money. He rejoices when his embarrassing horse is stolen, for example, even though he bought it for more than it was worth (SP 151). In another case, after a neighbor’s pigs trample his pea crop, and then one gets into the house and wreaks havoc during a party, Mr. Sparrowgrass blithely asks his wife, “Why should we repine about trifles? If we want early peas we can buy them, and as for the vase, flowers, and confectionary, they would have been all over with, by this time, if the pigs had not been here” (SP 93). Though their economic security keeps the various fiascoes from ever seriously troubling the family, it does not prevent him from often feeling ashamed, inconvenienced, and dissatisfied.

It is the beauty of rural nature, not the independence derived from wealth, that makes the Sparrowgrasses “begin to love the country more and more” (SP 59). This sentiment is voiced in the context of an appreciation of their first winter in the country: “To see a noble forest wreathed in icy gems, is one of the transcendental glories of creation. You look through long arcades of iridescent light, and the vision has an awful majesty, compared with which the most brilliant cathedral windows pale their ineffectual fires. It is the crystal palace of Jehovah! Within its sounding aisles a thought even of the city seems irreverent” (SP 58-9). Similar passages record
every new season, major weather events, and other natural wonders of the country. On the surface, he seems to concur with Hentz’s and Cary’s disparagement of the city and alignment of nature with the Christian God. His writing also shares an apparent affinity with Transcendentalism. Cozzens repeatedly expresses what seems to be a Thoreauvian belief in “the tonic of wildness,” as when Sparrowgrass remarks, “Thank Heaven for this great privilege, that our little ones go to school in the country. Not in the narrow streets of the city; not over the flinty pavements; not amid the crush of crowds, and the din of wheels . . . . Learning a thousand lessons city children never learn; getting nature by heart—and treasuring up in their little souls the beautiful stories written in God’s great picture-book” (SP 184).53

Nevertheless, I would argue that, far from positioning rural nature against urban immorality or conventionality, Cozzens understands nature as the supreme luxury of living in the country, suburbia’s most reliable way of providing social distinction. As the “picture-book” image implies, nature’s value lies in its potential for aestheticization, or more precisely its picturesqueness. In the passages above, he evaluates country and city through sensory experience: iridescence, reverberating silence, and extensiveness are superior to pallor, din, and narrowness. Accordingly, his writing about nature is more voluminous and detailed than either Hentz’s or Cary’s. Suburban horticulture and landscaping may be difficult to develop and maintain, but not the wilderness.

Cozzens’s description of a rainstorm demonstrates how indebted his concept of suburban nature is to the picturesque aesthetic. He writes:

The Palisades stared up in the gloom, as their precipitous masses were revealed by the flashes of unearthly light that played through the rolling clouds. The river before us, flecked with snow, stretched away to the north, where it lay partly in sunshine, under a blue sky, dappled with fleecy vapors. Inland, the trees were twisted in attitudes strikingly picturesque and novel; the scud flew before the blast like spray, and below it the swells and slopes of livid green had an aspect so
unusual that it seemed as if I had been transported into a strange place—a far country. Our cottage, too, which I had planned and built, changed its walls to stark, staring white, with window-panes black as ink. From room to room Mrs. Sparrowgrass flitted like a phantom, closing the sashes, and making all secure. Then the electric prattled overhead for a moment, and wound up with a roar like the explosion of a stone quarry. Then a big drop fell and rolled itself up in a globule of dust in the path; then another—another—another. Then I bethought me of my new straw hat, and retreated into the house, and then—it rained!

Reader, did you ever see rain in the country? I hope you have; my pen is impotent; I cannot describe it. (SP 33-4)

The rain has a sublime quality, similar to the “awful majesty” of the wintertime forest, yet only Mrs. Sparrowgrass feels anything approaching Burkean horror. On the contrary, the narrator blithely tarries until the last moment in his customary reverie, so that he may capture the entire event in this sketch. In other words, the aesthetic value of the event takes precedence over the experience of sublimity.

Mr. Sparrowgrass’s rhetorical denial of artistry—he spends a few pages detailing this indescribable weather—is also consonant with the picturesque. More importantly, the remark serves to endorse an unmediated encounter with nature. A mere description by someone else will not suffice; one must live in the country in order to experience the everyday changes and create one’s own art. Mr. Sparrowgrass’s growing appreciation of rural nature’s aesthetic value partially explains his increasing love for life in the country. I interpret his references to God as similarly rhetorical: Cozzens demonstrates none of Cary’s belief that nature represents an alternative set of values, a morality at odds with capitalism. Instead, he makes the conventional association between nature and the divine, it seems, in order to advertise the superlative quality of the scenery. Mr. Sparrowgrass further inflates this landscape’s value through seemingly offhanded references to John Frederick Kensett of the Hudson River School as well as to Washington Irving’s recently published *Wolfert’s Roost* (SP 48). The Sparrowgrass family is elated to discover that the famous author “has mentioned our village once or twice; and the
beloved Nepperhan river rolls along, no longer a dumb feeder of mill-ponds, but a legended stream. . . . A touch of Irving’s quill, and lo, it is immortal!” (SP 64). Irving lends Yonkers literary distinction, which benefits both Cozzens and Mr. Sparrowgrass.

A closely related way in which Cozzens attempts to make suburbia more distinctive is by adopting the literary form of the sketch. Sketching, as opposed to trained drawing, was “a relatively stable sign of gentility” among the landed gentry in Britain until the late eighteenth century. Around that time, sketching became associated with both romanticism and the picturesque: “Hasty brushwork and shading, broken lines, roughness, and irregularity thus invite viewers to think in terms of either the artist’s spontaneous and authentic feelings or the naturalistic and dynamic rendering of landscape.” Partly through these associations, the visual and verbal sketch became a way for the middle class to redefine its identity and challenge the authority of the landed gentry: Richard C. Sha states, “the rising middle class would in the course of the next century appropriate the sketch—and its ability to confer truth and nobility upon the artist—for its own ends.” When the sketch migrated to the U.S., it was put to a similar use. Washington Irving was the first important American sketch writer, and his “modern tourist” Geoffrey Crayon instructed the young nation about the value of travel and the picturesque. Irving, according to Kristie Hamilton, “condensed into the brevity of the sketch activities that would actually require a prohibitive amount of time and money.” She concludes, “The aspiration to leisure that was a mark of the middle class was thus inscribed in the genre, as Irving executed it.” In other words, sketching could serve as another strategy for bourgeois distinction, not unlike sincerity and sentiment, domesticity, and suburbia.

Cozzens’s invocation of Irving seems no mere coincidence. The Sparrowgrass Papers are referred to as “sketches” by their fictional author (SP 30), and I believe Cozzens chooses this
genre as a way to further demonstrate the suburban privilege of aestheticizing everyday life. The sketch form, at least in its early nineteenth-century incarnation, emphasizes its status as amateur or “artless” art, performed by a person of leisure. For instance, in the beginning of one of Irving’s pieces in *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1820), the narrator belabors how he was “loitering” and “lolling” through the British Museum in an “idle way,” feeling “listlessness” and “languid curiosity,” until he chanced to “blunder upon a scene.” Irving assumes this casual posture in order to deflect criticism from his work and to stake out his own originality. Although Crayon apologizes for ignoring the conventional landmarks of Europe sought by the “regular” traveler, he expresses pride that “never need an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery.” Similarly, Mr. Sparrowgrass learns not to become upset or disgruntled by the many difficulties that attend living in the country, because one of the distinctive luxuries of suburbia is his freedom to make light of his misadventures, to step outside his experiences so to speak and record them in art—hence the suggestiveness of the term “retirement” to describe suburban life. Though his many amateurish failures seem to impede his leisure, they are actually proof of it, particularly when he adopts an ironic, sarcastic, self-deprecating attitude. The unfinished, fragmentary quality of the sketchbook form—and especially the abrupt topical shifts that Cozzens makes—complement this sensibility. I quoted Robinson earlier as saying, “To tolerate some irregularity, to risk withholding complete control means that the Picturesque depends on a preexisting condition of plenitude.” The same holds true for the Irvingesque sketch. To put it another way, Mr. Sparrowgrass can afford to laugh at his mistakes, especially because they prove that he is not a villager, that he is middle class.
This conversion of some of the ostensible defects of life in the country into merits is the accommodation that Cozzens reaches with suburbia. *The Sparrowgrass Papers* ends once this process is complete. Reflecting on living in the country, Mr. Sparrowgrass declares to his wife, “I have had my say about it. I begin to feel that the first impressions, the novelty, the freshness, incident to change from city to country are wearing away. . . . Do you not see it with very different eyes from those you first brought with you out of the city?” (*SP* 244-5). He goes on to assess the advantages and disadvantages of each place, and this long final chapter provides the most thorough account of everyday life in early bourgeois suburbia that exists in fiction. In doing so, he observes that the family has better learned how to keep house, cultivate a garden, and so forth.

He also admits that his “preconceived notions” have been abandoned:

> It must be confessed that turnpike roads are not always avenues of happiness; that distance, simply contemplated from a railroad depot, does not lend enchantment to the view of a load of furniture travelling up hill through a hearty rainstorm; that communion with the visible forms of nature, now and then, fails to supply us with the requisite amount of mild and healing sympathy; that a rustic cottage may be overflowing with love, and yet overflowed with water; that, in fine, living in the country rarely fulfils at once the idea of living in clover. (*SP* 251-2)

Whereas Hentz and Cary propose that suburbia’s success requires the bourgeoisie to make a moral adjustment, Cozzens recommends a more practical one of diminished expectations, looking for distinction not through material conveniences, idyllic recreation, or social standing but rather through aestheticized nature, humor, and the symbolic sacrifice of suburban luxuries. Cozzens concludes by contrasting the Sparrowgrasses’s experience with the pastoral ideal:

> “Once understood that life in the country does not imply exemption from all the cares and business of ordinary life; that happiness, here as elsewhere, is only a glimpse between the clouds;” one can then properly appreciate suburbia (*SP* 254).63
Published a decade later, Robert Barry Coffin’s *Out of Town: A Rural Episode* (1866) is quite derivative of Cozzens’s book. Coffin repeats several of the very same reasons for discontent with suburban life, and he reaches a comparable accommodation through sketching. Even his narrator and protagonist, Mr. Gray, closely resembles Mr. Sparrowgrass. Having become “thoroughly disenchanted with town life,” Mr. Gray decides to move out of New York City, despite his wife’s apprehensions.⁶⁴ He complains of “[t]en years spent amid brick walls and street flagging, without getting, in all that time, a whiff of country air, or a sight of a blade of grass, save what the city parks afforded,” but he also notes that they leave because “house-rents in town had increased enormously” (*OT* I). Sensory pleasure and economy, along with the health of his wife and children, are his reasons for relocating to the village of Fordham, “a quiet, unpretentious little place, nestled on and among the hills, with sundry picturesque houses, and an air of thrift pervading its people that was delightful to witness. It is poetic ground, too; for here Poe once lived, and Drake wrote charmingly of the little river, the Bronx, which flows through its precincts” (*OT* v). The move allows the Grays to maintain the economic status that the expensive city compromises—and through means beyond lower rents. “My publishers want another book of mine,” Mr. Gray informs his wife, “and so I’ll write an account of our life in the country, from spring until mid-winter, and they shall publish it under the title of ‘Out of Town’” (*OT* vii). Yet again, the city threatens the middle class’s position, but the aesthetic and literary qualities of bourgeois suburbia come to the rescue.

Like Mr. Rovington, Mr. Harmstead, and Mr. Sparrowgrass, Mr. Gray demonstrates a thorough familiarity with Victorian suburban ideology. He describes the various places he considered before settling upon Fordham as “suburban retreats,” an observation that reflects how the bourgeois form began to achieve widespread recognition and growth after the Civil War (*OT*
2). Mr. Gray calls the house they move into “Woodbine Cottage,” from the fact that a woodbine, or, after all, it may be a honeysuckle, grows about the front veranda (OT 8). Like the vines on the Rovingtons’ cottage in Lovell’s Folly, the plant symbolizes rural domesticity, though his potential misidentification of it reveals the relative importance to Mr. Gray of actually experiencing and knowing nature in comparison to acquiring its conventional imagery.

In the same manner, Mr. Gray establishes a garden, which provides him with food but more importantly with an opportunity for leisure:

I find myself continually seeking reasonable excuses for not going into town every day. While I was engaged in planting my half-acre garden, I had no difficulty in the matter... I had decided to do all the work myself, and therefore, it was really necessary for me to stay at home to accomplish it. To be sure, after working an hour or two of a morning, under the hot sun, I found it agreeable to my feelings to retire within the house and take a long nooning of five or six hours, relieving the tedium of the time with a book, an iced punch, a saucer of strawberries and cream, and a cigar. In this way I managed to make a good many working-holidays for myself. I saved, too, to some extent, my hands from being as blistered as they would have been had I worked steadily on the twelve hours’ rule. (OT 13)

Even this minimal exertion proves too much labor for Mr. Gray, so he hires a gardener. He admits, “although my intentions were good in regard to doing all the work myself, after the first day I relinquished the greater part of the labor to an older hand than mine, and with very gratifying results, as my table, which is chiefly supplied with vegetables of my own raising, sufficiently attests” (OT 14). In this exemplary episode, Coffin’s humor resembles Cozzen’s, though Mr. Gray appears less conscious of his foibles than the self-deprecating Mr. Sparrowgrass. We also witness a similar effort to convert the signs of rural living into bourgeois status: Mr. Gray claims as his own the products, which are cheaper and fresher “than I could get them in town,” while keeping his hands clean (OT 14).

Mr. Gray finds life out of town to be more difficult than he anticipated, and as in The Sparrowgrass Papers, the country rather than the city becomes the principal cause of
indistinction for the remainder of the book. Several motifs are repeated from that previous work: the neighbors’ cows make their way into the Grays’ garden and eat all the “tender shoots” (OT 9). Mr. Gray buys a goat that is reminiscent of Mr. Sparrowgrass’s horse. The goat, Mr. Gray says, “now eats off my turnip-tops” and otherwise makes itself an annoyance, until it escapes its pen, devours a neighbor’s cabbage crop, and gets impounded—something that never seems to happen to his neighbors’ vagrant animals (OT 69). His wife has similar luck with chickens: “every one of the fowls that Mrs. Gray bought proved to be of the masculine gender” (OT 18). Furthermore, when word spreads among the country folks that the Grays are looking to buy hens, “it was as if Barnum were opening a new poultry show” (OT 16). Scores of locals come eager to sell, and some become irritable when their offers are declined. One woman, says Mr. Gray, claims she “had come ten miles, in the broiling sun, to sell me those fowls, and that it was n’t treating her decently to refuse to buy them,” and she threatens to “get even” with him (OT 16). Haggling with the locals sometimes overwhelms the new suburbanites, who for a short time receive milk from three separate milkmaids (OT 9), while two different ice men deliver “a hundred pounds of ice” daily (OT 11).

Mr. Gray feels shamed, as Mr. Sparrowgrass did, during such interactions with his social inferiors. For instance, the family retains a “maid-of-all-work,” and to Mr. Gray’s displeasure she makes fun of the small size of Woodbine Cottage (OT 3). The family’s two appliances, a refrigerator and a heater, are almost inconveniences, being nearly too large to move into the cottage (OT 7). As the enormous heater sits outside day after day, passersby “began to cast ridicule at both the heater and the owner, and the boys took to pelting it with green apples from the neighboring orchard. One man, indeed, had the audacity to ask me what I intended to do with my elephant. If he had not been a particular friend of mine, I should have knocked him down”
(OT 8). Their attempts at leisure are also plagued by embarrassing “mishaps,” as when the entire family—including the baby and its nurse—goes out to picnic at the Bronx River, where the novice angler Mr. Gray intends to fish (OT 28). Despite being warned by the village “fool” that rain is imminent, he persists in getting the family and his excess of fishing gear down to the river, where he proceeds to have “many misadventures,” including breaking one rod and catching his son’s ear with a hook (OT 29). Inevitably, a heavy shower ruins the picnic lunch.

These episodes are all occasions for humor at Mr. Gray’s expense, though he maintains a cheerful disposition, lecturing his family pedantically about the new wisdom they have gained. The beauty of rural nature helps to compensate for the misfortunes and disappointments of suburban life, yet Mr. Gray’s bourgeois aestheticism also serves as another target for gentle mockery. For instance, he expounds: “At this season it is a luxury to be out-of-doors; and whether it be early in the morning while the dew still jewels the grass, at noontide when the sun shines warmly, or at twilight when the stars begin to glimmer, the open fields, the mazy orchards, and the silent woods possess charms for the thoughtful and observant mind” (OT 71). Mr. Gray continues to wax poetic about apples ripening and grapes “growing purple on their vines,” but his discourse is brought up short when his own “little boy asked, ‘where are the apples and the grapes?’” (OT 72). Mr. Gray’s attention to nature and the seasons is less intense than Mr. Sparrowgrass’s, and he never seems to master living in the country to the same degree.

Despite the continually lighthearted tone of Coffin’s writing, a subtle uneasiness or bitterness seems to percolate through the narrative. I sense that all is not well with the Grays’ marriage, and that Mr. Gray is more discontented about suburban domestic life than his gentlemanly behavior would lead one to believe. In order to explore this possibility, I must first consider Coffin’s employment of the sketch form, because the sketch—far more than the
picturesque concept of nature—provides Mr. Gray his means of accommodation with suburbia. Mr. Gray uses the term “sketch” to describe his writing (OT 14), and indeed Out of Town demonstrates many similarities to the Irvingesque sketch, especially in the digressions that begin to dominate the narrative about halfway through the book. Just as Irving’s Sketch-Book jumps from contemporary England to old Dutch New York, from German folktales to “plain unvarnished tale[s]” of colonial-era Native Americans, Coffin’s Out of Town unexpectedly shifts settings from suburban Fordham to Utopia, as Mr. Gray regales his children with tales of his other, imaginary family that lives there. These stories are “Christmas Nights’ Entertainments” that feature Mr. Gray celebrating the holiday in Utopia, and they include “a story within a story” that he tells to his Utopian children (OT 228). Coffin’s reference to Santa Claus indicates Irving’s influence, as does the use of the embedded narrative, a device Irving borrowed from The Arabian Nights.

Whereas Mr. Sparrowgrass uses sketching as a way to find the good in suburbia, Mr. Gray uses the form as a means of escaping his everyday life. Not only does he vividly render his imaginary wife Ruth and daughters Mary and Fanny, but within the Utopian story he also reminisces about his true love from boyhood, Louise. For eight years, he claims, she was “the sunshine of my days, the starlight of my nights” until she died, and he incorporates into the text a sentimental poem honoring her (OT 253). Mr. Gray’s attention is often absorbed by women other than his wife, such as his “young literary friend” who frequents Woodbine Cottage to discuss her writing. An explanation for such behavior may be found in another series of digressive tales, which concern a Captain Timothy Coffin who lived long ago. That Robert Barry Coffin, the author of Out of Town, creates a character that shares his last name only adds another confusion to the book’s already convoluted series of digressions. The story of the captain begins with a
description of his house, which was “the prettiest in the neighborhood” due to the efforts of the
captain’s wife Sally: “Such extraordinary scrubbing and cleaning as she kept up throughout the
week, was enough to drive a poor man, who loved retirement and quiet, quite crazy. Mondays
and Saturdays were her great days, wherein she celebrated her love for cleanliness with more
ardor and devotion than she was wont to celebrate the anniversary of her marriage” (OT 272).
Mr. Gray then tells his children, “Indeed, my little ones, such an exemplary housekeeper is
seldom to be found nowadays.’ Here I looked at Mrs. Gray, who, without looking up from her
crocheting, simply said, she should hope so” (OT 272). Such interruptions and subtle
provocations occur throughout Out of Town, often when Mrs. Gray questions her husband’s
romanticized notions about suburban life.

Mr. Gray goes on to tell that the house “was owned and occupied by a jolly little man by
the name of Timothy Coffin; though, to tell the truth, Tim was a mere cipher in his household, as
meek and patient as a lamb, though out-of-doors Captain Tim was as bold as a lion, and feared
no man” (OT 273). The cipher image is fitting, since he retired from the sea and now spends
much of his time telling stories to his child—which sounds like Mr. Gray’s own domestic and
literary life. Mr. Gray makes a casual comment about the captain’s love of a “mug of ale” or
“good brandy.” He may well be an alcoholic, since in many sketches he makes similarly
enthusiastic comments about drinking, and he drinks to demonstrate his leisure and artistic
temperament, yet his wife abstains and seems critical of his habit (OT 273). The criticism of
domesticity and women continues: “The greatest plague to Captain Tim was his wife’s tongue,”
says Mr. Gray, who then repeats a saying he heard that “the reason monkeys do not talk, is, that
they may not work; but many women, on the contrary, talk twice as much, just because they
work” (OT 274). Interrupting, Mrs. Gray accuses him of the worst libel against women she has
ever heard (OT 275). This accusation is repeated when he generalizes about women often ignoring their domestic duties to keep up with fashion (OT 277). Mr. Gray’s story, bogging down in this contradictory criticism, takes a strange turn as his focus shifts from the “jolly old” captain and his “chiding” wife to their daughter Ruth, an idealized “pretty little maiden” with a “most loving heart” (OT 276-7). The amount of detail given to describing the girl’s beauty and virtue is suggestive, considering that Ruth is also the name of Mr. Gray’s Utopian wife. At this point, the narration begins to seem a little schizophrenic, as the stories, the characters, and the author begin to blur together. Incidentally, Out of Town was published by Robert Barry Coffin under the pseudonym of “Barry Gray.”

Confusion and diversion may be among Coffin’s reasons for adopting the sketch form, since these kaleidoscopic digressions and overlaps, as well as the shifts from present to past and reality to fantasy, allow him to avoid the topic of suburbia. Indeed, Out of Town concludes abruptly with the marriage of a different Captain Coffin, this one “a second or third cousin” of Mr. Gray (OT 294). The captain, settling down after his final voyage, marries the old woman from whom Mr. Gray bought the goat—she turning out to have been the captain’s sweetheart thirty years ago. No final reflections on the Gray family’s suburban experience are provided, only these odd reiterations of the themes of wistful love and retirement. Out of Town ends on a much different note than The Sparrowgrass Papers does, despite beginning as a virtual imitation of that book. Cozzens concludes with an affirmation of male domesticity, as Mrs. Sparrowgrass declares, “I have so much to be thankful for, that the children are so strong and hardy; that we keep such good hours; and that you have grown to be so domestic,” at which her husband smiles in agreement (SP 245). Mr. Gray, by contrast, attempts to lose himself and his readers in his labyrinthine narration, yet his resentment of middle-class suburban domesticity infuses even his
tallest tales. In this regard, *Out of Town* provides a hint of the future of the suburban subgenre, in the domestic strife that will become a staple of the twentieth-century novel.

**“It Wanted the Atmosphere of Sentimental Association”: Howells**

Both Cozzens and Coffin employ the picturesque aesthetic and the sketch form, as well as humor and an artist protagonist-narrator, in their efforts to construct a middle-class suburban identity in fiction, though these elements work somewhat differently in each text. They prefer to compose representative scenes of everyday life over singular, dramatic events in order to familiarize their readers with the suburban experience. In other words, by episodically portraying the mishaps of new suburbanites, *The Sparrowgrass Papers* and *Out of Town* help set appropriate expectations about the new environment. Interpreted this way, the sketchbooks perform something like the “settlement” function that Amy Kaplan observes taking place in William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. “The notion of settlement, a way of conceptualizing urban class differences, has two related meanings: to make the city knowable and inhabitable by the middle classes and to subdue the city’s unsettling foreign forces.”

Howells’s *Suburban Sketches* (1871) could perhaps be interpreted as another attempt at settlement, but this work differs from previous sketchbooks—as well as his own later urban fiction—in several important ways. Despite the title, his sketchbook really performs a literary mapping of Boston. The fictitious suburb of “Charlesbridge” mainly provides a starting point from which to explore the city, just as his suburbanite protagonist-narrator provides the point of view. Howells does not describe Charlesbridge in much detail, while suburban domestic life remains practically invisible. He finds large-scale urban spectacles such as a public exhibition and the theatre much more fascinating than suburban landscapes or rural nature. He comes closest to addressing something like suburban culture in the sketches about the horse-car...
phenomenon and a recreational trip that his suburbanites take. Indeed, the book would be more accurately titled *Sketches by a Suburbanite*.

Just as Howells’s Charlesbridge is less knowable of a community—to borrow Raymond William’s phrase—than are Cozzens’s Yonkers, Coffin’s Fordham, or even the New York City of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* for that matter, so does Howells’s understanding of suburban distinction differ from that of his predecessors. His main concern is about the suburb’s lack of picturesqueness and romance. Their absence results for him in its unnarratability and thus his turn to Boston. For Howells, middle-class status is tied first and foremost to an ability to be entertained and to sentimentality. In other words, aestheticism is not merely a substitute means of distinction, as was the case in *The Sparrowgrass Papers* and *Out of Town*, but the only operative one for Howells. The suburb and its residents simply do not provide the material for such experiences, so his attention is drawn to the urban poor, ethnic immigrants, and racial minorities that exist at the edges of suburbia. The unnamed narrator-protagonist of most of the sketches, who may likely be Howells himself and is a professional writer like his two predecessors, desires to convert his encounters with “vagabonds,” ethnic ghettos, and displaced domestic artifacts into picturesque diversions.67 Though he succeeds on occasion, the sketches more often than not conclude in frustration and pessimism, because he discovers disturbing signs of social change and gritty realities that hinder his imagination. The plotless, ephemeral quality of some of Howells’s sketches, along with the unusual obscurity of his suburbanite characters, further intimate a sense of failure.

Like the two previous sketchbooks, *Suburban Sketches* begins with a newly arrived family, and Howells seems prepared to follow their domestic adventures, making light of their difficulties through sarcasm: “It was on a morning of the lovely New England May that we left
the horse-car, and, spreading our umbrellas, walked down the street to our new home in Charlesbridge, through a storm of snow and rain so finely blent by the influences of this fortunate climate, that no flake knew itself from its sister drop, or could be better identified by the people against whom they beat in unison” (SS 11). This first sentence already reveals a few important differences between this and the other texts. Howells’s suburbanites are rarely more distinguishable than the flakes, the narrator employing “we” when speaking for the anonymous, undisclosed family. They will remain at the center of the narrative and yet curiously absent from it. The failure of the snow to demonstrate its usual whiteness could also be symbolic, because race and ethnicity will preoccupy Howells far more than any other writer in this group except Hentz.

The narrator next provides a first impression of the landscape’s “peculiar cheerfulness,” and again we are given hints as to where his attentions will fall: “Here and there in the vacant lots abandoned hoop-skirts defied decay; and near the half-finished wooden houses, empty mortar-beds, and bits of lath and slate strewn over the scarred and mutilated ground, added their interest to the scene” (SS 11). Meanwhile, the struggling vegetation receives only a rare, obligatory mention. The term “scene” will be repeated throughout the sketches, a signal of the narrator’s readiness to discover the picturesque, though it will not be found in rustic nature. The family’s initial assessment of suburbia reveals their predictably faulty expectations: “Charlesbridge appeared to us as a kind of Paradise,” says the narrator, adding, “[w]e were living in the country with the conveniences and luxuries of the city about us” (SS 12). Nonetheless, much of the book is dedicated to exploring the inconveniences of living on the “frontier” (SS 13). Howells briefly alludes to some by now predictable irritations, including the noisy cows and their youthful tenders who eye the suburbanites’ pears, the chickens and bad weather that ruin
their “play” garden, and the general lack of excitement: “It was very quiet; we called one another to the window if a large dog went by our door” (SS 13). Despite these signs of rural life, one could not confuse this streetcar suburb with the country. “All around us carpenters were at work building new houses,” notes the narrator, while passing trains shake the house and a horse-car irregularly stops on their street (SS 14).

Another of these annoyances associated more with city life supplies the topic for the first sketch: the trouble of finding domestic help. Unlike the Sparrowgrasses or the Grays, Howells’s suburbanites actually appreciate their initial maid, Jenny, but she only stays until September, quitting due to the lack of street lighting, which made her fearful of traveling at night (SS 15). When “the young housekeeper” goes to an intelligence office in the city and inquires whether anyone would care to do housework in Charlesbridge, “there came from the maids invoked so loud, so fierce, so full a ‘No!’ as shook the lady’s heart with indescribable shame and dread” (SS 16). Being identified with the suburb suddenly becomes “a matter of reproach,” yet the narrator just as quickly shifts from pathos to sarcasm, realizing the dull conventionality of this teacup tragedy: “Any one who looks upon this page could match it with a tale as full of heartbreak and disaster, while I conceive that, in hastening to speak of Mrs. Johnson, I approach a subject of unique interest” (SS 17).

Mrs. Johnson, who provides the sketch its name, is African-American, and the novelty of her race in a middle-class suburban context promises to fulfill the specific needs of both Howells and his characters. He writes, “A Lybian longing took us, and we would have chosen, if we could, to bear a strand of grotesque beads, or a handful of brazen gauds, and traffic them for some sable maid with crisped locks, whom, uncoffling from the captive train beside the desert, we should make to do our general housework forever, through the right of lawful purchase. But
we knew that this was impossible, and that, if we desired colored help, we must seek it at the intelligence office, which is in one of those streets chiefly inhabited by the orphaned children and grandchildren of slavery” (SS 18). The rhetorical shift between these two sentences emphasizes just what the family and the writer find so interesting about Mrs. Johnson. Hiring her allows them to assume the position of master and fulfill a racist desire for power, but more importantly they buy a familiarity with her that enables the free play of their imaginations, as the desert fantasy demonstrates. In other words, her “colorful” foreignness could provide the aesthetic material that their indistinguishable white suburb needs in order to become interesting and literary.

Bringing Mrs. Johnson into suburbia reverses the trend of metropolitan segregation that Howells observes in his discussion of the different ethnic quarters of the city. In fact, the family chooses an African-American based on their perceptions of the different parts of Boston. “An air not so much of decay as of unthrift, and yet hardly of unthrift, seems to prevail in the [African-American] neighborhood, which has none of the aggressive and impudent squalor of an Irish quarter, and none of the surly wickedness of a low American street. A gayety not born of the things that bring its serious joy to the true New England heart—a ragged gayety, which comes of summer in the blood” (SS 20). This racial essentialism, along with memories of the recent institution of slavery, convinces the suburbanites that Mrs. Johnson will remain appropriately unthreatening and furthermore provide them with entertainment through her picturesque juxtaposition with the white middle-class suburb.

Mrs. Johnson becomes their ideal domestic, since she loves to cook for them and imparts “something original and authentic mingled with the accustomed flavors” (SS 21). More importantly, her person provides the narrator with pages of material, as he expounds on the
topics of her mixed ancestry, her “child-like” tastes and “savage” love of sweets, her turban and 
“mystical swathings,” and her “gold-bowed spectacles of massive frame” (SS 22-3). Mrs. 
Johnson’s purpose becomes explicit when the narrator remarks, “she most pleasured our sense of 
beauty and moral fitness when, after the last pan was washed and the last dish was scraped, she 
lighted a potent pipe, and, taking her stand at the kitchen door, laded the soft evening air with its 
pungent odors” (SS 22). Her labor, race, and personal habits all provide the suburbanites with 
distinction, in part by drawing attention away from their own boring middle-class 
conventionality.

When Mrs. Johnson’s son Hippolyto Thucydides visits, he disrupts the suburbanites’ 
pleasure, or as the narrator tellingly puts it, “the presence of Thucydides in our kitchen 
unaccountably oppressed our imaginations” (SS 32). He is a liminal figure like his mother, yet 
her opposite in many ways: “He was a heavy and loutish youth, standing upon the borders of 
boyhood, and looking forward to the future with a vacant and listless eye” (SS 31). Where his 
mother’s thoughts dwell mostly on her past, Thucydides seems to suffer from thwarted 
ambitions. He refuses to stay in the city, running away from his boarding house constantly 
during the summer to visit his mother. Yet he does not conventionally fit into suburbia either, 
because he neither works nor lives there. Most strikingly, Thucydides prefers to lie half inside 
the house, “balanced—perhaps in homage to us, and perhaps as a token of extreme sensibility in 
himself—upon the low window-sill, the bottoms of his boots touching the floor inside, and his 
face buried in the grass without” (SS 31-2). Whereas Mrs. Johnson charmingly stands framed by 
the doorway smoking her pipe, continuing to serve them as a picturesque dessert herself so to 
speak, her son provides an affront through his unaesthetic inactivity.
Thucydides is threatening and disruptive like the Irish, not docile and aesthetic as the suburbanites believe African-Americans should be. As the narrator says: “We beheld him all over the house, a monstrous eidolon, balanced upon every windowsill; and he certainly attracted unpleasant notice to our place” (SS 32). The suburbanites try to manage him by claiming he shares his mother’s “primitive nature,” though she informs them of “his industry, his courage, and his talent,” claiming that “there was no one so agreeable in society, or so quick-witted in affairs” (SS 32). This description of the young man’s qualities makes him a potential parody of the white middle-class suburbanites. The family decides that he must go, and the sketch ends abruptly with Mrs. Johnson remorsefully quitting their service. If Mrs. Johnson serves as an exception that proves the rule of suburban exclusivity, then Thucydides, with his offensive inclination for suburban life, spoils the possibility of picturesque mixture.

The next two sketches repeat Howells’s themes, contrasting Boston’s Italian “vagabonds” with the Irish residents of the “Dublin” community. The narrator admits, “we Northern and New World folk cannot help but cast a little romance about whoever comes to us from Italy, whether we have actually known the beauty and charm of that land or not” (SS 45). The various Italian beggars, organ grinders, and scissors grinders who appear at his door could be considered nuisances, yet he finds them enjoyable because of the diversions these immigrants offer—indeed, this sketch begins a trend of drifting away from the topic of suburbia that will only become more pronounced. Although the Italians are all impoverished and homeless, their need to elicit his goodwill through pleasantry allows him to imagine their lives as he wishes: “I feel that they only pretend a disgust with it, and that they really like organ-grinding, if for no other reason than that they are the children of the summer, and it takes them into the beloved open weather” (SS 35). Recording the appearance and habits of one peddler, he nonchalantly remarks, “she, too, has had
her troubles,—what troubles I do not remember” (SS 46). Like Mrs. Johnson, these “doorstep acquaintances” are liminal yet nonthreatening, allowing the suburbanite to purchase the rights of familiarity. One organ grinder, he says, “sketches me the story of his life” as part of their exchange, going so far as to perform the narrator’s aesthetic work for him (SS 48).

The necessary relationship between class and the suburbanite’s romanticism is made more explicit when he interacts with a Civil War veteran who, despite begging for work, “was not lacking in the fine instincts of personal cleanliness, of dress, of style” (SS 55). One of the suburbanite’s domestics accidentally takes the vagabond for a gentleman and leads him into the parlor, to the amusement of all. The narrator remarks: “We all know how pleasant it is to laugh at people behind their backs; but this veteran afforded me at a very low rate the luxury of a fellow-being whom one might laugh at to his face as much as one liked” (SS 56). As in the case of Hentz’s suburbanites wearing the clothes of farmers, the transgression of the suburban class boundary in this comical way actually reinforces social differences. Yet such encounters can quickly sour for the patronizing suburbanite as soon as the tacit rules of behavior are not followed. The sketch ends when the narrator makes fun of the veteran’s desire for a home, asking why the man does not get married. The veteran, who has suffered a mysterious wound, smiles sadly and turns the discussion back to the work he still owes the suburbanite. At this, the narrator proclaims, “A sudden and unreasonable disgust for the character which had given me so much entertainment succeeded to my past delight. I felt, moreover, that I had bought the right to use some frankness with the veteran, and I said to him: ‘Do you know, now, that I shouldn’t care if I never saw you again?’” (SS 59). The homeless man’s unspoken answer would make his situation unbearably stark and unaesthetic, while his unwillingness to completely surrender his dignity despite his hardships makes his presence in suburbia impossible.
The Italians are charming to the suburbanite in part because they appreciate America but do not desire to live here permanently: “the population of Ferry Street exists but in the hope of a return, soon or late, to the native or the ancestral land” (SS 37). They are Howells’s model minority, not least because most of them agree with the opinion of one Italian scissors grinder, who “viewed with inexpressible scorn those Irish who came to this country, and were so little sensible of the benefits it conferred on them” (SS 42). The Irish immigrants are the principal subject of the next sketch, titled “A Pedestrian Tour.” The narrator begins by disparaging walking for exercise, though he admits, “some sort of recreation is necessary after a day spent within doors; and one is really obliged nowadays to take a little walk instead of medicine; for one’s doctor is sure to have a mania on the subject” (SS 60). His protestations contain references to his class position, as does his choice of terms for his walk. Touring, like sketching, was closely allied with the picturesque aesthetic in the late nineteenth century, and the picturesque tour was a well-established literary genre by this point as well. According to Beth Lynne Lueck, “the picturesque tour played a significant role in enabling American writers to establish a national identity,” as literary descriptions of natural wonders, battlefields, and the West were used to promote American independence and expansionism.68 One might expect Howells to use this genre to celebrate his middle-class suburb, therefore, but his sketch instead avoids the subject for the most part, in part because he finds the “uniform neatness and prettiness” of the newly built houses monotonous (SS 61). Indeed, the negative connotation of “pedestrian” is intentional, as he declares, “I fear that I should find these rambles dull, but that their utter lack of interest amuses me,” and he further apologizes by adding, “I cannot promise to be really livelier than my walk” (SS 61).
As the narrator wanders the suburban fringe, he comes upon a railroad, “vast brick-yards” that remind him of Egypt, and a boarding house for the brickwork’s French-Canadian laborers (SS 62). Each of these encounters provides fodder for his imagination and memory. These nearby sites hold exotic associations for him, yet trains, brick edifices, and industrial workers literally support and sustain his suburban world. The Irish settlement disrupts his tour, because prejudice and fear color his observations, disallowing what he sees to affirm his worldview, particularly his notion of a natural hierarchy of races. Commenting on the large number of Irish children in the streets, he declares, “such increase shall—together with the well-known ambition of Dubliners to rule the land—one day make an end of us poor Yankees as a dominant plurality” (SS 68). He also bemoans the lack of care the Irish give to the old Yankee houses they inhabit. Howells describes one such farmhouse with a flourish of genteel rhetoric: “Its gate is thrown down, and the great wild-grown lilac hedge, no longer protected by a fence, shows skirts bedabbled by the familiarity of lawless poultry, as little like the steady-habited poultry of other times, as the people of the house are like the former inmates” (SS 69).

This outlook disables the suburbanite’s aestheticism, as when he views mourners at an Irish graveyard and reflects, “I was now merely touched as a human being, and had little desire to turn the scene to literary account. I could not help feeling that it wanted the atmosphere of sentimental association, the whole background was blank or worse than a blank” (SS 66). His expression seems odd, since the wailing Irish woman there is intensely emotional, but by “sentimental association” the narrator seems to mean the kind of romantic daydreaming that requires disengagement. To be picturesque or sentimental in Howells’s sense is to be entertaining, supportive of nostalgia, and most of all conforming to middle-class views. The Irish settlement is none of these.
The Irish community not only frustrates the narrator as a writer, but it directly assaults the suburban effort at distinction—which I have been suggesting are two parts of a single process, there being as Bourdieu says no “pure” aesthetic free from class struggle. Speaking about the common nativist prejudice, the narrator divulges:

We must make a jest of our own alarms, and even smile—since we cannot help ourselves—at the spiritual desolation occasioned by the settlement of an Irish family in one of our suburban neighborhoods. The householders view with fear and jealousy the erection of any dwelling of less than a stated cost, as portending a possible advent of Irish; and when the calamitous race actually appears, a mortal pang strikes to the bottom of every pocket. Values tremble throughout that neighborhood, to which the new-comers communicate a species of moral dry-rot. (SS 70-71)

Just as the residents flee at the sight of the Irish, so does the tourist, who returns to the “picturesque” middle-class area of Charlesbridge. On his way home, he stops at a second-hand shop, which he announces is “an enchanted place to me, and I am a frequent and unprofitable customer there” (SS 77-8). What he finds so fascinating about the store’s vast collection of cast off domestic artifacts, predictably, is their strong sentimental association. The things have little commercial value, but their age lends them a romantic aura in the artist’s eye. “The melancholy of ruinous auction sales, of changing tastes or changing fashions, clings to them,” says the suburbanite, and in his various speculations about the past lives of these pathetic objects and their previous owners, reminiscent of Mr. Gray’s fantasies, we again witness the suburban compulsion to feel socially superior.

The detour does not restore the equilibrium that the tour of “Dublin” upset. Arriving at “the Avenue,” a principle thoroughfare in Charlesbridge, the suburbanite declares, “it is not only handsome, but probably the very dullest street in the world,” and indeed he provides an uncharacteristically concise and unembellished description of its scenes (SS 87). Returning home at dusk, he finally gives vent to his discontent, becoming melodramatic about the time and place
that have put an end to his tour: “This is in fact the hour of supreme trial everywhere, and
doubtless no one but a newly-accepted lover can be happy at twilight. In the city, even, it is
oppressive; in the country it is desolate; in the suburbs it is a miracle that it is ever lived through”
(SS 89). He ends by further condemning his new home, “In town your fancy would turn to the
theatres; in the country you would occupy yourself with cares of poultry or of stock; in the
suburbs you can but sit upon your threshold, and fight the predatory mosquito” (SS 90).

Howells’s first three sketches establish the basic themes, motifs, and narrative patterns
that the remainder will only further elaborate. In “By Horse-Car to Boston,” this new mode of
transportation that greatly enabled middle-class suburbanization leads the narrator to reflect upon
the change of customs that it impels, specifically a decline of public gentility. The narrator
remarks, “I have seen a laborer or artisan rise from his place, and offer it to a lady, while a dozen
well-dressed men kept theirs” (SS 95). His long discourse on the many incivilities of riding ends
with the hope: “Perhaps when the ladies come to vote, they will abate, with other nuisances, the
whole business of overloaded public conveyances” (SS 98). The issue of suffrage repeatedly
crops up in this sketch, perhaps because women and their reform movement represent social
change and the uncertain future, much as Thucydides and the Irish children do. Again, he seeks
out the reassurance of “agreeable variety,” and his eye falls upon “inebriate passengers,” a
mender of umbrellas, a peddler of soap, and a man with “a beard dyed an unscrupulous purple”
(SS 100). Though the narrator finds some parts of the spectacle enjoyable, he ultimately decides
that the overcrowded horse-car as an American institution is indicative of our “weakness as a
public,” declaring it “below the level of the most uncomfortable nations of the Old World” (SS
113-4).
The ironically titled “A Day’s Pleasure” addresses the topic of suburban leisure. The entire family, including the baby and its nurse, travel by horse-car to the harbor to take a ferry to the Gloucester beach. They meet with minor setbacks along the way, culminating in their decision not to disembark from the boat once they finally arrive because of a slight chill in the air. Where Coffin turned the same scenario to a humorous end, swiftly piling up outrageous accidents in order to exhibit his suburbanites’ ineptitude, Howells’s long, tedious sketch makes the same point with his characteristic blend of pathos and sarcasm. Upon hearing a brief account of the excursion, one of the suburban women who stayed at home exclaims, “I don’t wish to hear anything more. That’s your idea of a day’s pleasure, is it? I call it a day’s disgrace, a day’s miserable giving-up. There, go in, go in; I’m ashamed of you all. Don’t let the neighbors see you, for pity’s sake” (SS 158).

The next pair of sketches touch most directly upon the aesthetic problems with which Howells struggles. In “A Romance of Real Life,” a gaunt man named Jonathan Tinker comes to the door of a Charlesbridge resident late in the evening, claiming to be a sailor just returned from a two years’ voyage, trying to locate his daughter who is reputed to live nearby. The protagonist, a contributor to the magazines, takes this chance encounter as proof of his embryonic theory of literary realism: “This contributor had been lately thinking, whenever he turned the pages of some foolish traveller,—some empty prattler of Southern or Eastern lands, where all sensation was long ago exhausted, and the oxygen has perished from every sentiment, so has it been breathed and breathed again,—that nowadays the wise adventurer sat down beside his own register and waited for incidents to seek him out” (SS 172). The contributor helps the sailor canvass the neighborhood, and in learning more of Tinker’s adventures “rejoiced in him as an episode of real life quite as striking and complete as anything in fiction. It was literature made to
his hand” (SS 181). As in previous sketches, Howells ends by mocking his suburbanite’s aesthetic notions as well as the literary potential of suburbia. The contributor discovers the “sailor” was recently released from a prison sentence for bigamy, that the daughter is hiding from her father, and that Tinker’s cover story was likely lifted from Two Years Before the Mast by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. The narrator reports, “However Jonathan Tinker had fallen in his esteem as a man, he had even risen as literature. The episode which had appeared so perfect in its pathetic phases did not seem less finished as a farce” (SS 186). Yet the unrelenting desire for pathos that animates Suburban Sketches cannot be satisfied by such substitute pleasures, especially when the joke is on the suburbanite because of his inability to recognize the confidence man.

The shortest sketch, simply titled “Scene,” most strikingly demonstrates the contributor’s vexed relationship with realism. When he hears that a young woman in the Irish community has drowned herself, “that literary soul fell at once to patching himself up a romantic story for the suicide, after the pitiful fashion of this fiction-ridden age” (SS 191). The contributor cannot build up much sympathy, though, because he can only imagine the suicide in terms of the “very tiresome figure” of the “Fallen Woman” (SS 191). He continues to fantasize about the lovers, attempting to lend the event interest, until his imagination is checked by the narrator’s uncharacteristic one sentence paragraph: “And now they were bringing her in a wagon” (SS 193). His intrusions are silenced, and the sketch ends with an uninterrupted description of the corpse’s progress, offering neither a conventional conclusion nor a definitive answer as to what compelled the suicide. This second trip to the Irish ghetto is the most unsettling moment in the sketchbook.

Both “Jubilee Days,” concerning a massive public exposition, and “Some Lessons for the School of Morals,” about the theatre, make little pretense of discussing suburbia, Howells being
drawn to urban spectacles instead. The main idea of “Jubilee Days” recapitulates that of “By Horse-Car to Boston.” Observing the exhibition crowd of fifty thousand people, the narrator remarks: “It was as if you were a private in an army, or a very ordinary billow of the sea, feeling the battle or the storm, in a collective sort of way, but unable to distinguish your sensations from those of the mass” (SS 200). Although the grand event pleases his civic pride at first, by the end it has much the same effect on the suburbanite as his other encounters with urban diversity, producing “the sarcastic pathos with which we Americans bear most oppressive and fatiguing things as a good joke” (SS 211). The preamble to “Some Lessons for the School of Morals” expresses the same outlook: “Any study of suburban life would be very imperfect without some glance at that larger part of it which is spent in the painful pursuit of pleasure such as are offered at the ordinary places of public amusement; and for this reason I excuse myself for rehearsing certain impressions here which are not more directly suburban, to say the least, than those recounted in the foregoing chapter” (SS 220).

“Flitting,” the final sketch of the collection, finds the suburban family packing up and moving out. “I profess to have all the possible regrets for Benecia Street, now that I have left it,” comments the narrator. Nevertheless, the title and tone of this piece reinforce the sense of previous sketches that the experiment in suburban living has been a failure, at least on Howells’s terms (SS 241). He does not mention whether the new house they have chosen is located in the city or the suburbs. The latter seems more likely, given the changes that have taken place to Charlesbridge during their four year tenure, as the vacant, trash-strewn lots have transformed into freshly painted new wooden houses, and the cows have lost their pastures (SS 242-3). I doubt it is a coincidence that they flee in the face of this development, yet Howells characteristically does not address his suburbanites’ role in these processes or the economic
aspect of their decision. Instead, the sketch vainly persists in seeking out sentimental associations. The narrator watches his daughter pack up her dollhouse, declaring: “Nothing real in this world is so affecting as some image of reality, and this travesty of our own flitting was almost intolerable. I will not pretend to sentiment about anything else, for everything else had in it the element of self-support belonging to all actual afflictions” (SS 244). Sentimentality, understood as escapism, entertainment, and the essence of literature, cannot be sustained by suburbia.

“Without Glory of Any Kind”: Beers, Bunner, and Cutting

The suburban fictions of Hentz, Cary, Cozzens, Coffin, and Howells demonstrate many commonalities, centered around the theme of indistinction. The nineteenth-century subgenre’s identity is further consolidated by the repetition of the three narrative patterns in the work of three turn-of-the-century authors. Henry A. Beers’s short story “A Suburban Pastoral” (1894) should be read as a response to or extension of Howells’s sketches for many reasons. The story begins with the protagonist Clitheroe and his friend Sproat walking for exercise, and their pedestrian tour takes them through a setting that quite resembles Howells’s suburban fringe. The narrator prefaces a lengthy description of their ramble with the disparaging comment: “There is one glory of the country and another glory of the town, but there is a limbo or ragged edge between which is without glory of any kind.”

His vivid description is worth quoting at length:

Hither are banished slaughter pens, chemical and oil works, glue factories, soap boilers, and other malodorous nuisances. Here are railroad shops and roundhouses, sand lots, German beer gardens, and tenement blocks. Land, which was lately sold by the acre, is now offered by the foot front; and no piece of real estate is quite sure whether it is still part of an oil field or has become a building lot. Rural lanes and turnpikes have undergone metamorphosis into “boulevards,” where regulation curbstones prophesy future sidewalks, and thinly scattered lamp-posts foretell a coming population. Far out on the sandy plains the ear is startled by the tinkle of horse-car bells. . . . Here is a smart new corner grocery in red brick, center of a
growing trade, and deriving its patronage from rows of little new wooden houses, to whose front yards and turf borders the lawn mower and the rubber hose have already given a municipal smugness. The frequent baby carriage and the swarms of children hanging upon the music of that suburban minstrel, the organ grinder, justify the enterprise of the grocer and the faith of the real estate speculator. On the opposite corner is a decayed farmhouse, with its cow sheds and outbuildings. (“Pastoral” 5-6)

Despite the intervening generation between Howells and Beers, middle-class suburbia appears nearly the same. The industrial city is inescapable, while the old countryside fades into oblivion, and a few new conveniences contrast with the disorder of development.

Beers also returns to his famous predecessor’s obsession with aestheticism, romance, and sentimentality, which Beers makes the subject of his more direct, almost Juvenalian satire. “As they grew familiar with this outcast region,” he writes, “our peripatetic philosophers found a picturesqueness in its peculiar scenery,” and Sproat even accuses Clitheroe “of getting points of view from Mr. Howells’ ‘Suburban Sketches’” (“Pastoral” 7). Signaling how trite and conventional the picturesque aesthetic had become by the end of the century, Sproat ridicules his friend: “there’s an old hen-house with the sunset shining through the laths; and there’s an abandoned omnibus, and two or three red cedars, and some ducks in a puddle in the foreground, and two niggers with a scoop-net going across the middle distance. Can’t you get up some fluff about that? Effet de soleil or something? Come, give us a frenzy!” (“Pastoral” 7). Nevertheless, Beers ultimately offers nothing particularly new or different in terms of his setting, theme, or story, and his parody of Howells often reads like a simple copy. Clitheroe takes Sproat’s cousin Miss Venable on a sort of date to Shuttle Pond Meadow, where he had been collecting orchids. After he describes it to her as “a splendid wild place,” she requests to take along her drawing equipment in order to make sketches (“Pastoral” 19). Sproat provides the counterpoint to these romantics, reviling the place as “a collection of ditches surrounded by pig-pens and slaughter-houses” (“Pastoral” 19). The intrepid seekers after beauty persist, enduring the noxious smell of
the place. When Clitheroe drops his glasses in the bog, Miss Venable rescues them, and when the potential lovers accidentally touch, he pulls away “abashed at his own secret temerity” (“Pastoral” 27).

Whereas Howells identified with his protagonist despite his reservations about such romantic tendencies and aestheticism, Beers appears quite unsympathetic and hostile. He transfers Howells’s rather complacent racial anxieties onto gender, suggesting that middle-class men risk feminization by failing to acknowledge reality. As Clitheroe and Miss Venable walk back from their sketching expedition, the pair are harassed by a group of “corner boys” outside a “liquor saloon” (“Pastoral” 28). The lower-class men, who speak in dialect, go so far as to spit tobacco on Miss Venable, yet Clitheroe “strode on with a feeling of utter helplessness” (“Pastoral” 29). After this encounter, Beers’s writing shifts from a parody of Howells’s genteel rhetoric to language reminiscent of Frank Norris: “It had been one of those junctures where the carefully spun fictions of civilization are torn aside and the brutal facts of human nature stand out in their nakedness: the demand of the female upon the male for protection; her instinctive choice—her absolute need—of physical strength and prowess” (“Pastoral” 30). Beers is no naturalist, though, and his story resolves in Howellsian minor key sentimentality, as the “bud of promise” between Clitheroe and Miss Venable never blooms, though she remains “as gracious as ever” toward him (“Pastoral” 31). Clitheroe continues to fantasize in dreams that he had acted differently, imagining himself being “shockingly bullied, beaten, perhaps killed?” (“Pastoral” 31). The final lines echo with perhaps only more bitterness Howells’s assessment of suburban fiction: “Awaking from such a dream, Clitheroe would wonder whether melodrama is any more essentially tragical than farce” (“Pastoral” 32).
Henry Cuyler Bunner’s *The Suburban Sage* (1896) is close to the writings of Cozzens and Coffin in form, content, and meaning.72 Mr. Sage, whose name testifies to his hard-won wisdom, is a professional writer who moved from New York City to the Jersey suburbs some years ago. He works out of his house, producing these autobiographical sketches.73 This sketchbook provides another Horatian satire of everyday suburban life, focusing upon the inexperience of newcomers as well as the minor deceptions and self-delusions that result from the desire for distinction. The comedy of manners begins with “Mr. Chedby on a Regular Nuisance.” The title character spends much of this sketch complaining to his neighbor Mr. Sage that “the borrowing habit is the curse of suburban life,” because people do not return items or sometimes even ask one’s permission (*Sage* 6). Mr. Sage has come to ask Mr. Chedby to return his lawn roller, telling him, “‘if you can send your man up with it in the morning, I’ll be much obliged.’ (He had no man; but it is a polite suburban fiction to assume that everybody keeps one)” (*Sage* 7). Unperturbed, Chedby proclaims his surprise at learning the roller belongs to Sage, since he found it at another neighbor’s house. The fibbing on both sides exemplifies the behavior that Bunner considers essential to middle-class suburban distinction. To admit one needs the roller to perform one’s own yardwork would be to lose face. Through such illusions, the community depends upon its members to inflate their collective status.

The same unsubtle, comic irony that characterized the work of Cozzens and Coffin is also present in *The Suburban Sage*. In “The Suburban Horse,” for instance, Mr. Sage recounts the life of Rix, a horse that passes through many hands like the lawn roller. Mr. Sage finds describing Rix to be difficult: “he is no particular kind of horse—or he is any and every kind, as you please to put it. His quality, character and station among horses depend almost entirely upon his ownership and employment” (*Sage* 23). Because suburbanites lack any real experience with
horses, they base their assessments of Rix upon such superficialities as the look of his harness or the cart he pulls. Mr. Sage’s friend Mr. Fornand shows an interest in buying Rix, until the animal changes hands from a sporty butcher to a shabby clergyman. After the horse becomes the property of a fashionable undertaker, Mr. Fornand bids a good deal more money than he would have previously paid to buy Rix at an auction. In other sketches, the same sort of social competitiveness and self-delusion marks such suburban activities as golf or church attendance.

Although Bunner’s use of the sketch form is less interesting than any of the previous sketch writers, and he does not significantly engage with the picturesque aesthetic, he does employ self-deprecating humor to reach an accord with suburbia as *The Sparrowgrass Papers* and *Out of Town* did. His humor continues to address the social construction of value through pretense, his prime fascination. The two sketches that best demonstrate this, “The Pointers” and “The Sporting Scheme,” address techniques used to sell suburban houses. The first is named for the urbanites who make a pastime of visiting the suburbs in order to “loiter and gawk” (*Sage* 71). These “pointers” are lured by real estate agents offering them free carriage rides, “cakes and ale in it, free, too; and more than this, there is consideration and respect and even deference and delicate flattery—undeserved it is true” (*Sage* 75). The crafty salesmanship inevitably turns the tables on the pointers, who originally look down upon benighted suburbanites but end up buying property. Similar to “Mr. Chedby,” each party attempts to deceive the other with a “polite suburban fiction” based on the pointers’ desire for status.

“The Sporting Scheme” refers to a more dubious ploy that Mr. Sage discovers. A suburban realtor hires poor Irish men to dress up as sports and pose near railway stations. When the pointers catch sight of these phony golfers and hunters, they are mistakenly convinced that middle-class suburbia supports a patrician life of leisure. The realtor defends his practice by
condemning the pointers: “The people who are attracted by that sort of thing are every bit as bad fake-sports as my bog-trotters here. These poor fellows of mine are honest laboring men out of employment. They do this thing for their board and lodging—you see I feed them well—and they’re a good deal better men than most of the dudes who think they can’t live without white boxcoats and balloon riding-breeches” (Sage 163). Most damning is the realtor’s claim that former pointers perpetuate his hoax: “The people who are caught want to catch others. I’ve known them to go out in their own sport clothes and drill with my boys when the express trains came in” (Sage 163-4). Bunner thus portrays suburbia as a kind of mass delusion, and experienced hands such as Mr. Sage can laugh at the process, having paid the price of admission to this society—being duped oneself.

Although Mary Stewart Cutting’s “The Suburban Whirl” (1907) lies outside of my grouping by strict chronology, her long story surprisingly demonstrates more affinities with the texts written by my two antebellum female authors than with much of the twentieth-century subgenre. Her protagonist, Hazel Fastnet, faces a moral dilemma as she must choose between two suburban lifestyles, one materialistic and caught up in fashionable society, the other characterized by the retirement, domesticity, and simplicity Hentz and Cary prescribed. Cutting’s story begins with Hazel showing two of her wealthy, older neighbors around her new home: “Hazel was sublimely unconscious of the fact that this interior, which she proudly showed each visitor, was to her not the reality of bare floors and empty rooms, but a spot ideally endowed by the imagination with all the luxuries of the future.”74 She is young, ambitious, and eager to emulate her neighbors, admiring Mrs. Stryker in particular because her clothes “were always little short of magnificent” (“Whirl” 5). The problem the Fastnets discover about living “in the country,” as Hazel describes it, is not the inconveniences that provide Cozzens and Coffin so
much literary material. Hazel does have trouble learning to operate a coal oven, being accustomed to the gas range in their urban apartment, but the real shock to her husband is the coal bill. The Fastnets have underestimated the expense of operating the new house, and moving “had taken more than the last penny of the reserve fund,” leaving little money for the furnishings and club memberships that Hazel desires (“Whirl” 17).

The Fastnets begin to resume the lifestyle that they apparently left the city to escape. Speaking of their earlier married life, Cutting writes, “they could hardly be said to have begun housekeeping there; they took most of their meals out, and the period had been so fragmentary that it was hard to get a focusing point. In that year they had lived in a jumble of ornaments and invitations to dinner, and returning calls” (“Whirl” 16). Now they have a baby and Hazel is learning to keep house. Her husband made another important change during this time: “From a boy Hollister had been over a desk, with results that had nearly been disastrous. He owned to a weak throat, if nothing worse; a couple of months after his marriage, and none too soon, he had made the change to a firm where he could have outdoor work, though the salary was not large. Hazel thought he had never looked so well” (“Whirl” 20-1). After they move to the suburbs, she begins pressuring him to ask for a raise or find a better paying job. A seemingly ideal opportunity appears when Mr. Stryker dies suddenly, since Hollister knows his business and has made influential connections through his neighbors.

Cutting’s opinion of this opportunity should be obvious to the reader. One of her few comments about the deceased Mr. Stryker is that he “was immersed in the cares of business, was never visible by daylight in winter, and was only seen on summer Sundays” (“Whirl” 5). This description contrasts with his strikingly conspicuous wife, who is the closest thing to an antagonist in the story. A true creature of society, she is childless and reluctant to even hold the
Fastnets’ baby (“Whirl” 38). Following her husband’s untimely death, Mrs. Stryker “plunged fiercely for distraction into the drapings of her widowhood,” inaugurating what Cutting derides as “a revel of dressmaking inside and out of the house” (“Whirl” 84). The Fastnets are quickly caught in the same trap. Before Hollister even has Stryker’s job, Hazel begins planning to buy new clothes and talks to her husband about moving to a more fashionable house (“Whirl” 95). As the Fastnets go off to a party, she placidly leaves the baby with its new nurse, a more subtle shift away from her previous domesticity (“Whirl” 96).

Hazel turns from her course when she discovers the conditions of the office where Hollister will work, a “cave of industry” artificially lit and steam heated (“Whirl” 48). With melodrama suitable to the Victorians, she professes her unwillingness for her husband to suffer this extreme oppression, and her speech to him also recalls the pastoral values of early Victorian suburban fiction: “I couldn’t be happy—it would kill me! to be in the sunlight and the fresh air every day and know you were cooped up there, going so early, staying so late!” (“Whirl” 108-9). Cutting even returns to the religious morality that characterizes her female literary predecessors, as Hazel informs her husband of her realization that they do not need more money: “God has been helping me to find that out, to-night. It’s all spending and striving after more and more, without any peace or rest in it” (“Whirl” 110).

The three narratives examined in this concluding section demonstrate the repetition that is necessary to establish a genre. Most of the features that describe this body of fiction change function or simply disappear in the twentieth century. Gone are the notions of “living in the country,” along with extended descriptions of picturesque nature as well as any serious consideration of suburbia as pastoral. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “fresh, green breast of the new world” in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is a vision of the receding past, while Edith Wharton’s description of
the Van Osburgh marriage in *The House of Mirth* (1905) as a “simple country wedding” and “sylvan rites” drips with sarcasm.\(^7\)

Also gone are non-whites, who are banished from suburbia until the 1980s. While Tom Buchanan may echo the spurious racial theories of Howells’ narrator, no such characters as Mrs. Johnson or her son Thucydides are featured in *The Great Gatsby* or novels of its period. Sinclair Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) features an apparently white suburban protagonist whose great-great-great-grandparents are discovered to have been an Indian and “a full blooded Negro,” and even such a seemingly insignificant revelation leads to hysteria.\(^6\) Gone as well are representations of non-upper- or middle-class neighbors or visitors to suburbia, as the fear of their threatening or shaming suburbanites dissipates. The mechanic George Wilson’s surprising behavior at the end of *The Great Gatsby* provides a rare exception, while George Babbitt is far more representative of the new attitude. When his teenaged son Ted announces that he would like to learn boxing and self-defense in case he needs to defend the family’s honor in public (presumably from the same type of fellows who harass Clitheroe in Beers’s story), Babbitt dismisses his son’s desire as unnecessary: “‘Nobody’s going to pass no slighting remarks on nobody,’ Babbitt observed, ‘not if they stay home and study their geometry and mind their own affairs instead of hanging around a lot of poolrooms and soda-fountains and places where nobody’s got any business to be!’”\(^7\) Home, the suburb, is where the middle-class person is finally somebody.

All of this is to say that the theme of indistinction no longer defines suburban fiction.

---

**Notes**


7 Ibid., 44.


9 Ibid., 195.


18 Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares*, 46. John R. Stilgoe discusses West Philadelphia circa 1860-1880 as a community that “advertised the perils of disorganized real estate subdivision” in the absence of such governance (*Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988], 138). He records: “Attorneys and real estate agents, butchers and plumbers, dry goods retailers and carpenters had established offices and shops along one horsecar route, and black and immigrant families lived close by, in cramped row housing. Many parts of West Philadelphia remained wholly upper or middle class, but others displayed a marked integration, or rather confusion, of housing types and social classes” (*Stilgoe, Borderland*, 138).


20 Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, 145.

22 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 71.


26 Ibid., 127.


29 Ibid., xiii.

30 Ibid., 83.


34 Ibid., xi-xii.


36 Ibid., 114.

37 The apparent disregard for economic value inherent in suburban landscaping is ironic, considering the roots of the landscape concept as a mathematically-based, visual means of ordering and managing land for the developing capitalist economy. Dennis Cosgrove says, “Originally . . . landscape was composed and constructed by techniques which were considered to ensure the certainty of reproducing the real world” (“Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea.” *Reading Human Geography: The Poetics and Politics of Inquiry*, eds. Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory [New York: Arnold, 1997], 336).


41 Caroline Lee Hentz, *Lovell’s Folly: A Novel* (Cincinnati: Hubbard and Edmands, 1833), 8. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as LF.

42 Lovell’s role as a grotesque reminder of the dangers of luxury and public display seems to fit within the moral framework of the traditional gothic narrative. In the late-eighteenth-century British gothic novel, according to Richard Lehan, the world of the landed estate—rooted in aristocratic inheritance—is disrupted by the evils of the urban commercial class (*The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998], 37). My interpretation of Lovell as representing a conservative critique of urban capitalism might then also complement Gillian Brown’s unusual reading of the gothic in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*. Brown proposes that the hysteria and mesmerization of Hepzibah Pyncheon signals a fear of capitalism subjecting the aristocratic body to public labor (*Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990], 81-2). Proper domesticity, for both Hawthorne and Hentz,
would remedy this danger of exposure or “alienation,” as Brown terms it, by making work invisible. Perhaps most interesting in this connection is Brown’s discussion of Andrew Jackson Downing’s Gothic Revival architecture, which she analyzes as promoting leisure, privacy, individuality, and the romantic past—as opposed to work, the marketplace, and family inheritance (Domestic Individualism, 71-4). Although Brown does not recognize the necessity of a suburban setting to Downing’s vision, she shows how the Gothic Revival codifies the suburban values that Hentz—and perhaps Hawthorne too—most favors: in fact, Lovell’s Gothic pillars are the feature that demonstrate his house’s original “severity” and simplicity (LF 8).


44 This theme anticipates Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables (1851). In Hudson’s dissertation, “From Nowhere to Everywhere,” he discusses The Blithedale Romance as the first instance of American suburban discourse.


46 Ibid., 10, 5.

47 I therefore disagree with Hudson’s statement that “[t]he literary equivalent and predecessor of the picturesque is the pastoral” (“From Nowhere to Everywhere,” 60).

48 On the “suburban ideal,” see Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 45-72. On the “triple dream” of “house plus land plus community,” see Hayden, Building Suburbia, 8

49 Cary wrote a sequel titled Clovernook, or, Recollections of Our Neighborhood in the West (Second Series) (1853), which has very little to do with suburbanization.

50 Stilgoe, Borderland, 168.

51 Alice Cary, Clovernook, or, Recollections of Our Neighborhood in the West (1852; reprint, New York: John W. Lovell, 1884), 59-60. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as C.

52 Frederick S. Cozzens, The Sparrowgrass Papers, or Living in the Country (1856; reprint, Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 13. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as SP.


55 Ibid., 4.

56 Ibid., 23.

57 Washington Irving, The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Writings, introduction and notes Peter Norberg (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006), 51.


59 Ibid., 42.

60 Like those other strategies, sketching may have involved the social production of space. Sha writes, “By the early nineteenth century, the English country house often had rooms designated specifically for drawing. According to the OED, drawing rooms were both rooms to which ladies would withdraw after dinner and rooms where their drawing
equipment would be set up” (The Visual and Verbal Sketch, 75). After Irving, the sketch would go on to perform other kinds of cultural work, according to Hamilton, serving conservative and progressive agendas, as did the picturesque. On the latter’s transforming role, see Beth Lynne Lueck, American Writers and the Picturesque Tour: The Search for National Identity, 1790-1860 (New York: Garland, 1997).

61 Irving, The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, 100.

62 Ibid., 50-1.

63 At the very end of The Sparrowgrass Papers, the conventional symbol of Leo Marx’s complex pastoral makes its appearance, as a train darts past the family’s house while they stand admiring the “wonderous scene” of a winter evening (SP 260-1).

64 Robert Barry Coffin, Out of Town: A Rural Episode (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), 1. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as OT.

65 Irving, The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, 144.


67 The narrator claims to have served as a United States official in an Italian city where the sea flows in the streets. The brief description of his work is reminiscent of the author’s activities as a consul in Venice (William Dean Howells, Suburban Sketches [1871; reprint, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1888], 91). Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as SS. In addition, the Howellses bought a house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1866 (Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, William Dean Howells: A Writer’s Life [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005], 110).

68 Lueck, American Writers and the Picturesque Tour, 194.

69 Bourdieu, Distinction, 4.

70 Henry A. Beers, “A Suburban Pastoral,” A Suburban Pastoral and Other Tales (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1894), 4, 5. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as “Pastoral.”

71 Beers’s story therefore follows the path of later Howellsian realism, which has been interpreted as a revolt against “art” and “style,” made to allay Howells’s own fears about masculinity. See Michael Davitt Bell, The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993).

72 Bunner also wrote Jersey Street and Jersey Lane: Urban and Suburban Sketches (1896). Two of its three pieces about suburbia are dominated by nostalgia for landmarks of his boyhood, namely a section of woods and a footpath, which have suffered from suburbanization. The sentimentality in these writings is more personal than Howells’s flights of fancy. The final sketch is very similar to the concluding section of The Suburban Sage, describing how people become suburbanites and pragmatically acquiescing that suburbanization seems inevitable.


74 Mary Stewart Cutting, “The Suburban Whirl,” The Suburban Whirl, and Other Stories of Married Life (New York: McClure, 1907), 16. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as “Whirl.”


CHAPTER 3

BABBITT AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SUBURBAN INTIMATE SPHERE

“I Don’t Know that I’m Entirely Satisfied!”: The Emergent Discontent of the Twentieth-Century Suburban Novel

In the 1920s, suburban fiction developed most of the characteristics that readers have thereafter understood as defining the subgenre. Novels began to feature not only a recognizably suburban setting (the automobile being important to this recognition) but also a new set of themes, motifs, symbols, and other formal characteristics. In particular, two related qualities mark this transition period: first, a focus on the white middle class, with the decreasing visibility of other types of people, and second, an attention to domestic family life, with the decreasing visibility of urban space and waged work. These features may seem self-evident, considering the name of the subgenre, but as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, they do not describe nineteenth-century suburban fiction.

The nineteenth-century fiction’s portrayal of discontent was rooted in a perceived failure of the suburbs. Throughout the nineteenth century, the twin forces of industrialization and urbanization benefited and expanded the middle class, yet also threatened its stability. Three causes of suburban migration stand out. First, proletarianization, immigration, and the self-made man myth raised fears and doubts among the existing white, native-born middle class about its ability to socially reproduce itself. Second, the proximity of middle-class residences to noxious industries or other nuisances (e.g., tenements or traffic from businesses) raised concerns about deteriorating sanitation, local communities, and property values.¹ Third, urban culture presented moral dangers from above and below on the social scale: aristocratic decadence and effeminacy were thought to be inevitable consequences of urban luxury, just as the intemperance and “blind assertiveness” of laboring men were believed the result of concentrated poverty.²
Suburbs seemed to promise a way for the middle class to negotiate these hazards, through the emulation of respectable upper-class residential styles in a virtuous rural setting that evoked the republican values associated with the yeoman. Yet no matter how well designed the landscape, architecture, or interior spaces, which were the primary concerns of the earliest suburban advocates such as Andrew Jackson Downing and Catharine Beecher, literary authors inevitably found this new environment to be an imperfect synthesis of city and country. William Dean Howells and other fiction writers created an image of the suburbs through a theme of indistinction, in order to criticize the shortcomings of the nineteenth-century space. In other words, fiction betrays an anxiety about the uncertain effects of suburbs on middle-class status and identity.

Around the turn of the century, by contrast, suburbia had turned from being a potential failure to an assured success. After a brief competition against the urban apartment during the early Progressive era, the detached, single-family, suburban house was overwhelmingly adopted by the middle class as their ideal. The suburbs triumphed in part by resolving the social or cultural shortcomings perceived by authors like Howells. The automobile, for instance, allowed greater physical distances between middle-class residences and the threatening urban center, while providing a more convenient and respectable mode of commuting than public transportation. Car ownership also enabled another means of marking social status. Advances in transportation and domestic technology let suburbanites enjoy independence and a respectable “standard of living” despite their increasing distance from urban amenities. Alan Gowans, who describes the years 1890-1930 as the era of “the comfortable house,” notes, “Indoor plumbing, built-in gas and electric facilities, central heating, all that had been luxuries available only to the well-to-do just a few decades earlier, now became standard features for all.” Restrictive
covenants dictating land use, including racial covenants, further ensured the exclusivity, stability, and distinction of suburban residence. Such covenants, appearing in only the most expensive nineteenth-century developments, were a standard feature of many middle-class communities by 1910. These and other innovations made suburban residence difficult to associate with social inferiority any longer.

Success had its price, however, at least in the imagination of 1920s fiction, coming in the form of new problems and fears. Although early-twentieth-century suburbs provided stability for the middle class within industrial capitalist society, the evolving physical and social structure of these suburbs unintentionally resulted in the erosion of certain aspects of middle-class life not organized through capitalism. To put it more schematically: with one hand, the suburbs offered group security; with the other, they diminished individual freedoms. New suburban problems, no longer rooted in a fear of proximity or similarity to other classes, arose as unintended consequences or side effects of building such a radically exclusive, homogeneous environment. This shift in the source of trouble from the threatening city to the treacherous suburbs may help to explain the newly introspective orientation of the subgenre, or in other words the increasing attention paid to white, middle-class, domestic, family life. These several changes can be observed in the two best-known suburban narratives of the early twentieth century: *Babbitt* (1922) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

The problem for all three suburban men in *The Great Gatsby*—middle-class Nick, social-climber Jay, and upper-class Tom—does not involve finding a place in the suburbs, but instead belonging to that place. As Robert Beuka has argued in *SuburbiaNation*, the geographical transformation and individual mobility associated with rapid growth of and migration to the automobile suburbs created anxiety about dislocation, rootlessness, disconnection from the past,
and inauthenticity. While attaining a respectable suburban residence helps certify one’s class status, F. Scott Fitzgerald suggests this achievement comes through the sacrifice of previous sources of identity such as family or geographical region, the loss of other sources of meaning and belonging besides wealth and status.

*Babbitt* also addresses the unintended difficulties or demands of belonging in suburbia, as Sinclair Lewis’s protagonist George Babbitt rebels against excessive conformity and standardization. These pressures too stem from the success of the twentieth-century suburbs. With their original function as a space of distinction firmly established, less reason existed to maintain the antagonistic, contradictory relationship between the suburbs and industrial capitalism. The middle class would continue to socially reproduce itself, perhaps even more successfully, when the nineteenth-century state of exception was revised, opening the suburbs up completely to mass consumerism (though continuing to exclude the world of waged labor and industrial production) and allowing the suburb itself to become a mass-produced commodity.

Babbitt experiences this change negatively, as the colonization or loss of his personal life, a source of meaning and identity formerly separated from industrial capitalism and its products.

I want to discuss *Babbitt* in greater detail for two reasons. In addition to allowing me to articulate this theory about unintended consequences or side effects, the novel provides an excellent example of the sort of irony through which I am defining the twentieth-century phase of the subgenre. This irony becomes apparent when George Babbitt’s discontent is closely examined, as Catherine Jurca does in *White Diaspora*. What right does he have to complain about suburban conformity and standardization, she asks, since living in an environment purged of the nuisances and dangers of the nineteenth-century city, as Babbitt does, and owning a comfortable, modern house are actually privileges, not problems? For instance, Jurca repudiates
the novel’s implication “that such things as comfortable mattresses, window shades that don’t crack, and standard lamps are somehow . . . intrinsically alienating for the consumer and legitimate sources of middle-class dissatisfaction.” She contends that Babbitt’s discontent is in fact a ruse that serves to guard his privilege from envy and provide a subtle boost to his status—dissatisfaction being “the advertisement of his affluence.” Discontent even brings a sort of perverse pleasure, Jurca suggests, concluding: “The challenge of being middle class, for Lewis, is to enjoy the trap, not to escape it, to feel sorry for oneself as one struggles in and benefits from it.”

Babbitt certainly has less to complain about than poor people or racial and ethnic minorities who did not have the means or freedom in that era to live in such housing or enjoy such material privileges. While Jurca’s reading is psychologically insightful and provocative, I do not agree that Babbitt’s discontent is wholly a matter of self-advancement or somehow “empowering.” Though Babbitt’s complaints may indeed make him feel superior, his egotistical “kicking” against the era’s suburban conventions—civic boosterism, Republican party politics, mass consumerism, and the proprieties of marriage—unquestionably endangers his business and his marriage, the foundations of his economic and social standing. Jurca is wrong to dismiss his rebellion on the basis that he eventually submits and suffers “no lasting consequences.” Indeed, he gives up because his privileges are genuinely imperiled. Why then does he take such a risk?

As long as competition for class position or social status remains the only frame of reference, we are bound to agree with Jurca’s judgment that since Babbitt enjoys more privileges, he has no basis for complaint. I don’t see, however, that Babbitt’s real worry regards the amount of material privileges he enjoys relative to those outside the suburbs; such thinking
seems closer to the concerns of nineteenth-century suburban fiction. While a general labor strike
does momentarily threaten Babbitt’s home city of Zenith, his own middle-class security is never
in question. The only “Red” he ever encounters is his old college friend Seneca Doane, a radical
lawyer, while people outside the middle class are of little concern to Babbitt except in so far as
they do work for him—quite different from the experience of Howells’s suburbanites. Babbitt’s
discontent more immediately regards a feature of the suburbs that is transforming, a privilege
that is not a tangible material or economic benefit: his personal life. He rebels because the
relative autonomy of the intimate sphere is being eroded by the consumer culture that colonizes
the early-twentieth-century suburbs. Here lies the novel’s great irony: Babbitt as a suburban
resident loses his space for privacy and intimacy due to the kind of work he himself does as a
real-estate agent, suburban land speculator, and community developer, the Babbitt who
represents industrial capitalism’s encroachment into the suburbs. Sinclair Lewis positions his
protagonist to experience both sides of this transformation. I agree with Jurca, therefore, in
understanding Babbitt as not simply a victim of his environment. Babbitt experiences suburban
life as a trap, but the trap, ironically, is one of his own devising.

The Old Comforts of Home: The Decline of Bourgeois Intimacy

The best way to explain Babbitt’s discontent begins with an examination of his different
roles that come to be at odds. I will start with his work persona, because it dominates his
character and determines most of his important actions through the first half of the novel, prior to
his rebellion. Babbitt’s occupation is real-estate broker; he operates the Babbitt-Thompson
Realty Co. in the city of Zenith with his partner and father-in-law, Henry Thompson.
They manage rental properties, negotiate land transactions, and on the side sell suburban homes built
in a “high-class restricted development” called Glen Oriole (B 34). Babbitt’s work occupies what
Jürgen Habermas terms the private sphere. Habermas describes the economic behaviors of production and exchange in capitalist societies as private because:

In a certain fashion commodity owners could view themselves as autonomous. To the degree that they were emancipated from governmental directives and controls, they made decisions freely in accord with standards of profitability. In this regard they owed obedience to no one and were subject only to the anonymous laws functioning in accord with an economic rationality immanent, so it appeared, in the market. These laws were backed up by the ideological guarantee of a notion that market exchange was just, and they were altogether supposed to enable justice to triumph over force.14

In *Babbitt*, of course, Sinclair Lewis harshly satirizes the liberal idealism of the bourgeois private sphere through his unflattering portrayal of American business, and Babbitt stands indicted as representative of his class.

Nowhere are Babbitt’s business ethics more apparent than in the Glen Oriole project. Although his advertised business is as a broker, he and Thompson secretly own the majority share of the Glen, violating the trust of other developers who do not expect competition from real-estate agents acting as builders themselves. As a result, Babbitt can underhandedly steer homebuyers toward his own properties and, on top of that, earn a commission for doing so. Babbitt also engages in land speculation several times in the novel, buying and raising the price on land to make a profit (*B* 42, 210). I would also surmise that he cherry-picked the land on which Glen Oriole was built, illegally gaining advance knowledge of where commuter railways were to be placed—a common tactic of streetcar companies, as Dolores Hayden observes.15 As evidence of this possibility, the minority partners of the Glen are “the president and purchasing agent of the Zenith Street Traction Company” and a notorious local politician who bribed “health inspectors and fire inspectors and a member of the State Transportation Commission” (*B* 40-1). Later in the novel, Babbitt trades political favors for “advance information about the extension of
paved highways” that could benefit the next suburban development scheme he and Thompson are concocting (B 161).

Throughout the first half of the novel, Babbitt repeatedly demonstrates his psychological adjustment to the practices of the private sphere, his willingness to participate in the cutthroat competitiveness that Lewis believes dominates that realm. For instance, the narrator reports that Babbitt “was conventionally honest” (B 37), meaning that at professional luncheons he would speak sonorously of Unselfish Public Service, the Broker’s Obligation to Keep Inviolate the Trust of His Clients, and a thing called Ethics, whose nature was confusing but if you had it you were a High-class Realtor and if you hadn’t you were a shyster, a piker, and a fly-by-night. These virtues awakened Confidence, and enabled you to handle Bigger Propositions. But they didn’t imply that you were to be impractical and refuse to take twice the value of a house if a buyer was such an idiot that he didn’t jew you down on the asking-price. (B 38)

As Babbitt’s performances demonstrate, his successes have brought him not only wealth and business connections but also social status and a position in the public sphere. He is considered a “Solid Citizen,” a reputation confirmed through his speech making at civic and professional functions, his political speeches for the Republican presidential candidate, and even an occasional bit of publicity about his exploits in the local newspaper.

Habermas describes the classical bourgeois public sphere as a space of free, rational debate, the counterpart to the free, rational commerce of the private sphere—both being relatively autonomous from the sphere of the state. The public sphere was originally institutionalized in print culture as well as British coffee houses and French salons during the Enlightenment. These are the antecedents to Babbitt’s banquets, political rallies, and mass-circulation corporate newspapers, though Lewis of course satirizes the questionable rationality of these later forms of publicity. In them, we can observe the transformation of the public sphere that troubles Habermas, the emergence of an uncritical, commercialized “pseudo-public,” or
what Michael Warner terms a “mass public.” In any event, the hypocritical idealism of Babbitt’s public activity complements his private occupation, and vice versa.

In both spheres of life, Babbitt appears to others as well-adjusted and complacent. He undoubtedly enjoys triumphing in business: he celebrates as “a manly battle” his extorting of ten thousand dollars of pure profit from a grocer for a piece of land that Babbitt bought on speculation in anticipation of the grocer’s interest (B 44). He also takes a distinct pleasure in feeling important in front of an audience and hearing himself utter platitudes. Due to the omniscient third-person narrator, however, we learn that Babbitt has flashes of inarticulate discontent. As he casually confesses to his best friend Paul Riesling, in a rare moment of candor, “I’ve pretty much done all the things I ought to; supported my family, and got a good house and a six-cylinder car, and built up a nice little business, and I haven’t any vices ’specially . . . And yet, even so, I don’t know that I’m entirely satisfied!” (B 53). To Babbitt’s surprise, Riesling not only sympathizes but openly questions their hustling, boosting, and “pep.” Mocking his own occupation, Riesling declares:

The roofing business! Roofs for cowsheds! Oh, I don’t mean I haven’t had a lot of fun out of the Game; out of putting it over on the labor unions, and seeing a big check coming in, and the business increasing. But what’s the use of it? You know, my business isn’t distributing roofing—it’s principally keeping my competitors from distributing roofing. Same with you. All we do is cut each other’s throats and make the public pay for it! (B 56)

Although Babbitt acts affronted by this seditious questioning of the rules of the “Game,” we witness his own occasional uncertainty about its demands, in particular through his weariness with the strenuous masculinity that underpins the dominant codes of private and public behavior for men. Babbitt’s response to Riesling unwittingly reveals this gendered code of conduct: “a man who doesn’t buckle down and do his duty, even if it does bore him sometimes, is nothing but a—well, he’s simply a weakling. Mollycoddle, in fact!” (B 57). Babbitt’s colloquial language
constantly reveals this connection: business letters must have “punch” and “kick” (B 43), good advertisements are “he-literature” (B 107), and so on. Even as he blusteringly tries to check Riesling’s dissent, Babbitt remains uneasy about his hypocritical conformity.

What keeps Babbitt’s discontentment with the private and public spheres in check, until his rebellion? The answer lies within the intimate sphere, Habermas’s term for the domestic realm of the bourgeois family. In more than one way, Babbitt and his peers are working to provide the comforts of home. Many of the men’s jobs relate to the suburban housing industry: in addition to the aforementioned professions of Babbitt, Thompson, and Riesling, Thompson also operates a “kitchen-cabinet works” (B 60), and among Babbitt’s neighbors, Dopplebrau works in bathroom fixtures (B 21), Littlefield serves the Zenith Street Traction Company (B 22), and Swanson sells automobiles (B 99). Babbitt takes pride in his own modern house, appointed with the most “up-to-date” conveniences. He also seems to take more pleasure from domestic family life than in formal society. Upon reading in the newspaper about a dance given at the home of the wealthy Charles McKelvey, a college acquaintance of Babbitt’s, he remarks to his wife Myra: “Oh, thunder, let’s not waste our good time thinking about ‘em! Our little bunch has a lot liver times than all those plutes. Just compare a real human like you with these neurotic birds like Lucile McKelvey—all high-brow talk and dressed up like a plush horse!” (B 19-20). While a fair amount of class-based resentment animates these comments, Babbitt and Myra are nevertheless firmly committed to the bourgeois intimate sphere and its values, as demonstrated again in a scene that occurs in their living room.

The scene begins when their adult daughter “Verona escaped, immediately after dinner, with no discussion save an automatic ‘Why don’t you ever stay home?’ from Babbitt” (B 66). As the father reads the comic strips and the mother darns socks, their teenaged son Ted announces
he would like to learn boxing and self-defense by mail. Ted reads to his parents the
advertisement, headlined “Can You Play a Man’s Part?” He asks:

“And then suppose I was walking with you, Ma, and somebody passed a slighting
remark—”

“Nobody’s going to pass no slighting remarks on nobody,” Babbitt observed, “not
if they stay home and study their geometry and mind their own affairs instead of
hanging around a lot of poolrooms and soda-fountains and places where nobody’s
got any business to be!”

“But goooollllllly, Dad, if they DID!”

Mrs. Babbitt chirped, “Well, if they did, I wouldn’t do them the honor of paying
any attention to them! Besides, they never do. You always hear about these women
that get followed and insulted and all, but I don’t believe a word of it, or it’s their
own fault, the way some women look at a person. (B 72)

As revealed in such passages, George’s and Myra’s ideas of propriety regarding public and
private space—and by contrast the intimate sphere—were formed in the late Victorian milieu of
their childhoods.

Babbitt, who is forty-eight at the end of the novel (B 351), came of age in the 1880s. In the
nineteenth century, industrial capitalism disrupted the existing codes of public behavior.
According to Richard Sennett, Enlightenment societies dealt with the problems of the urban
stranger and class instability by creating elaborate public costumes and impersonal manners in
order to distinguish people. In the nineteenth century, the mass production of clothing renewed
anxieties about the unmanageability of social signs. Social distinctions had to be based upon
such minor details as whether a gentleman’s coat buttons were decorative or could actually
unfasten. Myra Babbitt’s comment may refer to this public disorder in which even the slightest
gesture could have consequences, such as an impolite look marking a woman as dishonorable.
Sennett remarks about the period: “[not] in street behavior do loose women show themselves
specially. They give off small clues only, a glance held too long, a gesture of languor, which a
man who knows how to read will understand.”17 In the face of this social difficulty, Sennett argues, “Gradually the will to control and shape the public order eroded, and people put more emphasis on protecting themselves from it. The family became one of these shields. During the 19th Century the family came to appear less and less the center of a particular, nonpublic region, more an idealized refuge, a world all its own, with a higher moral value than the public realm.”18 As we see, George and Myra assume that public and private spaces are not proper or rewarding except for conducting “business.” A “good time” occurs at home with family, where one can be a “real human,” leaving off the impersonal mask that Mrs. McKelvey dons for society.19 For Babbitt, the intimate sphere has a particular allure as a feminized haven from the heartless world of other men.

Although Babbitt might desire the comforts of home he recalls from childhood, the early-twentieth-century intimate sphere does not provide the same benefits to him, and this inability I argue is ironically tied to the successfulness of the suburbs. In order to explain this claim, I must first look more closely into the intimate sphere’s function in relation to the suburbs and then consider their mutual transformation around the turn of the century.

The intimate sphere developed in bourgeois society within the private sphere as an extension of its liberal ideology. Habermas writes, “In the intimate sphere of the conjugal family privatized individuals viewed themselves as independent even from the private sphere of their economic activity—as persons capable of entering into ‘purely human’ relations with one another.”20 Habermas’s somewhat idiosyncratic terminology may be confusing, since common usage would label family rather than work as part of private life, but his differentiation of the intimate from the private is essential to understanding the former’s eventual transformation. The intimate sphere, therefore, was opposed to capitalism to a degree, a space of exception to some
of its rules, even though the intimate sphere as such only existed within the bourgeois private sphere—a fundamental contradiction. 21 As Stephanie Coontz observes, “the separation of home and family from market and state represented an attempt to limit the transformation of personal relations into commodity relations.”22 These personal relations were understood as voluntary, “disinterested,” and non-instrumental, paradigmatically represented by friendship and “the lasting community of love on the part of the two spouses.”23 The notion of pure humanity to which Babbitt still seems to subscribe corresponds to the nineteenth-century idea of “personality.”24 The belief that intimacy allows the expression of individual personality was enshrined in what Eli Zaretsky terms “personal life,” which occurs paradigmatically in the private residence.25 The increasing value placed by the bourgeoisie on personality, privacy, intimacy, and domesticity represented an inversion of the classical belief in the primacy of the res publica—happening not coincidentally when the inversion of suburb and city also took place.

Ideology, of course, does not correspond exactly to the realities of everyday life. As Habermas admits, the freedom and pure humanity of the intimate sphere remained “largely a fiction.”26 These ideals nevertheless provided the alibi for the more immediate, practical functions that the intimate sphere served, namely the perpetuation of capitalism and the social reproduction of the bourgeoisie. The home and the nuclear family became spaces of exception within capitalist society, serving as an individual (rather than social) safety net protecting against the instabilities of the private economy. To this end, a gendered division of labor was inscribed upon the separate spheres, and women’s unpaid domestic work was sentimentalized through the new language of personality and intimacy. The moral influence of the respectable home was to provide stability for the entire family in the face of an unpredictable economy and a disorganized social order, allowing “the smooth reproduction of class differences” in the absence of other
social mechanisms that could reliably transmit bourgeois values. Thus, the nineteenth-century intimate sphere did not primarily serve the ends of individual fulfillment, romantic satisfaction, recreation, or frivolity. As Stephanie Coontz observes, “dinner table rules and other formalized interactions emphasized the subordination of each individual’s desires to the unit as a whole, the necessity of accepting the work ethic, respecting private property, and taking responsibility for fulfilling one’s proper gender role.” The “disinterested” personal relations of the nineteenth-century intimate sphere, when disciplined in this way, operated as a counterbalance to the individualism and rational self-interest of the private sphere.

The relationship between the bourgeois intimate sphere and the private sphere closely resembles that between the nineteenth-century middle-class suburbs and the industrial city. Indeed, the suburbs may be understood as roughly analogous to the intimate sphere, though not all bourgeois families lived in suburbs, and suburbanites were certainly not all middle-class. The two spaces, one geographical and the other metaphorical, share an origin and function as exclusions of or exceptions to features of capitalist society that threatened the bourgeoisie. In the case of the suburbs, these threats came from the realm of production (the dangerous classes and noxious industry), from urban culture (luxury and vice), and from the market (community impermanence and property deterioration). In the case of the intimate sphere, the concern shifts from proximity in space to the individual’s life course over time. The intimate sphere supplemented the private sphere by providing for the acquisition of middle-class values and habits (building character), the transmission of vocational skills, access to white-collar positions, and support in old age.

In a few ways, the Babbitts’ domestic life appears to demonstrate the practical orientation of the nineteenth-century intimate sphere. The self-effacing, hard-working, sexually-repressed
Myra provides a caricature of the Victorian matron, as revealed more than anywhere in her brief yet extraordinary outburst at the end of the novel (B 313). Meanwhile, George feels a very middle-class responsibility about his children’s futures. He worries about his son Ted in particular. The high-school boy takes drives with friends whom his mother worries may not be “nice decent girls,” and he aspires to be a car mechanic (B 77). Babbitt announces his other intentions for his son: “I’ve told him a hundred times, if he’ll go to college and law-school and make good, I’ll set him up in business” (B 11). This comment reveals how the times have changed, despite George’s and Myra’s lagging attitudes. If Ted were to earn a law degree at the state university Babbitt attended, he would not require paternal assistance, because he would have acquired an impersonalized, standardized set of skills enabling him to enter the professional or corporate world—something more widely marketable than his or his family’s reputation. The public educational system is only one element of the new social sphere that emerged during the Progressive era, removing from the family and the home much of the responsibility for the middle class’s social reproduction. The social sphere, as Habermas describes it, collapsed the boundaries between the private sphere, the public sphere, and the state through practices such as economic interventionism and social legislation. The social sphere is therefore related to the corporation and the wage system, which also introduced more regularity to the class structure, reducing the dynamic social mobility associated with the entrepreneurial private sphere of the nineteenth century.

The Babbitts’ domestic life, as one might expect, reflects the increasing influence of the social sphere and the resulting transformation of the intimate sphere in the early twentieth century. While Babbitt realizes it is important to encourage his children to be formally educated, he does not bother himself with training them at home in middle-class values such as the
Protestant work ethic. Indeed, he enjoys a secret pride that his son Ted does not perform any chores around the house (B 64), although he still hypocritically invokes the work ethic as an excuse to avoid paying a bonus to his young employee Stanley Graff (B 62). Babbitt also avoids the responsibility of moral authority and instruction. Although both parents are vaguely troubled by the possibility that Ted is having premarital sex, Babbitt only makes an empty promise to his wife that “Yes sir, by golly, I’m going to take Ted aside and tell him why I lead a strictly moral life,” to which Myra doubtfully responds, “Oh, will you? When?” (B 78). Ted’s socialization does not seem to depend upon the intimate sphere; neither does Verona Babbitt follow her mother’s path. Verona, “just out of Bryn Mawr” College (B 13), works as a “filing-clerk at the Gruensberg Leather Company offices, with a prospect of becoming secretary to Mr. Gruensberg and thus, as Babbitt defined it, ‘getting some good out of your expensive college education till you’re ready to marry and settle down’” (B 14). Babbitt’s assumptions about a woman’s proper trajectory are matched by his inability to comprehend his daughter’s interest in the social sphere, what he derides as “all this uplift and flipflop and settlement-work” (B 14). The gendered determinism of the separate spheres retains a powerful hold on Babbitt’s imagination.

Just as the Babbitt family’s domestic life does not adhere to the nineteenth-century pattern, so does George Babbitt’s experience of the suburbs reveal a significant difference from their portrayal by Howells and other Victorian fiction writers. The discontent of nineteenth-century suburbanite characters came from their perception that the suburbs failed to reinforce a precarious middle-class identity by unsuccessfully excluding threatening aspects of the industrial city. On the contrary, Babbitt reveals no such concern about the suburbs of Zenith. The opening paragraphs of the novel reflect his confidence in the modern, class-segregated metropolis:
The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office-buildings.

The mist took pity on the fretted structures of earlier generations: the Post Office with its shingle-tortured mansard, the red brick minarets of hulking old houses, factories with stingy and sooted windows, wooden tenements colored like mud. The city was full of such grotesqueries, but the clean towers were thrusting them from the business center, and on the farther hills were shining new houses, homes—they seemed—for laughter and tranquility. (B 1)

These houses glitter on the inside as well, being outfitted with all sorts of up-to-date domestic technology and amenities. Lewis describes at length Babbitt’s material privileges, his “royal bathroom” (4), his “triumphant modern mattresses” (B 12), his “hot-water radiator . . . of exactly the proper scientific surface for the cubic contents of the room” (B 12), his electric lamps, vacuum cleaner, “electric percolator and the electric toaster” (B 13). Such conveniences helped to resolve the nineteenth-century dismay with suburban life as inferior to urban standards. Lewis presents Babbitt’s house as perfectly standardized, “right out of Cheerful Modern Houses for Medium Incomes” (B 12), and Babbitt himself betrays no anxiety about his suburban residence failing to make him feel middle class. Finally, covenants and deed restrictions, such as those he established in Glen Oriole, legally ensured the exclusivity of the early-twentieth-century suburbs, providing yet another reassurance.

These changes show that, although George and Myra appear nostalgic for Victorian ideals of intimacy and personal life, their domestic situation does not conform to the nineteenth-century pattern of behavior that made those ideals achievable. Without the family’s taking part in socialization through moral authority and discipline, creating bonds outside the medium of market exchange, a sense of duty and mutual dependence among family members remains weak. In other words, the more the Babbitt family members make their own way in the world, the less likely they will be to experience the non-instrumental relations and pure humanity they desire.
Thus, we need to examine the twentieth-century intimate sphere in more detail in order to understand Babbitt’s discontent.

The New Comforts of Home: The Rise of Mass Consumerism

With the emergence of the social sphere and the success of the suburbs, little reason remained for the intimate sphere to continue serving its original function of socialization. The ideal of intimacy did not as a result suddenly cease to compel belief, however. The intimate sphere had been the subject of an extensive ideological campaign throughout the nineteenth century. Intimacy had provided the alibi not only for women’s domestic labor but also for men’s participation in capitalism as well, their consolation and compensation, as demonstrated by the intense sentimentalization of “Home Sweet Home.” I see two possible explanations for what happened. The first possibility is that when the practical need for the family to indoctrinate, coerce, and inhibit its members diminished, the radical potential implicit in the intimate sphere’s opposition to capitalism could be unleashed. The intimate sphere as a prop could be pulled out from under the private and public spheres, and the structure of the spheres stood on its head, with the intimate sphere at the apex and the new social sphere providing support. What before had been mostly ideology, an alibi, could potentially become realized as a genuine end in itself, in what Sennett calls the “intimate society” of the twentieth century.  

Such a structural transformation would help to explain why the intimate sphere did in fact reorganize during the Progressive Era around an ethos of personal fulfillment, romantic satisfaction, and leisure. New practices that distinguished this incarnation of the intimate sphere included “masculine domesticity,” the companionate marriage, and family togetherness. All three can be understood as attempts to turn sentimental Victorian ideals about intimacy into reality. Margaret Marsh defines the first as “not equivalent to feminism” but instead “a behavioral model in which fathers agreed to take on increased responsibility for some of the day-
to-day tasks of bringing up children and spend their time away from work in playing with their sons and daughters, teaching them, taking them on trips.” The purpose of such leisure activities was not to instill values of obedience and discipline, as the Victorian patriarch attempted, but to achieve intimacy as its own end and reward. Marsh writes, “fathers were encouraged to be ‘chums’ with their children, especially, but by no means exclusively, with their sons.” In the post-Victorian world, sharply dichotomized gender roles remained normative, even as their foundations were melting into air. Fathers thus took special interest in their sons out of fear that, without a masculine presence in the intimate sphere, boys risked feminization, yet also because their own manhood needed a place for regeneration due to their perceived emasculation by bureaucratic, corporate, and managerial work. By no coincidence does George’s son happen to be named Theodore Roosevelt Babbitt.

Domestic interior architecture also embodied the new ethos, and again, the intimate sphere finds its analogue in the suburbs. Whereas “Victorian houses had been designed for separation,” Marsh determines, “[t]he most striking thing about early twentieth-century suburban houses was their design for togetherness.” Popular open floor plans featured living rooms or family rooms, which replaced the numerous spaces for individual privacy: the sewing room, the sitting room, the library, the den, and the smoking room. The Babbitts value time spent together in their living room, as we’ve seen, and George might adhere to the new masculine domesticity as well. For instance, he takes his son along on a business trip to Chicago, and “once away from the familiar implications of home, they were two men together,” smoking cigars, telling jokes, and acting chummy (B 215).

The flaw in this explanation, at least as far as Babbitt is concerned, is that his domestic life does not really satisfy him. He experiences the same flashes of irritation and gnawing discontent
at home as in his private business or his public performances. Indeed, the majority of the
domestic scenes in the novel portray skirmishes in “the greatest of Great Wars, which is the
family war” (B 17). Among the many points of contention, Babbitt repeatedly harasses Myra
about the family’s diet, Ted and Verona regularly bicker with him about who will use the family
car, and Babbitt becomes indignant about the state of the bathroom towels: “He was raging, ‘By
golly, here they go and use up all the towels, every doggone one of ‘em, and they use ‘em and
get ‘em all wet and sopping, and never put out a dry one for me—of course, I’m the goat!” (B 5).
Family seems a source of irritation rather than a balm. Babbitt’s commitment to masculine
domesticity, meanwhile, is summed up concisely by Lewis: “Though he saw them twice daily,
though he knew and amply discussed every detail of their expenditures, yet for weeks together
Babbitt was no more conscious of his children than of the buttons on his coat-sleeves” (B 200).
George and Myra’s marriage has little to recommend it as companionate either. During their
awkward courtship, “Of love there was no talk between them” (B 79), and afterward Myra
“made him what is known as a Good Wife. She was loyal, industrious, and at rare times merry . .
. she existed only for him and the children” (B 80). While she remains dully dutiful, he matures
into a domestic tyrant who bullies his wife, yet expects her attention and sympathy. They show
little genuine interest in each other, especially as companions outside of the house. Babbitt
clearly prefers the male company found at the Elks Lodge, the Boosters’ Club, and the Zenith
Athletic Club. The most telling failure of the intimate sphere is exposed by the narrator. At the
end of one long passage, surveying the modern domestic comforts the family owns, comes the
observation, “In fact there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home”
(B 13).
The reason for Babbitt’s discontentment, I believe, is that a second explanation exists for the persistence of intimacy in the twentieth century. Given the intimate sphere’s abdication of its task of social reproduction, and the suburbs’ success at the same, little reason remained for either to maintain their antagonistic, contradictory relationship with industrial capitalism. Successful and firmly entrenched, this ideology and this space could both be turned to a different purpose. The intimate sphere and the suburbs, if no longer organized as spaces of exception, could shift functions from protecting capitalism to expanding it, by allowing Fordist mass production to enter via an industrialized housing business and mass consumerism of domestic goods. The intimate sphere and the suburbs could therefore become new markets. In this view, suburban domesticity can be understood as providing an alibi for consumer capitalism. Economic life would no longer be subordinated to the radical potential of intimacy and personal life.

Neither of these explanations is exclusively true, I believe. Together, they renew the contradiction that animates the intimate sphere. Recognizing this contradiction provides the best insight into Babbitt’s very confusing, love-hate relationship with his own domestic life. Committed to working for the new comforts of home, seemingly more readily obtainable than ever, Babbitt nevertheless cannot enjoy them because his modern house and family unceasingly remind him of the industrial capitalist world he wants to escape. The novel suggests three such ways in which he is frustrated. First and most obviously, the intimate sphere provides a key site for conspicuous consumption, so that domestic life becomes a perpetuation of the competition that also dominates Babbitt’s private and public life. A multitude of examples in the novel demonstrates how much the Babbitts live their personal lives in constant reference to consumer culture and out of concern for their social status. When Babbitt looks out at his yard, for instance, he spies “the corrugated iron garage. For the three-hundred-and-sixty-fifth time in a year he
reflected, ‘No class to that tin shack. Have to build me a frame garage. But by golly it’s the only thing on the place that isn’t up-to-date!’” (B 4). This sort of unbidden awareness, repeated ad nauseam with the thousands of commodities Babbitt owns or considers buying, shapes the pattern of his neurotic consciousness.

Second, domestic relations assume a more instrumental character when consumerism provides the setting and medium for intimacy. The Babbitt children, for example, attempt to trade on their parents’ love in order to acquire nicer things. Ted begins by comparing himself to his high-school classmates: “Say, gee, I ought to have a car of my own, like lots of the fellows” (B 16). Babbitt squashes this notion, but later he raises the topic of replacing the family car, only to incite all three children and Myra into making similar arguments in favor of a more expensive, prestigious model than he happens to prefer (B 65). Babbitt resents such incursions on his patriarchal authority, but his old-fashioned efforts at economic discipline are at odds with the intimate sphere’s new ethos.

Third, domestic consumerism taints the material pleasures of Babbitt’s personal life with a fear of being tricked, cheated, or sold superfluous things—in other words, overspending or overconsuming. The same sort of corruption that pervades his own business could be at work in the domestic goods industry, and thus entering his home. Lewis reveals this danger lurking within the Babbitts’ living room, at their sacred hearth no less: “The fireplace was unsoftened by downy ashes or by sooty brick; the brass fire-irons were of immaculate polish; and the grenadier andirons were like samples in a shop, desolate, unwanted, lifeless things of commerce” (B 82). While Babbitt can be predatory and domineering as businessman, he stands powerless as consumer:

just as the priests of the Presbyterian Church determined [Babbitt’s] every religious belief and the senators who controlled the Republican Party decided in little smoky
rooms in Washington what he should think about disarmament, tariff, and Germany, so did the large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fix what he believed to be his individuality. These standard advertised wares—toothpastes, socks, tires, cameras, instantaneous hot-water heaters—were his symbols and proofs of excellence; at first the signs, then the substitutes, for joy and passion and wisdom. (B 85)

Though Babbitt himself never becomes quite so articulate or conscious of the forces determining the texture of his personal life, he feels a constant, uneasy guilt about his domestic consumerism, especially when it comes to literal consumption. He complains about the family’s diet to Myra, preaching to her about the virtues of oatmeal and apples because, hypocritically, he cannot resist the temptation of commercially produced foods and tobacco products. Babbitt, who is “exceedingly well fed” (B 2), has a typical experience at the dinner party he and Myra throw for their friends: since “all really smart dinners ended, as on a resolving chord, in Vecchia Neapolitan ice cream” (B 97), of course Babbitt ends up lamenting, “‘Had too much grub; oughtn’t to eat this stuff,’ he groaned—while he went on eating, while he gulped down a chill and glutinous slice of the ice-cream brick” (B 110). The dinner demonstrates the influence of social status on his consumption, as does his addiction to tobacco. Though he perpetually plans to quit, the prestige of owning an electric lighter for his car or displaying a new silver cigarette case return him to the habit against his will. After buying the lighter, “Thrice its novelty made him use it, and thrice he hurled half-smoked cigarettes from the car, protesting, ‘I got to quit smoking so blame much!’” (B 60).

The comforts of home that Babbitt craves are ultimately the elusive, interpersonal, and largely psychological rewards of intimacy, not the purchasable material privileges and consumer conveniences that industrial capitalism offers to excess. Although mass-produced commodities promise to facilitate intimacy by providing the glue for togetherness and companionship, they also tend to agitate Babbitt’s family relationships, place an unwanted “standard of living” upon
his personal life, and degrade his health as well. I am suggesting, therefore, that Babbitt struggles against the “the constriction of male middle-class desire” that David Leverenz attributes to corporate capitalism, a constriction “to a drive for upward mobility in workplace hierarchies” that I argue finds its counterpart outside the workplace in consumerism.\textsuperscript{39}

At this point, two questions remain: how did intimacy become mixed up with consumerism, and how does Babbitt’s revolt attempt to disentangle them? I will deal with these in turn in the following two sections. To begin with the first: commercial advertising, which grew explosively in America after WWI, provides one already-well-explored avenue of explanation. Stuart Ewen argues that advertisers, in an attempt to increase demand through “the creation of desires and habits” keyed to new products, shifted away from appeals based on product utility and began playing on fears and aspirations rooted in intimacy and the family.\textsuperscript{40} Halitosis could prevent father’s morning kiss; appliances could save time for mother; dangerous germs could be carried to baby. According to Ewen, “The use value of ‘prestige,’ of ‘beauty,’ of ‘acquisition,’ of ‘self-adornment,’ and of ‘play’ were all placed in the service of advertising’s basic purpose—to provide effective mass distribution of products.”\textsuperscript{41}

Sinclair Lewis remained sharply attuned to the new language of the “poetry of industrialism” in writing \textit{Babbitt} (B 107), and the protagonist himself produces several examples, including a form letter that begins with an appeal based on intimacy: “SAY, OLD MAN! I just want to know can I do you a whaleuva favor? Honest! No kidding! I know you’re interested in getting a house, not merely a place where you hang up the old bonnet but a love-nest for the wife and kiddies” (B 32). Babbitt’s ad employs informal, familiar speech for business purposes, but his business itself provides another, less commonplace answer to the above question. As I will argue, the transformation of the intimate sphere was caused by the commodification and mass
production of suburbs. Through this recognition, the constitutive irony of the novel crystalizes: Babbitt wants his own “love-nest” where he can be a “real human,” yet his work as a suburban real-estate developer contributes to the capitalist colonization of the intimate sphere that jeopardizes this possibility.

**The Business of Home Making**

In Babbitt’s professional capacity as a real-estate agent, and even more so in his surreptitious business as a speculative builder, he represents the newly emerged suburban housing industry that helped change the relationship between the suburbs and capitalism. Before the 1880s, suburban housing was relatively autonomous from both industry and the market’s influence. Some of the most influential early promoters of American suburbanization, to begin with, were not professional builders but instead popular authors and public figures such as Nathaniel Parker Willis, Catharine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, Andrew Jackson Downing, and Sarah Josepha Hale. These advocates favored the “individual home” in a pastoral setting as an alternative to “the turmoil of cities” and commerce. They preferred simple, functional designs for cottages and villas that would foster democratic, republican values, “eschewing the taste for luxury and expense associated with the wealthy and their architects.” Through their popular writings, especially pattern books of model homes, they influenced the mass of carpenters and amateur builders who actually constructed the great majority of mid-nineteenth-century middle-class housing.

Although suburban land speculation became a source of large profits soon after the Civil War for subdividers and “the robber barons of the street railways,” the building of houses remained a very small-scale, fragmented enterprise. As Sam Bass Warner, Jr., discovered in his landmark study of Boston’s suburbs: “The 22,500 new dwellings of Roxbury, West Roxbury, and Dorchester were the product of separate decisions made by 9,000 individual builders. Some
of these builders were carpenters, some real estate men, but most were not professionals at all. The vast majority were either men building houses for their own occupancy or small investors who built a house nearby their own residence in order to profit from the rents of one to three tenants.”⁴⁵ The financing of the suburbs also remained highly individualized prior to the 1880s. Warner writes, “In the absence of widespread bank participation, thousands of private investors made up the mortgage market. They lent money to homeowners and builders in small quantities for terms of six months to ten years.”⁴⁶ Not only was the suburban house imagined by its cultural promoters in terms antithetical to the industrial city and capitalist marketplace, therefore, but the business of house construction also lacked organization and profitability, further limiting its influence. This situation of relative autonomy allowed the suburbs, and by extension the intimate sphere, to operate as a space of exception.

The 1880s proved the turning point for the industrialization and commodification of the suburbs. While the same values and iconography continued to hold sway, their material expression became more and more the product of commerce and industry, inside and out. “Through the 1870s,” Gwendolyn Wright notes, “middle-class housewives filled their presentation rooms with ‘household elegancies’ or ‘ladies’ fancy work’ of their own making,” which included objects such as “hand-crocheted pillows and rustic furniture, knotted rugs and hand-painted screens, gilded rockers and laminated bric-a-brac stands.”⁴⁷ In the 1880s, however, factory-produced furniture and ornamentation began to replace such handmade items. That decade also introduced a “greatly increased output and variety” of prefabricated, ornamental woodwork and other building materials, such as plaster and plate glass.⁴⁸

As a result, the contradiction implicit in the suburbs and the intimate sphere, always present, reached a peak, as industry and the market provided the means to achieve forms of
domesticity that progressively abandoned the core values of simplicity and functionality. For instance, the High-Victorian Picturesque architectural style became popular at this time; individual personality was thought to be expressed through its “profusion of functionally useless ornament” borrowed indiscriminately from other styles—ornamentation that was mass produced, furthermore.49 As Wright observes, “In order to have the home seem to be a haven from the world of business and industry, it was necessary to bring in industrially produced furniture, bric-a-brac, curtains, and wallpapers, and to learn from department-store displays, manufacturer’s advertisements, and books of advice how to arrange these things.”50 Industrialization did more than replace handicraft; it opened the way for a significant transformation of the house and the suburbs.

The change occurred more straightforwardly in the building of houses, as the subdivider was succeeded in importance by the speculative developer. Previously only suburbs for the wealthy had been methodically designed and laid out. Due to the advances in the manufacture and distribution of construction materials, along with the slow rationalization of the building trades, Fordist efficiencies of scale could be achieved, and the first large-scale builders of middle-class communities arose in the 1880s, such as Samuel Eberly Gross in Chicago. Their projects were often widely advertised, effectively creating local suburban brands and turning houses into standardized commodities. Most importantly, they showed that mass suburbanization could be a profitable industry. As Dolores Hayden reflects, “Developers like Gross had demonstrated that housing could be a very broad business spanning land subdivision, construction, and mortgage lending.”51

The most visible sign of change came with a shift in suburban architectural styles after the turn of the century. A new aesthetic of minimalism became dominant, embodied most notably in
the bungalow. On the surface, the minimal house seems completely at odds with its Victorian predecessor, yet they share an underlying commitment to domesticity and intimacy, rearticulated by the minimal house in terms of comfort and togetherness rather than simplicity and virtue. The various agents of capitalism backed this change, because the minimal house, despite its name, was a more profitable product. Minimalism, according to Wright, refers to the house’s exterior outline and ornament, as well as its square footage and the number of rooms inside. Reductions in all these categories were made to accommodate a rapidly increasing investment in domestic technology. New additions to middle-class suburban homes between 1890 and 1920 included indoor plumbing, central heat, bathrooms, electricity, appliances such as vacuums and toasters, and materials such as porcelain and linoleum. According to Wright, such additions were estimated to have increased construction costs by a quarter to a half in the period between 1890 and 1905, resulting in the need for aesthetic minimalism simply in order to keep housing affordable. The crucial effect of these new conveniences was not increased prices—though they did rise steadily—but the greater industrialization of the suburbs. A typical middle-class suburban house could no longer be had independent of developers, manufacturers, and advertisers. Even the less expensive “self-built” houses of the period between 1910 and 1929 were often prefabricated products bought from mail-order companies such as Sears, Roebuck and Co. In short, the nineteenth-century “individual home” had become Babbitt’s standardized house.

Where exactly lies the problem with this intervention of industrial capitalism into the suburbs, in which Babbitt is implicated? Does Lewis believe mass-produced domestic goods are essentially bad? Catherine Jurca makes this very accusation, taking Babbitt’s message to be “that such things as comfortable mattresses, window shades that don’t crack, and standard lamps are
somehow . . . intrinsically alienating for the consumer and legitimate sources of middle-class
dissatisfaction, as though living in ‘a very good hotel’ were some kind of terrible penalty.”
Lewis’s critique has more to it than she acknowledges, though admittedly his writing can be
inconsistent and imprecise. I believe Lewis generally targets capitalist exchange rather than
industrial production in his satire. When Lewis demeans the Babbitts’ bedroom, for instance,
saying, “It had the air of being a very good room in a very good hotel” (B 12), he is not
cconcerned about a hotel room’s quality, but the commercial nature of a hotel. The passage
continues, “One expected the chambermaid to come in and make it ready for people who would
stay but one night” (B 12). The figure of the maid embodies the problem Lewis detects—not how
the room functions according to technical measurements, but whose interests are represented (or
obscured and reified) in the room, or to put it another way, what purposes a commodity serves in
a consumer’s life.

This last concern appears clearly in an example that ties directly to the matter at hand,
industrial capitalism’s penetration of the suburbs, an intervention that Lewis suggests falls short
of pure beneficence:

In nothing—as the expert on whose advice families moved to new neighborhoods
to live there for a generation—was Babbitt more splendidly innocent than in the
science of sanitation. . . .

When he laid out the Glen Oriole acreage development, . . . he righteously put in a
complete sewage-system. It made him feel superior; it enabled him to sneer privately
at the Martin Lumpsen development, Avonlea, which had a cesspool; and it
provided a chorus for the full-page advertisements in which he announced the
beauty, convenience, cheapness, and supererogatory healthfulness of Glen Oriole.
The only flaw was that the Glen Oriole sewers had insufficient outlet, so that waste
remained in them, not very agreeably, while the Avonlea cesspool was a Waring
septic tank” (B 40).

The novelist’s point is that expensive, “up-to-date,” status-signifying innovations might serve the
developer’s interests more than those of the residents. The Glen’s plumbing malfunction
demonstrates this point, but in fact, most consumer goods featured in the novel work flawlessly. Lewis remains far less critical of commodities than of the social relations embedded in them through mass-market exchange. Most importantly, he seems worried that commercial relations may disrupt intimacy and turn personal life into the material for an advertising campaign, in the same manner that Habermas finds the public sphere being replaced by the culture industry’s administered conversation.57

In other words, the problem with the extension of industry’s reach into the suburbs is really the intrusion of capitalism into the intimate sphere.58 Babbitt, as a real-estate agent and developer, is to a degree responsible for the general commercialization of suburban domestic life that frustrates him personally. He is caught in a trap of his own devising. In order to appreciate better why Lewis positions his protagonist so, and what Lewis thinks about the fate of the intimate sphere in the twentieth century, I will conclude by analyzing Babbitt’s rebellion, which constitutes most of the novel’s main plot.

**Home Away from Home**

Babbitt’s rebellion should be read as a series of attempts to create opportunities for personal life and intimacy somewhere other than the suburban intimate sphere, to reinstate their former idealized opposition to consumerism and capitalism in general. His revolt begins innocuously with incoherent feelings of dissatisfaction and climaxes much later in his willful flouting of the beliefs and demands of his wife, his neighbors, and his friends. Four moments spanning the spectrum from passive discontentment to active rebellion are worth examining: his dream of the fairy child, his friendship with Paul Riesling, his camping trips to Maine, and his affair with Tanis Judique. In all four cases, Babbitt seeks to attain the rewards that domestic life fails to provide him, searching for a space outside of the family and the suburban house in which to enjoy them. These rewards are, respectively, the experiences of romantic love, friendship,
leisure, and domesticity, all liberated from the burdens of capitalist exchange and status competition. Through Babbitt’s struggles, Lewis’s thoughts about the possibilities for intimacy and personal life can be explored.

The first alternative featured in the novel is the most radical though insubstantial, Babbitt’s dream of “a fairy child, a dream more romantic than scarlet pagodas by a silver sea” (B 2). Lewis’s description of the dream reveals its relationship to the topic at hand:

For years the fairy child had come to him. Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth. She waited for him, in the darkness beyond mysterious groves. When at last he could slip away from the crowded house he darted to her. His wife, his clamoring friends, sought to follow, but he escaped, the girl fleet beside him, and they crouched together on a shadowy hillside. She was so slim, so white, so eager! She cried that he was gay and valiant, that she would wait for him, that they would sail—

Rumble and bang of the milk truck. (B 2)

The romantic quality of his dream has to do first with its blend of the exotic (e.g., pagodas) and archaic (e.g., gallantry), which contrast sharply with the world to which he is awakened. The dream is thus a vision of “personal life, experienced as something outside work and society.” In addition, the fairy child is a romantic figure as a love object and potential sexual fantasy. She clearly stands apart from the intimate sphere of the family and home. This imaginary personal life outside of the intimate sphere can easily be interpreted as Babbitt’s psychological compensation for the inadequacy of his domestic situation. By helping Babbitt run away from everything, the fairy child paradoxically uncovers his “personality.” What the fairy child does not provide, though, is intimacy. As a mere dream, she remains a narcissistic projection rather than a relation of genuine intimacy and love, which are fundamentally social experiences. Indeed, this difference might help clarify Babbitt’s further stages of rebellion.

In the classical liberal formulation, the intimate sphere provided a refuge, but not for the purpose of solitude; a person was instead most individualized in the impersonal private sphere.
The intimate sphere instead sheltered a distinctive form of society, separated from economic activity and unmotivated by rational self-interest or instrumental calculation. Only in such voluntary, disinterested “personal relations” could sympathy, intimacy, and love be experienced. Babbitt’s dream of the fairy child cannot provide such pleasures, because it is mere escapism, an imagined freedom from all forms of society. The desirability of personal relations comes not from any potential utility. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith proposes, “there is a satisfaction in the consciousness of being beloved, which, to a person of delicacy and sensibility, is of more importance to happiness, than all the advantage than he can expect to derive from it.” Smith’s notion of sympathy as a good in itself and a foundation for moral behavior had a profound influence upon the Victorian culture of sentiment. The reward or value of personal life is found not merely in the approbation of others, but even more in the belief that one’s personal life is most truly human because freely entered, not born of necessity or self-interest. The freedom associated with personal life is thus not individualistic. Personal relations can involve obligations, dependency, and even self-sacrifice, the last considered perhaps the truest expression of love.

To actively pursue Babbitt’s dream, however, would be to seek complete individual freedom and collapse the liberal distinctions. Replacing the impersonal self-interest of the private sphere on the one hand and the disinterested personal life of the intimate sphere on the other would be their bastard union, narcissistic individualism and its “therapeutic quest for self-fulfillment.” As Lears, Sennett, and others observe, the therapeutic culture that emerged in the early twentieth century began as a reaction against industrial work, seeming to align it with the original values of the suburban intimate sphere, yet the goal of self-fulfillment was readily harnessed to consumerism and thereby neutralized. Stuart Ewen explains how modern
advertising and “the mystification of the production process” enabled this turnabout. I have suggested a similar result came through the industrialization of the suburbs and colonization of the domestic realm. In the corporate ideology of the 1920s,” writes Ewen, “the goods of the marketplace were sold to the public with the ‘liberating’ and ‘democratic’ lingo which had up till then been heard most loudly among those whose attack was on the corporate premise of the market economy itself.” Individualized consumption became the reward for and an escape from work, paradoxically, the basis for a new pseudo-personal life, set within the family reconstituted as merely “a community of consumers.” Babbitt for the most part rejects this logical consequence of his dream, as I have demonstrated, and tries to realize his desires in more satisfactory ways.

The second alternative, Babbitt’s friendship with Paul Riesling, comes closest to creating a viable personal life that achieves real intimacy outside of the suburban intimate sphere. Their relationship offers Babbitt much the same benefits as the dream imagines. Riesling, a friend since college, knew Babbitt as a youth and can recall his forsaken ambitions to go into law or politics (B 79). Riesling provides a living reminder of Babbitt’s former identity underneath the mask of adult compromises, just as Babbitt can sympathize when Riesling complains, “I ought to have been a fiddler, and I’m a pedler [sic] of tar-roofing!” (B 54). Perhaps the most crucial element of this friendship is their openness to sharing such feelings of discontentment, something Babbitt does not find with other neighbors and acquaintances—and not because those others are “entirely satisfied.” When the advertisement writer Frink encounters Babbitt late one night by accident, for instance, he confesses, “I’m a traitor to poetry. I’m drunk. I’m talking too much. I don’t care. Know what I could’ve been?” (B 243). Frink darts away, while Babbitt “accepted Frink with vast apathy; he grunted, ‘Poor boob!' and straightaway forgot him” (B 243). By
contrast, the friendship between Babbitt and Riesling, based on mutual care and consolation, offers an alternative to the impersonal self-interest that animates the private sphere as well as the impersonal sociability of the public sphere. Lewis cannot help but describe their intimacy in familial terms: “He was an older brother to Paul Riesling, swift to defend him, admiring him with a proud and credulous love passing the love of women” (B 50). The problem with this friendship lies in finding an appropriate space in which to express such emotions.

As with the dream of the fairy child, the intimate sphere appears inimical to male friendship, especially because wives are implicated in the commercialization of the domestic realm. Whereas the men in Babbitt facilitate this intervention insidiously through their work, women such as Zilla Riesling represent the consummate consumers for Lewis. He unleashes his venom upon these modern, middle-class wives:

their houses were so convenient that they had little housework, and much of their food came from bakeries and delicatessens. . . . They worked perhaps two hours a day, and the rest of the time they ate chocolates, went to the motion-pictures, went window-shopping, went in gossiping twos and threes to card-parties, read magazines, thought timorously of the lovers who never appeared, and accumulated a splendid restlessness which they got rid of by nagging their husbands. The husbands nagged back. (B 109)

Paul Riesling’s complaints to Babbitt put the blame for domestic intimacy’s failure squarely upon his wife’s shoulders: “I don’t mind sitting down to burnt steak, with canned peaches and store cake for a thrilling little dessert afterwards, but I do draw the line at having to sympathize with Zilla because she’s so rotten bad-tempered that the cook has quit, and she’s been so busy sitting in a dirty lace negligee all afternoon, reading about some brave manly Western hero, that she hasn’t had time to do any cooking” (B 56). Intimacy cannot coexist with all these reminders of the world of economic activity, so Babbitt and Riesling run away from the feminized, commodified domestic realm.
The first meeting between Babbitt and Riesling in the novel takes place at the Zenith Athletic Club. They are playfully harassed when they choose to sit apart from their regular companions, because “privacy was very bad form” (B 53). This custom seems out of place, since “[t]he first institution created specifically for private speech was the men’s club” according to Richard Sennett.65 He speaks of the original clubs of seventeenth-century Europe that served a similar function to that of the bourgeois intimate sphere: providing an escape from the pressures of impersonal urban life, a way to manage sociability by excluding strangers. By the early twentieth century, Lewis suggests, men’s clubs and associations have reorganized along the same lines as the domestic realm, becoming just another venue of capitalist society, neither public nor intimate. “Of a decent man in Zenith,” writes Lewis, “it was required that he should belong to one, preferably two or three, of the innumerous ‘lodges’ and prosperity-boosting lunch-clubs” (B 181). While at the Athletic, for instance, Babbitt conspicuously announces his purchase of the electric cigar-lighter to other members of the club, concurs with them about the necessity of “having the best” products, and trades “amiable insults” about their crooked business dealings—all forms of masculine competition and status-seeking that yet again impede his desire (B 50). Babbitt can find no place for his intimate friendship, it seems.

The third alternative, Babbitt’s camping trips in Maine, has again much in common with his dream of the fairy child and his friendship with Riesling. Babbitt idly fantasizes about “running off” to the woods for some time, having even bought a khaki blanket “for a camping trip which had never come off. It symbolized gorgeous loafing, gorgeous cursing, virile flannel shirts” (B 4). He predictably envisions the wilderness as a masculine space of leisure, liberated from the world of work as well as the feminized domestic realm. When he and Riesling eventually go off together to a rustic hotel in Maine, their male friendship does indeed find a
place to blossom. However, this situation can only be temporary for Babbitt, because he is unwilling to give up his middle-class life, as he discovers while on his second, solo trip to Maine. This realization is essential to understanding his character: Babbitt wants both bourgeois intimacy and his material privileges.

His determination to embody a contradiction leads to his characteristic frustration: “Wish I’d been a pioneer, same as my grand-dad. But then, wouldn’t have a house like this. I— Oh, gosh, I don’t know!” (B 78). As in the case of the intimate sphere and men’s clubs, capitalism encroaches upon his recreation. The hand of the emerging twentieth-century leisure industry becomes visible in his preparatory shopping expedition to the “Sporting Goods Mart” (B 123), in the rustic hotel complete with “log cottages” at which he vacations, and in his fellow tourists (B 133). They give the newcomer a “critical examination,” perhaps resentfully because his appearance undoubtedly reminds them of themselves and of the closing of the frontier as an escape from corporate capitalism: “Babbitt in khaki shirt and vest and flapping khaki trousers. It was excessively new khaki; his rimless spectacles belonged to a city office; and his face was not tanned but a city pink” (B 133).

The fourth alternative, Babbitt’s romantic affair with Tanis Judique, materializes after Paul Riesling is sentenced to prison for the attempted murder of his wife Zilla. Without this unique friendship to sustain him, Babbitt is forced to reconsider his life:


“I give it up,” he sighed.

But he did know that he wanted the presence of Paul Riesling; and from that he stumbled into the admission that he wanted the fairy girl—in the flesh. (B 244)

Babbitt spirals into open rebellion, and his extramarital affair with Judique stands as his most thorough attempt to create the contradictory life he wants. Like the fairy child and Paul Riesling,
Judique provides him the comforts normally associated with home and family, though in a setting decidedly different from the conventional suburban intimate sphere. She lives in an apartment in a district of “hard little bungalows” (B 286), little shops, and apartment houses, yet at their first romantic rendezvous she serves him tea, admires his knowledgeability in the matter of her leaky roof, listens to his various complaints, and puts him “in a glorious state of being appreciated” (B 287). Judique’s ready sympathy makes her far more attractive and satisfactory than the prostitutes, office workers, and neighbors in whom Babbitt had previously tried to discover the incarnated fairy girl. Although Babbitt makes a rhetorical apology to Judique, “I’m probably boring you to death with my troubles!” (B 288), her obliging attention provides the intimacy for which he has been searching, and they share the “burden of personality” in their relationship of mutual self-disclosure.

The affair satisfies Babbitt for other reasons as well. Because he is not married to Judique, and because they attempt to keep their affair a secret, he manages to divide his personal life from his public and private (i.e., economic) life in a way he never hoped to achieve with his wife and children. Unlike the dream and his leisure activities, which are inevitably temporary outlets for Babbitt, the affair becomes a part of his everyday routine with no predetermined ending. In addition, the affair takes on characteristics of the companionate marriage, particularly when Judique introduces him to her bohemian friends “The Bunch,” and the relationship becomes the basis for a new, separate social life for Babbitt.

At about the same time as he begins the affair, a general labor strike occurs in the city of Zenith, and “Babbitt chose this time to be publicly liberal” (B 277). Indeed, much of Babbitt’s first intimate conversation with Tanis revolves around his complaints about the prejudices of his associates against the strikers and her admiration for his liberalism. Although the term “liberal”
seems to refer to his political position in Zenith’s dispute over unions, wages, and work hours, it more accurately describes the individual revolution that Babbitt stages in defense of a separate personal life. After all, he only wants to voice his personal opinions about the strike, not to do anything publicly in support of it. He does not march with his old acquaintance Seneca Doane in defense of the strikers, though he speaks out in the company of his associates at the Athletic Club, saying, “ Strikes me it’s bad policy to talk about clubbing ’em” (B 281). He never considers changing his work ethics or political affiliations; he only stands up for the right to think differently in his personal life than he acts in his private business. He wants to lead two separate, contradictory lives. As Babbitt tells Doane, “I’ve always aimed to be liberal” (B 269).

Unfortunately for Babbitt, others refuse to let him achieve his goal. From Tanis Judique, he wants sentiment on his schedule, when his bruised ego needs ministrations, and he does not appreciate that she begins to make demands upon his sympathies: “when he forced himself to ask, ‘Well, honey, how’s things with you,’ she took his duty-question seriously, and he discovered that she too had Troubles” (B 322). She turns intimacy into an obligation that intrudes into his other life, calling him at work to make sure he still cares for her. He breaks off the relationship, therefore, saying, “I want us to be friends but, gosh, I can’t go on this way feeling I got to come up here every so often—” (B 326). In addition, Babbitt’s individual revolution, like the general strike, runs into strong opposition from his associates in the business community. They refuse to tolerate the political independence that he expresses in his personal life, even though his actual commitment to business has not perceptibly changed. They are equally upset that he seems to be abandoning the class-affirming rituals of the suburban intimate sphere for the bohemian lifestyle of Tanis’s Bunch, even though he has already broken off the affair by the time they confront him. They pressure him to join The Good Citizens’ League, a
counterrevolutionary, anti-unionist organization, and they threaten his livelihood if he does not conform.

After Babbitt receives the League’s ultimatum, he finally abandons his protracted struggle to maintain his suburban material privileges while enjoying an autonomous personal life. He chooses to return to his old routine with his wife Myra, rather than abdicating the social and economic security of middle-class suburban society for the uncertain pursuit of intimacy elsewhere. Though Babbitt is described as weak and powerless, his surrender is not presented by Lewis as an utter defeat. Babbitt bequeaths his idealism to the next generation, approving of his son’s romantic elopement with his sweetheart and hoping the young man will maintain his independence from social conventions and “carry things on further” (@ 355). This conclusion underscores the novel’s ambiguity: *Babbitt* could be read as a nostalgic elegy for the idealized bourgeois intimate sphere, or instead as a satire of bourgeois liberal hypocrisy and self-contradiction. In any case, Lewis seems to say that Babbitt’s particular desire is impossible to fulfill under the conditions of early-twentieth-century capitalist society. His liberal belief in the separation of spheres is out of step with his times, especially because suburbia no longer functions as a space of exception to capitalism to the degree it did in the Victorian era.

George Babbitt’s dissatisfaction with his personal life and his desire for intimacy—which suburbia both incites and frustrates—herald the arrival of a new type of suburban literary complaint and a new theme of irony. His problems, I have argued, result from a structural transformation of the bourgeois intimate sphere around the turn of the century. This change, in turn, can be understood as the unintended side effect of suburbia’s increasing success at providing distinction. Nineteenth-century suburban fiction, by contrast, expresses discontent about the potential indistinction of the suburbs. In other words, the dominant anxiety of that
earlier phase of the subgenre regards class and status, not intimacy and love. One could argue that a more autonomous personal life—along with a deepened appreciation of nature—is actually part of the consolation that romantic suburbia offers, the way it attempts to rehabilitate middle-class distinction. Features of the turn-of-the-century intimate sphere such as family togetherness and male domesticity, for instance, are foreshadowed in the Civil War-era sketchbooks of Frederick S. Cozzens and Robert Barry Coffin. *Babbitt* in effect reverses the nineteenth-century narrative, and in doing so inaugurates the twentieth-century suburban novelistic tradition.

---

**Notes**


6. This thesis can be taken as an extension of Jackson Lears’s argument about the rise of antimodernism in *No Place of Grace*. He argues that “the official culture” of progressivism created “an age of confidence” from 1880-1920 (4), yet it simultaneously caused “a crisis of cultural authority” that first struck the cultural elites and then the bourgeoisie (5). While these groups certainly gained from the advances of industrialization, rationalization, and secularization, they lost traditional sources of authority, morality, and identity, leaving them to experience modern life in terms of unreality, weightlessness, and helplessness. Thus, the “beneficiaries of modern culture began to feel like they were its secret victims” (xv), being cut off from authentic experience, intense emotion, and “the primal, irrational forces in the human psyche” (57).


8. Ibid., 58.

9. Ibid., 68.

10. Recent scholarship has acknowledged a broadening participation in suburbanization between 1900 and 1930, due to less expensive, mail-order suburban houses being self-built using prefabricated components. For an overview, see Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).

11. Ibid., 48.

12. Ibid., 68.
Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (1922; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1996), 60. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as B.


Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 76.


Ibid., 19-20.

*Babbitt’s* speech describing the “Ideal Citizen” reiterates these values (B 162). Although Babbitt does briefly entertain a desire for upward mobility, forcing himself into the McKelveys’ social circle (B 173), he consoles himself for his failure there by renewing his commitment to intimacy, successfully befriending Sir Gerald Doak—one of the McKelveys’ prized social ornaments. As Babbitt announces in triumph, “Jerry, you’re a regular human being!” (B 221).

Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 47.


On the differences between “natural character” and personality, see Sennett, *Fall*, 150-3.


Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 47.


Ibid., 269.

Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1959) suggests that the very origins of the intimate sphere, the suburbs, and the modern novel were intertwined. In a chapter on the literary innovations of Samuel Richardson, an early participant in British suburbia who felt “a great need for a kind of emotional security and understanding which only the shared intimacies of personal relationships can supply” (186), Watt concludes by observing Richardson’s legacy:

> It is paradoxical that the most powerful vicarious identification of readers with the feelings of fictional characters that literature had seen should have been produced by exploiting the qualities of print, the most impersonal, objective and public of the media of communication. It is further paradoxical that the process of urbanization should, in the suburb, have led to a way of life that was more secluded and less social than ever before, and, at the same time, helped to bring about a literary form which was less concerned with the public and more with the private side of life than
any previous one. And finally, it is also paradoxical that these two tendencies should have combined
to assist the most apparently realistic of literary genres to become capable of a more thorough
subversion of psychological and social reality than any previous one. (206)

30 Habermas, Structural Transformation, 142.

31 Sennett, who remains highly critical of the rise of intimacy and the decline of public life, writes with sarcasm, “we
all know, the fundamental problem of capitalism is dissociation, called variously alienation, non-cathetic activity,
and the like; division, separation, isolation are the governing images which express this evil. . . . A crowd would be a
prime example; crowds are bad because people are unknown to one another. Once this modulation occurs . . . then to
overcome the unknown, to erase differences between people, seems to be a matter of overcoming part of the basic
illness of capitalism” (The Fall of Public Man, 295). In a similar vein, Christopher Lasch argues, “the glorification
of privacy . . . reflected the devaluation of work. As production became more complex and efficient, work became
increasingly specialized, fragmented, and routine. Accordingly, work came to be seen as merely a means to an
end—for many, sheer physical survival; for others, a rich and satisfying personal life” (Haven in a Heartless World:


33 Ibid., 76.

34 Ibid., 80.


36 Marsh, Suburban Lives, 84.

37 Ibid., 86.

38 For a discussion of conspicuous consumption in Lewis’s novel, see Clare Virginia Eby, “Babbitt as Veblenian

39 Leverenz, Paternalism, 16.

40 Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture (1976;

41 Ibid., 35.

42 Andrew Jackson Downing qtd. in Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United
States (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 64.

43 Gwendolyn Wright, Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago,

44 Jackson, Crabgrass, 109.

45 Sam Bass Warner, Jr., Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900 (1962; reprint, New York:
Atheneum, 1976), 37.

46 Ibid., 118.

47 Wright, Moralism, 34.

48 Ibid., 87.
50 Wright, *Moralism*, 97.


52 Wright, *Moralism*, 231.


54 Wright, *Moralism*, 238.


56 The same ironic subversion of the purported ends to which technology was applied occurred with domestic appliances as well. As the Lynds reported in their classic *Middletown*, “A number [of housewives] feel that while the actual physical labor of housework is less and one is less particular about many details, rising standards in other respects use up the saved time” (Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929], 171). These standards are publicized by the same advertisers who sell products to achieve those standards. See Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, as well as Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

57 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 164.

58 Rather than read Babbitt’s revolt as a struggle for intimacy, Jurca introduces an idea of spirituality that she derives from the “young intellectuals” Lewis Mumford and Waldo Frank. She argues that Lewis’s suburban characters voice false “[l]aments about spiritual sterility” (*White Diaspora* 70), “spiritual homelessness and discontent” (70), and a “spiritual alienation from the suburban house” (74). Not only is Jurca’s use of the term insufficiently explained, but I also find no such reference in *Babbitt* itself.

59 Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life*, xi.


63 Ibid., 201.

64 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 156.

65 Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 83.

66 Graham Thompson makes a compelling argument that the fairy child and Tanis Judique serve as substitutes for Babbitt’s homosexual desire for Paul Riesling. Nevertheless, I believe that the dream, the friendship, and the affair are all rooted in a common desire for intimacy, as well as an antipathy to capitalism and to the treacherous intimate sphere of home and family. Instead of making sex the objective for Babbitt, in other words, I see sex as merely one means to achieve the “consolation” from the “desairs and delusions” created by corporate office work that Thompson offhandedly acknowledges (*Male Sexuality under Surveillance: The Office in Literature* [Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2003], 48). The elusiveness of Babbitt’s goal might better explain why he swings so wildly in his efforts, moving from his tender, potentially homosexual desire for Riesling to the homosocial, “virile” camping
trips to his heterosexual liaisons with working-class women and prostitutes.

67 Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 265.
CHAPTER 4

LOLITA’S UNDISCIPLINED SUBURBS

“A Foreigner and an Anarchist”: Humbert Humbert in Postwar Suburbia

*Lolita* is not considered a suburban novel, nor does its protagonist-narrator Humbert Humbert conform to the stereotype of the American suburbanite. Yet one of its most important settings is described as a suburb. When Humbert searches for a new home in America, he says, “I cast around for some place in the New England countryside or sleepy small town.”¹ He decides upon “green-and-pink Ramsdale,” arriving by train at “the toy station” and patronizing “the only hotel” (*L* 35). Humbert is informed that he can rent a room from Charlotte Haze, and his chauffeur almost runs over a “suburban dog” on “Lawn Street” where her house is located (*L* 36).

Humbert describes his arrival in terms that reveal his preconceived disgust for American suburbia and its middle-class residents: “the Haze house, a white-framed horror, appeared, looking dingy and old, more gray than white—the kind of place you know will have a rubber tube affixable to the tub faucet in lieu of a shower” (*L* 36). He similarly disparages Haze’s décor: “The front hall was graced with door chimes, a white-eyed wooden thingamabob of commercial Mexican origin, and that banal darling of the arty middle class, van Gogh’s ‘Arlésienne’” (*L* 36). His first conversation with Haze, in which they discuss “the privilege of living in Ramsdale,” confirms his prejudices: “She was, obviously, one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul; women who are completely devoid of humor; women utterly indifferent at heart to the dozen or so possible subjects of a parlor conversation, but very particular about the rules of such conversations, through the sunny cellophane of which not very appetizing frustrations can be readily distinguished” (*L* 37). In short, Humbert considers himself vastly superior to the “rather
ridiculous Mrs. Haze, with her blind faith in the wisdom of her church and book club, her
mannerisms of elocution,” and her suburban house that so transparently exposes her lack of taste
and originality (L 75).

Humbert is an outsider to the society of Ramsdale in several ways. He is a cosmopolitan,
European intellectual, having been educated in London and Paris, currently writing a
“comparative history of French literature for English-speaking students” (L 32). His most alien
attribute is his pedophilia; Humbert harbors a secret desire for the young girls he deems
“nymphets.” He chooses Ramsdale only because he discovers that the McCoos, the family he
initially contacts about summer lodging, have a twelve-year-old daughter. When their house
burns down on the night Humbert arrives in Ramsdale, Mr. McCoo redirects him to Charlotte
Haze. Humbert is repulsed by what he finds at Lawn Street, until he spies twelve-year-old
Dolores Haze, or Lolita. Humbert expends most of his attention and narration on Lolita—her
body, her habits, her activities—as he recalls the ten weeks spent as Haze’s lodger. Toward his
new American environment Humbert remains as condescending and dismissive as he is toward
Charlotte.

Near the end of his stay, Humbert finally describes his “suburban street” as he surveys it
while cutting Haze’s grass. He observes two little girls with a bicycle, “old Miss Opposite’s
gardener,” and a station wagon being chased by a neighbor’s dog (73). This tableau seems
intentionally commonplace in order to counterpoint the drama occurring, as Humbert anxiously
watches for Charlotte to arrive home so that he can propose marriage—she having declared her
love for him in a letter and commanded him to leave while she is away. The marriage is merely
his scheme to remain near Lolita, and after it takes place, he again mocks Charlotte’s domestic
behavior as a way to reiterate her oblivious ignorance via her poor taste: “With the zest of a
banal young bride, she started to ‘glorify the home’” in cretonnes and chintzes, consulting “illustrated catalogs and homemaking guides” (L 77-8). When Charlotte dies in a car accident, Humbert flees Ramsdale almost immediately, embarking on a yearlong road trip across America with Lolita.

Humbert shows little interest in suburbia, either as a resident or as the writer of this narrative, and his attitude is shared by literary critics. This setting is not usually considered important to Nabokov’s novel, which is often interpreted as a metafiction about art or else discussed for the ethical problems raised by its portrayal of pedophilia. Significantly, none of the suburban literary scholars addressed in my first chapter mention Lolita in their accounts of the subgenre. When compared to George Babbitt, the quintessential twentieth-century suburbanite character, Humbert does indeed appear to be “a foreigner and an anarchist,” as Nabokov deems him (L 315). Babbitt is largely a representative type: a narrow-minded, hypocritical American businessman and civic booster who expresses himself in platitudes, remaining out of touch or at odds with his feelings and desires. Suburbia provides Babbitt with self-affirmation through its homogeneous community, while offering him the socially acceptable emotional outlet of family life. Humbert, by contrast, is an abnormal, antisocial individual, committed to nurturing his secret passion and seemingly unconcerned about his public or professional existence. The strict normativity of post-WWII suburbia, where a childless, single adult who works at home is morally suspect, makes Humbert feel stifled.

Surprisingly, the two characters do have a few things in common. Both are romantic dreamers who desire a “fairy girl”—Lolita often being playfully described by Humbert as a nymph, elf, pixie, and other similar mythological figures. The men also demonstrate a similar confusion about their society. As I argued in the previous chapter, Babbitt maintains a nostalgia
for the Victorian separate spheres, not realizing that the kind of intimacy he craves from his fairy
girl is undermined by the commodification of suburbia that he facilitates as a real-estate
developer. Humbert also seems out of touch with his time and place, imagining his desire for
Lolita constrained by a disciplinary power not unlike the panopticism analyzed by Michel
Foucault. While Humbert relentlessly exerts this type of power over Lolita, he actually operates
within a middle-class social order characterized by conflict avoidance and disengaged tolerance.
Suburbia is the place where Humbert’s confusion is most apparent, particularly because he is less
of an outsider there than he would care to admit.

“A Lighted House of Glass”: Humbert under Surveillance

Humbert Humbert’s brief account of his earliest sexual experiences focuses upon his first
love, Annabel Leigh, whom he describes as the “prototype” for Lolita (L 40). He taunts his
readers with the possibility that his childhood romance with Annabel in some way led to his
adult pedophilia. These experiences also seem to provide a precedent and explanation for his
adult paranoia about surveillance. In his “unsuccessful first tryst” with Annabel, the two
youngsters “managed to deceive the vicious vigilance of her family,” meeting in a mimosa grove
behind her house at night (L 14). They masturbate each other and Humbert almost ejaculates, but
he is interrupted by “a sudden commotion in a nearby bush . . . probably a prowling cat, there
came from the house her mother’s voice calling her, with a frantic rising note—and Dr. Cooper
ponderously limped out into the garden” (L 15). Humbert states that after this rather theatrical
interruption, “the only privacy we were allowed was to be out of earshot but not out of sight,”
while their families stay together at the beach. In their unsuccessful second tryst, the children
deceive their guardians and seclude themselves “in the violet shadow of some red rocks forming
a kind of cave,” where they almost manage to have sex until “two bearded brothers, the old man
of the sea and his twin, came out of the sea,” interrupting the ill-fated lovers (L 13).
These experiences seem to shape Humbert’s consciousness, because when his Annabel returns to him in the form of Lolita, so does his belief that he is persecuted by a “vicious vigilance.” Indeed, his brief stint in Ramsdale becomes increasingly pervaded by an atmosphere of surveillance. Soon after Humbert joins the Haze household, a trip to Hourglass Lake is planned, with Humbert, Charlotte, and Lolita all harboring secret motives for going. He tellingly mishears name of the lake as “Our Glass,” which suggests some kind of communal transparency. Humbert hopes to reenact the beach episode from his childhood, but his plan is thwarted by Charlotte, who invites along Lolita’s friend Mary. Charlotte desires to get her handsome lodger alone “in the seminude, far from prying eyes,” while the children go off and play together (L 56). “Incidentally, eyes did pry and tongues did wag,” reports Humbert, who must have later learned from Lolita that she and Mary spied upon him and Charlotte that day (L 56). This offhand remark provides an early hint of Lolita’s desire for Humbert, completing the odd love triangle. Not recognizing the young girl’s interest, Humbert fears Lolita will detect his ardor, and his cautious attempts to experience her sexually without her knowledge—he toys with the idea of drugging and raping her—first succeed in a chance encounter some time later in the Haze living room. “Sitting there on the sofa,” says Humbert, “I managed to attune, by a series of stealthy movements, my masked lust to her guileless limbs. It was no easy matter to divert the little maiden’s attention” (L 58). He believes that he successfully evades her notice as he masturbates, yet we have ample reason to doubt his judgments about Lolita.

After Humbert marries Charlotte, she informs him of her intentions to enroll Lolita in a boarding school and afterward Beardsley College. He reacts to this frustrating impediment by plotting to drown Charlotte in Hourglass Lake. He lures her out into the water, yet cannot bring himself to act. Returning to the beach, Charlotte removes her bathing suit top in order to tan her
back, and hearing a nearby noise, she reproves “[t]hose disgusting prying kids” (L 88). The noise turns out to come from their neighbor Jean Farlow, an amateur painter. Humbert quips, “Jean said she had been up there, in a place of green concealment, spying on nature (spies are generally shot)” (L 88). Jean informs Humbert that she noticed he wore his watch while swimming. Impressed at this minute perception, Charlotte remarks, “You could see anything that way” (L 89). Indeed, Jean would have seen the drowning too from her vantage point. As if summing up the situation in Ramsdale, Humbert, reflecting on his aborted murder, remarks, “in our middle-class nosy era it would not have come off” (L 87).

The most “nosy” person in Ramsdale, of course, may be Humbert himself. In reminiscing about his childhood, Humbert makes a characteristically revealing offhand comment: “I wanted to be a famous spy” (L 12). This seeming oxymoron, conjoining celebrity and secrecy, might well describe Humbert’s existence in Ramsdale. Though he appears subjected to various gazes as a handsome, sophisticated, exotic newcomer, he conducts the most extensive surveillance in his clandestine pursuit of Lolita. His narrative is sprinkled with instances of him eavesdropping or spying on her. At one point, he describes himself as a pale spider: “My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard” (L 49). Humbert even compares his recollection of the contents of his old diary to the memory of a spy (L 41). Although Charlotte Haze seems to be the least observant character, she ultimately performs the most dramatic, effectual spying when she “rapes” Humbert’s locked table and discovers proof of his pedophilia in that same diary (L 96).

Surveillance continues to be a motif after Charlotte dies, as Humbert takes Lolita on a road trip crisscrossing America. When he goes shopping to outfit his young ward, he reports: “I realized I was the only shopper in that rather eerie place where I moved about fish-like, in a
glaucous aquarium. I sensed strange thoughts form in the minds of the languid ladies that escorted me from counter to counter, from rock ledge to seaweed, and the belts and bracelets I chose seemed to fall from siren hands into transparent water” (L 108). His feeling of living in a fishbowl persists as the pair travel by automobile. When Humbert pulls to the side of the road for their first passionate kiss, he recounts that “blessed intuition broke our embrace—a split second before a highway patrol car drew up alongside” (L 113). He continues to worry about being confined with the alluring girl in a glass-windowed box: “At inspection stations on highways entering Arizona or California, a policeman’s cousin would peer with such intensity at us that my poor heart wobbled” (L 160). After a year of living out of hotels and motels, Humbert and Lolita return to suburbia, settling down in Beardsley, “a mellow academic townlet” and home to Beardsley College (L 179). In one of his most revealing comments regarding the scrutiny under which he seems to live, Humbert declares, “I often felt we lived in a lighted house of glass, and that at any moment some thin-lipped parchment face would peer through a carelessly unshaded window to obtain a free glimpse of things that the most jaded voyeur would have paid a small fortune to watch” (L 180).

“Our Middle-Class Nosy Era”: The Disciplinary Society

It is tempting to read Lolita’s depiction of postwar America’s suburbs and highways through the theory of “the disciplinary society” that Michel Foucault describes in his highly influential Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975), and to read passages such as the one about Humbert’s glass house in relation to the panopticon that Foucault made famous. A precedent for such readings exists in Robert Beuka’s SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film (2004). He declares that the titular device of John Cheever’s short story “The Enormous Radio” “reminds one of a latter-day
incarnation of Bentham’s panopticon.”² In Beuka’s view, this radio’s magical capability for eavesdropping suggests the increasing power of surveillance in postwar America and the impact such surveillance may have on community dynamics. Concerns about the increasing visibility of private lives were to become part of the critique of suburbia in the cold war era, as the “picture window,” a standard feature of the postwar suburban house, symbolically eliminated the distinction between the public and private sectors. Tawdry behavior viewed through the picture window was to become a staple image in critiques of the suburban lifestyle, and most works of fiction and film set in the suburbs play on the heightened sense of visibility fostered by the suburban environment.³

Beuka makes more specific claims about the function of such surveillance. He argues that the “paranoid” fears of the radio’s owner about unintentionally broadcasting her own private life demonstrates Foucault’s idea that panopticism “serves to induct individuals into society’s matrix of power relations.”⁴ In addition, Beuka claims, “we might consider the nature of Foucauldian internalized discipline in terms of its relationship to class position; although Jim scoffs at Irene’s fear of being heard by the radio, he too has internalized a pervasive form of self-discipline” that drives Jim to work hard and buy material goods in order to “maintain the appearances of an upper-middle-class lifestyle.”⁵

Beuka also discovers Foucauldian themes in Cheever’s more famous story “The Swimmer,” in which the public pool is “characterized by its strict disciplinary superstructure” and “the penetrating, panoptic gaze of the lifeguards.”⁶ In his analysis of the 1975 film The Stepford Wives, Beuka perceives “an image of the suburb as an intensely visual landscape, a terrain marked by a compromised subjectivity brought about by the breakdown of distinctions between public and private spaces.”⁷ Again, he suggests that picture windows are responsible, but the surveillance in Stepford is much more wide-ranging, insidious, and gender specific: “Indeed, the town itself becomes a veritable grid of surveillance that serves to entrap the few remaining human women” in “a seemingly omnipresent male power structure.”⁸ In these
readings, Beuka makes some provocative, occasionally sweeping arguments about the relationships between landscape, perception, and power. Might *Lolita* also be interpreted as a commentary on disciplinary society, with Humbert’s “nympholepsy” serving as a metaphor on the order of the enormous radio or the robotic wives of Stepford? To consider this option, we need to thoroughly understand Foucault’s theory.

The origins of disciplinarity, according to Foucault, can be located in France during the Enlightenment with a reform movement directed at the justice system. Opposed to the arbitrariness and obscurity of monarchical justice, these reformers believed “[t]he ideal punishment would be transparent to the crime that it punishes.” They sought to establish a fixed code of punishments that would appear rational, fitting, and natural rather than the capricious whim of authority; thus, murder would be punished by death, usury by a fine, and so forth. As Foucault puts it: “The punishment must proceed from the crime; the law must appear to be a necessity of things, and power must act while concealing itself beneath the gentle force of nature.” In addition, the reformist jurists wanted punishment to enjoy a new visibility. If punishment was made public in the Ancien Régime, it was as a spectacle designed to instill fear of the sovereign. The reformers held that in order to actually reduce crime, “punishments must be a school rather than a festival; an ever-open book rather than a ceremony.” They hoped that “[i]n the penalty, rather than seeing the presence of the sovereign, one will read the laws themselves.” Foucault describes their ideal space as a “punitive city,” throughout which “hundreds of tiny theatres of punishment” would be exhibited everyday for the people’s edification.

This dream of an internalized authority gives rise to “disciplinarity,” which Foucault associates with the modern prison institution developing in the late eighteenth century. The
discipline of the prison does not attempt to reach the criminal’s “humanity” through reason and representation, as the reformist jurists demanded. Instead, it strives to create “docile bodies” through techniques and exercises:

- time-tables, compulsory movements, regular activities, solitary meditation, work in common, silence, application, respect, good habits. And, ultimately, what one is trying to restore in this technique of correction is not so much the juridical subject, who is caught up in the fundamental interests of the social pact, but the obedient subject, the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders, an authority that is exercised continually around him and upon him, and which he must allow to function automatically in him.  

The prison’s “machinery” operates through a meticulous organization of space and time, surveillance being integral to maintaining order and control. Indeed, Foucault’s most well known example of disciplinarity is a model prison, Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, in which a centralized observer could see every inmate without being seen in turn. The panopticon twists the Enlightenment ideal of transparency as a kind of public knowledge into an ominous form of power. The inmates cannot be sure when they are actually being observed, yet the prison’s structure habituates them to assume perpetual visibility.

In the nineteenth century, disciplinary power escapes the prison. No longer simply a means to punish, it becomes instrumental in the positive constitution of subjects, and its techniques are employed “to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work.” The role played by capitalism in the creation of the disciplinary society cannot be overemphasized. One of Foucault’s initial descriptions of discipline speaks of “methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility.” While he foregrounds docility throughout his analysis, utility might be the ultimate objective that motivates the entire system. Foucault poses the rhetorical questions:

“How can one capitalize the time of individuals, accumulate it in each of them, in their bodies, in
their forces or in their abilities, in a way that is susceptible of use and control? How can one organize profitable durations? The disciplines, which analyse space, break up and rearrange activities, must also be understood as machinery for adding up and capitalizing time.”\textsuperscript{18} The difference between panopticism and Taylorism, or the domination of prisoners and the management of workers, is not as great as one might hope.

\textbf{“The Merciless Glare of the Common Law”: Humbert and Disciplinarity}

Does \textit{Lolita} represent the postwar U.S. as a disciplinary society? Humbert Humbert most frequently fears the informal surveillance of his nosy neighbors and fellow highway travelers, who might unwittingly discover his pedophilia. Yet he also occasionally worries about official authorities and the state’s power. He seems to believe that “the police and society [are] cracking down” on “so-called aberrant behavior” (\textit{L} 88). Nevertheless, he admits to his thorough ignorance of the law, particularly in regards to his guardianship of Lolita. He wonders how it would appear that he, “a brand-new American citizen of obscure European origin, had taken no steps toward becoming the legal guardian of his dead wife’s daughter” (\textit{L} 105). He cleverly manages to preempt the neighbors’ questioning of his legal rights. Around the time of his marriage to Charlotte, he spreads the rumor that they had been lovers thirteen years earlier (\textit{L} 75). After Charlotte’s death, John Farlow—Jean’s husband and Charlotte’s legal adviser—demands to know what Humbert intends for Lolita. Jean rushes to Humbert’s aid, exclaiming, “Humbert is Dolly’s real father” (\textit{L} 101). John apologizes, “I am sorry. Yes, I see. I did not realize that. It simplifies matters, of course. And whatever you feel is right” (\textit{L} 101).

Humbert is not able to secure his position with the authorities so easily. Although he surreptitiously researches the matter, he says, “I somehow never managed to find out quite exactly what the legal situation was” (\textit{L} 171). This admission prefaces a page-long review of the scattered facts Humbert has learned about American justice and when it intervenes in such
situations. “The best policy,” he concludes, “seemed to be to refrain from any application [for guardianship]. Or would some busybody, some Humane Society, butt in if I kept too quiet?” (L 172-3). Humbert displays some psychopathological traits in his treatment of Lolita, yet he still appears socialized enough to exhibit a generalized apprehension of authority—though he, like most of us, does not know its true scope or power. While this internalization may be the effect of disciplinarity, Humbert is no docile body. Instead, his wariness of being “hemmed in by mysterious statutes in the merciless glare of the Common Law” leads to his life in flight with Lolita, as he tries to evade the system that would apprehend him in its grid of knowledge and power (L 106).

The Beardsley School for girls, in which Humbert enrolls Lolita upon their settling down, provides the most recognizable and unequivocal example of disciplinarity in the novel. When headmistress Pratt calls in the new father for a conference about his child’s poor report, Humbert “imagined all sorts of horrors,” and in this instance his anxieties about detection are reasonable (L 193). Pratt, whose name when reversed suggests her power to ensnare and confine, bluntly questions him about Lolita and their home life. Pratt is concerned that “the onset of sexual maturing seems to give her trouble,” and the headmistress reads from a series of teacher reports on Lolita’s habits, interests, vocabulary, health, and so on (L 193). The surveillance that Beardsley School performs on its students “situates them in a network of writing,” to borrow Foucault’s words; “it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them.”

Indeed, the school uses this knowledge to exert power not only over the students but also their parents. Pratt interferes in Humbert’s “old-fashioned Continental” tutelage, insisting that Lolita be allowed to act in the upcoming school play.
Despite Humbert’s resentment of Pratt, he employs very similar methods on Lolita. A few chapters before the episode with Pratt, Humbert mentions “solemnly weighing the winter-bleached lassie in the bathroom” as part of his recitation of activities that comprise their Beardsley existence (L 189). He seems to have memorized a set of measurements made by Charlotte on Lolita’s twelfth birthday, and his purpose in collecting new information is not to proudly track the child’s growth as most parents might, but instead to coerce her into maintaining the nymphet body type that he prefers (L 107). Thus he tells Lolita: “You should try to be a little nicer to me. You should also watch your diet. The tour of your thigh, you know, should not exceed seventeen and a half inches. More might be fatal (I was kidding, of course)” (L 209). He is brutally serious, however, in his invocation of authority in order to keep her docile, telling her: “if we two are found out, you will be analyzed and institutionalized, my pet, c’est tout. You will dwell, my Lolita will dwell (come here, my brown flower) with thirty-nine other dopes in a dirty dormitory (no, allow me, please) under the supervision of hideous matrons. This is the situation, this is the choice” (L 151). His offer of a choice seems rhetorical, since he uses every kind of coercion to keep Lolita in line, including bribes, trickery, and violence.

Readers have noted Nabokov’s penchant for including doubles in his fiction. It seems plausible to interpret Humbert Humbert as a monstrous double of Pratt and authority figures in general because of the way that he bends their techniques to his sinister ends. Foucault makes a relevant comment about the pervasiveness of disciplinarity: “While, on the one hand, the disciplinary establishments increase, their mechanisms have a certain tendency to become ‘de-institutionalized,’ to emerge from the closed fortresses in which they once functioned and to circulate in a ‘free’ state.”20 The last phrase could be taken to mean that disciplinary techniques become more or less ubiquitous, or it could be read as Foucault sarcastically commenting on the
extension of disciplinarity into liberal democracies such as France and the U.S.—countries Nabokov lived in after fleeing communist Russia and fascist Germany. In short, Foucault seems to authorize us to find disciplinarity almost anywhere, and in *Lolita* it apparently permeates the American suburbs while also being hijacked by a madman.

**“The Spell of Absolute Security”: Undisciplined Surveillance**

As compelling as this interpretation of the novel may be, it fails to account for some important details. In particular, I am not convinced that Humbert’s anxieties are consonant with the danger he faces. Almost every instance of surveillance discussed above is in fact lascivious, and very few of these acts seem to control, regulate, or prevent sexual behavior in the way one might expect from a disciplinary power. This surveillance does not produce “docile bodies,” and it certainly does not “capitalize the time of individuals.” Humbert’s misunderstanding begins in childhood during his final attempt to have sex with Annabel Leigh. Far from protesting, the “old man of the sea” and his brother actually offer “exclamations of ribald encouragement” when Humbert is “on the point of possessing” the girl (*L* 13). Young Humbert, it seems, is discouraged by the potential spectators interrupting his privacy. One of the great ironies of the novel is that, despite all his bluster about his unique sexuality, Humbert remains prudishly oblivious to the sexual desires and “deviancy” all around him—most importantly Clare Quilty’s.

Recollecting his former life, Humbert the narrator admits he “was as naïve as only a pervert can be” (*L* 25). Nowhere is this more evident than in his initial interactions with Lolita. He overlooks the signs of Lolita’s sexual awareness in order to “solipsize” her, making her conform to his nymphet ideal (*L* 60). His caution, doubtfully necessary in the scene on the Haze sofa, is finally rendered absurd at the Enchanted Hunters hotel. He struggles to explain their accommodations to his new daughter, proposing, “while we travel, we shall be obliged—we shall be thrown a good deal together. Two people sharing one room, inevitably enter into a
kind—how shall I say—a kind,” at which point the girl frankly interjects: “The word is incest” (L 119). He then spends the night on pins and needles attempting to surreptitiously rape the girl after giving her an ineffectual sedative, but in the morning, he claims, “it was she who seduced me” (L 132). He soon learns that Lolita had already been introduced to sex with boys and girls at summer camp. Thus, we should be doubly skeptical of Humbert’s announcement early in the novel: “You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!), in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs,” anymphet (L 17). He is not as exceptional as he presumes, and his whimpering caution (concealed within parentheses!) also seems unnecessary. To put it another way, not only does Humbert display a terrible “incuriosity” about other people, as Richard Rorty notes, but he also misinterprets surveillance as portending punishment rather than merely being prurient inquisitiveness.²¹

This nosiness about sexual matters is ubiquitous. After Charlotte Haze appreciates Jean Farlow’s veritable panopticon at Hourglass Lake, Jean replies by recalling the children she had previously spotted “at sunset, right here, making love” (L 89). She goes on to gossip about other neighbors and their observed or imagined indiscretions. The proliferation of transgressions that Jean’s surveillance sparks runs counter to the purpose of panopticism. In addition, Jean’s own potential impropriety should be noted. Though a married woman, she may have been watching Humbert in the water so intently because she finds him attractive, or so he insinuates—making Charlotte’s assumption of “disgusting prying” correct, though misattributed (L 104). The Farlows are first cousins, mentions Humbert in passing, and he similarly comments on several
other divergences from sexual norms that are somehow common knowledge yet not penalized (L 79).

The most notable character in this regard is Gaston Godin, the professor who invites him to Beardsley College. H.H. has much in common with G.G., who is a European émigré and pedophile. Humbert discusses his counterpart because “his Beardsley existence had such a queer bearing on my case. I need him for my defense. There he was, devoid of any talent whatsoever, a mediocre teacher, a worthless scholar, a glum repulsive fat old invert, highly contemptuous of the American way of life, triumphantly ignorant of the English language—there he was in priggish New England, crooned over by the old and caressed by the young—oh, having a grand old time and fooling everybody; and here was I” (L 183). Humbert’s resentment is a bit paradoxical, because Godin is not so very successful, in fact. Clearly, Humbert is aware of his colleague’s sexual desire for boys, and both men’s secrets have likely been suspected by others, though they have not been confronted about their behavior.

Humbert’s relationship with Godin in Beardsley suggests an alternative to the notion of this society as disciplinary. Humbert declares: “The main reason why I enjoyed—or at least tolerated with relief—his company was the spell of absolute security that his ample person cast on my secret. Not that he knew it; I had no special reason to confide in him, and he was much too self-centered and abstract to notice or suspect anything that might lead to a frank question on his part and a frank answer on mine” (L 181). The implication is that Humbert is not the only person absorbed in his own sexuality, and for all the surveillance in this society, there is nearly as much tolerance and aloofness. Thus, Humbert similarly appreciates his neighbors “tweedey and short-haired Miss Lester and fadedly feminine Miss Fabian, whose only subject of brief sidewalk conversation with me was (God bless their tact!) the young loveliness of my daughter and the
naïve charm of Gaston Godin” (L 179). Their names hint that these two cohabitating professors are lesbians, while the remark about Godin reminds us of Humbert’s own confessed naïveté, implying that the women have some idea what the men are about, and have tacitly agreed to a policy of mutual noninterference. Indeed, Humbert’s pedophilia is anticipated or exposed on more than one occasion, yet nothing results of it.

Two scenes in particular demonstrate a general tendency to avoid confrontation and the intervention of authorities. When Charlotte Haze breaks into Humbert’s writing table, discovering proof of his aversion to her and lust for her daughter, she does not call the police to report his criminal intentions. Instead, she apparently writes three letters, which Humbert rips up but later tries to read. The reassembled fragments “point to Charlotte’s intention of fleeing with Lo” (L 99). One letter appears addressed to Lolita, one seems to be an application to a strict boarding school for the girl, and the last Charlotte intended for Humbert. To him, she expresses her heartbreak yet leaves open the possibility of reconciliation (L 99). Interestingly, Charlotte singles out her blameless daughter, rather than her monstrous sham husband, for institutional discipline.

The second incident, “a strident and hateful scene,” takes place at the end of Humbert’s stay in Beardsley (L 205). During one of his most heated arguments with Lolita, they are interrupted by a ringing telephone, and he realizes that not only had an eastward-facing window been left open, but also

prude and prurient Miss East—or to explode her incognito, Miss Fenton Lebone—had been probably protruding three-quarter-way from her bedroom window as she strove to catch the gist of our quarrel.

“... This racket ... lacks all sense of ...” quacked the receiver, “we do not live in a tenement here. I must emphatically ...” (L 206)
Nabokov’s oxymoronic description of the neighbor reinforces the oddness of the woman’s behavior—to wit, she seems offended by the fighting and noise, which she considers inappropriate for a middle-class suburb, rather than by whatever titillating information she strains to overhear. In short, surveillance in Lolita does not appear motivated by disciplinary power—except in the case of driving infractions, when the police appear with frightening efficiency, as happens upon Humbert’s high-speed return to Beardsley as well as during his final reckless jaunt (L 171, 306). It seems that Humbert largely imposes disciplinarity on U.S. society, just as he imagines that he reincarnates Annabel in Lolita.

We might wonder whether Humbert has solipsized the suburbs along with Lolita, projecting onto others his own perverse lustfulness as well as his style of power. He regularly seems to assume more than he could reasonably know about the erotic desires of others, as in the case of Jean Farlow and Miss East, and his narration is particularly unreliable when it comes to understanding emotional lives besides his own. An intriguing example of this projected prurience comes as Humbert, bringing Lolita to the Enchanted Hunters hotel, exclaims: “Ah, gentle drivers gliding through summer’s black nights, what frolics, what twists of lust, you might see from your impeccable highways if Kumfy Kabins [a fictitious motel chain] were suddenly drained of their pigments and became as transparent as boxes of glass!” (L 116-7). Humbert presumes a knowledge for which we would require a panoptic view, which is impossible except through the magic of his imagination, and indeed his claim may be a solipsistic fabrication based upon his later experiences with Lolita. During the same scene, Humbert declares that “countless motor courts” are “ready to accommodate salesmen, escaped convicts, impotents, family groups, as well as the most corrupt and vigorous couples” (L 116). Every item on this grotesquely diverse list could in fact describe Humbert: he briefly worked in New York as an ad writer for his
deceased uncle’s perfume company (L 32); he could figuratively be described as an escaped convict, being on the run from suburbia and having committed himself to a few mental institutions; he experiences impotence with Charlotte (L 74); and finally, he and Lo constitute a family group as well as a corrupt and vigorous couple.

Beyond the lack of evidence within the novel, little research suggests that postwar American suburbia or automobile culture is particularly characterized by disciplinarity or panopticism. Humbert makes a pertinent observation about Clare Quilty’s suburban house Pavor Manor, as he locks all the interior doors to preclude Quilty’s escape: “The house, being an old one, had more planned privacy than have modern glamour-boxes, where the bathroom, the only lockable locus, has to be used for the furtive needs of planned parenthood” (L 294). Humbert is correct, in that a change took place around the turn of the century regarding domestic interior architecture. Margaret Marsh examined popular suburban house pattern books from the 1860s and 70s: “The design and function of the rooms suggested not only a separation between the family and outsiders, but also a good deal of internal family segregation.” By contrast, a so-called “open floor plan” became popular around the turn of the century: “the important new idea about domestic space was that the house should express togetherness and family activities, not provide special spaces for individual activities.” Indeed, the house’s latent role as a site of production and instruction continued to diminish with the increasing institutionalization of such activities during the Progressive Era via the corporate capitalist market and the public education system. Spaces such as a basement kitchen run by servants, a sewing room, or a study were abandoned in favor of a living room and family kitchen.

Despite Humbert’s worry that modern suburban houses lack privacy, the turn-of-the-century rearrangement had little to do with instituting disciplinarity or panopticism. “In the
redefined space of the suburban house,” writes Marsh, “families would ideally spend their evenings together—reading aloud, playing word games, talking.” Far from enforcing “the meticulous control of the operations of the body” that Foucault envisioned, private family time was conceived in opposition to work and school as recreational or even therapeutic. This project revived in the postwar era: “The suburban vision of the early 1950s was less a new expression of the domestic ideal than a feverish—and in the long run unsuccessful—attempt to erase the depression and the war and return to the 1920s. The architecture of the new suburbs was nostalgic; ersatz colonial and ‘cape cod’ styles abounded.”

The obvious exception from this image of the family at play would be the housewife. The American suburban home has long been targeted by a variety of reformers seeking to make housework more efficient and productive, going back at least to the publication of Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The American Woman’s Home* (1869). Betty Friedan recognized how the postwar desire for the Progressive Era’s type of family life led to domestic discipline, confining women to the home: “The end of the road is togetherness, where the woman has no independent self to hide even in guilt; she exists only for and through her husband and children.” Friedan provocatively calls suburbia a “comfortable concentration camp” for middle-class women.

Outside of the house, it seems even more difficult to contend that the suburban landscape exerts a disciplinary power. Foucault’s analysis emphasizes the importance of physical centralization along with surveillance, yet two of the defining features of the middle-class suburban ideal in all periods of American history are decentralization and family privacy. Low density, residential communities of detached houses sited on relatively large plots of land simply are not spaces well suited to panopticism, and in fact postwar automobile suburbs were on
average almost half as dense as older railway suburbs. Along with housing density, other popular architectural features such as picket fences, enclosed garages, and cul-de-sacs ward off unwanted intrusions. Although Robert Beuka discovers several examples of picture windows in suburban fiction and film functioning as symbols of panoptic power, privacy fences and hedges are mentioned in *Lolita* almost as often as windows. For instance, when Humbert and Lolita move to Beardsley, he looks forward to spying on her school’s playground, located across a vacant lot from their house, until a wooden fence is erected on the first day of school, blocking his “magic vista” (*L* 179).

It is possible to make too much of such details, as in Beuka’s reading of Cheever’s “The Swimmer.” Although the idea of comparing lifeguards to prison guards is interesting, a public pool is ultimately a place of recreation, not punishment or productivity. I am skeptical of Beuka’s reliance upon such imagery to argue for a collapse of public and private boundaries in postwar suburbia. Looking for confirmation of a theory like Foucault’s in fiction (and vice versa) can be a questionable pursuit. With this caveat in mind, I would like to speculate about what type of power *Lolita* represents if not a disciplinary society.

**“Humbert the Terrible Deliberated with Humbert the Small”: Power and Avoidance**

One of the few studies to examine suburbia as a society defined by its organization of power is M. P. Baumgartner’s *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (1988). She argues that middle-class suburban communities can be characterized by a type of order that she calls “moral minimalism.” Within such a society, individuals make efforts to deny, minimize, contain, and avoid conflicts. People shun confrontations and show great distaste for the pursuit of grievances or the censure of wrongdoing. In fact, only when they can be assured that someone else will bear the full burden of moral authority, allowing them to remain completely anonymous and uninvolved, do suburbanites approve the exercise of social control. This syndrome of conflict aversion and moral restraint has as hallmarks a great deal of tolerance and frequent resort to avoidance when tensions arise.
Baumgartner’s perspective allows us to reconsider the behavior of Lolita’s characters, beginning with Charlotte Haze, “Miss East,” and Misses Lester and Fabian. These suburban women demonstrate a notable reluctance to exercise social control over Humbert, though they all know about his indecency with Lolita to some degree. Their failure to act might not be a capricious choice on Nabokov’s part, but instead could reflect his awareness of the social disorganization of suburban communities.

Baumgartner contends that moral minimalism stems from a lack of “cohesive and enduring ties” to a community. People are more likely to face rather than flee conflicts when they are bound by necessity to remain in a relationship, or when their reputations or honor within their larger community are at stake. Suburbs do not foster strong ties for several reasons, as Baumgartner summarizes:

Suburbs are physically and socially structured in ways that allow a great deal of privacy and separation, and it is not uncommon for people to know few of their fellow residents. More important, suburban households often are separated by a great deal of social distance. High transiency rates truncate connections between them in time, for instance. . . . In addition, even while they exist, most suburban relationships encompass only a few strands of people’s lives. Such ties usually arise from residential proximity or common membership in an organization, and they are only rarely buttressed by shared employment, joint ownership of possessions, participation in a closed social network, or economic interdependence.

Class seems the most critical single factor to consider, since it serves as a rough index of the amount of autonomy a person can afford. In fact, Baumgartner claims that the working-class members of her sample community were likelier to use “more confrontational modes of conflict management—especially violence and the use of the local court”—than their wealthier neighbors. While behaviors such as conflict avoidance certainly take place outside the confines of suburbs, suburbia appears to be a separate social order within capitalist society because of the pervasiveness of tolerance and avoidance there—or what amounts to the same thing, its concentration of wealth. In the terms I have been using, moral minimalism can be understood as
another side effect of the successful creation of a distinctive, homogeneously middle-class environment.

While Baumgartner’s analysis of suburbia as atomized and unsociable may not apply to all middle-class communities equally, it illuminates certain aspects of *Lolita*. Charlotte Haze most resembles Baumgartner’s portrait of the disconnected, nonconfrontational suburbanite. She moved to Ramsdale less than two years before Humbert arrives (*L* 46), or as he mockingly observes: “she had lived in coy Ramsdale, the gem of an eastern state, not long enough to know all the nice people” (*L* 78). Charlotte’s relationship with her twelve-year-old daughter is not overly placid and affectionate. Humbert remarks on common noises around the Haze household, including Lolita “banging the refrigerator door or screeching at her detested mama” (*L* 49). Their relationship further sours with the arrival of the handsome new lodger. As Humbert considers it, “mother Haze hated my darling for her being sweet on me” (*L* 54). Rather than brawl with her daughter in front of him, Charlotte maintains a gentility that Humbert finds affected and ridiculous. When Lolita imposes herself on the adults’ excursion downtown, for instance, Charlotte reacts by telling Humbert to ignore the girl, and she refuses to directly discipline her daughter. “‘It is intolerable,’ said Haze, violently getting into second [gear], ‘that a child should be so ill-mannered. And so very persevering. When she knows she is unwanted. And needs a bath’” (*L* 51). Baumgartner observes that “youths take the place of an underclass in suburban communities,” because they create disturbances, congregate improperly in public places, and are disorderly. Lolita, who is loud, confrontational, rude, and dirty, can be understood as a lower-class interloper in Charlotte’s house.

Charlotte’s passive aggressive driving, as she jerks her two passengers around, foreshadows her style of conflict resolution, which is strongly marked by avoidance. After
Charlotte marries Humbert, she informs him of her plan to remove her irritating daughter from the household: “Little Lo goes straight from camp to a good boarding school with strict discipline and some sound religious training. And then—Beardsley College” (L 83). When Charlotte reads Humbert’s diary, her immediate reaction is to want to flee Ramsdale, ceding him the house that was hers prior to their very recent marriage (L 96). Humbert intercepts her writing the three letters, but rather than make a scene, Charlotte expels him from the room. As he ponders how to deny his wrongdoing, she races to the mailbox to send her letters, preferring to write him rather than argue in person—though she fails to avoid being struck by a neighbor’s car in the street.

The curious behavior of “Miss East” also might demonstrate moral minimalism. Overhearing Humbert and Lolita’s quarrel, the neighbor does not call the police to report a noise disturbance, a domestic dispute, or something more unsavory. Perhaps she cannot contact the authorities and still remain anonymous, since she is the neighbor most obviously affected by Humbert’s east-facing open window. Miss East’s disgruntled phone call nevertheless substitutes for a face-to-face confrontation, and she chastises Humbert in what seems an attempt to contain rather than rectify his conflict with Lolita. Similarly, Lester and Fabian do not investigate or interfere, whatever they may suspect, perhaps because their new neighbors will soon be leaving—Humbert rents the house of a professor on sabbatical—as in fact they do (L 176).

Humbert’s management of conflict and power is the most complex and dynamic, as befits his character’s position in the narrative. He provides a self-analysis early in his pursuit of Lolita: “Despite my manly looks, I am horribly timid. My romantic soul gets all clammy and shivery at the thought of running into some awful indecent unpleasantness. Those ribald sea monsters” (L 53). Although he insinuates that his childhood experience influenced his aversion to conflict,
while also attributing it to an innate tenderness, the invocation of decency suggests social class or status as a possible source of his behavior instead, as further evidenced by his account of his first marriage. When his wife Valeria tells him she cannot move from France to America with him because she’s seeing another man, Humbert thinks: “To beat her up on the street, there and then, as an honest vulgarian might have done, was not feasible. Years of secret sufferings had taught me superhuman self-control. So I ushered her into a taxi which had been invitingly creeping along the curb for some time, and in this comparative privacy I quietly suggested she comment her wild talk. A mounting fury was suffocating me” (L 27). Valeria tells of her plans to divorce as they ride in the Parisian taxi, and he strikes her knee.

Humbert is upset not because he loves his wife—he disdains her in fact—but because she challenges his authority. As Humbert recounts: “matters of legal and illegal conjunction were for me alone to decide, and here she was, Valeria, the comedy wife, brazenly preparing to dispose in her own way of my comfort and fate” (L 28). Indeed, her only two positive qualities in his eyes are “the imitation she gave of a little girl” and her “muted nature which did help to produce an odd sense of comfort in our small squalid flat” (L 25, 26). In other words, he appreciates her approximation of the lack of power possessed by a young girl. In an often-quoted passage, Humbert declares: “I am not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (L 134). Erotic attraction in Humbert’s case is perversely bound up with the idea of dominating another human being. He has no ethical compunction about using violence to achieve this end, being mainly concerned about its unseemliness for a gentleman in public. Later in the narrative, he impudently brags of having domestically abused his first wife: “In the good old
days, by merely twisting fat Valechka’s brittle wrist (the one she had fallen upon from a bicycle) I could make her change her mind instantly” (L 83).

Though his claim of being romantic seems dubious, Humbert is correct in describing himself as horrible and a coward. He is a self-described “monster,” but he is also middle class, meaning that he not only publicly acts in accordance with the reserve and civility appropriate to his class position, but he also rather cravenly fears those who might exert power or authority over him—almost always men, incidentally. His public propriety serves as a screen for his domestic depredations, but these aspects of his personality also disagree on occasion. When Valeria’s lover, who is their taxi driver, introduces himself, Humbert immediately stops trying to maintain his control over her and suggests that she pack up her belongings and depart. He shifts from violence to avoidance in the presence of this intimate stranger, yet he describes his inner self as unusually conflicted: “Humbert the Terrible deliberated with Humbert the Small whether Humbert Humbert should kill her or her lover, or both, or neither” (L 29). He seems slightly disarmed by the taxi driver Maximovich, because “the stocky White Russian ex-colonel” probably accompanies Valeria in order to prevent further physical abuse, yet the man demonstrates a “discreet old-world civility, punctuating his movements with all sorts of mispronounced apologies” (L 28, 29). Humbert the Small proves the more powerful psychic figure in this instance, and Humbert Humbert withdraws like a sulky child for the remainder of the encounter, fantasizing about acts of violence against Valeria as the new couple ready her things.

Once the lovers leave, Humbert becomes enraged as he discovers “alien urine” and a cigarette butt in the toilet. He takes these remnants as “a crowning insult” by Maximovich (L 30). This gesture, of all things, pushes Humbert the Terrible to the fore—or so the narrator claims. “I
dashed out of the house with the heroic decision of attacking him barefisted; despite my natural
glor, I am no pugilist, while the short but broad-shouldered Maximovich seemed made of pig
iron” (L 30). The obvious explanation is that Humbert acts only after the danger is safely passed,
salvaging his masculine self-respect by taking offense at a trivial oversight, since his formidable
opponent is of course nowhere to be found. A more original interpretation would be that
Maximovich is an unsettlingly indeterminate figure, an exiled authority (an ex-colonel) now part
of the working class (a cabbie), who confuses Humbert’s expectations for how their conflict will
be resolved. By not flushing the toilet, Maximovich symbolically threatens the decorum that
sustains Humbert’s perverse life. Indeed, Maximovich could confront Humbert about being an
abusive husband as well as forcing Valeria to play out a pedophiliac fantasy on their wedding
night (L 26). The incivility is what Humbert finds intolerable, not the loss of his wife. Humbert
later comes to believe the toilet was left unflushed as a gesture of “middle-class Russian
courtesy,” as he hypothesizes that Maximovich attempted “to muffle his private need in decorous
silence so as not to underscore the small size of his host’s domicile with the rush of a gross
cascade on top of his own hushed trickle” (L 30). Humbert raises the cab driver’s social status, it
seems, in order to reassure himself that Maximovich is too genteel to expose his transgressions.

When Humbert arrives in Ramsdale, he finds Lolita, of course, but he also discovers a
society where social control seems to be minimally exercised. He is an able exploiter of
vulnerabilities, as he demonstrates with Valeria’s wrist, Charlotte’s loneliness, and Lolita’s
dependency. Though he disparages Charlotte’s genteel pretensions, he embraces her middle-class
culture of avoidance for the opportunities it provides him with Lolita—to the extent that he finds
himself practically disarmed, unable to commit violence against his wife at Hourglass Lake.
When he finally puts his foot down at Charlotte’s plan to vacation in England, his argument only
emphasizes his newfound domestic timidity: “I love being bossed by you,” he tells her, “but every game has its rules. I am not cross. I am not cross at all. Don’t do that. But I am one half of this household, and have a small but distinct voice” (L 91). Humbert the Small is ascendant, and fate sides with him for a time.

After Charlotte’s fortuitous death, Humbert even borrows some of her ideas, such as fleeing Ramsdale and taking Lolita to Beardsley. On the road, he makes suburban transiency a permanent condition, and when they settle down again, Humbert masters the art of maintaining weak ties with his neighbors: “I prided myself on the exact temperature of my relations with them: never rude, always aloof” (L 179). Taking a cross-cultural perspective, Baumgartner claims that avoidance “seems to have been common among hunting and gathering peoples but to have been greatly overshadowed in virtually all more developed societies.”35 Suburbia’s moral order, she determines, most resembles that of nomadic tribes: “Few other groups have ever left so simultaneously undeveloped both the means for aggressive retaliation and those for the nonviolent airing and resolution of disputes.”36 Baumgartner concludes by calling suburbia “a kind of limited anarchy.”37 If Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, as Nabokov says, then he blends into his adopted home surprisingly well.

In this context, Humbert’s relationship to Lolita stands out for its contentiousness. According to Baumgartner’s research, suburban families practice conflict avoidance among their own members as much as with neighbors. Baumgartner claims these “relatively weak families” spend a great deal of time apart following individual routines, are often dispersed within the space of the house, and “strive to minimize joint ownership of possessions.”38 In contrast, Lolita does not enjoy much independence from Humbert. He not only pesters her for sex constantly, but he also jealously tries to discipline her activities and friendships, using surveillance in order to
prevent her having any life apart from him. When she is hospitalized, he realizes “that for the first time in two years I was separated from my Lolita” (L 241). He also exerts power through money, paying her in exchange for sex (L 184), and he even uses violence on the child. During the quarrel that Miss East overhears, Humbert admits that he held her wrist hard as she struggled to escape him “and in fact hurt her rather badly”—repeating his abuse of Valeria (L 205). Later, he forcefully strikes Lolita’s face for lying to him (L 227). I proposed that Lolita can be interpreted as a disorderly lower-class figure in her suburban environment, but the responsibility for their discord rests on Humbert. His behavior with both Valeria and Lolita is out of keeping with his normal aversion to conflict, revealing the essential contradiction in his character. He affirms moral minimalism to the degree that he can exploit it as a screen behind which to dominate less powerful individuals.

Lolita seems to learn from Humbert how to take advantage of weakness, as she manipulates him through his tendency to avoid conflicts and maintain minimal social ties. She tricks him by proposing they leave Beardsley and take another long trip, ostensibly to remove them from the sources of their growing animosity—namely, her interest in boys and the school dramatics program, neither of which is approved by Humbert. In secret, Lolita schemes with Clare Quilty to run away together after she embarks with Humbert, presumably because escaping her jealous guardian would be easier in the midst of strangers, once Humbert had unenrolled her from school and notified their neighbors about the move, so that hardly anyone would notice her disappearance. Quilty follows them in an “Aztec Red Convertible,” and Humbert’s paranoia about surveillance reaches a fever pitch, as he imagines the pursuer to be “a detective whom some busybody had hired to see what exactly Humbert Humbert was doing with that minor stepdaughter of his” (L 217). When Humbert questions Lolita about their shadow, she counsels
avoidance: “‘If he’s really a cop,’ she said shrilly but not illogically, ‘the worst thing we could do, would be to show him we are scared. Ignore him, Dad’ (L 219). Through such manipulations, Lolita finally manages to escape from Humbert.

“The Feeling Was Good”: Humbert’s Moral Apotheosis

Over the next few years, Humbert seems to undergo a change of heart and behavior. He takes up with a woman named Rita, but she is not another girl-substitute like Valeria, another powerless woman to be controlled and abused. Instead, he shows surprising respect for her, considering his disgust with almost every other female character, saying, “she was the most soothing, the most comprehending companion that I ever had” (L 259). With Rita, he cruises the highways for two years searching for Lolita, rather than simply extricating himself from the entanglements of the past. Humbert’s change during this period can be detected in minor details, such as his decision to fistfight with a drunken man at a bar who tries to retain Rita—something he failed to do in the episode with Maximovich and Valeria (L 263).

By the time Humbert hears from Lolita again, he seems ready to abandon moral minimalism. He prepares to visit his former lover by waking at six in the morning. “Then, with the stern and romantic care of a gentleman about to fight a duel,” Humbert recounts, “I checked the arrangement of my papers, bathed and perfumed my delicate body, shaved my face and chest, selected a silk shirt and clean drawers, pulled on transparent taupe socks, and congratulated myself for having with me in my trunk very exquisite clothes—a waistcoat with nacreous buttons, for instance, a pale cashmere tie and so on” (L 268). More to the point, he carries along a gun. This dramatic effort to prepare for conflict is somewhat thwarted by the setting: he finds Lolita and her husband living in a “clapboard shack” on the edge of a “small industrial community” called Coalmont (L 269, 267). Humbert appears silly and weak next to Lolita’s husband and his friend, both working-class, combat-wounded WWII veterans, who simply
“looked at her fragile, frileux, diminutive, old-world, youngish but sickly, father in velvet coat and beige vest, maybe a viscount” (L 273). The men treat Humbert with “[t]he exquisite courtesy of simple folks,” another echo of his encounter with Maximovich, and in the face of these fine manners and his own foppish weakness, Humbert the Small momentarily surfaces again.

Humbert tries to reassert his power by reverting to the old tactic of extortion, withholding the money Lolita asked for until she reveals the identity of the man in the Aztec Red Convertible (L 271). She almost refuses to give up Quilty, then finally submits, seemingly unconcerned about what Humbert might do with the information. As if to underline her assumption that Humbert always avoids conflicts except with her, Lolita informs him that Quilty “[h]ad rocked with laughter when she confessed about [Humbert] and her, and said he had thought so. It was quite safe, under the circumstances, to tell him . . .” (L 275). She seems to believe that since Quilty suspected yet tolerated Humbert’s pedophilia, Humbert will probably not try to punish him—since both men are equally guilty and vulnerable to the law.

Humbert’s odd imitation of a European duelist may be irrelevant to the outcome of his encounter with Lolita, yet the performance can be read as another sign of his ongoing repudiation of certain aspects of American society. Leaving Coalmont, Humbert observes: “Now and then cars passed me, red tail-lights receding, white headlights advancing, but the town was dead. Nobody strolled and laughed on the sidewalks as relaxing burghers would in sweet, mellow, rotting Europe” (L 281). Though he has traveled from coast to coast, he only now seems aware of how social isolation is structured into postwar U.S. culture through its automobiles, motels, televisions, and suburban houses. Similarly, he becomes increasingly self-aware and self-critical about his brutal treatment of Lolita, as demonstrated throughout chapters 31 and 32. These epiphanies are related, I would argue, in that Humbert loses his taste for the minimalist society
that enabled his terrible abuse. The absence of laughter will be connected to Lolita’s lost childhood in the poignant memory at the very end of the novel.

Humbert’s final symbolic break with suburbia’s social order occurs, ironically, when he returns to Ramsdale to elicit Clare Quilty’s whereabouts from the man’s uncle, Ivor Quilty. Driving directly from Coalmont through the night, Humbert takes a shortcut and his car gets stuck in the mud. He changes out of his fancy outfit into some old clothes and extricates the car. Arriving in Ramsdale, he decides to visit the former Haze residence. “Forgetting that in an American suburban street a lone pedestrian is more conspicuous than a lone motorist,” Humbert says, “I left the car in the avenue to walk unobtrusively past 342 Lawn Street” (L 288). He tries to speak with a young girl who apparently lives in the old Haze house, but she runs and fetches “a violent-looking dark man.” Humbert recounts: “I was on the point of identifying myself when, with a pang of dream-embarrassment, I became aware of my mud-caked dungarees, my filthy and torn sweater, my bristly chin, my bum’s bloodshot eyes” (L 288-9). It only takes him a short time to walk back to the avenue, yet he discovers: “A red ticket showed between wiper and windshield; I carefully tore it into two, four, eight pieces” (L 289).

This entire scene demonstrates his disregard for the rules that make moral minimalism possible. Although Baumgartner considers suburbia to be a kind of limited anarchy, suburbs are nevertheless relatively peaceful and orderly, in part because the lack of individual responsibility for maintaining order is compensated for by a strict social code governing the use of public space, a code applied by residents and enforced by authorities. To begin with, residential suburbs—especially postwar ones—do not typically have much public space beyond parks, streets, and perhaps sidewalks. “Partly because there are no destinations along most roads except private houses, and partly because residents drive when they have errands to do, there is very
little street life,” says Baumgartner, echoing Humbert’s observation of deadness. Pedestrians are inherently suspicious in such a setting. Even though suburban neighbors may have weak social ties, they recognize each other—as Humbert demonstrates with his nicknames such as “Miss East” and “Miss Opposite”—and they notice strangers. The homogeneity of suburban communities also allows residents to assess order on the basis of appearances. Baumgartner writes, “those who appear to be outsiders—by virtue of race or unconventionality—deviate by their very presence.” These conventions have largely to do with class, of course, and Humbert realizes that his resemblance to a homeless person is highly alarming on Lawn Street. Finally, the lack of avoidance or aloofness, to use Humbert’s preferred term, can itself be another sign of disorder in suburbia. “It is expected that strangers will not impose themselves upon others,” Baumgartner notes, and Humbert breaks this rule by approaching the girl, an obvious infraction that reveals just how little he cares to blend in anymore.

Humbert’s repudiation of avoidance explains a few curious encounters he has in Ramsdale. He meets Mrs. Chatfield, a former acquaintance, and reports: “She attacked me with a fake smile, all aglow with evil curiosity. (Had I done to Dolly, perhaps, what Frank Lasalle, a fifty-year-old mechanic, had done to eleven-year-old Sally Horner in 1948?) Very soon I had that avid glee well under control” (L 289). Previously, he would have been terrified and sought an immediate escape, but instead Humbert engages in conversation, exaggerating Lolita’s success in marriage as a good father might. Then he does something shocking, after Chatfield said she disapproved of such early marriages, she would never let her Phyllis, who was now eighteen—

“Oh yes, of course,” I said quietly. “I remember Phyllis. Phyllis and Camp Q. Yes, of course. By the way, did she ever tell you how Charlie Holmes debauched there his mother’s little charges?” (L 290)
This excessive response to Chatfield’s rude comment strips away the delusion that Ramsdale’s adults operate under—as Humbert once did—regarding their children’s supposedly nonexistent sexual activity. Humbert’s insult is rather daring, considering Chatfield’s possible suspicions about him, and it is soon followed by another, equally surprising breach of propriety.

Under the pretext of consulting about some dental work, Humbert obtains Clare Quilty’s location from his uncle Ivor, at which point he says:

“On second thoughts, I shall have it all done by Dr. Molnar. His price is higher, but he is of course a much better dentist than you.”

I do not know if any of my readers will ever have a chance to say that. It is a delicious dream feeling. (L 291)

Humbert’s new willingness to ignore decorum and incite conflict is the counterpart to his diminishing need to exert absolute control over one person. His pointless insults can be understood as inversions of the superficial forms of politeness, which to a large degree maintain order in suburbia.

Humbert’s confrontation with Clare Quilty could possibly be read as a recapitulation of the scene with Maximovich. Quilty has an indeterminate social status, comparable to that of the Russian ex-colonel-turned-cab driver. He is a famous playwright who lives in a mansion, having both cultural and economic capital it would seem, yet he also makes pornographic movies with boys, girls, and men according to Lolita (L 276). In addition to his cultural bankruptcy, Quilty appears economically insolvent, declaring: “I have not much at the bank right now but I propose to borrow” (L 301). Indeed, he initially takes Humbert for a bill collector from the phone company. Humbert describes Quilty as being in a fog, perhaps intoxicated, and Quilty’s reactions to his threats are as hazy and mutable as his status. He begins with denial, disbelieving Humbert’s obvious intentions as he pulls his gun, then wrestles with his assailant to gain control of the weapon, and finally tries reasoning with Humbert while also offering him bribes, the most
extravagant being his mansion—just as Charlotte Haze turned over her house when she tried to escape him (L 301). Quilty can be considered Humbert’s double for their many similarities. In this scene, he mirrors Humbert’s slippage from one mode of conflict resolution to another. Humbert has settled upon his own method, however, and murders Quilty just as he came to do, finally committing violence against a man.

Humbert’s last important act is another symbolic gesture of his shift toward a more “unlimited” anarchism, so to speak. He announces, “since I had disregarded all laws of humanity, I might as well disregard the rules of traffic. So I crossed to the left side of the highway and checked the feeling, and the feeling was good” (L 306). This behavior can be read in several ways. We might take it as a suicide attempt, Humbert having completed his vengeance and being left with only his painful memories of Lolita. Alternatively, we could interpret his driving as revealing a desire to be caught and punished—a definite possibility, since his confession of the murder to Quilty’s sarcastic, insouciant guests failed to have any effect. While both of these options are quite plausible, I read Humbert’s driving on the left side as another reference to Europe, and thus as a symbolic repudiation of American society and its peculiar weakness—a society where, at least in his experience, traffic violations are more effectively regulated than child abuse.43 Therefore, I disagree with John Haegert’s idea of the “Americanization” of Humbert. His thesis is that “Humbert’s evolving attitude toward Lolita reflects (to use no stronger a word) his creator’s changing and generally much-improved estimate of American life. . . . Humbert’s ambivalent search for ‘his’ lost Lolita in the last third of the book enacts an émigré’s quest for a truer vision of his host environment—an America no longer seen as a nubile nymphet in need of European refinement, but as an estimable independent spirit requiring (and deserving) a national identity of her own.”44 Instead, I believe Lolita’s escape
teaches Humbert about the futility of seeking absolute (totalitarian?) power and, perhaps more importantly, the impossibility of social autonomy. In her absence, Humbert realizes that he cannot cut off his feelings in the same way he avoided other ties and conflicts, that in some depraved way he loves her.

I do not wish to imply that Humbert’s turn to violence and embrace of conflict represents an ideal state for Nabokov. In the foreword to the novel, John Ray, Jr., proposes that Humbert writes “a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis” (L 5). Ray’s opinions are not usually shared by Nabokov, though, and Humbert’s changing relationship to power ends in a worse kind of anarchism than suburbia’s, though it feels good to Humbert.

Notes

1 Vladimir Nabokov, The Annotated Lolita: Revised and Updated, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 35. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as L.

2 Robert A. Beuka, SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 80.

3 Ibid., 79-80.

4 Ibid., 80.

5 Ibid., 80, 81.

6 Ibid., 99.

7 Ibid., 177.

8 Ibid., 180, 181.


10 Ibid., 105.

11 Ibid., 106.

12 Ibid., 111.

13 Ibid., 110.

14 Ibid., 113.

15 Ibid., 128-9.
16 Ibid., 205.
17 Ibid., 137.
18 Ibid., 157.
19 Ibid., 189.
20 Ibid., 211.
23 Ibid., 83-4.
24 Ibid., 88.
25 Ibid., 185.
27 Ibid., 282.
29 Keith Gandal is similarly critical of the loose usage of Foucault’s theory by Mark Seltzer, who according to Gandal reductively “deduces the realist and naturalist novel from the general phenomenon of disciplinary society” (*The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997], 18).
31 Ibid., 12.
32 Ibid., 9.
33 Ibid., 12.
34 Ibid., 110.
35 Ibid., 128.
36 Ibid., 128.
37 Ibid., 127.
38 Ibid., 160, 161.
39 Ibid., 102.
40 Ibid., 104.
41 Elsewhere in the novel, Humbert’s presence in suburbia is questioned on the basis of race, namely the Jewish heritage that is mistakenly attributed to him. See Alfred Appel, Jr.’s annotations on “the anti-Semitism theme” (*L. 448*).

Lynn Sacco’s *Unspeakable: Father-Daughter Incest in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2009) finds evidence that might support such a claim. Her research discovers a systematic effort by doctors between the 1890s and WWII to cover up an “epidemic” of gonorrhea among girls of the white middle and upper classes.

The bombs in Vietnam explode at home.
—Martin Luther King, Jr.¹

The Second Corpse

*Expensive People* was published in the fall of 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War and about a year after a catastrophic riot in Detroit, Michigan, where Joyce Carol Oates had lived for the previous six years. Yet one would hardly suspect that these events ever happened or that these places existed when reading her novel. Set almost entirely within the confines of affluent suburbia, *Expensive People* tells the commonplace story of a family falling apart. The narrator is an eighteen-year-old named Richard Everett, and his memoir reconstructs the traumatic events that occurred around his eleventh birthday in 1960. He begins with the surprising admission that in his youth he committed a murder, a mystery about which he promises a full confession—though his playful, digressive, and occasionally surreal narration continually defies the reader’s desire for answers. This plot device and his style are only two of Oates’s many intertextual references to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Indeed, the lonely, immature boy is troublingly devoted to his mother Natashya, an aloof intellectual and fiction writer who resents her unfulfilling life as a suburban housewife and mother. After she repeatedly attempts to leave the family and very likely cheats on her husband as well, the already insecure Richard suffers a self-described mental and physical “disintegration” and purchases a rifle. Rather than killing the mysterious rival for his beloved’s affections, as Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert does, Richard claims to have murdered his mother and vows to commit suicide after concluding his confession, though his potential insanity throws doubt upon his entire, convoluted account.
Nabokov’s novel is, of course, not the only touchstone for Oates. *Expensive People* appears to follow a certain narrative pattern established by *Babbitt* and elaborated on by *Lolita*, Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* (1960), and Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* (1961), not to mention a host of subsequent novels that comprise the “suburban” genre. The common plot that has developed across these works should be familiar: the stultifying conventionality and conformism of suburban life, combined with the nuclear family’s repressiveness and suffocating “togetherness,” cause a nebulous malaise that expresses itself through adultery or some other sexual intrigue and occasionally through mental illness as well, all terminating in a spontaneous, inept act of domestic violence. In keeping with the theme of entrapment, furthermore, the action takes place almost exclusively within the confines of a generic, indeterminately located, nearly mythic landscape: Suburbia, USA. Oates’s book can easily be made to fit this mold, as one of her critics reveals by claiming: “there is in *Expensive People* a continuing concern with ‘personal’ as opposed to ‘public’ history, with stifling family ties.”

*Expensive People* does not fall in line as neatly as might appear on first glance. In later writings, Oates contradicts the presumption of geographical non-specificity that readers could reasonably make about her book, given its lack of real-world place markers. She admits, “Much of my novel *Expensive People* did occur, if not in Birmingham, Michigan, strictly speaking, then in one or another Detroit suburb.” She adds, “So much of my writing from approximately 1963 to 1976 centers upon or has been emotionally inspired by Detroit and its suburbs (Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills, to a lesser degree Grosse Pointe) that it is impossible for me now to extract the historical from the fictional.” Rather than being trivia, this information provides an indispensable means by which to locate certain historical elements within her fiction—for public
history also lies hidden within this tale of one family’s domestic life, buried away like a second enigmatic corpse. The novel contains several cryptic moments of violence that allude to the Detroit riot of July, 1967, as well as to the escalated Vietnam conflict during the Johnson administration. Several surprising points of similarity, which include sniping by civilians, self-immolation, and the destruction of documents in records rooms, imply that Richard’s disintegration and his mother’s death may have some connection to those larger events from the narrator’s (and Oates’s) contemporary moment.

This possibility becomes more comprehensible when we consider Oates’s descriptions of suburban geography. Much has been made of Expensive People’s satirical “caricature” of the suburbs, yet analysis has focused upon isolated details such as place names or architectural descriptions, with little attention paid to her depiction of the broader suburban landscape. For instance, Richard distinguishes his own exclusive suburb, “where the country houses of the past had been built for the wealthy of the city many horse-drawn miles away,” from what encroaches, “those absurd new towns and villages, row after row of clean, respectable houses and maze after maze of buff-brick housing developments, all overpriced and treeless, the slums of tomorrow.” What Oates describes in such passages is “sprawl,” a distinctive form of suburban space appearing in the post-WWII era, generated by the process known as deterritorialization—a process Richard implicitly recognizes by its hallmarks: accelerated development, inflated value, and quick depreciation.

Deterritorialization describes a contemporary mode of the production of space, one that various contemporary theorists have invoked as a way to define phenomena as sweeping as postmodernity, globalization, and “Empire.” It has created suburban sprawl, reshaped America’s postwar cities, and even influenced American interventions in places such as Vietnam.
Deterritorialization can thus be understood as a common process connecting these sites, impacting each differently. City dwellers are often hurt by deterritorialization, for instance, while most suburbanites—including Richard’s parents—stand to gain. Many of the Everett family’s seemingly private problems, particularly Richard’s disintegration, can also be traced back to deterritorialization, or more specifically the way of life associated with sprawl. The echoes of Detroit and Vietnam therefore suggest an interpretation of the murder as another symptom of—or perhaps a form of opposition to—the deterritorialization of suburbia. Richard may have killed his mother because she epitomizes the expensive people who dominate and exploit others via the production of deterritorialized space, a geography that has caused him suffering. By following this chain of associations, my reading of *Expensive People* calls into question a common assumption made by readers and writers suburban fiction: that the everyday, “personal” troubles of suburbanites come from within, that the confining natures of the suburbs and the nuclear family are principally to blame for suburban discontent, dysfunction, and conflict. The suburbs should be held responsible, but not only in the ways most suburban novels would lead us to believe.

**Allusive Violence**

One of the deadliest, most destructive episodes of urban violence in U.S. history started in Detroit on July 23, 1967, during which “43 persons were killed, 7,200 were arrested, and $45 million worth of property was destroyed.”9 *Expensive People*, Oates’s third published novel, was conceived and composed in that same city, where she resided from mid-1962 to mid-1968.10 The Detroit riot affected Oates deeply; it was one of her reasons for moving away, and even served as an important backdrop for her fourth novel, *them* (1969).11 In later writings, Oates claims both novels developed out of her “romance with Detroit” (EP 242), calling the city “my ‘great’ subject.”12 Discerning this influential presence can be quite difficult in the case of *Expensive
People. The narrator, Richard Everett, thoroughly describes the fictional suburbs of his childhood, yet he fails to identify the “famous American city” near which he grew up—or the one in which he now lives, for that matter (EP 15). Further complicating matters, Richard’s memoir focuses almost exclusively on the past, specifically the period from January to July, 1960, and provides only a few glimpses of his present life. Oates’s assertions are puzzling, yet they may make more sense when we observe that the novel’s scenes of violence contain unexpected references to the Detroit riot as well as the Vietnam War.

The first such moment begins with a disturbance witnessed by Richard and his mother Natasha while driving. Drawn to the scene by a crowd gathered there, they observe three men run out of a bank only to be gunned down by trench-coated figures waiting outside. After the shooting, “One of the men who had fallen jumped up and brushed off his clothes. He began to argue with the trench-coated men, and another man joined them from somewhere to the side. ‘Oh, Christ,’ said Nada [Richard’s pet name for Natasha] faintly, ‘it’s a television show or something. A rehearsal’” (EP 67). The Everetts drive away, and the event is never discussed further. Although Natasha’s interpretation seems valid, the robbery could be an allusion to the looting and shooting that took place during the riot of 1967. Contrary to the mainstream media’s descriptions, what happened in the Motor City that summer does not strictly fit the pattern of a “race riot.” Instead of violence occurring between racially homogeneous mobs, crimes against property—arson and especially looting—dominated the chaotic scene. In addition, the majority of the deaths that occurred during the riot were caused by law enforcement officers attempting to apprehend suspected looters and snipers. Finally, the scene on the Detroit streets was filmed by television crews, the last of three possible parallels with the bank robbery.
The plausibility of this reading becomes more apparent after considering a later event, a car crash Richard witnesses on the expressway. Returning home from a rare trip into the city, Richard notices the “sleazy viaducts and overpasses where Negro children dawdled, some of them kicking pebbles off onto the passing cars” (EP 119). The driver, his friend Gustave Hofstadter’s father, has meanwhile become tense “as if preparing for battle” with the other motorists, whom he honks at and attempts to speed past (EP 119). Then, says Richard, “we flashed under an overpass, and just at that moment some kids dropped something over—a length of pipe, maybe—and it hit the windshield of a car alongside us” (EP 120). As the struck vehicle hurtles off the road and crashes, Mr. Hofstadter announces to Richard and the other young passengers: “It’s a rehearsal. Television show” (EP 120). These are nearly the same words Natasha used to describe the bank robbery, but Mr. Hofstadter’s terse explanation is much less believable—how could a simulated crash possibly take place in the midst of real traffic?

In separate discussions of this scene, Ellen Friedman and Greg Johnson both focus attention on the father’s road rage, which concludes when he arrives home and rams his car with odd satisfaction into his nonfunctional electric garage door. In Friedman’s opinion, such behavior reveals the suburban men of Expensive People to be “warriors without a war, a cause, or a visible enemy,” and she proposes that “the enemy is not outside but inside.”13 According to Johnson, “maniacal driving becomes a metaphor for the cutthroat, egocentric combativeness necessary for ‘success’ in Fernwood.”14 These readings, which align perfectly with the assumptions of the entrapment narrative discussed above, ignore the urban setting, the African-American children, and the second group who cause the wreck—all the visible reasons why the driver might become tense. To me, the expressway attack is strangely reminiscent of the action that almost all commentators agree started the Detroit riot. A police raid was conducted upon a
12th Street drinking establishment patronized by African-Americans, and when the action drew many outraged bystanders, an unidentified black youth incited the crowd to riot by smashing the rear window of a police car with a bottle.\textsuperscript{15}

The nearly identical parental responses exemplify an important theme that develops in the novel: suburban adults shielding children from the disturbing realities of violence and death. Despite their efforts, incidents such as the robbery and the crash reveal an historically resonant atmosphere of violence and social unrest seething in the background of Richard’s narrative. Car travel is almost the only occasion during which Richard achieves any contact with the conflicts being waged outside the suburban sphere, such as when he passes by “a drive-in restaurant in front of which sullen Negro women, of middle age, were walking with picket signs” (\textit{EP} 193). These figures are presumably representatives of the Civil Rights Movement, but young Richard does not comprehend or relay the meaning of what he fleetingly sees. Instead, the narrator only records the absurd, misleading reaction of his white, upper-middle-class chaperone: “‘That is one thing you would never see me doing, never,’ Mrs. Hofstadter declared. ‘I would never in my life carry a picket sign!’” (\textit{EP} 193). In failing to acknowledge the protesters’ identity or purpose, the narrator seems to adopt the perspective of his younger self, who was quite naïve. The boy’s ignorance is palpable when he encounters a family friend who makes small talk, “mentioning the names of people I should have known, mentioning a sensational news event elaborated upon daily in the papers—‘Isn’t it just a shame? A shame’—and something about football” (\textit{EP} 109). The adult narrator leaves such references obscured in his memoir, making it difficult to know what the boy might be overlooking.

Young Richard’s lack of worldly awareness can be attributed to his upbringing and the sheltering suburban environment. The only people of color he ever personally encounters are
female domestics, since the Everetts “rarely descended into the ‘city,’ though Father worked
downtown” (EP 65). His mother Natashya maintains this detachment most radically.¹⁶ In
keeping with her declaration that, “For me, history is what is in this room, nothing more” (EP
76), she avoids television and the news, guarding her son against these disturbing influences as
well (EP 221). Nevertheless, history and its violence do slip through the filter. When Richard
happens to pick up a stray Time magazine, he is caught off guard: “my nausea rose suddenly at a
picture of a mutilated Communist riot victim (the caption read, ‘After the dance, the piper to be
paid’)” (EP 76). The image raises questions about the mysterious conflict it records, but the
narrator chooses this moment to shift the topic to his mother’s “lack of interest in politics, in
history, in reality”—a suitably ironic way to cover up what he has almost revealed (EP 76).

At the end of Richard’s digression about his mother, he notes, “I have caught her
solipsism from her, the way I used to catch colds and flu from her” (EP 76-7). Although this
admission may cause us to distrust the eighteen-year-old narrator as we might the other suburban
adults, the young boy’s naiveté seems different from the self-serving solipsism of Natashya or,
more infamously, Lolita’s Humbert Humbert. Richard’s ignorance protects him against the pain
that comes from knowledge. The two incidents that most precipitate his disintegration, after all,
are a conversation with his drunken father, who informs Richard that his mother had attempted to
have an abortion before he was born, and Richard’s subsequent discovery of his mother’s
outrageous expectations regarding his I.Q. score. Sex, violence, and the world beyond the
suburbs seem conflated in his mind, because all are subjects of secrecy that pose an obscure
threat to the stability of his world. Despite Richard’s fears about what he may discover, the boy
remains irrepressibly curious. He spies and eavesdrops upon his parents, particularly his mother,
even though her adulterous behavior distresses him. His quest for knowledge also explains his
mail-order purchase of a rifle. The weapon may represent a misguided attempt to achieve sexual maturity, since it is described in blatantly phallic terms. More importantly, Richard seems to create through the gun a bizarre relationship with those two forbidden subjects, the Vietnam War and the Detroit riot. Indeed, references to these events become more frequent and recognizable once he acquires the rifle.

On the night of July 23, 1960, Richard begins stalking the backyards of his suburb. He discovers a surreal world while spying on his neighbors through his rifle’s telescopic sight. The main oddity he witnesses takes place at a pool party:

By the steps to the diving board a group of young people were anointing a girl, who jumped up daintily onto the board. . . . Then someone clicked a cigarette lighter and touched the flame to her ankle and she burst all at once into flames! And as I stared in bewilderment and from all parts of the patio came a wondrous murmuring, the girl walked on tiptoe to the end of the board, aflame, and did a perfect dive into the pool. When her golden head appeared once more the fire was extinguished and only a few people applauded. I felt as if I had gazed on something forbidden. (EP 213)

Immediately after observing this, Richard begins a several-day-long shooting spree, intentionally missing his human targets every time. Once the sniper becomes a topic of public discussion, one panicked suburbanite comments, “There’s no protection, it’s like a jungle” (EP 216).

This section provides an unmistakable link between Oates’s suburban world and Detroit. The date of Richard’s first shot echoes the date the riot began: July 23, 1967. Moreover, this same critical passage in the text authorizes the unusual way of reading I have been pursuing. A moment before Richard sees the girl on fire, he looks up at the night sky and makes a curious digression, as he recalls a teacher saying “the stars did not exist but they did represent—they represented ‘stars’ from the past” (EP 212). He goes on to muse that, since “You are only looking into a concept of the past which is your concept of the past, . . . it’s rather whimsical to suggest that you are looking into a past that is anyone’s past, let alone a historical past” (EP
It seems likely that Richard, consciously or not, has infused his memory of childhood with traces of his adult experiences.

If we are willing to follow this cue, further references and anachronisms crop up throughout the text. Only one other date is mentioned in the novel. This critical date marks the beginning of Richard’s mental and physical problems, when he vomits and then bursts out in tears while taking a prep school entrance exam in order to please his mother. Richard says, “I want to preserve a phony but convincing chronology, so that there is the impression of development—wrong word: degeneration—in the child-hero. So let’s arbitrarily fix the date as January 20, 1960, when I began to disintegrate” (EP 44). His announcement all but begs us to consider possible allusions. In fact, this date anticipates that of John F. Kennedy’s presidential inauguration speech in 1961, which effectively declared his administration’s position on Vietnam—a neat analog for Richard’s own inaugural moment of madness, when he commits to winning his mother’s heart and mind at what is eventually a terrible price.

Another compelling reference to Vietnam appears on Richard’s eleventh birthday in March, when he breaks into the school’s Records Room to discover the results of his I.Q. tests, numbers that have disappointed his mother. Finding scores of 153 and 161, Richard says, “the hot kernel of fire burst in my stomach and I began to sob. I sobbed with rage. What did she want from me then? What more could she want? . . . I tore the paper in pieces” (EP 99). He proceeds to trash the room, throwing a jar of ink against a wall and finally vomiting all over. This behavior is reminiscent of other symbolic protests that were made with young men’s birthdays in mind: namely, the destruction of Vietnam draft records. From 1966 through 1968 (the period when Oates was writing this novel), anti-war activists raided draft board offices and destroyed their files using black paint, human feces, pigs’ blood, and even homemade napalm. Again, an
analogy can be drawn: whereas these draft resisters challenged the senseless sacrifice of young soldiers by the U.S. government, Richard protests the fact that he cannot satisfy his mother, because what she wants from him, it seems, is never to have been born.

The most iconic of Oates’s historical references can be found in the swimming pool scene. The prankster who gets set on fire might seem irrelevant to the story, at most signaling the depths of suburban boredom. In the context I am proposing, the girl’s image calls to mind something much more disturbing: the self-immolation done by war protesters in America, who were themselves emulating the actions of Buddhist monks in South Vietnam. Perhaps Oates recalled from her local newspapers the story of the first of these protesters: “Alice Herz, an eighty-two-year-old refugee from Nazism, [who] set herself aflame at a busy Detroit intersection” in 1965. Richard detects “something forbidden” about the flaming girl, possibly her corruption of chronology or the way she surreptitiously inserts an image of political protest into suburbia’s placid backyards.

The allusions come rapidly once the shootings commence. Oates repeatedly uses the term “sniper,” a clear reference to Detroit’s highly-publicized civilian shooters, while the suburb under siege is referred to as a “jungle,” a word that for contemporary American readers would evoke thoughts of Vietnam. Furthermore, Richard intentionally misses his neighbors, just as the Detroit shooters seemingly intended to drive off rather than kill police and fire responders. The many possible parallels between the riot, the war, and the events of Expensive People that can be found are compelling, but what do they ultimately tell us? In order to understand how these references allow us to rethink Richard’s disintegration and matricide, we must consider the histories of these places and their different relationships to the process of deterritorialization.
Deterritorialization and Sprawl

The term deterritorialization has taken on a fairly wide range of meanings in geography, anthropology, and sociology. As the term implies, deterritorialization can describe the act of restructuring space through the removal or destruction of whatever gives a place its perceived identity or value. Alternately, the term can describe a way of occupying space that does not conform to traditional notions of “place.” This second meaning has gained the most attention in recent academic work, particularly because of interest in the related phenomenon of globalization. According to Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, “global space is conceived of as the flow of goods, people, and services—as well as capital, technology, and ideas—across national borders and geographic regions—resulting in the deterritorialization of space, that is, space detached from local places.” A frequently invoked example is the commercial airport, which has been analyzed as a “non-place” between actual destinations, circulating crowds of isolated travelers who experience minimal social interaction. Similarly, a chain store or restaurant franchise demonstrates the architectural homogeneity and simulation that tend to characterize deterritorialized space. In short, deterritorialization signifies a “breakdown in the isomorphism of space, place, and culture.”

When considered in this second sense, deterritorialization appears to be a phenomenon of comparatively recent history, promoted in particular by revolutionary technologies such as the automobile. Yet we should not overestimate its newness or technology’s influence. Indeed, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari first introduced the concept in their account of Western political and economic history. According to these two philosophers, each political-economic system has had its own particular way of (de)territorializing space, but capitalism represents “a new threshold of deterritorialization,” because it not only allows but also rewards the systematic transformation or “creative destruction” of space, much more so than previous systems.
Where then do Oates’s suburbs fit into this picture? After all, the suburb—a place set apart from the bustling city, a place associated with home—seems quite the opposite of those corporate non-places, far removed from the maneuverings of global capitalism. Although suburbia does not feature in any discussions of deterritorialization I have encountered, the two experiences that Oates spotlights in her depictions of everyday suburban life and landscape—uncertainty regarding value (whether economic or social) and disorientation in space—correspond to the two facets of deterritorialization discussed above.

*Expensive People* commences its idiosyncratic presentation of suburbia with a short description of a house. Richard carefully recreates the scene when, at age ten, he first arrived with his mother and father at their new home in the suburb of Fernwood:

Now, on the far side of the street (I am considering your point of view) is a handsome old house, set back from the sidewalk, English Tudor of an Americanized sort, with great hunks of plate glass and standard evergreen shrubs, etc. You’ve seen thousands of such houses. And now if you’ll turn—notice how cautious I am, wanting you to see and feel everything without confusion—if you’ll turn you will see what those four people are staring at. Another house. A house, that’s all. A bastardized French-American affair, brick painted white, with balconies of wrought iron fastened somehow beneath the four big second-floor windows, and a big double door with gold, or gold-plated brass, knobs. The house has been built atop a hill, and all eyes are drawn to it. Banks and clumps of expensive evergreens run down in a friendly riot along the edge of the ‘circle’ driveway to the street. (*EP* 9)

This passage is worth examining as a concise presentation of Oates’s two major themes regarding the suburban environment. Richard begins his description respectfully enough, yet he quickly turns dismissive, aborting the sketch of the first house abruptly once the taint of mass-produced banality appears. Throughout the passage there exists a palpable tension between the authentic and the derivative, between the old (world or money) and the new. Richard remains ever conscious of such distinctions, surely emulating his status-obsessed mother in this regard, and he repeatedly reassures us that his childhood homes were located in established suburbs,
nestled among the “old country estates” (EP 28). The Everetts’ persistent concern betrays a fear of being unable to distinguish a respectable home from its cheaper, mass-produced imitators.

Richard carries this wariness forward into his summary of the second house’s attributes. He insinuates his superiority over the engrossed participants as well as his readers, who might be unable to detect the building’s illegitimate background and structural deceptions—though his qualifying comments betray his own lingering uncertainty. His indecisiveness increases in the penultimate sentence, as he reverses course, conjuring up a sense of pride and unity among the assembled by introducing a hint of nationalist rhetoric (cf. John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill”). This mood too gets undercut by the playful disorder in the front yard, as the oxymoronic phrase “friendly riot” provides another ominous allusion to Detroit. Through such rhetorical moves, Oates consistently signals that these suburbs defy easy valuation, whether economic or social.

As the passage quoted above demonstrates, disorientation also occurs on a physical level. Despite Richard’s seemingly gratuitous consideration for his audience, his focus on the first house causes the reader to momentarily assume it as the focal point of the scene, when the second house turns out to be the one his family has come to purchase. The narrator’s trick forces us to adopt the perspective of the child, who perhaps does not know which house to admire until told by the adults. Richard intends his reader to experience suburbia as he did, and over the course of the novel, it becomes more apparent why one could become disoriented. Once the Everetts move in, they discover that “there was a family from Brookfield over on the other street, who had apparently moved at the same time we had; and not one mile away was the same house we had lived in for the last three years in Brookfield, present here in Fernwood like a miracle; and the Hunt Club was the same Hunt Club as Brookfield’s, except that it had ‘Valley’ prefixed
to its name and had evidently sold its lands, bridle paths and all, to a housing contractor” (*EP* 15).

Oates continues to pile on similar incidents to humorous effect, as when, only a few months later, the Everetts move from Fernwood to Cedar Grove, another suburb that Richard fails to recognize until his father exclaims, “Ha, you’re a riot, Kid! You know very well that we lived in Cedar Grove once before” (*EP* 131). Richard becomes dangerously distraught—as his father’s choice of the word “riot” foreshadows—when the two of them arrive at their new house in Cedar Grove. Richard breaks down as the earlier scene in Fernwood is virtually repeated: the boy remains disoriented as his father points out different houses, only to arrive at one practically identical to their old Fernwood house (*EP* 137-8). By the end of the novel, Richard is completely disoriented, accidentally returning home to their previous Cedar Grove house on one occasion and at another moment announcing, “Everyone agrees with everyone else in Fernwood, or Cedar Grove, wherever we are” (*EP* 202, 183).

*Expensive People* is exceptional in rendering its characters’ experiences or perceptions of suburban architecture and environs, and in these few examples, we can detect fundamental similarities between deterritorialized spaces and Oates’s suburbs, the post-WWII environment often referred to as sprawl. In 1958, William H. Whyte, Jr., invoked the disparaging term “sprawl” to describe “vast, smog-filled deserts that are neither city, suburb, nor country,” areas expanding, he claimed, “at a rate of some 3,000 acres a day.”25 By most accounts, sprawl originated with the rise of the American housing industry. Beginning in the early 1930s, federal government began collaborating with several national construction and real estate associations in an effort to end the Depression by promoting homeownership and private business.26 Through the Federal Housing Administration, the government loaned immense sums of money to
builders, just as homebuyers were subsidized through the Home Owners Loan Corporation. These agencies established the financial and regulatory conditions necessary to allow developers, builders, and lenders to begin operating on a regional or even national scale, undertaking much larger projects than were previously feasible. As Kenneth T. Jackson observes, “Between 1950 and 1970, the [U.S.] suburban population doubled from 36 million to 74 million, and 83 percent of the nation’s total growth took place in the suburbs. In 1970, for the first time in the history of the world, a nation-state contained more suburbanites than city dwellers or farmers.” From the perspective of the late sixties, therefore, Oates’s vision of endless suburbia seems more a matter of prescience than caricature.

If the new scale of spatial production is a first sign of the shift to postmodern deterritorialization, the new economic geography of America is a second one. Even suburbanites who did not buy one of the many new, inexpensive tract houses using a government-backed loan stood to benefit financially from pro-sprawl legislation, which actually favors the wealthiest of homeowners. Since the 1940s, the Internal Revenue Code has been structured to give substantial tax breaks to mortgage holders and property owners, with fatter rewards going to those with bigger homes. Added to these inducements are the relatively low property taxes that suburban dwellers enjoy. These and similar benefits mean that suburban properties, especially sizable ones, are less expensive to build, buy, and occupy than they otherwise would be. Sprawl construction, meanwhile, remains quite lucrative for builders, in part due to the implementation of advanced mass production techniques. Land conversion also became a much greater source of profits for sprawl developers and speculators. As Marion Clawson reports: “The average market value of a building site for single-family homes, according to data from the Federal Housing Administration, rose from $761 in 1946 to $3,725 in early 1967.” According to Mark
Gottdiener, “During the 1970s, the real estate and construction industries were the largest in the United States, with $100 billion in revenue compared to $13 billion for the auto industry.”32 The movement of housing dollars to the suburbs, of course, tends to establish a vicious cycle of depreciation and flight in more established, urbanized areas. The economically-motivated destruction and migration of housing resources on a national scale, systematized and industrialized after WWII, is clearly a form of deterritorialization.

Oates demonstrates her keen awareness of the economics of sprawl in her chronicle of the Everetts. The family picks up stakes every year or so, presumably because of the father’s frequent changes of employer. The Everetts profess a desire to be part of established society and put down roots near venerable country estates, yet they unhesitatingly shuttle from suburb to suburb, buying a three story house for $78,000 in Fernwood that they sell “for $88,000, a fine profit” (EP 14, 128), in order to buy one in Cedar Grove worth $95,000 (EP 229), only to move to a “more expensive” house at the end of the novel (EP 233). While the grand estates give their neighborhoods the distinction of age and the illusion of stability, only “A few were left, but most of the land had been divided up into, say, three-acre plots for other houses” (EP 29). Though we are never informed if the Everetts’ houses are part of this new construction, clearly their upward mobility—economically and socially—is tied to the suburban real estate game.

Oates also makes incisive observations about the experience of sprawl as a deterritorialized “non-place.” Although claims about the monotony of suburban architecture began appearing in the late nineteenth century, it was not until the establishment of the postwar housing industry that suburban space began to be truly mass-produced, reaching whole new levels of indistinction. Jackson goes so far as to credit sprawl with destroying America’s regional vernacular architecture, claiming: “by the 1960s the casual suburban visitor would have a difficult time
deciphering whether she was in the environs of Boston or Dallas.” Oates references this phenomenon succinctly by having a friend of Natashya’s, visiting from New York City, inquire, “Is this the Midwest?” (EP 186). Expensive People refuses to ever explicitly answer the question or geographically locate its “anonymous miles of suburban wasteland” (EP 67). Richard Everett refers to another now-familiar phenomenon when he mocks the “suburb of Pleasure Dells, as bereft of dells as Oak Woods was bereft of oaks” (EP 68). As he observes, sprawl often destroys the topography and natural attractions that, in a postmodern manner, reappear nostalgically in a subdivision’s name, a last remnant of the old pastoral desire to blend city and country life. As Robert Fishman remarks, “The great American postwar housing boom was perhaps the purest example of the suburban dream in action, yet its ultimate consequence was to render suburbia obsolete.”

**Detroit and Vietnam**

Deterritorialization can also be discovered at work in the disinvestment of America’s cities as well as in the capital investments made by the U.S. in South Vietnam. The signs in a place like Detroit, an exemplary American city of the postwar period, are too obvious. In 1950, Detroit was the nation’s fourth largest city; “The Motor City’s population peaked in 1952 at 1.85 million. By 1960 the number of people residing in the central city had fallen to 1.67 million. During the next 20 years Detroit lost nearly half a million people, while surrounding suburban counties gained over a million new residents.” This change in the location of housing was matched by an equally remarkable shift in property values within Metro Detroit. In 1960, the total value of property in the city stood at $5 billion, almost equal to that of its suburbs. By 1970, city properties showed almost no change, while the value of suburban properties had increased to $12 billion.
The impact of deterritorialization can also be witnessed through Detroit’s commercial decline in the immediate postwar years. “Between 1947 and 1958,” writes Thomas J. Sugrue, “the Big Three [Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler] built twenty-five new plants in the metropolitan Detroit area, all of them in suburban communities, most more than fifteen miles from the center city. The lion’s share of new plants, or ‘runaway shops,’ as Detroiters called them, however, went to small- and medium-sized cities in the Midwest . . . and to the South and West, especially California.” Sugrue estimates that the three corporations together spent approximately $7 billion on plant relocations in that period. Sugrue concludes, “the number of shops and factories constructed or modified in Detroit fell tenfold between 1951 and 1963.” By no coincidence, therefore, did urban decline occur at the same time as the massive investment in residential and commercial sprawl.

The link between deterritorialization and the rioting that struck Detroit and elsewhere in the 1960s should be apparent. Those who could not buy houses out in the suburbs or follow the flow of jobs were physically and economically left behind, unable to enjoy the advantages conferred by mobility. African-Americans were especially victimized by this process because of the institutionalized racism that permeated the suburban housing industry. Detroit’s situation exemplifies the rapidly increasing segregation and ghettoization of U.S. cities during this period. Sidney Fine writes, “Of the 330,000 new housing units built in the Detroit metropolitan area between 1950 and 1960, only 3 percent were made available to blacks.” Exacerbating the problem was the loss of affordable housing caused by Detroit’s urban renewal projects: “Between 1960 and 1967, 25,927 dwellings were demolished in the city . . . and only 15,494 new housing units were built. The new units, moreover, were mainly for middle- or upper-income households.” Just as often, old housing was replaced with freeways and corporate office
towers, recreating America’s downtowns as deterritorialized spaces. The net result of these changes was the residential confinement of a poorer, mostly African-American population to a few shrinking, decaying areas of the inner city that were increasingly disconnected from the rest of the metropolis. In the months before the riot, the vacancy rate in Detroit was at an alarming 1 percent. Is it any wonder, then, that most of the rioters were African-American? Deterritorialization has not affected American cities and suburbs alone; it describes a recent trend in the capitalist mode of production of space and, as such, has had a global influence. Indeed, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri adopt the term for this very reason, relying on the concept to define and explain what others call globalization and they name “Empire.” They claim:

Through the decentralization of production and the consolidation of the world market, the international divisions and flows of labor and capital have fractured and multiplied so that it is no longer possible to demarcate large geographical zones. . . . If the First World and the Third World, center and periphery, North and South were ever really separated along national lines, today they clearly infuse one another, distributing inequalities and barriers along multiple and fractured lines.

Interestingly, Hardt and Negri consider the Vietnam War to be a crucial event, the last gasp of imperialism before the turn to the program of deterritorialization and post-Fordism that characterizes Empire. I believe, however, that this shift can already be detected within Vietnam’s lesser-known yet remarkable history of spatial investment by the U.S. during the 1960s.

Before U.S. intervention, South Vietnam was almost completely rural, with an agrarian-based economy. During 1962 and 1963, the U.S. made an attempt through Diem’s government to thwart the communist revolutionaries by herding the rural population out of their villages and into new, government-approved settlements. According to Michael E. Latham, “the Strategic Hamlet Program was the centerpiece of the Kennedy administration’s Vietnam policy” and a
prime example of the influence of “modernization” theory on the Americans’ approach to problems in the Third World. The intention of this counterinsurgency program was to create “defended outposts that could be more easily subjected to military control and social engineering.” In other words, the production of space was used to introduce capitalist habits to the Vietnamese people. “Land was divided into plots on which families were expected to build new homes and raise poultry, farm animals, and fruit trees,” records Latham; “During the day, peasants worked on rice fields up to three miles away,” a new hardship, and “villagers bitterly resented being driven from their homes and forced to pay rent" for their new property. The Strategic Hamlet Program created several thousand new communities and resettled several million Vietnamese at a cost of about $100 million a year to the U.S., yet it failed in its mission of physically and ideologically fortifying the peasants of the South against Communist insurgency, with the result of an “Americanization” of the conflict under President Johnson.  

To support the arrival of U.S. combat personnel, a different investment in Vietnam’s geography had to be made. Again, the prejudices of the Americans are apparent in the way they developed the country not only to accommodate their immediate needs, but also to inculcate their way of life. According to James M. Carter’s revealing history of this second, equally short-lived construction project, “Johnson authorized in 1964 a consortium of private firms to begin an epic programme of military construction designed to create the kind of physical infrastructure that would make escalation possible.” Just as in the case of sprawl back home, the American government provided private enterprise with quite an economic opportunity; by the fall of 1966, they were putting up “$40 million of work-in-place per month,” and with no lack of humility, the consortium in 1966 renamed itself the “Vietnam Builders.” They continued the ideological project of modernization begun with the Strategic Hamlets, though in a different modality. At
this point in the war, U.S. officials believed that improving the cities and herding rural refugees in “would make them aware of the material benefits to be found in a thriving, capitalist, metropolitan center and accelerate the development of a new set of modern values, loyalties, and ties between the South Vietnamese state and its citizens.” Thus, the Vietnam Builders created airfields, ports, canals, and hospitals in addition to military installations. The overall costs of the construction project at the end of the contract were finally estimated at $1.8 billion. The counterpart to this benevolence was a staggering assault on rural Vietnam, the conventional war that infrastructure construction facilitated. In conceiving of ways to drive peasants and insurrectionists out of the uncontrollable countryside, U.S. officials expressed a vision of Vietnam that is strangely reminiscent of suburban sprawl and perhaps the most surprising way that Americans attempted to export their familiar mode of production of space during this era. According to Marilyn Young, “Westmoreland and his staff devised a new approach in 1966 and 1967: destroy everything in an area known to be largely under NLF control, whether or not there had been an attack—trees, houses, crops—and then withdraw, taking the population out with the troops, leaving the burned-over district as a free field for bombs and artillery.” The scale of this geographical deterritorialization would have impressed even the suburban developer William Levitt. In one instance, “The entire Iron Triangle area, within a 32-mile perimeter, was first to be pulverized by B-52 and artillery fire, then flattened with giant bulldozers.”

“By October, 1968, U.S. forces had dropped almost 3 million tons of bombs on North and South Vietnam—nearly 50 per cent more than they had dropped in both the European and Asian theaters during World War II.” This figure does not include napalm or other weapon systems used to clear the countryside of all traces of life; for instance, “one hundred million pounds of
herbicides would be dropped on over four million acres of South Vietnam” between 1962 and 1970. In the words of Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, “We seem to be proceeding on the assumption that the way to eradicate the Vietcong is to destroy all the village structures, defoliate all the jungles, and then cover the entire surface of South Vietnam with asphalt.” Here we have a striking expression of what I would call the deterritorialized capitalist imaginary. McNaughton pictures a whole country “developed” into a giant parking lot, that icon of postwar American capitalism and of sprawl. Given the tenacity of this imaginary throughout all phases of the conflict, it comes as less than a surprise that his boss, Robert S. McNamara, the acknowledged architect of the war, had served as the president of Ford Motor Company in Detroit, immediately prior to becoming Secretary of Defense in 1961.

**Expensive Sprawl**

A specific history lies buried within the unusual imagery and allusions of *Expensive People*. The concept of deterritorialization can connect this public history to the novel’s suburban setting and to its protagonist’s everyday experiences in unexpected ways. Now I want to consider what purpose these allusions serve and suggest how we might reinterpret Richard Everett’s disintegration and matricide.

The deterritorialization of suburbia provides an alternate explanation for many of Richard’s problems. He experiences the geography of sprawl as disorienting, and he suffers both psychologically and physically due to the hypermobility and social isolation that Oates attributes to suburban life. The boy recalls moving residences at least six times before age twelve, and this sort of life change has a measurable impact upon young people’s self-concept and esteem. “Extensively mobile children are more likely to be psychiatrically hospitalized,” according to recent research, and are more prone to depression and suicide—all tendencies that Richard demonstrates. Constant uprooting means Richard is able to maintain only one friendship during
his childhood, and his troubling attachment to his mother could also be a result of residential mobility, rather than due to some innate, incestuous desire. Because sprawl discourages walking and public transportation, the boy is dependent upon adults with private cars, and he often ends up isolated in the home or car with Natashya, his constant companion. A significant amount of the time they spend together during the novel occurs while driving, which does not necessarily make for quality time spent together—one explanation for why he seems starved for attention. The automobile-oriented environment of sprawl, furthermore, has been strongly linked to many physical ailments, including several Richard complains about, such as respiratory illness and obesity.

The global process of deterritorialization could lie behind what has often been considered an inherently suburban pathology, one that appears in most of the genre’s twentieth-century novels. As I stated earlier, conventional wisdom locates the source of suburban fiction’s characteristic discontent and familial dysfunction exclusively within the suburb. Its monotonous architecture, social conformism, oppressive family togetherness, and so forth are understood to make the suburban house feel like a trap, while turning the nuclear family into a hotbed of adulterous desires and oedipal conflicts. I am not necessarily disputing this analysis, which can be applied to Oates’s novel. To stop at this point, though, is to fail to explain why postwar suburban geography and society take the form that they do—to fall back upon Freudian theory, perhaps, or upon the belief that suburbs are innately bad. I am advocating a broader perspective for understanding the postwar suburban pathology, because deterritorialization—a system that benefits suburbanites in many ways, particularly economically—better explains how the suburbs are flawed, yet why people nevertheless desire to live there.
The necessity of this perspective for reading *Expensive People* becomes apparent when we consider one last feature of the pathology: psychological detachment. Natasha expresses this attitude most radically; she avoids television and the news, also guarding her son from such disturbing influences. She reveals her reasoning in an outburst near the novel’s conclusion, exclaiming: “Most of the world is swimming in a cesspool, trying to keep their heads up, and I’m sick of it, I’m sick of knowing it, God, how I’m sick of living and thinking and being what I am! But I won’t live any other way. This is heaven. *This* is heaven, I’ve found it, they don’t torture you or back you in ovens here, in 1960 . . . I am Natasha Everett and I am out of history” (197-8). Similarly, Elwood maintains an unusual detachment from his job, keeping its nature a secret from his family. When Richard pries, Elwood confesses that he oversees the manufacture “a certain device that . . . well, has immense value in determining the security of America” (*EP* 131). Richard asks if the device is a bomb, at which his father laughs, saying “maybe and maybe not” and then repeatedly advising the boy to “forget it” (*EP* 131).

These moments obliquely reveal what remains suppressed throughout most of the novel: global conflict and political violence. Richard’s parents, like most of the adults, practice deception and detachment to enjoy life in the suburbs, to repress consciousness of the effects of deterritorialization elsewhere. For instance, Richard learns after her death that his mother Natasha Romanov Everett was born “Nancy June Romanow,” that her parents were not political émigrés from Russia as she hinted but just “ordinary people” still living in North Tonawanda, New York (*EP* 230-1). Natasha was never threatened by the Gulag or the Holocaust, yet her unfounded fears rationalize her life of luxury, just as Elwood too lives a double life, disowning the ominous work that helps make suburbia a paradise. No other explanation for their behavior makes as much sense.
The culminating event of Richard’s disintegration, the murder of Natashya, can be interpreted as symptomatic of, or even a reaction against, sprawl and the culture of deterritorialization. When he sneaks out of the house at night to stalk his neighborhood, Richard not only brings violence into the suburban haven, but he also symbolically engages with the history that his mother represses. As we saw earlier, he becomes “the sniper,” adopting the guerrilla tactics and nocturnal activity cycle of Detroit’s rioters and the Vietnamese insurgents as he attacks the suburban architecture itself, shooting into random houses with the intention of only scaring the occupants—just as the riot’s snipers seemed to fire warning shots at emergency responders in order to drive them away. The numerous invocations of Detroit and Vietnam suggest that Richard’s attacks make a symbolic challenge to the suburban fantasy of disconnection that threatens him. If we read these references as aligning his actions with the violence done by rioters and revolutionaries, part of a generalized resistance to deterritorialization, then the murder of his mother also takes on a new significance. Rather than being the culmination of their familial conflict, a twist on the Freudian oedipal drama, the murder could be interpreted as a political act, punishing Natashya because she articulates the most radical, intellectualized argument for the culture of deterritorialization.

This interpretation of Richard’s violence raises a few problems. Comparing a white, upper-middle-class, suburban child’s actions to those of a Detroit rioter or a Vietnamese combatant is problematic. Not only are the experiences and struggles of each very different, but Richard also does not demonstrate any real consciousness of the potential significance of his actions or the sources from which he seems to draw inspiration. The idea of his emulation without comprehension may seem unlikely, yet millions of disaffected white suburban youth in the
following decades maintained a similar relationship to urban black culture, becoming consumers of rap and hip-hop music, appropriating the street idiom, and glorifying gang culture.

A more serious complication with this reading is that Richard may be lying when he claims to have murdered his mother. Many readers have had their suspicions raised by the postmodern style of the novel, particularly due to the narrator’s metafictional asides and admissions of fabrications. If we reconsider the evidence, his father Elwood seems the most probable culprit. Elwood’s boot prints were the primary evidence found at the crime scene, though his son claims to have been wearing the boots at the time. In addition, the murder weapon was never discovered where Richard claims that he hid it, to his surprise. More importantly, Elwood has several motives: he fights viciously with his wife about many things, as Richard enumerates (EP 74-5). Moreover, Elwood informs Richard, “I almost lost my top [security] clearance because of your mother,” perhaps due to her bohemian behavior or her invented Russian background—a likely liability in Cold War America (EP 131). By killing her, Elwood could make room for a more advantageous spouse. Indeed, Richard enters a psychiatric hospital upon collapsing after his mother’s death, and a week after his discharge, his father presents the boy to his new step-mother (EP 234). He moves the reconstituted family to new, more expensive house, which he can afford having recently been hired as a company president, and he probably collected life insurance money as well. Statistically, acts of domestic violence are overwhelmingly committed by adult men, and Natashya’s not-so-secret sexual affairs provide a final, banal reason to suspect her husband.

If Richard’s matricide—the lynchpin of the entire narrative—is another lie, it only reinforces my reading of the novel as a sprawl narrative. Richard’s memoir is unquestionably an attempt to make sense of his past, though as an adult he still does not know all that really
occurred. While he tries to create some meaning for his mother’s murder by claiming it as his own deed, making himself into a powerful agent rather than passive victim, he expresses reservations about this effort to the end. He concludes his memoir by stating, “whatever single ghastly act I did manage to achieve, it was done out of freedom, out of choice. This is the only consolation I have in the face of death, my readers: the thought of my free will. But I must confess that there are moments when I doubt even this consolation . . .” (EP 236). As part of his creative process, the narrator incorporates many of the adult matters that threaten or confuse him, particularly violence and sexual behavior, into his story. Thus, his memoir of childhood is infused with historical anachronisms from the late 1960s.

Even his intended suicide could be a response to the threat of his own adulthood’s arrival, his inevitable indoctrination into a world of violence—manifested in the form of the Vietnam draft, for which he might now be eligible. In the end, Richard’s account, by virtue of its very dubiousness and incompleteness, demonstrates the characteristic disconnectedness or historical amnesia of postmodern culture that is one effect of deterritorialization. The novel’s form reinforces its meaning. At the same time, Oates’s allusions provide her readers with material to perform the work that Fredric Jameson calls “cognitive mapping” and reach their own conclusions. Oates’s dual agenda is what makes Expensive People an exciting yet difficult work to interpret.

My reading of the novel suggests one direction in which suburban narratives have developed away from the confinement paradigm developed in the early-twentieth-century and often repeated in postwar fiction. In Expensive People, the most important problem with post-WWII suburbia is not architectural homogeneity, social conformism, or a sexually repressive code of behavior. Instead, the problem can be summed up in the word “sprawl,” a system that
sells nicer, more affordable, socially advantageous housing as the American Dream, for the price of potentially increased geographical segregation, residential mobility, and social isolation—not to mention economic exploitation, violence, psychological detachment, and the suppression of historical consciousness. Reading Oates’s novel this way demonstrates the possibility of theorizing late-twentieth-century suburbanization through the rhetorics of postmodernism and globalization, rather than consigning the phenomenon to a separate, domestic history.\textsuperscript{65} Finally, this chapter has proposed the broad value of deterritorialization as a concept that bridges different domains and disciplines. It links in this case the production of space to the experience of place as a part of everyday, domestic life.

\section*{Notes}
\begin{enumerate}
    \item For a discussion of the suburb’s portrayal as a trap, particularly for men, see Robert Beuka, SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 107-48.
    \item G. F. Waller, Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979), 113.
    \item Ibid., 348.
    \item Joyce Carol Oates, Expensive People (1968; reprint, Princeton, N.J.: Ontario Review Press, 1990), 28. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as \textit{EP}.
    \item On the last, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000).
    \item Lawrence S. Wittner, \textit{Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate} (New York: Praeger, 1974), 284. Hubert G. Locke also reports that 1,680 fires were set (\textit{The Detroit Riot of 1967} [Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1969], 30).
    \item Oates, “Visions of Detroit,” 347.
\end{enumerate}


16 Amy Maria Kenyon has convincingly analyzed “detachment” as an endemic disposition of suburban characters. See her *Dreaming Suburbia: Detroit and the Production of Postwar Space and Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2004), 41-68.


18 Wittner, *Cold War America*, 254

19 Although police and firefighters reported taking heavy fire on several nights, to the point of being driven from the streets, very few were injured or killed by the snipers. Meanwhile, some of the sniper attacks occurred in a remarkably well-organized fashion, as if coordinated with the efforts of looters and arsonists. See Locke, *Detroit Riot*, 40, 125-8.

20 A third usage of deterritorialization should be noted, namely the disjunction of cultures and identities from their traditional spaces, though this one has the least bearing upon my discussion of suburbia.


23 Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, “Introduction,” 25. I should note that the term “deterritorialized space” signifies a breakdown relative to the composition of traditional places, not an absolute deterritorialization. The postwar suburb is certainly an identifiable place (a “reterritorialization” of the classical suburb, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology), yet I will argue that part of its identity lies in its distinctive relationship to deterritorialization.


28 *Crabgrass Frontier*, 283-84.

29 I strongly disagree, therefore, with arguments such as this one by Waller: “It would be possible, but difficult, to see the setting of *Expensive People* merely as an attempt to depict suburban life. Of course, the affluent suburbs of the American metropolis – Updike’s television aerials and abortive friendships, marriages, conversations, or
Riesman’s suburban sadness – remain a parlour-game obsession for both sociologists and novelists. But Oates’s technique is not to analyze but to distort and caricature” (*Dreaming America*, 114).

30 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 293.


33 *Crabgrass Frontier*, 240.


36 Ibid., 21.


38 Ibid., 149.

39 “As early as 1963,” observes Jackson, “industrial employment in the United States was more than half suburban based” (*Crabgrass Frontier*, 267). Corporate headquarters also relocated to suburban campuses in significant numbers during this period. Meanwhile, Lizabeth Cohen notes the rapid growth of suburban shopping centers and “the tremendous increase in suburban share of total metropolitan retail trade from 4 percent in 1939 to 31 percent by 1948; by 1961 it would total almost 60 percent in the ten largest population centers” (*A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* [New York: Knopf, 2003], 257).


41 For Detroit, the index of dissimilarity tracking the “level of unevenness in the spatial distribution of blacks and whites” was 17 percent in 1940, 26.6 percent in 1950, 44.4 percent in 1960, 32.8 percent in 1970, and 75.3 percent in 1980 (Darden et al., *Detroit*, 77-8).


43 Ibid., 57. Jon C. Teaford remarks on the recognized failure of urban renewal to adequately treat those displaced: “Between 1949 and 1964, only 0.5 percent of all federal renewal money was expended on relocation of individuals and families” (*The Metropolitan Revolution: The Rise of Post-urban America* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2006], 118).

44 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 57.

45 Days before the riot, a front page article titled “Housing No. 1 in Negro Aims” appeared in *The Detroit News* (July 17, 1967; final edition; 1A), written by a reporter touring Michigan’s cities to discover the sources of racial tensions; he found housing to be the primary cause of hostility.

46 *Empire*, 335.

47 Ibid., 260.

49 Ibid., 154.

50 Ibid., 170.

51 Ibid., 182-3.


53 Ibid., 51.

54 Latham, Modernization as Ideology, 151.


56 For a recent study of how the U.S. has exported the suburban way of life through the design of its military bases, see Mark L. Gillem, America Town: Building the Outposts of Empire (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007).


58 Ibid., 174.

59 Wittner, Cold War America, 279.

60 Young, The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990, 82.

61 Qtd. in Wittner, Cold War America, 279.


63 For Freudian readings of the novel, see Friedman, Joyce Carol Oates, 56 and Joanne V. Creighton, Joyce Carol Oates (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 62.


65 Several critics have addressed the novel’s late 1960s context. See Daly, Lavish Self-Divisions, 27-8 and Susana Araújo, “Space, Property and the Psyche: Violent Topographies in Early Oates Novels,” Studies in the Novel 38 (winter 2006): 411. Inevitably, they agree with Waller that “there is in Expensive People a continuing concern with ‘personal’ as opposed to ‘public’ history,” the latter supposedly being the concern of Oates’s follow-up novel them (Dreaming America, 112). Eileen Teper Bender echoes this dichotomous reading: “One exposes the limits and dangers of private authority. The other focuses upon socioeconomic forces and external constraints” (Joyce Carol Oates, Artist in Residence [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987], 30).
LIST OF REFERENCES


______. *Clovernook, or, Recollections of Our Neighborhood in the West (Second Series)*. New York: Redfield, 1853.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andrew Stuart Reynolds was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, in 1974. He earned three degrees in English: a Bachelor of Arts from Louisiana State University, an Master of Arts from The State University of New York at Buffalo, and a Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Florida. He published an essay in the edited collection *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed*, as well as a book review in the journal *American Quarterly*. He worked as a visiting lecturer in the Department of Languages at McNeese State University, teaching composition and American literature courses. At the University of Florida, he worked as a teaching assistant for the English Department’s American literature courses, as a tutor at the Reading and Writing Center, and as a mentor in the University Writing Program, where he co-taught the freshman composition series with inexperienced teaching assistants. His academic interests include nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, the novel, science fiction, genre theory, literary criticism, and critical theory.