

UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN, TRINITY COLLEGE

Why Is Your Brand Crisis?

Challenging the Representation of Masculinity in the Work of Richard Yates, Richard Ford, and Jonathan Franzen

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College, in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

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Summary

Through an analysis of American fiction, with a special focus on the writing of Richard Yates, Richard Ford, and Jonathan Franzen, this thesis argues that American men have always struggled with what it means to be an American Man, but that this does not equate to a crisis in masculinity. This thesis maintains that American culture propagates a myth of white masculinity in crisis more out of habit than any basis in fact, thereby ignoring how the American creed of achievement and success impacts on men and women alike.

The Introduction lays out the theoretical framework which will be employed throughout this thesis. It discusses the theory behind the crisis in American masculinity, and engages with a number of prominent critics, such as Michael Kimmel and Sally Robinson, who endorse the concept of a gender-based crisis. This chapter situates the crisis theory in relation to aspects of American history such as the influence of the earliest settlers, and the conflict inherent in the establishment of the United States. It also analyses the concept of a masculinity crisis in relation to specific American social ideas such as the American dream, and exceptionalism.

Chapter One is an analysis of the Richard Yates novel, *Revolutionary Road*. Beginning with a brief outline of Yates's life and career, the analysis moves on to discuss the representation of the suburbs in the novel and how this has been misinterpreted through the years. This chapter also deals with the idea of exceptionalism and the expectations this engenders in American citizens. Supporting analysis is provided through the discussion of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt*, and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

Chapter Two uses the Yates novel, *The Easter Parade*, as the central text to move the analysis on to include discussions of feminist theory, including Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The chapter examines representations of female characters and how they come to be afflicted by the same malaise as effects the male characters in similar novels. Using Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*, and *Stoner* by John Williams, the chapter also examines attitudes to education and work, expectations for women in the home and the workplace, and changing attitudes to mental health in America.

Chapter Three is based on Richard Ford's series of Bascombe books; *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day*, *The Lay of the Land*, and *Let Me Be Frank With You*. Examining the books as a whole piece, rather than discrete novels, this chapter assesses the critical analysis Ford's writing has received, and offers alternative readings of the Bascombe books that suggest Frank Bascombe is not experiencing a masculinity crisis, but is actually a character quite content with his lot in life. This chapter also analyses ideas of home ownership, the nature of work, exceptionalism, and how men interact with each other in suburban America.

Chapter Four is an analysis of the Jonathan Franzen novels, *The Corrections*, *Freedom*, and *Purity*. This chapter begins with a discussion of white masculinity based on correspondence between Franzen and David Foster Wallace, and then moves to examine how Franzen has uncritically absorbed the idea of a masculinity crisis into his writing. His

contradictory representation of the American suburb is analysed, as is his reliance on unstable marriages and male/female conflict to drive plots.

A brief Afterword concludes the thesis, discussing how the privileged position of literature can influence the development of social and cultural theory.

For Mam, Dad, Laz and Borbs

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation

(Henry David Thoreau, 1854)

It's true I'm male and have some power, but I never asked to be born male

(Jonathan Franzen, *Purity*, 2015)

Introduction: Masculinity and America

Michael Kimmel declares that “the restlessness that men feel today is nothing new in American history; we have been anxious and restless for almost two centuries.”¹ Over the course of several books, essays, and articles, Kimmel has repeatedly asserted this belief that a sense of uncertainty has been building in American men since the beginning of the nineteenth century, gathering steam with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and finally exploding into a fully-fledged crisis in the 1950s. In particular, Kimmel ties the idea of a crisis in American masculinity to important historical moments, citing periods of national upheaval and change as having an analogous trajectory to how men in America view themselves and their place in society:

I'm interested in moments of crisis when masculinity is threatened and people worked hard to try and salvage, revitalize, and resurrect it. These crisis points in the meaning of manhood were also crisis points in economic, political and social life – moments when men's relationships to their work, to their country, to their families, to their visions, were transformed.²

While it is certainly undeniable that there is an inevitable questioning that occurs in times of national instability, it can also be argued that Kimmel's hypothesis is simplistic. His repeated assertions that American masculinity was relatively stable until two centuries ago, suggests that until that point American men were secure in, and sure of, their identities as men and Americans. Indeed, he goes so far as to criticise Arthur Schlesinger for having “indulged in a bit of ahistorical nostalgia, as we often do during periods of uncertainty, suggesting that earlier times were happier, easier, and more stable times.”³

¹ Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia,” in *The Masculinities Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank Barrett (Cambridge, UK : Polity ; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 284-85.

² Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 173.

The problem with Kimmel's approach is that it does exactly what he accuses Schlesinger of, namely romanticising a past in which he would have us believe that masculinity and manhood in America were concrete, foundational concepts of which everyone was certain. He seems to dismiss the possibility of there ever being any doubt about what masculine identity was before the 1800s, and the onset of modernity and industrialisation. As his timeline would have it, the more industrialised and commercial the United States became, the more uncertain and challenged masculinity became, occasionally and spectacularly exploding into an all-out crisis in a pattern that neatly synchronised with periods of national social upheaval.

Indeed, considering that Kimmel employs cultural productions such as literature, art, and film in articulating his theory, it is striking that his analysis of masculinity in America overlooks where these stories came from. As Richard Slotkin observes

The poets of the early years of the republic [...] attempted to fabricate an "American epic" that would mark the beginning of a national mythology, providing a context for the works to come after. Their concept of myth was essentially artificial and typically American: they believed, in effect, that a mythology could be put together on the ground, like the governments of frontier communities or the national Constitution, either by specialists or by the spontaneous awakening of the popular genius.⁴

These ideas and models had to be written into existence, making them constructs just like the gender roles that are fundamental to the crisis theory. The time that Kimmel refers to as "before identity crises" is simply not that.⁵ What Kimmel suggests was a more stable era for American men and the performance of their masculinity was really an era of making it up as they went along. In the same way that patriarchal structures are paradoxically malleable to change in order to maintain power, the stories and images that are pointed to as examples of the crisis narrative are, as Slotkin notes, at once consistent but still adaptable:

while the images may readily exhibit changes in response to the play of social and psychological forces, the narrative or narratives which relate them to each other have or acquire a certain fixity of form. Their structure and character may be more clearly

⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 3.

⁵ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 81.

articulated through the passage of time and the operation of historical forces on the mind of the audience, but their essential nature remains substantially the same.⁶

Kimmel acknowledges the connection between cultural progression and how American men see themselves, but he does so in a manner that only allows for a specific interpretation of the issues supposedly challenging masculinity. His insistence on a thesis that recognises a shift in masculinity at the turn of the century means that the “crisis,” as he frames it, can really only be viewed in narrow, gender-specific terms. By defining this masculinity crisis as inherently linked to increasing industrialisation and ever-changing gender issues, it diminishes any sense of historical trends, or the possible influence of some form of cultural memory or national consciousness that exists before his timeline. He states that

the analogy between individual development and cultural development holds – and at no time more clearly than the turn of the century. Just as the realm of production had been so transformed that men could no longer anchor their identity in their position in the market, we created new symbols, the consumption of which “reminded” men of that secure past, evoking an age before identity crises, before crises of masculinity – a past when everyone knew what it meant to be a man and achieving one’s manhood was a given. In the culture of consumption, identity was based less on what one did and who one was and more upon how one appeared and lived.⁷

There can be no doubt that the changing marketplace had an impact on how American men saw themselves and their place in society, as well as how they interpreted their masculinity, but this holds true for everyone – men and women alike. Indeed, Bryce Traister has rightly called out Kimmel’s narrative as provocative, possibly deliberately so, suggesting that

he is being provocative, if not entirely accurate. The provocation on which his introduction mediates is delivered in the statement’s suggestion that we lack a history of male achievement, that we live in an intellectual culture somehow devoid of the masculine perspective. *Of course* we have that. And then some. What Kimmel wants to write instead is a history that understands “American men ... as men,” a statement that, on the face of it,

⁶ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 9.

⁷ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 81.

sounds a tautological cadence, one that is repeated with remarkable and nearly ritualistic precision in the new scholarship of American masculinity.⁸

Kimmel falls into the very same trap he accuses Schlesinger of falling victim to in sentimentalising earlier American men for the supposed stability and confidence of their position. He also suggests that the idea of an acceptable form of masculinity or manliness in order to fit in and conform became more prevalent in modern society. However, as seen in Caleb Crain's study, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation*, the belief that men had to act in a certain manner regardless of their orientation was present from very early in the United States.

Kimmel's approach studiously ignores the great contradictions inherent in the foundation of the United States as an entity, and even within the original colonies before that. There is a historic trend of conflict, contradiction, and doubt at the heart of American identity. In 1854, Henry David Thoreau declared in *Walden*, somewhat dramatically, that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."⁹ His concept of desperation and Kimmel's crisis may not be precisely the same but, nonetheless, there existed a dichotomy at the heart of American identity which Thoreau expressed in the 1840s, and which had been present even before the Declaration of Independence. This insistence, then, upon binding a new sense of American identity to emerging capitalism and increasing materialism, fails to recognise the influence of the founders of the republic on seeking to define what it means to be American. Kimmel rightly observes that there has been a "history of fears, frustration, and failure. At the grandest social level and the most intimate realms of personal life, for individuals and institutions, American men have been haunted by fears that they are not powerful, strong, rich, or successful enough."¹⁰ Part of what this thesis attempts to do is to show how these fears that Kimmel lists are not limited to the American man. He consistently insists, however, on interpreting the persistence of these fears as a crisis of masculinity. This conveniently ignores the debates around the position of America and its citizens that marked its entrance on to the world stage as the United States.

⁸ Bryce Traister, "Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2, (June 2000): 280-81, doi: 10.1353/aq.2000.0025

⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (London: Penguin, 1986), 50.

¹⁰ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 6.

Frank Kelleter describes the deep conflict that marked the foundation of the republic, noting that influential statesmen such as Thomas Paine and John Adams found themselves divided on how this emerging nation should identify itself. Issues of populism and class appeared in almost everything they wrote and said. The contradictions present in the original foundational texts set the scene for how the development of American identity would progress. As Kelleter observes

To found a country and to constitute a “people” on the basis of natural rights – rather than to commit an existing country or an existing people to such principles – is an improbable thing to do. It marks that country for utopian overreach or constructive despair. It produces forms of self-obsession that often lead one to forget that there is a world outside of one’s own country. It produces perennial disputes about the meaning of one’s communal existence in the world. To the extent that the United States was founded by force of documents, texts, and clashing forms of rhetoric, the United States is bound to be a nation of competing readers and competing readings. And to the extent that even the most self-evident propositions are invariably confronted with local meanings and interests, the United States has always been a nation divided in trying to become one nation.¹¹

It is this “perennial dispute,” as Kelleter calls it, that I suggest helps to encourage the conditions in which the theory of a masculinity crisis can persist. The contradiction inherent in trying to be a unified nation of distinct individuals has allowed a discourse to develop which mistakes this dilemma for a crisis in masculinity. In analysing the literature that proposes a crisis in masculinity in the United States, there begins to emerge a sense that this supposed crisis has been talked into existence.

Even in recent literature on the subject, there is a tendency to accept the crisis narrative as a fact and work from there, rather than to engage with it on the basic level of a theory to be challenged. Indeed, Sally Robinson goes so far as to say that “the question of whether dominant masculinity is ‘really’ in crisis is, in my view, moot: even if we could determine what an actual, real, historically verifiable crisis would look like, the undeniable fact remains that in the post-liberationist era, dominant masculinity consistently represents itself as in crisis.”¹² This statement is troubling for several reasons. It reads as a facile attempt to brush off any notion of dissent from the dominant narrative of masculinity in crisis. Robinson appears to suggest that because men regularly present themselves as in the

¹¹ Frank Kelleter, “A Dialectics of Radical Enlightenment,” in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 101-2.

¹² Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 11.

grip of a crisis it must, therefore, be accepted that they are actually in a crisis. It dismisses any analysis of what can legitimately be considered a crisis, and accepts without question the branding of a phenomenon that bears all the hallmarks of having been created in textbooks. It ignores the influence of an ever-expanding media and increasingly influential popular psychology. Accepting without question that men present themselves as in crisis also ignores the far more interesting issue of why they do this. What exactly are these representations that critics such as Robinson and Kimmel keep referring to, and why has this concern seemingly become accepted as a cultural fact?

Robinson attempts to give her approach some further weight by arguing that a crisis is “real” when its rhetorical strategies can be discerned and its effects charted; the reality of a particular crisis depends less on hard evidence of actual social trauma or do-or-die decision-making than on the power of language, of metaphors and images, to convincingly represent that sense of trauma and turning point.¹³

While this can be seen as an entirely logical and reasonable approach to take when analysing this so-called crisis in masculinity, it is also almost inherently contradictory. It simultaneously acknowledges the fundamental question marks over the nature of the crisis, while also accepting its validity without exploring those questions in any way. Robinson appears to acknowledge that the crisis is something that men talk about and academics discuss, as opposed to something that has a wide, lived experience. It also poses an interesting dilemma for critics when approaching the crisis in masculinity narrative. Do we accept the so-called crisis as an actual social and cultural fact and proceed from there – as Kimmel and Robinson do – or do we seek to examine why the “hard evidence” which Robinson claims is not important has, until this point, been seen as irrelevant to any discussion of the origins of the crisis.

The general acceptance of the crisis motif suggests an occurrence that is not dissimilar to what Robinson describes as a “capitulation to the imperatives of a mass, mechanized culture.”¹⁴ Masculinity, in the American setting, was challenged by the increasing industrialisation of society, work, and culture, and the overwhelming acceptance of this movement signalled “an abandonment of masculinity understood as uniqueness and individual will.”¹⁵ It can be argued that like the masses of men who accepted their fate and

¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 92.

¹⁵ Ibid.

conformed to this new mass culture, the majority of academics, psychological professionals, and cultural commentators also accepted the popular belief that masculinity was, and continues to be, in crisis. The continued discussion and debate about just what is wrong with America's men has never actually achieved anything approaching a solution or workable theory as to how and why it happened if, indeed, anything really is wrong in the first place. The declarations of crisis have simply persisted and, at various times, gotten louder.

In arguing that the crisis is an illusion, it can also be argued that continuing to perpetuate the myth of a crisis only serves to maintain its pre-eminence as the accepted theory. It is important to note at this stage that all this is not to dismiss, or make light of, the current discussion around the importance of mental-health awareness for men, but this thesis does seek to make a distinction between those very real problems and the more abstract, theoretical problems that are supposed to constitute the masculinity in crisis narrative as identified in literary theory and cultural studies. There is a profound difference between the narrative of the crisis theory which is primarily concerned with a certain type of privileged masculinity and the real, lived experiences of men from all walks of life who suffer with depression and serious mental-health conditions. It is for this reason that this thesis will employ works of fiction to chart and analyse the abstract concept of a masculinity crisis and its representation in certain elements of American culture. I am primarily concerned with how this supposed crisis is portrayed and interpreted in fiction, and how, through the privileging of works of art such as fiction, this comes to serve as a basis for a wider cultural acceptance of what is arguably a flawed narrative.

Even Robinson acknowledges that “the announcements of crisis thus actually function to ward off a ‘cure’ since it is through dwelling on crisis that the threats to the normativity of white masculinity get managed.”¹⁶ This statement itself requires some deconstruction. It suggests that the normal state for white masculinity is actually to be in crisis. It feeds into the sense that in order for masculinity to continue to function and dominate it must be embattled, or at least believe it is. This inevitably raises the question of whether it can legitimately be described as a crisis. Is it not more accurate to suggest that this is simply how masculinity functions? It would appear to run contrary to the very definition of a crisis to accept that this siege mentality is the normative state for masculinity

¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

to inhabit. If it is the general condition, then what exactly is so critical about it? In particular, when dealing with the case of masculinity in the United States, a historical trend can be seen that proposes a broader approach to the question of what is wrong with American men, rather than defaulting to the narrowly defined perspectives of gender and power. As Frank Kelleter points out, the very origins of the country were clouded in conflict and contradiction. The fundamental question of what it meant to be an American was never fully resolved or fully agreed upon, so one cannot declare American masculinity to be in crisis without acknowledging the deep complications that being “American” brings to this particular equation.

Indeed, there is nothing particularly new about claiming a crisis for American masculinity. As James Gilbert reminds us:

It must seem that, once again, Americans were faced with an unacceptable and unworkable definition of masculinity, once again confronting a “masculinity crisis.” Before deciding that the 1990s movements represent the beginning of another conservative affirmation of patriarchal values for a society whose men yearn for instruction in traditional ways, it would be well to recall the complexity that we have discovered in the 1950s, the many differing voices that can be found in a period that seemed even more resolutely conservative and conformist. Was the 1990s the age of Robert Bly’s *Wild Men* or the *Promise Keepers*, or was it the domestic world of the neighborly Fred Rogers? Or have we just got the question wrong again?¹⁷

Central to Gilbert’s argument is the observation that while a crisis was being discussed ad infinitum within academic and psychological circles, the vast majority of men in America were simply getting on with life. Amid the repeated proclamations of the gravest crisis ever to face American masculinity, which saw the emergence of books such as Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* which was published in 1942, it cannot be ignored that most men continued to function within society in what can only be called a “normal” manner. Movie representations and literary interpretations of masculinity, and men’s experience of life in America, projected fantastic images that were far removed from the reality of everyday life. Yet it is these media representations, for the most part, that have fuelled the theoretical claims for a crisis. The general consensus seems to be that men would not represent themselves in such a fashion if they did not feel a deep sense of conflict in their own

¹⁷ James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 224.

identity. With regard to the acceptance of fictional accounts of a crisis as evidence for its existence in reality, Gilbert also notes that

some historians have considered these cultural daydreams to constitute the essential qualities of modern masculinity, arguing that masculinity was increasingly associated with violent, escapist, and heroically individualistic popular culture. But it is not clear to me that spectatorship masculinity is anything more than what it seems: fanciful. It is unreasonable to assume that most men misjudged the distance between their lives and this imagined heroism.¹⁸

It is, therefore, equally unreasonable to argue that literary and cultural representations of masculinity in crisis necessarily equate to a crisis in actuality. However, by the same token, literature does not exist in a vacuum protected from social and cultural trends. It can be reactive to, and reflective of, issues and concerns that exist at the time of its creation. This makes it imperative that we examine whether our interpretations of literature and other cultural outputs have been accurate, or if they have been shaped by a general acceptance of a pervasive trend towards a crisis of masculinity.

Essentially Robinson, and many other critics, maintain that because American men present themselves as in crisis this makes a masculinity crisis a fact. While it is true that from the 1950s onwards a noticeable trend of men in crisis can be seen in American literature this does not necessarily equate with real, lived experience. Certainly, there are examples of individual men in crisis. However, these should not be seen as indicative of a general crisis of masculinity, but rather as a symptom of the upheaval being experienced across American society in general. It is also interesting to note that the crisis discourse really began to gain currency around the same time that professionals such as psychiatrists and psychologists began to notice what came to be known as the Age of Anxiety. In his book about manhood during the Cold War, K.A. Cuordileone notes that

never before had the self come under such scrutiny, a measure of the growing influence of professional psychology and psychiatry as well as its popularization for a mass audience. The concern with the besieged American self also registers a shift in the principal concerns of leading intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s [...] Whether middle-class Americans knew it or not, they were psychologically plagued by the very prosperity that seemed to promise

¹⁸ Ibid., 31.

them more freedom and security. The more sated and comfortable they grew, the more conformist and self-less they became; such was the price of affluence.¹⁹

It is from this sense of an inner split and unfulfilled expectations that we must approach examples of fiction deployed as proof to support the crisis narrative. Much of the criticism supporting the masculinity crisis narrative references literature, film, and art as proof of the dire situation the American man continues to find himself in. Indeed, Michael Kimmel firmly marks the battleground of the crisis narrative as distinctly cultural when he remarks that

the fears of feminization – that we have lost our ability to claim our manhood in a world without fathers, without frontiers, without manly creative work – have haunted men for a century. And nowhere have these fears been played out more fully for the past hundred years than in literature, film, and television. How else are we to understand the constant symbolic efforts to retrieve the lost father, to recreate the frontier testing ground, to experience romance and excitement in the workplace?²⁰

What seems to be overlooked in most discussions of American masculinity is the impact that the idea of the American dream has on both men and women. This dichotomy of reconciling the pursuit of individual exceptionalism with patriotic unity has caused a culture of perpetual masculine crisis to spring up and persist, without question or reference to the impact simply being an American has.

The concept of spectatorship masculinity raises an interesting issue. Mass media and popular culture were (and still are) producing images of masculinity as almost impossibly heroic, but also of masculinity in extreme crisis. These images range from the stoic cowboys of John Wayne westerns, Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry, Sylvester Stallone's Rambo and Rocky and, more recently, to the entirely other-worldly characters of superhero comics and film franchises. Even the current explosion of UFC's popularity ties into this image of illusory power, vanity muscle, and pointless over-the-top violence, an exercise in outsized masculine posturing. The counter image to these supposed paragons of masculine virtue are characters like Michael Douglas in *Falling Down*, and more recently Walter White in *Breaking Bad*. Both of these images are consumed in the market place, so does this make both of these images of masculinity acceptable? More likely, it brings us to a place where we must accept that masculinity is a multi-faceted concept with no definitive meaning. Men

¹⁹ K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 98.

²⁰ Michael Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 211.

experience their masculinity in relation to myriad others; women, class, race, sexual orientation. As a consequence of this, we must be specific almost to the point of obsession when clarifying what we mean when we discuss the term “masculinity.” Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett expand on this point when they observe that “masculinities are not fixed; they change over time, over space, and, not least, during the lives of men themselves. Having accepted this premise, it is clear that for there to be a crisis of masculinity there would have to be a single masculinity; something solid, fixed, immovable, brittle even.”²¹ Moreover, they also warn against “the trap of equating changes in men’s experiences and opportunities with a crisis in masculinity. Men adapt.”²²

It is this rush to declare a crisis at the first signs of social change that is most alarming. Men and masculinity have repeatedly been warned of their impending doom, and yet in almost every society and culture on the planet, the dominant force in economic, social, and cultural terms is men. In much the same way that James Gilbert ponders if we are asking the right questions when it comes to masculinity, could it be that the pronouncements and acceptance of a crisis only serve to feed into the maintenance of the dominant patriarchy? Promoting a theory of crisis is just one method of keeping masculinity at the forefront of whatever the debate happens to be. To indulge in some conspiracy style thinking for a moment, we could argue that it suits dominant, hegemonic masculinity to claim a crisis in order to facilitate a seizure and maintenance of power that allows it to continue to shape the agenda. Andrew Ross comments on this dynamic, suggesting that

Patriarchy is consistently reforming masculinity, minute by minute, day by day. Indeed, the reason why patriarchy remains so powerful is due less to its entrenched traditions than to its versatile capacity to shape-change and morph the contours of masculinity to fit with the shifts in the social climate; in this it shares with capitalism a modernizing hunger to seize the present and dictate the future. Sometimes we feel that the new man, even when he is PC, is much less palatable than the incorrect guy he displaced.²³

It might be useful to pause for a moment and consider this idea of the new man being “less palatable than the incorrect guy he displaced.” It is generally accepted that there is no one masculinity. There are many, and they are constantly evolving in relation to the social

²¹ Whitehead and Barrett, *The Masculinities Reader*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 9.

²³ Andrew Ross, “The Great White Dude,” in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 172.

and cultural climate around them. Consequently, when the new man is recognised as “new” and distinctly different from the “incorrect” man, this inevitably sparks a discussion as to why there was a need for a new man in the first place. The trend, thus far, has been to define this change as a crisis. There could not have been a need for change unless there was some catastrophe looming on the horizon for men in general and whatever brand of masculinity they claim. The fact that the new man is probably not accepted, until he is the out of date man being replaced, initially suggests that the “masculinity in crisis” theory simply cannot keep pace with the constant need to adapt that masculinity must face. There are echoes of the Puritan declension narratives in all of this; the idea that the new generation is somehow inferior physically, emotionally, and morally.

John MacInnes remarks that “it has become a cliché to argue that masculinity is in crisis. But although men’s privilege is under unprecedented material and ideological challenge, the briefest historical survey will show that masculinity has always been in one crisis or another.”²⁴ It is this idea of a constant crisis that I believe is fundamentally flawed. A crisis should be a turning point, or a moment so markedly different from the standard course of events as to be easily recognisable. Logically, masculinity should emerge from the crisis state altered in some way. Yet, how can one emerge from a state that one is almost permanently in? Stating that masculinity is constantly in crisis only serves to undermine the whole theory. It is more logical to propose that masculinity, like other identities, is constantly evolving in relation to all other systems it must interact with. However, to agree with this is to accept that the word “crisis,” and all its attendant concepts, is the wrong terminology to use.

R.W. Connell discusses in detail this idea of what constitutes a crisis, and what it means for the concept of masculinity, noting that

The concept of crisis tendencies needs to be distinguished from the colloquial sense in which people speak of a “crisis of masculinity.” As a theoretical term “crisis” presupposes a coherent system of some kind, which is destroyed or restored by the outcome of the crisis. Masculinity, as the argument so far has shown, is not a system in that sense. It is, rather, a configuration of practice within a system of gender relations. We cannot logically speak of a crisis of a configuration; rather we might speak of its disruption or

²⁴ John MacInnes, *The End of Masculinity: The Confusion of Sexual Genesis and Sexual Difference in Modern Society* (Buckingham [England]; Philadelphia: Open University Press: 1998), 11.

transformation. We can, however, logically speak of the crisis of a gender order as a whole, and its tendencies towards crisis.²⁵

Connell argues, not unreasonably, that because there is no definitive masculinity there can be no definitive crisis. Rather, she proposes that the entire gender order is in something resembling a crisis by virtue of the inevitable resistance to patriarchal society that emerged with the increasing influence of feminism, saying

The enormous growth of the material power of men in metropolitan countries has been accompanied, I would argue, by an intensification of crisis tendencies in the gender order [...] They have resulted, clearly enough, in a major loss of legitimacy for patriarchy, and different groups of men are now negotiating this loss in very different ways.

The clearest sign of this loss, and the most striking feature of the present moment in the gender order of the rich countries, is the open challenges to men's privileges made by feminism. By virtue of these countries' wealth and control of mass communications, this challenge circulated globally as soon as it was made.²⁶

Connell, somewhat inadvertently, solves the riddle as to why there was a sudden explosion of interest in the supposed crisis facing masculinity. The development of new technologies and the seemingly unstoppable expansion of new media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have made the dissemination of information increasingly easy and, more significantly, increasingly rapid. There is much to be said for exploring the links between advances in technology and communication and the increase in the discussions of difficulties for masculinity, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, following on from Connell's own description of hegemonic masculinity, it can be argued that because men have traditionally controlled the channels of communication they have, therefore, had the power to conduct the discourse to their own advantage. If the crisis narrative has been talked into existence it has been done so by the men who dictate the public discourse and control the narrative.

What is it that men have lost though? Connell infers that the act of challenging the patriarchal order has caused a destabilisation of the entire gender order. Women unquestionably have vastly more opportunities than they previously had, but in the majority of arenas – and certainly when it comes to politics, economics, and wealth – men

²⁵ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 201-2.

still hold the bulk of the power. This is consistently borne out in statistics. In the 2010 midterm Congressional elections, the number of women elected to the Senate remained the same as before, but the number of women elected to the House of Representatives actually dropped for the first time since 1979, meaning that women accounted for just 17% of the seats in Congress. The United States performs woefully internationally in terms of female political participation, ranking just 73rd in overall representation in 2012.²⁷ The situation has improved somewhat since the 2014 midterms, which saw new women candidates elected to Congress in numbers described as “record breaking,” but which are still far from a proportionate reflection of the number of women citizens.²⁸ More tellingly, at the time of writing there has still yet to be a single female candidate for the office of President. Considering the treatment of both Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Presidential primaries and election, it would not be unreasonable to consider the election of a woman to the Oval Office as anything but a long shot, even taking if Clinton were to win the race for the Democratic nomination in 2016.

It is not just the political sphere in which men continue to dominate. Similarly, in the world of business, men continue to hold the majority of influence and power. Despite women making up over half of the workforce of the United States, only 24 of the current Fortune 500 companies have female CEOs, which works out at just 4.8%.²⁹ In a further sign of how skewed workforce dynamics are, the United States remains one of only three nations in the world that still does not have federally mandated paid maternity leave.³⁰ The National Institute for Mental Health reports that women in the United States are “70% more likely than men to experience depression in their lifetime.”³¹ It is, of course, worth pointing out that professionals disagree on the complete accuracy of these particular statistics, suggesting that women are more likely to seek help than men which leads to the higher instances reported. Similarly, a November 2011 study found that “women were

²⁷ “Fast Facts About Women in Politics,” *WCF Foundation*, accessed June 14, 2012, <http://www.wcffoundation.org/pages/research/women-in-politics-statistics.html>

²⁸ Alana Abramson, “Election 2014: How Female Candidates Fared in the Midterms,” *ABC News*, accessed December 23, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/election-2014-record-breaking-number-women-serve-congress/story?id=26716664>

²⁹ Caroline Fairchild, “Number of Fortune 500 women CEOs reaches historic high,” *Fortune.com*, accessed December 23, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2014/06/03/number-of-fortune-500-women-ceos-reaches-historic-high/>

³⁰ Adam Peck and Bryce Covert, “U.S. Paid Family Leave Versus The Rest Of The World, In 2 Disturbing Charts,” *Think Progress*, accessed December 23, 2015, <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2014/07/30/3465922/paid-family-leave/>

³¹ “What is Depression?” *National Institute for Mental Health*, accessed December 23, 2015, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/index.shtml>

more than twice as likely as men to take antidepressant medication (15.4 percent compared with 6.0 percent).”³²

Can we really say with any conviction, therefore, that masculinity has in fact lost anything? It has unquestionably had to adapt to social changes but, in the case of American masculinity, it can be argued that this has not been to the extent that we can reasonably apply the term “crisis.” It has evolved over time, but always in a manner that manages to maintain its own power. Connell observes that “the history of European/American masculinity over the last two hundred years can be broadly understood as the splitting of gentry masculinity, its gradual displacement by new hegemonic forms, and the emergence of an array of subordinated and marginalized masculinities.”³³ There is a sense that because new forms of masculinity have emerged and been recognised over the past hundred years or so that this in some way has delegitimised the idea of a dominant masculinity.

While this is certainly true in theory, in practice there still remains a very distinct advantage for the hegemonic masculinity which Connell refers to, and which can be defined in American terms as predominantly middle-class and white. However, if we are to accept Michael Kimmel’s version of the masculinity crisis narrative, to be a middle-class white male in America is to almost be denied a coherent identity as he declares, “I’m universally generalizable. As a middle-class white man, I have no class, no race, no gender. I’m the generic person!”³⁴ This plaintive cry for recognition would be faintly hilarious if it were not so dramatically tone deaf. Speaking from a position of unrivalled privilege in both gender and economic terms, Kimmel also claims that “American men have no history of themselves as men.”³⁵ This fundamentally ignores the fact that mainstream history in the United States is all about the achievements of men – and white men at that.

Kimmel essentially argues for a movement to liberate men in much the same way that feminism allowed women to step outside the confines of the home. He bemoans the idea of the white male being “generic,” of having no distinctive identity, but what an enormous privilege this is seems to escape him. To not be viewed in terms of gender or race, to not be marked in any way is a freedom beyond comprehension, certainly beyond the scope of the masculinity crisis narrative, and consequently not worth having. It

³² Jonathan Wolfe, “Who’s Taking Antidepressants? What the Numbers Show,” *Psychiatry Online*, accessed June 14, 2012, <http://psychnews.psychiatryonline.org/newsarticle.aspx?articleid=180851>

³³ Connell, *Masculinities*, 191.

³⁴ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

therefore must be seen as a negative thing. Everyone else, be it women or African Americans or any other distinct identity grouping, gets to define themselves as something specific. Could it be that the proponents of the crisis narrative and their interpretation of masculinity just want to be invited to the identity party? Sally Robinson suggests as much in *Marked Men* when she says that “invisibility is a privilege enjoyed by social groups who do not, thus, attract modes of surveillance and discipline, but it can also be felt as a burden in a culture that appears to organize itself around the visibility of difference and the symbolic currency of identity politics.”³⁶

A strong case can be made that the crisis of masculinity is a way for dominant men to create a challenge to their own order, something that they must battle against in order to reinforce the legitimacy of their position. Peter Middleton expands on this idea when he says

Oppression confers an identity. For members of an oppressed group to recognize that they are oppressed is crucial, because that is the moment when they perceive that their experience is not the result of their own specific nature or the nature of the world, but the result of an alterable state of things (however difficult change might be in practical terms). It is the recognition of injustice, of the fact that their oppression is the result of a systematic treatment of a group with which they are identified by others, whether or not they identify with it themselves.³⁷

It may very well be the case that there is no actual crisis in the sense that has been claimed, but by constantly insisting on the existence of one – however loosely defined it may be – it refocuses attention on masculinity that had been diverted elsewhere. Connell makes an interesting point that gender within masculinity, not just in relation to masculinity, plays an important role in shaping how men are viewed, and view themselves, saying that

To recognize diversities in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance, and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on. There is a gender politics within masculinity.³⁸

³⁶ Robinson, *Marked Men*, 3.

³⁷ Peter Middleton, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 146.

³⁸ Connell, *Masculinities*, 37.

Gender issues have undoubtedly been central in destabilising the foundations upon which a patriarchal society has been established for so long. Connell again expresses a desire to redefine how we look at masculinity by suggesting that

semiotic approaches abandon the level of personality and define masculinity through a system of symbolic difference in which masculine and feminine places are contrasted. Masculinity is, in effect, defined as not-femininity [...] To grapple with the full range of issues about masculinity we need ways of talking about relationships of other kinds too: about gendered places in production and consumption, places in institution and in natural environments, places in social and military struggles.³⁹

While it is difficult to argue with this hypothesis, it is also difficult to accept that these new places of which Connell speaks are entirely or exclusively gendered. Indeed, perhaps the insistence on viewing everything through the lens of gender is what creates the conditions for the masculinity crisis narrative in the first place.

In a specifically American context, it behoves us to take a slightly different approach. Compared to other countries, the history of the United States is relatively short and, as such, it is possible to observe other potential factors outside of gender issues that could play an equally important, if not more significant, role in forming masculine identity in that country. It cannot be denied that gender is central to the formulation of concepts of masculinity; the crudest definition still remains that masculinity is simply whatever is not feminine. But this in itself is a slightly reductive approach to utilise when seeking to define an identity, as if the absence of certain qualities is a sufficient description. However, when we examine masculinity in the United States, as with almost everything else American, the influence of the original founders and the course they set the nation upon cannot be ignored. The perennial issue of the American Dream – whatever it is – cannot but feed in to how masculinity (and femininity, and issues surrounding race, and class, and poverty, and wealth) developed in the United States. The individualism promoted by this vaguely defined dream is entirely at odds with the creation of a coherent national identity, let alone any other kind of identity one might claim. It also brings us back to notions of decline and decay, that there is some kind of generational failure at play in a supposed weakening of the American male. Susan Faludi suggests that for men in late twentieth-century America

³⁹ Ibid., 70-71.

This was to be the era of manhood after victory, when the pilgrimage to masculinity would be guided not by the god of war Mars, but by the dream of a pioneering trip to the planet Mars [...] The men of the fathers' generation had "won" the world and now they were giving it to their sons. Their nation had come into its own, powerful, wealthy, dominant.⁴⁰

In the same book, Faludi examines several specific case studies in which American men struggle to establish a solid identity for themselves in the wake of job losses or divorce. It also looks at a number of groups that sought fame, however fleeting, and the impact that this had on how they viewed themselves as men. Faludi's approach is steeped in gender theory. The men she analyses, and the theories she develops about American men and their masculinity, are intrinsically linked to their relationships with women and their attitudes to women in society. Faludi also accepts the idea of the masculinity crisis narrative but ultimately concludes that she, like many other observers, had been approaching it from the wrong angle:

If so many concurred in the existence of a male crisis, consensus collapsed as soon as anyone asked the question: Why? [...] I can see now that I was operating from an assumption both underexamined and dubious: that the male crisis in America was caused by something men were doing unrelated to something being done to them, and that its cure was surely to be found in figuring out how to get men to stop whatever it was.⁴¹

In keeping with the vast majority of literature on the masculinity crisis, Faludi concludes that it is the increasing industrialisation of society along with growing consumerism that causes men to feel the way they do. American culture, the narrative goes, has become all about image, lacks any substance and this, therefore, is what fuels the crisis for American men. There is no longer any meaning to what they do in our postmodern society.

While this is a persuasive argument, it does not fully get to the root of the problem. It also fails to recognise that this particular set of conditions is not in any way unique to men; everyone else is moving through the same social and cultural constructions as well. As with Kimmel, Faludi's approach is heavily focused on the twentieth century but still employs elements of the declension narrative. Faludi exalts the status of the fathers' generation. These were men who had fought wars with identifiable purposes, who had worked in factories and built things that were needed. In short, these were men who knew who they were and what they were doing. Yet this idea that the previous generation were

⁴⁰ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: Perennial, 2000), 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

somehow more accomplished, more masculine, more authentically American has been in existence in the United States for centuries. Even the jeremiads of the Puritans bemoaned the decline of religious belief in the colonies, thereby establishing a classic pattern of angst at the supposed failings of the next generation.

Susan Sontag comments on the idea of a shared or collective memory of something, suggesting that “what is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened.”⁴² This idea, not of a shared experience of masculinity, but of a stipulation of how men should feel is what I believe is at the root of this crisis narrative. In this thesis, I propose that this can also be applied to the experience of men and masculinity in the United States. The dominant narrative has become one of crisis, and so people are conditioned to accept it, believe in it, and possibly even live it. But it is still an artificially constructed crisis. It does not exist in reality the way that it is represented in literature. Somewhere along the way, it became accepted without question as part of the narrative. As James Gilbert notes

Because this literature was so pervasive and convincing in invoking a contemporary crisis of masculinity, American historians living through that period, or registering its aftershocks, may have accepted the terms of this phenomenon as expressed. More important, many of them were convinced that a history of character, in which gender panic was sometimes an explicit feature, represented a persuasive way to retell the story of American social development. Thus, the 1950s became a crucial decade as subject and object in a major reformation of American historiography, and this development in turn has continued to influence the writing of American history and gender history within it even today.⁴³

Elizabeth Long suggests that this sudden need to question the American experience was related to an acknowledgment that the concept of the American Dream was beginning to crumble as an aspiration for the vast majority of people. Where it had been “an ideal that once gave people direction, and bound their individual endeavors to a broader sense of American mission and progress [...] The promise of the early postwar years has dissolved into a period of cultural confusion and volatility.”⁴⁴ A serially overlooked aspect of the

⁴² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 85-86.

⁴³ Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 10-11.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Long, *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 3.

experience of men in the United States is the role that this broader national anxiety plays in the formulation of their identities.

There is a deep-seated duality at the heart of the American experience which I believe has been mistaken for a crisis in masculinity. There has always been an intrinsic conflict in American identity between the duelling concepts of individuality and conformity which has proved to be almost impossible to reconcile. Caleb Crain's account of Alexis de Tocqueville's travels in America outline the central points of this contradiction:

In 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville noticed that Americans were Cartesian in all but name. "Everyone shuts himself up tightly within himself," Tocqueville observed, "and insists upon judging the world from there." [...] Thanks to the rough parity of economic and political power that obtained here, no citizen was obliged to trust any other citizen. Everyone was free to adopt a wait-and-see approach [...]

This distrust helped to spark the Reformation and dethrone kings, but it worried Tocqueville, because the intellectual fire wall that it raised between Americans and their world isolated not just minds but hearts [...] The code of chivalry required a man to lay down his life for another, in an act of political love. But a democrat possesses no natural friends. "In ages of equality every man naturally stands alone; he has no hereditary friends whose co-operation he may demand, no class upon whose sympathy he may rely."⁴⁵

Clearly, from Tocqueville's account of his time in America there was already a well-established sense of contradiction present in the American experience. Americans were encouraged to pursue their own happiness and financial security but, as Tocqueville observes, this fostered a climate of competitiveness which did not allow for a sense of real unity to grow. They all may have been Americans together, but it can be argued that they were all Americans competing against each other together. The roots of this national anxiety undoubtedly stem from the struggle for independence. Given the tumultuous early years of the new democracy, and the almost inevitable Civil War in the 1860s, it is clear to see that the competing voices clamouring to impose a vision of what the United States should be failed to reach agreement. The idealistic nature of these ambitions did not give adequate weight to the impact that emphasising individual rights would have on the great enterprise of nation building. As Gordon Wood notes,

⁴⁵ Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 148-49.

In a monarchical world of numerous patron-client relations and multiple degrees of dependency, nothing could be more radical than this attempt to make every man independent. What was an ideal in the English-speaking world now became for Americans an ideological imperative.⁴⁶

The enormity of the task was not lost on those involved in the revolution, but the independent republican utopia they had envisioned did not come to pass:

Instead of creating a new order of benevolence and selflessness, enlightened republicanism was breeding social competitiveness and individualism; and there seemed no easy way of stopping it. Since at the outset most revolutionary leaders had conceded primacy to society over government, to modern social virtue over classical public virtue, they found it difficult to resist people's absorption in their private lives and interests. The Revolution was the source of its own contradictions.⁴⁷

In accepting this concept of a duality at the heart of the American experience, we can move to a point where we can begin to question the validity of the masculinity crisis narrative as it currently stands. It is established and accepted theory, but the evidence put forward in its support proves to have a gap in its foundation. The tendency to prioritise the impact of modernity, capitalism, and feminism means that the proponents of the crisis narrative leave out a fascinating aspect of American identity, but as it is one that is not limited to men and masculinity it would somewhat undermine the crisis narrative.

From the very beginning, to be American has meant attempting to reconcile the duality of an intense individualism, and belief in one's own exceptionalism, with a sense of national patriotism. The pursuit of this American dream engenders a sense of endless striving for achievement, and improvement of one's material position. This struggle has created the conditions for an anxiety to emerge which, I argue, has made more of an impression on American masculinity than anything to do with the performance of gender roles. It is this broader mood of a national anxiety that will be at the heart of this thesis as it engages with writers and critics in an attempt to reassess the masculinity crisis narrative in an American context.

It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to examine in detail the entire history of masculinity in America. The specific experience of black men in America is something

⁴⁶ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 179.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

that is deliberately not addressed here as it does not occupy a dominant social position in the same way that white masculinity does.⁴⁸ Even aspects of white masculinity, such as the genre of the Western and its attempt at a form of recuperative masculinity that retreats from domesticity, or elements of post-9/11 fiction and trauma fall outside of the remit of this thesis.⁴⁹ However, it is possible to identify trends as have been outlined here, and apply them to contemporary literature in order to illustrate the central argument of this project, namely that the masculinity crisis narrative is a reductive, simplistic, yet populist approach to issues of identity in America. To this end, three writers of fiction – Richard Yates, Richard Ford, and Jonathan Franzen - have been selected on the basis of their being white, middle-class, male writers and, as such, would be seen as exemplars of the crisis narrative. What this thesis tries to do, however, is to engage with these writers and the texts they produce from a different angle. Instead of reading them as stereotypes of the white male in crisis, I approach them as texts that speak to a broader interpretation of the American experience, one that is not solely concentrated on the plight of the white male, but can be shown to impact both men and women alike.

The specific novels of each writer that will be discussed throughout have been deliberately selected to allow for a chronological sweep of the discourse surrounding the masculinity in crisis narrative. Contrary to the standard theory of regular eruptions of concern about what is wrong with America's men, I argue that this concern has been evident from the beginning of the American project, but has been co-opted into the historical narrative over time, and moulded to form a version of American identity that makes clear, but ultimately flawed, delineations between how men and women experience American exceptionalism.

In selecting the novels for consideration here, I have attempted to create links between each chapter, either through the selection of works by the same writer (such as Richard Yates), writers who have been influenced by others discussed in the thesis (Richard Ford's deference to Yates), or writers who can be seen as a product of the crisis narrative as it has developed in recent years (Jonathan Franzen). Each chapter is an attempt

⁴⁸ Critics such as bell hooks have considered the issue of black masculinity in much more detail than it is possible for me to do here.

⁴⁹ For a more recent consideration of trauma narratives see Alan Gibbs's *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014) in which he discusses the "self-reinforcing circuit of fictional and non-fictional prose narratives that existed in tandem with a supporting critical structure" (2), an approach that is similar to what this thesis attempts to do.

to build upon the previous one rather than four discreet sections and, as such, there is an effort to create a dialogue across the entire dissertation.

Although there has been a resurgence of interest in Richard Yates's writing, there is still a lack of critical analysis on a writer who regularly engaged with themes of isolation, alienation, and disappointment that consistently appear in discourse on the masculinity crisis. The first chapter of this thesis looks at *Revolutionary Road*, which was published in 1961. Considering the novel is deliberately set in 1955 in order to take full advantage of an American setting that has yet to see the Civil Rights movement or desegregation take place, *Revolutionary Road* is the natural starting point for this thesis coming as it does at the beginning of great social change in America. Chapter One examines how Yates presents the Wheelers and the novel's suburban setting as indicative of an American malaise, not a masculinity crisis. Indeed, the analysis in this thesis seeks to position Yates, not as a critic of suburban America, but of the unreasonable expectations that resulted in the emergence of the suburbs' negative reputation. This chapter also looks at other novels, such as Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, that deal with similar themes as a way of demonstrating that this was not anything new in 1950s American life.

Chapter Two takes Yates's 1976 novel, *The Easter Parade*, as its starting point. What little criticism there is of Yates tends to concentrate on *Revolutionary Road*, to the detriment of his other work, and in particular *The Easter Parade* which is one of his best books. Unusual in Yates's body of work for the relative swiftness of its production but also, more notably, for its female protagonists, *The Easter Parade* provides a direct counterpoint to the masculinity in crisis narrative with which Yates can usually be associated. Where *Revolutionary Road* was written just as the second wave of feminism was beginning to gain traction, *The Easter Parade* is a product of a society that had seen significant change in the role of women and what they expected from their lives. As a way of developing the idea of a trend that is not the sole domain of the white male or highbrow literary fiction, this chapter also looks at, among others, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and Jacqueline Susann's bestselling *The Valley of the Dolls*, by way of comparison. It broadens the analysis beyond the confines of Yates's work to interrogate the ways in which other writers at the time engaged with similar themes and chart a trajectory through the crisis narratives of the 1960s and 70s. Although this chapter utilises *The Easter Parade* as a pivot, it is not, in the strictest sense, a second Yates chapter. In seeking to identify and establish the progression of the central argument of this thesis, including Yates here creates a link to connect several

different writers to a common theme of questioning accepted narratives of identity in American society.

Richard Ford's series of Bascombe books is the subject of Chapter Three. As with Yates, any criticism on Ford has tended to be quite narrow, often trying to force him into the category of a Southern writer regardless of whether he fits or not. His inclusion in this thesis is not only a means of creating a coherent timeline in my own argument, but also an attempt to broaden the analysis of Ford and his Bascombe books. Relatively evenly spaced, with approximately a decade between the publication of each of the four books, they act as a survey of a particular type of American life and how it changes over the thirty years that the books span. Beginning with *The Sportswriter*, published in 1986, and continuing on through *Independence Day* (1995), *The Lay of the Land* (2006), and *Let Me Be Frank With You* (2014), Ford traces social, political, and economic trends in American culture through the lens of Frank Bascombe's droll observations. I am deliberately reading the Bascombe books as a unified piece, despite the obvious difference in the structure of *Let Me Be Frank With You* as a series of novellas. Ford himself has discussed the development of the series, noting that while it was never his intention to write four connected books because "I didn't believe I was the calibre of writer who *could* write connected novels," nevertheless by the time he came to write *The Lay of the Land* his "not entirely envisioned 'trilogy' came about."⁵⁰ Their inclusion also allows for a development of the argument across the decades, maintaining the chronological sweep of the thesis. This chapter also picks up on, and develops, ideas from the preceding chapters relating to life in suburban America, and the persistence of its stereotypically negative depictions. The concept of authorial intention is also analysed, particularly in relation to the generally accepted interpretation of Frank Bascombe as a man in crisis.

The cliché of boring suburban life is again addressed in Chapter Four which deals with three novels by Jonathan Franzen – *The Corrections* (2001), *Freedom* (2010), and *Purity* (2015). Considering Franzen's status as one of the most well-known American writers, it is somewhat surprising that, like Ford, there is something of a gap when it comes to a substantial body of criticism on his work to date. The idea of a masculinity crisis is something that pervades Franzen's writing, and in concluding with an analysis of his three

⁵⁰ Richard Ford, "Frank and me: Richard Ford on his Bascombe novels," *Financial Times*, accessed August 10, 2016, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/7900fd24-5858-11e4-b331-00144feab7de.html>.

big books, we are able to examine the crisis narrative as it stands today. This chapter examines the ways in which Franzen presents male and female characters, and the more troubling aspects of his engagement with issues surrounding gender and sexual politics. The selection of three substantial works from Franzen is deliberate, highlighting the recurring themes he engages with and the lack of progression in how he presents them. It suggests that Franzen is an enthusiastic inheritor of the literary crisis narrative which subsequently problematizes his position as one of America's foremost contemporary writers.

Taken as a whole, this thesis will challenge the dominant narrative of a middle-class white masculinity crisis as presented in American fiction, and will propose an alternative interpretation, one that erases the arbitrarily imposed gender divide and instead offers a reading that suggests a more inclusive approach involving the overwhelmingly common elements of American exceptionalism. At the centre of my approach is the idea that the masculinity crisis narrative is limiting. In its current, and historical, iteration it constricts analysis of accepted cultural narratives and insists on narrowly defined definitions of what it is to be American. It is exclusionary and reactionary and entirely self-serving. In trying to claim a similar narrative of oppression that historically marginalised identities have articulated, it misses the point that those same models of oppression simply cannot be applied to masculinity, coming as it does from a historically embedded position of power and dominance. What this thesis suggests is that the way in to a more nuanced discussion of American masculinity is not to read it in terms of gender, but to read it in terms of America.

A fundamental part of my reading is an acceptance of the pervasiveness of a theory of exceptionalism throughout American society and culture. While it may have altered somewhat from the original Puritan settlers' ambitions to establish a religious community that would be a beacon for the world, this idea of striving for perfection in the American grain has remained. Indeed, as Deborah Madsen observes

American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans. Though the arguments themselves change over time, the basic assumptions and terms of reference do not change, and it is

the assumptions that are derived in important ways from the exceptionalist logic taken to the New World by the first Puritan migrants.⁵¹

In seeking to reposition ideas of American exceptionalism as central to any debate about American masculinity, I am not attempting to delegitimise ideas of crisis or genuine issues affecting American men in terms of mental health. What this thesis does intend, however, is to demonstrate how the narrative as it pertains to representations of crisis in fiction have warped the discussion, undermining legitimate concerns and creating a circular debate that only serves to further entrench the gender divide.

⁵¹ Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, (BAAS Paperbacks: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 1.

The True, the Good, the Beautiful. They're just around the corner, in the next corridor; they're in the next book, the one you haven't read, or in the next stack, the one you haven't got to. But you'll get to it someday. And when you do—when you do...

John Williams, *Stoner*

Chapter One: “Hopeless Emptiness?” Deceptive Narratives and Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*

“The important thing, always, was to remember who you were” – so says Frank Wheeler, the protagonist of Richard Yates’s 1961 novel, *Revolutionary Road*.¹ Frank fully subscribes to the theory that life in the suburbs of 1950s America is dull, banal, and stiflingly conformist. However, if he can just remember who he really is – not a corporate grey-flannelled drone, but a unique individual with endless potential – then he can happily pass the time in his suburban home until something more in keeping with his personal sense of exceptionalism comes along. Given Yates’s obsession with writing about male characters in the midst of some kind of calamity, Frank is often considered part of a parade of Yates characters in books that “negotiate a crisis in masculinity characteristic of the 1950s and early 1960s.”² Unhappily married, uncomfortably domiciled in the suburbs of Connecticut, and unsatisfactorily employed in a corporate behemoth, Frank dreams of a grander life but repeatedly fails to make these fantasies a reality. In fact, this failure of fantasy in all of Yates’s writing suggests that something fundamental is rotten at the core of American existence, for both men and women.

Contrary to the prevailing trends in psychiatry and cultural commentary at the time, which will be discussed later in this chapter, the central tragedy of Frank Wheeler’s life is not, I contend, a crisis of his masculinity. It becomes apparent quite early in the novel that if Frank and his wife, April, are victims of anything, it is of their own pretensions to superiority. Throughout Yates’s novel, the consequences of chasing an American Dream so vaguely defined as to be inexplicable become all too evident as the Wheelers struggle to the brutally inevitable conclusion of their narrative. Given that a significant amount of writing on the masculinity crisis references representations of men in fiction and film as

¹ Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Vintage, 2007), 20.

² Kate Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 159.

indicative of a broader societal trend, it is, therefore, appropriate in this instance to employ examples from American fiction to present an alternative interpretation of this so-called crisis. As outlined in the Introduction, the central argument of this thesis is that the narrative of masculinity in crisis is disingenuous at best, only serving to mask more pertinent issues surrounding the construction of an American identity.

It is from this point, one of a broader scope of American identity, as a whole rather than a gender-based crisis, that we come to the writing of Richard Yates. Although his writing career spanned several decades, he was consistently – almost obsessively – preoccupied with the mentality of 1950s America, rarely straying from the same “half-acre of pain” that one reviewer criticised him for.³ Ann Beattie has suggested that “[t]here’s something in him of the spirit of Robert Burns, whose famous poem lamented that we cannot see ourselves as others see us. Yates’ characters don’t dare, because therein lies the tragedy.”⁴ This motif of willing self-deception recurs throughout Yates’s writing, and the idea of deception and false narratives is something that is woven strongly throughout *Revolutionary Road*. His characters are often fully aware of how they delude themselves as to their own potential, yet they persist in these delusions, unwilling or unable to change their ways, paralysed by the fear and anxiety of being exposed as somehow less than they imagine themselves to be. They resist all exhortations to view their lives honestly.

This stands in stark contrast to Yates’s own unflinching honesty as a writer. He was a proponent of high realism, always searching for the most truthful means of making his point. He was particularly resistant to what he considered the trickery and insincerity in the writing of many of his more experimental contemporaries, resenting the plaudits that came their way for what he saw as lazy chicanery. In many ways, the overarching theme of all of his fiction is the artifice of modern society, and the pressure it places on his protagonists to be more accomplished in ever more bewildering and unknown ways.

Yates’s writing, both his novels and short stories, almost always contains some form of autobiographical element. Indeed, it is difficult to find a piece that does not have some echo of his life or personal experiences. He is notorious for the uncompromising

³ Robert Tower, “Richard Yates and his unhappy people,” *The New York Times* November 1, 1981 <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/01/books/richard-yates-and-his-unhappy-people.html?pagewanted=all>

⁴ Ann Beattie, “Out of Oblivion: A writer rejoices that Richard Yates’ stories are back in print,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 6, 2001. <http://sfgate.com/books/article/Out-of-Oblivion-A-writer-rejoices-that-Ricard-2922737.php>

manner in which he presents his characters, resisting any semblance of a trite or happy denouement. He has been accused of being bleak, depressing, wilfully narrow in his choice of topics, and horribly sexist in his treatment of female characters. Yet despite all of these shortcomings – and there is certainly an element of truth in all of them – Yates is also considered one of the great chroniclers of what came to be known as the Age of Anxiety, and the curious phenomenon that was life in the mid-twentieth century American suburbs.⁵

The almost relentless hardship of Yates's own life provided him with ample material to draw on in his writing. Born in Yonkers in 1926, he was the son of a flighty mother with pretensions to artistic greatness and, more significantly, a desire for acceptance in the more exclusive social circles of the East Coast. His parents divorced when he was just three years old, and his childhood was beset by chronic instability as he and his older sister moved from place to place with their mother. This was often because she had found a social set that fulfilled the criteria that she aspired to, but more often it was to escape unpaid rent and bills. Yates fought in World War II, but was constantly plagued by nagging doubts about his performance as a soldier, something made abundantly clear in the novel *A Special Providence*. Eventually published in 1969, after a torturous writing process that saw Yates almost buckle under the pressure of producing an adequate follow up to *Revolutionary Road*, the novel's protagonist Robert Prentice is shown to be a hapless daydreamer who never fully fits in. Yates was married twice and although both unions ended acrimoniously, he was a devoted if slightly distracted father to his three daughters. The restlessness of his childhood appears to have stayed with him as he moved from place to place throughout his life, looking for any kind of writing work that would pay him enough to support himself and his daughters. He once commented to an interviewer that "as long as I've lived, getting out of wherever I am has seemed an appealing idea."⁶

To say that Yates smoked is to vastly understate the sheer scale of damage he did to his lungs throughout his life. He was notorious for his hacking, consuming cough, was hospitalised for months with TB, and only finally gave up smoking towards the end of his

⁵ K.A. Cuordileone suggests on p.102 of *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* that the idea of the Age of Anxiety took hold in popular consciousness after the publication of the W.H. Auden poem of that title in 1947.

⁶ Blake Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (New York: Picador, 2003), 2.

life when he was almost constantly connected to oxygen tanks, surprising himself with how easy it was to quit. As an alcoholic, he recklessly exacerbated his bipolar disorder, refusing to curb his drinking despite repeated warnings from doctors about the health risks he could face from the toxic interaction of his anti-psychotic medication with alcohol. Reading his excellent biography, written by Blake Bailey and published in 2003, reveals a man who suffered numerous mental breakdowns that often ended in his committal to an institution. These episodes became increasingly severe as he grew older. And yet, somehow, he managed to live to the age of 66 and produced seven novels and two short story collections. As James Wood remarks in *The New Yorker*, “smoking and drinking [...] they only killed him, while writing plainly kept him alive.”⁷

Yates never wrote while drunk. Despite this one concession to discipline, however, he was a slow writer, experienced regular blocks, agonised over every word he set down on the page, and was infuriated by what he saw as his own laborious lack of speed. He never felt that his work received the recognition it deserved and was caustic in his dismissal of some of his contemporaries, partly out of jealousy of the apparent ease with which they produced work and earned seemingly endless plaudits, and partly out of an honest contempt for what he saw as the flashy emptiness of much contemporary writing. Throughout his life, he was tormented by the thoughts of his own failings as a writer, something which only seemed to make him even more compulsive in his dedication to his craft. A victim of a combination of terrible timing and his own self-destructive tendencies, apart from a brief window of celebration following the publication of *Revolutionary Road* in 1961, he would never feel that he had exploited his full potential. As early as 1972 in an interview for *Ploughshares*, he could already see that his relative lack of recognition was partly his own fault:

in my more arrogant or petulant moments, I still think *Revolutionary Road* ought to be famous. I was sore as hell when it first went out of print, and when Norman Podhoretz made a very small reference to it in his book several years ago as an “unfairly neglected novel” I wanted every reader in America to stand up and cheer. But of course deep down I know that kind of thinking is nonsense [...] What happened after those two books was my own fault, nobody else’s [...] I can’t

⁷ James Wood, “Like Men Betrayed,” *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2008.
http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/12/15/081215crbo_books_wood

honestly claim that my stuff has been neglected; it's probably received just about the degree of attention it deserves. I simply haven't published enough to expect more.⁸

In his later years, Yates would often be found in his favourite booth at his local bar in Boston listing his published work, as he raced against time to reach his own, ultimately unfulfilled, personal goal of fifteen books.⁹

Over the years, Yates's writing would go in and out of fashion, and print, with alarming regularity. Only the efforts of other writers such as his friends Kurt Vonnegut and Andre Dubus, and more lately Richard Ford, have kept his name alive in literary circles. All of his books were out of print until very recently. *Revolutionary Road* was reissued by Vintage in 2000, and an Everyman collection of *Revolutionary Road*, *The Easter Parade*, and *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* was published in 2009. Vintage later reissued all of Yates's work in 2008 around the same time that the director Sam Mendes finally brought a film version of *Revolutionary Road*, starring Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio, to the screen.

Yates was considered a master of the short story form, publishing two collections – *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962) and *Liars in Love* (1981). In spite of the almost universal acknowledgement of his skill in this particular form, *The New Yorker* rejected every single piece he submitted during his lifetime, something that Yates obsessed over. Somewhat perversely, they eventually published one of his stories, “The Canal,” nine years after his death to coincide with the publication of the *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates* in 2001. The earlier collection in particular indicated the tone and topics that Yates would repeatedly return to over the course of his career touching on lonely outsiders, frustrated ambitions, and failures of communication. “The Best of Everything” can almost be seen as a prequel to the unhappy marriages that would populate Yates's longer form fiction, but this collection also includes a broader range of characters and situations, many of them more urban-centred than the suburban, domestic setting of *Revolutionary Road*.

In contrast to the roster of characters in his short stories, his longer fiction is almost exclusively, and often brutally, autobiographical. Representations of his mother, his father, his sister, his wives, of him, repeatedly appear in his novels. Although he is unflinchingly direct in the portrayal of every character, sometimes painfully so, Yates reserves the most microscopic interrogation for those characters based on himself and his

⁸ Richard Yates, “From the Archive: An Interview with Richard Yates,” by DeWitt Henry and Geoffrey Clark, *Ploughshares* 37.3 (2011): <https://www.pshares.org/issues/fall-2011/archive-interview-richard-yates>

⁹ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 530.

mother. Through these portraits, he examines the destructive impact of the clash between fantasy and reality, between improbable dreams and the practicalities of day-to-day life. These characters, traced from the outline of his mother and himself, always believe they could get more from life, that they are not fulfilling their potential as individuals. However, this is persistently undermined by a creeping suspicion that they are fully aware of their own limitations, but choose to ignore them.

The sense of compulsion in Yates's fiction is powerful. This compulsion to write, to the detriment of his health, financial security, and personal relationships, is reflected in his characters who are also compelled to see out the unhappy conclusions of their narratives. The reader, and the author, can see the dangers inherent in the delusions his characters entertain, but we are also painfully aware that they can never alter their course. To do so would be to fundamentally change who they are. Through an unrelenting examination of his own struggles as a writer, and as a troubled individual, Yates suggests that there is something more complicated at work than simply wanting what you cannot have. In his own words, his characters "rush around trying to do their best – trying to live well, within their known or unknown limitations, doing what they can't help doing, ultimately and inevitably failing because they can't help being the people they are. *That's* what brings the calamity at the end."¹⁰

The majority of his protagonists are men who struggle with almost every facet of their lives: their jobs, their marriages, their relationships with women and other men, their own sense of individuality. These are not high achievers. They dream of being accomplished but are doomed to be even more pathetic Walter Mittys. This tendency to focus on male characters goes hand in hand with the fact that Yates was unashamedly anti-feminist. He accused his second wife of taking up with "women's libbers" when she finally decided to leave him. He held very traditional views about the role of women – mainly that they should stay at home and have lots of babies. He once got into a heated argument with a female writer with whom he was in competition for a Guggenheim award, which ended with him pointing out that she didn't deserve to win because "you're a girl, and you've got a baby."¹¹ However, in his fiction we see, somewhat surprisingly, a more complex version of the American woman who appears to be just as prone to the same travails as the male characters who usually dominate his narratives. He may undoubtedly have been a sexist

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Ibid., 245.

with infuriatingly old-fashioned attitudes to the women in his life, but that does not save his female characters from the same discontent that haunts his men. Both his male and female characters are ordinary people equally cursed with just enough awareness to wish they were extraordinary.

It is this desire to be something other than ordinary that creates much of the conflict in Yates's writing. He writes of an America that demanded two fundamentally contradictory ways of being from its citizens: to conform to the dominant, accepted trends but also to stand out from the crowd in some way. These conflicting burdens bring us to a point where we must re-examine the narrative surrounding representations of American masculinity in crisis. The men of Yates's uncomfortably familiar fictional universe are blighted with personalities prone to dramatic, hysterical crises, but the same can also be said of his women. All of his characters suffer from a particularly American malaise. They all long for the right to consider themselves exceptional. They all yearn to be considered unique. Yet none of them are entirely sure how any of this can be achieved.

The America that Yates writes of is populated with people struggling to reconcile the day-to-day banality of their lives with a culturally engrained set of beliefs that tells them they can be anything they want to be. This manifests itself in a misguided belief that all desires should be fulfilled, that everyone is entitled to see their wildest dreams come true. But it also creates a crippling discontent; when everyone else subscribes to a similar belief, it makes it almost impossible to define what is exceptional about one's own existence, resulting in a sensation of stalling, of immobility. Consequently, we are confronted with a plethora of issues arising out of this stagnant American dream which are fundamentally at odds with the hope and potential that marked the foundation of the state. Yates himself indicated that the title of *Revolutionary Road* was "meant to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 [...] our best and bravest revolutionary spirit had come to something very much like a dead end in the 50s."¹² Without ever explicitly mentioning it, Yates therefore calls into question the validity of the American Dream and all its attendant complications. A country that was essentially founded as a concept had, to Yates, run out of ideas. In the same way that the closing of the frontier is alluded to in the opening of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* as a kind of full stop on progress, Yates's characters continue the cyclical

¹² Yates, "From the Archive: An Interview with Richard Yates."

struggle with the idea of what comes next. What do you do when you reach the end of the road?

In a similar vein, in his analysis of the idea of an American Dream, Richard Rorty articulates the inherent contradiction in American society. It is the establishment of the United States as a man-made concept rather than a naturally evolving society that creates so much of the difficulty in defining what it actually means to make it in America. He expands on this further, saying

You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become, as well as in terms of what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.¹³

The whole meaning of being an American in America is called into question when, at the heart of this American dream, there exists a requirement to pursue dreams and fantasy over lived reality.

Throughout Yates's fiction, it is just such a contradiction that is at the root of his characters' problems. They are so obsessed with their fantasies and outsized ambitions that they fail to live the life they actually have. The dream state, or the idealised nation state, comes to take precedence over mundane everyday life. This subsequently feeds into other identity issues, allowing individuals to become beholden to the fantasy of who they wish they could be rather than finding a way to exist contentedly within their natural limits. It is this cultural dichotomy, I contend, rather than a crisis of the gender order, that is the root of the psychological issues felt by mid-century middle-class Americans. Yates is of particular relevance to exploring this idea because, as Kate Charlton-Jones observes

Yates indicates how people of both genders take refuge in self-aggrandizing fantasies and demonstrates how the aspirations of his characters are not only indicative of a human tendency to mythologize and exaggerate but also represent something far more dangerous. It is the refusal to see things as they are that implicitly prevents them from ever living fulfilled lives.¹⁴

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 101.

¹⁴ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 211.

As mentioned earlier, these issues have existed since the foundation of the state. However, it is with the emergence of a sustained narrative of masculinity in crisis in the 1950s that things become muddled. All of a sudden, the middle-class white male found himself at the centre of a vociferous campaign rooted in gender theory and the pressures of modern society. Forgotten were the deeply problematic issues resulting from an idea as tenuous and elastic as the American Dream, and in their stead emerged an ever-increasing clamour to declare American men and their masculinity under attack. The rest of this chapter will begin to trace an alternative path through the established narrative of white, middle-class masculinity in crisis. Using *Revolutionary Road* as the pivot around which a number of other texts will also be analysed, it will explore a new narrative which encompasses a broader theme of national anxiety for both American men and women.

In 1922, Sinclair Lewis published *Babbitt*, a deeply satirical take on the life of a middle-class American business man. When we first meet George Babbitt, he is a pillar of the community who is a member of all the right clubs, and steadfastly observes all the norms of the social circle he moves in. The Babbitts are a textbook family, as indicated by the description of their house's master bedroom:

It was a masterpiece among bedrooms, right out of Cheerful Modern Houses for Median Incomes. Only it had nothing to do with the Babbitts, nor with any one else. If people had ever lived and loved here, read thrillers at midnight and lain in beautiful indolence on a Sunday morning, there were no signs of it. It had the air of being a very good room in a very good hotel [...] Every second house in Floral Heights had a bedroom precisely like this.¹⁵

However, all of this is not enough for Babbitt because, as Lewis observes “there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house. It was not a home.”¹⁶ Babbitt gradually becomes more and more unsettled, questioning everything from his marriage to the way he does business, to the very foundation of a capitalist system. Babbitt becomes so unhinged in his discontent that he lies awake at night questioning the point of a fishing trip with one of his friends: “For many minutes, for many hours, for a bleak eternity, he lay awake, shivering, reduced to primitive terror, comprehending that he had won freedom, and wondering what he could do with anything so unknown and so embarrassing as freedom.”¹⁷ Until this point, Babbitt has always done what was expected of him. To find himself suddenly

¹⁵ Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 23-24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

unshackled is deeply disturbing, and is something that recurs in many of the novels that will be discussed in this thesis. Having loudly complained at length about needing some time away from his family, the actual prospect of it is much more daunting than anyone could reasonably expect.

Babbitt goes completely off the rails, alienating himself from business colleagues, embarking on an affair, and socialising with a group of people that he and his old friends would have frowned upon for their unconventional behaviour. Eventually, however, Babbitt is brought back into the safety net of the home. His wife, fully aware of his affair, forgives him and they both return to the comfort of their unexciting marriage. There is still a small trace of rebellion in Babbitt when, at the end of the novel, he reassures his son Ted that he will support him in his decisions after his surprise marriage to the girl next door, saying, “those folks in there will try to bully you, and tame you down. Tell ’em to go to the devil! I’ll back you.”¹⁸ Although Babbitt returns to almost the same starting position as he held at the beginning of the novel, the rigid, unyielding conformity he once subscribed to is softened ever so slightly.

Babbitt is just one example of an author taking the subject of intense conformity and examining it in the context of American culture. The general consensus is that the 1950s in America marked the emergence of a solid and sustained effort to homogenise every aspect of life. Yet Lewis’s novel was published in 1922, before the tumultuous years of World War II which supposedly created the urge to conform to a standardised norm, and in it we see the same cookie-cutter houses and compulsion to keep up with the neighbours that marks stereotypical accounts of life in 1950s America. So recognisable was George Babbitt to the reading public that the idea of Babbitt as a noun became absorbed into American culture. Sloan Wilson invoked the term in his subsequent lament about how *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was misinterpreted, bemoaning the fact that people saw the character he had created as indicative of a certain “American type more kindly and intelligent than a Babbitt, but still a rather limited sort of fellow.”¹⁹ Later still, Richard Ford employed the term “perfect Babbitts” to describe the unadventurous men Frank Bascombe meets as part of a Divorced Men’s Club.²⁰ Essentially, conformity is a constant presence in American culture. It may take different shapes and forms but, at its heart,

¹⁸ Ibid., 380.

¹⁹ Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (London: Penguin, 2005), 279.

²⁰ Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 80.

America is a fundamentally traditional, conformist society. Perhaps what marks the 1950s out as an exceptional decade is the wider political implications and the sense that the consequences of straying from a pre-determined path were more sinister than merely facing the opprobrium of one's neighbours.

It is this atmosphere of heightened tension that helped to produce such controversial pieces as Norman Mailer's 1957 essay on hipsters, "The White Negro." In it, he describes the 1950s as a decade plagued by fear and neurosis, a time in which all individuality was discouraged:

One could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one's own voice, for the years in which one could complacently accept oneself as part of an élite by being radical were gone. A man knew that when he dissented, he gave a note upon his life which could be called in any year of overt crisis. No wonder then that these have been years of conformity and depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve.²¹

It is just such a failure of nerve that throws Babbitt back into the circles that he always moved in, returning to the status quo albeit ever so slightly altered internally. The aberrant years of World War II, which saw the traditional social order upended, created a much sharper contrast with which to compare the traditional way of life that was supposedly what everyone would return to.

The nuclear family, always a significant part of any expression of American values, became the central fulcrum around which Cold War propaganda revolved. Dissent from this narrative was severely frowned upon. Where once the pursuit of exceptionalism and proclaiming your individualism was the order of the day, it came to seem that the dominant force in American life was to defer to a new concept of safe, unthreatening conformity. But as seen in the travails of George Babbitt, this was not a new experience for American citizens. Indeed, writers such as Edith Wharton and Henry James alluded to similar experiences in their work, which suggests that this tension existed even before the publication of *Babbitt*. It was, however, framed in a new narrative and so came to seem even more proscriptive than before. Any sense of deviation from the status quo was considered to be not only a failure of character but also a failure of patriotism. Elaine Tyler May explains the reasoning behind such trends in her study of American families during the Cold War, noting that

²¹ Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," in *Advertisements for Myself* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 291.

National strength depended upon the ability of strong, manly men to stand up against communist threats. It was not simply a matter of general weakness leading to a soft foreign policy; rather, sexual excesses or degeneracy would make individuals prey for communist tactics. According to the common wisdom of the time, “normal” heterosexual behavior culminating in marriage represented “maturity” and “responsibility”; therefore, those who were “deviant” were, by definition, irresponsible, immature, and weak. It followed that men who were slaves to their passions could easily be duped by seductive women who worked for communists.²²

As a result of this prevailing belief, the 1950s saw the emergence of a new breed of young American as immortalised in Sloan Wilson’s novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955). Wilson wrote of “a lot of bright young men in gray flannel suits rushing around New York in a frantic parade to nowhere. They seemed to me to be pursuing neither ideals nor happiness – they were pursuing a routine.”²³

This was the standard white collar worker who commuted from his average home in the homogenous suburbs to his non-descript job in the city where “it was fashionable [...] to be cynical about one’s employer.”²⁴ Nothing about his existence marked him out as different from any of the countless other grey-suited drones who filled the commuter trains and high-rise office buildings of America’s cities in the aftermath of World War II. So generic and indistinguishable was this man that he became the poster boy for conformity in a decade that prized conformity above all else. This is not to say that the “gray flannel man” was accepted as a necessary by-product of the new post-war America. Wilson’s novel articulated the sense of unease and discontent that was bubbling under the surface of this seemingly well-adjusted citizen. Somewhat paradoxically, Wilson did not set out to write a cautionary tale about the pressures of conformity, instead viewing the book as “largely autobiographical.”²⁵ Many years later, he also lamented the tendency of “all sorts of serious thinkers” to “keep using the title of the book in their writings to designate a certain, instantly recognizable kind of man.”²⁶ Wilson clearly viewed Tom Rath as a sympathetic hero who struggled against the pressures of modern society rather than the bland corporate drone that reviewers and readers identified.

²² Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 82.

²³ Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, 272.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.

The tacit complicity with which these men, and as a direct consequence, their families, embraced the dominant narrative of family values and constant upward mobility for the good of America created a contradiction that some began to question. The sense of a never-ending quest was inescapable. While Wilson might not have intended it, Tom and Betsy Rath, the couple at the centre of the book, succumb to just the same sort of doubts. They find it “curious to believe that that house [...] was probably the end of their personal road. It was impossible to believe. Somehow something would have to happen.”²⁷ As Wilson puts it later in the novel, “contentment was a source of contempt.”²⁸

The pressure to conform to what was considered acceptable, and fashionable, at the time causes a brief disruption in Tom and Betsy’s existence. Wilson comes perilously close to giving voice to the inner struggles of many Americans when Tom wonders if “it’s a matter of expectations” that is the source of their unhappiness.²⁹ The pursuit of the ideal lifestyle at all costs creates an inevitable disappointment with their situation in life as it routinely fails to match those dreams:

he and Betsy had always expected so much! Everything would be perfect for them, they had expected from the beginning. They would be rich, they would be healthy, and they would do no wrong. Any deviation from perfection had seemed a blight which ruined the whole.³⁰

Just as it begins to appear that Wilson might follow through with an indictment of the hollowness of the American Dream, and the pressure to conform that the Raths find themselves struggling under, Tom and Betsy find all their dreams coming true and live happily ever after. It is the happy ending to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* that should disabuse readers of any intention on Wilson’s part to challenge the dominant narrative of chasing the American Dream. Tom and Betsy escape from their dull, poorly-maintained suburban house with its crack in the shape of a question mark on one of the walls, and become property developers, presumably about to embark on a path towards financial wealth and personal fulfilment. Their trajectory, Wilson’s novel suggests, shows that it is possible to have it all; there may be a struggle, but the happy ending will eventually materialise.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 109.

²⁹ Ibid., 175.

³⁰ Ibid.

In some ways, *Revolutionary Road* echoes many aspects of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Once again, we are presented with a young couple living in the suburbs in a house they hate, but bought anyway because it was what young couples with children did, and a man apparently stultified by his dullest of dull jobs while he and his wife grow increasingly bitter about the elusive nature of their dreams of exceptionalism. However, unlike Wilson, Yates confronts both the Wheelers and his readers with a more complex interpretation of the supposed plight of young Americans. He provides an early hint that all will not be well with the epigraph he selected to open the novel, “Alas! When passion is both meek and wild!” Taken from the John Keats poem, “Isabella,” itself about a doomed romance, it sets the tone for the narrative. By the conclusion of the novel, this short line will have come to bear ominous overtones as the Wheelers descend into a self-inflicted, but apparently wholly unavoidable, tragedy. Their overwhelming desire to be different from the mainstream is brought into direct conflict with their equally overwhelming lack of courage to do anything to achieve it. Both Frank and April are consumed by their passionate convictions that they will not succumb to the suburban trap and become like all the other residents of the Revolutionary Hill Estates, but this passion is utterly negated by their inability to make any meaningful changes in their lives until it is already too late.

The concept of a mass society, and the ensuing pressures to conform to a generic ideal, are not subtle undercurrents bubbling beneath the surface of the book. Yates places them firmly in the foreground. He grants the Wheelers just enough education to be able to question the rationality of complying with the suburban existence that was promoted as an ideal expression of American patriotism. What he does not grant them is the intelligence to move beyond these questions in any meaningful way. Crucially, in a 1972 interview with the literary journal *Ploughshares*, Yates explicitly stated that the novel was not intended to lambast the suburbs, or deconstruct some notion of ‘The System’. Such a sentiment is echoed by Richard Ford in his essay on *Revolutionary Road* when he asks, “just how bad can it literally be out there in the burbs?”³¹

Yates saw the novel “more as an indictment of American life in the 1950s. Because during the fifties there was a general lust for conformity all over this country, by no means only in the suburbs – a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any

³¹ Richard Ford, “American Beauty (Circa 1955),” *The New York Times*, April 9, 2000
<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/09/books/essay-american-beauty-circa-1955.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

price.”³² The problem was not the suburbs, or the city, or the system. They were the inevitable results of what was actually wrong. For Yates, the problem was the people who comfortably inhabited the system with little or no desire to change it, or challenge it substantially in the pursuit of something more fulfilling or out of the ordinary. Blake Bailey notes that

Amid the affluence of postwar America, the temptation was particularly keen to accept the easy rewards of suburban comfort, an undemanding job, and to fill the emptiness that followed with dreams of potential greatness or adventure. But to pursue such dreams in fact – as Yates well knew – required a resilient sense of autonomy that resisted the siren call of say a comfortable ranch house in Reading as opposed to a roach-infested basement in the Village.³³

Frank and April repeatedly discuss the ills of contemporary society and continually attempt to place themselves above it. All this they do from the comfort of their detached suburban house complete with the ubiquitous, and much maligned, picture window. They find it easy to critique the system they are part of because they are convinced that they, and they alone among their peers, are fully aware of everyone’s place within it. It is essential for them to feel slightly removed from the mass conformity they participate in, but still condemn, because their superiority complex is bound up in what they see as their acute awareness of their leading just such an existence. Frank, in particular, is especially adept at critiquing American culture and the supposedly dull, vacuous, and ignorant lives of those he considers less insightful than him.

Barbara Ehrenreich, in a move that surely would have infuriated Sloan Wilson, appropriated his hero to describe her “gray flannel rebel,” a man that bears a remarkable similarity to Frank Wheeler. She describes her rebel as follows:

The gray flannel rebel lived by the rules. He accomplished his major “developmental tasks” by his late twenties, found a wife and made the appropriate adjustments to marriage, established himself in a white-collar job that would lead, over the years, to larger offices and longer vacations, bought a house, and nestled into the “congenial social group” with whom he would share highballs and the tribulations of lawn maintenance. He was adjusted; he was mature; he was, by any reasonable standard, a success as an adult male breadwinner. But (maybe because he was just a little smarter than other men) he knew that something was wrong [...] The only word he had to describe the

³² Yates, “From the Archive: An Interview with Richard Yates.”

³³ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 232.

problem was one which, unfortunately, described everything and explained nothing. The word was “conformity”, and in the fifties “conformity” became the code word for male discontent.³⁴

Apart from a general abhorrence of lawn maintenance, Frank Wheeler is Ehrenreich’s “gray flannel rebel” to a tee. He has bought into the life of 1950s suburbia, in spite of all his vociferous protestations to the contrary. By being what Ehrenreich calls “a little smarter” than most, Frank is able to justify to himself, and to those around him, the extent to which he can maintain a pose of intellectual superiority while simultaneously being one of the corporate drones he so enthusiastically derides on a regular basis.

Before he even gets his steady, respectable, but deadly dull job at Knox Business Machines, Frank is already the epitome of what Sloan Wilson referred to as fashionably cynical about any of his potential employers, brashly declaring,

All I want is enough dough coming in to keep us solvent for the next year or so, till I can figure things out; meanwhile I want to retain my own identity. Therefore the thing I’m most anxious to avoid is any kind of work that can be considered “interesting” in its own right. I want something that can’t possibly touch me. I want some big, swollen old corporation that’s been bumbling along making money in its sleep for a hundred years, where they have to hire eight guys for every one job because none of them can be expected to care about whatever boring thing it is they’re supposed to be doing. I want to go into that kind of place and say, Look. You can have my body and my nice college-boy smile for so many hours a day, in exchange for so many dollars, and beyond that we’ll leave each other strictly alone.³⁵

This idea of retaining his own identity is something that Frank returns to repeatedly throughout *Revolutionary Road*, but it is never entirely clear if he even knows what that means. He is desperate not to care about his job so that it will not impinge upon his identity, but in the same breath declares that he still has to “figure things out.” His carefully maintained image of cynical and knowing detachment is Frank’s attempt to show his peers that he is above the mindless conformity that he believes is destroying American society.

The most important weapon in Frank’s arsenal is that he is vocally aware of how society expects him to behave. He does not claim to conform to the norms of marriage, children, a decent job in the city, and a house in the suburbs because he feels it is right, or because it is actually what he secretly desires. He claims only to follow this path of the conservative, traditional family man because it suits him for the time being until he can

³⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Pluto Press, 1983), 29.

³⁵ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 75.

think of a more exciting and attractive alternative. This allows him to cultivate an air of individuality without ever having to define it. For the moment, his words are sufficient to fulfil his much-heralded desire for distinction because the most “important thing, always, was to remember who you were.”³⁶ This is the fundamental flaw in the pose that Frank adopts – and it is a pose, as becomes painfully clear as the novel progresses. He repeatedly invokes a desire to remain immune to the damaging forces of mass society and consumerism. Yet, if even gently pushed, Frank would not be able to define himself in any way that did not relate to his job, his family, or his home. He has no identifiable talents or abilities beyond a striking capacity to talk a good talk. And yet in spite of this, he “hardly ever entertained a doubt of his own exceptional merit.”³⁷

Given Yates’s predilection for writing about conflict between men and women, it may seem somewhat reductive to read *Revolutionary Road* as a treatise on the negative effects of the American Dream because that is exactly what it is. With the narrative dominated by Frank’s point of view, it is tempting to prioritise his struggle and couch it in terms that would define it as a masculinity crisis. But the intensity of April’s characterisation makes *Revolutionary Road* an ideal text to utilise in demonstrating how what could be seen as a masculinity crisis can be read instead as a more general American malady affecting both men and women in equal measure. Both Frank and April Wheeler are guilty of what K.A. Cuordileone describes as “the anxiety, the apathy, and the conformity of individuals living in the freest society in the world and yet unwilling or unable to accept their freedom or embrace their individuality.”³⁸ For Frank and April, their individuality is something that they must create and shape to fit some idealised notion they have of the perfect life. That there is an element of conformity in this too does not ever seem to occur to them. The simple fact of their existence as individuals in the universe remains a mystery to them.

Frank and April may affect the image of knowingly jaded intellectuals, but the reality is that they are just as caught up in their version of the American Dream as any of the millions of others they pass judgement on. Jim Cullen observes that three hundred years after the Puritans struggled to reconcile their beliefs with the reality of their new lives in the colonies, “the American Dream still straddles – perhaps it’s more accurate to say it *blurs* – the tension between the one and the many, a tension we still all too often fail to

³⁶ Ibid., 20.

³⁷ Ibid., 22.

³⁸ K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 100.

recognize, let alone resolve.”³⁹ It is just such a struggle that the Wheelers allow themselves to become trapped in.

Although the term “American Dream” is a relatively recent one, the concept has been in existence ever since the arrival of the earliest European settlers. It can be argued that the entire Declaration of Independence is the first articulation of what would come to be known as the American Dream. It is the very lack of a definition that plagues the concept, however, and makes it so problematic when it becomes something that people actively choose to pursue. In many ways, it can be whatever a person wants it to mean. But it can also be just as easily co-opted by external forces to impose a different interpretation upon the general public. Cullen again addresses this point, saying,

a reckoning with the Dream also involves acknowledging another important reality: that beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no *one* American Dream. Instead, there are many American Dreams, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity. What James Truslow Adams called in the epilogue of *The Epic of America* “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man” may be fine as far as it goes, but the devil is in the details: just what does “better and richer and fuller” *mean*?⁴⁰

It is this absence of concrete meaning in the face of supposedly acceptable mass conformity that the Wheelers find so hard to reconcile with their own lifestyle. Their education and learning has encouraged them to think of themselves as highly individual, that the only truly authentic way to be exceptional in an American sense is to mark themselves out from the crowd. It has almost been cultivated in their minds as a right, as something to which they are entitled. However, the education they received is entirely at odds with the lives they find themselves leading after college. The grand ideas and lofty concepts they so dearly love to debate are virtually impossible to locate with any substance in their lives as seemingly just another suburban couple.

This self-proclaimed uniqueness is the most essential part of the Wheelers’ American Dream. It allows them to feel superior, if not a little smug, for being so aware of the “outrageous state of the nation.”⁴¹ Their strident criticism of conformity and those who succumb to it is clearly a defence mechanism. By deflecting their criticism on to their neighbours, and American society in general, they manage to stave off any examination of

³⁹ Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴¹ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 59.

their own position within such a culture. Only they, they repeatedly tell themselves, are truly cognisant of the perils of blindly following everyone else. The perpetuation of this belief allows Frank to reinforce his image of the shrewd, canny intellectual:

“The point is it wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t so typical. It isn’t only the Donaldsons – it’s the Cramers too, and the whaddyacallits, the Wingates, and a million others. It’s all the idiots I ride with on the train every day. It’s a disease. Nobody thinks or feels or cares any more; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity.”⁴²

Invoking the evils of conformity and mass society as tried and tested debating points is their protective shield against falling victim to these same ills. Along with their neighbours Shep and Milly Campbell, who appear to be the only thing approaching friends that the Wheelers actually have, their stagey performances of diagnosing just *What Is Wrong With America* allows them to maintain an illusion that “they alone, the four of them, were painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture.”⁴³ Of course, Frank fails to see the spectacular irony in his declaration about mediocrity. Safe in the comfort of his stable but unchallenging job, and decent yet unremarkable home, he is free to project the image of a man who purports to believe in nothing other than his own personal sense of superiority because he faces no risk in doing so.

The stability of their illusion is undermined by the complete failure of the Laurel Players’ performance that they all participate in in some way. It is no accident that Yates chooses to open the novel with an account of the disastrous production. Having spent all their energy playing roles in their everyday lives, the play is subsequently doomed to failure as their best acting takes place offstage. Indeed, the notion that rehearsals, or the idea of things, are infinitely better than their actual reality is something Yates proposes to the reader straight away when the dress rehearsal the night before the play opens is perfect. The series of unfortunate events that see the opening night performance stumble to its embarrassing conclusion underlines this even more. April’s isolation in the main role as the play dissolves into uncomfortable chaos around her foreshadows her subsequent isolation in the Wheeler family home. Stripped of even the illusory cloak of the character in the play, she is exposed in a way that none of the other characters – not Frank, not the Campbells – have to endure.

⁴² Ibid., 60.

⁴³ Ibid.

The Wingates and Donaldsons and Cramers, the supposedly dull and ignorant neighbours they took such delight in mocking, are the very ones who go to see the play “with a surprisingly generous openness of mind, and had been let down” by its failure.⁴⁴ The attendance of all their neighbours in the audience suggests to the Wheelers that they might not be as special or unique or enlightened as they like to tell themselves they are. The dilemma for Frank and April becomes one of how to still claim superiority or difference from the people who live in the same place, drive similar cars, have similar jobs, and now apparently have similar interests to them. The convenient other against which the Wheelers have consistently defined themselves no longer exists in a clearly identifiable form for them, and this becomes an extremely disruptive force in their lives. Having spent all their years together holding forth on the empty nature of American society, they are suddenly confronted with the obvious hypocrisy of their stance as they stand exposed as apparent frauds.

Frank and April Wheeler can be said to be examples of what Richard Rorty has criticised as the Cultural Left in America. These are people who would rather theorise around a problem and talk endlessly about how terrible it is than push themselves to suggest or find any concrete solutions. Rorty argues that “hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left – principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness.”⁴⁵ It is debatable whether Yates would agree completely with such an interpretation of his work, and yet the strands of just such a theory are clearly present. Frank waxes lyrical about the “hopeless emptiness” of American society on several occasions throughout *Revolutionary Road*.⁴⁶ He is enchanted by the sound of his own voice and takes a perverse pleasure in diagnosing what is wrong with America, but he never challenges himself to come up with a viable remedy to the problem, something that resembles the echo chamber that can revolve around the masculinity crisis narrative.

Rorty’s suggestion that hopelessness is a somewhat trendy position for those on the Cultural Left to cling to, can also be seen as a symptom of the rise of a therapeutic culture and an increasing dependence on healthcare professionals. In the so-called Age of Anxiety that was the 1950s, people were encouraged to talk about their problems until they accepted their existence rather than actively try to solve them. There was a noticeable rise

⁴⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 37.

⁴⁶ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 190.

in the popularity of self-help books. Access to mental-health services increased, particularly in outpatient care. In an analysis of American mental-health policy, Gerald N. Grob noted that, between 1955 and 1968,

inpatient care episodes at public institutions in the same period fell from 818,832 to 791,719, whereas outpatient care episodes increased from 379,000 to 1,778,590. These data demonstrate that the growth in outpatient services was not at the expense of inpatient ones. Many of the changes in the mental health system occurred because of the expansion of services and the recruitment of new clientele.⁴⁷

Prescriptions for tranquilisers and amphetamines were also rising, a trend explained by Nicolas Rasmussen in a study on amphetamine use in the United States:

The answer lies in the type of patient for whom amphetamine-based prescriptions had become typical in the 1950s and the trends and exigencies of primary care. At least one third of primary care office visits are motivated by complaints for which the physician can find no organic explanation, a longstanding fact of life for general practitioners that received official recognition in the 1950s. “Psychosomatic medicine” enjoyed a postwar vogue, and as a substitute for the archaic bromides and nerve tonics then still commonly prescribed, primary care authorities in the 1950s began advocating barbiturates, amphetamine, and amphetamine-barbiturate combinations for the mild depressions and other emotional disturbances presumed to be driving such mysterious complaints. Psychiatric specialists writing on general practice also endorsed these prescribing approaches, although they understood sympathy, reassurance, and time as the main therapeutic agents for all neurotic ailments. Assisted by such trends in medical thought, along with pharmaceutical marketing that reinforced them, amphetamines became first-line treatments for emotional distress and psychosomatic complaints in the 1950s.⁴⁸

Psychiatric professionals became more prominent and influential as more and more people began to access therapy in an attempt to cope with their day-to-day problems. The inevitable side-effect from the conformist nature of mainstream society was a reluctance to embark upon any sort of radical change in order to combat mental or emotional problems. Medication, therapy, and coping skills were the order of the day. As Elaine Tyler May notes

experts advocated coping strategies to enable people to adapt to the institutional and technological changes taking place. The therapeutic approach that gained momentum during these years was geared toward helping people feel better about their place in the world, rather than changing it. It

⁴⁷ Gerald N. Grob, “Mental Health Policy in America: Myths and Realities,” *Health Affairs* 11, no.3 (1992): 13, doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.11.3.7

⁴⁸ Nicolas Rasmussen, “America’s First Amphetamine Epidemic 1929 – 1971: A Quantitative and Qualitative Retrospective With Implications for the Present,” *American Journal of Public Health* 98, no.6 (2008), doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2007.110593

offered private and personal solutions to social problems. The family was the arena in which that adaptation was expected to occur; the home was the environment in which people could feel good about themselves. In this way, domestic containment and its therapeutic corollary undermined the potential for political activism.⁴⁹

The negative aspects of social conformity drove people to seek professional help in order to deal with their inexplicable unhappiness. They were, after all, doing what was expected of them in seeking to follow the normative lifestyle. Somewhat perversely, the prescribed solution was to conform even further. Mental-health experts and self-help gurus encouraged people to live with society rather than seek to change it in any way.

Yates was in no way an admirer of this growing reliance on therapy and psychoanalysis. Despite his own severe mental-health problems, or more likely as a direct result of them, he had a deep, hostile distrust of the psychiatric profession and its proponents. His cynicism about the burgeoning therapeutic culture pervades *Revolutionary Road* from start to finish. Frank in particular is almost gleeful in invoking what he sees as the poisonous influence such a dependence engenders as part of his continuing series of living room lectures on conformity:

“I mean talk about decadence,” he declared, “how decadent can a society get? Look at it this way. This country’s probably the psychiatric, psychoanalytical capital of the world. Old Freud himself could never’ve dreamed up a more devoted bunch of disciples than the population of the United States – isn’t that right? Our whole damn culture is geared to it; it’s the new religion; it’s everybody’s intellectual and spiritual sugar-tit. And for all that, look what happens when a man really does blow his top. Call the Troopers, get him out of sight quick, hustle him off and lock him up before he wakes the neighbors. Christ’s sake, when it comes to any kind of showdown we’re still in the Middle Ages. It’s as if everybody’d made this tacit agreement to live in a state of total self-deception. The hell with reality!”⁵⁰

What is interesting to note here is that Frank does not articulate this critique in terms of a gender conflict. It is society as a whole that is deceiving itself rather than men or women separately pursuing a path of self-deception. There was a general malaise affecting many Americans regardless of gender or economic circumstance. In part, this can be assigned to a shifting of attention by intellectuals from wider issues, such as poverty and social justice, to a more detailed, introspective examination of the American self. K.A. Cuordileone argues that

⁴⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, xxv.

⁵⁰ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 65.

the shift away from public institutions and their shortcomings toward private ailments and inner dissatisfaction reflected postwar economic recovery and the arrival of an affluent society. But it was not just that economic deprivation was no longer the pressing issue of the time. Once fears of economic crisis were put to rest once and for all in the boom years of the 1950s, affluence itself became the problem. The great retreat into private life was accompanied by chronic worries about the psychological effects of consumerism, materialism, suburbanization, leisure, and self-indulgence on the American character [...] Whether middle-class Americans knew it or not, they were psychologically plagued by the very prosperity that seemed to promise them freedom and security. The more sated and comfortable they grew, the more conformist and self-less they became.⁵¹

Not only did individuals feel the pressure to conform to the mass-society expectations of acquiring a decent job, a suitable car, and a respectable house, but they then had to deal with the added complication of how to reconcile their financial comfort with another facet of the populist narrative of the American Dream, that of endless acquisitiveness. As Jim Cullen notes, “the goal has always been to end up with more than you started with.”⁵² One of the problems middle-class Americans faced in the 1950s was how to combine their apparently contented lives in the suburbs with this idea that they should always want to improve their situation simply by virtue of being American. “More” has never been adequately defined, however, so no one could say for certain when it had actually been satisfactorily achieved. Moreover, the starting point from which all progress was measured kept shifting, meaning that that for many people like the Wheelers, “enough” was always going to be insufficient.

It is the dichotomous nature of various social and economic expectations rather than a crisis of Frank’s masculinity that conspires to undo the Wheelers. While their issues do at times manifest themselves in overtly gendered terms, it is not specifically a clash of gender roles that is the cause of their problems. For Yates, and by extension Frank, submitting to therapy was a negation of manhood and independence, an admission of weakness. However, Frank readily suggests therapy for April when she expresses her desire to terminate her unplanned third pregnancy because, as she puts it, he thinks it is a “denial of womanhood.”⁵³ While it certainly does seem that way on the surface, the reader also knows that Frank is desperately searching for an excuse to back out of April’s Paris plan, and a pregnancy provides the perfect opportunity to do so while still allowing him to save face by being the responsible, mature adult. The danger of April’s desire to abort the

⁵¹ Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 98.

⁵² Cullen, *The American Dream*, 159.

⁵³ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 233.

pregnancy also has to be read in light of the fact that abortion was illegal in the United States at the time, and the contraceptive pill was not yet available, which highlights the depths of her desperation. Frank's attitude to therapy and his eagerness to have April agree to it is indicative of the contradiction of 1950s therapeutic culture, as outlined by Elaine Tyler May:

For men, psychology offered an explanation for their distress; they claimed that "anxieties" or "inferiority complexes" generally resulted from problems at work. Rather than calling for social change, they looked to the home as the prescription for relief, where a man could find comfort, solace, and a release from stress. Women, however, identified stress at home, or resentment against one's spouse or domestic situation, as pathological. Psychology provided a way to articulate the problem and find a solution. If women experienced stress, they should seek professional assistance to help them adapt. In other words, although psychology provided an explanation for men's woes and the home offered a cure, the home was often the source of women's stress and psychology offered the cure.⁵⁴

Although the diagnoses offered to men and women differed radically – seek comfort in their home life as opposed to seeking comfort from psychology – the eventual outcomes were the same. Above all else, individuals were to learn to cope with their situation rather than to challenge it.

For all of Frank's bluster about the vagaries of psychoanalysis, there is a deeper point to his outbursts that he fails to see. By prioritising a therapeutic, coping approach to issues rather than pursuing a dynamic attempt to change, society deliberately creates a vicious cycle. Individuals must learn to deal with problems that afflict them rather than seek to change them; but merely coping with the presence of those problems rather than solving them means that the problems still exist, which in turn perpetuates the need for therapy. It is a self-serving cycle. It ignores the faults in the system to place all the emphasis on the individual's ability to cope. Frank is so caught up in ensuring that everyone knows where he stands in relation to the system, that he utterly fails to recognise his own immersion in it. Sending April to therapy will not repair the cracked foundations upon which their relationship was built, but it would allow him to feel he still has control of the situation.

When Frank exclaims "the hell with reality!" at the end of his tirade on American society's love affair with psychoanalysis, he unwittingly predicts his own denial of reality

⁵⁴ May, *Homeward Bound*, 167.

that will surface when April suggests a termination.⁵⁵ He sinks into the self-deception he not so long ago enthusiastically eviscerated others for. He would prefer to continue believing that April actually does love him rather than accept the reality that they were poorly matched, and deceiving each other, from the beginning. He attempts to use a therapeutic approach to maintain a positive narrative of their relationship which he is not prepared to relinquish. In this context it becomes plain that April's wish to abort the pregnancy is not a denial of womanhood. It is an unashamed acknowledgement of how deeply and persistently they have misled themselves and each other.

When April calmly declares that she does not love him and probably never has, Frank insists that she is “trying to resign from personal responsibility between now and the time you begin your treatment.”⁵⁶ In admitting the lie that she sees in their relationship, April is actually assuming the responsibility of honesty, in spite of how callously she puts it or how deliberately she tries to hurt his feelings. April takes a slightly different approach to Frank's therapeutic one, and attempts to rewrite their narrative to suit her current mind set. Frank, despite all his previous pronouncements to the contrary, is ultimately the one who believes that therapy will be the answer to all their problems. The cruel irony of the novel is that Frank is the one who is most susceptible to the influences of mass society and therapeutic culture, in spite of his carefully modelled stance on the perils of just such a trend.

Given this insistence on the examination of the self that had taken hold in American culture, it is perhaps only natural that the individual could become self-involved to the extent that it would negatively affect other relationships. The propensity for seeking therapeutic solutions encouraged a selfishness that could potentially morph into narcissism. When individuals were made to focus all their attention on their inner selves and how outside influences impacted upon them, it created a situation whereby the individual could, to a certain extent, ignore the consequences of his or her own behaviour. In the world of *Revolutionary Road*, the pursuit of an individual's dreams serves to exacerbate the anxieties experienced by each of the characters. The therapeutic culture of which Yates is so suspicious creates an environment in which the individual is forced to examine themselves in increasingly minute detail. This obsession with the self is to the detriment of interpersonal relationships and engagement with society as a whole, as outlined in David

⁵⁵ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 65.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 278.

Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* published in 1950, and Yates paints a picture of increasingly isolated people who are wholly alone in the midst of a multitude.

Historians such as Elaine Tyler May have, as noted previously, observed how psychology suggested different coping strategies for men and women rather than social activism, encouraging a retreat into the tightly-controlled domestic world. This trend allowed an increasing sense of isolation from other people to be seen as a pursuit of individualism. Promoting the narrative of self-improvement and, more significantly, self-satisfaction above all else could foster a sense of narcissism and obsession with the self that results in the unhealthy interactions that we see in *Revolutionary Road*. In his book on the American personality, Christopher Lasch describes the typical American narcissist as follows:

By refusing to take seriously the routines he has to perform, he denies their capacity to injure him. Although he assumes that it is impossible to alter the iron limits imposed by society, a detached awareness of those limits seems to make them matter less. By demystifying daily life, he conveys to himself and others the impression that he has risen beyond it, even as he goes through the motions and does what is expected of him.⁵⁷

According to Lasch's definition, Frank Wheeler displays all the characteristics of the classic narcissist. When Lasch speaks of the narcissist's tendency to belittle the requirements of his job or responsibilities, he describes the very essence of Frank and his carefully controlled image of detachment. It must be noted that April is also guilty of this very same inward gaze. She is careful to cultivate an air of coolness, and is comfortable in her own narrative as a potentially great actress who was stymied by the unavoidable domestic myth. It is the toxic combination of two such self-involved personalities that creates the conflict in their relationship, rather than any form of a gender crisis.

To Frank, appearing to be completely untainted by his job or the perceived banality of his routine is the most important factor in maintaining his image. His own sense of self-worth is wrapped up in encouraging admiration from his peers for his effortless ability to surmount the hollowness of modern mass society. In his mind, affecting this posture is more important than affecting a change in his circumstances. By clinging to an image of

⁵⁷ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus Press, 1980), 172-173.

how he wishes to appear, he is able to reconcile the reality of his existence with how he wishes to be viewed by others:

Intelligent, thinking people could take things like this in their stride, just as they took the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs. Economic circumstances might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated.⁵⁸

In the case of the Wheelers though, the most important thing really is believing that they were not contaminated by their surroundings, regardless of whether all the indications are to the contrary. Frank's self-absorption is entirely complete. This general American obsession with the self consumes him to the point that he does not see how he fits into society. He must mould it to fit around him instead. As a result, Frank seems to live entirely within his own head, oblivious to the thoughts and feelings of those around him. K.A. Cuordileone discusses this intense, new fascination with the self during the 1950s, noting that

Fear, neurosis, retreat, conformity, erosion of the self – these were the debilitating byproducts of a “mass society” in which the individual, unloosed from traditional, social kinship, or spiritual moorings, left rootless and adrift, became ever more overwhelmed by the impersonal, self-crushing forces of modernity – bureaucracy, organization, technology, and a mass-produced homogenous culture. The psychological implications of a mass society, and the difficulty of achieving autonomy – an independent, well-fortified sense of self within that society – became the single most compelling problem for postwar intellectuals and social critics.⁵⁹

This idea of the individual “adrift” in society is quite apt for both of the Wheelers. The alienation from the political and economic systems forced people to retreat to more intimate parts of life, turning inward to focus on the family or the self. A later edition of John Updike's *Couples*, first published in 1968, opens with an epigraph that touches on this turn to intimacy when public life becomes too challenging:

There is a tendency in the average citizen, even if he has a high standing in his profession, to consider the decisions relating to the life of the society to which he belongs as a matter of fate on which he has no influence – like the Roman subjects all over the world in the period of the Roman empire, a mood favorable for the resurgence of religion but unfavourable for the preservation of a living democracy.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 20.

⁵⁹ Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 98-99.

⁶⁰ Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, quoted in John Updike, *Couples* (London: Penguin, 2007).

However, neither of the Wheelers have a particularly strong extended family unit. Frank actively avoids his family despite there never seeming to have been a reason for the rupture, while April's parents were absent her entire life. The circle of close friends that would be expected of a couple their age is not a factor in their lives meaning they have no real sounding board other than each other and their own interior thoughts. This plays a significant role in the extreme downward spiral that they find themselves in throughout the novel. Other people do not exist as rounded human beings to them, but are instead players in their own personal game of life.

There is a distinct lack of empathy that comes with this extreme form of narcissism. Lasch, again, suggests that the intense focus on the self makes it impossible "to enter imaginatively into the lives of others while acknowledging their independent existence."⁶¹ All of the characters in *Revolutionary Road* are guilty of this to varying degrees. Concern for how their own selves are perceived is their main priority rather than how they interact with others. When April tells Frank the sad story of her unhappy childhood, he cannot be sure that he feels "sorrow for the unhappiness of the story or envy because it was so much more dramatic than his own."⁶² Even at that early stage of their relationship, Frank's commitment to his own sense of exceptionalism means that he is vaguely threatened by the possibility that April might have a better tale to tell than he does.

Lasch further expands the definition of this American narcissist as someone who admires and identifies with "winners" out of his fear of being labeled a loser. He seeks to warm himself in their reflected glow; but his feelings contain a strong admixture of envy, and his admiration often turns to hatred if the object of his attachment does something to remind him of his own insignificance. The narcissist lacks the confidence in his own abilities that would encourage him to model himself on another person's exalted example.⁶³

The relative normality of his own childhood immediately puts Frank on the defensive with April. He had attached himself to her because he believed she was the first and only "exceptionally first-rate girl" he had ever met.⁶⁴ Her beauty and poise fed his desire to be thought of as special. It allowed him to project an image of achievement to the world as he clearly must be an exceptional individual himself in order to have attracted and married

⁶¹ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 158.

⁶² Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 38.

⁶³ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 157.

⁶⁴ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 23.

someone like her. However, as Lasch's description of the narcissist suggests, Frank is sometimes also prone to irrational hatred and jealousy of April. He feels that he should resent her troubled childhood as it somehow belittles his own experience. It is the dilemma of the desire to be exceptional – how to deal with the fact that other people, in this case his own wife, may have a more exceptional story to tell.

It would be incorrect to single out the Wheelers as the only narcissists in the novel. Yates populates the novel with a series of self-centred, often unlikable characters who all display elements of the traits the Wheelers possess in abundance. Shep Campbell also exhibits some of these narcissistic tendencies during a flashback section in which we learn about a troubled phase in his life. Shep came from a wealthy family, with a mother who spoiled him and groomed him to follow a particular path that would reflect his privileged upbringing. Having rejected the life he felt his mother was forcing upon him, Shep joined the army and later took a degree in the “unquestionably middle-class” profession of mechanical engineering, all the while “growling his beer-bloated disdain for the liberal arts.”⁶⁵ All of a sudden, however, Shep began to question the choices he made, an awakening that can be seen to trace a similar trajectory to the growth in popularity of therapy, the self-help industry, and the increased focus on the individual. It no longer satisfied Shep to be one of the boys. The promotion of introspection and self-examination causes him to uproot his family in a desperate pursuit of his own interpretation of individual fulfilment.

This episode is a classic example of narcissism out of control. Shep retreats within himself to brood upon the sort of life he believes he should have had, disrupting the family dynamic and unsettling Milly and their children. His youthful rebellion against his mother, and the automatic privilege he was being raised in, suddenly seems to be a huge mistake as he muses that “all at once it seemed that the high adventure of pretending to be someone he was not led him into a way of life he didn't want and couldn't stand, that in defying his mother he had turned his back on his birthright.”⁶⁶ For Shep, the privileged education and lifestyle that he comes to believe that he is entitled to is vaguely similar to Frank's claim to a hidden talent “somewhere in the humanities.”⁶⁷ Having actively channelled a tough-guy

⁶⁵ Ibid., 139.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 140.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 22.

image, Shep succumbs to the inward impulse of a therapeutic culture when he becomes obsessed with himself and what he feels he should have achieved.

However, also like Frank, there is an emptiness at the heart of his dream. Shep ruminates over an ill-defined life in “the East” where “a man went to college not for vocational training but in disciplined search for wisdom and beauty, and nobody over the age of twelve believed those words were for sissies.”⁶⁸ In yet another echo of Frank though, Shep never manages to find a coherent expression of just what it is he desires and so settles down into his comfortable life in suburban Connecticut. He rationalises his current lifestyle and its distance from what he once dreamed of by telling himself that he was not “plagued any longer by the sense of having culturally missed out and fallen behind his generation. He could certainly feel himself to be the equal of a man like Frank Wheeler, for example, and Frank was the product of all the things that once had made him writhe with envy.”⁶⁹

It would be misleading to suggest that only the male characters of *Revolutionary Road* succumb to this type of bitter fantasy. As Kate Charlton-Jones points out,

Yates indicates how people of both genders take refuge in self-aggrandizing fantasies and demonstrates how the aspirations of his characters are not only indicative of a human tendency to mythologize and exaggerate but also represent something far more dangerous. It is the refusal to see things as they are that implicitly prevents them from ever living fulfilled lives.⁷⁰

April Wheeler is just as guilty of it and admits as much when she tells Shep about how she always felt that she was missing out on something, a more exciting and attractive life that would eventually, magically, somehow be hers:

I still had this idea that there was a whole world of marvelous golden people somewhere [...] people who knew everything instinctively, who made their lives work out the way they wanted without even trying, who never had to make the best of a bad job because it never occurred to them to do anything less than perfectly the first time. Sort of heroic superpeople, all of them beautiful and witty and calm and kind, and I always imagined that when I did find them I'd suddenly know that I

⁶⁸ Ibid., 140.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 142.

⁷⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 211.

belonged among them, that I was one of them, that I'd been meant to be one of them all along, and everything in the meantime had been a mistake, and they'd know it too.⁷¹

April's lament for a life she dreamed of, and saw others as living, but could never quite find a way to make her own is a remarkable echo of Frank's experience in Paris during the war:

The place had filled him with a sense of wisdom hovering just out of reach, of unspeakable grace prepared and waiting just around the corner, but he'd walked himself weak down its endless blue streets and all the people who knew how to live had kept their tantalizing secret to themselves.⁷²

The similarity in their thinking is drawn into sharp focus in these two passages, somewhat ironically suggesting that they are better matched for each other than they like to admit. Both feel like outsiders longing for admission to some kind of golden circle of achievement and coolness. They both obsess over what they consider to be their own less than exceptional existences by comparison. Both believe strongly in the idea that other people hold the key to living life to its fullest potential and are just not sharing the secret with them. Yates suggests that they are both equally to blame for their own downfalls as a result of their refusal to define their ambitions beyond ambiguous platitudes.

As with Frank and Shep, April's idea of what she thinks her life should be is infuriatingly vague. None of them can actually define what it is they think that they lack, other than the general admiration of other people. For April, the most important part of her dream is that other people would recognise that she belonged among what she calls the "golden people."⁷³ Recognition is always paramount. Frank thrives on the knowledge that people have always believed him to be full of potential and more accomplished than he actually is. Shep reconciles the fact that life with Milly on the Revolutionary Hill Estates is "not exactly what he'd pictured in his Arizona visions of the East" with the comforting thought that he is the equal of Frank.⁷⁴ It is reassuring for him that Frank has had all of the opportunities that he scorned but still has not managed to progress much further than he did. This deep need to be validated by other people without achieving anything remotely demonstrable to deserve it fuels the narcissism that plagues all of the characters of *Revolutionary Road*. They inhabit an America that Christopher Lasch describes as

⁷¹ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 260.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

a society in which the dream of success has been drained of any meaning beyond itself, men have nothing against which to measure their achievements except the achievement of others. Self-approval depends on public recognition and acclaim, and the quality of this approval has undergone important changes in its own right [...] Today men seek the kind of approval that applauds not their actions but their personal attributes. They wish to be not so much esteemed as admired. They crave not fame but the glamour and excitement of celebrity. They want to be envied rather than respected [...] Most Americans would still define success as riches, fame, and power, but their actions show that they have little interest in the substance of these attainments.⁷⁵

Admittedly, Lasch most likely only had men in mind when writing about this American narcissist, but this does not negate the fact that the women of the time were just as susceptible to the bombardment of messages telling them to want more. The desires they felt may have been expressed in a different fashion, but they emanated from the same root as their male counterparts' did – the pursuit of a vacuous American Dream and its attendant problems. The dissatisfaction Yates's characters express is not even particularly new. It echoes the theme of one of Yates's favourite novels, *Madame Bovary*, first published in 1856. Emma Bovary is as restless as any of Yates's characters, declaring "she was not happy – she never had been. Whence came this insufficiency in life – this instantaneous turning to decay of everything on which she leant?"⁷⁶ Indeed, *Madame Bovary* came to be a powerful influence on a host of American writers who sought to articulate the plight of the frustrated woman, such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* or even Carol Kennicott in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*. Not once throughout *Revolutionary Road* do any of the characters express genuine satisfaction with their situation. Any hint of happiness is always tainted by the sense that it is not enough; they could be happier.

The intense introspection that all of Yates's characters display results in an escape to fantasy that is proven to be both delusional and dangerous. At some point, almost all of the major characters are shown to indulge in daydreams that end up clashing with, and destabilising, their reality to varying degrees. Helen Givings, the busybody real-estate agent who sold the Wheelers their home, exists in a tightly controlled bubble of fantasies so that she may project to the world the stereotypically chirpy demeanour expected of a married suburban woman of her age. She tells herself that she loves her job, that she needs the routine and exhaustion that only hard work can provide. It is her defence against what we come to learn is an unsatisfactory marriage and a difficult adult son. As she grows older,

⁷⁵ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 116-117.

⁷⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1993), 180.

she finds that she must adapt her fantasies or daydreams in order to fit with her evolving reality. Her obsession with work becomes “silly [...] foolish and wrong” as she changes her narrative to accommodate what she calls a “final bloom, a long-delayed emergence into womanliness.”⁷⁷ She compulsively constructs her fantasies to contextualise, or sometimes deny, her disappointment with how her life has turned out.

In one particular sequence, she is shown to invest all of her hope for some stability in a daydream that is entirely dependent on the Wheelers agreeing to a visit from her mentally disturbed son, John. She returns to this plan so often that it becomes “as real as a magazine illustration, and she kept improving on it [...]. And the more vivid it grew, the less fault she was able to find with its plausibility.”⁷⁸ She revisits the daydream, adding to it, embellishing it, polishing it until the thin line between reality and dream begins to blur. Having played the scenario repeatedly in her head before approaching the Wheelers, her highly stylised image of smoothness and sophistication immediately disintegrates in the face of the Wheelers already knowing of John’s problems and their own plans to leave America permanently. Her fantasy did not allow for the reality of other people. This recurring problem for all of the characters in the novel is an echo of Christopher Lasch’s assertion that narcissists cannot relate to other people in a manner that allows for those people to exist independently as individuals in their own right.

Helen is so destabilised by the negation of her fantasy that she becomes enveloped in a memory of her childhood, when she was still full of potential, and momentarily forgets that she is a grown woman. Snapping back to reality at the sight of her fifty-six year old feet described, with the all the vicious clarity that marks Yates’s descriptive powers, as looking like “two toads,”⁷⁹ she allows all the disappointment that she carefully manages to hide with her fantasies to surface temporarily:

She cried because she’d had such high, high hopes about the Wheelers tonight and now she was terribly, terribly disappointed. She cried because she was fifty-six years old and her feet were ugly and swollen and horrible; she cried because none of the girls had liked her at school and none of the boys had liked her later; she cried because Howard Givings was the only man who’d ever asked her to marry him, and because she’d done it, and because her only child was insane.

⁷⁷ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 157.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

But it was soon over; all she had to do was go into the bathroom and blow her nose and wash her face and brush her hair.⁸⁰

For Helen Givings, as with most of the inhabitants of *Revolutionary Road*, myth-making and memory shaping is essential to maintaining appearances. When she allows herself to be caught by the real memory of her life – no meaningful friends, a loveless marriage, an insane son – she briefly ceases to function and is paralysed with grief. However, when she is able to remain in the grip of her fantasies, she can pretend as if she is fully content with her life, and her childhood can take on the shape of something happy and privileged in spite of her own admission of being lonely and friendless. At all times though, her fantasies are contingent upon other people over whom she has no control. This results in a need for fluid narratives that can change to suit her mood, or the caprices of other people.

Similarly, Shep Campbell, despite his apparent contentment with how life in the East has worked out for him and Milly, also resorts to fantasising in order to manage a reality that he is not entirely certain actually satisfies him. He is infatuated with April Wheeler and regularly fantasises about her, something he tells himself that it is “healthier to own up to [...] than to hide from.”⁸¹ He compares his dream of the cool, sophisticated, beautiful April with the reality of a slightly crumpled Milly and is left feeling short-changed.

When the Wheelers reveal that they are moving to Paris, Shep initially pines at the thought of being in Paris with April. However, he soon finds that, in order to deal with the imminent departure of the Wheelers, he must replace his fantasy of April with a harder, harsher version of her. This allows him to rationalise the Wheelers’ decision to emigrate as immature and impractical. He indulges in a vision of April returning from France ten years later, imagining that “she’d grown thick and stumpy from her decade of breadwinning.”⁸² He uses this unflattering image of her to “strengthen his belief that the world was full of better-looking, more intelligent, finer and more desirable women than April Wheeler.”⁸³ In performing a pattern that occurs repeatedly throughout the novel, Shep uses his fantasy to bolster the persona he attempts to project to the outside world. Once again, however, other people are the source of his fantasy’s disruption, causing a disturbance in his emotional equilibrium. When the Wheelers change their minds and decide to stay in

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 147.

⁸² Ibid., 238.

⁸³ Ibid., 239.

Connecticut, Shep must contend with how to reconcile this new reality with his previously reassuring dream of a haggard April that is now “shot to hell.”⁸⁴

The difference between these characters and the Wheelers is that Shep Campbell and Helen Givings occasionally, even if just fleetingly, acknowledge that the more disappointing aspects of their lives are the result of their own personal limitations. In stark contrast to this is the consistent denial of the Wheelers that any failures they might experience are anything other than someone else’s fault, or a result of the pervasive clutches of mass society. April once speaks something resembling the truth when she says to Frank

“everything you said was based on this great premise of ours that we’re somehow very special and superior to the whole thing, and I wanted to say ‘But we’re not! Look at us! We’re just like the people you’re talking about! We are the people you’re talking about!’ I sort of had – I don’t know, contempt for you, because you couldn’t see the terrific fallacy of the thing.”⁸⁵

April is certainly correct in observing that they are the same as the people that Frank mocks, but this is still only part of her greater fantasy to get them to Paris. We can never be sure that she really means it because she is, after all, employing it as a bargaining tool. At this point, such a bold statement is akin to the repeated touching up that Helen Givings does to her fantasy of a wonderful friendship between the Wheelers and John. It is a means to an end rather than some grand admission of the falseness of their existence. Kate Charlton-Jones suggests that at this stage in the novel, April’s “method may be artful but the reader does not, at this stage, feel that this is merely a cynical ploy on her part; April has maintained her belief that Frank is ‘the most interesting person I’ve ever met’.”⁸⁶ I would question whether this is entirely accurate. By this point in the book, we may not have been given much insight directly into April’s thoughts, which are only revealed much later, but we have learned in great detail about how Frank feels about their relationship and her attitude to him. He notes bitterly that

he was married to a woman who had somehow managed to put him forever on the defensive, who loved him when he was nice, who lived according to what she happened to

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁸⁶ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 157.

feel like doing and who might at any time – this was the hell of it – who might at any time of day or night just happen to feel like leaving him.⁸⁷

We already know by this point that April is nobody's fool so the suspicion, however slight, is always present that she has an ulterior motive in appealing to Frank's vanity.

We never really see much of the inner workings of April's mind, but we can deduce from the brief section Yates devotes to her as she prepares for the attempted abortion/suicide that she has been just as caught up in the web of fantasy as Frank. This short chapter is the only time April's point of view is presented directly to the reader without the filtered lens of another character's interpretation. She lists all the ways that she and Frank have deluded themselves over the years of their relationship. Their courtship and marriage started from a basis of pretence and that artifice grew exponentially to the point at which she now finds herself. She laments the way they allowed each other to indulge their fantasies, saying,

Oh, for a month or two, just for fun, it might be all right to play a game like that with a boy; but all these years! And all because, in a sentimentally lonely time long ago, she had found it easy and agreeable to believe whatever this one particular boy felt like saying, and to repay him for that pleasure by telling easy, agreeable lies of her own, until each was saying what the other most wanted to hear – until he was saying "I love you" and she was saying "Really, I mean it; you're the most interesting person I've ever met."⁸⁸

April's solitary chapter concludes with her finally admitting to herself that "if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone."⁸⁹ Her final admission is an echo of Yates's own preference for the "kind of story where the reader is left wondering who's to blame until it begins to dawn on him (the reader) that he himself must bear some of the responsibility because he's human and therefore infinitely fallible."⁹⁰ Somewhat ironically, April is the one character in the whole novel who ultimately stops living in relation to other people and in this way actually does achieve something approaching the exceptionalism that they all claim to desire, even though it does result in her death. Charlton-Jones posits that it is "April's predicament that is most fully explored" in *Revolutionary Road*.⁹¹ Certainly, April's honest reflections once she

⁸⁷ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 51.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 305.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁹⁰ Yates, "From the Archive: An Interview with Richard Yates."

⁹¹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 166.

has decided upon her course of action permit the reader to feel a certain amount of sympathy for her, but always with the knowledge that, had she been as brave earlier in their relationship, it would never have gotten to that point.

April eventually drops the pretence that she and Frank have both perpetuated for their entire life together, but there is no such realisation for Frank. April tells him to “put it whichever way makes you feel the most comfortable,” something which could be enshrined as Frank’s motto for living life.⁹² The extent of his self-absorption and constant fantasising is quite astonishing. Yates depicts a man who is so consumed by his internal imagined life that he becomes unable at times to distinguish between where the fantasy ends and real life begins. Indeed, it is no accident that when Frank is first introduced to the reader he is in the midst of dealing with a crushing reality impinging upon the dream world he had carefully constructed for himself that afternoon.

Sitting in the audience at the Laurel Players’ performance of *The Petrified Forest*, the disparity between Frank’s fantasies and his actual life is slowly revealed. He does not daydream about going to the moon or being a famous celebrity. Instead, he creates elaborate fictions surrounding his marriage and his relationships with other people. These are then given just enough basis in fact that Frank comes to believe there is no reason why they should not come true. Repeatedly, we see the disappointment he faces when his illusions fail to match his real experiences. Yet this does not discourage him from his myth-making. He is undeterred by the fact that he has yet to see his dreams come to life. The first daydream we are shown, followed by its swift disintegration, is a microcosm of how Frank will behave throughout the novel:

The truth was that all afternoon in the city, stultified at what he liked to call “the dullest job you can possibly imagine,” he had drawn enough strength from a mental projection of scenes to unfold tonight: himself rushing home to swing his laughing children in the air, to gulp a cocktail and chatter through an early dinner with his wife; himself driving her to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand (“If only I weren’t so nervous, Frank!”); himself sitting spellbound in pride and then rising to join a thunderous ovation as the curtain fell; himself glowing and dishevelled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss (“Was it really good, darling? Was it really good?”); and then the two of them, stopping for a drink in the admiring company of Shep and Milly Campbell, holding hands under the table while they talked it all out.⁹³

⁹² Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 278.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

Unfortunately for Frank, and, similarly, Helen Givings, reality never even remotely matches his fantasies. He lives a life that is plagued by constant disappointment and frustration as his daydreams inevitably crack and disintegrate with the slow, predictable intrusion of his actual life. We also begin to see the self-centred nature of the Wheelers' existence. Everything revolves around them as, in Frank's mind, they will be in the "admiring company" of the Campbells. Frank repeatedly imagines "himself" doing this and "himself" doing that while other people admire him for his confidence and easy success. More importantly, even though April is the actual star of the play, it is Frank who claims the spotlight. This very first delusion that we are shown immediately crumbles:

Nowhere in these plans had he foreseen the weight and shock of reality; nothing had warned him that he might be overwhelmed by the swaying, shining vision of a girl he hadn't seen in years, a girl whose every glance and gesture could make his throat fill up with longing ("Wouldn't you like to be loved by me?"), and that then before his very eyes she would dissolve and change into the graceless, suffering creature whose existence he tried every day of his life to deny but whom he knew as well and as painfully as he knew himself, a gaunt constricted woman whose red eyes flashed reproach, whose false smile in the curtain call was as homely as his own sore feet, his own damp climbing underwear and his own sour smell.⁹⁴

In this passage, it would be all too easy to read Frank as a man in the grips of a masculinity crisis exacerbated by a disastrous marriage and shrewish, judgmental wife. However, as the novel develops Yates makes it abundantly clear that both Frank and April entertain the same kind of delusions.

As Frank is the protagonist, we come to realise this about him much quicker as he makes his first appearance in the grips of a shattered fantasy, whereas April is revealed to us in stages, first through the thoughts of Frank, then Shep, and finally, briefly in her own words before her death. From the outset, Frank is torn between the comfort of what he characterises as his dull job with its reassuringly regular pay cheque, and the nagging sensation that he could be doing something more worthy of his "own exceptional merit."⁹⁵ He is proud of other peoples' assertions that his interests and talents "would lie somewhere 'in the humanities,'" but in reality he has no definite idea what he would do if the opportunity ever arose for him to finally embrace his unspecified talents and realise his

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 22.

potential.⁹⁶ Instead, he hides behind the pretence that his not knowing what he should do is remarkable in itself:

Weren't the biographies of all great men filled with this same kind of youthful groping, this same kind of rebellion against their fathers and their fathers' ways? He could even be grateful in a sense that he had no particular area of interest: in avoiding specific goals he had avoided specific limitations. For the time being the world, life itself, could be his chosen field.⁹⁷

Frank is wholly enthralled by this notion that he can be anything he puts his mind to; he just has not gotten around to it yet. Circumstances beyond his control (a marriage he essentially sleepwalked in to, unplanned pregnancies, work commitments) have dictated that he would have to wait to indulge his fantasy of being truly exceptional and, more importantly, being recognised for it. Even in Frank's semi-admission of not really knowing what it is he is destined to do there is an element of fabrication. His assertion that the avoidance of "specific goals" removed the inevitable "limitations" these goals would place on his ambition is a gentler way of stating that he was also actively avoiding failure. If he never declares a specific interest, he can never be seen to fail at it.

He did not grow into this tendency to fantasise, which suggests that Frank's personality makes him particularly vulnerable to the demands of his dreams. Yates shows us that this has always been a part of his character, as evinced by the memory of his magnificent youthful plan to ride the railroad all the way to the West Coast, only to have his plan mocked and ridiculed by a school friend. The most important aspect of this plan, however, is how much attention Frank paid to his appearance, selecting each item of clothing he would wear with meticulous detail. The fact of the journey or where he was going did not matter so much to him as long as he looked the part.

The narcissistic impulse discussed earlier in this chapter is strongest in Frank of all the characters in the novel. This is in part due to the fact that we as readers are most exposed to his point of view, but the attitude he affects throughout the novel with other characters is also a strong indication of a tendency to play the part he thinks fits whatever situation he finds himself in. He is utterly absorbed in himself and how other people perceive him. He craves what Christopher Lasch described as adoration without achievement. The substance of Frank's achievements is not all that important to him so

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

long as other people admire him and believe that “old Wheeler really had it.”⁹⁸ “It” is never defined. He is purposely vague about his ambitions and is perfectly content to bask in the admiration of other people without ever doing anything to earn it.

To maintain such a stance, Frank repeatedly resorts to fooling himself. He changes memories to fit his own constructed narrative that he presents to the world and uses it to justify his belief that he is always right. He convinces himself that his and April’s marriage is in difficulty because of April’s flightiness and his fear that she “might at any time of the day or night just happen to feel like leaving him.”⁹⁹ He is never (to his mind) complicit in the state of their marriage, always deflecting the merest hint of blame back on to April, even going so far as to suggest that his affair with Maureen Grube was in response to how April was treating him, claiming that his “masculinity’d been threatened somehow by all that abortion business; wanting to prove something; I don’t know.”¹⁰⁰ But this is all part of yet another charade that Frank wilfully incorporates into his everyday routine. Yates describes how Frank’s “voice, soft and strong with an occasional husky falter or hesitation that only enhanced its rhythm, combined the power of confession with the narrative grace of romantic storytelling.”¹⁰¹ It is just another performance designed to place him at the centre of the story as its tragic hero. He continually blames April because accepting that some of the fault also lies with him would destabilise his self-image of the assured, sophisticated adult that he is so anxious to maintain.

Even smaller incidents require that Frank embellish them in some way. When he slaps his son Michael for coming too close while he is digging the terminally unfinished stone path outside their house, despite the fact that the child was not actually in his way, he immediately rewrites the event in his mind to justify his actions:

For a split second, in the act of bringing the shovel blade down, he thought he saw Michael’s sneaker slip into its path. Even as he swerved and threw the shovel away with a clang he knew it hadn’t really happened – but it *could* have happened, that was the point – and his anger was so quick that the next thing he knew he had grabbed him by the belt and spun him around and hit him hard [...]

⁹⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 279.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Well, damn it, I *did* keep telling them and telling them, he assured himself, and by now his mind had mercifully amended the facts. The kid put his foot right the hell in my way, for God's sake. If I hadn't swerved just in time he wouldn't *have* a foot, for God's sake.¹⁰²

At all times, Frank is pretending, editing and redrafting his memories. This process allows him to continue with maintaining the artificial pose he has assumed of the cool, urbane, pseudointellectual who is merely biding his time in what he makes sure to always refer to as the “dullest job you can possibly imagine”¹⁰³ until the day arrives, as Stewart O’Nan puts it, that “through some unforeseen mechanism, he might really achieve his dreams and become this other, more accomplished person.”¹⁰⁴ By indulging the fantasy of his own supposedly unrealised potential, Frank willingly abdicates the responsibility of ever having to prove it.

The disaffected pose that he has assumed for so many years now means that he cannot show any genuine contentment with his life, echoing Sloan Wilson’s assertion that “contentment was an object of contempt.”¹⁰⁵ He is unquestionably the architect of his own misfortune. He played the role of the sophisticated intellectual when he first met April and has constantly maintained that image since. From the moment he convinces her not to abort their first child, he must then also keep up with another illusion that he has unwittingly created for himself:

I didn't want a baby any more than she did. Wasn't it true, then, that everything in his life from that point on had been a succession of things he hadn't really wanted to do? Taking a hopelessly dull office job to prove he could be as responsible as any other family man, moving to an overpriced, genteel apartment to prove his mature belief in the fundamentals of orderliness and good health, having another child to prove that the first hadn't been a mistake, buying a house in the country because it was the next logical step and he had to prove himself capable of taking it.¹⁰⁶

The reader knows that Frank never really wanted the children either, yet both times that April wanted to terminate the pregnancy he was the one to object in spite of his own reluctance to become a father. It also undermines his later attempt to rationalise his affair as a result of the apparent threat to his masculinity that April’s desire for an abortion

¹⁰² Ibid., 52-53.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰⁴ Stewart O’Nan, “The Lost World of Richard Yates: How the great writer of the Age of Anxiety disappeared from print,” *Boston Review* October 1, 1999, <http://bostonreview.net/stewart-onan-the-lost-world-of-richard-yates>

¹⁰⁵ Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, 109.

¹⁰⁶ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 50-51.

creates. If we accept the idea that gender roles are all performative, then Frank's allegedly imperilled masculinity, which he never really expresses much direct concern for throughout the novel, is simply another one in a long line of parts he chooses to play. In Frank we can see the toxic result of what happens when the narcissism that results from a therapeutic culture's promotion of self-obsession is combined with an ill-defined American Dream. He builds delusion upon delusion until he can no longer say with any certainty just who he really is.

It is undoubtedly Frank's greatest fear that he will be thought a bore. April initially won his affection by telling him that he was the "most interesting person"¹⁰⁷ she had ever met, but the "stare of pitying boredom"¹⁰⁸ she fixes on him during a rehash of one of his state-of-the-nation rants leaves him feeling "condemned to a very slow, painless death"¹⁰⁹ and worst of all "middle-aged."¹¹⁰ It is here that we find the core of Frank's problems. He is happy to play the most interesting man in the room without ever having to do anything substantive to back it up. David Castronovo makes the valid point that "Frank is better at talking than running, and best at posing and pretending [...] Frank's stock-in-trade has always been a pseudointellectual knowingness – and April was enchanted from the start."¹¹¹

It is not accurate to say that April was "enchanted" by Frank from the beginning of their relationship. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, she was just as complicit in the pattern that they established early on in their marriage. Theirs is a symbiotic relationship. They have facilitated each other in their shared belief they were above average. They feed each other's need to feel special and exceptional. If anything, Frank was more enchanted with April, allowing himself to believe that this beautiful girl genuinely thought him to be the most interesting person she had ever met. The thing that enchants them most though, is not each other, but the image of themselves that the relationship allows them to construct. Built on such shaky foundations, it is no wonder the entire façade eventually crumbles so spectacularly.

April is just as guilty as Frank of allowing her fantasies to consume her. She becomes more desperate than Frank to leave America, but she cleverly disguises it as a

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 68.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ David Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books From the 1950s That Made American Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 192.

sacrifice she is willing to make in order that Frank may find himself. She longs for a change from her routine, but the only way she can achieve this escape is to appeal to every part of Frank's vanity in order to persuade him that he will be the one to benefit the most from it: "It's got nothing to do with definite, measurable talents – it's your very essence that's being stifled here. It's what you are that's being denied and denied and denied in this kind of life [...] You're the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You're a man."¹¹² April actively deludes herself in an attempt to get what she wants. She encourages Frank to indulge his fantasy of being exceptional and "interesting" and, in turn, convinces herself to ignore all the evidence that Frank is just an "attractive hot-air artist who's probably better suited to bitching and moaning about suburbia than striking out for a bolder destiny."¹¹³ April's calling of his bluff means that he is suddenly faced with the very real possibility that the only thing they will discover in Paris is that he has never been anything more than "a little wise guy with a big mouth [...] showing off a lot of erudition I didn't have."¹¹⁴ It is important to note that both April and Frank play with the idea of imperilled masculinity, or the concept of a crisis, in order to gain the upper hand in their marital power struggle, but the book itself suggests a broader malaise that is not specific to men or women.

Both Stewart O'Nan and Blake Bailey suggest that Frank harbours ambitions of becoming a writer. However, not once throughout the novel does Frank ever express this desire. April even chides him when he points out that he does not possess any artistic talent by asking if he "can [...] really think artists and writers are the only people entitled to lives of their own? [...] I don't care if takes you five years of doing nothing at all; I don't care if you decide after five years that what you really want is to be a bricklayer or a mechanic or a merchant seaman."¹¹⁵ More recently, Kate Charlton-Jones develops this idea of Frank-as-writer further by suggesting that as his role at Knox Business Machines evolves, Frank becomes a writer of sorts without really realising it, "a man who writes without placing any value on, or displaying any commitment to, the written word."¹¹⁶ She expands on this further to posit that

Frank Wheeler may not be a writer of fiction but his position as a writer is very relevant to how he is received. One of the subtler ways in which Yates steers judgment of him is by portraying him as a

¹¹² Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 115.

¹¹³ Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit*, 193.

¹¹⁴ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 114.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹¹⁶ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 114.

man who squanders words (among other things) for money and immediate gratification; there is, therefore, a strong sense of moral disapproval in the way Wheeler leads his life.¹¹⁷

This is true, but only to a point. Frank does not consider himself a writer of any description, and it is certainly not what he was hired for. The critical insistence that Frank thinks there is a writer hidden somewhere inside him is ultimately misleading. He freely admits that he has no such specific goals.

When he unexpectedly starts to do well at work, Frank wants to take pride in it but is unable to. His posturing throughout his entire marriage results in April's refusal to value his work. She is, after all, only following his lead having listened to him dismiss his work time and again as unimportant. He has, in a way, sabotaged himself. He is then left confused by this craving for praise both at work and at home, and once again his attempt to fantasise an exchange with April leaves him back where he started, caught between his dreams and his real life:

“Why do you always undervalue yourself? I think it proves you're the kind of person who can excel at anything you want to, or when you have to.”

And him: “Well, I don't know; maybe. It's just that I don't want to excel at crap like that.”

And her: “Of course you don't, and that's why we're leaving. But in the meantime, is there anything so terrible about accepting their recognition? Maybe you don't want it or need it, but that doesn't make it contemptible, does it? I mean I think you ought to feel good about it, Frank. Really.”

But she hadn't said anything even faintly like that; she hadn't even looked as if thoughts like that could enter her head.¹¹⁸

Frank's dreams end up tying him in knots. He dreams of being exceptional and wonderful but at the same time admits that he longs for stability, wishing that his marriage could be “unexcited, companionable, a mutual tenderness touched with romance.”¹¹⁹ James Wood discusses this contradiction in Frank Wheeler, suggesting that the “mid-century American suburban man is so maddening because he is both a rank escapist and a conservative pragmatist: he has arrogated to himself twin rights that ought to be incompatible – to dream of escape [...] while simultaneously dreaming of timid stability.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 115.

¹¹⁸ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 176-177.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 183.

¹²⁰ Wood, “Like Men Betrayed.”

The Wheelers couch much of their arguments with each other in gendered terms, but the crux of their problems has nothing to do with a gender-related crisis. They argue over things like who should mow the lawn, and whether April's reluctance to have children makes her less of a woman, but these debates are in actual fact a disguise to hide the real cause of their problems. For their entire marriage they have assigned roles to each other and themselves. They have played these parts with such diligence that they end up not knowing each other at all. When April discovers that she is unexpectedly pregnant again, Frank sees it as a relief, that "the pressure was off; life had come mercifully back to normal."¹²¹ April, on the other hand, once again plans to terminate the pregnancy much to Frank's consternation.

He may indeed have genuine concern for her health, but his greatest anxiety is that his convenient escape from the Paris plan will be eliminated. Given the serious nature of April's proposal, one would think that this would be the end of artifice for the Wheelers. She is honest in admitting that she does not want another child but, in the face of her bluntness, Frank redoubles his image-making and fantasising, happier to deal with the consequences of bringing another unwanted child into an already unhappy marriage than face up to any truths about himself. He embarks on a remarkable campaign to convince her that staying in Connecticut and continuing on with their life as it is does not equate to an irrevocable blow to their brilliant dreams. The lengths he goes to in order to create an image of a man wholly at one with his situation are quite astonishing. Yates describes nothing short of a theatrical performance:

These moments were not always quite spontaneous; as often as not they followed a subtle effort of vanity on his part, a form of masculine flirtation that was as skilful as any girl's. Walking toward or away from her across a restaurant floor, for example, he remembered to always do it in the old "terrifically sexy" way, and when they walked together he fell into another old habit of holding his head unnaturally erect and carrying his inside shoulder an inch or two higher than the other, to give himself more loftiness from where she clung at his arm. When he lit a cigarette in the dark he was careful to arrange his features into a virile frown before striking and cupping the flame (he knew, from having practiced this at the mirror of a blacked-out bathroom years ago, that it made a swift, intensely dramatic portrait), and he paid scrupulous attention to endless details: keeping his voice low and resonant, keeping his hair brushed and his bitten fingernails out of sight; being always the

¹²¹ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 208.

first one athletically up and out of bed in the morning, so that she might never see his face lying swollen and helpless in sleep.¹²²

Rather than face the issue directly, Frank endeavours to create yet another image of himself in the belief that he can win April over just as he did when they first met. This time, however, he realises that “the trouble was that ordinary life still had to go on.”¹²³ The Wheelers needlessly complicate their existence because they are actually content to live the dull suburban life so long as they can maintain the fantasy of being completely above it. If they lose that, there is nothing left. The problem with this approach is that neither of them is possessed of any great talent, nor do they strive to improve themselves in any way. Frank in particular would “prefer to believe he’s special without putting the matter to a test.”¹²⁴ They instead continue to struggle with living out their faulty version of the American Dream, but there is no formula for success available to them other than to continually want more than they have. As Stephanie Coontz points out, “the flip side of the urge to have it all is the fear of settling for too little. Something more real might come along.”¹²⁵

John Givings is the one character to openly accuse Frank of hiding his real motivations. He is initially established as a man with serious mental problems, liable to say anything, but his brutal honesty is what finally destroys the veil of fantasy that the Wheelers have thrown across their lives. The language Givings uses to berate them is couched in explicitly gendered terms. He accuses Frank of having “knocked her up on purpose, just so you could spend the rest of your life hiding behind that maternity dress,”¹²⁶ and lays the charge at April’s feet that she “must give him a pretty bad time, if making babies is the only way he can prove he’s got a pair of balls.”¹²⁷ Here, Frank is wholly exposed as using his children as an excuse to renege on the Paris plan, never expecting that someone could be so shockingly blunt as to call him out on it. The most telling phrase throughout his entire rant, however, has nothing to do with stereotypical gender roles; he says to Frank “you figure it’s more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness after all.”¹²⁸ It is not Frank’s masculinity or his position as a man that is called

¹²² Ibid., 220.

¹²³ Ibid., 222.

¹²⁴ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 233.

¹²⁵ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 177.

¹²⁶ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 288.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

into question, but the air of intellectual exceptionalism he had projected. When John Givings demolishes this final deception, neither of the Wheelers are left with anything to pretend. April proceeds with the abortion/suicide and Frank is faced with attempting to reconstruct an image of himself that fits into a world that he has attempted to deny for so long.

It is not Frank's masculinity that he seeks to reinforce with all of this daydreaming and fantasising. It is his sense of place within American society in the 1950s, something April tries to do as well. The fundamental difference between the two of them is that April is eventually prepared to act in an attempt to do something honest. Frank fails to read the signs from her on their last morning together as he is yet again caught up in his own self-obsession. He sees April's behaviour as a "game, this strange elaborate pretense that nothing happened yesterday."¹²⁹ At no point does it occur to him that the strangeness might have something more sinister behind it. Instead, he draws comfort from her interest in his work and the effort she makes to be sociable after the enormous fight of the night before, all the while maintaining his old pose, hiding "his delight with the deprecating, side-of-the-mouth smile he had used for years in telling her about Knox."¹³⁰ The fantasy always has him at the centre as its star and is often framed like a clip from a film, a trope that Yates employs regularly in his writing. As he leaves for work, Frank moves to kiss her "as slowly as any movie actor," conscious as always of how he appears.¹³¹ When April manages to shock him one last time with the actions that lead to her death, Frank suddenly finds himself confronted with the fact that his life is not even remotely like he imagines it to be. He desperately tries to make sense of what has happened, telling Shep "and she was so damn nice this morning. Isn't that the damnedest thing? She was so damn nice this morning [...] She did it to herself, Shep. She killed herself."¹³²

The last fantasy Frank has is when he returns to their home on the night of April's death. As he cleans up, he hears her voice in his head, guiding him around the house, advising him what to do. After Shep arrives at the house, Frank loses her voice. In one of the most poignant scenes in the novel, he wanders around the house trying to find it and, by extension, reclaim his own imagination, but it is too late. Reality has finally and

¹²⁹ Ibid., 297.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 298.

¹³¹ Ibid., 300.

¹³² Ibid., 321.

irrevocably intruded upon Frank's fantasies. As John Mullan succinctly puts it, "his punishment for imagining her talk all too easily is that finally he cannot imagine it at all."¹³³

The great irony of *Revolutionary Road* is that Frank Wheeler is ultimately revealed to be the very type of man he spends so much time and effort criticising. Despite a necessary appearance of grieving for his dead wife, in reality Frank has finally achieved what he always subconsciously desired – stable conformity. In losing his imagination and propensity to fantasise, he gives himself over wholly to a new persona – the bland, corporate drone who likes to talk about his analyst. Having spent much of the novel bemoaning America's love affair with therapy, he now finds himself unashamedly devoted to just that. In his essay "The White Negro," Norman Mailer seems to chart the trajectory that Frank Wheeler takes:

In practice, psycho-analysis has by now become all too often no more than a psychic blood-letting. The patient is not so much changed as aged [...] The result of all too many patients is a diminution, a "tranquilizing" of their most interesting qualities and vices. The patient is indeed not so much altered as worn out – less bad, less good, less bright, less wilful, less destructive, less creative. He is thus able to conform to that contradictory and unbearable society which first created his neurosis. He can conform to what he loathes because he no longer has the passion to feel loathing so intensely.¹³⁴

With April's death, Frank apparently loses the ability to feel passionately. He even loses his voice as his story after April's death is told as an anecdote by Milly Campbell to her new neighbours.

Frank's problems are not borne out of a threat to his masculinity. April, along with many of the other minor characters, is afflicted with the same delusional tendencies. Neither are they pushed into their tragedy by the pressures of suburban conformity. Yates himself explained that their problems are interwoven with each other, not outside forces: "The Wheelers may have thought the suburbs were to blame for all their problems, but I meant it to be implicit in the text that that was *their* delusion, *their* problem, not mine."¹³⁵ *Revolutionary Road*, then, is not a treatise on the battlefield of marriage, or a vicious indictment of the suburbs, or a battle of the sexes, or a catalogue of masculinity in crisis. These are all symptoms rather than the cause. It is a searing condemnation of the

¹³³ John Mullan, "Left Unsaid," Guardian Book Club, September 18, 2004
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/sep/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview26>

¹³⁴ Mailer, "The White Negro," 298.

¹³⁵ Yates, "From the Archive: An Interview with Richard Yates."

hollowness of the American Dream and the neurotic, self-delusional vanity it engendered in the men and women of 1950s America.

*He had dreamed of a kind of integrity, of a kind of purity
that was entire; he had found compromise and the assaulting diversion
of triviality. He had conceived wisdom, and at the end of the long years
he had found ignorance. And what else? he thought. What else?
What did you expect? he asked himself.*

John Williams, *Stoner*

Chapter Two: “Better Luck Next Time.” Ideas of Crisis and Feminism from Yates to the Second Wave

“Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents’ divorce” is essentially the most succinct spoiler alert that Richard Yates could have chosen as the opening sentence of *The Easter Parade*.¹ This is a novel that demands its readers abandon any semblance of hope for its characters from the very outset, and signals that if a reader is searching for a happy ending then they should look elsewhere. Looking back now, it might seem to Yates that this refusal to pander to the greater book-buying public was part of the reason he found sustained success so elusive. In resolutely cataloguing the endless tiny disappointments that made up the lives of his characters, Yates offered no sense of escape for his readers. Not that this was ever his intention, as he repeatedly stated his desire to write “honestly” about life. Happy endings, professional success, and personal fulfilment, were all things that happened to other people, as his writing plainly makes clear.

In 1975, Yates published what is widely considered to be his weakest novel. *Disturbing the Peace* was greeted with lukewarm reviews by critics who saw it as nothing particularly outstanding from the writer who had published the acclaimed *Revolutionary Road* in 1961, eventually followed it up with the solid, but hardly outstanding, *A Special Providence* in 1969, and then failed to publish anything else for the next six years. One of the most positive reviews described *Disturbing the Peace* as “an eloquent minor novel [...] by an author whom one begins to suspect of systematically denying himself major possibilities.”² It would later be selected for a \$2,000 award from the National Institute of Arts and

¹ Richard Yates, *The Easter Parade* (London: Vintage, 2008), 3.

² Blake Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (New York: Picador, 2003), 443.

Letters, but as with Yates's other books it was anything but a commercial success.³ Given the recent relative flop of *Disturbing the Peace*, and his own laborious rate of production, it took the literary world by surprise when *The Easter Parade* unexpectedly appeared in 1976. Yates was supposed to be washed up, out of touch, and past his prime, but seemingly out of nowhere he had produced a book as incisive as it was concise. He went through a number of major health crises just after he had finished writing the novel, including hospitalisation for injuries he suffered after he set his apartment on fire. He was eventually institutionalised later that same year after experiencing another mental breakdown. Before his hospitalisation, however, he still found time – or was still lucid enough – to harangue his literary agent about the publisher's intention to market *The Easter Parade* as that most dreadful of things, “a woman's book.”⁴

One of the most startling things about the novel is his decision to cast two sisters, Sarah and Emily Grimes, as the central characters. Although female characters do play important roles in all of Yates's writing, it is more usually the male characters with whom Yates is most concerned. A decidedly old-fashioned, if not downright chauvinistic man, Yates was unashamedly vocal in his belief that women should stay at home and concern themselves only with having lots of children. He took extreme exception to the idea that his second wife, Martha Speer, had come under the influence of evil women's libbers when she eventually decided to divorce him. In spite of all his own personal sexism, *The Easter Parade* places Yates firmly within a tradition of male writers who write sympathetically about women, however unintentional this actually was. Emily Grimes can be added to a list of characters ranging from Henrik Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House* – referenced in the novel in relation to the Grimes sisters' mother: “she felt ‘stifled’; she wanted freedom; she always used to compare herself with that woman in *A Doll's House*” – Sinclair Lewis's Carol Kennicott in *Main Street*, and, Emma Bovary, a creation of one of Yates's heroes, Gustave Flaubert.⁵

The women of Yates's novels and short stories are treated with the same compassion, or lack thereof, as his men. They are prone to the same dreams and fantasies as his male characters, and are equally afflicted by the same delusional tendencies and terrible decision making. For a man who openly railed against increasing equality for

³ Ibid., 447.

⁴ Ibid., 457.

⁵ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 134.

women, the equality with which he treats his male and female characters is therefore quite surprising. As Kate Charlton-Jones points out, it cannot be argued that “Yates was a profeminist; he was not. There is a real split between Yates’s *intellectual* appreciation of how life is peculiarly difficult for women within marriages that constrain or diminish them and his *emotional* distaste for anything that smacks of a political move to address these issues.”⁶ So it is almost accidental that Yates finds himself in such company, but this quiet tradition of male writers creating rounded, sympathetic female characters who share in the same dilemmas as their male characters does imply an undermining of the interpretation that it is a crisis of masculinity that underlies the issues at hand.

R.W. Connell makes the following observation about the nature of gender relations:

The logic of the genre focuses on “difference” and its explanation. In fact the main finding, from about eighty years of research, is a massive psychological similarity between women and men in the populations studied by psychologists. Clear-cut block differences are few, and confined to restrictive topics. Small differences-on-average, in the context of very large overlapping of the distributions of men and women, are usual even with traits where differences appear fairly consistently. If it were not for the cultural bias of both writers and readers, we might long ago have been talking about this “sex-similarity” research.⁷

Connell approaches gender, and masculinity in particular, from a position of power dynamics. This suggestion that the narrative of gender difference has been skewed by “cultural bias” is useful in attempting to reinterpret the idea of a masculinity crisis, especially in the context of American literature, as this thesis aims to prove.

Of course, this cultural bias to which Connell refers is but one part of the patriarchal society and hegemonic masculinity that she analyses. To take her theory further, we can argue that in pursuing an agenda that promotes the idea of difference between the genders, hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchy it serves are able to maintain successfully the narrative of a masculinity crisis. Difference implies conflict. Conflict necessitates the defence of one’s position or status from attack. Therefore, by seeking to maintain the eminence of the concept of gender difference, the dominant narrative of

⁶ Kate Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream: The Life and Fiction of Richard Yates* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 154.

⁷ Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 170.

masculinity in crisis feeds itself. By repeating and strengthening the notion that masculinity, particularly that of middle-class white men, is in danger of losing its dominance in society, a position is staked out insisting that middle-class white masculinity is something in need of defending and protecting.

In a similar vein to Connell's suggestion of "cultural bias," Michael Kimmel discusses the idea of "confirmation bias."⁸ Kimmel mentions it in relation to the validity of the midlife-crisis, describing it as when a "single case or a few cases of the expected behavior confirm the belief, especially when the behavior is attention-getting or widely reported. Less-obvious disconfirming behavior is easier to ignore."⁹ This brief explanation also undercuts, to a point, Kimmel's own promotion of the narrative of a genuine masculinity crisis. His contention that isolated, but attention-getting behaviour is taken as indicative of a broader trend is precisely what this project suggests is the main driver of the concept of a masculinity crisis. Literature that supports or promotes the crisis narrative has a tendency to reference very specific groups of men, usually in the midst of some upheaval such as sudden unemployment, and take them as representative of all American men and how they view their masculinity. Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (2000) is a prime example of this, employing specific case studies to suggest a fundamental crisis affecting the vast majority of men in America. Interestingly, Faludi's later study, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (2007) takes a slightly different approach, observing how the appeal to embedded cultural and historic stereotypes impacted on gender relations in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

While there is undoubtedly value in the kind of social study that employs small samples to discuss broader trends, this approach can be counterproductive as well. As James Gilbert notes, in his study of representations of masculinity in the 1950s, "for many men there was no crisis at all [...] They understood modern masculinity as quite other than a calamity, even if they experienced the challenge of redefining themselves."¹⁰ He goes on to suggest that rather than reading changes in the experience of men as a crisis, it should be seen instead as "an opportunity for a new fluidity in gender roles, for new forms of self-expression, not the sorry end of individualism or a chilling menace to American

⁸ Michael Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 108.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 221.

manhood.”¹¹ This gender-role fluidity that Gilbert suggests recalls the “sex-similarity” that Connell describes as the alternative approach to the power dynamic in gender relations, and is something we can see traces of in Yates’s characterisation of Emily Grimes in *The Easter Parade*.

Crucially, Gilbert also observed the emergence of a “large and disturbing literature about imperiled masculinity” that began to emerge in the 1950s which helped to fuel the assumption that the American man was under attack.¹² As he points out, this body of literature always identified the attacker as the American woman, eager to subjugate and punish all men. This repeated identification of women as the enemy in books such as Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers*, makes it virtually impossible to discuss the idea of a so-called masculinity crisis without addressing the position of American women at the time that this specific narrative begins to emerge and gain traction. The rest of this chapter will discuss the particular set of challenges facing the mid-twentieth century American woman, and how this compared with the issues faced by her male counterparts. It will also analyse how Yates struggles with the emergent feminist movement and how his depiction of the Grimes women of *The Easter Parade* is a direct, if possibly unintentional, challenge to narrative of the masculinity crisis.

So rapid was its acceptance into the mainstream, the belief in a masculinity crisis was firmly entrenched by the time Betty Friedan published her explosive book, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963. A pioneer of the second-wave of feminism, who had been steadily producing feminist articles and think pieces in the years before *The Feminine Mystique*’s publication, Friedan took exception to the American woman’s apparent retreat into the home and family life after the end of World War II. Friedan not only acknowledged and accepted the existence of the masculinity crisis narrative, but she also demanded to know why nobody was showing any concern for the equally troubling plight of the American woman, observing that

Many saw the tragic waste of American sons who were made incapable of achievement, individual values, independent action; but they did not see as tragic the waste of the daughters, or of the mothers to whom it happened generations earlier. If a culture does not expect human maturity from its women, it does not see its lack as a waste, or as a possible neurosis or conflict. The insult, the real reflection on our culture’s definition of the role of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 217.

women, is that as a nation we only noticed something was wrong with women when we saw its effects on their sons.¹³

By accepting the crisis narrative as fact, Friedan also reinforced the gender-difference narrative that was so instrumental in its propagation. In something of a contradiction, Friedan ties the masculinity crisis narrative firmly to the oppression of American women. Were women free to pursue any opportunity, she seems to suggest, it would instantly resolve the issues supposedly afflicting American men. Her approach is somewhat similar to Connell's "sex-similarity" approach. Connell argues that if the promotion of gender difference had not been accepted then divisions between the genders would naturally have been less significant, which in turn would possibly have reduced any concept of crisis for anyone, whereas Friedan sees the elimination of this division as a free for all in terms of complaints.

Friedan demanded acknowledgement that American women were struggling under the weight of a crisis just as debilitating as that experienced by American men. I would argue that this is again a misreading of the dominant masculinity crisis narrative. The American woman, Friedan asserted, is entitled to share in every opportunity open to American men, including the right to declare herself in crisis. However, similar to the way in which Friedan described the ailments of America's women as a "mystique" which created a problem with no name, this crisis that she was so eager to claim a part of for women is not as clear-cut as she believed.¹⁴ As with the proponents of the crisis narrative in the 1950s, Friedan operated from the assumption that this malaise was gender related. In a roundabout way, she accepted that American men were experiencing some difficulties, but emphatically declared that it was directly related to the plight of the American woman. Friedan bought into the masculinity in crisis narrative in an attempt to highlight the negative attitudes and prejudices that women faced.

Opportunities for women were unquestionably limited, especially in an era with little or no reproductive freedom or access to contraception or abortion, and the expectation that they would all happily become wives and mothers only increased during a decade of social conformity and containment. However, the narrative of a gender-related masculinity crisis that Friedan tried to place women within is not entirely accurate. Friedan

¹³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Gollancz, 1971), 179.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

questioned why the oppression of women was not recognised as relevant to the difficulties of men by attempting to demonstrate that the frustration of American women only served to fuel the crisis experienced by American men. The comparison does not hold though. Yes, women were (and in many cases still are) oppressed solely on the basis of their gender, but we cannot logically argue that the so-called masculinity crisis arose from the oppression of men based on their gender as there is plainly no evidence to support this assertion.

Friedan failed to recognise the fundamental flaw in her acceptance of the masculinity crisis narrative, especially in relation to her suggestions as to how it intertwined with women's issues. At its most basic level, the masculinity crisis narrative does not seek to improve the lot of women. It is concerned exclusively with maintaining the position of prominence historically afforded to men, at any cost. This does not allow for the admission of other groups in to the crisis-fold, as to do so would be to acknowledge the legitimacy of the oppression felt by groups that hegemonic masculinity consistently defines itself as being the opposite of. Yet for all this, when we examine the issues that are raised as impacting both men and women, they are remarkably similar. Conforming to social norms affected both sides of the gender divide – in an ostensibly different manner, but which inevitably circled back to the same thing: the stability of the home and family. The route that American men and women were expected to take on their way to the traditional nuclear family was all that differed.

The dominant subject of the masculinity crisis narrative is one that concerns a very specific group – the white, middle-class American man. It is difficult to find a writer who is more concerned with white, middle-class America than Richard Yates. In all of his work there is only one black character, a minor player in one of his short stories, “A Really Good Jazz Piano.” Even *Revolutionary Road* is set in 1955 which is often represented as the last year of the “ideal” America. It is right on the cusp of the Civil Rights movement, leaving Yates free to concentrate on his very white, very conformist corner of American society without having the deal with the added complication of the advent of desegregation. The men's movement, and much of the literature on the crisis narrative, is generally restricted to the kind of middle-class white man that Yates wrote about so obsessively. There is, therefore, a certain synergy in appropriating what should be an exemplar of the crisis narrative in order to debunk it.

During his career, Yates was considered one of the great chroniclers of what had come to be known as the Age of Anxiety. He had an uncanny ability to articulate a certain malaise that had apparently taken hold of middle-class American society. Yates's America is not a particularly hopeful one, however, and it never really manages to leave the 1950s. His novels never sold well in his lifetime due, in part, to his own unreliability which was exacerbated by his alcoholism and mental-health problems. Another considerable factor in his lack of success, though, is the bleakness of his vision. On the wall above his writing desk in the last apartment that he would live in before he died, Yates had pinned an Adlai Stevenson quotation that read "Americans have always assumed, subconsciously, that every story will have a happy ending."¹⁵ Indeed, Tennessee Williams once noted that "the Cinderella story is our favorite national myth."¹⁶ Challenging this idea of the happy ending, of things somehow always working out in spite of themselves, is at the heart of the Yatesian vision. It is not, however, a challenge that sits well with the dominant American creed of exceptionalism and achievement.

In this chapter, through the fiction of Yates, and others such as Sinclair Lewis, John Williams, John Updike and Sylvia Plath, we will continue the re-examination of the validity of the masculinity crisis narrative. It is possible to read this narrative as a piece of a larger national identity question in American culture, one that affects both men and women equally but does not have its basis in gender division. At its root, it is not based on gender differences but rather an ongoing attempt to reconcile the vaunted pursuit of individual excellence whilst maintaining a uniform, patriotic identity. Betty Friedan talks of an "inner split," of competing parts within the internal psyche that cause an external crisis for the individual.¹⁷ It is possible to expand this idea to encompass the concept of *e pluribus unum*. One of the unofficial mottos of the United States, its literal meaning is "out of many – one." It is this dichotomy that is an ignored, yet fundamentally significant, part of what drives the narrative of a masculinity crisis. How can all of these separate, disparate individuals create a single, unified, identifiable whole without compromising their own personal "one-ness"?

¹⁵ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 581.

¹⁶ Tennessee Williams, "The Catastrophe of Success," in *The Glass Menagerie* (London: Signet; Penguin, 1987) 7.

¹⁷ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 266.

The very foundation of the state was the pursuit of an idea as opposed to a supposedly coherent national identity that naturally evolved over time. Diverse and divergent philosophies and opinions were all bound up in the idea of the United States without ever really resolving what America itself actually meant. In a sense, this allowed the idea of America as an unfinished and ultimately unfinishable project to emerge and persist. It might very well be whatever you wish it to be, but it can also be whatever anyone else wishes it to be as well.

This idea of America as unfinished and unfinishable is something Yates alludes to in *Revolutionary Road* in the form of Frank's forever incomplete stone path linking their house to the road of the novel's title. The Wheelers, like most other Yates characters, fail to connect their own sense of who they are and what they want with the dominant currents of American culture. Reconciling the differences between these various visions of what is a true national identity is problematic in the extreme. The constant pursuit of more and better things fosters an uneasy restlessness that cannot be explained by the masculinity crisis narrative, especially when it can be shown to be an issue that can affect anyone across the gender divide. Seymour Martin Lipset elucidates the contradictions inherent in American identity when he notes that

American values are quite complex, particularly because of paradoxes within our culture that permit pernicious and beneficial social phenomena to arise simultaneously from the same basic beliefs. The American Creed is something of a double-edged sword: it fosters a high sense of personal responsibility, independent initiative, and voluntarism even as it also encourages self-serving behavior, atomism, and a disregard for communal good. More specifically, its emphasis on individualism threatens traditional forms of community morality, and thus has historically promoted a particularly virulent strain of greedy behavior.¹⁸

The belief that it was just American men who were experiencing a struggle that was difficult to define has come to seem the hallmark of the masculinity crisis narrative. The feminist movement supposedly empowered women and gave them a sense of identity; that it was an identity marked by a lack of opportunity and institutionalised sexism that permeated every aspect of society did not matter. The Civil Rights movement gave African Americans a cause to unite in support of, but again, the fact that this was a movement

¹⁸ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-edged Sword* (New York; London: Norton, 1996), 268.

borne out of the denial of rights and systemic racism did not register high on the scale of importance for proponents of the masculinity crisis narrative. Essentially, the crisis narrative provided a rallying cry for those who would seek to maintain the dominance of men and masculinity in American society. Claiming that it was under attack, and in the grips of a desperate crisis, served to draw attention to it to reinforce its position, and helped to reclaim some of the spotlight from those pesky oppressed minorities. Somewhat paradoxically, it also created a sense of unity in the face of supposed reverse discrimination.

Betty Friedan made the following observation about the challenges facing America's young men:

Even today a young man learns soon enough that he must decide who he wants to be. If he does not decide in junior high, in high school, in college, he must somehow come to terms with it by twenty-five or thirty, or he is lost. But this search for identity is seen as a greater problem now because more and more boys cannot find images in our culture – from their fathers or other men – to help them in their search. The old frontiers have been conquered, and the boundaries of the new are not so clearly marked. More and more young men in America today suffer an identity crisis for want of any image of man worth pursuing, for want of a purpose that truly realizes their human abilities.

But why have theorists not recognized this same identity crisis in women? In terms of the old conventions and the new feminine mystique women are not expected to grow up to find out who they are, to choose their human identity. Anatomy is woman's destiny, say the theorists of femininity; the identity of women is determined by her biology.¹⁹

Taking Friedan's question as to why critics failed to see any similar identity crisis in American women in tandem with R.W. Connell's idea of "sex-similarity," this chapter will chart a path through representations of men and women in American fiction that will ultimately undermine the sense of uniqueness that drove the masculinity crisis narrative during the period in question. More importantly, by directly challenging Friedan's assertion that women should be welcomed in to the crisis-fold as it stood, this chapter will suggest an alternative reading of the crisis narrative for the American context.

¹⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 69.

Betty Friedan quotes an article that appeared in *The New York Times* in 1960 which observed that

Many young women – certainly not all – whose education plunged them into a world of ideas feel stifled in their homes. They find their routine lives out of joint with their training. Like shut-ins, they feel left out. In the last year, the problem of the educated housewife has provided the meat of dozens of speeches made by troubled presidents of women’s colleges who maintain, in the face of complaints, that sixteen years of academic training is realistic preparation for wifedom and motherhood.²⁰

However, this epidemic of highly-educated but unsatisfied housewives was not a new phenomenon that only emerged in the 1950s and 60s. Sinclair Lewis, one of the most internationally successful American writers of his time – and the first to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930 – expounded at length on the topic of the over-educated housewife in his novel *Main Street*, which was first published in 1920. His female protagonist, Carol, has a college education, worked for several years as a city librarian, and fancies herself as something of a trailblazer only to find herself stifled by the crushing conformity of small-town Middle America. According to the other characters in the novel, Carol is the quintessential woman with notions above her station. Percy Bresnahan makes this abundantly clear when he responds to yet another one of her complaints about the insular and close-minded nature of the inhabitants of Gopher Prairie, saying

“You like to think you’re peculiar. Why, if you knew how many tens of thousands of women, especially in New York, say just what you do, you’d lose all the fun of thinking you’re a lone genius and you’d be on the bandwagon whooping it up for Gopher Prairie and a good decent family life. There’s always about a million young women just out of college who want to teach their grandmothers how to suck eggs.”²¹

The characterisation of Carol Kennicott in the novel is decidedly ambivalent. She is profoundly stultified by what she sees as the old-fashioned, socially conservative ways of Gopher Prairie. However, she is also quite naïve in her dealings with the inhabitants of the town, failing to understand why her new ideas and modern attitude might antagonise her neighbours.

²⁰ Ibid., 20.

²¹ Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (London: Penguin, 1991), 276.

Repeatedly, Lewis comments on the level of education that Carol has attained and contrasts it with what is expected of her as a housewife and mother. The underlying feeling throughout the novel is that what she has learned from books has in no way prepared her for the real world, and in fact may only have served to fill her with unnameable and unattainable desires. Carol becomes a symbol for the masses of women being filled up with what is seen as wholly inappropriate and irrelevant learning:

The authors whom she read [...] were young American sociologists, young English realists, Russian horrorists; Anatole France, Rolland, Nexo, Wells, Shaw, Key, Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Henry Menchen, and all the other subversive philosophers and artists whom women were consulting everywhere, in batik-curtained studios in New York, in Kansas farmhouses, San Francisco drawing-rooms, Alabama schools for Negroes. From them she got the same confused desire which the million other women felt; the same determination to be class-conscious without discovering the class of which she was to be conscious.²²

What Friedan called a mystique some forty years later, Sinclair Lewis labels a “confused desire.” Carol is vocal throughout the novel about her desire to “find what my work is,” but she never really does.²³ Nor does she ever manage to settle on one plan of action, instead flitting from one project to another without ever seeing any of them to completion. This is a character trait flagged by Lewis quite early on in the novel when he states that “her versatility ensnared her.”²⁴

Carol is in many ways an early ancestor of Frank Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road*. Both are prone to the same daydreaming tendencies and remain vaguely unfulfilled throughout their respective stories. Carol, like Frank, never finds contentment in the task at hand, preferring instead to imagine whatever project she’s working on taking on much grander proportions with her at the heart of it all, a natural beacon for admiration as a result. In the opening pages of the novel, this comparison is most evident as Carol daydreams her way through a history lecture – a fact in itself indicative of the ultimate waste that her education will be:

He [her history lecturer] spent three delightful minutes in assuring himself of the fact that no one exactly remembered the date of the Magna Charta [*sic*].

²² Ibid., 256.

²³ Ibid., 404.

²⁴ Ibid., 9.

Carol did not hear him. She was completing the roof of a half-timbered town hall. She had found one man in the prairie village who did not appreciate her picture of winding streets and arcades, but she had assembled the town council and dramatically defeated him.²⁵

This is not to suggest that Carol is alone in this type of behaviour in the novel, however. The young tailor, Erik Valborg, catches her attention when he arrives in town. Not only is Carol captivated by his handsome good looks, but also his apparent love of books and art and grand ideas that seem to mirror her own in a way that none of the other residents of Gopher Prairie do. As with all of her other schemes and dreams, Carol gets swept up in the idea of Erik without ever stopping to consider the real, practical implications of her actions. The idea is what is most important to Carol, not its application, but this is to the detriment of her marriage and her reputation in the town as the doctor's loyal, dependable wife (however unearned this might be). Her own vague desires are reflected in Erik as she defends him to her husband Will, when he questions the validity of their shared fantasies of artistic endeavour, asking

“What’s he done to make you think he’ll ever be anything but a pants-presser?”

“He has sensitiveness and talent –”

“Wait now! What has he actually done in the art line? Has he done one first-class picture or – sketch [...] or anything except gas on about what he’s going to do?”

She looked thoughtful.

“Then it’s a hundred to one shot that he never will. Way I understand it, even these fellows that do something pretty good at home and get to go to art school, there ain’t more than one out of ten of ‘em, maybe one out of a hundred, that ever get above grinding out a bum living – about as artistic as plumbing. And when it comes to this tailor, why, can’t you see – you that take on so about psychology – can’t you see that it’s just by contrast with folks like Doc McGanum or Lym Cass that this fellow seems artistic? Suppose you’d met up with him first in one of those reg’lar New York studios! You wouldn’t notice him anymore ‘n a rabbit!”²⁶

What is the most striking about the character of Carol Kennicott, however, is that when read in the light of *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published more than forty years after

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 383.

Main Street, it becomes plainly clear that Betty Friedan was not articulating anything new about the experience of middle-class women in America. In fact, the complaints that Carol gives voice to in *Main Street* haunt the pages of *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan wrote of the virtual impossibility of finding anything resembling fulfilment in scrubbing floors and minding small children. Carol similarly rages at her husband about the lack of accomplishment that she sees in her culturally assigned role in the home:

“These business men, from their crushing labors of sitting in an office seven hours a day, would calmly recommend that I have a dozen children. As it happens, I’ve done that sort of thing. There’ve been a good many times when we hadn’t a maid, and I did all the housework and cared for Hugh, and went to Red Cross, and did it all very efficiently [...] But was I more happy when I was drudging? I was not. I was just bedraggled and unhappy. It’s work – but not my work. I could run an office or a library, or nurse and teach children. But solitary dish-washing isn’t enough to satisfy me – or many other women.”²⁷

Repeatedly, throughout American fiction, we see this contradiction between education, the expectations it engenders in individuals, and the society in which they must then attempt to pursue a living.

Indeed, it was not only in the realm of fiction that this narrative held true though. The increase in access to further education for both men and women also created new, previously unheard of problems. It was generally accepted that men went to college to train for employment while their female counterparts went to college to find husbands. Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic nominee for President in 1952 and 1956, who could count Richard Yates as a staunch supporter, gave a now notorious address to the 1955 graduating class of Smith College, the premier women’s college in the United States. Supposedly the great liberal hope, Stevenson encouraged this group of highly-educated young women to accept their duties and responsibilities as wives and mothers. Their primary role in life, he declared, would be to support their men-folk, both their sons and husbands, in the travails of business. The audience of female graduates, including a young Sylvia Plath, were warned not to harbour any aspirations outside of the home and eventual motherhood, as nothing else could compare to the sacred duty bestowed upon them as the carers of the nation’s men. The address was also later reprinted in the *Women’s Home Companion*, allowing for

²⁷ Ibid., 404-405.

wider dissemination of Stevenson's suggestions, and gained its notoriety with the frequency that Plath scholars point to it as a formative experience in the young writer's life.

Opening with the assertion that "there is much you can do about our crisis in the humble role of housewife," he advised them to forsake any ambitions that they might hold for occupation or employment outside of the home.²⁸ Stevenson effectively declared the education of women a pointless pursuit beyond the purpose of "keeping your man straight on the differences between Botticelli and Chianti."²⁹ The most important use to which these women could ever hope to put their education was the ability to hold a conversation with their husbands without taxing him too much after a hard day at work. It was nothing less than their civic duty as responsible citizens to provide and maintain stable home environments at all costs in which their husbands could educate their children in the American way of life.

An unanticipated outcome of this increased access to education, however, was the attendant increase in expectations it encouraged. Was it really acceptable for the women of America to spend upwards of sixteen years in full-time education but never put it to any use outside of the home? Stevenson insisted that the role of women in the home was "important work, worthy of you, whoever you are, or your education, whatever it is."³⁰ He took pains to point out that "this assignment for you, as wives and mothers, has great advantages. In the first place, it is home – you can do it in the living-room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand. If you're really clever, maybe you can even practice your saving arts on that unsuspecting man while he's watching television!"³¹ After a particularly demoralising recital of the chasm between their experiences as college students and the expectations of them as wives and mothers, Stevenson cheerfully reminded these young women that they had "never had it so good [...] And in spite of the difficulties of domesticity, you have a way to actively participate in the crisis in addition to keeping yourself and those about you straight on the difference between means and ends, mind and spirit, reason and emotion."³²

²⁸ Adlai Stevenson, "A Purpose for Modern Woman," published in *Women's Home Companion* (September 1955): 30-31. *W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.*

http://www.wwnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch32_04.htm

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Somewhat unsurprisingly given her attendance at Stevenson's address, one of the most well-known examples of a young woman struggling with the expectations she finds imposed upon her is Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, first published under a pseudonym in 1963. The book is set around 1954-55, firmly establishing it in the same pre-choice era of limited opportunities for women. Esther Greenwood, the troubled protagonist, ruminates on the fate of her and the women around her, all of whom she sees as doomed to a uniform life of similar drudgery that Carol Kennicott lamented:

This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself.³³

Esther is plagued by serious mental-health problems, but even before her breakdown and various suicide attempts she begins to lose her belief in the validity of her ambitions. Having convinced herself that a life of high achievement and success would be hers for the taking, she gradually becomes aware of the underlying pointlessness of it all. She ruefully observes that "after nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race."³⁴ She is reminded from all quarters that the main expectation of her is to find a husband and settle down rather than become a successful, independent career woman. Indeed, when she awakens in the hospital after attempting suicide and declares "I can't see," a cheerful, disembodied voice replies, "There are lots of blind people in the world. You'll marry a nice blind man some day."³⁵ The implication is clear: as a woman, Esther cannot stray too far from what is expected of her gender or her type. It is not surprising to note that Esther's despair at what is expected of her as a woman graduating from college is the exact opposite of Adlai Stevenson's jovial dismissal of all the academic work these young women had completed to reach that point.

Similarly, was it really fair to educate young American men to a high standard, expose them to philosophies of individualism and self-fulfilment while indoctrinating them into believing they could achieve anything they wanted, only for them to be absorbed into the uniform world of white collar (or grey flannel) corporate business? When combined

³³ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 80.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

with the American creed of constant upward social mobility, it is somewhat inevitable that a large cohort of highly-educated, but ultimately aimless individuals would emerge. Friedan herself noted that “it is not possible to preserve one’s identity by adjusting for any length of time to a frame of reference that is in itself destructive to it. It is very hard indeed for a human being to sustain such an ‘inner’ split – conforming outwardly to one reality, while trying to maintain inwardly the values it denies.”³⁶

The fictional embodiment of this inner split which Friedan discusses is William Stoner, the quiet hero of John Williams’s 1965 novel *Stoner*. Originally from a small farm, Stoner goes to the University of Missouri to study agriculture with the vague aim of modernising how the family farm is run. While there, he becomes more interested in literature and ends up switching his major, turning his back on the farm and instead embarking on a somewhat inadvertent career as an academic. What follows is a chain of events which Stoner appears to have no control over. He desires certain things and to be a certain way, but anything he ever achieves is accidental and more often than not his ambitions and dreams are thwarted by other people, so that after his death he essentially fades into obscurity:

Stoner’s colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers.³⁷

Stoner’s ambitions are by no means outlandish or extravagant, but even still there is a sense that he always just misses out on true satisfaction, possibly suggesting that there is no such thing in American society. Fantasies, however vague, will always seem more fulfilling than the reality of these characters’ situations.

Stoner, despite Williams’s plea to his publishers not to treat it as “just another ‘academic novel,’” is a novel about university life.³⁸ However, whereas Richard Yates slightly glamourises the process of obtaining a degree, romanticising the idea of living in a world of ideas for four years before having to deal with the mundanity of everyday life, in *Stoner* it is the university that becomes mundane. What could be fantastic instead becomes

³⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 266.

³⁷ John Williams, *Stoner* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), 1.

³⁸ Julian Barnes, “Stoner: The Must-read Novel of 2013.” *The Guardian*, December 13, 2013, sec. Books. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/13/stoner-john-williams-julian-barnes>

just like any other job, filled with office politics, relationship dramas, and professional stagnation. We catch a glimpse of what the ideal university could be for Stoner in an exchange with one of his few acquaintances, David Masters:

“Have either of you gentlemen ever considered the question of the true nature of the University? Mr Stoner? Mr Finch?”

Smiling, they shook their heads.

“I’ll bet you haven’t. Stoner, here, I imagine, sees it as a great repository, like a library or a warehouse, where men come of their free will and select that which will complete them, where all work together like little bees in a common hive. The True, the Good, the Beautiful. They’re just around the corner, in the next corridor; they’re in the next book, the one you haven’t read, or in the next stack, the one you haven’t got to. But you’ll get to it someday. And when you do – when you do.”³⁹

Throughout the novel there is the sense of a split in what the university, and the education it provides to its students, means. On the one hand, it is just like any other workplace, but on the other there is also the sense that the university provides a protective bubble in which its inhabitants can ignore and avoid the outside world. Stoner refuses to enlist along with his friends when America joins the war, as “he could find in himself no very strong feelings of patriotism, and he could not bring himself to hate the Germans” however much he might have “resented the disruption which the war forced upon the University.”⁴⁰ In staying behind and refusing to fight, Stoner marks himself out as being weak, unable to face a challenge when most needed, and yet through the whole novel Stoner never exhibits anything other than resigned acceptance at the way things turn out for him, wondering on his deathbed “What did you expect?”⁴¹

This resignation is perhaps one of main similarities between William Stoner and Emily Grimes. Where Carol Kennicott and Esther Greenwood have dramatic breaks from their respective lives, Emily Grimes – apart from an uncharacteristic outburst towards the end of the novel – seems consumed with resignation at how her life turns out. Yates once remarked somewhat despairingly, in another nod to Flaubert, that “Emily fucking Grimes is me.”⁴² This was an interesting observation for him to make, and highlights the

³⁹ Williams, *Stoner*, 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁴² Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 465.

interchangeable, and decidedly not gender-related, nature of the malaise that Yates was so adept at writing about. His female protagonist is a fully realised woman, yet her neuroses and fears, which he points out are also his own, are instantly recognisable as the same that cripple Esther Greenwood, Carol Kennicott, and even Frank and April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*.

Education and intelligence are both a blessing and curse for Emily from a young age. Early on in life, she realises that she is much smarter than her mother, Pookie, but given her increasing distaste as she grows up for all things related to her mother, this does not really give her much cause for concern. It is only when she comes to understand that she is also more intelligent than her beloved older sister Sarah that she begins to feel a contradiction in the value she herself places on her education. She wholeheartedly buys into the idea that a college education will set her apart from the average person, marking her as special in some way. However, the growing knowledge she acquires during her college years, that she is not just more educated but also more intelligent than her sister, prompts her to come to feel as if “she had betrayed a trust.”⁴³

Despite the guilt she feels over this perceived betrayal of Sarah, Emily still sees the world of further education as a means of escape from her dysfunctional family. It presents her with the opportunity to become a member of society with more meaning and substance than the “flair” her mother is so obsessed with.⁴⁴ A winner of a scholarship to Barnard, Emily fails to recognise that the emphasis she places on the value of being an intellectual is not all that dissimilar to the flair she judges her mother so severely for aspiring to when she notes that

School was the center of her life. She had never heard the word “intellectual” used as a noun before she went to Barnard, and she took it to heart. It was a brave noun, a proud noun, a noun suggesting lifelong dedication to lofty things and a cool disdain for the commonplace. An intellectual might lose her virginity to a soldier in the park, but she could learn to look back on it with a wry, amused detachment. An intellectual might have a mother who showed her underpants when drunk, but she wouldn’t let it bother her. And Emily Grimes might not be an intellectual yet, but if she took copious notes in even the dullest of her classes, and if she read every night until her eyes ached, it was only a question

⁴³ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

of time. There were girls in her class, and even a few Columbia boys, who thought of her as an intellectual already, just from the way she talked.⁴⁵

At a time when women were not only encouraged, but expected, to become wives and mothers as soon as possible, Emily invests her college education with a meaning beyond just academic learning. Education and the importance of being an “intellectual” are her way of ascribing some meaning to her life and marking it as different from her mother’s shambolic existence and her sister’s chaotic marriage.

Somewhat paradoxically, Emily does not see her education as a means to a stable career, nor does she see her time in college as an opportunity to form an auspicious attachment with an accomplished young man. Instead, she learns the lesson that recurs in most of Yates’s fiction that college was about opening the mind, not training it, noting that “college had taught her that the purpose of a liberal-arts education was not to train but to free the mind. It didn’t matter what you did for a living; the important thing was what kind of person you were.”⁴⁶ As with many of Yates’s characters, the admiration of others is something that Emily craves. She takes a secret pride in the way others view her. This is evident early on in her college days when she describes a novel as a “pernicious bore”⁴⁷ and then notices “that several other girls made liberal use of the word ‘pernicious’ around the dormitory during the next few days.”⁴⁸

This insistence on the importance of the kind of person you became mattering more than your eventual career or status is something of a Yates trope. Emily’s father reinforces this when he tells her that her time in college will see her “live in the world of ideas for four whole years before you have to concern yourself with anything as trivial as the demands of workaday reality.”⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, given Yates’s staunch admiration of the man, it also touches on the themes of Adlai Stevenson’s Smith College address. Yes, these women like Emily Grimes would be highly-educated, but rather than cultivate career ambitions they should instead be satisfied just to acknowledge what a well-rounded person they had become during their time in college. What is interesting about this aspect of *The Easter Parade* is that Yates places almost the exact same words into Frank Wheeler’s mouth

⁴⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 33.

in *Revolutionary Road*. Frank repeatedly reminds himself that “the important thing, always, was to remember who you were.”⁵⁰

That Yates saw fit to attribute the same aesthetic value on education to both a male and female character draws attention to an interesting quirk in attitudes toward higher education. John Lewis Gaddis notes that the United States required a continuous supply of highly educated graduates, something which saw enrolments in third-level education triple between 1955 and 1970. However, he also notes that “learning does not easily compartmentalize: how do you prepare students to think for purposes approved by the state – or by their parents – without also equipping them to think for themselves?”⁵¹ We are again confronted with the idea of a “split,” this time one that is essentially state-sanctioned in the form of an increasingly educated population that is then expected to fall into line once they graduate. Such an environment results in admonitions such as that delivered by Stevenson to the graduates of Smith College to be proud of their education but not so proud as to expect to put it to use. Mainstream culture embraced the idea of higher education in and of itself, but did not see any need to provide adequate outlets for these graduates to put their education into practice. However, as Yates demonstrates through the characters of Frank Wheeler and Andrew Crawford, most likely inadvertently, this was a phenomenon that was not just confined to the young women of America.

The emphasis Emily places on being an “intellectual” is what leads to her disastrous marriage to Andrew Crawford, a graduate student she meets at a college party. In the character of Andrew we see the amalgamation of several different stereotypes – the anxious white male struggling to deal with impotence, and also the average male college student that William Whyte surveyed during the 1950s who “talk little about money [but] talk a great deal about the good life.”⁵² Andrew’s assertion that he eventually wants to teach once he has travelled the world – “I like the academic life”⁵³ – could have been pulled from one of Whyte’s interviewees who, he observes, “have thought about a career in teaching, but [...] it appears it is not so much that he likes teaching itself as the sort of life he associates with it.”⁵⁴ Andrew uses his learning as a shield to protect himself from the

⁵⁰ Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 20.

⁵¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 147.

⁵² Quoted in Andrew Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle-Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White Collar Work* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 34.

⁵³ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 50.

⁵⁴ Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle-Class*, 34.

demands of the outside world, safe in the knowledge that he can retreat to academia's safety net and not have it viewed as a sort of failure because of the value that everyone else has placed on it. He may be unable to function as a normal, emotionally stable human being but that does not really matter because people like Pookie who do not know any better will "love the sort of formal way he talks" because it suggests he "must be *very* intelligent."⁵⁵

Andrew is intrinsically linked with college and learning in *The Easter Parade*. His attitude is also reminiscent of another element of David Masters's dissection of the university in *Stoner* and those who inhabit it, the idea of college as some form of security blanket:

"society, or fate, or whatever name you want to give it, has created this hovel for us, so that we can go in out of the storm. It's for us that the University exists, for the dispossessed of the world; not for the students, not for the selfless pursuit of knowledge, not for any of the reasons that you hear. We give out the reasons, and we let a few of the ordinary ones in, those that would do in the world; but that's just protective coloration [...] But as bad as we are, we're better than those on the outside, in the muck, the poor bastards of the world. We do no harm, we say what we want, and we get paid for it; and that's a triumph of natural virtue, or pretty damn close to it."⁵⁶

Effectively, in *Main Street*, *Stoner*, and *The Easter Parade*, education provides already dissatisfied characters with the vocabulary to articulate their discontent, but no concrete skills to tackle it. What is striking about *The Easter Parade* is that Yates presents us with a male character experiencing the same absence of substance that Emily finds in almost everything she does. This has the subtle effect of destabilising the accepted masculinity crisis narrative, as they both exhibit similar anxieties that cannot be attributed to a gender-based conflict. Both Andrew and Emily crave recognition and admiration for their academic achievements. They are both guilty of believing that in some way their college experience automatically bestows upon them a certain higher status. This results in them seeing themselves as above most other people they encounter. Ultimately, like the Wheelers of *Revolutionary Road*, they do not wear their learning lightly, and instead become snobbish and elitist in their attitudes to those around them, including each other.

⁵⁵ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 70.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Stoner*, 31.

On a disastrous visit to Sarah and her boorish husband Tony, Emily and Andrew smugly congratulate each other on having correctly predicted the less than challenging reading matter that they would find in the house, noting that “they *do* read nothing but the *Daily News*.”⁵⁷ Their pretensions to intellectualism and their own intense self-obsessions have left them unable to see the legitimacy in interests other than their own. Andrew speaks at length about an obscure art house film to Tony, completely oblivious to the fact that Tony has no interest in either the film or in what Andrew is saying. As Andrew is completely incapable of seeing himself in relation to other people, he sees nothing wrong with expecting that others adapt to his ideas rather than the entertaining the possibility of any adjustment on his own part.

For all of Yates’s talk of how education was “not to train but to free the mind,” the cumulative effect of Andrew’s education is to make him hyper-aware of his own shortcomings while still entertaining a nagging belief that he should be able to mould the world and those in it to suit him.⁵⁸ This is most obvious in the trajectory of Andrew and Emily’s marriage. It appears that it is not so much being married to Emily as being married to anyone that is the most important thing to him. He tells her “I do know what love is, and I’m going to work on you and work on you until you do too.”⁵⁹ For Emily, their marriage is nothing more than another item on the list of things that happen to her in a life that she fails ever to fully define. Andrew never does properly “work” on her as she has no real love for him to begin with beyond a vague sense of sympathy. It is a remarkable echo of the relationship between William Stoner and his own wife Edith, which sees him also talk a reluctant woman into marrying him with the gentle declaration “Then I must tell you again [...] And you must get used to it. I love you and I cannot imagine living without you.”⁶⁰

Once Emily and Andrew’s marriage unravels in acrimonious divorce after his blunt declaration that “I hate your body,” Emily embarks upon a career in editing and a life in New York City.⁶¹ However, she is once again faced with the essential hollowness of her existence, plagued by the doubts and lack of meaning that all the other characters previously mentioned in this chapter deal with too. The façade that she learned to perfect

⁵⁷ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 75.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶⁰ Williams, *Stoner*, 56.

⁶¹ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 76.

in college remains just that as she never acquires a definite sense of her own ambitions or how to articulate them, observing that “you had to be serious, but – this was the maddening paradox – you had to seem never to take anything seriously.”⁶² Just as frustrating for Emily is her complete inability to shake off this “maddening paradox.” She remains caught between her fundamental desire for warmth and love and stability, and her sense that an educated, independent woman should maintain the pose of the aloof intellectual.

Emily is presented as chronically preoccupied with worry and doubt from a young age. Yates builds up the concept of a college education as something that will provide some desperately needed stability in her life. We learn that their mother, the constantly dishevelled and work-shy Pookie, allowed Emily and Sarah to believe that their father had “gone through Syracuse.”⁶³ When her father reveals, much to Emily’s surprise, that he only spent a year in college before taking a full-time job, he witheringly observes that her “mother has her own way of dealing with information.”⁶⁴ By cultivating the falsehood that her husband was a college-educated man, Pookie is able to bask in the reflected sophistication of such an achievement. This again calls attention to the American belief in the transformative powers of a college education. However, as with Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, Emily never really manages to use her education for anything other than reassuring herself that she is a serious person, entitled to feel above average despite her mundane “undemanding” job.⁶⁵ As with Esther Greenwood and Carol Kennicott before her, and her older sister Sarah, Emily is ultimately expected to marry rather than pursue a career. However, she puts to good use the only ostensible skill she acquired in college – apart from critical reading – and projects a jaded sense of being above it all, which results in her own sister believing that “Emmy’s a free spirit [...] Emmy doesn’t care what anybody thinks. She’s her own person and she goes her own way.”⁶⁶

In all of these novels, the protagonists see themselves as free spirits, as operating slightly outside of the mainstream, and all as a result of the kind of thinking that their education has engrained in them. When they leave college, however, it is only to find that their knowledge effectively splits them down the middle, engaging them in a battle between

⁶² Ibid., 49.

⁶³ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 201.

what they dream of being and what they actually become. The disparity between the preparation young men and women received in high-school and college, and the society they are thrust into upon leaving these institutions feeds into the sense of detachment and aimlessness they all exhibit. Having spent their formative years learning to view themselves as individuals and as special in some unique way, the reality of the social conformity they find themselves contending with proves insurmountable. It recalls F. Scott Fitzgerald's suggestion that he had once believed that there are "no second acts" in American life.⁶⁷ But where Fitzgerald allows for the possibility that such a belief might be erroneous, none of the characters discussed here so far do. All of them were taught to fetishise their own potential and nothing else. The promise always matters more than anything they could ever do.

To assign the blame for this malaise to the narrative of a masculinity crisis or a gender-based upheaval is not entirely accurate. It is a circular argument at best. The emergent feminist movement of the 1960s wanted to lay claim to equality for women across all spheres of experience, including the crisis of identity that was supposedly afflicting American men. The more women agitated for recognition, the more vociferous the men's movement became about pushing back, claiming that increased equality for women only served to aggravate the crisis that they were apparently in the throes of. As James Gilbert observes, there was a

repetitious chorus of complaints by observers in the 1950s, that women were intruding into male institutions and feminizing American life. In part, this may have reflected difficulties in adjustment to civilian life after the experience of mostly male society of the military. But intellectuals poured worry and woe over evidence of America's growing culture of domesticity.⁶⁸

However, it is the wrong crisis that activists such as Betty Friedan sought to be a part of. As R. W. Connell points out, "all forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men [...] there is no femininity that holds among women the position held by hegemonic masculinity among men."⁶⁹ This is not strictly true, especially now with the rise of intersectional feminism and a growing awareness of the internal power dynamics that inhabit an increasingly fractured feminist

⁶⁷ F. Scott Fitzgerald, "My Lost City," in *On Booze* (London: Picador, 2012), 75.

⁶⁸ Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 217.

⁶⁹ Connell, *Gender and Power*, 186-187.

movement. However, in the context of these novels and the experience of these middle-class white women, the uniformity of experience holds true. As a result of the fundamental structural differences between masculinity and femininity as Connell sees it, there cannot logically be a shared gender crisis for feminists like Friedan to demand recognition in. In an American context then, rather than recognise the priority that the American creed placed on the concept of continuous achievement and the impact this had on men and women alike, theorists fell into the easy and comfortable trap of constructing the narrative of a masculinity crisis fuelled by a larger crisis of the gender order. Emily Grimes and William Stoner have all the intellectual freedom afforded to them by their respective educations, yet both are still trapped by the pressure to conform to societal norms.

David Van Leer observes the following about the atmosphere of American life in the 1950s:

Existentialism defined the generation's conception of self and society. Rebelling against traditional notions of authority, dogma, and political ideology, the existentialists spoke instead of an individual's "being" or "engagement" with the world [...] As a philosophical movement, existentialism critiqued the falsely scientific tone of certain analytic schools of thought and rejected metaphysicians' pursuit of foundational truths. When translated into a popular idiom, however, the philosophy tended to encourage individual self-absorption over social involvement. What began as an attempt to explain and overcome the absurdity of modern life at times seemed to support and celebrate it. Alienation became not a symptom of the general malaise but a mark of one's superiority to the conformist mentality of the masses.⁷⁰

This "individual self-absorption" which Van Leer speaks of can be observed in many of the characters in the novels under discussion here. However, as Van Leer also notes, this self-absorption is not recognised as potentially being a part of a larger problem with the contradictory nature of the American creed. Instead it is embraced and almost celebrated as a sign of these characters' belief in their own superiority, and their equally held belief in the unique nature of their own difficulties in resolving the conflict.

It is an issue that is raised time and again in discussions of the American dream and its inherently contradictory nature, but it is not something that is ever given sufficient consideration in discussions of the masculinity crisis narrative. Wiley Lee Umphlett takes

⁷⁰ David Van Leer, "Society and Identity," in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott (New York; Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1991), 487.

the idea of self-absorption and observes how it creates a problematic situation for citizens attempting to pursue the fabled dream, noting that

the development and proliferation in this century of an increasingly visual and fantasy-inspired culture reflect both a gradual takeover of the individual's will to interpret for himself what he sees and the individual's impaired capability to see himself in relationship to his environment.⁷¹

This inability to relate to other people, or to identify one's place in society, is a recurring theme in many of the novels discussed in this thesis. Such a difficulty feeds into the challenges many of these characters experience in trying to know themselves as individuals while also satisfactorily placing themselves within a culture that demands a certain amount of conformity.

Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, the hero of John Updike's Rabbit novels, articulates this sense of being apart from society during his failed attempt at escape to the South in *Rabbit, Run*, the first book in the series. In writing Rabbit, Updike deliberately created an Everyman type of character, someone who could accurately depict the progress of a certain type of life in America. The sense of pointless achievement engendered in the female characters already discussed in this chapter is not unlike the way Rabbit views his days as a star high-school basketball player. As he explains, "after you're first-rate at something, no matter what, it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate."⁷² For Rabbit, the greatness he achieved on the basketball court colours everything else that comes after it. As with the women of the other novels who struggle to reconcile their educational achievements with their lot in life as wives and mothers, Rabbit battles to accept the average hand of being a mediocre salesman with an unhappy marriage that life has dealt him since leaving high-school. As Morris Dickstein suggests, "the subject of the books, especially *Rabbit, Run*, is not Rabbit's fall so much as his inchoate quest, his effort to shape his life to the fleeting glimpses of glory he once had."⁷³

While stopped at a roadside diner, he experiences a moment of intense introspection, thinking "he had thought, he had read, that from shore to shore all America

⁷¹ Wylie Lee Umphlett, *Mythmakers of the American Dream: The Nostalgic Vision in Popular Culture* (Lewisburg, Pa.: New York; London: Bucknell University Press; Cornwall Books, 1983), 16.

⁷² John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (London: Deutsch, 1974), 107.

⁷³ Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970* (Cambridge, MA.; London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 106.

was the same. He wonders, Is it just these people I'm outside, or is it all America?"⁷⁴ Rabbit is often held up as the archetypal example of a masculinity crisis. He does, after all, abandon his heavily pregnant wife and small child for no valid reason other than his belief that his relationship with Janice "was really second-rate."⁷⁵ His treatment of women is questionable at best, and his quest for sexual fulfilment is often deeply problematic as evinced in his treatment of Ruth. However, what he expresses in the diner episode is not the problematic nature of his masculinity, but rather how he is supposed to relate to his country as an American person.

For the other characters in the novel, his abdication of his responsibilities as a husband and father is deeply troubling. Reverend Eccles in particular makes it his mission to deliver Rabbit back to his family, thereby reinforcing the conflict between the individual and the collective. Rabbit's reasons for running, regardless of how specious they might seem, are not all that important to the Reverend. What matters is that Rabbit maintain the stable family unit and live up to his responsibilities – otherwise known as conforming to the socially accepted norm. Rabbit is portrayed as obsessed with his sense of his own manliness and the expression of his masculinity, but it is not really this obsession that pushes him to run away. Catherine Morley notes that

Throughout the Rabbit series, Updike sets the actions of the individual against a wider national context – in a way, engaging with the former de facto national motto, *e pluribus unum* – but also using Rabbit to demonstrate one of the central tensions in the consolidation of the nation: the assertion of the individual identity as part of the democratic collective [...] The essential instability of his identity is the cause of Rabbit's despair and dissatisfaction.⁷⁶

The recurring theme of asserting one's sense of identity as an individual and also recognising one's responsibilities as an American citizen rebound on Rabbit time and again. He is the prism through which Updike reflects the greater questions of national identity.

Unlike Emily Grimes, or Esther Greenwood, or Carol Kennicott, Rabbit is not highly educated. This is not to say that he is above judging others for their reading material.

⁷⁴ Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 33.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷⁶ Catherine Morley, *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction: John Updike, Philip Roth and Don DeLillo* (London: Routledge, 2009), 76.

Emily and Andrew's gloating discussion of Tony and Sarah's reading matter in *The Easter Parade* is in much the same vein as Rabbit's distaste Ruth's fondness for cheap paperback novels. In the later novels of the series, he is as often as not to be found reading consumer reports or trade magazines, although by the time of the final novel he gamely attempts to read some American history books in yet another effort to place himself once and for all.

Rabbit has not been exposed to the same kind of philosophical ideas that Emily Grimes or Esther Greenwood or Carol Kennicott take so much to heart. Yet, he still experiences a similar struggle to reconcile his own identity as an individual in relation to the societal pressures to conform to the collective ideal. Here we have very disparate characters, all coming from very different perspectives, and yet all still fail to realise any concrete sense of what their own personal ideal existence is.

The idea of the United States as an unfinished project pervades much of the literature of the country at a fundamental level. While manifestations of it in fiction can seem to take this as a negative, cultural commentators such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. seek to recast this unending quest in a positive light, declaring that

the American Creed facilitates the appeal from the actual to the ideal [...] It is not an impervious, final, and complacent orthodoxy, intolerant of deviation and dissent, fulfilled in flag salutes, oaths of allegiance, and hands over the heart. It is an ever-evolving philosophy, fulfilling its ideals through debate, self-criticism, protest, disrespect, and irreverence; a tradition in which all have rights of heterodoxy and opportunities for self-assertion. The Creed has been the means by which Americans have haltingly but persistently narrowed the gap between performance and principle. It is what all Americans should learn, because it is what binds all Americans together.⁷⁷

Schlesinger argues that all Americans should actively recognise and embrace their right to be different as that is what makes them all essentially American. It seems to be a facile argument, aimed at drawing together too many divergent strands without reconciling any of them to each other in any meaningful way. There still exists at the heart of American culture a contradiction between the rights of the individual and the expectations on the citizen which cannot be explained as being "what binds all Americans together." Indeed, the somewhat flimsy nature of this creed, and its supposed ability to encompass everyone's desires without fail, is directly questioned by the old man Rabbit encounters at the gas

⁷⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (London; New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 145.

station on his way down South who advises him that “the only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you’re going before you go there.”⁷⁸

Nor is this issue something new to the fiction that emerged in the 1950s and 60s. The similarities between John Updike’s *Rabbit* and Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* have been widely noted. These similarities extend not just to the rhyming names of the characters, but also to their growing dissatisfaction with their jobs, family lives, and general issues with the society they find themselves living in. Updike, however, claimed ignorance of *Babbitt* before writing *Rabbit, Run*. Even accepting the author at his word, it still raises an interesting point, as Catherine Morley suggests

That an American writer in the late 1950s, without knowledge of a similar text first published almost forty years earlier, could publish a novel which questions national values and “norms”, suggests that far from being a contemporary or post-war phenomenon, scepticism about the myths of national idealism runs like a thread through the twentieth century.⁷⁹

This desire to question the perceived norms of American society can be traced through not only the *Rabbit* series, but other more populist works such as Jacqueline Susann’s phenomenally successful 1966 novel *Valley of the Dolls*. Proving that it was not just literary works of a high-brow nature that could deal with existential questions of national identity, here was a best-selling novel that also questioned the fundamental nature of ambition and achievement in American society, albeit dressed up in a glossy, pop-culture veneer. Susann may not have intended it, but her bitter, drug-fuelled romp through American celebrity culture is a cautionary tale about the perils of actually achieving a particular brand of the American dream.

The book opens with a prelude that ruminates on how “it was more fun at the bottom when you started, with nothing more than hope and the dream of fulfilment” and things quickly deteriorate from there as her characters come to realise that achieving your dreams is not always what it is cracked up to be.⁸⁰ Anne, the main character, is a well-educated heiress from a small New England town. Her one-dimensionally frigid mother expects nothing else of her but an advantageous marriage, rejecting outright the validity of any ambitions that Anne might have beyond this. When she rebels and moves to New

⁷⁸ Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 28.

⁷⁹ Morley, *The Quest for Epic*, 70.

⁸⁰ Jacqueline Susann, *Valley of the Dolls* (London: Virago, 2008)

York to take up a secretarial position with a PR company, she encounters the two other women who the novel tracks. Neely is the talented performer waiting for her big break (apparently based on Judy Garland), and Jennifer, the bombshell starlet who makes her living trading off her looks to disguise the absence of any real talent.

All three women are chewed up and spat out by the industry in which they make their livings. Indeed, all three of them end up addicted to prescription medication – the titular “dolls” – to dull the pain of their experiences. Although *Valley of the Dolls* is popular fiction at its most mediocre, at its core there is genuine anger at the blithe acceptance of the culturally engrained sexism each of these women face. This is only compounded by the ultimately vacuous nature of all their relationships and career choices. In the introduction to the 2008 edition of the novel, Julie Burchill notes of Susann and the book that

it was written by that rare thing, the published novelist not castrated by an extended education [...] there is an indignance and real anger in Susann’s writing, a refusal to use irony or education as a wet blanket which might tastefully mute the lurid flames of her outrage over something that is a cliché now but amounted to a denouncement of a good part of the American Dream at the time – the fact that women are valued briefly for their beauty, bought and sold like prime cattle in the meat markets of entertainment, and cast aside when inevitably mugged by gravity whereas men, even in showbusiness, are valued for the sum of their parts rather than some of their parts.⁸¹

It is interesting to note how Burchill fixates on the issues raised by the treatment of the women in the novel, especially considering how all of the characters, male and female, are essentially vacuous and pathetic. Without question, the sexism experienced by the female characters is particularly brutal. However, this is not to suggest that the male characters escape lightly in terms of negative treatment at the hands of others, be it Neely’s cuckolded first husband who is cast off as soon as she hits the big time, Anne’s long-term partner Kevin who is quickly pushed aside as soon as the dashing Lyon Burke reappears, or Jennifer’s disastrous marriage to Tony which ends in divorce and abortion.

For Susann, it does not matter what her female characters try to do; they will never achieve any semblance of fulfilment in a culture that sees the odds so heavily weighted against them. Paradoxically, the three women seek to make a mark for themselves and express their individuality by pursuing careers in film and television, the ultimate

⁸¹ Ibid., xii.

transmitters of conformist ideals. Inevitably, all three of them succumb to the same pressures. Their ambitions to be recognised and accepted see them conform to the standard stereotype of financially comfortable, but desperately unhappy, women.

It is important to note that *Valley of the Dolls* also draws into sharp focus the questions surrounding the validity of the crisis narrative that Friedan sought to appropriate for women of that time. At every turn, Anne, Neely, and Jennifer are discriminated against solely on the basis of their gender. In spite of her protestations, Anne is let go from her job when she finds herself unintentionally engaged to New York's most eligible bachelor. In a similar way to Carol Kennicott of *Main Street*, Anne tries to avoid the expectation of marriage in favour of a career for as long as she possibly can without being thought odd or, even worse, too old. It is with something approaching cruel glee that Susann presents Anne as obtaining everything expected of a woman in her position only to find that none of it makes her happy. While the male characters may experience problems in the workplace or difficulties adapting to their home life, they do not encounter the same gender-based discrimination as the female characters. Friedan's insistence on equality of experience does not tell the whole story, especially when men escaped judgement purely on the basis that they were men. It also raises the question of what exactly these men and women were supposed to conform to if even the achievement of a glossy American Dream like Susann's was shown to be fundamentally vapid and unsatisfying.

This constant striving for a certain kind of lifestyle is something that also haunts the pages of *The Easter Parade*. Esther Grimes, Emily and Sarah's mother, or Pookie as she preferred to be called, tries all her life to conform to a standard of sophistication that she finds hard to define and nigh on impossible to ever attain. Her interpretation of Schlesinger's "creed" is to aspire to upward mobility in spite of having no clear way of achieving the social status she craves. Essentially, she tries to fake it until she makes it, but always falls just short of the standards she aspires to, with Yates describing her as follows:

Pookie, was a small, active woman whose life seemed pledged to achieving and sustaining an elusive quality she called "flair". She pored over fashion magazines, dressed tastefully and tried many ways of fixing her hair, but her eyes remained bewildered and she never quite learned to keep her lipstick within the borders of her mouth, which gave her an air of dazed and vulnerable uncertainty. She found more flair among rich people than in the middle class, and so she aspired to the attitudes and mannerisms of wealth in raising her

daughters. She always sought “nice” communities to live in, whether she could afford them or not, and she tried to be strict on matters of decorum.⁸²

Pookie’s obsession with conforming to her idea of what it is to be an accomplished American is vague and impossible to achieve, hence her incessant moving around trying to find “nice” places to live, never settling anywhere long enough to establish any sort of stability. It also highlights the fundamentally classist structure of American society that is so routinely denied. The concept of class is anathema to American culture, yet the gospel of upward mobility as preached in the American Dream is profoundly undermined without a strictly defined class system. Pookie aspires to the lifestyle of the wealthy and mimics what she believes are their attitudes. In doing so, she fails to live within the boundaries of her own actual lifestyle, instead becoming a caricature of herself. In her unsuccessful dream to be something that she is not, she is also unsuccessful at being what she really is.

It is this fixation on “flair” that drives Emily to seek an alternative path through college, through employment, through her relationships. She makes a conscious effort to be everything that Pookie is not – educated, independent, thoughtful, accomplished – but Emily only ever manages to reproduce the same aimlessness that afflicts Pookie. All she knows is that she does not want to be like her mother, which in itself is hardly a concrete ambition considering Pookie’s flightiness. How, after all, can one be the opposite of another person if even that person does not know who they are? Pookie tries talking Emily into settling down, suggesting that she herself wishes that she had found a “satisfying career” when she was younger.⁸³ Emily’s blunt response – “It’s not a ‘career’; it’s only a job” – speaks volumes to the difficulties that she experiences in trying to find fulfilment beyond the established norm of getting married and having a family.⁸⁴

This challenge is something that Yates struggled with throughout his writing, and there is certainly a disconnect between how he rationally thought and how he actually felt about women working outside the home. As Kate Charlton-Jones observes, “Noticing how constrained they were, Yates felt women should be able to work and have a life independent of the home, but feeling the effects of this in his own life, he felt they should still put the concerns and needs of their husbands first; to do less was to earn his

⁸² Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

contempt.”⁸⁵ Nowhere is this dichotomy more clearly evident than in the character of Sarah and the tragic trajectory of her life and marriage. By comparison with Emily, Sarah apparently has it all with her handsome husband and beautiful children, but Yates undermines the idealised norm of the traditional nuclear family in the depiction of the shambolic nature of every marriage in the novel, especially Sarah and Tony’s.

They begin, quite literally, as the picture perfect couple, having been photographed by a newspaper as part of Fifth Avenue’s Easter Parade at the peak of their beauty, the celluloid epitome of young love. Indeed, the allusions to the popular 1948 musical – also called *The Easter Parade* – starring Fred Astaire and Judy Garland, and from which this chapter takes its title, would not have been lost on Yates’s readers, in particular the film’s climax with the glamorous, well-dressed stars taking their place among the parade of New York’s beautiful people. The importance of the image is reinforced by Pookie’s insistence that Sarah not only get as many “glossies” as she can, but that Emily buy as many copies of the newspaper that she can carry.⁸⁶ The picture becomes not only the standard to aim for, a physical manifestation of Pookie’s relationship goals for her daughters, but also proof that the Grimes women can attain perfection of some kind, however briefly, which leads Emily to acknowledge that “whether she was annoyed or not as she left the house, Emily knew how important it was to have as many copies as possible. It was a picture that could be mounted and framed and treasured forever.”⁸⁷ Of course, this being a Yates novel, the photo comes to haunt Sarah and Tony throughout the course of their marriage. It becomes a Dorian Grey-esque portrait in reverse, watching their marriage rot and crumble as they never again match the perfection captured in the picture’s image.

Of the two Grimes sisters, Sarah is the one who most willingly tries to conform to what she understands is expected of her as a woman. She is anxious from an early age to find a husband and start a family, something which Pookie actively encourages her in. Pookie gets Sarah involved in a political club in order to meet suitable young men, and it is not long before Sarah is engaged to a serious man named Donald. This whole episode reinforces how much both Pookie and Sarah are beholden to the idea of projecting the correct image to the extent that they fail to see any potential issues with the decisions they make. Donald appears to be a suitable match for Sarah because he conforms to their image

⁸⁵ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 154.

⁸⁶ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 27.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

of a good husband who is well-dressed, nicely spoken, and has a decent job. All this is utterly irrelevant, however, once the girls' father points out that they really do not know anything about Donald at all. His entire story unravels, and Sarah and Pookie are exposed in their willingness to buy into the image he had projected because it allowed them to embellish their own images as happy fiancée and excited mother of the bride. Moreover, even after the engagement is finally broken off, Sarah continues to see Donald for a time rather than face the opprobrium of "all the people to whom she'd introduced him as 'my fiancé'."⁸⁸

It is interesting to note that this quest for satisfaction through marriage is something that Betty Friedan returns to throughout *The Feminine Mystique*. She notes that

If a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it. If she tried to tell her husband, he didn't understand what she was talking about. She did not really understand it herself.⁸⁹

The central aspect of this observation is when Friedan notes that "other women were satisfied with their lives." This touches on the dominant narrative in play at the time of the happy, contented housewife who diligently worked to maintain a stable home in the performance of her patriotic duty. Friedan attempts to link the notion of a masculinity crisis to the changing dynamics of gender relations, suggesting that the male malaise rises in tandem with the trend of increasingly educated middle-class housewives slowly beginning to articulate their own discontent. This, of course, ignores the consistent "othering" that is a historical trend in all forms of patriarchal masculinity.

The combination of an increasingly conformist social atmosphere with a college population that was experiencing a boom created a situation where two diverse trends could never overlap in anything other than the most contradictory of fashions. John Kenneth Galbraith astutely observes the inherent dichotomy of maintaining control of an increasingly educated workforce when he notes that

⁸⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 17.

Education, therefore, is a double-edged sword for the affluent society. It is essential, given the technical and scientific requirements of modern industry. But by widening tastes and also including more independent and critical attitudes, it undermines the want-creating power which is indispensable to the modern economy. The effect is enhanced as education enables people to see how they are managed in the interest of the mechanism that is assumed to serve them. The ultimate consequence is that the values of the affluent society, its preoccupation with production as a test of performance in particular, are undermined by the education that is required in those who serve it.⁹⁰

It seems inevitable that such a schism would arise in American society during the height of the Cold War. The domestic narrative of conformity and containment was paramount at the same time that the United States was essentially the most powerful economy in the world, requiring an educated but still sufficiently compliant workforce to maintain that power. Opportunities in the workforce may have been limited for women, but they were becoming increasingly educated to the point that many of them began to voice dissatisfaction with the prescribed role of housewife and mother as they saw it. Their complaint was unavoidably articulated in gendered terms owing to the nature of the oppression they experienced. However, rather than emerging out of a gender conflict, the concurrent dissatisfaction exhibited by some American men was of a more general nature than a specific masculinity crisis triggered as a consequence of feminist agitation. Andrew Crawford is already damaged before he meets Emily Grimes in *The Easter Parade*. Emily is already anxious and uncertain from an early age before she learns the vocabulary to articulate her discontent. Pookie is, at her core, unstable and inconsistent and it has nothing to do with her relationships with the opposite sex or how she views men and women's roles in society, and everything to do with her pursuit of "flair," her American dream.

The concept of conformity to a broad national stereotype did rankle with many, however, as can be seen in the novels discussed, not just throughout this chapter, but throughout this thesis. This trend was not felt more keenly by men or by women. Many struggled to adapt to the dictated checklist that consisted of a family, a home, and a permanent pensionable job that was set out before them as the epitome of patriotism. This, however, is not to accept the legitimacy of a gender-related crisis as trumpeted by promoters of the masculinity crisis narrative and certain elements of the feminist

⁹⁰ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (London: Penguin, 1999), 208.

movement. As noted earlier, the frame of gender panic has consistently provided a convenient structure for cultural historians in America. It makes for a much more straightforward argument to pit masculinity (always in crisis) and feminism in opposition to each other and have that be the core component of the issue, rather than recognising the ongoing battle between American citizens and the contradictory ideals of their nation. William H. Chafe also notes about life in the late 1950s and early 1960s that

Because of the anticommunist crusade, domestic dissent was stifled, civil liberties were compromised, and advocates of social reform risked being pilloried as agents of a foreign state. The prospect for change that had given hope to activists, blacks, labor leaders, and women after the war had shrunk before the chill wind of anticommunism.⁹¹

But even earlier than this, we see the same tendency to conformity in American society in the noisy rebellion of characters like Babbitt, or the quiet refusal of William Stoner to follow the crowd and sign up for the Great War. Rather than read the dominant narrative as a masculinity crisis – which, in part, happened because the most valued literature was written by men about men – we should instead recognise it as a continuing national identity question. It is a question that brings into sharp focus the contradiction between the promotion of American individualism and the simultaneous desire for stable conformity. The result of this was to drive many into jobs and lifestyles that were acceptable to society at large, but fundamentally at odds with how they viewed themselves.

One of the many ways in which this dichotomy manifested itself in American literature was the routinely negative representations of life in the suburbs. Suburban America became something of a ground zero for this issue given the confluence of so many competing concepts. It was the intersection where middle-class values overlapped not only with ideas of conformity but also the deeper thinking that had been encouraged in its educated population. For some reason, life in the suburbs came to be seen as a defeat. It is almost always depicted as vapid, empty, repetitive, and bereft of any real meaning. As we have already seen, Richard Yates's presentation of the suburbs in *Revolutionary Road* complicates matters somewhat. The Wheelers view their lives in the suburbs of Connecticut with something approaching horror, yet Yates himself insisted that this was not his own opinion. Instead, the Wheelers chose to apportion all the blame for the

⁹¹ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 104.

disappointment of their lives on to the suburban experience rather than admit any personal shortcomings of their own.

Not all see the suburbs through such a negative lens though. There is an increasing body of literature emerging which rejects the idea of the suburbs as some kind of stagnant void in which no one was happy. It forces an examination of the motivation behind fictional representations of this kind of such a significant segment of American life. As with cultural representations of a masculinity crisis, the suburbs appear to have acquired a bad reputation based on their depiction in film and literature despite there being a sizeable number of inhabitants who actually were extremely happy and content to live there.

Catherine Jurca exposes the contradictions inherent in literary representations of the suburbs in her book *White Diaspora*. She uses the term “white diaspora” to draw attention to the self-involved nature of such depictions, suggesting that

it is designed to emphasize and lay bare the role of the novel in promoting a fantasy of victimization that reinvents white flight as the persecution of those who flee, turns material advantage into artifacts [sic] of spiritual and cultural oppression, and sympathetically treats affluent house owners as the emotionally dispossessed. Such fraudulent identifications are treated as the birthright of the suburbanite and are the hallmark of the suburb’s luxury and privilege.⁹²

In many ways, Jurca’s argument is in a similar vein to the observations of Michael Kimmel mentioned earlier in this chapter in relation to the idea of “confirmation bias,” and R.W. Connell’s comments on the “cultural bias” of certain critics. Certainly, in terms of how life in the suburbs was and sometimes still is depicted in American fiction, the dominant themes are ones of alienation and dissatisfaction. The suburbs are seen as a vacuum, sucking the potential for achievement out of its inhabitants.

As with other trends discussed so far in this chapter, this reliance on the stereotype of suburban life is not unique to the time period in question. Similar concerns about life outside the big city are prominent in Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*. Carol is almost militant in her disdain for the conservative and conformist nature of small-town life. Her persistent attempts to bend the town of Gopher Prairie to suit her own interests and outlook cause regular arguments with her husband, leading him to accuse her of snobbery: “Trouble with

⁹² Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-century American Novel* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8-9.

you is, you don't make any effort to appreciate us. You're so damned superior, and think the city is such a hell of a lot finer place, and you want us to do what *you* want, all the time."⁹³ For all of her intelligence and supposed sophistication, Carol never fully accepts her life in Gopher Prairie as it is which, when viewed objectively, is not actually all that bad. She does, after all, have a home, a husband who tolerates her foibles, and a son she adores. But all of this in itself is still not sufficient to satisfy her sense of wanting something more. Settling, which comes to seem synonymous with life outside the big city whether in a suburb or smaller town, is the very opposite of what is encouraged of young Americans as they emerge from school and university. Even towards the end of the novel, Carol still clings to this desire to stand out from the crowd, to be noticed and acknowledged for her own exceptional qualities:

She had fancied that her life might make a story. She knew that there was nothing heroic or obviously dramatic in it, no magic of rare hours, nor valiant challenge, but it seemed to her that she was of significance because she was commonplaceness, the ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting.⁹⁴

In keeping with the tendency toward self-absorption and fraudulent victimisation that has been observed in many of the novels under discussion, Lewis describes Carol in terms that echo Christopher Lasch's definition of the narcissist: "It had not occurred to her that there was also a story of Will Kennicott, into which she entered only so much as he entered into hers; that he had bewilderments and concealments as intricate as her own, and soft treacherous desires for sympathy."⁹⁵

The overwhelming need to think of one's self as special, and know that this is recognised by others, is part of the self-absorption that Carol struggles with, along with Emily Grimes among others. It leaves them incapable of acknowledging the possibility of others experiencing a similar struggle and heightens their own sense of themselves as unique individuals, alone against the world. Carol does attempt a grand adventure in the big city of Washington D.C. as a government secretary, but even this begins to lose its appeal from the very moment she sits on the train leaving Gopher Prairie feeling that "she had her freedom, and it was empty."⁹⁶ As with all of these characters, the idea is often

⁹³ Lewis, *Main Street*, 166.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 422.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 406.

more attractive than its practical execution. Although Carol eventually returns to Gopher Prairie and recommits to her marriage, it is not without also reaffirming her belief in the superiority of her own outlook on life.

The “soft treacherous desires for sympathy” that Lewis speaks of also leave their mark on Rabbit Angstrom.⁹⁷ Again, we see the protagonist escape from his “second-rate” life in the suburbs of Mt. Judge to a more dangerous and exciting life in the nearby city of Brewer. This self-obsession that is the hallmark of literary depictions of life in the suburbs is encapsulated in the character of Rabbit. Having excoriated Janice for her unhappiness during her pregnancy, demanding to know “what’s so damn fancy about you?”⁹⁸ Rabbit does not skip a beat when responding to Reverend Eccles’s question, “What do you think it’s like for other young couples? In what way do you think you’re exceptional?”⁹⁹ Rabbit immediately responds, saying

“You don’t think there’s any answer to that but there is. I once did something right. I played first-rate basketball. I really did. And after you’re first-rate at something, no matter what, it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate. And that little thing Janice and I had going, boy, it was really second-rate.”¹⁰⁰

“That little thing” he refers to is only his marriage, his son, his job, and his grotty apartment. Rabbit sees no value in these parts of life, and certainly takes no satisfaction from them as they consistently fail to reach his idea of first-rate. But when “first-rate” is equated from an early age with the adoration bestowed upon a star athlete it marks that life out for inevitable disappointment. A recurring train of thought in literary representations of middle-class white men is that they have to be indulged by society, or at least believe that they should be. Mrs. Springer, Rabbit’s mother in law, observes this sense of entitlement in Nelson, Rabbit’s toddler son, saying, “Well, he’s like his dad: spoiled. He’s been made too much of and thinks the world owes him what he wants.”¹⁰¹

As Catherine Jurca points out, this concept of the world owing you something can also be applied to the white middle-class flight to the suburbs. The subsequent painting of this as a kind of oppression effectively mirrors the cyclical nature of the masculinity crisis

⁹⁷ Ibid., 422.

⁹⁸ Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 11.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 106-107.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 153.

narrative as well. In relation to Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* she observes the following, but the principle is relevant to all of the novels discussed throughout this thesis:

The achievement of racial and class homogeneity affords Babbitt the luxury of experimenting with resistance to his privileges. When the white male suburbanite is secure, with nothing left to work for or fight against, he turns his critical energies inward and comes up with discontent. Twenty-five years after *Babbitt*, Lewis admitted that escape from the suburb is only desirable when no one questions one's right to be there.¹⁰²

In essence, these false narratives of victimhood are construed as a means of justifying one's existence. There is no pressing need to defend or explain one's presence in a particular place, yet there are other groups crying out about the oppression of their rights. It can be seen as an attempt to appropriate some of the sympathy afforded to other minorities in spite of an absence of any actual oppression. It is what happens when there is nothing left to talk about. Where Jurca limits her analysis, however, is in suggesting that it is only the male suburbanite who attempts to appropriate this victimhood. We see this same desire for escape from the suburbs in Yates's *Revolutionary Road*. Interestingly though, it is not just Frank who tests the limits of his resistance to suburban life. April pushes the boundaries of their privilege to an even greater extent, so stultified and stifled is she by the humdrum life of the suburban housewife. Frank is quietly content to play at being unhappy with life in the suburbs while secretly welcoming its soothing regularity.

At the heart of many depictions of suburban life is a suggestion that the suburbs constitute an inherently gendered space. The suburbs are wholly female, defined by the home, the family, and safety. It is where full-time mothers stay at home and end up dominating the landscape, while their husbands with full-time jobs elsewhere almost come to view it as a dormitory or playground, somewhere that they can never entirely infiltrate and so must inevitably seek to flee. That both Rabbit and Carol look for escape routes points to a flaw of this idea of the suburb as female sanctuary. Indeed, *The Bell Jar's* Esther Greenwood demonstrates a similar suspicion of life in the suburbs after her internship in the city. The creeping sense of dread as she arrives back home for the summer is palpable as she notes that "the motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded me [...] A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death."¹⁰³ In an earlier imagining of what would

¹⁰² Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 75.

¹⁰³ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 109.

be expected of her as housewife, she describes a hollow existence where she would be nothing except in relation to her husband:

It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and rollers after he'd left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he'd expect a big dinner, and I'd spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell in to bed, utterly exhausted.¹⁰⁴

Esther's vision of the stereotypical suburban housewife's day-to-day experience contains a massive hole at its centre. The whole day is simply a void to be filled until her services are required by her husband. Filling that void is exhausting and draining, resulting in the woman becoming the victim of her own privilege. Just what is one to do with all this time?

The juxtaposition of the comforts of her own family home with Esther's personal desire to escape from just such an environment creates exactly the paradox that Catherine Jurca notes in representations of the suburbs that equate them with the oppression of the individual. When Esther climbs into her mother's car to go home from the train station, she likens it to an imprisonment:

The grey padded car roof closed over my head like the roof of a prison van, and the white, shining, identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well-groomed green proceeded past, one bar after another in a large but escape-proof cage.

I had never spent a summer in the suburbs before.¹⁰⁵

As with Rabbit and Carol, Esther associates the suburbs with confinement, even as she acknowledges the cleanliness and comforts of her well-kept, tree-lined prison. She notes the hypocritical attitudes the inhabitants of her street display toward Dodo Conway and her constantly expanding family. They all claim to love her, but they are also slightly dismayed at the undignified number of children she has. Dodo may conform to the paradigm of the standard suburban housewife/mother, but she takes it to the extreme in the eyes of her neighbours. Esther also notes the disapproval of Dodo's atypical house, with its larger size, different colours, and worst of all the high trees that screened it from

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 110.

view, “something considered unsociable in our community of adjoining lawns and friendly, waist-high hedges.”¹⁰⁶

There is a circular nature to Esther’s account of Dodo. She clearly judges the other neighbours harshly for their slightly hypocritical attitudes, but she herself is also unsettled by Dodo and her brood. At one point, Esther comes to think that she walks up and down the road outside her house with her children in an attempt to help Esther see the positive side of family life. Esther judges her just as much as the other neighbours do. Where they are alarmed at the size of the Conway family because it does not fit neatly into the staid image they all have of the nuclear family – seven children does hint at a lack of control or, at worst, the indulgence of appetites best left unspoken – Esther is clearly just appalled by the size of the family for no reason other than the sheer number of children in it. Even with her own desire to reject the suburban norm as she sees it, she is still unsettled by the manner in which Dodo challenges it in the opposite way to her.

This discomfort with straying too far outside the norm – one way or the other – is something that is echoed in *The Easter Parade* when Pookie expresses her distaste at how quickly Sarah and Tony have their three children. The quick succession of births moves Pookie to remark, “oh dear, the way they’re *breeding* [...] I thought only Italian *peasants* did things like that.”¹⁰⁷ When Emily and Andrew visit them at what Sarah calls the “house at Pooh corner,” they are greeted by the perfect pastoral scene of a young family sitting on a blanket outside their home in the summer sunshine.¹⁰⁸ The image Yates presents is so deliberately soft-focus that the writing on the page almost blurs, and Emily cannot help but remark that they “make a lovely picture.”¹⁰⁹ However, as with the haunting spectre of the photograph from the Easter Parade, the image is shattered when Tony reveals his true nature and their marriage dissolves in a haze of alcoholism and violence.

Unlike the other depictions of the safe and comfortable suburban home noted throughout this chapter, Yates takes a slightly different approach. Kate Charlton-Jones suggests that, “for Yates the house is a metaphor for a relationship that is not gender specific: He writes against notions of security and abundance, depicting the home instead

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰⁷ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 43.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 72.

as a locus of friction, incomprehension, and division.”¹¹⁰ Certainly in *The Easter Parade*, the lack of stable, happy homes is notable. Moreover, the absence of comfortable houses is also striking. Indeed, Yates shows the Grimes women as moving from one spartan, unwelcoming living space to another, beginning with the apartment on Washington Square that Pookie loved for its high ceilings and flair, but contained nothing much in the way of home comforts. Pookie tries to push both of her daughters into the suburban family ideal because, for all of her obsession with flair, she still identifies an advantageous marriage and stable family unit as representative of her concept of the respectable middle and upper classes. This is something that Sarah appropriates quite happily into her own life, but it ends disastrously for her as she is trapped in an abusive relationship, unwilling to leave because “if you want to stay married, you learn to put up with things.”¹¹¹

There is an air of impermanence about all of the spaces these women live in, irrespective of their situation at the time. The instability of both Sarah’s marriage and house is hinted at when Emily observes that the framed photo of Sarah and Tony at the Easter Parade all those years ago hangs slightly askew, “as if from the impact of some heavy blow that had shuddered the wall.”¹¹² Their own internal instability infects the environment around them. Emily resists Pookie’s desire for her to marry and settle down to the point of becoming an unemployed recluse in her New York apartment, finally having to admit that “she lived in memories all the time.”¹¹³ However, once again Yates undermines the dominant theme of the boring, suffocating suburban life at the end of the novel. While Emily is at possibly her lowest ebb, Yates chooses to end the novel with just the tiniest possibility of comfort which is unusual in itself for her. Emily is last seen being taken in by her favourite nephew Peter, even after she has subjected him to an unprovoked tirade of vitriol and spite. Having run from the suburban family ideal all her life, Emily is offered sanctuary by that very ideal in the end as Peter invites her into his home. In an almost impossibly subtle fashion, Yates challenges the suspicion of settling for a family and life in the suburbs by having a defeated and “tired” Emily subsumed into a stable family unit.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 153.

¹¹¹ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 151.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 192.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

But again, by way of contrast, in *Valley of the Dolls*, Anne balks at the idea of living in the family home she inherits when her mother dies. The smothering conformity she perceives in her neighbours, and the fact that everyone knows each other, creates a sense of claustrophobia that she finds paralysing. Repeatedly, American fiction presents us with members of the privileged, white middle-class psychologically trapped by their own comforts. The contradictory nature of these representations is rarely touched upon. Not only do these characters find confinement in their freedom to choose, but they also create an image of the desperate suburbanite that is not supported in fact. Catherine Jurca again notes that

the dispersal of population to the suburbs in the twentieth century has been one of the most significant social and political facts of modern American life. The novel's intervention into the cultural meanings of this transformation 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, as it has been documented and interpreted by social and cultural historians of American suburbs, housing, and the white middle class.¹¹⁵

This divergence from real, lived experiences of the suburbs that literary representations insist upon perpetuating can be looked at in a different light. Almost all of the characters discussed here are in search of excitement, of something that will make them feel even the slightest bit exceptional and extraordinary. Suburban America, with its image of stability and order, could not be less extraordinary. At best it is seen as incompatible with this quest, and at worst it is simply not cool. Just as the masculinity crisis narrative referenced examples from film, television, and literature as somehow supporting the validity of the crisis concept, the narrative of suburban discontent has also been overblown. This can clearly be seen in the recent emergence of a body of literature in the social sciences and cultural history pointing to the real experience of suburban life as a generally positive one. Studies such as Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen's make the astute observation that

From Mumford to Keats, critics noted a phenomenon, but failed to grasp it from the perspective of those who lived it. The voices of these pioneers were conspicuously absent from the critiques. Even when they spoke for the suburbanite, as Friedan did, they spoke for the privileged, not the masses. The pundits condemned the conformity, predictability,

¹¹⁵ Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 5.

and sameness, but they would not or could not appreciate the soul of the new suburbanite – indeed they were blind to it.¹¹⁶

Such a dichotomy forces us to acknowledge that while literature can be a mirror on society, the image it reflects can often be exaggerated and distorted.

The dialogue between the emergent feminist movement in the 1960s and the proponents of the masculinity crisis narrative makes for interesting reading, if only to note the similarities in the issues they raised as specifically affecting their own interests. As R.W. Connell notes, “it was often pointed out by ‘men’s movement’ writers in the 1970s that most men do not really fit the image of tough, dominant and combative masculinity that the ideologists of patriarchy sell.”¹¹⁷ It is also important to note of the men’s movement and the masculinity crisis narrative that declaring that men do not fit the dominant image of masculinity as projected in mass culture, then using these dominant images to justify a crisis narrative, is inherently contradictory and essentially invalidates the argument.

James Gilbert makes the suggestion that Americans repeatedly return to gender “as a principled means to understand a historical moment.”¹¹⁸ However, when examined more closely, it cannot be accepted that the supposed crisis in masculinity is the dominant element through which all else should be filtered. As demonstrated by the female characters mentioned throughout this chapter, the apparent crisis that was supposedly unique to white, middle-class men, had just as much of an effect on their female counterparts. This in turn suggests that prioritising a gender-related crisis of masculinity in an American context is a denial of a greater national malaise.

The Grimes women are classic Yates characters – unfulfilled, unsatisfied, and searching for a dream existence that is as tenuous as it is destructive. However, despite the crushing inevitability of every choice they make, at no point does the novel judge them. The matter-of-fact style that Yates employs in *The Easter Parade* led one friend to remark that the book works so well because of how “very, very, very sad” it is.¹¹⁹ This leads us to the novel’s conclusion, where a sad and defeated Emily Grimes finally admits that “I’ve

¹¹⁶ Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), 165-166.

¹¹⁷ Connell, *Gender and Power*, 110.

¹¹⁸ Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 224.

¹¹⁹ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 465.

never understood anything in my whole life.”¹²⁰ Considering Yates’s personal beliefs about feminism and increased opportunities for women, one could expect him to champion the masculinity crisis narrative. However, he never blames his characters’ lack of understanding and the anxiety that ensues on a gender-based crisis. *The Easter Parade*, and indeed all of Richard Yates’s fiction, serves as an example of an alternative narrative that does not buy into the masculinity crisis concept. Unquestionably, his men and women often fail to understand each other, but in his narratives there are no winners – and certainly none who lose more than anyone else either. Instead, Yates focuses on individuals who have been disappointed by their own delusions of grandeur, and subsequently seek to absolve themselves of any responsibility by shifting the blame on to forces over which they have no control.

The Easter Parade, then, stands out in Yates’s body of work for several reasons. It is arguably one of his finest pieces of writing. However, its foregrounding of female characters afflicted with the same malaise and anxiety as his long line of male characters is the most significant element of the work. It suggests that perhaps the gender-based crisis narrative that is pinned on to so many men is, in fact, something borne out of an American obsession with an unattainable dream, something that has complete disregard for the narrowly prescribed gender roles that have so thoroughly dominated readings of American literature.

¹²⁰ Yates, *The Easter Parade*, 226.

What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Chapter Three: "Reality Speaking English." Richard Ford's Bascombe Books and the Elevation of the Ordinary

Richard Ford was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1944. After brief stints teaching junior high school, enlisting in the Marines, and an aborted attempt at law school, he eventually decided to pursue a career as a writer, completing the MFA in Creative Writing at U.C. Irvine in 1970. His first novel, *A Piece of My Heart*, was published in 1976. It was instantly and repeatedly compared to the work of other major Southern writers such as William Faulkner, a fact which grated on Ford to the extent that he resolved never to write about the South again, or to identify as a distinctly Southern writer in any way, as he explained in an interview:

"I'm a southerner, obviously; I like the South, I still live some in the South, but the South is just not a subject on which I have any interesting things to say, and probably having made that decision back in the middle 70s, my southern experience is even thinner now."¹

Although some of his favourite authors are from and write about the South, such as Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty, for much of his career Ford has actively avoided topics that would be considered typically of the South. Being from Mississippi, there is an expectation that he should engage with race in some way, but this is not something that he has written about to any great extent. Indeed, his most recent attempt to write of race

¹ Elinor Walker, *Richard Ford* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000), 7.

relations in “Everything Could Be Worse,” one of the sections in the newest Frank Bascombe book, was met with sharp criticism for its lack of subtlety.

The four Bascombe books, *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), *The Lay of the Land* (2006), and *Let Me Be Frank With You* (2014), are Ford’s best-known works. Positively received by critics upon publication, Ford won numerous awards for the novels, including the Pulitzer Prize and PEN/Faulkner Award for *Independence Day* in 1996, marking the first time a novel won both awards in the same year. The most notable aspect of the original trilogy of Bascombe books was the departure from the “dirty realism” that marked much of Ford’s earlier work and had seen him categorised, somewhat erroneously, alongside Tobias Wolff and Raymond Carver. While still essentially realist in style and muted in its tone, Frank Bascombe is an unashamedly middle-class man, and is a marked contrast to the working-class characters Ford wrote of in *Rock Springs* (1987). Frank is regularly referred to as an “Everyman” type of character, as somehow being representative of America because of his enthusiastic embrace of the ordinary. This is an interpretation that Ford is reluctant to agree with, and is something he directly addresses in the introduction to the Everyman edition of the first three Bascombe books, saying “the truth is that Frank Bascombe as ‘everyman’ was never my intention. Not only would I have no idea how to go about writing such a full-service literary incarnation, but I’m also sure I’d find the whole business to be not much fun in the doing. And I still want to like what I’m doing.”²

Robert Woolfolk and Frank Richardson declare that “the birthright of every American male is a chronic sense of personal inadequacy.”³ In the novels discussed up to this point, this could certainly seem to be the case and has often been accepted as so. However, as the previous chapters have pointed out, to suggest that this “inadequacy” is the sole preserve of the American male, or is based on a crisis of a very narrow definition of masculinity, is somewhat misleading. It once again shows a tendency to revert to gendered readings of American culture. What is more, the analysis in the previous chapters of female characters like April Wheeler, Carol Kennicott, Esther Greenwood, and Emily Grimes has pointed to something more complex at the heart of American identity than that which can be explained through the lens of a gender crisis. The idea of “chronic inadequacy” that is at the centre of much of the literature on the masculinity crisis

² Richard Ford, *The Bascombe Novels* (London: Random House LLC: Everyman’s Library, 2009), vii.

³ Robert Woolfolk and Frank Richardson, *Stress, Sanity and Survival* (London: Futura Publications, 1979), 57.

narrative, if analysed in any depth, does not in fact recognise gender boundaries. Instead, it can be seen to afflict men and women alike, throwing lives into chaos, creating drama and tension where previously there was none. The dominance of the crisis narrative has seen female characters overlooked, or reduced to nothing more than the shrewish wife or unreasonable partner, in texts that would be seen as primarily concerned with masculinity.

There is still an insistence, however, that some form of crisis exists for American men that is primarily related to the concept of their masculinity. In what is a classic example of repeating something so often that it becomes accepted as a fact, the masculinity crisis narrative is now a central aspect of any discussion of masculinity, not just American masculinity. In the peculiarly American context, however, it has grown to become a part of the cultural memory of America and its men. It does not matter whether or not these men acknowledge this crisis, or feel their identity threatened by the various “others” lined up as challenges to their masculinity. It could therefore be suggested that the crisis narrative has only gained such traction in the mainstream because of its dominance in theoretical discussions. Trends were identified in modes of thought, and it was deemed necessary to construct a narrative around them that could be easily understood.

In truth, there is nothing new about the tendency to proclaim a crisis, and there is also nothing new about the insistence that this time it really is different. Issues surrounding American identity have existed since the foundation of the state, with sporadic eruptions of concern for the direction in which the citizenry is moving. Kathy Knapp makes the case that 9/11 fundamentally changed the way middle-class white men were depicted in American fiction, suggesting that in *The Lay of the Land* “Ford tills the ground for a new aesthetic to take root, one that no longer trains its eye on individual experience but instead posits a world where interconnection is not only possible but necessary.”⁴ I contend, however, that the Bascombe books are more noteworthy for the lack of change in Frank’s attitude. For a man that many critics describe as being on a downward spiral – one reviewer has described him as “a man in the midst of what might charitably be called a breakdown” – his outlook on life remains remarkably benign.⁵ To be sure, the world Frank inhabits experiences change, often seismic in its scale, but Frank maintains a bemused

⁴ Kathy Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel after 9/11* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), xxxiv.

⁵ Tod Goldberg, “Carnage Hill, Frank Bascombe’s Later Years,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 13, 2014 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/carnage-hill-frank-bascombes-late-years/>

detachment from these events, coming to seem as if he is the calm eye at the centre of a storm that rages all around him. In a direct contradiction of Knapp's assessment that *The Lay of the Land* marks a shift in tone that can only be explained by the events of 9/11, Ford in fact suggests that what motivated him in the writing of that particular instalment of the books was rather more complex:

One of my points in writing this book is that everything that happened in 9/11 was already happening in America before 9/11. The magnitude was just not there. But there was the passivity of government, entropy, fear of the other, violence around the periphery of life, a quiet sense of unease.⁶

What Ford is articulating here is a sense that there are ever-present issues in American society, but that they only get sustained attention in the light of an extraordinary event or threat. Just because the threat is eliminated, or dies down, does not automatically mean that the issues are resolved. It is a kind of pre-trauma, acknowledging that what is linked to a catastrophic event is, in actual fact, a consistent symptom of the American condition. To expand it further, this can also be applied to the narrative proclaiming a crisis in masculinity. We can see spikes in its intensity, usually at times that coincide with increased agitation for the rights of minorities, but the underlying issues at the heart of the narrative rarely change, which raises the question: can a crisis be a crisis if it has lasted for centuries?

Moreover, as indicated above, the crisis narrative excludes the experience of American women and, in many cases, actually establishes them as its primary cause. It disregards the societal pressures exerted by concepts of individualism, exceptionalism, and patriotism in favour of a more sensationalist, gendered reading of the American experience. This approach inevitably becomes counterproductive, creating self-perpetuating cycles of crisis and hand-wringing analysis that achieve nothing beyond vague platitudes about how men and women have to learn how to live in harmony with each other. The strength with which critics cling to the crisis narrative is such that it also dismisses the concept of authorial intention when applied to literary analysis. As a result, we get statements such as this from Michael Kimmel: "Ford has steadfastly resisted any effort to characterize his work as 'gendered', or to speak about masculinity as a theme in his work. Well, Josep M. Armengol knows better – or at least he knows different."⁷ The

⁶ Brian Duffy, *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Yates* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2008), 134.

⁷ Josep M. Armengol, *Richard Ford and the Fiction of Masculinities* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), np.

idea that an author might know what his intentions were when writing a piece of fiction is dismissed outright in favour of the imposition of a crisis framework upon novels that simply do not support it. Similarly, when an author dares to reject a gendered reading of his work this, too, is dismissed in order to force the square peg of the theory into the round hole of the fiction. Certainly, while all literary analysis consists of reading between the lines in order to shape one's analysis, at times there can be a slavish submission to theory that sees critics such as Armengol and Kimmel loath to adapt their pre-ordained ideas about a masculinity crisis.

This is quite clearly the case in relation to Richard Ford's series of Bascombe novels. A considerable proportion of the analysis of the Bascombe books reads Frank Bascombe as the classic example of a man firmly in the grips of a crisis of his very white, very middle-class, masculinity. This approach pointedly downplays the larger themes present in the novels, such as American exceptionalism, life in the suburbs, consumerism, and the changing natures of work and the family, thereby reducing these conflicting and contradictory representations of American society to the supposed turmoil of one man, who regularly proclaims "I'm the happiest man in the world," and most of the time actually means it.⁸ Instead of reading Ford's mid-decade State-of-the-Union style novels as a taking stock of America's house, they are more often treated as a catalogue of the challenges facing Frank Bascombe's masculinity. Part of this is perhaps due to Ford's resistance to the idea of Frank as an Everyman type of character, representative of grand themes in American life. However, Frank does not have to be an Everyman in order for the books to address those themes. Indeed, as Ford explains

Vastly more than I want my characters to atomize into some general or even personal applicability, I want them first to be radiant in verbal and intellectual particularity, to not be an everyman but to revel in being specifically this man, this woman, this son, this daughter with all his or her incalculability intact. And I make characters with this intention because I think we were all made and become interesting and dramatic and true by the very same method – which is to say, again, rather fortuitously.⁹

Having questioned the legitimacy of the crisis narrative as it emerged in the 1950s through a discussion of the work of Richard Yates in the previous chapters, the natural progression is to pick up these threads with something of a literary descendant in Richard Ford. Frank

⁸ Richard Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 196.

⁹ Ford, *The Bascombe Novels*, x.

Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road* shares many traits with Ford's Frank Bascombe, not the least of which is a dogged insistence by literary critics that both characters are in the throes of a masculinity crisis. This commonality will facilitate the development of further discussion of the tendency to cling to a crisis narrative above all else.

This chapter will also explore the roles that houses and home ownership play in the Bascombe books. As a consequence, the representation of the American suburb will be discussed in relation to Frank's ongoing attempt to define himself as a man, and as an American. The American creed of improvement and progression as it relates to the concept of home ownership and the perception of place will be examined as it impacts on Frank's sense of himself. The suburbs have traditionally been presented as a feminised space. The tension between Frank's apparent contentment living in such an environment, and how this is reconciled with his role as a white, middle-class man is also a central concern in how we read the Bascombe books as part of the wider narrative of white, American masculinity. In doing so, this chapter will suggest that contrary to their negative literary representations, the suburbs can actually be seen as the ideal site for the performance of white, middle-class masculinity.

In *Independence Day*, the second novel in the Bascombe series, Frank has turned his back on writing and become a successful real estate agent. In the course of his work, he ends up advising a particularly irritating client that "you are best off coming as close as you can and trying to bring life to a place, not just depending on the place to supply it for you."¹⁰ This is a curious, and somewhat contradictory, statement for Frank to make considering his own nomadic tendencies over the course of the four books, with each one seeing him living in a different house. His concept of home, of both what and where it is, constantly shifts from when we first meet him in *The Sportswriter* as a newly divorced, mildly successful sportswriter, to when we finally (possibly?) leave him at the end of *Let Me Be Frank With You*.

Frank's idea of himself, and in a wider sense of America and how he fits into it, becomes bound up in his idea of the home. This is not just the physical bricks and mortar of the house, but also the quest to find the ideal, perfect home. His job is quite literally to sell this vision to his clients. However, the vision that Frank sells is far from straightforward. The journey towards something is often considered to be more interesting

¹⁰ Richard Ford, *Independence Day* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 76.

and meaningful than the destination, as is evident in the many examples we can point to in American fiction such as the Wheelers in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*, Harry Angstrom in John Updike's Rabbit novels, or Carol Kennicott in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*. Frank is ultimately more interested in anticipation, in the process of finding, buying, and selling houses, than in what happens after his clients move in.

The intricately detailed descriptions of the physical environment lend the Bascombe books a distinctly cinematic quality, something that is also evident in much of Ford's other writing, particularly in *Canada* (2012). In the whole Bascombe series, Ford indulges in lengthy passages documenting the view from Frank's car window. These passages are seemingly designed to celebrate the New Jersey landscape, and simultaneously to point out its wholly generic American features. On the one hand, there are the minute descriptions of New Jersey, but on the other there is rarely a sense of community, or of this place having an identity sufficiently distinct to mark it out from anywhere else in America:

Much of what I pass, of course, looks precisely like everyplace else *in* the state, and the dog-leg boundaries make it tricky to keep cardinal points aligned. The effect of driving south and east is to make you feel you're going south and west and that you're lost, or sometimes that you're headed nowhere. Clean industry abounds. Valve plants. A Congoleum factory. U-Haul sheds. A sand and gravel pit close by a glass works. An Airedale kennel. The Quaker Home for Confused Friends. A mall with a nautical theme. Several signs that say HERE! Suddenly it is a high pale sky and a feeling like Florida, but a mile further on, it is the Mississippi Delta – civilized life flattened below high power lines, the earth laid out in great vegetative tracts where Negroes fish from low bridges, and Mount Holly lumps on the far horizon just before the Delaware. Beyond that lies Maine.¹¹

Eudora Welty's famous essay, "Place in Fiction," suggests that "fiction depends for its life on place"¹² – something that Ford resists in his reluctance to be considered anything more specific than an "American writer."¹³ While location is important for Ford it may, as Elinor Walker suggests, "have nothing to do with one's surroundings [...] underlying the principle of 'locatedness' is in fact its transience."¹⁴ Frank's relationship with the fictional suburb of

¹¹ Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 239.

¹² Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," in *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (London: Virago Press, 1987) 118.

¹³ Walker, *Richard Ford*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

Haddam is that of the contented outsider. He is constantly on the side-lines of community life, always observing but never fully experiencing it. Frank may be the centre of the books, but he also consistently expresses contentment with his life on the periphery of things. His career choices attest to this, with the literal positioning of the sportswriter on the side-line of events, and the constant turnover of both people and property that comes with being a real-estate agent. Neither require an emotional investment on Frank's part and allow him to indulge in many different possibilities.

Possibility, of course, is something that Frank refers to repeatedly over the course of the four books, the idea that something can have many different outcomes and alternative views. Indeed, Frank is still very much in thrall to the idea of infinite possibilities in the most recent instalment, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, when he wistfully declares "I'd been lying awake in the early sunlight and shadows, daydreaming about the possibility that somewhere, somehow, some good thing was going on that would soon affect me and make me happy, only I didn't know it yet."¹⁵ This recurring theme echoes elements of the Wallace Stevens poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" which asks "O thin men of Haddam,/ Why do you imagine golden birds?/ Do you not see how the blackbird/ Walks around the feet/ Of the women about you?"¹⁶ In situating Frank in a town called Haddam, Ford deliberately draws parallels with Stevens's poem and its ruminations on differing perspectives. The attention of the reader is instantly drawn to the significance of place within the books, but it is a tenuous, ill-defined presence.

Frank's own lack of connection to any one place leaves him rootless, without a past, firmly fixed in the present. It is with something approaching pride that he proclaims his lack of a family history, creating the impression that he has sprung to life fully-formed as a middle-aged man in the suburb of Haddam. Yet there is a hollow at the centre of Frank's declarations. It is just such an emptiness that allows him to construct a view of life that protects him from any outside influences, leading him to ask,

does that seem like an odd life? Does it seem strange that I do not have a long and storied family history? Or a list of problems and hatreds to brood about – a bill of particular grievances and nostalgias that pretend to explain or trouble everything? Possibly I was

¹⁵ Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, 7.

¹⁶ Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," in *The New Anthology of American Poetry* eds. Steven Gould Axelrod, Camille Roman, Thomas Travisano (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 154.

born into a different time. But maybe my way is better all around, and is actually the way with most of us and the rest tell lies.¹⁷

Repeatedly throughout the first three novels, Frank dismisses the importance of place, of any place, in shaping a person's identity or experience, going so far as to say "place means nothing."¹⁸ In many ways, it really does mean nothing for him in a specific sense as all the vistas he describes as he drives around New Jersey come to seem interchangeable, filled as they are with billboards, roadside diners, mile markers, sign posts. Frank revels in the homogeneity of these scenes, celebrating them for how easily recognisable and knowable they are:

I am not displeased by New Jersey. Far from it. Vice implies virtue to me, even in landscape, and virtue value. An American would be crazy to reject such a place, since it is the most diverting and readable of landscapes, and the language is always American.¹⁹

Ford draws the reader's attention to the idea of Frank as an American first and foremost, rather than a man of one specific place within America, and it is this that becomes crucial in how we read the character of Frank Bascombe. He is happy to live in a town that asks little of him, and has no real influence on how he sees either the world or himself.

Haddam's apparent lack of character as a commuter town is its major selling point, as far as he is concerned. It requires no concerted effort on the part of its inhabitants to live there, and encroaches not one bit on their individuality:

A town, almost any town, would seem to have secrets all its own. Though if you believed that you'd be wrong. Haddam in fact is as straightforward and plumb-literal as a fire-hydrant, which more than anything else makes it the pleasant place it is.

None of us could stand it if every place were a grizzled Chicago or a bilgy Los Angeles – towns, like Gotham, of genuine woven intricacy. We all need our simple, unambiguous, even factitious townscapes like mine. Places without challenge or double-ranked complexity.²⁰

For all of his repeated dismissals of the importance of place in people's lives, however, Frank consistently circles back to discuss it in a manner suggestive of someone who is trying to convince himself, more than anyone else, that it does not matter. He equates

¹⁷ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 29.

¹⁸ Ford, *Independence Day*, 151.

¹⁹ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

place, and the prominence that people give it in their definitions of self, with a form of narrative construction. It is a way of claiming an identity for one's self that removes any actual responsibility from the individual. Indeed, Frank's determination not to consider himself of any one place is why he celebrates Haddam's inbetween-ness to the extent that he does:

It is on the train line midway between New York and Philadelphia, and for that reason it's not so easy to say what we're a suburb of – commuters go both ways. Though as a result, a small-town-out-of-the-mainstream feeling exists here, as engrossed as any in New Hampshire, but retaining the best of what New Jersey offers: assurance that mystery is never longed for, nor meaningful mystery shunned.²¹

Frank's belief that he is a normal, ordinary, "literalist" is perfectly at home in what he sees as Haddam's similar ordinariness.²² He does not really come from anywhere, which is fine as he does not really live anywhere.

All of this facilitates the dreaminess that plagues Frank throughout *The Sportswriter*, and which recurs to varying degrees in the three subsequent Bascombe books. The lack of connection that he feels to any particular place matches, and in many ways helps to fuel, his own lack of connection to other men. Frank freely admits that "women have always *lightened* my burdens."²³ He is a reluctant member of a Divorced Men's Club, which is theoretically a way for Haddam's newly-single men to maintain some form of human connection in their area. As Frank observes, "it is not, I have come to understand, easy to have a divorced man as your neighbour."²⁴ Frank is doubly disconnected from any sense of place after his divorce. Where once he could find groundedness in his unified nuclear family, in the aftermath of the divorce this is no longer available to him. He instead drives around Haddam observing, rather than being actively involved in anything, and parks outside his ex-wife's new house to steal a chat with his son, Paul.

In spite of Ford's consistent insistence that he is not a Southern writer in the accepted sense of the term, and in spite of the distinctly un-Southern settings of the Bascombe books along the Eastern seaboard with the occasional foray into the Midwest, attempts to locate Ford in the canon of Southern writing persist. Matthew Guinn suggests

²¹ Ibid., 48.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 61.

²⁴ Ibid., 5.

that the obsession with Ford's own Southern background in relation to his writing is misplaced. He observes that "given that Ford's development has hinged on his abdication of southern influence, it seems spurious to connect his sportswriter novels with a tradition he has left behind."²⁵

It is, in some ways, a lazy connection to make. The bulk of the criticism on the Bascombe books takes Frank's and Ford's shared birthplace – they are both men who were born in the South and who have migrated to other parts of the country – and use this as a means to manoeuvre the books, and by extension Ford's writing, into the canon of Southern literature, no matter how tenuous the link. Rather than try to read the Bascombe books as a misunderstood text of the South, it is perhaps more appropriate to acknowledge that while there is certainly a concern with place in the books that echoes the sensibilities of Southern writing, it is not a concern with a recognisably Southern place. Although Frank may spend four books discussing at length his own lack of felt connection to a place, the fact remains that the concept of place does lie heavily over the entire series of books.

Like Ford himself, Frank is an exile of the South, but he displays no strong connection to where he was born, nor does he identify with the mind-set that is so often attributed to Southerners. Nonetheless, in much the same way that many critics still attempt to shoehorn Ford into the Southern canon, early on in *The Sportswriter* Frank's first wife, Ann, blames his dreaminess on his Southern background, with Frank recalling that

She said this was because I didn't know my parents very well, had gone to a military school, and grown up in the south, which was full of betrayers and secret-keepers and untrustworthy people, which I agree is true, though I never knew any of them. All that originated, she said, with the outcome of the Civil War. It was much better to have grown up, she said, as she did, in a place with no apparent character, where there is nothing ambiguous around to confuse you or complicate things, where the only thing anybody ever thought seriously about was the weather.²⁶

The so-called sense of place that is so central to the writing of the South is not the same sense of place that is present in Ford's fiction. Elinor Walker observes that Ford himself "acknowledges that place is 'supposed' to be important to Southerners, but he suggests that many places become devoid of meaning for their inhabitants. It is not geography or

²⁵ Matthew Guinn, *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2001), 117.

²⁶ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 13.

landmarks, Ford contends, that make a person feel at home. Even home itself, Ford claims, is a ‘variable concept’.²⁷ It can be said that what Ford articulates in the Bascombe books is an awareness of place rather than a sense of it. Haddam has no discernible character and is, in fact, quite like those indistinct places that Ann suggests it is better to have grown up in. For Frank, the most important thing is not where you live, but what you bring to it yourself. The books, to varying degrees of success, attempt to renegotiate the relationship that citizens have with their homes and the places in which they live, all whilst simultaneously seeking a place in the broader American culture that Frank celebrates.

As has been discussed in the earlier chapters, literary and cultural representations of the American suburbs tend to be largely negative, with the emphasis on mind-numbing conformity and isolation all safely contained in row upon row of identical houses. We can point to any number of examples of unhappy suburbanites such as the Wheelers of *Revolutionary Road*, or Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* to name just two. Trying to create a list of mainly positive representations of American suburban life is much more difficult, with not much more than the 1980s television series *The Wonder Years* making the cut. It is, I contend however, a coincidence that these characters find themselves apparently trapped by the confines of suburban life. They would have been unhappy anywhere; they just happen to find themselves in the suburbs.

Scott Donaldson takes issue with such representations of the American suburb in literature and supposedly scientific social studies, saying

The chances of living a good life, the critics assure suburbanites, are not good. If they can convince enough people, the critics may turn out to be right.

The process of conviction has advanced so far already that the image of the suburbs has become stereotyped. At the mention of “suburbs” or “suburbia” two reactions are permitted. You may comment indignantly (preferred) or giggle nervously (permitted to those who happen to live in the suburbs but are right-thinkers).²⁸

Essentially, what Donaldson articulates here, is something similar to the “confirmation bias” that Michael Kimmel identified in relation to discussions of mid-life crises. Hear a thing often enough, and it becomes fact. As a result, an expectation is engendered that if a piece of fiction is about the suburbs, as in this instance, it follows that critics will read it

²⁷ Walker, *Richard Ford*, 10.

²⁸ Scott Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth* (New York; London: Columbia University Press, 1971), 5.

with one eye out for a particular interpretation. The trend towards literary and cultural portrayals of suburban discontent stand in stark contrast to people's lived experience of them as evinced by the recent increase in sociological and historical studies suggesting that suburban life was not actually all that bad. The Bascombe books can be seen as a deliberate attempt to redress the balance somewhat. Ford strongly rejected any reading of the books that viewed the depiction of suburban New Jersey as ironic or judgmental, saying that

There are a lot of things to dislike about the suburbs, and the New Jersey suburbs in particular, but people don't dislike them. And that's just the truth. The suburbs have been written about ironically so often that I thought it might be a more interesting surgery on the suburbs to talk about them in unironic terms.²⁹

It is, perhaps, a symptom of how often the suburbs have been written about in a negative sense that it is difficult for many critics to take Ford's intention seriously, as if it is not possible to look at American suburban life from anything other than an ironic point of view. While the books are heavily laden with irony, and Frank often hilariously misses the mark in his philosophising, the suburbs of the Bascombe books are simply not an ironic creation. They are as "plumb-literal" as Ford intends them to be.³⁰ In the insistence on viewing Frank as an Everyman, the irony that he embodies as a character seems to transfer on to his surroundings for many critics.

Certainly, Kathy Knapp and Catherine Jurca see Ford's depiction of Haddam as being of the same type that presents suburban America as something problematic, a reading that, for both of them, positions Frank's own identity as bound up in the supposedly questionable environment in which he lives. Jurca suggests that Frank's uneasiness is as a result of his inability to "distinguish between contentment and despair," linking Frank's disingenuous (to her mind) trumpeting of suburban life with his own discontent as a middle-class white male in America.³¹ She presents Frank as a victim of what she has coined "white flight."³² She goes on to suggest that his contentment with suburban living is a façade, saying that

²⁹ Duffy, *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford*, 19.

³⁰ Ford, *The Sportsman*, 103.

³¹ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-century American Novel* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 170.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

The novel applauds the fineness of Frank's perceptions even as they beset him. Appreciating the mysteries of his comfortable suburban existence means finding an almost unbearable pathos in virtually everything. His generally wistful assessments of his life [...] bespeak energies that are less directed towards epiphanies than toward cultivating feelings of poignant ambivalence.³³

This refusal on the part of Jurca, and other critics, to accept Frank's sincerity as genuine is quite challenging to rationalise, as it is suggestive of a cynicism that does not allow space for the articulation of a view of suburban life that is not wholly negative. It directly contradicts Frank's pronouncements, which can be excused on the basis that fictional characters are not always truthful in what they say, nor do they have to be. However, it also directly contradicts Ford's own stated intentions in writing about the suburbs. Kathy Knapp suggests that, similar to Catherine Jurca's reading of Updike's Rabbit tetralogy,

Bascombe likewise tries to escape the ills of his station – marital trouble, alienation from his children, career dissatisfaction – by heading to Florida before returning to the fictional suburb of Haddam as a real estate broker (like Babbitt) in order to endure afresh variations of the same miseries [...] the Frank Bascombe we encounter in *The Sportswriter* is likewise isolated and adrift in a hostile environment.³⁴

To suggest that Frank is isolated implies that he is unhappy with that condition, and ignores the fact that as the books progress he becomes increasingly less inclined to spend time with people. Certainly, by the time of the fourth instalment he somewhat enthusiastically notes that “for months now – and this may seem strange at my late moment of life (sixty-eight) – I've been trying to jettison as many friends as I can, and am frankly surprised more people don't do it as a simple and practical means of achieving well-earned, late-in-the-game clarity.”³⁵ Put simply, Frank is a loner, and quite content with it, which makes the anonymity of the late twentieth-century suburb the perfect place for him to inhabit. However, much of the literature on the Bascombe books reads Frank, and his suburban experiences, as slyly ironic, in cahoots with a knowing audience who are expected to read between the lines and grasp Frank's hidden unhappiness with the place where he lives. Acceptance of authorial intention, then, is at the heart of how the Bascombe books are interpreted. This thesis takes issue with the accepted reading of the Bascombe books as

³³ Ibid., 170.

³⁴ Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism*, 3.

³⁵ Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, 187.

being a negative representation of suburban life. Ford's goal was to "write about a decent man. Frank is very definitely just a man who was trying to make his life happy."³⁶ In many ways, Frank is the classic Emersonian individual, contentedly attempting to maintain his own individuality and independence in the midst of the suburban crowd.

For the purposes of this argument, let us accept Ford's contention that Frank is happy with his life, and that the New Jersey suburbs he inhabits are not the cause of any problems that he might encounter. How then do we read the suburban experience as presented in the four books? Unquestionably, in spite of Frank's protests to the contrary, he does in fact have some issues in his life, but they are not as a result of his being stifled by life in Haddam, and would likely have afflicted him wherever he chose to live. Nor are they as a result of any crisis of masculinity that critics might care to apply to his situation. Frank freely admits to having very few friends, and it genuinely does not seem to bother him, breezily admitting to his ex-wife at one point that "I don't have any relationships at all."³⁷

Ian McGuire describes Ford's depiction of the suburbs as an attempt to present a "believable version of American pastoral."³⁸ McGuire also suggests that "Ford is using, or trying to use, the suburbs as a symbol of consolation in the same way that poets since antiquity have used flowers, birds, stars, the sun, and so on."³⁹ This, of course, raises the question as to what Frank is seeking consolation for. His self-confessed "dreaminess" in *The Sportswriter* is an echo of Frank Wheeler's fantasising that is so central in *Revolutionary Road*. These are men who find escape in their dreams, but this dreaming does not always have to equate to a concrete desire to do something different or be somewhere else. Certainly, Frank Bascombe in his later incarnation as a salesman actively tries not to sell dreams to people looking for their ideal homes. American men are rarely allowed to admit that they are quite content not to embody some form of heroic masculinity or live a life of non-stop adventure, even if it is entertaining to pretend otherwise every now and then. Nowadays, there is almost something wrong if an American man does not accept some form of the crisis narrative as having an effect on his existence. It verges on being un-American to celebrate the ordinary, to see worth and value in things and experiences that

³⁶ Huey Guagliardo, ed., *Conversations with Richard Ford* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 29.

³⁷ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 328.

³⁸ Ian McGuire, *Richard Ford and the Ends of Realism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

are of the everyday. This could go some way to explaining the scepticism that many critics express as to the authenticity of Frank's satisfaction with living where he does. Bearing this in mind then, what role, if any, do the American suburbs play in this dreaminess that seems to afflict fictional male characters with noticeable regularity? Frank suggests that

people never find or buy the house they say they want. A market economy, so I've learned, is not even remotely premised on anybody getting what he wants. The premise is that you're presented with what you might've thought you didn't want, but what's available, whereupon you give in and start finding ways to feel good about it and yourself. And not that there's anything wrong with that scheme. Why should you only get what you think you want, or be limited by what you can simply plan on? Life's never like that, and if you're smart you'll decide it's better the way it is.⁴⁰

Life in the suburbs, then, may not be what is ultimately desired, but it is blank enough and sufficiently unchallenging that it, somewhat paradoxically, leaves the way open for unlimited possibilities. With varying success, Ford attempts to characterise the supposed emptiness of suburban life as something that is filled with potential, something that an individual could embrace to their own advantage as Frank attempts to do. As a result, in the Bascombe books the American suburbs, I contend, rather than being the predominantly feminised space which exclude men that they are so regularly presented as, in fact hold the potential to become the most suitable site for the performance of a particular type of masculinity.

Instead of the stereotypical challenge to his masculinity that the suburbs would routinely be presented as, Frank sees their blankness as a positive. They are something to be celebrated because they are the one thing that does not impinge upon how he would like to see himself, regardless of how that might change over time. Unlike Knapp's and Jurca's readings of Frank's repeated returns to Haddam as some failure to break out of a bad cycle, instead it can be seen as him reverting to the comfort of his Default Self – it is the place he knows himself the most, whether he will admit to it or not. It does not matter that how he sees himself is in a constant state of flux. To Frank Bascombe this can only be a good thing, especially at the beginning of the series when he notes that

A woman I met at the college where I briefly taught, once told me I had too many choices, that I was not driven enough by dire necessity. But that is just an illusion and her mistake.

⁴⁰ Ford, *Independence Day*, 41.

Choices are what we all need. And when I walk out into the bricky warp of these American cities, that is exactly what I feel. Choices aplenty. Things I don't know anything about but might like are here, possibly waiting for me. Even if they aren't [...] These things are waiting for you. And what could be better? More mysterious? More worth anticipating? Nothing. Not a thing.⁴¹

Here, Frank equates the city with limitless possibility, but it is somewhere he only occasionally goes. It is the site of concrete decisions rather than potential. The suburbs are where dreams have room to breathe – or be ignored, depending on one's mood – whereas in the city they must be acted upon. On more than one instance in *The Sportswriter*, Frank refers to the dread he experiences in New York and other big cities. Despite working for a New York-based publication, he rarely ventures into the office and when he does, he always escapes from the city before sundown. It is as if he views the city as a form of reverse vampire that, instead of sucking the life out of him, will force him not only to fully articulate his dreams and fantasies, but also to act upon them.

What is traditionally seen as the suburbs' staid, characterless conformity becomes precisely the kind of blank canvass upon which men like Frank can have it all. Instead of looking to the blankness as some kind of uncertainty that will undermine his masculinity, Frank seeks to view it as a freedom of sorts. He can live in relative comfort and security, but still pursue whatever flights of fancy happen to grab his attention without causing any lasting damage to himself. The similarities in this instance between Frank Wheeler and Frank Bascombe are striking. Frank Wheeler lives his life in his head, constantly fantasising and editing his experiences to make his existence seem more tolerable, and to a certain extent Frank Bascombe does the same thing too, attributing his attitudes to whatever made-up stage of life he happens to think he is in (Existence, Permanence, etc.).

However, a significant difference between the two is that while Bascombe recognises his fantasies as just that, he does not feel the same sense of loss that Frank Wheeler feels when he has to admit that his fantasies are not really possible in reality. Frank Bascombe sees it as a quintessential American gift that all things ultimately are possible. This does not, however, stop him from experiencing minor dreads similar to Frank Wheeler's at times, observing that "I may still possess a remnant of the old feeling I had when I was thirty-three: that a tiny director with a megaphone, a beret and jodhpurs is

⁴¹ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 7-8.

suddenly going to announce ‘Cut!’ and I’ll get to play it all again.”⁴² Life is essentially a performance for Frank – indeed, for both Franks – but where other characters mentioned in previous chapters so far have struggled to perform the roles ascribed to them by society that did not fit with how they personally saw themselves, Frank Bascombe is happy and content to live out a quiet, middle-class suburban life, with the occasional interruption of excitement. It comes to seem the most patriotic and American thing that he can do.

Ian McGuire further suggests of Ford’s depiction of the suburbs that “although energetically and convincingly asserted, [it] still appears shaky at times. Ford’s revisionist symbolism, perhaps because it is more original and idiosyncratic, also seems sometimes as weak as the inherited symbols it has replaced – an effort of individual will that may easily fail.”⁴³ Owing to the dominant narrative that suburbanites should be disaffected and dissatisfied, it is an effort on the part of Frank, and more to the point on the part of Ford, to keep control of the more positive interpretation that he seeks to put forward in the Bascombe novels.

Traditional treatments of the suburbs in literature have suggested that the conformity and isolation inherent in their construction is what makes them so stifling. From the universe of the Bascombe books, however, it is possible to read them as the purest demonstration of a certain type of American national character, which feeds into the idea of self-invention that can be seen in many of the texts that have been discussed so far in this thesis. At the heart of much of the discussion of the masculinity crisis narrative is the idea that men do not know who or what they are supposed to be as there is no fixed identity any more. However, as McGuire points out, “Ford is clearly attaching his protagonist and himself to a particularly American line of liberal and pragmatic thought that emphasizes fluidity and self-creation over identity and sureness.”⁴⁴ In Ford’s Bascombe world, nothing is more American than adaptability and going with the flow, a subtle reference to Frank’s recurring engagements with Emerson who once suggested that “society is a wave.”⁴⁵

⁴² Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 278-79.

⁴³ McGuire, *Richard Ford and the Ends of Realism*, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* 6th ed. Vol. B, ed. Nina Baym (London: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 2003), 1176.

Pursuing the exceptionalism and individualism that is considered to be every citizen's right could not be carried out in a more fitting setting than alone in a crowd. Ford suggests of the American experience that

it's just part of our American heritage to exclude. White people came to the American continent to exclude ourselves, and as soon as we got here we started excluding everybody else. It's this whole spurious idea of independence. The American practice of independence is premised on the notion of "get away from me, because I'm better off when I'm here by myself and can be seen; or, my independence or my worth is more easily proven when I'm not somehow diluted by you."⁴⁶

The quintessential American state, then, is to be isolated and not only to be accepting of that but to actively seek it out. Nothing could be more patriotic. The suburbs, as Frank Bascombe sees them, become the best place to express this patriotism. He observes that "it is a token of the suburbs that I love, that from time to time a swimming pool or a barbecue or a leaf fire you'll never ever see will drift provocatively to your nose."⁴⁷ At all times, Frank is aware of other people, but he is still fundamentally alone, voluntarily isolated from others.

Of course, there is still inevitably a contradiction of sorts in Ford's creation of Haddam and the various locations in which Frank lives. In spite of Ford's stated ambition to write about life in the suburbs, the environment of the Bascombe books is not the stereotypical American suburb with row upon row of identical houses sprawling for miles and miles. Each and every house that Frank lives in has some unique feature, setting it apart from the houses surrounding it. Indeed, Frank's wealth and financial comfort only increase over the course of the books, meaning that the places he can choose to live in may technically be suburban, but are in fact exclusive in terms of location and property prices. Even though Ford espouses a mantra of normality for Frank, there is still an element of exception to where he lives, regardless of his consistent celebration of the ordinary, and his desire to live quietly in it.

His first house in *The Sportswriter* is an old, three-floor, mock Tudor gem, with rooms filled with overstuffed chairs and bursting with character. He trades down in *Independence Day* to his ex-wife's smaller house, but it is still a high-end, top-spec building.

⁴⁶ Guagliardo, *Conversations with Richard Ford*, 139.

⁴⁷ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 14.

The Lay of the Land sees him the proud owner of a beach-front property in an exclusive area along the Jersey shore. By the time of *Let Me Be Frank With You*, he and his second wife, Sally, have moved back into Haddam, having been door-stepped with an offer that was too good to refuse for their beach house. It could be argued that Frank is only such a champion of the suburbs because he does not actually have to live in them.

Houses come to play central roles in all of the Bascombe books as Frank constructs and rebuilds his sense of identity. Indeed, the relationship that Frank has with houses and homes directly feeds into the idea of allowing for fluidity in identity, and colours how we read his approach to his own masculinity. Yet, over the course of the various days that all of the books trace, Frank is more often than not to be found out of the house, in his car. This leads him to ask the inevitable question as to whether cars are the only site of “interior life left.”⁴⁸ For all that Americans have financially invested in their homes and emotionally invested in the concept of home ownership, cars have come to represent the last vestige of true freedom being as they are unrooted to any one place and free to move at any time.

For all of Frank’s talk of bringing life to a place, he actually spends the majority of his time in transit – both physically and mentally. In a physical sense, he is in constant motion throughout the books, travelling between fixed points, filling in the events of his life in flashbacks as he commutes. *The Sportswriter* sees him driving all over Haddam during an Easter weekend, pondering the dreaminess that has led to the disintegration of his marriage and what it might mean for his new relationship with Vicki Arcenault. *Independence Day* takes place during an actual road trip he undertakes with his now troubled teenage son Paul, throughout which he ruminates at length on the nature of society, and tries, unsuccessfully, to interest Paul in the writings and ideas of Emerson. *The Lay of the Land* sees Frank shuttling between Sea-Clift and Haddam, dealing with actual vandalism to his car as he considers how things have deteriorated on a local and national level. Even the first story in *Let Me Be Frank With You* opens with Frank out and about in his car in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. As Rabbit Angstrom notes, not entirely happily, “most of American life is driving somewhere and then driving back wondering why the hell you went.”⁴⁹ While this could imply a certain restlessness in Frank, all his driving and travelling

⁴⁸ Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 297.

⁴⁹ John Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* in *Rabbit Angstrom: Tetralogy* (London: Random House LLC: Everyman’s Library, 1995), 1074.

takes place in ever decreasing circles, leading him to eventually note that “the world gets smaller and more focused the longer we stay in it.”⁵⁰

The break at the Vince Lombardi Rest Area in *Independence Day*, as Frank makes his way up to Deep River to collect Paul, becomes a microcosm of the way people interact with each other. Everyone is on the road to some other place, maintaining slight, and safe, distances as they orbit each other. However, they occasionally pause to come closer and observe each other in more detail, silently acknowledging that they are “adversaries from the turnpike” taking a break in a place that is “as chaotic as a department store at Christmas yet also, strangely, half asleep.”⁵¹ Mr. Tanks, the furniture removal man that Frank meets outside a motel later that same night, actually lives in his truck, telling Frank that his house is just somewhere that his furniture “stays [...] I pay it a visit once in a while when I miss it.”⁵²

Safely cocooned alone in his car, Frank seems most stable, less likely to “say anything” which so often gets him into trouble with others who simply do not get where he is coming from, as far as he is concerned.⁵³ His long drives during which he describes every single thing he sees are when he is most sure of his standing as a man, and as an American. As Robert Putnam observes of contemporary American life, “we are spending more and more time alone in the car. And on the whole, many of us see this as a time for quiet relaxation [...] According to one survey in 1997, 45 percent of all drivers [...] agreed that ‘driving is my time to think and enjoy being alone’.”⁵⁴ The landscape scrolling past Frank’s car window like a movie reel is suggestive of the highly visual aspect of contemporary American culture. The motion lacks the sense of permanence that so bothers him. The constant movement implies perpetual possibility. Until he actually reaches his destination, anything can happen. This, then, is how the suburbs become the ultimate site of possibility for American citizens – as long as they own a car.

The original move to the suburbs was facilitated by the mass production of automobiles, which allowed people to move around in the absence of suitable public transport. The more contemporary version of this tale is inverted, with the car now

⁵⁰ Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, 160.

⁵¹ Ford, *Independence Day*, 178.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵³ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 295.

⁵⁴ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 213.

allowing the suburbanite to escape from the suburbs whenever they feel like it. It becomes the indicator of life beyond the street on which these individuals live, and also allows them to indulge in bigger dreams. All they have to do is look out the window to their driveway. Although owning the perfect house, or the near enough to perfect house, is an essential part of the American dream that Frank tries to sell to his clients, it does not mean that he fully believes in it himself, or ever feels settled. His house, the house of his ex-wife, the houses he sells, all become beacons that he is drawn to. Once he reaches them, however, he instantly wants to leave, creating a sense of constant psychological transit.

As with characters in many of the other novels previously discussed, Frank Bascombe has been read as struggling with his identity, with being afflicted by a peculiarly masculine identity crisis. The dominance of Frank's voice in the narrative, I contend, slightly shields from view the fact that most other characters in the Bascombe books are probably more discontented than Frank ever is. The saga of Joe and Phyllis Markham's attempt to buy a house in Haddam which takes up a significant portion of *Independence Day*, suggests that it is not primarily a problem with masculinity that afflicts some of these characters, but a deeply engrained refusal to let go of their idea of the American Dream. Early on in the books, this is flagged by Vicki Arcenault's father Wade, during a fractious Easter Sunday dinner when he observes that "Americans are too sensitive to moving down in rank."⁵⁵ Scott Donaldson, for all of his insight into the complexities of how the suburbs are viewed, reinforces this idea that trading down is a failure when he says

Whatever the psychological effects of moving about, no one is likely to suggest seriously that Americans stay put. For the most significant thing about all this moving from place to place and job to job is that it is typically an *upward* movement [...] This continual movement toward bigger houses and better neighborhoods is the mark of success. In addition, a high level of mobility stands as proof of the democratic experiment: given equality of opportunity, people *can* rise. The people at the bottom have everything to gain and nothing to lose, and that is just as Americans have always felt it should be.⁵⁶

As Frank ruefully observes in the most recent instalment, "no one wants to stay any place. There are species-level changes afoot."⁵⁷ This sensitivity to be seen to be regressing is the cause of much distress for the Markhams, and as a consequence of being their realtor, for

⁵⁵ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 270.

⁵⁶ Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth*, 125.

⁵⁷ Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, 73.

Frank too. Having built their dream home and lived something of an idyllic existence in rural Vermont, they were suddenly taken with the notion that a more meaningful life experience was waiting for them elsewhere, that somehow they were missing out on something. Frank suggests that they did not see the “‘Vermont life’ as necessarily the ultimate destination.”⁵⁸ Ostensibly, their desire to live in Haddam is so that their daughter can take advantage of a greater range of educational opportunities, but at the heart of their move is the sense that they believed they had reached a standstill in Vermont, something that is a direct violation of the American dream of progression and development.

In a faintly humorous touch after Frank’s own chronic indecision in *The Sportswriter*, the tables are turned as he is plagued by the Markhams’ inability, or refusal, to pick any house that he shows them. Their unrealistic expectations of the New Jersey property market push Frank to the point that his studiously maintained veneer of laidback calm very nearly cracks. Joe and Phyllis have a vague idea of what they are looking for in a house, appearing surer of what they do not want than of having any real concepts of what they actually need. Their view is that they will not settle for anything less than their dream home. Frank sees it differently, however, observing that the “‘Markhams say they won’t compromise on their ideal. But they aren’t compromising! They can’t afford their ideal! And not buying what you can’t afford’s not a compromise; it’s reality speaking English. To get anywhere you have to learn to speak the same language back.”⁵⁹ Of course Frank, in his almost permanent politeness, would never say this directly to the Markhams, instead resorting to vague platitudes about how they should consider settling for something in their price range.

The Markhams link the physical structure and location of a house with the emotional and social status of the home they think they are entitled to. Their infatuation with this idea consumes them almost to the point of collapse. They become caught up in a cycle of constant viewing and refuse to make a decision, always managing to find something wrong with the houses Frank shows them, terrified that making a decision will cause them to miss out on something better. In many ways, Joe and Phyllis take Frank’s love of possibility to the extreme, becoming crippled by indecision rather than risk committing to something definite. Joe is finally moved to admit that “‘the reason we haven’t bought a house in four months is that I don’t want to goddamned buy one. And

⁵⁸ Ford, *Independence Day*, 37.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

the reason for that is that I don't want to get trapped in some shitty life I'll never get out of except by dying."⁶⁰

Phyllis articulates a similar reluctance in a slightly different way suggesting that Joe, and also she to a certain extent, believe that "if we're leaving Vermont we should be moving into a sphere of more important events that would bring us both up in some way. The places you showed us he didn't think did that. Your houses might be better for someone else, maybe."⁶¹ Joe and Phyllis have fully bought into a particular kind of American dream that means they must constantly seek improvement. What they have is never enough. Where they are is never special enough, and nothing they do will change that unless it is to move to somewhere "better." In a faint echo of April and Frank Wheeler's initial distaste for their house's gaudy picture window in *Revolutionary Road*, the Markhams cannot fully articulate what it is that they actually want beyond Joe's indecisive assertion that he does not "want to live in an area."⁶²

It is interesting to note that Frank describes the business of real estate as "not about finding your dream house but getting rid of it," as this is exactly what the Markhams have done.⁶³ Their move to New Jersey sees them unable to afford the houses that fit with their own image of themselves. They insist on linking their sense of who they could be with the type and location of house they might live in, insisting that the house will make them rather than they make a home. It is with not a little exasperation that Frank finally cracks and bluntly tells Phyllis, "you are best off coming as close as you can and trying to bring life to a place, not just depending on the place to supply it for you."⁶⁴ In this one short statement Frank encapsulates Ford's entire philosophy about place and the suburbs as it pertains to the Bascombe books: place is irrelevant in the overall scheme of things when trying to construct a life, and the cleanest, blankest canvas you can find on which to construct your identity is the suburbs, but you must be willing to embrace it and make it work for you.

The importance the Markhams place on the unique quality they seek in their new home is in direct contradiction to Frank's own stated belief as to what a house should be,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁶¹ Ibid., 189.

⁶² Ibid., 59.

⁶³ Ibid., 301.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 76.

which is “nothing consecrated by or for all time, only certified as a building serviceable enough to live in for an uncertain while.”⁶⁵ It is an idea that he returns to in *The Lay of the Land* when the insufferable Markhams are replaced by the obnoxious Feensters, Frank’s neighbours out in Sea-Clift. The Feensters are a window on to what would have happened to Joe and Phyllis Markham had they actually found their dream house. Winners of a massive jackpot in the lottery, Nick and Drilla Feenster have all the money that the Markhams ever needed, and more, but they are still not happy in their exclusive neighbourhood, erecting massive “keep out” signs and generally ignoring their neighbours when they are not blatantly antagonising them. Proving Frank’s earlier point that the house does not make you, he observes that the Feensters “only know they paid enough to expect to feel right, but for some reason don’t feel right, and so get mad as hell when they can’t bring it all into line.”⁶⁶ It is the desire to “feel right” that complicates matters for the Feensters, with Frank suggesting that “they would’ve been smarter to stay away from ocean-front and put their new fecklessly gotten gains into something that would keep longing alive. Longing can be a sign of vigor, as well as heart-stopping stress.”⁶⁷ Call it longing, or call it possibility, the unwritten rule of the American dream is never to actually achieve it. Moreover, in Ford’s depiction of the Markhams and the Feensters he demonstrates that it is a desire that can affect everyone, male or female, and is not a pressure solely confined to the men of America.

Through his observations of the Markhams and Feensters, Frank reinforces this idea that houses are just bricks and mortar, and that it is beyond their capacity to bestow upon their inhabitants any special gifts or status. However, we cannot help but notice that although Frank might proclaim such a belief, his actions belie how strongly that belief is held. Even though he criticises the Markhams for linking their sense of themselves with this mythical, ideal house that they seek to live in, Frank is clearly guilty of this too. Not only does he sell the original family home (for a tidy profit), he then buys and moves into the house that Ann and the children had moved to after their divorce. He explains this away as nothing more significant than a convenient business transaction, something that suits both him and Ann. And yet it is a clear indication of how bound up in the home that Frank’s idea of himself is. He admits that in the wake of the divorce he had

⁶⁵ Ibid., 152.

⁶⁶ Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 311.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

lain awake nights in my old place or roamed the rooms and halls of hers when all were sleeping – searching, I suppose, for where I fit in, or where I’d gone wrong, or how I could breathe air into my ghostly self and become a recognizable if changed-for-the-better figure in their sweet lives or my own. One house is as good as another for this kind of private enterprise.⁶⁸

There is a disconnect between how he rationalises the concept of houses and homes, and the roles that they play in identity formation, and how he actually experiences them. On the one hand, he asks the quite logical question towards the end of *Independence Day*:

is there any cause to think a place – any place – within its plaster and joists, its trees and plantings, in its putative essence ever shelters some ghost of us as proof of its significance and ours?

No! Not one bit! Only other humans do that, and then only under special circumstances [...] We just have to be smart enough to quit asking places for what they can’t provide and begin to invent other options.⁶⁹

This is an undeniably calm and clear rationale for not investing too much in where he, or others live, reiterating his insistence that place is unimportant, lacking anything substantive until people come along to inhabit it and actively make it their own.

Frank’s reasons for remaining in the house that he and Ann shared before they were divorced suggest otherwise, however. He is perfectly happy living there alone for a time as “it felt like home, in other words; and if not my home, at least my kids’ home, someone’s home.”⁷⁰ When Ann announces in *Independence Day* that she is selling up and moving away from Haddam as she is remarrying, Frank finally feels compelled to sell their original family home because now “my old place had begun to feel barny and murky, murmurous and queer, and myself strangely outdistanced as its owner [...] I was no longer, I felt, preserving anything for anything, even for myself, but was just going through the motions, joining life’s rough timbers end to end.”⁷¹ Ann’s decision to move away forces Frank to admit that he had, even if just subconsciously, associated all he thought he was with the house they had lived in and the life they had built together in Haddam, despite all his protestations to the contrary:

⁶⁸ Ford, *Independence Day*, 108.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 442.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

All my decent, reasonable, patient, loving components were developed in the experimental theater of our old life together, and I realized that by moving house up to Deep River she was striking most of the components, dismembering the entire illusion, intending to hook up with another, leaving me with only faint, worn-out costumes to play myself with.⁷²

While he and Ann may have done exactly what Frank believes is necessary when it comes to houses, which is to give a place life yourself, his own identity had been completely subsumed into the house and all it stood for. The relationship between Frank and the house becomes symbiotic in a way. The house loses its meaning without his family nearby, but he is also similarly diminished somehow when his children's connection to the house is removed. By remaining in their original home, Frank was maintaining a connection with who he thought he was. His subsequent move into Ann's old house is a subconscious attempt to absorb the ghosts of the family life that she and the children have left behind in its walls. Even if he is reluctant to admit it, Frank does on some level believe that a house can provide emotional consolation. He does all this while carefully projecting an image of a man who is just happy enough, just content enough, who cannot really complain.

Ford noted in a 1986 interview that much of *The Sportswriter* was about “the sustaining of the modern family apart. The family doesn't go away because its members don't live together. There's a line in the book to that very point, that sometimes you can love someone and not be where they are, but you still love them.”⁷³ This again goes back to Frank's attempts to exist independently of place. He is still a member of his now fractured family, but struggles to find a clear meaning for his role once they are scattered across two houses and two states in *Independence Day*. Home becomes what Ford has called a “variable concept,” no longer rooted in one physical place.⁷⁴

His repeated attempts not to invest houses with meaning beyond their physical essence are not always successful, or indeed particularly truthful. He is unable to hide the sense of loss he feels that the old Hoving Road house that he and Ann shared with their children ends up demolished by the time of *The Lay of the Land*, noting that “by seven in the morning all four walls – within which I'd started a family, experienced joy, suffered great sadness, became lost to dreaminess, but through it all slept many nights as peaceful as

⁷² Ibid., 105.

⁷³ Guagliardo, *Conversations with Richard Ford*, 31.

⁷⁴ Walker, *Richard Ford*, 10.

a saint under the sheltering beeches and basswoods – were gone.”⁷⁵ The demolition of the house becomes a symbol for the final destruction of any vestige of family life that Frank may have been clinging to. The erasure of the physical structure prepares the way for the tentative new situations in which he, Ann, and their children find themselves. It points back to Frank’s declaration early in *The Sportswriter* that he had no “storied” family history. The house was the last physical reminder in Haddam of the life he once had.

Frank could be projecting an image of a man who lacks a solid connection to any place in order to maintain his own cherished belief in possibilities. He accuses the Markhams of suffering from the “realty dreads” which have nothing to do with the house, and everything to do with what the process of buying a house symbolises.⁷⁶ He describes it as

the cold, unwelcome, built-in-America realization that we’re just like the other schmo, wishing his wishes, lusting his stunted lusts, quaking over his idiot frights and fantasies, all of us popped out from the same unthinkable mold. And as we come nearer the moment of closing – when the deal’s sealed and written down in a book in the courthouse – what we sense is that we’re being tucked even deeper, more anonymously, into the weave of culture [...] What we all want, of course, is all our best options left open as long as possible; we want not to have taken any obvious turns, but also not to have misread the correct turn the way some other boy-o would. As a unique strain of anxiety, it makes for a vicious three-way split that drives us all crazy as lab rats.⁷⁷

Buying a house represents the end of the line. It is a declaration that this is where roots will be planted and families formed. It is seen as the end of ambition rather than the beginning. In committing to a life in suburban America, one is considered to be settling for one kind of life over all others, one that will cease to expand or develop. However, as Frank notes in *Let Me Be Frank With You*, “the suburbs are supposedly where nothing happens [...] an over-inhabited faux terrain dozing in inertia [...] plenty happens in the suburbs – in the way that putting a drop of water under an electron microscope reveals civilizations with histories, destinies, and an overpowering experience of the present.”⁷⁸ And in many ways, despite its questionable success, Ford’s attempt to strip the home of some kind of mythology, and the insistence on Frank’s lack of a story, is also another way for him to

⁷⁵ Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 67.

⁷⁶ Ford, *Independence Day*, 57.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, 79.

resist classification as a Southern writer. The fact that Frank's houses all end up with some sort of story attached to them is suggestive of an American obsession with the home rather than a peculiarly Southern approach.

In much the same way that critics attempt to shoehorn Ford into the category of Southern writing, or read the suburban experience in the Bascombe books as slyly ironic, there is also an insistence on reading the books as a meditation on a supposed crisis of masculinity that Frank is apparently in the grips of. As with the persistent determination to categorise him as a Southern writer, Ford also dismisses the idea of the books as an articulation of some all-encompassing gender-based crisis. This resistance on Ford's part does not deter critics from reading the books as texts primarily concerned with masculinity, which raises some challenging issues as to how much primacy must be given to an author's interpretation of their own writing when it is placed under literary scrutiny. To return to Josep M. Armengol's book for a moment, Michael Kimmel makes the following observation in the foreword:

Just as masculinity has been invisible to us, a consequence of that privileged, unmarked status, so, too, is it often invisible to writers themselves.

That's certainly true of Richard Ford, one of America's most critically celebrated contemporary writers. Ford has steadfastly refused any effort to characterize his work as "gendered", or to speak about masculinity as a theme in his work.

Well, Josep M. Armengol knows better – or at least he knows different.⁷⁹

There is a fine line to tread between second-guessing an author's intention and superimposing one's own agenda upon a text. It is, undeniably, quite easy to read the Bascombe books as classic texts of the masculinity crisis narrative when the protagonist is a white, middle-class, middle-aged, divorced man who engages in lengthy philosophising about the state of America as he meanders between jobs and relationships and houses. But, in an echo of Frank's comment about the suburbs and microscopes mentioned earlier, there is much more going on in the Bascombe books than a masculinity crisis – if in fact, Frank is actually experiencing such a crisis at all. We are reminded at this stage of James Gilbert's comments about how analysis of American history and culture often defaults to gendered interpretations as the easier, more sensational reading to present. It is the idea of the state of America, and of being an American, that I contend is the central issue in the

⁷⁹ Armengol, *Richard Ford and the Fiction of Masculinities*, np.

Bascombe books, not the gendered reading that Armengol and Kimmel, among others, would insist is at the heart of the books. Published as they are at the mid-point of each decade, there is a sense of checking in on the state of the union as much as catching up with what Frank has been doing in the intervening years between each book.

Certainly, there is a concern with masculinity and performativity present within all of the Bascombe books. Frank at one point remarks that “in two hours I have been suspected of being a priest, a shithead, and now, a homo. I’m apparently not getting my message across.”⁸⁰ At times, Frank even seems to echo Kimmel’s own assertions about the invisibility of the white male as he notes that “Haddam is, however, a first-class place for invisibility.”⁸¹ But, it is not just Frank who fails to get his message across, as he puts it. Almost every character in the books is preoccupied in some way with how others see them, whether it is the troubled teenager Paul, or the Markhams in *Independence Day*, or Ann throughout all of the books (in spite of her solid Midwestern no-nonsense attitude that Frank repeatedly celebrates), or Frank’s second wife, Sally. The dominance of the male narrative voice, however, inevitably invites a reading that prioritises the interpretation of a masculinity crisis as the main concern above all else. It is certainly understandable that this is the case, especially when along with Frank himself, the books are populated with male characters bemoaning whatever misfortune happens to have befallen them. When the Bascombe books are viewed as a whole, however, it cannot truly be said that the core issue around which all else revolves is a particular type of masculinity crisis affecting these men, especially when they are analysed in relation to the women who also inhabit the same universe.

In *The Sportswriter*, we see Frank’s interactions with the members of the Divorced Men’s Club, and in particular with the troubled Walter Lockett. At the time of the novel’s publication in the mid-eighties, a burgeoning men’s movement was beginning to emerge in America. There are some similarities between the activities of Frank’s club and the activities of these men’s groups seeking to reconnect predominantly white, middle-class men with a stereotypical earthy, rugged masculinity. Frank and the other men in the group go on fishing trips (where they usually fail to catch much), drink beer, and studiously avoid talking about anything beyond the most superficial topics. The Divorced Men’s Club comes to seem like an attempt by its members to create a semblance of community in the

⁸⁰ Ford, *Independence Day*, 192.

⁸¹ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 340.

wake of their divorces. By meeting up on a semi-regular basis they can at least pretend to maintain some kind of contact with the area in which they reside. Mainly, though, it gives Frank an opportunity to interact with people without being beholden to them as a close friend would be because, as he notes later in *Let Me Be Frank With You*, “like most people [...] I was never a *very* good friend in the first place – mostly just an occasionally adequate acquaintance.”⁸²

Although Frank quite happily drifts away from the Club as the books progress – in part due to his second marriage, but also due to his own discomfort with the whole enterprise – we can still see traces of these men’s groups in *The Lay of the Land*. Frank recounts, with some horror, the behaviour of a band of male friends who rally around when one of their group is diagnosed with cancer:

Once such bizarre activities get going, you can’t stop them without making everybody feel like an asshole. And maybe calling a halt would’ve made Ernie feel lousier and even more foolish for being the object of this nuttiness. One of the immersion team was an ex-Unitarian minister who’d studied anthropology at Santa Cruz, and the whole horrible rigmarole was his idea. He’d e-mailed instructions to everyone, only I don’t have e-mail (or I wouldn’t have been within a hundred miles of the whole business).⁸³

Frank would literally prefer to run a mile in the opposite direction than willingly participate in something that he views as not only faintly ridiculous, but also an embarrassingly misguided expression of friendship between grown men. For a character who embraces uncertainty about most aspects of social life, Frank is very definite about how he chooses to interact with other men. A similar reluctance to allow a male friendship to develop any depth is evident in Frank’s relationship with Walter Luckett in *The Sportswriter*. Walter has been abandoned by his wife, and is struggling to deal with the possibility that he might be gay after an encounter with a business associate in New York – both issues that Frank very definitely does not want to hear about.

Walter, upon initial reading, embodies the classic tropes of a masculinity crisis. He is lost and aimless, emasculated by the actions of his wife to the point that he eventually commits suicide. Yet there is always an element of controlled performance about Walter, even in his last meeting with Frank, and the manner in which he carries out his suicide. We

⁸² Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, 188.

⁸³ Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 81-82.

are forced to question how his masculinity can be in crisis when he is not even certain himself what that means. Walter is clearly a very troubled man, but he is not troubled *because* he is a man. His sister tells Frank that Walter was always a “kind of enigma to her and her entire family,” and that there was something “very strange about her brother.”⁸⁴ However, it is not definitive that Walter’s concept of his masculinity is what is troubling him. His sister’s revelations about him suggest that Walter was troubled long before an awareness of adult gender roles would come to play a part in his life.

Frank explains away his self-imposed distance from Walter as being because he has “no exact experience in these matters.”⁸⁵ He takes this even further when he suggests that “friendship is a lie of life.”⁸⁶ The implication from Frank throughout the books is that the most natural state for a person to inhabit is solitude, whether they are male or female. Other people make it difficult for Frank to maintain his dispassionate view on life, which goes some way to explain the intentional distance he enforces with people such as Walter in *The Sportswriter*, the Markhams in *Independence Day*, or what leads him to reveal in *The Lay of the Land* that he hates “men my age” and so actively avoids them.⁸⁷ As mentioned earlier, in the most recent instalment in the Bascombe saga, Frank is to be seen happily reducing the amount of people he is prepared to care about, carefully apportioning percentages of time to the most important people in his life, including himself because “none of us, as far as I can tell, are really designed to have *that* many friends.”⁸⁸

At all times, Frank seeks to avoid any kind of emotional investment in people or places that might force him to confront the validity of his philosophy about different life stages. For all the disruption and disconnection this causes him, Frank is apparently not disturbed by any of this. He may be caught in the swell of his own dreaminess and not really know what he wants other than a nice, quiet life, but the suburb of Haddam seems to be the best and most suitable place for him to figure it all out. As he notes in *Let Me Be Frank With You*,

Most of my friends over time have been decidedly casual and our contacts ephemeral. And I don’t feel I’ve lost anything because of it. In fact, like many of the things we suddenly

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 183.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 195.

⁸⁷ Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 102.

⁸⁸ Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, 187.

stop to notice about ourselves, once we're fairly far down the line we are how we are because we've liked it that way. It's made us happy.⁸⁹

Ford has been quite open about his admiration for the writing of Richard Yates, describing *Revolutionary Road* as a “cultish standard [...] to invoke it enacts a sort of cultural-literary secret handshake among its devotees.”⁹⁰ It is not surprising then, that there are remarkable similarities between Yates's Frank Wheeler and Ford's Frank Bascombe beyond their sharing of a first name. They are characters that have been cut from the same cloth, but how they interpret situations is quite different. This in turn creates an interesting lens through which to analyse both the books in general, and more specifically their approaches to the question of masculinity.

The most obvious similarity between the characters is, of course, their name. They even share the trait of seeming to contradict what their name implies. Neither man is actually “frank” as the term is generally understood, instead tending to talk around issues rather than address them directly. Much has been made of the opening line of *The Sportswriter* – “My name is Frank” – as if it suggests what lies ahead in the pages to follow.⁹¹ Here is a man who will be direct and honest; it declares that a man named Frank could be nothing else. Of course, by the time of the most recent book, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, and Ford's deliberate, and terrible, pun in the title, those of us who have followed Frank's progress are moved to wonder what “Frank” actually means. Is it honesty, directness, bluntness, or is he asking to simply be himself? Perhaps, more likely, it is a comment on his own capacity to be frank with himself as opposed to the reader.

Both Franks contradict this implied honesty as they embark on complex journeys of emotional and psychological construction, attempting to create frameworks that will help them to exist in a culture they find themselves embedded in, but cannot fully understand. For Frank Wheeler, his defence mechanism is his elaborate fantasies and daydreams. For Frank Bascombe, it is his choice to develop a vague system of life-stage categories that help to explain whatever it is he thinks he is currently experiencing. Their most striking similarity though, is the desire to be remembered or recognised. Frank Wheeler is anxious for people to acknowledge that he is special and talented, “that ol'

⁸⁹ Ibid., 188-89.

⁹⁰ Richard Ford, “American Beauty (Circa 1955),” *The New York Times*, April 9, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/09/books/essay-american-beauty-circa-1955.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

⁹¹ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 3.

Wheeler [...] really had it.”⁹² Both Franks crave, at a most basic level, to be remembered for something, anything, with Frank Bascombe going so far as to say

And not that I wanted to blaze my initials forever into history’s oak. I just wanted that when I was no more, someone could say my name (my children? my ex-wife?) and someone else could then say, “Right. That Bascombe, he was always damn *blank*.” Or “Ole Frank, he really liked to *blank*.” Or, worst case, “Jesus Christ, that Bascombe, I’m glad to see the end of his sorry *blank*.” These blanks would all be human traits I knew about and others did too, and that I got credit for, even if they weren’t heroic or particularly essential.⁹³

Where they differ is that Frank Bascombe is not particularly caught up in the desire to be considered special that so consumes Frank Wheeler. He would be content just to know that somebody – anybody – remembers him for the simple fact of his existence. Part of this can be traced back to Ford’s attempt to elevate the everyday in the Bascombe books. Frank Bascombe would be a different character entirely if he actively sought success. In fact, Ian McGuire suggests that Ford’s insistence on “normalcy” is in itself a slightly exceptional act:

For Ford, the normal is not a dull or default condition shared by most of the population but rather a difficult and precarious emotional balancing act by which both form and power (in their Emersonian sense) can be given their due without either being unduly privileged. Normality, in that sense, is a state of mind that may seem unremarkable but is actually hard to achieve and even harder to maintain.⁹⁴

What both of the Franks share, though, is a lack of specifics. Wheeler cannot give any details as to what he thinks he should be doing with his life that would be more fulfilling than his current position, and Bascombe can only list a series of undefined blanks that he and others would eventually get around to identifying. Perhaps these blanks are a deliberate move on Bascombe’s part, echoing as they do the emptiness-as-potential that he trumpets in suburban life. As with John Williams’s Stoner, these are unremarkable men leading unexceptional lives.

There is also a certain echo of Yates’s intentions in how Ford attempts to write the suburbs in his Bascombe books. As noted in the previous chapters, Yates was on record as

⁹² Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 22.

⁹³ Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 75.

⁹⁴ McGuire, *Richard Ford and the Ends of Realism*, xxiv.

saying of *Revolutionary Road* that although Frank and April Wheeler might have hated the suburbs, he personally did not, and it was not the point of the novel to apportion blame to the suburbs for how their lives developed. It was their own foibles and indulgent behaviour that condemned them, not the house or the area that they lived in. Frank Bascombe can be seen as a next generation Frank Wheeler. He has learned from the mistakes of Frank and April, and while he might not be as strong on specifics as he could be, he is still able to make the best of the lot he is dealt which, by the end of the series of books, is not a bad lot at all. Indeed, it is also interesting to note that the traditionally feminised space of the suburbs is not an issue for Frank Bascombe. He is perfectly content to move around in this space, and does not see it as a challenge to his identity in any way.

We can see a literary lineage of sorts, the development of a specific type of male character that has been mistaken as being in the grips of a masculinity crisis because this is the dominant narrative for all things affecting American men, particularly middle-class white men. It is also present in John Updike's Rabbit tetralogy, with Frank and Rabbit sharing a similar confusion in the face of what is expected of those who chase the American dream. Where they differ, however, is in the trajectory of their respective paths. Rabbit experiences a fall that Frank never does, reaching the lofty heights of high-school basketball star and failing for the rest of his life – so he thinks – to ever attain a similar level of achievement. Frank, on the other hand, glides along through life, refusing to entertain the same outsized ambitions as Rabbit, noting

But what the hell more do I need to accept that I haven't already, and confessed as the core of my be-ness? [...] That I've chosen a life smaller than my "talents" because a smaller life made me happier? (Check, check, double check.)⁹⁵

This idea of Frank being happier with a "smaller life" is something that critics do not seem to want to accept. Kathy Knapp and Catherine Jurca certainly subscribe to the theory that Frank is "one more in a line of purportedly amiable but displaced suburbanites, wallowing in disingenuous self-pity as a means of justifying his self-centered, irrelevant existence."⁹⁶ Harsh words indeed for the self-proclaimed "happiest man in the world."⁹⁷ There is a

⁹⁵ Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 521.

⁹⁶ Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism*, 3.

⁹⁷ Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You*, 196.

resistance to any concept of Frank actually being satisfied with what he has, to the idea that he might not actually be experiencing some major identity crisis.

Even the idea of him being happy to step away from writing is considered a failure, a blow to his manliness, which possibly says more about the values of the readership who question it than about Frank's own motivations. Despite their adoption into discussions of the masculinity crisis narrative none of these characters, not Rabbit nor either of the Franks, can definitively be said to be experiencing a masculinity related crisis. As has been noted by James Gilbert, it is the default setting for cultural and literary critics to resort to gendered readings of American history because it is the most straightforward to take. It is the easiest one to sell to the general public.

Joseph H. Pleck also observed a similar trend in in a discussion of the Male Sex Role Identity paradigm, noting

In brief, the MSRI paradigm can be interpreted as the product of the interaction between late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social concerns about masculinity in the United States and an early, immature stage of psychoanalytic thought.⁹⁸

Pleck suggests that the crisis narrative reaches peaks during times of political and national disturbance, for example during the Great Depression of the 1930s or the Cold War years. What becomes evident from all of this is that we can see the continuation of the crisis narrative over generations, following something of a cyclical, almost regenerative pattern. Pleck describes it as follows:

the MSRI paradigm paradoxically sowed the seeds of its own demise. As sex role strain continued to build, the women's and men's liberation movements arose in response, providing individuals a way of understanding the strain they experience, analyzing its sources, and reducing it. These movements also stimulated an intellectual critique of the old paradigm and the emergence of the new. In essence, the theory of male sex role identity dialectically created sex role strain as its social and ultimately intellectual antithesis.⁹⁹

The main thrust of his argument is that American psychiatry never developed its relationship with Freudian analysis beyond the most basic level, hence the obsession with

⁹⁸ Joseph H. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1981), 158.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

the idea of a crisis in masculinity. It took over as the dominant narrative and has maintained that dominance, regardless of how theory or lived experience has moved on.

It is also fair to say that much of the analysis of the Bascombe books insists on fitting them into the masculinity crisis narrative, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. Certainly, Frank deals with individual episodes of turmoil in his life – the tragic death of a child, divorce, separation from his children, the failure of relationships – but his ability to perform the stereotypical white middle-class male function of earning a living and being a professional success is never in doubt. The crux of the masculinity crisis narrative is that these men do not know their place in society, are cut adrift from professional prospects, and cannot achieve the things dictated to them by cultural norms. None of this is true of Frank Bascombe. If he appears bewildered at times, it is mainly in relation to what he considers to be other people’s refusal to accept their lot in life, or their inability to see American life as he sees it. Frank believes that he has hit upon the secret of comfortable survival in modern America, and that secret is not to want too much, hence his choice of a “smaller life.”¹⁰⁰

Frank identifies in others the disruptive force of the American dream. He sees it in the women he loves, observing of Ann that she “was forever suspecting other people were happier than she was, that other husbands loved their wives more, achieved greater intimacy.”¹⁰¹ It is yet another nod to the Wheelers of *Revolutionary Road*. Ann’s dissatisfaction, or least Frank’s interpretation of it, is remarkably similar to April Wheeler’s lament that other people had figured out the secret to life but had yet to share it with her. Both women feel a lack in their lives, but neither can figure out a way to correct it. To a certain extent, Frank also identifies with this lack, but his way of dealing with it is just to accept it and move on – something that could be, and has been, viewed as a denial of unhappiness rather than the antidote to the stresses of modern life that Frank thinks it is.

Sally Caldwell, Frank’s second wife, also demonstrates this awareness of a lack in her life, ostensibly caused by the disappearance of her first husband, Wally. When Wally suddenly reappears, Sally leaves Frank to try and reclaim her first marriage and fill in the gaps she thought were missing from her life. By the end of *The Lay of the Land*, however, she appears to have come around somewhat to Frank’s way of thinking, realising that

¹⁰⁰ Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 521.

¹⁰¹ Ford, *Independence Day*, 253.

going after Wally was never going to achieve anything, and was ultimately a pointless pursuit of an unattainable dream. In seeing these traits in the women of the Bascombe books, and in the other minor characters, such as the Markhams, who punctuate the action, it becomes necessary to reappraise the accepted readings of the books as catalogues of one man's thinly veiled discontents with his role in society and his life in the suburbs.

Considering Frank's own ambivalence about what place and the suburbs mean to him, it is perhaps understandable that literary critics insist on reading him as gripped by crisis, and that his avoidance of male friendships is a sign of his unstable masculinity. The abandonment of his career as a writer of fiction is constantly interpreted as a failure. There is an element of some critical blindness being transferred on to Frank. For many, the idea of the writer's life is aspirational, something to be mourned when it is lost. The fact that Frank voluntarily walks away from it without any regrets is challenging for those in the world of words. Ford acknowledged such an interpretation in an interview just after *The Sportswriter's* publication, saying,

There are worse things in the world than not being a writer.

To a literary audience, I think, for a writer to stop being a writer seems a kind of world-class defeat, and for him to say, "Well, it's no big deal" is kind of ironic. Except that just isn't the way I meant it to be. I mean it to be all right. I mean it to be fine. Because he goes ahead and lives the happiest life he can live, full of mirth and tragedy and affection.¹⁰²

At least in *The Sportswriter*, Frank was still a writer of some description. By the time of *Independence Day* he is firmly ensconced in his career as a realtor, having completely turned his back on writing of any kind, barring the company newsletter that gets sent out to clients. For literary critics, this has almost uniformly been viewed as a failure of talent or motivation on Frank's part. "Who among us would happily turn our backs on one of the most idealised professions of all?" seems to be the rhetorical question these critics are all asking.

The Frank Bascombe of *The Lay of the Land* is virtually unrecognisable as the same man from the beginning of the series, comfortably wheeling and dealing, an established and successful businessman. For Frank, this is not a defeat but as Ford observes, for a section of the reading audience it is viewed as step down, or somehow lesser, because of the implied acceptance of consumption and capitalism. There is not much that is unique or

¹⁰² Guagliardo, *Conversations with Richard Ford*, 30.

romantic about the grubby business of selling houses and making money. Indeed, Frank is now an expert at that most typically American of professions: the salesman. But there is still an element of the fictional about even this, which could go some way to explaining Frank's sentimentalised description of his role as he claims "you don't sell a house to someone, you sell a life."¹⁰³

Huey Guagliardo suggests that

The text of suburbia is a text designed to foster a misreading of life. It promises permanence [...] but, as we have seen, life is not permanent. Suburbia lies because it is inconsistent; it tries to provide closure while at the same time excluding the ultimate closure – death. Although death is an intruder in the suburbs, life can still be found there.¹⁰⁴

This is the standard observation of American suburbia, linked with death, finality, and lies. Guagliardo declares that it is suburbia that lies, promising something that it cannot possibly deliver. However, in the world of the Bascombe books, it is the inhabitants of suburbia that lie the most. Although Frank can be included in this number, he also claims to be fully aware of the trap of suburban life and genuinely believes that he has cracked the code for optimum suburban living – a life that is productive and satisfying rather than consumed with finality and dead ends.

Living in the suburbs, Frank believes, is "not a matter of money, I don't think, but of a certain awareness: living in a place is one thing we all went to college to learn how to do properly, and now that we're adults and the time has arrived, we're holding on."¹⁰⁵ The great lie of the suburbs – that it is the ultimate and final destination – is in fact a lie created by those who go to live there and expect life to happen automatically for them. It is something that Frank suspects the Markhams of believing, imagining that their thought process upon deciding to move to New Jersey was something along the lines of

We simply discovered we had some pretty damn unique needs that could only be met by some suburban virtues we'd never even heard about before [...] I'm sure, in fact, the Markhams feel like pioneers, reclaiming the suburbs from people (like me) who've taken them for granted for years and given them their bad name.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ford, *Independence Day*, 112.

¹⁰⁴ Huey Guagliardo, ed, *Perspectives on Richard Ford* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 80.

¹⁰⁵ Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Ford, *Independence Day*, 57-58.

This “bad name” that the suburbs have gained over the years has been out of all proportion to the experience of living there, and in many cases has been based on a rose-tinted vision of some utopian past that critics believed could be reclaimed. As Scott Donaldson quite forcefully points out:

What is it, exactly, that the critics expected to discover and found lacking, in the American suburb? Their expectations can be summed up as nothing less than the realization of the American ideal – a return to nature, a return to the small village, a return to self-reliant individualism. The American suburb, many social commentators came to believe, was the twentieth century place in which this eighteenth century ideal could and should come true. Reality stands little chance against such illusions.¹⁰⁷

In a similar vein to how the masculinity crisis is discussed, the suburbs have earned a bad reputation based on unrealistic expectations, causing inevitable disappointments which leads to the emergence of a dominant narrative of decline. Complaining and negativity attract more attention than overwhelmingly positive stories, and the proliferation of negativity about the American suburban experience has cemented its place as the ultimate in uncool. But to lament the decline of American community is nothing new, as Robert Putnam observes:

Debates about the waxing and waning of “community” have been endemic for at least two centuries. “Declensionist narratives” – postmodernist jargon for tales of decline and fall – have a long pedigree in our letters. We seem perennially tempted to contrast our tawdry todays with past golden ages. We apparently share this predilection with the rest of humanity.¹⁰⁸

I believe it is Frank’s insistence on the inherent potential at the heart of the American suburb which causes him to be read as a man in crisis. He must be in denial about every aspect of life if he is willing to suggest that his life in a small town in New Jersey is enough to fulfil him.

Leaving aside for a moment any question of the American dream and the expectations it engenders on a superficial level, it is still considered desperately old-fashioned and traditional to aspire to a life in the suburbs. There is apparently nothing adventurous or creative to be found there, no romance at the heart of suburban life, which

¹⁰⁷ Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth*, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 24.

is perhaps why critics have such difficulty in accepting Ford's assertion that there is nothing ironic about his creation of Haddam and Frank Bascombe. There has to be some aspect of the Bascombe books that contains a sly wink to the readers, they insist; that if you read between the lines often enough you will find that Ford is really condemning the supposed hollowness of this kind of life.

Brian Duffy suggests that it is in fact Ford's lack of explicit criticism of the suburbs which is the thing we should consider the most:

Ford, almost unfailingly, simply gives full expression to his creation and allows his character to narrate his life and proclaim the pleasures of suburban existence without directing the reader to the fault-lines in that ideology, while nonetheless exposing the values and meanings of that world to the harsh examination of experience. In this sense, Ford is more disinterested scientist than ruthless ironist.¹⁰⁹

This, somewhat perplexingly, completely ignores the fact of Ford as the puppet master, literally putting the words into Frank Bascombe's mouth. Rather than try to reveal a veiled criticism of the suburbs that Ford insists simply is not there, it is more worthwhile to examine how Frank can be so contradictory about his experience. His lived life does not always match up with the philosophy he espouses, something Ford acknowledges when he says that

Lived life is very dense, and it's not very consistent and it's not very well-ordered, and it is full of competing details and competing ideas, and full of competing impulses. And so for me to do that in a novel, I'm going to have to somehow get that much detail onto the page.¹¹⁰

There is a sense that what Frank tries to do throughout all the books is to reconcile his almost genetically imprinted tendency as an American to dream big, with a rational thought process that can accept that not everyone will, or even can, hit the jackpot. If he fails at times to adequately do this, it does not necessarily mean that Ford is trying to convey a secret message about what he really thinks of the suburbs. Indeed, as Ford himself observes,

It matters to me and you, as human beings, whether or not each of us is reliable, but narrators don't have to be. Or maybe another way of saying it is sometimes they are and

¹⁰⁹ Duffy, *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford*, 19.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 352.

sometimes they aren't. They don't need to be or maybe they can't be [...] *Characters* don't tell the truth. They hypothesize; they speculate. That's their relationship to their maker, the author; they're speculators about things. They may say things that are useful, and very right, very moving, but their obligation isn't to tell the truth. The *book* may tell a truth by comprising all these other gestures.¹¹¹

As a result, the criticism levelled at Frank Bascombe as an unreliable narrator who repeatedly contradicts himself, is not in itself reliable. It is a curious sort of cultural prejudice that influences how the Bascombe books have been read and received. Frank is routinely described as unreliable, contradictory, even infuriating, as if all characters in all fiction have been easily classifiable and clear in their thinking.

Fred Hobson expands on this idea somewhat when he discusses Ford's motivation with regards to irony, or the lack thereof, in *The Sportswriter*, saying,

Ford is indeed a discriminating writer, but he is also a writer who would object less to the excesses of popular culture than to a particular world view – call it elitist or privileged – that would pass judgment on that culture. It is precisely this resistance to easy irony, a resisting the temptation to be ironic in dealing with popular culture, that distinguishes Ford from numerous other contemporary writers.¹¹²

There seems to be a collective agreement in Ford scholarship that the level of detail in the Bascombe books about labels, brands, locations, and the general joy of consumerism means that there has to be an ulterior motive. In many respects, it can be argued that there is an element of cultural snobbery about this. Frank orders his clothes from mail-order catalogues, and waxes lyrical about the solace that he and Ann took in ordering and perusing catalogues in the wake of their son Ralph's death. There is an echo here again of Rabbit Angstrom's curious delight in reading consumer reports. Similarly, several critics have expressed doubts about the sincerity of such actions. Frank's account of requesting catalogues, placing orders, and of delivery trucks parked daily on the street is not much more than a 1980s version of today's internet shopping. As Hobson remarks, Frank "is at home in the world of things" and unlike many of the other protagonists discussed in previous chapters, he appears to be perfectly accepting of this.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Guagliardo, *Conversations with Richard Ford*, 155.

¹¹² Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 46-47.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 47.

Frank's is therefore a peculiarly laidback interpretation of the American dream that causes difficulties for those who try to analyse the Bascombe books. If he is not criticising the suburbs then what is he criticising? If his masculinity is not under threat – and it is not, despite his often turbulent relationships with the opposite sex – then how can a gendered reading be imposed on the books? In truth, the Bascombe books can be read both ways, a dichotomy borne out of the contradictory nature of American exceptionalism. By presenting us with a sincere man who is genuine in his pursuit of contentment, Ford poses a fundamental challenge to proponents of the American dream: in downsizing his ambitions and recognising that not everyone can make it Frank Bascombe, perversely, ends up wealthy, successful, and reasonably happy. “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself,” as the poet says.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 2274.

“Self-inflicted. You pathetic American.”

“Different kind of prison,” Chip said.

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*

Chapter Four: “The Comfort of Victimhood.” Jonathan Franzen’s Lament for America’s Middle-Class White Men

In his now notorious essay, “Perchance to Dream,” Jonathan Franzen quotes liberally from correspondence between him and his friend, and literary rival, David Foster Wallace. In these letters, the two men attempt to rationalise their despair over what they saw as the plight of the white male writer in America, with Wallace declaring that “just about everybody with any sensitivity feels like there’s a party going on that they haven’t been invited to – we’re *all* alienated.”¹ Picking up the threads of alienation and isolation that have been discussed in previous chapters in the writing of Richard Yates, Sylvia Plath, and Richard Ford, Wallace and Franzen sought to elaborate on this discontent, and how it related to their ambitions to be considered “serious” writers in American culture. According to Franzen the novel, and along with it the role of the writer, was becoming increasingly marginalised in a society obsessed with mass consumerism and bite-sized information. He despaired, noting that “the novelist has more and more to say to readers who have less and less time to read: where to find the energy to engage with a culture in crisis when the crisis consists in the impossibility of engaging with the culture?”² Wallace expanded further on this idea of alienation, suggesting that

it’s not an accident that so many writers “in the shadows” are straight white males. Tribal writers can feel the loneliness and anger and identify themselves with their subculture and can write to and for their subculture about how the mainstream culture’s alienated them. White males *are* the mainstream culture. So why shouldn’t we angry, confused, lonely white males write *at* and *against* the culture?³

In an extraordinary feat of mental gymnastics, Franzen and Wallace manage to vault spectacularly over any discussion of the privilege that actually being a part of the

¹ Jonathan Franzen, “Perchance to Dream,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 1996, 51.
<http://harpers.org/archive/1996/04/perchance-to-dream/>

² *Ibid.*, 40.

³ *Ibid.*, 51.

mainstream culture bestows upon them. Instead, they proceed straight to the disaffected pose of the misunderstood middle-class white male. For both writers, there is no discernible difference between the challenges facing them as men caught in the mainstream, and writers working to critique that very same culture.

Existing in something of an echo chamber, Franzen and Wallace reinforce each other's belief in the plight of the white male, adrift and alone in a culture that no longer understands him. They are traumatised by the inability to articulate an oppression that could see them united in solidarity with their fellow men in the same way as the "tribal writers" to which Wallace refers. Indeed, they could be said to be classic examples of the invisibility that Michael Kimmel has suggested is at the heart of the middle-class, white male experience in contemporary American society. The greatest scar on the privileged white man's existence is the entire absence of any mark. Apparently lacking some easily-identifiable unifying quality, it could be inferred from Wallace and Franzen's exchange that white men, or white writers in this case, are routinely denied a receptive audience. In a footnote later in the same essay, Franzen observes that "writers like Jane Smiley and Amy Tan today seem conscious and confident of an attentive audience. Whereas all the male novelists I know, including myself are clueless as to who could possibly be buying our books."⁴ And yet, somehow, there clearly is a consistent audience for books written by male writers, in spite of what the concerns raised in Franzen's essay would lead us to believe.

Franzen's declaration that female writers have a guaranteed audience is somewhat reminiscent of Nathaniel Hawthorne's lament about the "mobs of scribbling women" he felt were destroying American literature.⁵ At a time when the majority of readers are actually women, for Franzen to suggest that there was no longer a stable, consistent audience for his books borders on casual sexism at best. According to the annual VIDA count, books by male writers still claimed more column inches in literature reviews in 2014 than those by female writers.⁶ Katha Pollitt noted in 2010, shortly after *Freedom* was published, that "plenty of women writers get excellent reviews, but it is very rare for them to get the kind of excited, rapturous, high-cultural reception given to writers who are 'white

⁴ Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 48.

⁵ John T. Frederick, "Hawthorne's 'Scribbling Women,'" *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Jun., 1975), 231. doi: 10.2307/364660

⁶ "The 2014 Vida Count," *VIDA: Women in Literary Arts*, April 4, 2015, <http://www.vidaweb.org/2014-vida-count/>

and male and living in Brooklyn’ or, since Franzen lives on the Upper East Side, are named Jonathan.”⁷ This is something that Franzen sarcastically alludes to in his most recent novel, *Purity*, when the embittered old writer, Charles Blenheim, declaims about the fact that there are “so many *Jonathans*. A plague of literary Jonathans. If you read only the *New York Times Book Review*, you’d think it was the most common male name in America. Synonymous with talent, greatness. Ambition, vitality.”⁸ Franzen’s books in particular are routinely heralded as the coming of the Great American Novel, or at least the closest that anyone has ever come to it. He has also been one of the few fiction writers to grace the cover of *TIME* magazine, appearing on the August 23, 2010 issue with the predictable tagline of “Great American Novelist.” When it comes to the Oppression Olympics, try as he might, Franzen is fighting a losing battle.

This was particularly evident in the saga of the selection, and subsequent dropping, of *The Corrections* for Oprah’s Book Club. Having mused aloud in an interview that he saw “this as my book, my creation, and I didn’t want that logo of corporate ownership on it,” Franzen found himself unceremoniously dropped from Oprah’s reading list.⁹ In email correspondence for Philip Weinstein’s recent book, Franzen suggested as recently as 2013, that “it simply didn’t occur to me that anyone would particularly care what I was saying [...] I was speaking to my personal readership, and at that point my perception of it was small.”¹⁰ There is still an element of Franzen attempting to deflect responsibility away from himself, even though Weinstein states that Franzen is the first to admit that his comments about the book club fiasco were “inappropriate.”¹¹ How was he to know that anyone would pay attention to anything he had to say, seems to be the story that he insists on sticking to. He had at that point, after all, only published two novels and several pieces of non-fiction in major magazines like *Harper’s* and the *New Yorker*. Weinstein further observes that “a compelling class/race narrative was in place, aligning the players inflexibly, with Franzen on the losing end.”¹² Weinstein’s inclusion of race in the rationale behind why Franzen came out of this episode so poorly is curious. The general reading of the debacle was one of class, of Franzen perhaps exhibiting an element of cultural snobbery.

⁷ Katha Pollitt, “Franzenfreude, Continued,” *The Nation*, September 15, 2010. <http://www.thenation.com/article/franzenfreude-continued/>

⁸ Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015), 207.

⁹ Philip Weinstein, *Jonathan Franzen: The Comedy of Rage* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 178.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 178-79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹² *Ibid.*

Adding race to the mix seems to be a way of heaping yet another affliction upon the poor, misunderstood, white male author. Regardless of who was in the right it seems, as the white male in the narrative, Franzen was always, inevitably, going to lose.

It is of particular interest, then, that Franzen notes later in “Perchance to Dream” that America “is a country to which hardly anything really terrible has ever happened. The only genuine tragedies to befall us were slavery and the Civil War, and it’s probably no accident that the tradition of Southern literature has been strikingly rich and productive of geniuses.”¹³ Such a comment demonstrates an insularity bordering on ignorance that Franzen would be quick to point out in others, a blindness to his own advantageous position. Consider for a moment what constitutes “really terrible?” In the pre 9/11 era, certainly, there had been no massive, foreign terrorist attack on a major urban centre at that point. There is still, however, the not inconsiderable weight of American history – outside of the two examples he makes token gestures towards – to contend with: the forced removal of Native Americans from their lands; the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s; the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr; the Los Angeles race riots of 1992 just four years prior to the publication of the essay. It could be suggested that Franzen forgot to finish his sentence in order to clarify that “hardly anything really terrible has ever happened” to white men in America. Ian McGuire has noted of the essay that “Franzen indeed confesses at one point to the weakness of his own historical understanding, and the essay demonstrates a very limited knowledge of American literature and culture before about 1970.”¹⁴ This admitted lack of knowledge does not prevent him from stating his case anyway, suggesting a fundamental element of security in the reception of his opinions that belies his repeated assertion that he lacks a coherent audience.

Returning to the theme that he and Wallace discussed earlier in the same essay, Franzen concludes “Perchance to Dream” by suggesting that “if multiculturalism succeeds in making us a nation of independently empowered tribes, each tribe will be deprived of the comfort of victimhood and be forced to confront human limitation for what it is: a fixture of life.”¹⁵ This idea of “independently empowered tribes” creates an equality of experience that is arguably inaccurate in American society. In attempting to identify the middle-class white male as a “tribe” like other groups, Franzen seeks to appropriate a sense

¹³ Franzen, “Perchance to Dream,” 53.

¹⁴ Ian McGuire, *Richard Ford and the Ends of Realism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), xxi.

¹⁵ Franzen, “Perchance to Dream,” 54.

of justified victimhood, craving permission to feel dissatisfied with life. The use of the phrase “comfort of victimhood,” implies a certain amount of perverse pleasure in one’s oppression, that these multiple tribes he and Wallace speak of are, in some way, sustained by the fact of their status as victims. It is something of an irony to consider that it is the very absence of a recognisable tribe that provokes the sense of victimhood articulated by so many in relation to the middle-class white male.

This embracing of victimhood is a notable side-effect of the increasing interest in masculinity studies and the Men’s Rights movement. Privilege is deemed irrelevant in the face of so many voices insisting that there is a crisis of monumental proportions. In an article from the year 2000, wonderfully entitled “American Viagra: The Rise of Masculinity Studies,” Bryce Traister observes that “the crisis theory of heteromascularity circulates in American popular culture with about the same ubiquity that it proliferates in our academic worlds.”¹⁶ With vocal proponents of the crisis theory running the gamut of experience from the reformed former feminist Warren Farrell and, more recently Farrell’s heir apparent Paul Elam, to the ultra-defensive online activism of the #NotAllMen movement, it becomes almost impossible for the crisis narrative to be challenged in any meaningful way. Regardless of how outrageous their claims may be – such as Farrell’s equation of female prostitutes with the “middle-class man [... who] recalls that when his children were born, he gave up his dreams of becoming a novelist and began the nightmare of writing ad copy for a product he didn’t believe in;”¹⁷ or Elam’s insistence that what he does with the sizeable donations made to his website, *A Voice For Men*, are precisely “none of your fucking business”¹⁸ – any engagement with the movement invariably begins with an acceptance of the fundamental tenet of their argument: that the white male is in deep trouble. This is something that Traister takes issue with when he points out that

American masculinity studies has created a disciplinary field in which all genders and sexualities are equally constructed, even if they do not share equal political and social

¹⁶ Bryce Traister, “Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies,” in *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2000). doi:10.1353/aq2000.0025, 285

¹⁷ Warren Farrell, *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex* (London: Fourth Estate, 1994), 164.

¹⁸ Adam Serwer and Katie Baker, “How Men’s Rights Leader Paul Elam Turned Being A Deadbeat Dad Into A Moneymaking Movement,” *Buzzfeed*, February 6, 2015. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/adamserwer/how-mens-rights-leader-paul-elam-turned-being-a-deadbeat-dad#.lqGPL5doan>

power [...] They may all be equally anxious, but they are not historical equals; the new heteromascularity studies potentially blurs this politically vital distinction.¹⁹

This desire to blur distinctions is clearly evident in the quoted exchange between Franzen and Wallace, and even more so in Franzen's suggestion that multiculturalism could succeed in erasing the "comfort of victimhood." Both writers are the inevitable products of a consistent and vociferous reiteration of the masculinity crisis narrative. While it would be inaccurate to put Franzen in the exact same category as sensationalist reactionaries such as Farrell and Elam, the fact remains that they occupy points along the same spectrum, all claiming an injury or injustice has been inflicted upon them by society for no reason other than that they are white men. Franzen may attempt to disguise his rage with irony and sly humour, but the ease with which he employs casually sexist and racist language in his narratives complicates any reading of his work.

The comfort of victimhood is something that permeates throughout the three novels that will be discussed in this chapter, *The Corrections* (2001), *Freedom* (2010), and *Purity* (2015). It is something that the characters of *The Corrections* wear like a cosy old sweater. Franzen sought to imbue the novel with a social commentary that presents to the reader the state of the nation in an increasingly globalised world. At its most basic level, however, he suspected that he had only written "a book that seemed to want to turn on the question of whether an outrageous Midwestern mother will get one last Christmas at home with her family."²⁰ Using the individual members of the Lambert family as prompts, Franzen fills the novel with discussions of everything from the altered state of the nuclear family, gender relations, the nature of work, mass culture and consumerism, mental illness, suburban decay, and urban anonymity, to the increasing encroachment of technology on the private lives of citizens.

At once sprawling and claustrophobic, *The Corrections* is a book with clear ambitions to be the Great American Novel. Franzen struggled with its writing for nearly a decade, a struggle that resulted in the infamous "Perchance to Dream" essay discussed earlier. Several drafts were discarded before he finally decided to focus on the saga of the Lambert family. While it may not be the Great American Novel, it is unquestionably a distinctly American novel, reflecting the concerns that Franzen expressed in his non-fiction writing

¹⁹ Traister, "Academic Viagra," 297.

²⁰ Jonathan Franzen, "On Autobiographical Fiction," in *Farther Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 136.

during the time he was working on it. It is also a novel that deals with many of the issues raised in previous chapters here, with male characters such as Alfred, Gary, and Chip Lambert expressing some of the same concerns regarding expectations and mass culture that Richard Yates touched upon in *Revolutionary Road* and *The Easter Parade*. There is also a similar obsession with the suburbs that both Richard Yates and Richard Ford address although, for Franzen, these are very much the suburbs of a stagnant conformity that infects the rest of the country, as opposed to a site of potential growth or ambition of any kind.

Franzen circles back to these familiar themes in 2010's *Freedom*, which, as with *The Corrections*, was once again instantly lauded as a modern classic upon publication. In returning to the tried and tested trope of the supposedly solid Midwestern family at war in various ways with contemporary society, Franzen inadvertently produced two novels that acted as bookends for the decade of the 2000s in America. Perhaps in an effort to show how far he had come after the debacle of their first interaction, this time round he did not object to the novel's selection for Oprah's Book Club – not in public anyway. In *Freedom*, once again, we see the supposedly stable nuclear family come apart at the seams, incapable of fully assimilating to the demands of modern life without plunging into some deep existential crisis. The Berglunds are a decidedly unsympathetic family, perhaps even more so than the Lamberts, and they scatter across the country in response to various family dramas. This time around, in a departure from the established suburban home of *The Corrections*, *Freedom*'s Berglunds are part of an urban gentrification that only seems to infect previously diverse areas of the city with the rigidity of suburban conformity.

That the issues Franzen raises in *Freedom* are not that dissimilar to the ones he addressed in *The Corrections* – apart from the addition of lengthy lectures on his pet topics of birds and overpopulation – raises an interesting question about the cyclical nature of crisis narratives. The Lamberts exist in a pre-9/11 world, untouched by the terrorist attacks that are directly, if only briefly, referenced in *Freedom*. Susan Faludi suggests that the anxieties and various crisis narratives that have been directly linked to the events of 9/11 are actually borne out of issues that “reside deep in our cultural memory.”²¹ However, as with many chroniclers of American masculinity, Faludi also insists on linking this reawakening of a John Wayne style masculinity to times of national crisis, claiming that this

²¹ Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 13.

is most likely to come to the fore when the nation is imperilled. Franzen's millennial bookends would suggest a different story, however. The idea of a cultural memory certainly abides, with both novels retracing familiar ground despite the events of the intervening years between their publications, but the sense of an imminent threat that would destabilise the nation is not present. There is no great national catastrophe that triggers the familial crisis of *The Corrections*, and the events of 9/11 are so briefly glossed in *Freedom* as to be almost incidental to the main plot of the Berglund family's disintegration. Instead of being linked to a sudden moment of disaster then, the challenges facing the Lamberts and Berglunds are more insidious and invasive, attacking them slowly by stealth. Franzen's narratives would seem to suggest that the greatest crisis is the manner in which ordinary Americans apparently sleepwalk through life, content to be consumers, wholly and blissfully unaware of the larger structural problems with the society they find themselves a part of.

His most recent novel *Purity*, published in September 2015, finds Franzen attempting to tread different ground from the family-centric terrain of his two previous books. All the family units in this novel are fractured and dysfunctional. In spite of this, the main themes of the book are heightened versions of what has gone before in *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. Environmentalism, financial crises, mental illness, and brief interludes of text speak all combine to create a book that is desperate to be of its time, and yet still stand apart from it as he critiques society from the position of omniscient narrator. Unlike the other books under discussion in this chapter, however, technology and the pervasive and invasive power of the Internet are front and centre in *Purity* – an acknowledgement of just how rapidly society has adapted to its presence.

This chapter will discuss how *The Corrections* and *Freedom* both critique family life in America, the expectations such a life bestows upon the members of the nuclear family, and how these themes connect with a culture that Franzen sees as both increasingly invasive and superficial. Running through all of these topics is a common theme of how the male characters react to the pressures they find themselves under. Franzen clearly sees merit in the masculinity crisis narrative given the ease with which he employs it in his fiction. An analysis of *Purity* will also serve to augment the readings of the other two novels, allowing for a fuller critique of the development of Franzen's writing, and his take on the curious phenomenon of what it means to be successful in America.

Paula Fox's 1970 novel, *Desperate Characters*, is a text that Jonathan Franzen repeatedly refers to as having had a profound impact on him. An essay he wrote in 1999 declaring the book to be "obviously superior to any novel by Fox's contemporaries like John Updike, Philip Roth, and Saul Bellow" and "inarguably great" was included as an introduction to the reissued edition of the novel when it was republished in 2003.²² Set over the course of a single weekend, it follows the increasingly fraught marriage of Otto and Sophie Bentwood. The Bentwoods are a pair of professional, childless forty-somethings, safely cocooned in the bubble of their own comfortable middle-class life. The seemingly innocuous arrival of a stray cat at their back door sets off a chain of events that leaves them questioning their marriage, their neighbourhood, and the very culture they find themselves to be completely immersed in. By way of contrast to Franzen's own long novels, *Desperate Characters* is a compact, concise book, clocking in at just 156 increasingly tense pages.

The questions Sophie and Otto ask themselves in their tastefully decorated Brooklyn apartment are remarkably similar to the issues raised throughout Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*. A vague feeling that society has begun to disintegrate in the same way that the Bentwoods' marriage is slowly crumbling permeates the whole book. Sophie and Otto are educated, accomplished, sophisticated, and suitably proud – or smug – about it. In much the same way that Frank and April Wheeler desire the admiration of those around them, the Bentwoods and their neighbours long for the "recognition of their superior comprehension of what counted in this world, and their strategy for getting it combined restraint and indirection."²³ At an almost stereotypically awful dinner party, Otto and a female guest share an exchange that is straight out of the Frank Wheeler playbook:

"We are all dying of boredom," the woman was saying. "That is the why of the war, the why of the assassinations, the why of why. Boredom."

"The younger ones are dying of freedom," Otto said in a voice flattened by restraint.²⁴

The Bentwoods are gripped by a paralysis in the face of rapid social changes, and become isolated in their own claustrophobic, slightly dysfunctional relationship as a result. They are united against the violent and messy outside world, but when this world is brought to their

²² Paula Fox, *Desperate Characters* (London: Flamingo, 2003), viii.

²³ Ibid., 12.

²⁴ Ibid., 19.

doorstep, quite literally, by the possibly rabid stray cat that bites Sophie, their superficial stability is fundamentally undermined. Otto has only one friend, his former business partner Charlie Russel, with whom he has just gone through an acrimonious split. Sophie, too, has acquaintances rather than real friends, and was at one point so disillusioned with her marriage that she had an affair with one of Otto's clients. Their superiority complex leaves them incapable of experiencing anything other than desperation with modern life as their universe shrinks to just the two of them. Indeed, the title of the novel itself points to the fact that these are not rounded human beings, but rudderless figures playing at being functional adults.

Charlie Russel gives a voice to the impotent, and inexplicable, rage that seems to afflict him and the Bentwoods to varying degrees. Otto recalls an episode in their office when Charlie was particularly infuriated with American society:

“Do you remember years ago, when people liked to quote Thoreau, that line about the quiet desperation of men's lives? [...] He said that quote was a prime example of middle-class self-love [...] Then he brayed that no oppression had ever been so difficult to resist as middle-class oppression, because it wears a thousand faces, even the face of revolution, and that it is an insatiable gut that can even nourish itself on the poison its enemies leave lying about to destroy it.”²⁵

At the end of Charlie's diatribe, instead of suggesting a solution to the ills of the modern world that he has just expounded upon, he simply “buzzed his secretary and told her to send in his appointment” underlining the inherently contradictory nature of the malaise he thinks he has identified.²⁶ He is at once consumed by an anger that lacks a specific focus, yet he is still entirely capable of functioning in his day-to-day activities, safe in the knowledge that he is not actually at any physical or material risk. The idea of the irresistible nature of the oppression that Charlie Russel speaks of is a precursor to the lack of tribal victimhood that Franzen and Wallace identified as afflicting the middle-class white male of the 1990s. It is attractive for the very reason that it gives a legitimacy to a sense of oppression and unhappiness, without having to experience the real effects of actual discrimination.

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Ibid.

It is not difficult to trace the influence of *Desperate Characters* through Franzen's fiction. The private sphere of a shaky marriage is utilised to look outwards at how this reflects the state of American society. The family unit becomes the mirror in which all else is viewed, particularly in *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. Fox's mention of Thoreau, and the ease with which Charlie's contemporaries appropriated his retreat to Walden as a way of simultaneously displaying their own troubles and erudition, foreshadows the retreats of various Berglunds to the isolated house on Nameless Lake in *Freedom*. The lone house in the woods is seen as the safest location, untainted by the contamination of society at large. Walter in particular seeks an escape from other people, craving isolation and a communion with nature in an effort to ignore the disintegration of his life. It is where Patty goes, initially, to escape the temptation of Walter's friend Richard. This rural retreat is removed from society, from culture, from the oppression of rules and order. It is the ultimate site of freedom.

Walter's first extended trip to the lake house occurs after a disagreement with his parents and older brother. His desire for isolation becomes overwhelming as he notes that, "seventeen years in cramped quarters with his family had given him a thirst for solitude whose unquenchability he was discovering only now."²⁷ When this solitude is disrupted by the sudden arrival of his brother, Mitch, Walter's attitude to the house, to other people, and to nature, is damaged in a way that will never be repaired over the course of the novel:

The din went on and on and on. It produced a fever to which everyone else was apparently immune. A fever of self-pitying isolation. Which, as it raged in Walter that night, scarred him permanently with hatred of the bellowing vox populi, and also, curiously with an aversion to the outdoor world. He'd come openhearted to nature, and nature, in its weakness, which was like his mother's weakness, had let him down [...] so, for the next twenty years, he made himself a city person. The love he felt for the creatures whose habitat he was protecting was founded on projection: on identification with their own wish to be left alone by noisy human beings.²⁸

More than anything, Walter's time at the lake house amplifies his general misanthropy. Franzen creates a family tree for the Berglunds that consists of a long line of people who do not interact well with others. Descended from a grumpy Swedish immigrant, Walter's dislike of the general population is firmly blamed on his genes. Franzen makes an

²⁷ Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), 455.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 457.

interesting point here about the origins of the modern American mind-set. He suggests that the “American experiment [... was] statistically skewed from the outset, because it wasn’t the people with sociable genes who fled the crowded Old World for the new continent; it was the people who didn’t get along well with others.”²⁹ This links back to the broader points made in previous chapters about how what is often termed a crisis of masculinity should actually be viewed in the light of the “American experiment.” It has more to do with a genetic hangover, or cultural memory, than a specifically gender-based conflict. As *Freedom’s* narrator observes, “nothing disturbs the feeling of specialness like the presence of other human beings feeling identically special.”³⁰

Walter is the classic example of how the burden of American exceptionalism can twist citizens almost into parodies of themselves. His belief in his own “specialness,” as Franzen calls it, is what fuels his explosive temper and irrational outbursts. The rest of the world is always to blame for any troubles he encounters because they simply cannot, or will not, measure up to his standards. Rather than viewing Walter as a victim of the American masculinity-as-crisis trope, however, it is more compelling to read him as a character entirely beholden to the pressures of this American dream of exceptionalism. We see a curious parallel here between Walter’s idea of exceptionalism, which is not terribly grand – he just wants to be left alone to congratulate himself on how enlightened and progressive he is – and that of Frank Bascombe in Richard Ford’s series of Bascombe books. Where Frank is happy to live in the ordinary and the mundane, recognises the inescapable logic that not everyone can make it to the top, and is content with his station in life, Walter repeatedly rails against the system he finds himself in. Both men are loners, but deal with it in different ways. Frank celebrates it and is happy to observe society from the side-lines, but Walter becomes increasingly isolationist. Using his own family as a reference point for the other by which he will define himself, he constructs a life with Patty that he is determined to make the exact opposite of his own experience growing up. It is this reaction that both he and Patty have to their families, and their personal histories, that colours how they interact with each other and the rest of the world, not necessarily anything to do with a masculinity crisis or a gender conflict.

In light of this, Patty Berglund’s torturous narrative serves to challenge any notion of a masculinity crisis – in spite of Franzen’s best efforts – as she too is caught up in a

²⁹ Ibid., 444.

³⁰ Ibid.

similar battle with the concept of exceptionalism that Walter and numerous other Franzen characters experience. Coming from a family of over-achievers, Patty sees staying at home and looking after her children as the most rebellious thing that she could do. In comparison with her mother (a career politician), her father (a respected and revered lawyer), and her two sisters (both artistically gifted), following the traditional, conservative route and conforming to the stereotype of the happy homemaker marks Patty out as unique in her own world. She notes, with not a little smugness, that

the autobiographer here acknowledges her profound gratitude to Joyce and Ray for at least one thing, namely, their never encouraging her to be Creative in the Arts, the way they did with her sisters. Joyce and Ray's neglect of Patty, however much it stung when she was younger, seems more and more benign when she considers her sisters, who are now in their early forties and living alone in New York, too eccentric and/ or entitled-feeling to sustain a long-term relationship, while struggling to achieve an artistic success that they were made to believe was their special destiny. It turns out to have been better after all to be considered dumb and dull than brilliant and extraordinary.³¹

Patty's firm belief in her ordinariness becomes a kind of protective shield with which she attempts to hide from the desire to be extraordinary. This belief is itself just another illusory facet of the deceptive American dream that all of Franzen's characters struggle with. Patty may attempt to reject the privilege and upper-class trappings of her own family, but she cannot fully reject the individual family members as they perform the role of her other, the opposite by which she is able to define herself. In the course of writing her therapist-prescribed autobiography, Patty states that "her obvious best shot at defeating her sisters and mother – was to marry the nicest guy in Minnesota, live in a bigger and better and more interesting house than anybody else in her family, pop out the babies, and do everything as a parent that Joyce hadn't."³² By choosing this conservative, traditional lifestyle Patty convinces herself that she is immunising herself against the toxic American dream and sense of entitlement that has infected her parents and siblings.

For all their liberalism, Patty's family (the Emersons) are depicted as utterly dysfunctional, trapped by the expectations their freedom imposes upon them. Freedom, then, becomes a counterproductive force in the novel, something stifling and suffocating that impedes progress and corrupts ambition. The self-loathing and self-pitying

³¹ Ibid., 118.

³² Ibid., 119.

autobiography Patty writes, that makes up a significant portion of the novel, only serves to demonstrate how futile her attempts to strike out on her own are. In seeking to mark herself out as different from the rest of her family, Patty's marriage to Walter becomes just another example of the middle-class privilege she attempts to separate herself from. She still inevitably finds herself craving success and channels her competitive instincts, not in to professional achievements like her parents, but into the creation of the perfect family unit. Philip Weinstein suggests that

Patty's narrative reverses the emphases of liberal narratives centered on the preciousness of selfhood. As such, her narrative may share common ground with the larger "free space" that *Freedom* aims to represent: that social arena on the other side of liberal pieties, the rest of America.³³

The problem with this interpretation is that Patty is not from the "Blakeworld" that Weinstein suggests.³⁴ Her rejection of her family's privilege does not render her, automatically, unprivileged, nor does it render her self-less. Patty deliberately subsumes herself in the team, be it an actual athletic team during her school and college years, or the team of her husband and children, but this should not be mistaken for some kind of subconscious absence of self. In fact, Patty's attempt to strike out on her own points to the difficulties in attaining the Emersonian ideal of the individual who can maintain their own identity while surrounded by a crowd. Patty's identity is the crowd. She craves approval and recognition. But the American imperative to be independent and exceptional sees her repeatedly trying to live up to an ideal that her personality does not suit.

Franzen's tendency to write relationships that are dysfunctionally co-dependent is evident throughout the three novels for discussion here. The marriage of Alfred and Enid Lambert in *The Corrections* is the pivot around which everything else turns, the elemental starting block upon which all else in the novel is built. Given this deliberately shaky foundation then, it is no surprise that the various members of the Lambert family are all troubled in some way. Having married mainly out of convenience, as opposed to feeling even a semblance of affection for each other, Enid and Alfred embark on a married life together that resembles psychological warfare more than a stable relationship. Where Enid is desperate to fit in with her neighbours and tick off the boxes on the list of things expected of a woman her age, Alfred silently fumes at the presence of other people in the

³³ Weinstein, *The Comedy of Rage*, 153.

³⁴ Ibid.

world. Where Enid is emotional and irrational, and often verbally and physically expresses her desires, Alfred represses his feelings with such ferocity that life in the Lambert house becomes suffocating in direct proportion to the intensity of his suppressed rage.

As with Walter Berglund, Alfred reserves his judgement for the rest of the world and its complete inability to operate in a way that does not offend him:

By night he lay awake on mattresses that felt made of cardboard and catalogued the faults of humanity [...] he blamed all of humanity for its insensitivity, and it was so unfair. It was unfair that the world could be so inconsiderate to a man who was so considerate to the world. No man worked harder than he, no man made a quieter motel neighbor, no man was more of a man, and yet the phonies of the world were allowed to rob him of sleep with their lewd transactions.³⁵

Alfred's exasperated belief that "no man was more of a man" is illuminated further by his invocation of Schopenhauer throughout the middle section of *The Corrections*:

Every time his wife's footsteps approached the lab he braced himself to accept her comforts. Then he heard the game ending, and he thought *surely* she would take pity on him now. It was the one thing he asked of her, the one thing –

(Schopenhauer: *Woman pays the debt of life not by what she does, but by what she suffers; by the pains of childbearing and care for the child, and by submission to her husband, to whom she should be a patient and cheering companion.*)

But no rescue was forthcoming.³⁶

Alfred blames his own deliberate denial of his urges on Enid's failure to be a proper wife or woman, abdicating any personal responsibility for his own unhappiness. Enid is just as intractable as Alfred, but at least seems to have some basic understanding of how her husband thinks, observing that "a decade-plus of marriage had turned him into one of the overly civilized predators you hear about in zoos [...] To exert attraction, Enid had to be a still, unbloody carcass."³⁷

Enid is just as guilty as Alfred of altering the reality of their narrative together to suit her own ends. There are tiny chinks of clarity throughout her illusory, self-serving interpretations of their relationship, but these stories mainly exist to help her cope with the

³⁵ Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 283.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 306.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 278.

unhappiness of her situation without having to acknowledge her own part in the dysfunction of their relationship:

It wasn't a wonderful life, but a woman could subsist on self-deceptions like these and on her memories (which also now curiously seemed like self-deceptions) of the early years when he'd been mad for her and had looked into her eyes. The important thing was to keep it all tacit. If the act was never spoken of, there would be no reason to discontinue it until she was definitely pregnant again, and even after pregnancy no reason not to resume it, as long as it was never mentioned.³⁸

There is irrationality on the part of both Alfred and Enid when it comes to the dynamics of their marriage and the place that sex has within it. Yet it is only Enid who is shown to be actively, and often knowingly, deceiving both herself and Alfred. These deceptions then spread out to infect the rest of her family, as she is always careful to phrase things in a way that is not an outright lie, but still conveniently manages to fudge the truth of the situation. For instance, when Chip loses his job as a university lecturer he takes up a poorly-paid position as a proof-reader at a Manhattan law firm. Enid tells all her friends that Chip is “doing law [...] I say he works at a law firm. That's all I say. A New York City law firm. And it's the truth. He does work there.”³⁹ Enid tries to create an image of her family that will fit in with what she sees her neighbours and friends back in St. Jude achieving. Denise's exasperated plea to her mother to “just say things that are true” is something that can be repeatedly addressed to Enid throughout the whole novel.⁴⁰ Alfred, on the other hand, could be begged to simply say anything at all. He is the silent, stoic patriarch who finds himself “increasingly bothered by my affliction.”⁴¹ His battle with Parkinson's disease creates irreparable cracks in his carefully constructed persona, leading to a destabilisation of the family structure in tandem with his own deteriorating mental state.

In Franzen's most recent novel, *Purity*, an unstable, unhealthy, rotten marriage is again at the centre of the plot. While Tom Aberant and Anabel Laird are not technically the main characters of the novel, their intensely insular relationship is the starting point for much of the narrative's arc and the incubator out of which the novel's main character, Pip, is literally born. Tom and Anabel are written as each other's opposite, something which

³⁸ Ibid., 279.

³⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 115.

allows them to fill the spaces in each other until this inevitably becomes too suffocating and pressurised. Tom is the practical, reasonable partner, powerless in the face of Anabel's artistic nature and inexplicable whims. She is the dominant partner who demands he conform to her way of thinking, the destabilising force in his life who isolates him from his family and friends, and eventually even from herself as she makes a Thoreauvian retreat to a cabin in the woods.

Supposedly a sympathetic character, Tom is meant to be the definition of an ideal liberal, but he still finds himself thinking things like "I felt as if I was up against a structural unfairness; as if simply being male, excitable by pictures through no choice of my own, placed me ineluctably in the wrong. I meant no harm and yet I harmed."⁴² Later in the novel, Tom's partner, Leila, describes him as

a strange hybrid feminist, behaviorally beyond reproach but conceptually hostile. "I get feminism as an equal-rights issue," he'd said to her once. "What I don't get is the theory. Whether women are supposed to be exactly the same as men, or different and better than men." And he'd laughed the way he did at things he found silly, and Leila remained angrily silent, because she was a hybrid the other way around: conceptually a feminist but *one of those women* whose primary relationships had always been with men and who had benefitted professionally, all her life, from her intimacy with them. She'd felt attacked by Tom's laughter, and the two of them had been careful never to discuss feminism again.⁴³

The portrayal of Tom and Anabel is another point to plot on the increasingly dysfunctional relationships that Franzen writes of in his novels, and presents a particular challenge in terms of how to interpret it. Philip Weinstein suggests that the relationship between Tom and Anabel is a thinly disguised account of Franzen's own disastrous marriage, and the choice to have the narrative told from the first-person perspective of Tom deliberately privileges his side of the story. But Weinstein also states that the narrative "captures Anabel's kookiness."⁴⁴ To label a character who is written with the very clear implication of some kind of undiagnosed personality disorder as "kooky" instantly diminishes the reasons for her behaviour. The more reasonable Tom tries to make himself appear, the more extreme and unstable Anabel becomes for the reader. His narrative is extremely self-serving in this regard, littered with plaintive declarations that he "was gripped by my old

⁴² Franzen, *Purity*, 346.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 228-229.

⁴⁴ Weinstein, *The Comedy of Rage*, 222.

sense of ineluctable male wrongness.”⁴⁵ Throughout his account of their marriage, Tom describes how he was the one to make adjustments, the one who sacrificed himself to the caprices of his wife, and allowed his identity as a man to be controlled – and nearly destroyed – by a woman:

Let it not be thought that I didn’t know what I was getting into with Anabel, or that I made no effort to escape it. Three days a lunar month we were a pair of junkies who’d scored the cleanest shit ever, but on the other twenty-five I had to contend with her moods, her scenes, her sensitivities, her judgments, her so easily hurt feelings. We seldom actually fought or argued; it was more a matter of processing, endlessly, what I or someone else had done to make her feel bad. My entire personality reorganized itself in defense of her tranquillity and defense of myself from her reproach. It’s possible to describe this as an emasculation of me, but it was really more like a dissolution of the boundaries of our selves.⁴⁶

In trying to present Tom as endlessly patient and receptive to his partner’s wishes, Franzen only reinforces the idea of the dominant, destructive female force that appears so often in his fiction. In showing himself as always acquiescing to Anabel’s whims, Tom seeks to claim ownership of all sympathy in the narrative. As Weinstein observes,

to write the relationship this way is also, achingly, a non-innocent move. A third-personal narrative of Tom-and-Anabel might perhaps grasp – from a perspective beyond either of theirs – the tragicomedy of a relationship it must have taken them both to destroy. But a first-personal narrative, however movingly sympathetic to the other person, finally stacks the cards in favor of the narrator (Tom).⁴⁷

The example Weinstein uses to illustrate this point is questionable, however. Anabel asks Tom to sit down when using the toilet, something that Tom knows “couldn’t be right” but which he agrees to in order to stop her hysterical crying.⁴⁸ Tom’s agreement to Anabel’s demand, what Weinstein calls his “act of forfeiting his ‘rightness’ in order not to wound his wife” allows him to assert his superiority in a perverse way.⁴⁹ By succumbing to Anabel he can claim the comfort of victimhood. It is this righteousness that Tom uses to justify the fact that while he might urinate sitting down when Anabel can hear him, “when she

⁴⁵ Franzen, *Purity*, 374.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 379.

⁴⁷ Weinstein, *The Comedy of Rage*, 221-222.

⁴⁸ Franzen, *Purity*, 379.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

couldn't, though, I peed in her sink. The part of me that did this was the part that ultimately ruined us and saved me."⁵⁰ It is this sort of conflict, between characters and within relationships, that Franzen repeatedly exploits to drive his plots. Regardless of the bigger issues he chooses to include as the supposed grand themes of his novels they all, at a basic level, can be reduced to this starting point of a male/female dichotomy that he resorts to with alarming ease.

For all of his attempts to appear progressive, Franzen almost invariably resorts to the traditional male/female binary to create conflict in all of his novels. Woman is always, inevitably, the opposite. This repeated tendency to create others dominates in both *Freedom* and *The Corrections*. Characters are constantly comparing themselves to other family members, friends, colleagues, and even complete strangers, in an effort to reinforce their own sense of individuality. The Lambert brothers, Chip and Gary, are prime examples of this and Franzen, once again, establishes female characters as their antagonists.

Chip is the troubled middle child of Enid and Alfred. An unemployed professor who was dismissed from his job in disgrace, Chip is the embodiment of cultural theory and criticism in *The Corrections*. His primary purpose is to interrogate American culture. This purpose operates on two levels: at a character level, it is his actual job; and on a narrative level, the choices he makes allow Franzen to venture into territory that questions the state of contemporary society. Chip manages, somehow, over the course of the novel to maintain a sense of his own superiority in relation to those around him. He takes a certain pride in having been “the only male professor in D—history to have taught Theory of Feminism.”⁵¹ However, the inference that he is some sort of equality champion is immediately undermined by the equation of his predicament, as he is unceremoniously fired, with that of the discrimination some women experience:

he understood how important it was for women not to equate “success” with “having a man” and “failure” with “lacking a man,” but he was a lonely straight male, and a lonely straight male had no equivalently forgiving Theory of Masculinism to help him out of this bind, this key to all misogynies:

To feel as if he couldn't survive without a woman made a man feel weak;

⁵⁰ Ibid., 380.

⁵¹ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 5.

And yet, without a woman in his life, a man lost the sense of agency and difference that, for better or worse, was the foundation of his manhood.⁵²

The foundational difference that Chip identifies as essential for his manhood is the presence of a woman in his life, suggesting that Franzen quite clearly buys into the historical narrative of gender division that has dominated discussions of American identity. Franzen explicitly links Chip's masculinity, and that of straight white males everywhere, with women, thereby reinforcing the gender binary, and allowing him to lament the belief that his existence as a straight white male denies him any valid sense of persecution. Although Chip claims to have no "Theory of Masculinism" to help him deal with his emotional crisis, Franzen clearly employs the equalising tactics of masculinity studies as described by Bryce Traister earlier in this chapter. Chip is so very in tune with theories of feminism, and says all the things expected of an intellectual, yet his actions betray the veracity of his appearance, exposing the fragility of the supposedly perfect liberal identity he has constructed for himself. He is, in many ways, a reversed version of *Purity's* Tom Aberant, being as he is so capable of talking the equality talk without actually meaning it with any real sincerity.

In a series of flashbacks, the circumstances surrounding Chip's dismissal from his academic post are revealed. His complete faith in the learned theories of culture, identity, and politics, and how he applies them to his life in general, are entirely exposed by his wildly inappropriate relationship with a female student. Something of a cliché, Melissa Paquette is a supremely confident, sexually attractive young woman who is the catalyst for the disintegration of Chip's life. She is the stereotypical destructive female force. The best student by some distance in his Consuming Narratives class, the back and forth between Chip and Melissa sets up a debate about the fundamental nature of critical theory, its inherent class issues, and what this means in the context of contemporary American culture. This conflict is sparked by Melissa's classroom rant:

"It's one critic after another wringing their hands about the state of criticism. Nobody can ever quite say what's wrong exactly. But they all know it's evil. They all know 'corporate' is a dirty word. And if somebody's having fun or getting rich – disgusting! Evil! And it's always the death of this and the death of that. And people who think they're free aren't 'really' free. And people who think they're happy aren't 'really' happy. And it's impossible to radically critique society anymore, although what's so radically wrong with society that

⁵² Ibid., 52.

we need such a radical critique, nobody can say exactly. It is so typical and perfect that you hate those ads!”⁵³

For all of his apparent self-awareness, it takes this outburst from a student to destabilise Chip’s intensely studied critique of contemporary American society and mass consumerism. Melissa continues on to dismantle not only Chip’s lesson plan, but the very basis his career is built on, as she points out that

“Here things are getting better and better for women and people of color, and gay men and lesbians, more and more integrated and open, and all you can think about is some stupid, lame problem with signifiers and signifieds. Like, the only way you can make something bad out of an ad that’s great for women – which you have to do, because there has to be something wrong with everything – is to say it’s evil to be rich and to work for a corporation.”⁵⁴

Chip’s sudden loss of confidence in his theoretical frameworks is articulated in a distinctly gendered fashion. It is one that highlights his apparent isolation as a straight white male in a culture dominated by increasingly fragmented and marginal identity groups, echoing the themes Franzen and Wallace raised with each other in their correspondence quoted in “Perchance to Dream.” The heightened self-awareness that Chip has always been so proud of is so concentrated on his own self that he lacks any understanding of how other people interact with modern culture. This inevitably leads him to question the foundations of his entire belief system, as he observes that

Criticizing a sick culture, even if the criticism accomplished nothing, had always felt like useful work. But if the supposed sickness wasn’t a sickness at all – if the great Materialist Order of technology and consumer appetite and medical science really was improving the lives of the formerly oppressed; if it was only straight white males like Chip who had a problem with this order – then there was no longer even the most abstract utility to his criticism. It was all, in Melissa’s word, bullshit.⁵⁵

However, even in the midst of his theoretical crisis (both the crisis of his theory, and the theory of his crisis), Chip still betrays an element of the privilege that Melissa criticises him for. His use of the words “formerly oppressed” to describe all those who are not straight white males is evocative of the equalising tendencies of masculinist theory, and performs

⁵³ Ibid., 50-51.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

an act of erasure that suggests the playing field has been levelled for everyone, which is simply not the case. Where Melissa points out that things are “getting better” for minorities, Chip interprets it differently. That he leans towards a belief that only straight white males have a problem with contemporary society implies that he also tends to think that sexism, racism, disadvantage, and discrimination of all kinds have been reduced to such a point that everyone now gets to compete on the same level. Chip’s intense belief in his own entitlement echoes the narcissistic personality traits outlined by Christopher Lasch in previous chapters as a part of mid-century American culture, indicating that perhaps it is something more persistent and engrained than has been thought.

Franzen presents Chip as being at the mercy of forces outside of his own control. Cursed with appalling decision-making skills, he nonetheless manages to find convenient catalysts to explain all of his poor choices. His decision to pursue Melissa, after months of rejecting her advances, comes once a female academic is awarded the tenure that he believed he had been all but guaranteed. The sudden catastrophic illness that strikes down his faculty mentor negates any sense of consequence that Chip might have previously entertained. He runs off to Lithuania in one of the novel’s more bizarre interludes as a result of his unceremonious dumping by his girlfriend. At no stage does Chip make a bad decision that he cannot explain away as having originally been someone else’s fault.

He is also remarkably adept at playing the victim, almost revelling in the “comfort of victimhood” that Franzen wrote of in “Perchance to Dream.” Chip bitterly observes that the faculty and students at his college had enthusiastically organised in support of a professor dismissed for falsifying a degree but, as he was “neither a lesbian nor a Filipina,” the best he could hope to get from his colleagues was an “a capella version of ‘Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien.’”⁵⁶ Franzen establishes a fairly predictable pattern early on for Chip that sees his antagonists as primarily female, and him as the put-upon, misunderstood white male. For all of his critique of the toxic nature of American culture, Chip is just as beholden to the idea of exceptionalism and unique individuality that everyone else is. His ability to identify it in texts, media, culture, and other people leaves him particularly blind to how he is also caught up in it.

This could be a deliberate tactic on Franzen’s part, but his non-fiction writings suggest that there could also be an element of over-identification at play; that as the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 96.

straight white male neither Chip nor Franzen ever stand a chance of being seen in a sympathetic manner. Franzen's treatment of gender on the whole is disconcerting at best, and incredibly naïve at times. In a passage from one of his essay collections, *The Discomfort Zone*, he recalls one of his first encounters with feminism and women's support groups, saying that

being a woman seemed to me the happening thing, compared to being a man. From the popularity of the weekly support groups, I gathered that women truly had been oppressed and that we men therefore ought to defer to them, and be nurturing and supportive, and cater to their wishes. It was especially important, if you were a man, to look deep into your heart and make sure you weren't objectifying a woman you loved. If even a tiny part of you was exploiting her for sex, or putting her on a pedestal and worshipping her, this was very bad.⁵⁷

There are traces of this complicated attitude to women and feminism running through all of Franzen's writing, from Chip Lambert to Walter Berglund to Tom Aberant. Franzen may declare he is not sexist but it comes across as a reflexive, defensive attempt to push back against the criticism he receives for writing such problematic characters.⁵⁸

Chip believes that his engagement with feminist theory in an academic environment should allow him to bask in the glow of being a straight white male who is conscious of women's issues. The extra credit he imagines this to earn him should award him an easy path to tenure. However, it ignores his utterly miserable attitude to actual women with whom he must interact in real life and not in a hypothetical intellectual sense. Even worse, the much vaunted feather in his cap of being the only male professor to teach the Theory of Feminism at his institution does not appear to have taught him anything. Almost every woman he interacts with, apart from his mother and sister, is instantly sexualised. Indeed to Chip, Enid is "so much a personality and so little anything else that even staring straight at her he had no idea what she really looked like."⁵⁹ His mother may escape the objectification other women are subjected to, but it is only at the expense of placing her at the opposite end of the spectrum, to the point that she becomes impossible to see. It is difficult to decide which option is worse, especially considering that his

⁵⁷ Jonathan Franzen, *The Discomfort Zone* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 126.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Franzen, "Jonathan Franzen Interview: 'There Is No Way to Make Myself Not Male,'" by Emma Brockes, *The Guardian*, August 21, 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/aug/21/jonathan-franzen-purity-interview>

⁵⁹ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 21.

interminably unfinished screenplay seems to blur into an endless parade of disembodied breasts. This does at least cause him some distress when he realises it, but only for the self-serving reason that two women will have to read it and they might not approve of it.

What is so interesting about Chip's farcical downfall – and it is farce – is that it could so easily have been a satire on so many things, with the potential to be hilarious at times. Franzen sets up the stereotypical anxious middle-class male, trying desperately to be cooler than his age allows, smarter than society expects, who experiences a truly calamitous fall from grace. However, Franzen is so completely serious in how he views the novel, and the characters in it, that it is almost impossible not to read it as a genuine and sincere rendering of the plight of the straight white male. Franzen believed that his

task, with Chip Lambert, was to find some way to include shame in the narrative without being overcome by it: some way to isolate and quarantine shame as an object, ideally as an object of comedy, rather than letting it permeate and poison every sentence. From here it was a short step to imagining that Chip Lambert, while having his dalliance with his student, takes an illegal drug whose primary effect is to eliminate shame. Once I had that idea, and could finally begin to laugh at shame, I wrote the rest of the Chip section in a few weeks and the rest of the novel in a year.⁶⁰

However, what Franzen seems so intent on classifying as Chip's "shame" is actually just a more extreme version of the entitlement that Chip demonstrates up until that point. Instead of eliminating shame, the magic drug only succeeds in masking it, while simultaneously increasing Chip's arrogance and heightening his sexual aggression. The actions he commits while under the influence of this "Mexican A" are what ultimately lead to his dismissal from his job. It is also no coincidence that Melissa is the person who suggests, buys, and dispenses the drug, thereby reinforcing her status as the rampaging, destructive female force, and limiting any of Chip's own responsibility. He becomes such an extreme version of himself, able to act on all his basest desires, that the consequences of his actions no longer hold any significance for him. It is crucial to note that Chip only embarked on his "dalliance" with Melissa when it became clear to him that he would not be awarded tenure, and before the shame-eliminating drug was ever suggested. His behaviour throughout this passage, and the choices he makes, are not as a result of the loss of his shame. Under the influence of the drug, the consequences of his actions no longer

⁶⁰ Franzen, "On Autobiographical Fiction," in *Farther Away*, 138.

hold any significance for him. However, it was not shame that had held him back up to this point, but rather the acknowledgement that there would be serious repercussions if he acted upon his desires. Self-interest is his primary motivation at all times, borne out of a deeply engrained desire to feel exceptional.

Again we come back to the possibility of Franzen's own over-identification with his characters. In speaking about having to remove the concept of shame from the character, he also speaks of his awareness of his own shame. Indeed, it can be argued that Chip's shame, however valid it may be, has nothing to do with the narrative at all and it was, in fact, Franzen's own internal embarrassment that had to be surmounted before he could write such an outrageous section as Chip and Melissa's motel tryst. As Philip Weinstein notes of Chip's creation:

Close to Franzen in his own younger years – his frantic attempt to score sexually and literarily, his stubbornly held visions of self-importance – the specter of Chip mortified his creator, induced a paralyzing shame [...] Shame emerges as a state of mind and feeling capable of shutting Franzen down. His materials come too close to his real-life distress to be literarily negotiable.⁶¹

Weinstein further argues that it was only when Franzen came to view Chip's narrative as something humorous and comedic, that he was freed from the shame and self-consciousness that prevented him from making any progress with it:

Franzen's writerly project continued to stall so long as he took Chip's troubles humorlessly. Chip and Franzen share an irreducible sense of shame that can become generative only when reseen as farce. Once Franzen grasped that Chip's torment is hilarious – and it took a precious act of distancing to recognize this – the chapter all but magically wrote itself.⁶²

While this is a compelling argument, it does not explain the persistently questionable gender politics that pervades both *The Corrections* and much of Franzen's other writing.

Throughout *The Corrections*, male characters such as Chip and his older brother Gary behave in ways that are textbook examples of the "beset manhood" that Tania Modleski describes as follows:

⁶¹ Weinstein, *The Comedy of Rage*, 113-114.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 115.

much American thought still falls squarely within the genre of what Nina Baym calls “melodramas of beset manhood.” What is of course besetting manhood today is feminism, which the melancholy male “hero” responds to by appropriating so that he can make its losses (for which he is thus partly responsible) his losses.⁶³

In a classic example of what Modleski calls “appropriating,” Chip – and possibly, by extension, Franzen – believes that his knowledge of feminist theory should afford him a protective shield from his own destructive behaviour. At the very least, it should allow him to feel sorry for himself without have to acknowledge, or apologise for, his privileged position.

Like his younger brother, Gary Lambert is beset on all fronts by women. His marriage to his wife Caroline is more power struggle than partnership, and his relationship with his mother is also far from ideal. The strained relations between the two women leaves him caught in the middle, something that is crystallised in his commitment to cooking regular mixed-grill dinners for his family:

Enid had observed that, for a bank vice president married to a woman who only worked part-time, pro bono, for the Children’s Defense Fund, Gary seemed to do an awful lot of cooking. Gary had shut his mother up easily enough; she was married to a man who couldn’t boil an egg, and obviously she was jealous. But on Gary’s birthday [...] Caroline handed him a platter of raw prawns and brutal swordfish to grill, and he wondered if his mother had a point.⁶⁴

Gary is the quintessential middle-class, straight white male, almost to the point of cliché. It is interesting to note that although he repeatedly sets up the women in his life as antagonistic forces or his “others,” he is still obsessed with Enid’s poorly disguised dislike of his and Caroline’s lifestyle. By placing himself in opposition to his own parents, and specifically to his mother, the need to gain her approval only grows greater. He finds himself hoping that “his parents would stay for an entire week in October. He’d wanted them to [...] generally see how good Gary’s life was, how worthy of their admiration and respect.”⁶⁵ As his equilibrium diminishes, however, so too does his attitude to Enid’s opinion: “He wanted to say to her: Of your three children, my life looks by far the most

⁶³ Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age*, (New York; London: Routledge, 1991), 10.

⁶⁴ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 189.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

like yours! I have what you taught me to want! And now that I have it, you disapprove of it!”⁶⁶

Having spent a lifetime pursuing the goals that his mother instilled in him, Gary begins to see himself as a mirror image of Enid, trapped in a dysfunctional marriage with a spouse who has no respect for him. There is a stark contrast between the power that Gary wields in the public sphere compared to the isolation and general impotence that he experiences in the privacy of his own home. In effect, he is unmanned by the domestic space, and almost feminised by the lack of influence that he has. The house is undeniably Caroline’s territory, even if Gary does most of the cooking. His professional success engenders a sense of exceptionalism that he finds himself unable to indulge in his personal life. Gary’s response to this bi-frontal assault from the women in his life is a reflection of masculinity theory’s propensity for revelling in “crisis.”

Where Chip affects the persona of the cynical, world-weary intellectual, Gary is utterly committed to his solidly middle-class lifestyle. He is the epitome of everything straight, white, and male. The whole world is essentially his enemy, thwarting any efforts he makes to bask in the comfort provided by his very good job, in his very big house, all while protected by the safety net of his wife’s own personal wealth. As is seen repeatedly throughout Franzen’s writing, Gary identifies the absence of an easily identifiable oppressor as one of the reasons for his unhappiness. A recurring motif for Franzen is the idea that not everyone can be exceptional, something Gary melodramatically ruminates on when he says

Oh, misanthropy and sourness. Gary wanted to enjoy being a man of wealth and leisure, but the country was making it none too easy. All around him, millions of newly minted American millionaires were engaged in the identical pursuit of feeling extraordinary [...] There were further tens of millions of young Americans who didn’t have money but were nonetheless chasing the Perfect Cool. And meanwhile the sad truth was that not everyone could be extremely cool; because whom would this leave to be ordinary? Who would perform the thankless work of being comparatively *uncool*?⁶⁷

Even the idea of cool becomes debatable. Both brothers are obsessed with their status, but equate what they see as success with very different things. This is clearly a theme that

⁶⁶ Ibid., 252.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 226.

Franzen riffs on repeatedly, with each novel becoming more explicit and damning in its judgment of the idea of being special or exceptional. *Purity*, for instance, contains the following exchange between Andreas Wolf, and the notional heroine Pip:

“Is it so bad to be special?”

“Have you seen any kids’ movies lately?”

“I sat through *Frozen* with a woman I was seeing.”

“They’re all about being the special one, the chosen one. ‘Only you can save the world from Evil.’ That kind of thing. And never mind that specialness stops meaning anything when every kid is special. I remember watching those movies and thinking about all the unspecial characters in the chorus or whatever. The people just doing the hard work of belonging to society. They’re the ones my heart really goes out to. The movie should be about *them*.”⁶⁸

That these words are given to a female character is important to note, accidentally acknowledging that the desire to be special is inculcated in the young people of America from an early age, regardless of their gender.

In Gary’s desire to show off to his parents everything that he has acquired, we again find ourselves reminded of those toxic elements of the narcissistic personality that Christopher Lasch suggested were so prominent in the American psyche. In direct contrast with his brother, Gary does not indulge in a negative critique of his growing wealth, or regret succumbing to his consumerist inclinations. He likes to have nice things and is unapologetic about it, as evinced by the mental list he keeps of his favourite things that Caroline has ever said to him, including “you don’t have to apologise for buying the BMW [...] Let’s buy both! [...] Denise is jealous of what you have.”⁶⁹ The upshot of this is that Gary is bothered by a sensation that Lasch described as “acquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits, he does not accumulate goods and provisions against the future [...] but demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Franzen, *Purity*, 269.

⁶⁹ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 211.

⁷⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus Press, 1980), 23.

Franzen consistently sets up these beset men, battling against their wives (Alfred and Gary Lambert in *The Corrections*, Walter Berglund in *Freedom*, Tom Aberant in *Purity*), their daughters (Alfred, Tom), or an endless stream of apparently unstable women (Chip Lambert, or Joey Berglund and Richard Katz in *Freedom*, Andreas Wolf in *Purity*). While the novels may deal with the pressures of contemporary American culture on supposedly ordinary people, Franzen cannot help but reduce the conflict to the stereotypical male-versus-female struggle. The relationships in all three novels are battlegrounds, with blurred lines and ineffective communication plaguing them all. These relationships-as-conflict seep out into the wider narrative, infecting the physical space and location the characters live in.

Franzen made the following observation about the town where he grew up:

As an adult, when I say the words “Webster Groves” to people I’ve just met, I’m often informed that I grew up in a suffocatingly wealthy, insular, conformist town with a punitive social hierarchy. The twenty-odd people who have told me this over the years have collectively spent, by my estimate, about twenty minutes in Webster Groves, but each of them went to college in the seventies and eighties, and a fixture of sociology curricula in that era was a 1966 documentary called *16 in Webster Groves* [...] I’ve tried to explain that the Webster Groves depicted in it bears minimal resemblance to the friendly, unpretentious town I knew when I was growing up. But it’s useless to contradict TV; people look at me with suspicion, or hostility, or pity, as if I’m deeply in denial.⁷¹

What makes this passage so remarkable is the consistent manner in which Franzen depicts suburban life in his novels. It is every bit as suffocating and insular and conservative as he takes exception to Webster Groves being classed as. This blatant acknowledgment of the existence of the negative stereotype of the typical American suburb makes his perpetuation of it in his writing all the more curious. In an interview, Franzen answered the question of how to identify the “serious novel” with the following definition: “Read the first five pages. Count clichés. If you find one, the buzzer goes off: it’s not a serious novel. A serious novelist notices clichés and eliminates them.”⁷² It is highly questionable, then, that he would consistently resort to one of the most over-used clichés in American fiction in the form of the suffocating suburb. It is not something that he only makes use of in his fiction. In “Perchance to Dream” he likens writing and reading serious novels to “a grand old Middle American city gutted and drained [...] ringed] by prosperous clonal suburbs of

⁷¹ Franzen, *The Discomfort Zone*, 60.

⁷² Weinstein, *The Comedy of Rage*, 159.

mass entertainments: techno and legal thrillers, novels of sex and vampires, of murder and mysticism.”⁷³ The suburbs, according to Franzen, is where taste goes to die.

Keith Wilhite suggests that there is a “preoccupation with an image of the suburb as reified artifact [*sic*] of Cold War cultural critique. Our theoretical frameworks have shifted with the times, but our readings remain beholden to traditional notions of suburban banality, neuroses, and disillusionment.”⁷⁴ Considering the stereotypical treatment of the suburbs in popular culture as sites of stifling conformity and boredom, it is easy to see how this perception has persisted for so long. It makes for a peculiarly fertile location to examine the contradictions of conventionality. Of equal note, however, is the tendency of decidedly middle-class writers and critics to present the suburbs in such a negative fashion, reinforcing the false perception of class blindness in American culture. As Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen note,

Cultural critics, like wealthy homeowners, did not fully understand the class concerns reflected in debates over suburbia [...] critics noted the phenomenon, but failed to grasp it from the perspective of those who lived it. The voices of these pioneers were conspicuously absent from the critiques. Even when they spoke for the suburbanite, as Friedan did, they spoke for the privileged, not the masses.⁷⁵

Franzen’s idea of suburbia fits into this model of unapologetic harangue. It is important to note, however, that the suburbs that are generally presented to us in the literature of the disaffected middle-class are usually populated with characters who would not ordinarily live there. Clearly visualising the rows and rows of identical houses, across vast tracts of land, breeding unquestioning conservatism and conformity in a suffocating Levitt-town-style development, Franzen then constructs a community of affluent citizens in larger than normal houses. This brings us back to Baxandall and Ewen’s study where they quote a resident of one of these stereotypical “middle class” suburbs who observes that, “one thousand one hundred square foot tract houses on streets meeting at right angles are not middle class at all. Middle class houses are the homes of people who would not live here.”⁷⁶

⁷³ Franzen, “Perchance to Dream,” 29.

⁷⁴ Keith Wilhite, “Contested Terrain: The Suburbs as Region,” *American Literature* 84, no. 3 (September 2012) doi:10.1215/00029831-1664737, 617.

⁷⁵ Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 165-166.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

This is particularly true of the manner in which Franzen chooses to present the typical Midwestern suburb – as he sees it – of St. Jude in *The Corrections*. Even the decision to name the ground zero of the novel’s action “St. Jude,” a reference to the patron saint of lost causes, is an instant indication to the reader as to how the author views life in the suburbs, which subsequently and unavoidably colours the reader’s interpretation of everything that happens in the Lambert family’s home place. However, as James Annesley observes, Franzen’s vision of the suburbs only “offers readers a stagnant vision, a feedback loop of exile and displacement, a discourse that insists again and again that its author has moved out and moved on, having staked his cosmopolitan aspirations on the ruins of his suburban past.”⁷⁷ Nothing happens in this place apart from a creeping inertia and conflict. Children turn into their parents, in spite of their best efforts, and parents lose their grip on reality as Alfred Lambert’s rapid physical and mental decline illustrates.

Stephen Burn asserts that “Franzen’s own comments about his work are often misleading” and “likely to distort a reader’s understanding” of *The Corrections*.⁷⁸ This is arguably not the case when it comes to the representation of the suburbs in the novel, nor as has been discussed previously in relation to much else that happens in the book. Franzen is clearly wedded to the narrative of the stultifying suburb and makes no apologies for it. St. Jude is not a place for progression, seemingly stuck in a time warp from which there is virtually no escape. At no point in the novel do any of the Lamberts have genuinely positive experiences there. Gary, Chip, and Denise all cannot wait to leave the place and show genuine reluctance to return, even for the shortest of visits. Alfred and Enid’s marriage and life there is a seemingly endless round of keeping up with the neighbours. There is nothing authentic about their existence. Alfred barely manages to keep a lid on his rage with the world in general, while Enid consistently deludes herself about every aspect of their life in an effort to maintain the appearance of a stable, contented housewife. As Wilhite expands, “for Franzen, suburbia will always imply a counterfeit, fictitious way of life.”⁷⁹ This is something he explicitly states in the novel when Klaus Müller-Karltreu, crucially not an American and, as a result, capable of voicing the truth, says

“I rilly hate the phony democracy. The people in St. Jude pretend they’re all alike. It’s all nice. Nice, nice, nice. But the people are not all alike. Not at all. There are class differences,

⁷⁷ James Annesley, “Market Corrections: Jonathan Franzen and the ‘Novel of Globalization’,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 2 (January 1, 2006) doi:10.2307/3831795, 631.

⁷⁸ Stephen Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (London; New York: Continuum, 2008), 51.

⁷⁹ Wilhite, “Contested Terrain,” 620.

there are race differences, there are enormous and decisive economic differences, and yet nobody's honest in this case. Everybody pretends!"⁸⁰

This idea of suburban pretence is central to how Franzen characterises life in St. Jude, and by extension every American suburb. Stephen Burn suggests that "the entire structure of *The Corrections* is designed to reveal how each of the characters is in the process of fabulating themselves" and this can certainly be seen in how the individual Lamberts interact with each other and the wider community.⁸¹ However, it is not a phenomenon confined to the suburbs. Denise, Gary, and Chip all live in the big cities of Philadelphia and New York, but are still as guilty of pretending as anyone stuck in the supposedly forsaken backwater of St. Jude.

Franzen's suburbs are a markedly gendered place, but this is more to do with him following the dominant trend in how they are presented than any particular innovation on his part. The house is unquestionably the domain of the women in *The Corrections*. Enid dominates the domestic sphere so much that Alfred takes to spending increasing amounts of his time in a makeshift lab in the basement. In an echo of Wade Arcenault's basement car in Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*, Franzen notes that "in the house of the Lamberts, as in St. Jude, as in the country as a whole, life came to be lived underground."⁸² This is reinforced by Gary's banishment to the basement of his own home, ostensibly a den for the children but where he is left alone while the rest of the family interacts upstairs without him. There is a clear equation of life with the patriarchal figure in the house as Enid's sphere of influence does not extend to the basement. This fact becomes increasingly clear with the exiling of Alfred's favourite blue chair to the underground room, and the accumulation of a large number of old coffee cans that Alfred takes to urinating in rather than going upstairs to the main house to use the bathroom.

While Alfred may be the patriarchal figure of authority, Enid simultaneously rules the house and undermines him at almost every turn. Their house becomes symbolic of the frustrations and increasingly fraught relationships within the family. It is at once too big and too small for them. As the years pass, the house becomes increasingly cluttered, filled with tacky ornaments, stacks of magazines, and expired coupon clippings. The physical structure of the house begins to decay, something Gary struggles to deal with over the ill-

⁸⁰ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 454.

⁸¹ Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, 115.

⁸² Franzen, *The Corrections*, 12.

fated Christmas visit as he points out the various flaws to Enid, and tries to persuade them to sell the house before it becomes completely worthless. This disintegration mirrors Alfred's own decline. The memories and emotions absorbed into the house's structure over its lifetime begin to seep out and become combustible, in much the same way as Alfred's mental state becomes increasingly unstable. The physical obstacles in the house – the “nest of magazines and jelly glasses,”⁸³ or the trash can's worth of “her mother's crap”⁸⁴ that Denise unceremoniously dumps which reveals the lost (or hidden) licencing agreements from the Axon Corporation – are all hurdles the various family members must navigate in order to make themselves heard, or to find a way out.

The Lambert house is, in effect, the sixth member of the family. Its structural deterioration comes to symbolise the disintegration of the family unit, its overwhelming clutter a reminder of the ever-decreasing room for manoeuvre the Lamberts find themselves in. As Wilhite observes

To own a suburban home is to be a shareholder in a patriotic project of nation building. In the novel, Alfred cannot disentangle his quest for privacy from his sense of identity, and the house he refuses to sell functions as the last redoubt against the advanced stages of Parkinson's disease that threatens to divest him of mind and body.⁸⁵

From the opening section of the book, the house is established as a powerful negative force, one in which its inhabitants must accept that “the fiction of living in this house was that no one lived here.”⁸⁶ In many ways, the Lamberts are at war with their house to an even greater degree than anything else. Later in the novel, the omniscient narrator declares, “whether anybody was home meant everything to a house. It was more than a major fact: it was the only fact. The family was the house's soul.”⁸⁷ In a curious resonance of Frank Bascombe's entreaty that only a family can “bring life to a place,” Franzen almost seeks to blame the house for the afflictions suffered by its inhabitants.⁸⁸

Although Franzen attempts to clearly mark the house as a female space, the dominance of Alfred's personality on every aspect of the Lambert family's existence turns it into a strangely liminal space. Instead of a safe, welcoming home that the archetypal

⁸³ Ibid., 287.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 587.

⁸⁵ Wilhite, “Contested Terrain,” 630.

⁸⁶ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 3.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 309-310.

⁸⁸ Richard Ford, *Independence Day* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 76.

suburban house is expected to be, the constant power struggle between Alfred and Enid essentially deconstructs the home. Enid and Alfred have clearly existed in a state of antagonism for the vast majority of their marriage and the house becomes their battleground. Their inability to communicate with each other causes the house to fill up with expired coupons, years old magazines, and unanswered correspondence. The house is, as James Annesley remarks, “too cluttered for Enid and too spacious for Alfred.”⁸⁹ The house is a black hole that appears to suck the life out of anyone who enters it. However, the statement that “the fiction of living in this house was that no one lived there” directly contradicts the later suggestion that a house is nothing without a family in it. If the family is the house’s “soul,” then, to take the analogy to its logical conclusion, is to suggest that the house is a reflection of those who inhabit it, rather than it being the force stifling the Lamberts. Contrary to what Franzen would have us believe, the toxic element is not the house, or where it is, or life in suburban America; it is the people in it.

This idea of the people infecting the place is evident in *Freedom*, published almost ten years after *The Corrections*. Franzen’s take on the suburbs hardens in line with the novel’s obsession with the consequences of catastrophic global over-population. Yet again, he chooses to set the novel’s origins in the Midwest, but this time in the city of St. Paul. Considering St. Paul is also the setting for the opening of Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* and its rumination on the closing of the frontier, this could be seen as an attempt on Franzen’s part to place his novel within a certain literary tradition. However, the mind-set of the characters is remarkably similar to those of *The Corrections*. As Kathy Knapp suggests,

Franzen writes a somewhat different equation in *Freedom*. His novel does not indicate that the suburbs have become more worldly; instead, the repellent values once associated exclusively with homogenizing suburban culture – consumerism, possessive individualism sanctified by the cult of the nuclear family, the fetishization of private property – have infected the culture at large.⁹⁰

St. Paul may be a large city, but the fact of its existence as an urban centre does not provide immunity from the encroachment of ideals once thought only to exist in the suburbs.

⁸⁹ Annesley, “Market Corrections,” 630.

⁹⁰ Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism*, 52.

Also in a similar vein to *The Corrections*, it is once again a woman who assumes the central role of the destabilising force in the novel, as Patty Berglund's actions set in motion the disintegration of her carefully constructed family unit. Franzen still plays with the idea of characters pretending, or creating images of themselves in line with how they want the world to see them, and Patty and Walter channel all their efforts into their home for the first twenty years of their marriage. Patty's appropriation of the role of the model American housewife, and the Berglunds' relationship more generally, is in question from the very beginning of the novel with the declaration that "there had always been something not quite right about the Berglunds."⁹¹

A significant departure from the setting of *The Corrections*, however, is the sense of decay, subsequent growth, and inevitable gentrification that happens in the Berglund's hometown. Franzen establishes Walter and Patty as "young pioneers [...] the first college grads to buy a house on Barrier Street since the old heart of St. Paul had fallen on hard times three decades earlier."⁹² Where the Lamberts' house falls down around them, the Berglunds are presented as a dynamic force in their neighbourhood. As they push themselves to renovate their creaky old house, so their street begins to catch up with them, as it develops from an area full of vacant lots frequented by unruly biker gangs that was "still basically a slum," into a haven for politically correct young families.⁹³ Patty, in particular, is noted as being "already fully the thing that was just starting to happen to the rest of the street."⁹⁴ The Berglunds are established as the original yuppies of their neighbourhood before the neighbourhood even fully exists as a recognisable place itself. For all the technological developments and social changes that happened in the decade between the two novels, the basic dynamics of the family, the home, and the suburban-type life which has now expanded to claim parts of the city remain the same. Even the catastrophic aberration of 9/11 fails to impact in any meaningful way on how Franzen views the lives of his supposedly average American characters. It is simply one more peripheral event that the characters acknowledge but are never significantly affected by. It suggests an element of insularity to their existence akin to living in a bubble; unless something has a direct impact on their lives, these characters are free to ignore it.

⁹¹ Franzen, *Freedom*, 3.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.

Patty and Walter move between three houses over the course of the novel, with each becoming a battleground in the same way that Alfred and Enid Lambert waged war against each other from the comfort of their own home. The Barrier Street house is the classic family home, with Walter sacrificing any personal and professional ambitions he might have harboured so that Patty could indulge her fantasy of being the perfect stay-at-home Mom. She bakes cookies for her neighbours on their birthdays, knows all the kids on the street, and projects an image of such all-round homey perfection that the other mothers on the street are always slightly wary of her. The defection of their adored son Joey to the undesirable neighbours next door sets in motion the disintegration of their carefully cultivated image of a solid family unit. Time and again, the idea of the phoniness of this suburban mind-set which has infiltrated urban living by the time of *Freedom* rears its head in Franzen's writing. The Berglunds' neighbours quietly, at first, question the integrity of their image:

To Seth Paulsen [...] the Berglunds were the super-guilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven; who lacked the courage of their privilege. One problem with Seth's theory was that the Berglunds weren't all that privileged; their only known asset was their house, which they'd rebuilt with their own hands. Another problem, as Merrie Paulsen pointed out, was that Patty was no great progressive and certainly no feminist (staying at home with her birthday calendar, baking those goddamned birthday cookies) and seemed altogether allergic to politics [...] Merrie [...] declared that there was *no* larger consciousness, *no* solidarity, *no* political substance, *no* fungible structure, *no* true communitarianism in Patty Berglund's supposed neighborliness; it was just regressive housewifely bullshit, and, frankly, in Merrie's opinion, if you were to scratch below the nicey-nice surface you might be surprised to find something rather hard and selfish and competitive and Reaganite in Patty; it was obvious that the only things that mattered to her were her children and her house – *not* her neighbors, *not* the poor, *not* her country, *not* her parents, not even her own husband.⁹⁵

This passage, apart from laying Patty's character bare at the very start of the novel, also draws attention to some crucial points about the idea of privilege, and how Franzen and his characters define it. The suggestion that Walter and Patty are not all that privileged betrays the novel's attitude to class. After all, they are both college graduates who own their own home, in a part of town where the property prices have only increased since they

⁹⁵ Ibid., 7.

moved in. In Franzen's writing, privilege seems to be inextricably linked with emotional stability and the ability to get what you want, as opposed to the freedom to pursue your goals without the interference of external forces such as financial constraints, or racial or gender-based discrimination.

Unlike in *The Corrections* where Alfred is isolated in the family home, in *Freedom* it is Patty who is forced out of the house each time something goes wrong. She leaves the Barrier Street home and retreats to the lake house during Joey's rebellion. When she and Walter move to Washington D.C., the home is not only their living space, but also the site of Walter's work. Patty is the one who is marginalised and made to leave the house in order to go in search of an occupation, with Walter declaring, "I never should have let you stay home. That was the mistake."⁹⁶ This amalgamation of two very distinct spheres shows how disrupted their lives have become. The home is no longer capable of defining their relationship within the now fragmented family unit. In what can only be seen as an unintentional move, Franzen flips the stereotypical gender dynamic which sees the female presence anchored in, and dominating, the home. In spite of all of Patty's years of practicing as the perfect homemaker, it is Walter who calls the shots in the house, demanding that Patty get out and find a job, always the one deciding to stay in the house while Patty leaves. Given that he is only ever reacting to Patty's behaviour, Walter still manages to claim the role of victim for himself, especially considering how loyal and devoted he shows himself to have always been to her.

Walter's continuously thwarted desire for isolation and solitude is reminiscent of Alfred's own internal rage at his lack of privacy. The home is supposed to be a private space, protected from the destabilising forces of the outside world. However, the women in each of these men's lives quite literally invite trouble in to the home. In Walter's case, it is Patty's brief, yet inevitable, affair with his best friend Richard Katz that finally undoes their marriage. Richard was always going to be an antagonistic force in his life, considering Walter's passion for birds and the less than subtle metaphor implicit in Richard's surname. A celebrated musician, Richard is also a carpenter. He literally builds up the physical structure of the lake house while metaphorically dismantling the Berglunds' marriage. But Patty still has to act on her own desires in order to initiate the chain of events that ultimately leads to her separation from Walter.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 328.

For Alfred Lambert, one brief incursion during his daughter Denise's teenage years is enough to disrupt his entire world view from that point on. Her affair with the much older Don Armour, an employee in the office where Alfred works, leads to a physical invasion of the home that Alfred simply never recovers from. The discovery of Don's crudely scratched heart containing the inscription "DA + DL" on the underside of Alfred's workbench eliminates any sense of equilibrium that he might have had.⁹⁷ The violation is so utterly complete that he inexplicably – to Enid and the rest of his family – retires two weeks before he would qualify for a vastly superior compensation package. Denise's betrayal continues to haunt him at the end of his life as he manages, in his dementia-ridden state, to let her know that he always knew what she had done.

Perhaps no home invasion is more of a betrayal, however, than the one that takes place in Gary Lambert's house. One of the major points of conflict between Gary and his wife Caroline is their disagreement over whether he is clinically depressed or not. Her recruitment of their three sons to her side of the argument only serves to heighten his paranoia. His sense of persecution is further intensified when he discovers that his son, Caleb, has been allowed to set up a surveillance camera in the kitchen, the latest expensive fad that he has been permitted to pursue, in express violation of Gary's own pronouncements on the subject. Although Gary always wants to know that other people have observed how successful and accomplished he is, how effortlessly cool he is (to his mind), when he is under actual surveillance it is an entirely different matter. The camera eliminates any kind of protective mask he may have been able to wear, and is conveniently positioned with the liquor cabinet in its line of sight. Not only is Gary being watched in his own home, supposedly a sanctuary from the intrusive forces of the outside world, but the camera comes to symbolise a long list of perceived slights from his wife. Caroline is keenly interested in self-help books, as shown by the reading pile beside her bed. However, in yet another example of the power of the privileged narrator, her belief in therapeutic measures is only shown to make her more judgmental and passive-aggressive rather than sympathetic or compassionate.

Characters with mental-health issues abound in Franzen's fiction. In "Perchance to Dream," he suggested the following about the American public's relationship with their emotional and mental health:

⁹⁷ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 603.

As the social stigma of depression disappears, the aesthetic stigma increases. It's not just that depression has become fashionable to the point of banality. It's the sense that we live in a reductively binary culture: you're either healthy or you're sick, you either function or you don't. And if that flattening of the field of possibilities is precisely what's depressing you, you're inclined to resist participating in the flattening by calling yourself depressed. You decide that it's the world that's sick, and that the resistance to function in such a world is healthy.⁹⁸

It becomes apparent reading *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, that Franzen tries to place his characters in the grey area between the reductive binaries of well and unwell that he identified in this essay, with varying degrees of success. Throughout both novels there is a continuous obsession with mental health and depression. In spite of this, *Freedom's* Patty Berglund is the only central character that Franzen actually sends to therapy, which results in the clunky middle section of the novel that doubles up as her memoir entitled, "MISTAKES WERE MADE Autobiography of Patty Berglund by Patty Berglund (Composed at Her Therapist's Suggestion)."⁹⁹ The self-referential nature of the title, the all-caps screaming of "MISTAKES WERE MADE," and the insistence on writing her own autobiography in the third person, indicates from the outset that this will not be an easy read.

It is Franzen's men, however, who must fight the fiercest battle with depression. Where his female characters have issues that must also be dealt with, there is rarely the sense of them embracing this "resistance to function" as he calls it. This is in part due to the characterisation of some of the most troubled of his female characters, found in *Freedom*. Both Patty, and Connie Monaghan – the Berglund's neighbour, Joey's seducer and later his wife – define themselves by the men in their lives. Patty goes so far as to say "I have no sake. I don't believe in anything. I don't have faith in anything. The team is all I've got."¹⁰⁰ Even the act of Patty writing her autobiography is eliminated as something she chose to do, composed as it is "at Her Therapist's Suggestion."¹⁰¹ There is a constant attempt on the narrative's part to absolve Patty of responsibility for her actions, that she is somehow at the mercy of forces beyond her control, a pawn in a game that everyone else is playing. At one point she asks,

⁹⁸ Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 44.

⁹⁹ Franzen, *Freedom*, 27.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

Where did the self-pity come from? The inordinate volume of it? By almost any standard, she led a luxurious life. She had all day every day to figure out some decent and satisfying way to live, and yet all she ever seemed to get for all her choices and all her freedom was more miserable. The autobiographer is almost forced to the conclusion that she pitied herself for being so free.¹⁰²

Patty may be treated like a nobody by everyone around her, but she consistently turns this around to make it into something positive, ultimately expressing her gratitude – albeit sarcastically – that her parents essentially ignored her development as she grew up.

The idea of depression being banal is what seems to concern Franzen, and in turn his characters, the most. If everyone else is depressed, what does that say for individualism? Is it not just another way of following the crowd and conforming to the herd mentality that he so clearly despises? This could go some way to explaining why his male characters so vehemently resist any sort of diagnosis, unless it is one they give themselves. There is also a very clear and deliberate centring of the focus on the depressive tendencies of the men, which allows the narrative to elicit sympathy for their plight in a way that is not quite so straightforward for the women of Franzen's novels. Even within her own clumsily narrated section, Patty fails to claim the comfort of victimhood that comes so easily to the male characters. This privileging of the male voice mirrors an observation that Bryce Traister makes about the *modus operandi* of masculinity studies in American culture when he states that

the new masculine American studies effectively crowds out the women and texts responsible for the rise of feminism within academic literary studies and returns the man to a humanity whose historicized particularity nonetheless shifts Americanist cultural criticism, once again, into the dominant study of mankind.¹⁰³

By crowding his narrative with depressive, or supposedly depressive males, Franzen denies his female characters the oxygen of sympathy, and marginalises their very similar issues.

Gary Lambert is the most candid character in the two novels when it comes to discussions of mental health. He, naturally, is resistant to any suggestion that his wife Caroline makes about the possibility of his being depressed. At the same time, however, he carefully monitors his mood, and spouts streams of jargon about chemical imbalances in

¹⁰² Ibid., 181.

¹⁰³ Traister, "Academic Viagra," 276.

the brain, implying that all is not actually well with Gary. Even still, there is a carefully studied air about his engagement with his potential depression. Always wanting to be cool and unique, there is still a sense of him playing at it, that any distress he feels has to fit into a certain type of behaviour. His constant othering of the women in his life sees him strenuously resist Caroline's repeated assertions that he is, in fact, in need of some help. However, once he suggests a diagnosis to himself, he admits that the "irony, of course, was that as soon as he'd surrendered – possibly as soon as he'd confessed to his depression [...] he not only no longer felt depressed, he felt euphoric."¹⁰⁴ He surrenders to Caroline's insistence that he is "extremely depressed" but this seems to arise from nothing more than a loss of the will to keep arguing with her about it.¹⁰⁵

Franzen's attempts to situate his characters in the space between the "reductive binaries" he identifies in contemporary American culture's obsession with mental health becomes another way for him to analyse the idea of exceptionalism. Neither Gary nor Walter nor Chip become so wholly depressed that they cease to function for any considerable length of time. Chip even goes so far as to acknowledge that "he felt as if he lacked the ability to lose all volition and connection with reality the way depressed people did in books and movies. It seemed to him [...] that he was failing even at the miserable task of falling properly apart."¹⁰⁶ As always with Chip, his concern about his appearance and image manages to stifle any legitimate emotional breakdown. In linking increased instances of depression with a concurrent desire to be unique and exceptional, Franzen finds himself on dangerous ground. The ultimate result of this is that the characters come across as petulant and whiny, wholly absorbed in the trivial matter of their less than extraordinary lives, stuck in an ever-shrinking bubble of self-absorption. They cannot even be depressed in a way that would mark them out from everyone else.

Susan Faludi deals at length with the idea that men in contemporary America have no idea how to be men anymore. Society is deemed to have changed to such an extent that they have been left behind, abandoned without the skills or emotional tools necessary to catch up. There are traces of this theory woven throughout both *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, most directly in the ill-fated cruise that Alfred and Enid undertake. Ted Roth,

¹⁰⁴ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 272.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 89.

another vacationer who dines at their table is a “retired vice president of Compliance.”¹⁰⁷ He suggests to Alfred that “we’re depressed because there’s no frontier anymore. Because we can’t pretend anymore there’s a place no one’s been.”¹⁰⁸ Sylvia, Ted’s wife, confides to Enid that she and Ted “don’t really agree at all anymore on what’s important in life” which takes the idea of Ted being a “retired vice president of Compliance” to a whole new level.¹⁰⁹ Not only has he retired from work, he has also retired from agreeing with his wife.

This idea of the absent frontier as being at the heart of the white male’s troubles is something that is referenced time and again in relation to American masculinity. The nostalgia for this fabled existence has resounded through American culture since at least the 1880s with the closing of the frontier. Men had conquered the land, but since then, in spite of their best efforts, everyone else has managed to colonise it, leaving middle-class American men stranded on the island of their historical patriarchal power. The inarticulate rage this engenders the characters of Walter Berglund and Alfred Lambert is a pitch-perfect telling of the masculinity in crisis narrative which leads to acts of what can only be described as self-sabotage. Before his retirement, Enid pleads with Alfred to purchase stock on the basis of his own insider knowledge, believing that “she and Al were the only intelligent people of her generation who had managed to not become rich.”¹¹⁰ Alfred’s refusal to take advantage of the situation is grounded in his own stereotypical patriarchal values. Incapable of taking the easy way out of anything, Alfred is the epitome of what Roger Horrocks describes as the crippling effect that patriarchal masculinity has on men:

Manhood as we know it in our society requires such a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self, a turning away from whole areas of life, that the man who obeys the demands of masculinity has become only half-human.¹¹¹

Alfred’s anger results in him being portrayed in slightly less than human terms throughout the novel. A man silently at war with himself, his wife, and the world, Enid comes to believe that “a decade-plus of marriage had turned him into one of the overly civilized predators you hear about in zoos.”¹¹² The Lamberts’ marriage is reminiscent of a profit and

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 379.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 356.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 359.

¹¹¹ Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities* (New York: Basingstoke: St. Martin’s; Macmillan, 1994), 25.

¹¹² Franzen, *The Corrections*, 278.

loss account, with Enid convinced that “his work so satisfied him that he didn’t need her love, while her chores so bored her that she needed his love doubly. In any rational accounting, his work canceled her work.”¹¹³ Alfred seems to be in the constant grip of a low-level rage that occasionally bubbles to the surface, causing his temper to explode in violent fashion, such as his reaction to Enid’s failure (or refusal) to move the piles of magazines and empty jars while he was away on a work trip:

he took a badly balanced hammer, a crudely forged Neanderthal club that he hated and kept only for purposes of demolition, and methodically broke each jelly glass. A splinter hit his cheek and he swung more furiously, smashing the shards into smaller shards, but nothing could eradicate his transgression [...] no matter how he hammered.¹¹⁴

The imagery in this scene is particularly striking. Alfred keeps this hammer solely for destructive purposes, and it is so primordially masculine in its imagery as to be clichéd. The act of obliterating the glasses with the “Neanderthal club” allows him to enact a part of his masculinity that has been suppressed, both by himself and the society he lives in. But there is no satisfaction to be found in this act of supreme violence. Alfred’s transgression (his compulsive awareness of other people’s sexuality and the intense self-loathing this sparks within himself) still haunts him so that the act, like his anger, becomes futile.

Alfred is plagued by his own sense of failure and inadequacy, but he projects this out on to the world. It is everybody else who is at fault, everybody else who fails – often quite happily and obliviously – to live up to the impossibly vague standards he sets for himself. At his core, Alfred dreams of being different in much the same way as Frank Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road*. Frank often wishes that people would look at him and think “that ol’ Wheeler [...] really had it.”¹¹⁵ Both men wish that they could be different to what they are, but both refuse to do anything productive to make it happen, preferring to wait it out in the hope that it will magically happen. Alfred describes it as the “dream of radical transformation: of one day waking up and finding himself a wholly different (more confident, more serene) kind of person, of escaping that prison of the given, of feeling divinely capable.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Ibid., 288.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 287.

¹¹⁵ Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 22.

¹¹⁶ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 313.

Almost a whole decade on from *The Corrections in Freedom*, the main differences between the male protagonists are their age and ability to make money. Walter Berglund is financially comfortable, almost ridiculously so by the end of the novel, yet he is consumed by the same internal anger that cripples Alfred for most of his life. The recurring tendency towards isolation is evident in both men as they seek to remove themselves from the presence of other people. It is a striking counterpoint to the deliberate isolation that Frank Bascombe pursues in Richard Ford's novels. He, too, is a man who would prefer to be alone but it is not out of a hatred for his fellow man, or disgust at how society is structured. He merely recognises that he functions better alone. Walter, on the other hand, sees the rest of the country almost deliberately failing to meet his standards, everyone blindly ignoring the impending destruction of the planet that so occupies his thoughts, to the point that "the unclouded serenity of his countrymen's indifference made him wild with anger."¹¹⁷

For all of Walter's success, before a fall so spectacular it would put Chip Lambert to shame, he cannot rid himself of the sense of being hounded by other people. The similarities between Walter and Alfred are particularly striking considering the differences in their ages, their jobs, their general interests, and the fact that they inhabit – on the face of it – very different worlds even though the novels are only ten years apart. For all the talk of the deep existential crisis that infected the American psyche after 9/11, and how this triggered a desire to reawaken traditional patriarchal masculine values, there is little to distinguish Walter's misanthropy from Alfred's. In fact, all of the Berglunds are remarkably untroubled by the events of 9/11. Joey sees it mainly as an inconvenient road block to the development of his social status at college and is in no way traumatised by it. The rest of the Berglunds, too, seem to be in no significant way affected by the fallout from 9/11.

Perhaps as a result of this, Franzen creates another scattered Midwestern family concerned with what are essentially the same issues. There is very little to distinguish between the problems that Alfred, Walter, Chip, and Gary feel they are besieged by. Despite social changes, an altered political landscape, and a massive global recession, Franzen's men – and to a lesser extent, his women – are treading the same ground. If the issues afflicting the American middle-class have not moved on from the insular family dramas presented by the supposed chronicler of a generation in Franzen, then what

¹¹⁷ Franzen, *Freedom*, 314.

conclusions can we draw about the American male that he places so prominently at their centres? It suggests that perhaps the masculinity crisis narrative, which is so dependent on the boom-bust cycle of national crisis followed by relative stability, is in fact inaccurate.

At a public interview, in response to a question from the audience about depressed men in *The Corrections*, Franzen remarked that “white masculinity is alive and well [...] it takes a particularly damaged and anxious white male to embrace how anxious and problematic that makes it for the white male.”¹¹⁸ What he means by “alive and well” is certainly open to interpretation. Taken in the context of his characters and his own pronouncements about the plight of the white male, it can clearly be seen to mean the version of white masculinity that is in crisis, plagued by its own power, and wounded by the absence of sympathy from the rest of society. In “Perchance to Dream” he asks the question, “does the distress I feel derive from some internal sickness of the soul, or is it imposed on me by the sickness of society?”¹¹⁹ This inability to reasonably define where the “distress” comes from seems to me to be indicative of the hollowness of the crisis narrative, and is central to its acceptance as a genuine affliction and a legitimate subject for study. If we do not know what causes it, and cannot define it with any certainty, we must study it in order to find out. This in turn draws attention to the fact that certain quarters believe there to be a crisis, which reinforces its supposed existence. Franzen’s repeated retreat to the depressed, put-upon white male is indicative of the tactics of American masculinity studies, as outlined by Bryce Traister when he suggests that

heteromascularity studies is not just historical corrective; it performs a therapeutic function as well, and so we may wonder whose compensatory narrative is being written here: the anxious failures desiring the consolations afforded by their proximity to the “normal,” or the bullies in need of the corrective offered up by the new narratives of American masculinity-as-crisis.¹²⁰

By consistently creating characters with depressive tendencies, Franzen repeatedly centres the focus on his male characters, and sidelines the female experience even though the women he writes are just as troubled, troubling, and downright annoying as his men. The male struggle is privileged, however, as a result of his inability to truly define what it is

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Franzen, “Jonathan Franzen on His Misanthropic Reputation: ‘We Live in a World of Cant,’” by Michelle Dean, *The Guardian*, May 27, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may27/jonathan-franzen-purity-novel-misanthropy>

¹¹⁹ Franzen, “Perchance to Dream,” 36.

¹²⁰ Traister, “Academic Viagra,” 292.

about. Franzen's women seem better able to cope with the issues they are confronted with, but this is not a reflection of the author's view of their capabilities. It is almost as if the historical marginalisation they have experienced provides them with a safety net they can fall back into which is not afforded to his men.

There is something approaching a sense of envy from Franzen and his male characters that women and minorities have clearly defined oppressors. Enid Lambert is shown to be at the mercy of Alfred's whims while also desperately trying to conform to the ideal of the good American housewife, whereas Alfred is a borderline misanthrope, who is incapable of interacting with other people in even a remotely healthy fashion, for no reason other than the fact that it is in his nature to be that way. Patty Berglund is also desperate to fit the mould of the perfect housewife and mother, and is wholly defined by her relations with men. Her experience of rape as a teenager colours her initial relationship with Walter, which in turn is challenged even further by her self-destructive attraction to Walter's best friend, Richard. Franzen's women are given an easy, clearly labelled excuse for their behaviour that his men are not. Where his women struggle with the men in their lives, his men rail against society and culture, displaying a marked disparity in their realms of influence.

This idea is brought to a longwinded climax in *Purity* in the form of the inevitable collapse of Tom and Anabel's marriage. Both see the other partner as their oppressor, something Anabel is wary of from the beginning of their relationship when she asks Tom if she should "worry about you taking my story and putting it in a novel."¹²¹ That he does ultimately betray her by writing his novella (which he ends up burning on their wedding day so visceral is her reaction to it), and then completing the memoir that makes up the [le1o9n8a0rd] section of *Purity*, is never really justified as anything other than Tom meaning well but never satisfying his demanding wife. It also reinforces the idea of Franzen's over-identification with some of his male characters, at the expense of his female characters. During a public lecture, he discussed the writing of *Strong Motion*, and how his then wife "once claimed, memorably, that I had stolen from her soul to write it."¹²² Of all Franzen's characters, Anabel is clearly the most disturbed, but as she is only ever shown

¹²¹ Franzen, *Purity*, 353.

¹²² Jonathan Franzen, "On Autobiographical Fiction," in *Farther Away*, 132.

from the narrative perspective of Tom and Pip, her rationalisations for her actions are always hidden. It allows Tom to complain that

When I was alone in the apartment, though, I felt depressed. Anabel had limitless money but intended never to take any of it, I was mad for her body but could have it only three days a month, I liked her dad but had to pretend I didn't, her dad had fabulous connections but I wasn't allowed to use them, I had a supposedly ambitious project but no chance of making it happen [...]

Our joint plan was to be poor and obscure and pure and take the world by surprise at a later date. Anabel was so convincing that I believed in our plan. My only fear was that she'd realize I wasn't as interesting as she was and leave me.¹²³

Rather than admit his own inability to make his projects happen, Tom ever so carefully and sympathetically lays the blame at Anabel's feet, implying that he was completely beholden to her. That he does then succeed once they divorce only serves to further underline her status as an obstructive force in his life. Even Anabel's disappearance from his life is framed as a victory for her, as Tom claims that

even when I found someone truly unlike her, a woman with whom it's an inexpressible blessing to share a life, Anabel's sadness and her moral absolutism continued to color my nighttime dreams. Her act of disappearance and negation becomes more significant and wounding, not less, with every year that passes without a sign of her existence. She may have been weaker than me, but she managed to outplay me. She moved on while I stayed stuck. I have to hand it to her: I feel checkmated.¹²⁴

Anabel becomes Tom's frontier. He may have conquered her, but he is the one who ends up losing, or so his narrative would have us believe.

Almost halfway through *Freedom*, Richard Katz asks Walter "what's wrong with being admired?" when Walter expresses unease at the growing attraction between him and his assistant, Lalitha.¹²⁵ Richard claims not to understand how anyone could possibly object to being admired by another human being. Richard then goes on to have an extremely uncomfortable exchange with a fan of his, exhibiting profound embarrassment that another human being admires him. He tries to explain this contradiction to Walter, saying "it's more like a situation where I would hate the absence of the thing but I don't like the

¹²³ Ibid., 392.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 443.

¹²⁵ Franzen, *Freedom*, 226.

thing itself, either.”¹²⁶ In spite of himself, Franzen manages to convey the issue at the heart of the masculinity crisis narrative in this one line. For all of masculinity studies’ tendency to demonise the pressures our traditional patriarchal society places on the straight white male, the prospect of losing its attendant power and influence is so much worse. To return to the ideas raised at the start of this chapter about the place of the novelist in contemporary culture – and by extension, the straight white male – Franzen states the following in another essay entitled “I’ll Be Doing More of the Same”:

Worst of all, I’m untribal. Or rather, my personal tribe of white American men is too busy making money or being depressed over not making money to have time for tribal tales of business and depression. I have a suspicion, in fact, that my tribe was *never* much interested in tales of itself, that the “general” audience our national literature once possessed was always predominantly female, and that sometime around 1973 women finally got tired of getting their news of the world via (frequently misogynist) male perspectives, and that that was the end of the “general” audience.¹²⁷

In spite of the namechecking of female authors, the overarching image of the novelist and America’s “national literature” which Franzen presents is overwhelmingly male and white. It results in sentences in *Purity* such as “once upon a time, it had sufficed to write *The Sound and the Fury* or *The Sun Also Rises*. But now bigness was essential. Thickness, length.”¹²⁸ The baldly sexual allusions, and the equation of achievement with size, reinforces the idea of how much size matters in a patriarchal society. Considering the mixed reviews for *Purity*, and the increasing backlash Franzen has to deal with, it might be more pertinent for him to consider that in prioritising just what it is he is trying to say, rather than the size of the book it takes him to say it, he might finally begin to know who these nameless, faceless readers of his books are.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 227.

¹²⁷ Jonathan Franzen, “I’ll Be Doing More of the Same,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, (Spring 96, Vol 16, Issue 1), 36-37.

¹²⁸ Franzen, *Purity*, 186.

Afterword

In his 2015 study, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, Mark Greif explains why his book – which is ostensibly a “philosophical history” – is so concerned with literature:

The first impetus is the peculiar fact of transmission of authority. Literary critics adapted questions of the nature of man – and affirmation, reconstruction, and revival of “his” will in America – to their demands on future novelists at the same moment that these critics were accomplishing the triumphant installation of past American literature within the university and on an international stage. The standing of this formerly subordinate national art as a source of eternal truth – when read correctly by its scholars – promoted it past mere entertainment and local color and its odd dependency on European models.¹

In attempting to trace an alternative reading of what is presented as sociological fact, it can seem counterintuitive to ground the analysis in works of fiction. They are, after all, by their very definition, acts of imagination. While it is possible to recognise elements of reality in literary works, they are still just one interpretation of events among a multitude of voices. Yet literature has taken a role far beyond the work of art for its own sake, particularly in the context of the themes discussed throughout this thesis. In elevating literature to a status that sees it as an unimpeachable reflection of life as we know it, it is, therefore, inevitable that its repeated tropes come to be seen as indicators of a wider societal trend. This leads us to a point where an entire theory of identity in crisis can base itself significantly on trends in fiction, film, and art. What the vast majority of these fictional works do not do, however, is offer any solutions to the supposed masculinity crisis. As Greif notes about the mid-century crisis of humanism, “the proliferation of answers, not their conclusion, seems to be the underlying point.”²

The central problem with the masculinity crisis narrative to this point has been a similar “proliferation of answers,” which only seem to serve the production of ever more questions. There is a reactionary element to masculinity studies that seeks to establish it as part of the same body of criticism that looks at marginalised identity groups, pointing out that patriarchal power structures hurt men as much as anyone else. While this is certainly true, the very nature of masculinity studies as it currently stands, is primarily concerned

¹ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), xi-xii.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

with the same hegemonic, straight, white male version of masculinity that is routinely criticised as epitomising The Problem. For example, in a 2013 collection entitled *Embodying Masculinities*, just two out of nine essays were about men who were not white, which seems to be a curious lapse in a collection that claims to be attempting “to explore the *continued* political relevance of the body to American society and culture all through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.”³ In what can only be seen as an example of how narrow the discourse on the masculinity crisis narrative is, however, such a limited survey serves to reinforce the dominant trends rather than disrupt them or challenge them in any way. It comes to seem that in seeking to position this particular type of masculinity on the spectrum of victimhood, to borrow Jonathan Franzen’s questionable term, there is an attempt to absolve those who benefit most from patriarchal structures from any complicity with the system they find themselves in.

The most perfunctory of library searches will return tens of thousands of results for the term “masculinity crisis,” which goes to show its prevalence in academic writing. But it is also firmly entrenched in the mainstream consciousness as a fully-fledged concept. In the course of working on this thesis, it has become clear that there is a circular narrative at work. The elevation of literature as some unimpeachable reflection of the truth of existence is a double-edged sword. In assigning truth and reality to a creative work, a work of fiction, a type of vacuum is created in which empirical evidence is not necessary. The dominant voices in fiction and cultural productions have traditionally been the middle-class white male, who has also come to dominate the crisis narrative as it appears in literary and cultural theory. In claiming a truth in fiction it becomes possible to reinforce the crisis narrative without stepping beyond the boundaries of literature. This then has the potential to seep out in to the wider discourse, taking on the form of the “stipulation” that Susan Sontag wrote of in *Regarding the Pain of Others*.⁴ It defines how the narrative is shaped, and who gets to shape it. What this thesis has attempted to do is reassess that narrative, and has deliberately used what are, admittedly, stereotypical selections of very white, male authors to that end. In doing so, it can be shown how the crisis theory is eminently ripe for disruption.

³ Josep M. Armengol, ed. *Embodying Masculinities: Towards a History of the Male Body in U.S. Culture and Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 4-5.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding The Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 85-86.

It is also important to restate that I see the crisis narrative that I have engaged with throughout this thesis as being very distinct from the current discussion around mental-health and depression as it affects men. It has also become clear to me that the crisis that gets spoken of in relation to literature is very separate, and rightly so, from the mental-health crisis. The crisis that leads to white males accounting for 70% of deaths by suicide in the United States in 2013 cannot, in any true sense, be compared to the literary crisis that populates American fiction.⁵ The difficulty arises in the overlapping terminology and discussions. A crisis of mental-health – and all of its attendant issues, including access to services and treatment, and the need to eliminate the stigma that goes along with it – is very different from the crisis of the middle-class white male that dominates so much of literary theory. It is not a crisis to experience a loss of power. It is not a crisis to not be the main breadwinner in a household. It is not a crisis to be a stay-at-home father, or any of the other things that Hanna Rosin posits as being proof that we live in a time that can be called *The End of Men*.⁶ This is a change in experience, something that must be adapted to, and might eventually be seen as socially acceptable, not something that requires medical intervention and treatment. The conflation of the two is what pushes the masculinity in crisis narrative into potentially disingenuous territory, especially considering that until recently the main voices pushing the narrative were white and male.

So engrained in thought has the narrative become, it has almost consumed itself, leading to novels such as Adelle Waldman's *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P*, first published in 2013. In the novel the protagonist, Nate, ticks every box that being a good liberal, equal-opportunities feminist should. But he also manages to sabotage every relationship he has with a woman because he still cannot understand them, in spite of his supposedly progressive open mindedness. In presenting us with a male character who could have stepped out of the pages of any Franzen novel, and populating her narrative with the professionally successful, but personally unhappy, women that Nate encounters, Waldman crystallises the problem with the crisis narrative and the multitude of answers that have been produced over the years. As with April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, Emily Grimes in *The Easter Parade*, Patty Berglund in *Freedom*, and all the other fictional women who struggle with malaises that bear striking similarities to the supposed crises the male characters of

⁵ "Suicide Statistics," *American Foundation for Suicide Prevention*, Accessed February 8, 2016, <http://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/>

⁶ Hanna Rosin, *The End of Men and the Rise of Women* (London: Penguin, 2012).

their respective novels experience, Waldman's women are unfulfilled and apparently incapable of doing anything about it. Instead of asking what is wrong with American men, then, perhaps the more accurate – and possibly unanswerable - question is what is wrong with America?

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