Existential Suburbia: The influence of Sartrean existentialism on US fiction of the suburbs from the 1960s to the end of the twentieth century

by Peter Latham

University College London

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<u>Declaration</u>

I, Peter Latham, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signature……………...Peter Latham

Date…………………26/08/16

Abstract

American suburban fiction is often viewed as satirical social commentary, critiquing its affluent, dull, and conformist cultural environment. In this thesis, however, I argue that a significant strand of such fiction, published between the early 1960s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, was concerned with broader existential themes, and was strongly influenced by European existentialism, particularly by Sartre's philosophy. While this influence is apparent in American urban fiction of the 1950s, for example in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), it is far more fully developed, and 'Americanized', in the suburban fiction of the 1960s – in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961), and Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1962), all of which, I argue, are fundamentally concerned with the notion of existential authenticity. I suggest that existentialist, and specifically Sartrean, themes are developed in subsequent fiction – from a concern with existential contingency in an increasingly threatening and violent suburban environment, apparent in such novels as Joyce Carol Oates' *Expensive People* (1968), John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969), Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971), and Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place* (1980), to an obsession with entropy, emblematic of the desire to escape existential freedom through stasis, in Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), and the stories of Raymond Carver; and a retreat into solipsism portrayed in later twentieth-century fiction, in Heller's novel, but also Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe novels, published between 1986 and 2014 (*The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day*, *The Lay of the Land*, and *Let Me Be Frank with You*), and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and *Aloft* (2004). I argue that the spatial and conceptual indeterminacy of the suburbs, their liminality, engenders existential anguish and unease, thus making them an especially conducive cultural environment for these authors' thematic concerns, one in which they are able to explore the ideas central to Sartre's existentialism. *Existential Suburbia* traces the influence of Sartre's philosophy, developed primarily in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), on the authors of suburban fiction in this period, both directly and indirectly, and provides a thematic (rather than chronologically based) analysis of the novels and stories based on key Sartrean concepts. Finally, the thesis discusses the revisionist TV series *Mad Men* (2007-2015), set in the 1960s and heavily influenced by the stories of John Cheever, considering its concern with existential authenticity and gender relations.

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Introduction: Existential Suburbia

When the French philosopher and playwright Gabriel Marcel described Jean-Paul Sartre as an existentialist in 1945, Sartre replied curtly, "My philosophy is a philosophy of existence; existentialism – I don't know what it is," despite having written an article entitled 'A More Precise Definition of Existentialism' several months earlier for *Action* magazine.[1] The following year, in response to criticism of his play *The Respectful Prostitute*, depicting racism in the American south, he stated, "I am not anti-American. I don't even know what the word means."[2] Yet in the same year, despite his disavowals and professed incomprehension, Sartre propounded a philosophy he called existentialism, with which his name would become virtually synonymous, and was often (and increasingly in the late 1940s) vociferously anti-American in his views.[3] The conception of existentialism as somehow antithetical to American culture became established during this period, and then became entrenched – so much so that 'American existentialism' is sometimes considered an oxymoron: Americans, supposedly, lack the European sensibilities that have produced great existentialist writers. Sartre famously commented that "there is no pessimism in America regarding human nature and social organisation."[4] Camus commented that America was a "country where everything is done to prove that life isn't tragic," and was disparaging of American materialism and its superficiality.[5] Simone de Beauvoir, meanwhile, wrote that "most Americans are afraid of themselves…afraid of that cold isolation, that dereliction into which man falls when he splits off from what is given," rendering them psychologically and culturally unreceptive (if not impervious) to existentialism, since "from this kind of separation the drama of human existence is born; without the pang of separation the drama is not authentically human, lacking consciousness and

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[1] Ronald Hayman, *Writing Against: A Biography of Sartre* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 224; 'A More Precise Definition of Existentialism' ('A propos de l'existentialisme: Mise au point'), *Action*, December 29, 1944, cited in Hayman, p.224.

[2] *New York Herald Tribune* (European Edition), 20 November, 1946, cited in Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, eds. *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Volume 1: A Bibliographical Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 199.

[3] Sartre gave a lecture in 1946, the purpose of which, he claimed, was "to offer a defence of existentialism." This was subsequently published as 'Existentialism is a Humanism', and was included in Walter Kaufman's anthology *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, published in 1956 (New York: Plume, 2004, p.345).

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'A European Declaration of Independence', *Commentary*, January 1950, cited in George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p.411.

[5] Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen The Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 22; Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (1979), p.378.

freedom."[6] Understood to include both the fervent anti-theological Christianity of Kierkegaard and the strident atheism of Sartre, existentialism, however, defies easy definition. Alienation, anguish, and authenticity are thematic preoccupations of existentialist writing. In addition to the 'three As', however, Walter Kaufman identifies an awareness of the 'four Ds' common to such writing: "dread, despair, death and dauntlessness."[7] Sartre, like Beauvoir, considered this awareness to be fundamentally non-American, since US culture was pervaded by "great myths, the myths of happiness, of progress, of liberty," its people encouraged to pursue "a life of rosy ease" by the media and entertainment industry, to be "conventionally happy," and to view their society as "the least 'historical' in the world… never complicating its problems with inherited customs and acquired rights."[8] These beliefs were by no means confined to Europeans (existentialist or otherwise) and US literary criticism has itself tended to view existentialism as 'un-American'. American critic Frederick R. Karl, for example, declared in 1983 that:

> Existentialism is meaningful literarily only where death (time, mortality, inescapability) is an ever-present reality, not in a society where it can be disguised with all the pleasures of wealth and ingenuity….In the end, the American believes he can conquer death, just as in coming to the new world as a settler, pioneer, or immigrant he placated the devil.[9]

This view is based on a fundamental assumption that there is a narrative expansiveness and disregard of history and time inherent in American culture, and by extension American fiction, and that the inwardness, the austerity and starkness of European existential writing is antithetical to such fiction. The influence in the 1940s and 1950s of existentialism on American fiction is, nonetheless, recognised by Karl, albeit "reduced and modified for American taste."[10] American novels of the 1950s, he suggests, addressed existential anguish, but sought transcendence of the absurd and so created a kind of 'failed existentialism'. Walter Kaufman's anthology *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, published in 1956, was hugely influential and provided

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[6] Simone de Beauvoir, 'An Existentialist Look at Americans', *New York Times Magazine*, 25th May 1947, cited in Margaret A. Simons, ed. *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 313.
[7] Walter Kaufman, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 26.
[8] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Americans and Their Myths', *The Nation*, October 18, 1947 (accessed 08/01/15 from: http://www.thenation.com/article/americans-and-their-myths).
[9] F.R. Karl, *American Fictions, 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 3.
[10] Ibid. p. 8.

American readers with an accessible overview of existentialism at a time when Sartre in particular was literarily fashionable.[11] The literary vogue enjoyed by Sartre and Camus in the U.S., and the influence of their fiction in particular, had an impact on novels of this period, generally urban fiction, featuring disaffected and alienated protagonists, searching for selfhood and self-knowledge. Perhaps most notable among these were Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), the latter written in exile in Paris, saturated with Sartre and Kierkegaard, its title a critical homage to Camus' *The Outsider* (1942). Such novels, however, tended to be seen as a kind of deracinated existentialism, a poor imitation of the original novels. Others, such as Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947) and *Seize the Day* (1956), and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), would presumably be considered by Karl as emblematic of the American 'failed existentialism' of this period.

However, it was in the suburban rather than urban fiction of the 1960s and later decades of the twentieth century that the influence of Sartrean existentialism was most profound: Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Joyce Carol Oates' *Expensive People* (1968), John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969), John Updike's 'Rabbit' tetralogy, Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), Richard Ford's 'Bascombe' novels, Raymond Carver's short stories, Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place* (1980), and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and A*loft* (2004), are all examples of a kind of 'American existentialism', one that could hardly be dismissed as simply an adulterated and imitative failure. All were influenced by European existentialism (many by Sartre), whether directly or indirectly, and all explored existentialist themes in the context of American suburbia, its liminality and indeterminacy providing the requisite cultural and existential disequilibrium (yet also, paradoxically, an ostensible orderliness and uniformity) to explore such themes.

In the chapters that follow I will discuss these themes and argue that they can be understood using a Sartrean analysis, based on the ontological system Sartre developed in *Being and Nothingness*, published in 1943 (and in several other mostly incomplete texts). Key Sartrean concepts will be explained and explored in the discussion of these suburban novels and short stories, most importantly perhaps the notion of bad faith, "a lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness," a response to the anguish of ontological freedom. Sartre explains this anguish – and the

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[11] George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

freedom that engenders it – as arising from the existence of 'being-for-itself', as distinct from 'being-in-itself'. Being-in-itself is complete and without possibilities, and characterises inanimate objects (but also non-human beings), which are in a fixed and permanent state, whereas being-for-itself, by virtue of consciousness (and specifically self-reflective consciousness) is in a perpetual state of existential flux, of change and instability. Consciousness, the defining characteristic of being-for-itself, embodies a lack, since it is necessarily separate from the being it is conscious of; put another way, "if being is present to itself it is because it is not wholly itself," so that "consciousness is not what it is," a state which engenders existential anguish. What Sartre calls the 'project' of bad faith originates in the desire for an impossible ontological unity, for "being-in-itself-for-itself."[12] For Sartre contingency, "the brute fact of being *this* for-itself in the world," without causal necessity, only possibility, is an inescapable cause of anguish, one that the for-itself will (seemingly inevitably) seek to assuage through bad faith, to provide some kind of (bogus) causal foundation in itself.[13] There is a tension in being caused by the coexistence of its facticity, "the for-itself's necessary connection with the in-itself, hence with the world and its own past," and its inevitable transcendence, "the process whereby the for-itself goes beyond the given in a further project of itself."[14] The two aspects of being are ontologically intertwined, as Jonathan Webber explains, since facticity can be understood to include "one's character as well as one's past and material body and surroundings, where this character consists in the set of projects that one is pursuing and that one can alter," while transcendence is "the ability to move beyond one's current situation into a new one." Although "one's facticity includes one's essence," this should not be understood as a 'nature', since it is freely chosen; consequently, "because this essence is not a nature…one can transcend one's facticity freely."[15] Also key to Sartre's ontology as discussed in this study is the notion of 'the look', others' objectifying conception of us, through which we become 'being-for-others', our subjectivity inevitably denied as we are reified, ascribed immutable natures or characters, again exemplifying bad faith. The only means of avoiding bad faith for Sartre is the continuous acceptance and valorisation of our inevitable ontological freedom, in our unstable equilibrium of freely chosen selfhood, which is a means of achieving authenticity, though this must be 'reacquired' in each new situation precisely because of the disequilibrium of being. The protagonists of the

[12] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p.629, p.77, p. 62, p.552.
[13] Ibid. p. 630.
[14] Ibid. p. 631, p. 635.
[15] Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 76.

texts I discuss all exemplify bad faith, though in markedly different ways, and all seek to bolster that bad faith in the false refuge of suburbia.

The authors of the suburban novels and short stories discussed in this study were particularly influenced by 'literary existentialism' – by Beckett, Kafka, Camus, and by Sartre himself, though they were also influenced by 'non-literary' existentialist philosophy. Kafka was probably the most influential of the 'literary existentialists' for many of the writers I discuss, and certainly for Joseph Heller and John Updike. This may be attributable in part to what Morris Dickstein calls "the Kafka vogue" after the war amongst American writers, in some of whose novels "the public world disappears completely and we are plunged into a vortex, a metaphysical abyss."[16] The reason for this vogue, though, as George Cotkin notes, was that Kafka's writing expressed "the anguish of modernity, the alienation of modern men and women" and "addressed anxiety and alienation in a spare language while confronting the faceless bureaucratic horror of modern existence."[17] There was a cultural receptivity to Sartre's ideas in the late 1940s and early 1950s because "at the moment when French existentialism arrived in New York, American intellectuals were confronting existential themes through the work of novelists Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky."[18] The result was that, as Frederick R. Karl argues, "Kafka's presence" was "reinforced…by French existentialism, the general ideas rather than precisely the fiction of Sartre, de Beauvoir or Camus."[19] In the 1950s and subsequent decades, however, Sartre's non-literary writing did not simply 'reinforce' Kafka's literary influence – it provided a kind of philosophical framework in its own right, quite distinct from the influence of Kafka, particularly for many suburban novelists of the 1960s and later. These American writers often came to Sartre by way of Kafka, who, as Walter Kaufman points out, "stands between Nietzsche and the existentialists," depicting in his fiction "the godless world of Sartre, the 'absurd' world or Camus."[20]

Camus' notion of the absurd is described by Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian as "a condition that results when man, seeking happiness and reason, confronts a

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[16] Morris Dickstein, 'The New Fiction: From the Home Front to the 1950s' in Sacvan Bercovitch, ed. *The Cambridge History of American Literature Volume 7: Prose Writing, 1940-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 145, p. 147.

[17] George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 108.

[18] Ibid. p. 108.

[19] F.R. Karl, *American Fictions, 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1983), p.8.

[20] Walter Kaufman, *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1956 (New York: Plume, 2004), p. 143.

meaningless universe," the result of "the implicit antagonism between the individual world and the collective world in which both strain against each other without the possibility of either satisfactory embracement or resolution."[21] This notion, expressed a little more succinctly (and poetically) by Camus himself in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) as the consequence of "the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world," between "the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart," is entirely consonant with Kafka's existential vision, as depicted in such works as *Metamorphosis* (1915) and *The Trial* (1925).[22] What appealed to American authors in particular, though, as Cotkin suggests, was "existentialism's preference for the concrete over the abstract, the contingent over the absolute."[23] This description could apply equally well to Sartre's existentialism and to Camus' absurdism, but it was Sartre's more fully developed, systematic, philosophy, and the primacy of authenticity and freedom within it, that proved especially influential. In an article for *The Nation* in February 1946 entitled 'French Existentialism', Hannah Arendt contrasted the philosophies of Camus and Sartre for an American readership, noting that Camus expounds "a philosophy of absurdity, whereas Sartre seems to be working toward some new positive philosophy and even a new humanism." Camus rejects the label 'existentialist' "because for him the absurdity does not lie in man as such or in the world as such but only in their being thrown together," so that life "must be lived as absurdity – lived, that is, in a kind of proud defiance…constantly rebelling against all its conditions" and "constantly refusing consolations." For Camus, Arendt argues, "all that remains, all that one can say yes to, is chance itself, the *hazard roi* which has apparently played at putting man and world together."[24] Camus thus stresses contingency, but does not explore (or possibly disavows) its implications for existential freedom, of crucial importance in Sartre's ontological system. As Arendt notes, for Sartre, what separates things in the world from the human being (even though absurdity constitutes "the essence of things as well as of man") is that "things are unequivocally identical with themselves, whereas man – because he sees and knows that he sees, believes and knows that he believes – bears within his consciousness a negation which makes it impossible for him ever to become one with himself." The primacy of consciousness, which has "the germ of negation in it," means "man is a creator," since "if man becomes aware of his own consciousness and its tremendous creative possibilities, and renounces the longing to

[21] Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian, eds. *The Existential Imagination*, 1963 (London: Picador, 1973), p. 14, pp. 14-15.
[22] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 32, p. 26.
[23] George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 110.
[24] Hannah Arendt, 'French Existentialism', *The Nation*, February 23, 1946, p. 27.

be identical with himself as a thing is, he realizes that he depends upon nothing and nobody outside himself and that he can be free, the master of his own destiny."[25] This is arguably *the* crucial distinction between Sartre and Camus (certainly in their early writing), and, as John Foley observes, "Camus seems to have had serious reservations about the implications of Sartre's depiction of solipsistic, absurd freedom."[26] Sartre, though, did not think that solipsism was inevitable within his philosophy, and in fact thought it could be countered through that philosophy.[27] He also suggested, Foley notes, that Camus had misinterpreted his "conception of, absolute freedom…as an assertion of absolute political freedom, rather than absolute ontological freedom."[28] While the notion of contingency, central to both Camus' and Sartre's philosophy, became influential in American literature, it was Sartre's concern with the problem of solipsism and its relation to authenticity and freedom that engaged American writers more fully.

Joseph Heller, whose novel *Something Happened* (1974) is discussed in Chapters One and Two, acknowledged that he was strongly influenced by Kafka, Beckett, and Camus (though he also has the protagonist of *Something Happened* cite Kierkegaard).[29] He told Richard B. Sale in an interview in 1970 (by which time he had been working on *Something Happened* for nearly eight years) that

> I read Beckett and Dostoevsky because I want to absorb their language. I want to be immersed in that type of expression… I read *The Fall* again; the third person narration there is similar to what I'm doing. I read *The Stranger* [*The Outsider*] when I was working on the first part of the book.[30]

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[25] Ibid. p. 27.

[26] John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2008), p. 109.

[27] This is discussed in Chapter Two.

[28] John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2008), p. 122. The distinction between ontological freedom and political freedom would become of crucial importance in Sartre's later writing, in which he attempted to reconcile his existentialism with his Marxism. In this thesis, however, I am concerned with his early philosophy, developed principally in *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

[29] Bob Slocum says of a former girlfriend that "she had never heard of Camus, Copernicus, or Søren Kierkegaard (the three big *K*'s, ha,ha)" (p.443) and of his wife that "she has never heard of Copernicus or Kierkegaard either, although she may have heard of Camus because he was killed in an expensive sports car." (p.449).

[30] Richard B. Sale, 'An Interview in New York with Joseph Heller', 1970, in Adam J. Sorkin, ed. *Conversations with Joseph Heller*: Literary Conversations Series (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 88.

In an interview with Per Winther in 1976, two years after the novel's publication, he suggested in reference to *Something Happened* that

> The bleakness of Beckett exceeds even mine. The difference is of course that I'm trying to make this horrible grotesque life and deal with it in thoroughly familiar terms, whereas Beckett doesn't and Kafka doesn't…So I try to deal with a world as horrifying as it is to Kafka's characters but to keep that world familiar.[31]

John Updike, whose fiction is discussed in three of the chapters in this study, also cited the influence of existentialist writers on his work. He told Jeff Campbell in 1976 that in their philosophising "Kierkegaard and I might be tedious in the same way...[in] this constant turning it over and seeing the opposite side and expounding it," and when then asked by Campbell if he shared Sartre's "affirmation of man's radical discontinuity with nature and his radical aloneness," Updike replied that he agreed that "there is a radical jump between one's individual sense of me – I – and any other kind of reality." He stated, in relation to Kierkegaard, that "what the existentialists picked up was his insistence on the importance of the individual."[32] In an earlier interview in 1973 Updike told Frank Gado that from Kierkegaard "it's not much of a jump to Camus and Sartre in whom I find the same gravity of moral concern persisting even though they had done away with the theism."[33] Another important influence, as for Heller, was Kafka, who for Updike "seemed to strike an essential chord," when he read him at the age of eighteen, because "Kafka suddenly opens up the desolation, the spiritual unrest which we all feel somehow and are unable to express."[34] Consequently, in "trying to present human experience," and specifically in *Rabbit Redux* (1971), Harry Angstrom's "anarchistic…search for infinite freedom" (a search in which violence is "organically evolved" from the "distinct reality" of his "individual sense of me"), Updike considered "existential philosophy more useful…than the more social views of humanity."[35]

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[31] Per Winther, 'Joseph Heller on *Something Happened*: An Interview', *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 8 (No.1, 1976), pp.17-31, p.30.
[32] Jeff Campbell, 'Interview with John Updike' in James Plath, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), p. 97, p. 98.
[33] Frank Gado (ed) *First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing* (Schenectady: Union College Press, 1973), pp. 88-89.
[34] Willi Winkler, 'A Conversation with John Updike', 1985, in James Plath, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), p. 172.
[35] Michael Sragow, 'Updike Redux', 1971, all in James Plath, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), p. 62;
Jeff Campbell, 'Interview with John Updike' in James Plath, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), p. 98.

Joyce Carol Oates has described her writing as being in part "workings out of remarks of Pascal, and also Kafka, and Kierkegaard," but also commented that she didn't know what free will meant, suggesting little familiarity with Sartre's arguments concerning ontology in *Being and Nothingness.*[36] Yet her concerns are Sartrean (there are four references to Sartre in her 1968 novel *Expensive People,* examined in Chapter Three); when asked about "existential matters…doubting one's existence" by an interviewer in 1982, she replied, "We believe we exist in terms of other people, our surroundings, our activities, or our environment. If these are altered or denied us – what then…Is personality nearly all cultural – external trappings?"[37] Ann Beattie cites Beckett as a major influence, the "whole Beckettian thing" of characters floundering and unable to act (which she described as a predicament in which each one thinks "I can't stay and I can't go")[38] so that, as Christina Murphy suggests, Beattie's characters, like Beckett's "seem to wait, to long; ironically, [and] even in the process of waiting, they do not know what to seek or what can save them."[39] Beattie views her writing as making "some attempt to grapple with that alienation...while at the same time not giving answers, because I don't think there are answers to give."[40] In *Falling in Place* (1980) there are repeated references to Camus' *The Outsider* (rather than to Beckett), which prefigure a violence comparable to that in Camus' novel. John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969) also has references to Camus, though Cheever did not explicitly acknowledge the influence of existentialism on his writing (critics generally assumed such an influence, however, viewing the novel as a literary representation of Sartrean existentialism).[41] Beattie's and Cheever's novels are considered in Chapter Three of this study.

Of all the writers whose work is discussed in this thesis, however, Walker Percy was probably the most extensively and profoundly influenced by existentialism, both

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[36] Linda Kuehl, 'An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates', 1969, in Lee Milazzo, ed. *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), p. 8, p.11.
[37] Leif Sjoberg, 'An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates', 1982, in Lee Milazzo, ed. *Conversations with Joyce carol Oates*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), p.102.
[38] Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'A Conversation with Ann Beattie', 1982, in Dawn Trouard, ed. *Conversations with Ann Beattie*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 43.
[39] Christina Murphy, *Ann Beattie*: Twayne's United States Authors Series (Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p. 103.
[40] Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'A Conversation with Ann Beattie', 1982, in Dawn Trouard, ed. *Conversations with Ann Beattie*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 35.
[41] Reviews of *Bullet Park* are discussed in Chapter Three.

Kierkegaardian and Sartrean. Explaining his inspiration for *The Moviegoer* (1960), discussed in Chapter Four, Percy told Zoltan Abadi-Nagy in an interview in 1987 for *The Paris Review*, that

> The spark might have come from Sartre's Roquentin in *Nausea* sitting in that library watching the self-taught man or sitting in that café watching the waiter. Why not have a younger, less perverse Roquentin, a Southerner of a certain sort, and put him down in a movie house in Gentilly, a middle-class district of New Orleans, not unlike Sartre's Bouville.[42]

In the same interview he spoke of "frantic selves" who "grope for any mask at hand to disguise their nakedness," and suggested that "Sartre's various descriptions of bad faith in role-playing are marvellous phenomenological renderings of this quest of the self for some, any, kind of habiliment."[43] In an earlier interview in 1974 Percy told Bradley R. Dewey that his "main debt to Kierkegaard is the use of his tremendous philosophical and theological insight as a basis to build on."[44] He acknowledged this debt with a quote from *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) as the epigraph for *The Moviegoer* ('...the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair.') Richard Ford, whose Bascombe novels I discuss in Chapter Two, has acknowledged the influence of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* in various interviews, most recently in 2007 in an interview with Brian Duffy. Discussing his reasons for choosing the particular narrative style and focus of *The Sportswriter* (1986) Ford claimed he was

> In the grip of…several books that I had read that I really liked: *The Moviegoer* by Walker Percy, *Something Happened* by Joseph Heller, and *A Fan's Notes* by Frederick Exley. Those books were told in the first person…and they just hugely affected me. So I was just in the grip of those books that I liked very much, and what I did with my own once I made that narrative decision just came quite fortuitously.[45]

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[42] Zoltan Abadi-Nagy, 'The Art of Fiction No. 97: Walker Percy', *The Paris Review*, No. 103, Summer 1987.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Bradley R. Dewey, 'Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview', *Journal of Religion* 54 (July 1974): 288, cited in Jac Tharpe, *Walker Percy*: Twayne's United States Authors Series (Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers, 1983), p. 5.

[45] Brain Duffy, *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 347.

In addition to this indirect influence, Ford has also repeatedly acknowledged the direct influence of existentialism on his writing. In the same interview he stated that "all of us American novelists are required to read Kierkegaard," his own reading most apparent in Frank Bascombe's references to Kierkegaard in *The Lay of the Land* (2006), the third of Ford's Bascombe novels.[46] Frank suggests that an acquaintance knows "better than Kierkegaard" that "the human species isn't supposed to go down willingly," and he describes the suburban "Haddam gang element" as communicating through "smirky graffiti from Sartre, Kierkegaard and martyred Russian poets," while early on in the novel he recognises the risk of succumbing to "despair that knows it's despair," an oblique reference to Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*.[47] In the interview with Duffy Ford also spoke of "fulfilling Sartre's requirement… to take something that was part of life but not noticed, give it a name, [which] elevates important bits of our existence to the level where we can think about them. That's what I did, or had Frank do…I'm just fulfilling Sartre's requirement."[48] Ford also suggested in an earlier interview with Elinor Ann Walker that his writing could be considered optimistic in the "Sartrean sense that to write about the darkest human possibility is itself an act of optimism because it proves that those things can be thought about."[49]

Three of the writers I discuss have not directly acknowledged the influence of existentialism, though their work does contain starkly existentialist themes, and often includes (whether implicit or explicit) recognition of the historical and cultural influence of Sartrean existentialism. In Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961) a suburbanite protagonist has a delusional sense of himself as "as an intense, nicotine-stained Jean-Paul-Sartre sort of man."[50] In Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft* (2004) the narrator recalls his father "recklessly quoting Sartre and Camus" and goading his Catholic mother into fury by referring to "the then recently announced death of God."[51] Raymond Carver was ambivalent about existentialism and its influence on his writing; in an interview in 1986 he told John Alton, "I don't feel I'm emphasizing the dark side of things. I don't call myself an existentialist and I don't feel like an existentialist – whatever that feels like." Carver described the conflicts in his stories as "domestic" but acknowledged that

[46] Ibid. p. 341.
[47] Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 2006 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), p. 89, p. 238, p. 76.
[48] Brain Duffy, *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 346.
[49] Elinor Ann Walker, 'An Interview with Richard Ford' in Huey Guagliardo, ed. *Conversations with Richard Ford* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 144.
[50] Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 1961 (London: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 23.
[51] Chang-rae Lee, *Aloft,* 2004 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), p. 44.

"domestic conflicts can quickly escalate into existential conflicts," and that the tone of his stories was "grave…and sometimes dark."[52]

The influence of existentialism on US culture (from the 1940s to the 1960s) has been explored in only two studies, Ann Fulton's *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945 – 1963* (1999), and George Cotkin's *Existential America* (2003). *Apostles of Sartre* focuses on the reception of Sartre's ideas amongst American philosophers rather than their impact on literature or US culture more generally. Within this fairly disparate group of scholars, Fulton includes Walter Kaufman, and also Hazel Barnes, who authored the first translation into English of *Being and Nothingness* (1943) in 1956. While Fulton does not discuss in any great depth how Sartrean existentialism related to what might be termed 'American philosophy' (within which the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in particular, but also of Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, would be particularly relevant), she does acknowledge that among philosophers there was an awareness of the similarities between 'Sartreanism' and William James' form of pragmatism which, she suggests, was regarded as "somehow quintessentially American."[53] Reaction to Sartre's existentialism, though, with its emphasis on individual freedom and the contingency of human existence, was generally negative in the 1940s. Fulton points out that Sartre's plays and novels, such as *Nausea* (1938), *The Flies* (1947), *No Exit* (1947), *The Age of Reason* (1947), and *The Reprieve* (1947), were translated into English, but not his philosophical works (until 1956), with the result that his ideas were seen as representing a 'literary school' rather than a philosophy. By the beginning of the 1950s however, Sartre's ideas had gained more credence; Roy Sellars, a key figure in American critical realism, noted in his review of 'Existentialism', the similarity in Emerson's and Sartre's notions of the self, while Marjorie Grene's *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism* (1948), was the first American scholarly book devoted solely to Sartre's philosophy. The two most significant factors, though, in the popularisation of Sartre's ideas were the publication of Walter Kaufman's anthology, *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, in 1956, and Hazel Barnes' translation of *Being and Nothingness*, published in the same year. Sartre's theories were also contextualised more clearly within the history of phenomenology and of existentialism itself, with a keener understanding of how his ideas differed from those of Kierkegaard

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[52] John Alton, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Literature: An Interview with Raymond Carver', in Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, eds. *Conversations with Raymond Carver* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), p. 159, p. 154, p. 156.
[53] Ann Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945 – 1963* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 3.

and Nietzsche in particular, though also from those of Heidegger, informed additionally by William Barrett's *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (1958). In a less rarefied environment, the university campus, Sartre gained popularity with students coming of age in the early 1960s because of the primacy in his thinking of individual freedom, responsibility and authenticity, though the full ontological significance of these concepts may not have been appreciated (or even considered). Fulton suggests that Sartre's appeal in America was limited to academics and to the period from the 1940s to the late 1960s. While she acknowledges that Sartre's existentialism was initially viewed as a literary phenomenon, and she notes his admiration for Hemingway, Faulkner and Dos Passos, this is the only reference to US fiction in her study. Yet the influence of Sartre's ideas on American novels and short stories was pronounced and profound, from the 1960s to the end of the twentieth century. Fulton's research focus is on the reception of Sartre's ideas within American academia, and she is not concerned with their literary impact, though it is precisely this impact that was the more significant, and lasting, as this thesis will seek to demonstrate.

George Cotkin's study presents a broader historical overview of existential philosophy in the US than *Apostles of Sartre*, tracing precursors to European existentialism, which, Cotkin argues, rendered US culture especially receptive to Kierkegaardian, and later Sartrean and Camusian ideas. Cotkin sees clergyman Walter Lowrie's interest in, and translation of, Kierkegaard's writing as the most significant event in the introduction of European existentialism to America. His principal contributions to the popularisation of Kierkegaard were his biography in 1938 and later his *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (1942), both intended to be accessible to a wide audience with no former knowledge of the subject matter. This popularisation occurred extremely rapidly and with the end of World War Two, the beginning of the Cold War, and the development of atomic weapons, "a discourse of anxiety exploded into the vocabulary of everyday life," at a time when Reinhold Niebuhr's moral and political ideas were highly influential, published in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941), and presenting a worldview paralleling that of Kierkegaard, and founded on "a recognition of the infinite distance between man and God, and an acute sense of anxiety." Rollo May's *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1950) acknowledged the importance of this particular historical and political period in fostering a generalised anxiety, but regarded it as a fundamental ontological state and believed its debilitating effects could be overcome through "self-realization and personal transformation," marking the beginning of what would become existential psychotherapy. Kierkegaard was also co-opted for anti-Soviet political ends, with Whittaker Chambers' *Witness* (1952),

exhorting its readers to make the "either/or choice between faith in communism versus faith in God."[54] It was, though, against the cultural backdrop of the burgeoning consumerism and affluence of the mid to late 1950s, Cotkin argues, that existentialism gained its greatest sway over American intellectual life, but now more through the popularisation of Sartre than of Kierkegaard. Like Fulton, Cotkin identifies Hazel Barnes' translation of *Being and Nothingness* as crucial in this, but he also stresses the impact of her later work *An Existentialist Ethics* (1967), which attempted to illustrate the relevance and consequences of such ethics for contemporary societal problems. Cotkin claims that it took scarcely more than a decade for existentialism to be transformed from "vogue to canon," its influence on fiction of this period most notable in the work of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Norman Mailer.[55] By the mid to late 1960s however, Albert Camus' popularity was growing with young Americans, for whom Camus' existential (if not 'existentialist', as he claimed) philosophy developed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Rebel* (1951), resonated strongly. For this generation of college students, Camus' insistence on the need to confront the human condition as inherently alienated and absurd, and, perhaps more importantly, on the concomitant necessity of undaunted rebellion (both existentially and politically) was inspiring. While Cotkin's study is broader in scope than Fulton's, it similarly concludes that the influence of existentialism on American culture diminished rapidly in the late 1960s. Cotkin views the American existentialist novel as a phenomenon of the 1950s and 60s, and as inherently urban, with the frenetic, harsh and dangerous environment of the city highlighting alienation and precipitating existential crises. Yet, as I will argue, the influence of Sartrean existentialism was most marked in US novels of the suburbs, and it became more, not less, significant as the 1960s ended, as suburban fiction adopted and adapted Sartre's ideas to create a peculiarly American existential vision.

There has, though, been little, if any, critical consideration of the influence of Sartre's philosophy on American suburban fiction. Catherine Jurca's *White Diaspora: The Suburbs and the Twentieth-Century Novel* (2001), Robert Beuka's *SuburbiaNation* (2004) and Bernice M. Murphy's *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009) discuss the symbolic significance of the suburbs, though each focuses on

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[54] George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 55, p. 61, p. 65, p. 75.

[55] Ibid. p. 135. Mailer's romanticised notion of societal transgression in 'The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster', published in *Dissent* in 1957, in which he writes of "the American existentialist – the hipster, the man who knows that…our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State…or with a slow death by conformity," has little foundation in existentialist philosophy, Sartrean or otherwise.

suburbia primarily as emblematic of the American Dream, or its evisceration. Jurca's study is concerned principally with US fiction of the suburbs from the early twentieth century to the 1950s, and she traces a thematic pattern in this literature, namely the (disingenuous) reconfiguring of "the rights and privileges" of living in suburbia as "spiritual, cultural, and political problems of displacement, in which the middle class is imagined to have as much or more to do with subjugation as with social dominance." Jurca suggests that Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1922) marks the beginning of the change in the literary conception of the suburban house as being synonymous with a comfortable, emotionally and spiritually restorative home, to its portrayal as an alienating and disempowering site of disenfranchisement; suburbanites, she contends, are now shown to be dispossessed, rendered spiritually homeless in novels with "ubiquitous complaints about mass production, standardization, dullness, and conformity," and which disavow "the very real privileges that the suburb has offered" and "generate a twentieth-century model of white middle-classness based counterintuitively, and, indeed, incredibly, on the experience of victimization." Jurca locates this sense of homelessness in what she sees as an "irresolvable psychic split" for fictional suburbanites between their enjoyment of the increasingly affluent materialism of their environment, and their anxiety about the spiritually deleterious and increasingly debilitating consequences of the standardization and conformity that accompany it. By way of contrast, and to point up what she considers to be the mendacity of privileged white middle-class suburbanites' arrogant, self-pitying claim to dispossession, Jurca discusses Richard Wright's urban novel *Native Son* (1940) and the black protagonist Bigger Thomas' thwarted desire for self-determination and the freedom to live where and in the way he wants. *Native Son*, she argues, highlights the fact that white people's residential freedom, whether they choose to live in a city or in a suburb, is "enabled and underwritten by the constraint of others."[56] In her brief discussion of the post-war novel of the suburbs, featuring "sanctimonious suburbanites," Jurca suggests there is little change in their portrayal in novels of the 1950s and 1960s, other than in the reflection of their authors' anxiety over the loss of an elevated social position, exemplified by Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1960).[57] Jurca regards suburban

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[56] Catherine Jurca, White *Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.4, p.6, p47, p. 103.

[57] Andrew Hoberek reiterates Jurca's argument in *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (2005), suggesting that "whereas the prewar generation could comfortably distinguish themselves from the philistinism of a small-business owner like George Babbitt, their postwar successors found themselves in the position of organization men par excellence, their employment symbolizing the ultimate degradation of creative mental labour within the white-

fiction of later decades of the twentieth century as merely continuations of the tradition of "undercut conceit, beleaguerment, and self-pity that has characterised the white diaspora in the suburban novel," the familiar disingenuous self-indulgence and comfortable bourgeois alienation of privileged white (mostly) male writers.[58]

Jurca's assertion that suburbia is generally a privileged space, affording its comparatively affluent inhabitants a material comfort and well-being not enjoyed by those outside such an environment, is surely irrefutable. It is not clear, however, why the relative economic prosperity and security of the protagonists of the suburban fiction Jurca so thoroughly disparages should preclude spiritual and existential anguish – indeed, these could be seen as providing the psychic space for such anguish to manifest itself, in an environment that is, contradictorily, culturally and physically amorphous and changeable, yet also rigidly normative. Implicit in her analysis is the assumption that alienation is a social, political and economic phenomenon, not an existential one, and that the anguish of suburbanites can only be an affectation. For Jurca Bigger Thomas' alienation is real, verifiable by his societal status as outsider, marginalised and oppressed, and it can only be overcome *socially,* in the 'community' of the similarly disenfranchised in prison. The implication of much of the suburban literature of alienation, however, is that it *cannot* be fully overcome socially and economically, since it is not solely social or economic; it cannot be explained in terms purely of anxieties over economic and social status and their perceived precariousness, a notion Jurca would surely dismiss as risible. Yet, in downplaying the thematic diversity and nuanced narratives of mid to late twentieth-century novels of the suburbs, her analysis elides significant developments in a body of fiction that necessarily charted a social, cultural and environmental phenomenon that was in a state of flux and indeterminacy. It is perhaps not surprising then that such fiction, as I will argue, evinced a consistent fixation with existential – and existentialist – concerns, displaying a heightening of existential anguish.

While Robert Beuka's *SuburbiaNation* does discuss mid to late twentieth-century suburban fiction (and films) in some depth, his analytical focus is on portrayals of suburbia as "the material counterpart" to a drive toward "cultural homogenization." Beuka argues that John Updike's *Rabbit* tetralogy traces "the collapse of the pastoral

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collar workplace." (*The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005, p.21).

[58] Catherine Jurca, White *Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.133, p. 168.

dream of the suburbs into an unsettling space of homogenous facelessness."[59] Like Jurca, he views "the failure of the suburban dream" depicted in fiction of the 1950 and 1960s as indicative of social and economic anxieties, and imperilled suburban masculinity in particular. Beuka's chronological analysis begins with a comparison of F. Scott Fitzgerald's depiction of Long Island exurbia in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, released in 1946. While the former concerns wealthy exurbanites of 1920s New York and the latter portrays middle class life in a small town during the Great Depression and World War Two, "each text is set in an environment in transition, and each positions a nostalgia for landscapes of the past in the face of the onrush of modernity, figured in the form of suburbanization."[60] Beuka views John Cheever's stories published between the late 1940s and the late 1960s as primarily reflecting "larger societal concerns over the relationship between economic position and social 'place'" in a period of middle class expansion. In the course of these two decades Cheever's characters change from city dwellers living economically precarious lives to wealthy but anxious exurbanites, yet both are plagued by insecurities concerning social position and status. As Beuka suggests, in the 1970s the oppression experienced by women in the suburbs was documented more than in previous decades, as exemplified by Ann Beattie's novel *Falling in Place* (1980) and Bryan Forbes' 1975 film adaptation of Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972). By the 1990s the suburbs had ceased to be the exclusive preserve of the white middle class, as reflected in Gloria Naylor's novel *Linden Hills* (1985) and Reginald Hudlin's film *House Party* (1990), both about African American suburbanites. They offer contrasting views of this experience, the former presenting a dystopian landscape in which the extreme materialism of the residents results in the dissolution not only of a sense of community, but also of a sense of racial identity itself (and even of self), while in the latter "the suburban terrain is valorized as representing the very promise of African American achievement."[61]

Although Beuka implicitly acknowledges that the crises faced by these suburbanites are existential in nature, since they concern a malleable sense of self and of identity, he considers such identities to be culturally determined, suggesting there is no self that is separate from its cultural construction – a view seemingly in accordance with postmodern theories of identity. He is right to stress, however, the importance of

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[59] Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscapes in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 2, p. 119.
[60] Ibid. p 136, p. 26.
[61] Ibid. p. 69, p. 197.

landscape in this construction, as a physical and conceptual phenomenon, and specifically the significance of the suburb as "both an idealized and insular landscape," in contrast to the common "perception of suburbia as a culturally flat, static space," a perception shown to be false in the texts he discusses. It is clear, as he suggests, that the interpretive power of this concept of the suburban landscape has not been fully explored, and in analysing it as a marker and indication of socio-economic and cultural changes he provides a valid, if partial, account of its significance.[62] The importance of the suburb as fraught and mutable existential space is not clearly acknowledged in his analysis, yet in many of the texts he discusses it is foregrounded – for example in Updike's *Rabbit Redux* and Beattie's *Falling in Place*, and in Cheever's exurbia of *Bullet Park* – as an environment exemplifying existential contingency. As I will argue in this thesis, fictive suburbia is often for American writers the liminal environment in which existential themes can be most effectively addressed and developed.

Bernice M. Murphy shares Jurca's and Beuka's view that post-war US fiction of the suburbs reflected white middle class anxieties over rapid lifestyle changes. She identifies the Suburban Gothic as "a sub-genre of the wider American gothic tradition that often dramatises anxieties arising from the mass suburbanisation of the United States." Murphy analyses novelistic and cinematic depictions of suburbia as a dystopian landscape besieged by aliens, androids, zombies, witches and vampires, haunted by ghosts, and stalked by serial killers. In the various novels and films she discusses, the suburban dream of a "utopian setting…insulated from the dangers of the outside world" has become "a place of entrapment and unhappiness…in which the most dangerous threats come from *within*, not from without." In the post-war culture of the 1950s mass suburbia was an ideal environment for fictional depictions of anxieties about depersonalisation because of its uncertain geographical status, "falling between two geographical stools," and being "an in-between space by definition: located beyond the heart of a town or city, yet still existing within its urban orbit."[63] This indeterminacy is of pivotal importance in her analysis, and equally so in the chapters that follow in this study, since anguish arises in "the gaps between what something is and what it is not," foregrounding questions about identity and selfhood. Like Beuka and Jurca, Murphy groups the texts she discusses both chronologically and thematically, beginning with Shirley Jackson's and Richard Matheson's fiction, which shares the same concerns with "paranoia, entrapment, domesticity, neurosis,

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[62] Ibid. p. 10, p. 21.
[63] Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2, p. 3, p. 4.

isolation, the redefinition of the meaning of the terms 'normal' and 'abnormal' and the exploration of the dark side of American society during the 1950s." Murphy also traces the development in fiction, film and television of the 'suburban witch', as exemplified in Fritz Leiber's *Conjure Wife* (1943), published as a full-length novel in 1952 and George A Romero's film *Jack's Wife* (1972), which present suburban domesticity as a form of entrapment and submission within an oppressive environment and culture. The sense of suburban menace and otherness is even more marked, Murphy argues, with depictions of (literal) dehumanisation in Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972). In the suburban haunted house, environment and inhabitant are also inextricably linked, as in *The Amityville Horror* (1977), Anne Rivers Siddons' novel *The House Next Door* (1978), and *Poltergeist* (1982), while in horror films featuring serial killers, such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Peter Bogdanovich's 1968 film *Targets*, and John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), suburbia becomes "a valid site for narratives in which apparently inexplicable and random acts of violence take place," with the family itself now "a powerful locus of horror."[64]

Murphy's study highlights a facet of suburbia that is of central importance – its indeterminate, liminal status as a fictional landscape, which is acknowledged but not explored in Beuka's *SuburbiaNation,* and not addressed at all in Jurca's *White Diaspora*. She rightly emphasises the unsettling effect this has on suburbanites, the sense of nebulousness and inchoateness that they feel, and the attendant unease, and often dread, precipitating crises of personal identity. She also recognises the seemingly contradictory tendency of suburban culture to restrict, delimit, isolate and homogenise, though this can perhaps best be understood as, at least in part, a reaction to the anguish provoked by this environment's liminality, its indeterminacy. Crucially, she identifies the sense of the Other, and of otherness, as a constant theme, with ever growing alienation as the suburb becomes increasingly interiorised, and the threat is not just from within suburbia, but from within the self, oneself *become the Other*, in inversions and reversals of identity. Since Murphy's study is concerned with representations of the suburban gothic and their socio-cultural significance she does not explore the existential themes of the novels and films she discusses (the word 'existential' appears only once, and only in the index in reference to 'existential crisis'). Yet this subgenre, like the urban gothic subgenre at the end of the nineteenth century – exemplified by R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886),

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[64] Ibid. p. 27, p. 142, p. 136.

Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) – while generally interpreted as a barometer of societal anxiety in a period of unprecedented change, also addresses existential themes and problematizes the notion of selfhood. This is key in much fiction of the suburbs in the second half of the twentieth century, not just in gothicised fiction, and it is this ramified theme that the current study will explore.

While existing studies, then, do acknowledge the dystopian bleakness of many novels of the US suburbs, they focus on their social, economic and cultural significance, rather than explicitly on their existential themes. Seemingly lacking the intensity and starkness of the urban novels by writers such as Bellow, Wright and Ellison cited earlier, suburban fiction is considered to be primarily social commentary and satire, if in the case of suburban gothicism, violent satire. These studies seem at times, though, to conflate the 1950s sociological critiques of the newly burgeoning mass suburbia with the novels depicting the lives and preoccupations of its inhabitants. William H. Whyte was one of the most influential social critics of this period, as Jurca, Beuka and Murphy all acknowledge, and his belief that the suburbs encouraged an oppressive banality, a fearful conformity, was echoed in much of the social commentary of the time. His study of Park Forrest, Illinois, published as *The Organization Man* (1956) found the inhabitants of this suburb to be inordinately conservative and conformist, their characters shaped and altered by corporate bureaucracy, the new consumer economy, and the homogeneity of suburbia itself, both architecturally (identical 'cookie-cutter' homes with picture windows in an otherwise largely empty landscape) and culturally. The new suburbs were of course also racially homogenous (though this was not a focus of Whyte's study) since the building company Levitts refused to sell their houses to black people for twenty years after the war, a policy that was not unusually racist for building firms at the time. Whyte was critical of the loss of individualism in the supposedly classless suburbs, and of their residents, who were in thrall to the organization (i.e. the increasingly powerful bureaucracies of post-war life), who were on "a vain quest for a utopian equilibrium" and who were suffering from "the soft-minded denial that there is a conflict between the individual and society."[65] Other critics voiced similar concerns, perhaps most notably C. Wright Mills in *White Collar* (1951) and David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), both identifying a loss of autonomy and freedom with the bureaucratisation of

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[65] William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* 1956 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 13.

middle class suburban life. The increase in leisure available to organization men, to the new suburbanites, did little if anything to offset this diminishing of individuation because, as Elizabeth Long points out, work had become "the only foundation of individual identity" and consequently "increased leisure offered no real possibility for freedom, but only the shallow joys of the consumer."[66]

The historical evolution of the 'suburban existential novel' can be traced from the disaffection of post-war fiction of the 1950s (partly a response to the anonymising and disempowering forces identified by Whyte, Mills and Riesman), which led to a peculiarly American 'suburban existentialism' in the 1960s and in later decades. Sloan Wilson's protagonist in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), Tom Rath – who David Castronovo aptly describes as a "well-educated man with no special abilities or destiny" - is dissatisfied with his drab and dismal suburban life and his job with a charitable foundation, a life Wilson implicitly critiques as being somehow 'inauthentic'.[67] This is contrasted with his former experience as a soldier in the war, which is shown as authentic (awareness of death revivifying life), although nightmarish and traumatising. Wilson also contrasts the quotidian predictability of Rath's marriage and his wartime affair with an Italian woman, an affair of heightened emotional and physical intensity, with a constant consciousness of death and loss. This binary opposition between inauthentic, somnambulant suburban life and authentic wartime experiences, also characterises Wilson's third novel, *A Sense of Values* (1960). The first person narrator, Nathan Bond, describes his service in the navy and the camaraderie amongst his fellow officers and seamen, who "joked constantly about death," and the incommunicability of these experiences in the material comfort and safety of the suburbs. In suburban fiction of this time there was also often a nuanced analysis of character and selfhood, and of the complex effects on inhabitants' sense of self of living in this new environment – explorations of what Chang-rae Lee calls the "drama between the self and his or her context."[68] In Philip Roth's *Goodbye Columbus* (1959), twenty-three-year-old Neil Klugman, a poorly paid library clerk living in a working class neighbourhood of Newark, has an affair with precocious and wealthy suburbanite Brenda Patimkin, an affair that highlights their insuperable cultural differences and values (Brenda represents Americanised Jewish upper middle-class

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[66] Elizabeth Long, *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 157.

[67] David Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2004), p. 16, p. 26.

[68] Asia Pacific Arts, 2004, *Interview with Chang-rae Lee 12th April 2004*, accessed 24/01/11 from http://www.asiaarts.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=11432.

consumerist conformity) leading him to question his identity, undermining his sense of self. The novella ends with Klugman staring at his reflection in a library window, thinking that "I was only that substance…those limbs, that face that I saw in front of me…I wished I could…get behind that image and catch whatever it was that looked through those eyes."[69]

Much of this fiction though, despite its critique of suburban uniformity and conformity as alien to American individualism and to a nebulous conception of existential freedom, also implicitly valorised ordinariness in the form of family life and 'family values' – the end of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* sees Tom Rath reconciled with his wife and newly committed to family life, and *A Sense of Values* (1960) also ends with a kind of familial resolution, husband and wife finally united and happy in their recognition of "responsibility, the danger of unrealistic dreams."[70] Similarly, Arthur Douglas, in David Karp's *Leave Me Alone* (1957), complains of "being locked up, wrapped up, snuggled down, tucked in" after moving from New York to the suburbs, but eventually accepts life in suburbia as "part of the adjustment you have to make" for the sake of family life. He still believes, however, that he and his wife can keep their individuality and identity as a couple separate from their environment, declaring, "We won't adjust it to suit the suburban ideal."[71] There are, nonetheless, existential dilemmas faced by the protagonists of these novels before the resolution of their domestic and familial conflicts. Indeed, it is precisely the homogenisation, conformity and apparent placidity of suburbia that highlights the alienation and isolation of the characters – something that would become far more marked in later fiction of the 1960s and of future decades.

The fictional representation of the suburbs began to change at the beginning of the 1960s, signalling the emergence of a thematic shift, as a new kind of American existentialist novel developed, one that could not be accused of simply expressing what David Castronovo calls the "locutions – used and misused – of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre himself," of being merely a distorted and diluted form of European existentialism.[72] In John Updike's *Rabbit Run* (1960) the internal monologues of Rabbit, Ruth and Janice show each character's existential crisis and sense of entrapment, with Rabbit experiencing "his inside as…a pure blank space…a

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[69] Philip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus* 1959 (London: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 124.
[70] Sloan Wilson, *A Sense of Values*, 1960 (London: Cassell and Company, 1961), p. 212, p. 480.
[71] David Karp, *Leave Me Alone*, 1957 (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 348, pp. 343-344, p. 344.
[72] David Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2004), p. 137.

kind of sweet panic" at the end of the novel, what Kierkegaard calls "possibility's despair."[73] Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* portrays Frank and April Wheeler's delusions of specialness as exacerbated by their suburban environment, since, as David Castronovo notes, "the place itself makes them more inert and garrulous, lonelier and more self-deluding than they might be if they were challenged and disciplined by a big city."[74] The suburbs allow Frank to indulge his sense of himself as somehow gifted and destined for some kind of artistic success, and April to nurture her pretensions to being a talented actress. Once the flight from suburban drabness is a potential reality, however, the couple can no longer sustain their illusions, resulting eventually in April's death and Frank's virtual loss of (the remnants of) self. The suburbs' putative safety and placidity were fictively threatened in this period by forces that could not be fully understood or combated. Murderous intruders figure in both Bruce Jay Friedman's *Stern* (1962) and John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969). Suburbia is now, as Bernice M. Murphy suggests, an environment in which "inexplicable and random acts of violence take place."[75] On moving to the suburbs Stern, the eponymous antihero of Friedman's novel, initially feels "as though a great eraser had swept across…[his] mind, and he was ready to start fresh again, enjoying finally this strange house so far from the safety of his city."[76] The suburbs, then, are no longer presented as a safe (if boring) refuge from the dangerous city – it is the city that affords protection and security, and the suburbs (increasingly, as the novel progresses) that are threatening and alienating for a Jewish middle-aged man. Stern is beset by various threats – menacing dogs, hostile suburbanites, but most frighteningly the "kike man", a neighbour who is abusive and intimidating, knocking Stern's wife over, and calling her a "kike." In *Bullet Park*, meanwhile, a suburbanite's property has become a dumping ground for city dwellers, who regularly leave "broken refrigerators, television sets, maimed and unidentifiable automobiles and always a few mattresses, rent, stained, human and obscene."[77] The suburbanite's son is suddenly struck down by an immobilizing depression, taking to bed for a month, and after 'recovering' is kidnapped and nearly murdered by a neighbour, a seemingly random act of violence in an

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[73] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 177; Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 1849 (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p.66. The epigraph to *Rabbit, Run* is a quote from Pascal, considered to be the precursor of Kierkegaardian existentialism: "The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances." (Pascal, Pensée 507).

[74] David Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2004), p. 192.

[75] Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 142.

[76] Bruce Jay Friedman, *Stern*, 1962 (New York: Grove Press, 1989), p. 10.

[77] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1968 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 22.

increasingly besieged fictional landscape. In Joyce Carol Oates' *Expensive People* (1968), the narrator, Richard Everett, decries suburban dullness and complacency, and the smothering of existential disquiet. In a reiterative and obsessive narrative, he berates his parents and other suburbanites for "dreaming the dream; all in conjunction, happy, so long as no one woke up," eventually seeking a release for his anguish and rage in violence, firstly in vandalistic destruction of property, and then in two shooting sprees, and finally in the shooting to death of his mother.[78] The suburb of Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971) is also a beleaguered and frightening environment, and Harry Angstrom's house is "a strange dry place…emptily spinning in the void of Penn Villas."[79] The house becomes a scene of violence, perpetrated by the impassive Angstrom and by a black self-proclaimed revolutionary who moves in with him, against a runaway teenage girl, and it is eventually set on fire by suburban vigilantes, killing the girl.

The precariousness and sense of existential contingency that characterises the suburbs in these novels can be seen, in part, as a reflection of the events and social and political turmoil of the 1960s, particularly the Kennedy and King assassinations, the continuing, and strongly opposed, war in Vietnam, and the civil rights movement (discussed in Chapter Three). However, many suburban novels of the 1970s continued to portray the suburb as embodying existential unease, but also, significantly, as an increasingly interiorised space. Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* was perhaps the most important of these, and is of pivotal importance in this thesis. The novel was published in 1974, the year often regarded as marking the onset of a new cultural and political period in America. Philip Jenkins, for example, argues that the 1960s began with the assassination of John Kennedy in 1963 and ended with the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974.[80] The Watergate crisis was one of several factors contributing to a loss of national self-confidence, as Edward D. Berkowitz points out, citing the end of US involvement in Vietnam in 1973, and the oil crisis that precipitated an economic recession (and a stock market in free fall) as the most significant of these.[81] 1974 was also the year Prozac was patented, introducing what would become a pharmaceutical solution, or palliative, for the national existential

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[78] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 119.

[79] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 255.

[80] Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 4.

[81] Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 1.

anguish and crisis that began in the 1970s. *Something Happened* may have reflected this crisis, but it was far more than simply a gauge of the cultural malaise of the period. Heller's novel characterised the suburbs not simply as places of dulling conformity and material comfort, but as the locus of existential dread. The first person narration of Bob Slocum, a compulsive, relentless chronicler of his fragmented and incoherent suburban situation, shifts repeatedly between his three preoccupations – his suburban family life, his anguished company relations, and his (de)formative adolescent years. Curiously, however, this seminal and influential novel is not discussed in the studies by either Jurca or Beuka, in part, perhaps, because it contains few explicit references to the suburbs (there are only six in the entire novel), but also because family and suburban life are conflated with the narrator's working life, no longer providing a refuge from corporate, bureaucratic forces of control and manipulation.[82]

The novel's social and historical significance has been recognised, however, by sociologist Elizabeth Long who observes that in *Something Happened* "the suburban haven of the 1950s has turned into a shambles, a quagmire" in which "interpersonal life is a desert. Isolation and despair are its prevailing emotional weather, and in time, they will erode personal relationships, personal integrity, and even personality." Long identifies this bleak portrayal of suburban life, viewed as no less (possibly more) alienating than work and corporate life, as indicating an important departure from previous literature of the suburbs. She argues that "the dramatic nature of this thematic shift cannot be overemphasized" since it addresses the "failure of success" and the beginnings of the dissolution (or degeneration) of the American Dream.[83] Long does not fully acknowledge that the American Dream had been in an ongoing process of degeneration since well before the 1970s, though the thematic shift she identifies was indeed highly significant. The importance of *Something Happened* lies in the *way* the degeneration of the American Dream is portrayed, in how it is characterised, in the novel's exclusive interiority; in an interview with George Plimpton for *The Paris Review* in 1974 Heller described the novel as being about "interior, psychological survival."[84]

In the 1970s and 1980s the suburbs themselves were becoming more complex and varied environments, with increasing numbers of Americans living in some type of

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[82] One would obviously not expect Murphy to discuss Heller's novel in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* since it is not an example of suburban gothic fiction.
[83] Elizabeth Long, *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 124, p.125, p.126.
[84] George Plimpton, 'The Art of Fiction No. 51: Joseph Heller', *The Paris Review*, No. 60, Winter 1974, p. 14.

suburb – not just the corporate suburb of *Something Happened*, but the lower middle class and working class suburbs depicted in Raymond Carver's stories, in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*? (1976), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) and *Cathedral* (1983). The suburbs in Carver's stories are spaces characterised by an implacable sense of menace and unknowableness, a muted interiority that contrasts with the hyper-analytical but incoherent effusiveness of Heller's Slocum. The interiority and existential anguish of *Something Happened* is developed in other fiction of the suburbs in this period. It is central to the stories in Ann Beattie's *Distortions* (1976) and *The Burning House* (1982), and especially to her novel *Falling in Place* (1980), with its eschewal of plot for muted descriptions of suburban affective numbness and somnambulant fatalism, which even the near-fatal shooting of a girl by her pre-teenage brother, in a tranquil suburban garden, cannot breach. John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) is dominated, unlike the two earlier Rabbit novels, by Harry Angstrom's internal monologue, his obsession with entropic decay and dissolution. In the ironized dread of Don DeLillo's absurdist *White Noise* (1984), meanwhile, a couple fixate on their own mortality, in a suburban environment filled with the static of relentless media information overload, entropic communication that pervades the protagonist's consciousness, nullifying interiority.

In Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* (1986), the first of the 'Bascombe novels', narrator Frank Bascombe believes the suburbs highlight contingency in their very denial of it, engender existential anguish in their very attempt to assuage it through their façade of tranquillity and calm. Frank uses an evolving existential terminology, initially contrasting 'factualism' with 'literalism', modes of being and experiencing denoting existential insight in the latter term, and lack of it in the former. In the second novel in the trilogy, *Independence Day* (1995), Frank has immersed himself in what he calls the 'Existence Period', characterised by a muted sense of self and the limited impingement of others on that self, and in *The Lay of The Land* (2006) he has entered what he calls the 'Permanent Period', this existential state being superseded in turn by what he considers a more open and transcendent existential awareness, the 'Next Level'. In *Let Me Be Frank With You* (2014), Frank enters his final existential state, the 'Default Period', with a 'Default Self', in which he believes "character…is one more lie of history and the dramatic arts," and that "we have only what we did yesterday, what we do today, and what we might still do."[85]

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[85] Richard Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), p. 145.

In the 1990s and early 2000s Chang-rae Lee developed similarly expansive suburban landscape narratives. Like Ford's Frank Bascombe, Lee's narrators see the suburbs they live in as allowing an existential ambivalence, between isolation and a sense of belonging or community. In *A Gesture Life* (1999) Doc Hata, now retired, reflects on his traumatic wartime experiences, his former relationship with a suburban widow, and on his troubled relationship with his adoptive daughter, each filtered through an emotional detachment that he has cultivated over the course of his life, which is finally challenged by an existential crisis that it cannot withstand. The Irish-American narrator of Lee's *Aloft* (2004), Jerry Battle, also retired, similarly has little contact with either his family or his neighbours, in his wealthy Long Island suburb. His narrative is permeated by existential anguish, in spite of his attempts to allay this by taking his Cessna Skyhawk on regular flights above the Long Island suburbs, allowing him physical as well as emotional detachment and distance, and he is forced to recognise that "self-definition…is now…a source of anxiety and dread," and questions "if you can speak of someone's nature."[86] As in Ford's Bascombe novels, others repeatedly threaten the narrator's precarious equilibrium, eventually forcing him to face what he calls "The Real". For Doc Hata and Jerry Battle, as for Frank Bascombe and Bob Slocum, the suburbs provide a landscape in which what Frederick R. Karl terms "consciousness of immensity" is "transformed into the consciousness of emptiness, so that escape into vastness – whether of self or of geographic space – does not fill, but empties one out."[87]

The chapters that follow are organised thematically, rather than chronologically, to illustrate most effectively the shared existentialist themes of the novels and stories discussed, and to allow a Sartrean analysis of those themes as they are developed in the texts. In Chapter One I discuss the portrayal of suburbia as an entropic environment, hermetically insular, in Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), and in stories by Raymond Carver, from *Furious Seasons* (1977), *Would You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), *Cathedral* (1983) and *Beginners* (2009). In these texts, the suburbs function as closed systems, entropic environments, their social homogenisation and uniformity hastening the process of entropy, their isolation and interiority mirrored in the suburbanite protagonists, who, in bad faith, seek a kind of 'entropic selfhood' to assuage their existential anguish. These suburbanites display

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[86] Chang-rae Lee, *Aloft*, 2004 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), p. 76, p. 101.
[87] F.R. Karl, *American Fictions, 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 35.

what Tony Tanner calls the "widespread fear of the tendency of all things towards eventual homogeneity," their "gradual collapsing towards inertia and death," which can be understood as a "manifestation of the ubiquitous dread of 'entropy'."[88] Yet, despite their dread of the entropic decline manifested in and through their suburban environment, the protagonists attempt to escape their intimations of ontological freedom, of the inevitable disequilibrium of consciousness (which is both facticity and transcendence), through a hermetic withdrawal, a kind of metaphysical shutting down. As Tanner observes, "as long as an individual is not a closed system he…cannot be in a state of equilibrium."[89] For the suburbanites discussed in this chapter, then, the dread of entropy, yet paradoxical drive towards a metaphysical entropic stasis, creates an irresolvable conflict, heightening their anguish. In Heller's novel, Bob Slocum's iterative narrative is both obsessed with, and itself embodies, physical, metaphysical and informational entropy; in Updike's third Rabbit novel Harry Angstrom is aware only of decline and dissolution, of his body, relationships, and even his nation; Carver's claustrophobic working class suburbs are isolated, from the world outside the suburban interior settings, but also each house from the others, and each oppressed suburbanite from the others – a series of closed systems that deplete and undermine the characters' sense of self, and from which protagonists sometimes attempt a form of escape through futile acts of violence.

Chapter Two focuses on solipsism as it is embodied in fictive suburbia, beginning with Heller's *Something Happened*, in which the protagonist's hermetic narrative charts his withdrawal into unreachable inner space within the indeterminate, detached environment of his Connecticut suburb. I then discuss Richard Ford's Bascombe novels, characterised by Frank Bascombe's solipsistic narrative in which others are understood according to the existential states that Frank believes himself to be in, often serving to illustrate the validity of these self-designated states, but denied full subjectivity by Frank in his jobs as sportswriter and then realtor; in both jobs he spends much time driving through the isolating New Jersey suburbs of Haddam and Sea-Clift, detached from but observant of others. The third part of this chapter considers the ways in which Chang-rae Lee's novels *A Gesture Life* (1999) and *Aloft* (2004) develop the theme of suburban solipsism that is so central to Ford's Bascombe novels. In the former, Doc Hata's solipsism leads to his estrangement from his daughter, but also from the suburban widow with whom he has a faltering intimacy and a relationship that

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[88] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970*, 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p. 142, p. 143, p. 142.
[89] Ibid. p. 147.

finally founders because of his emotional and psychic detachment, carefully cultivated in Long Island, since for Hata in the suburbs "the most available freedom is to live alone."[90] Jerry Battle, the narrator of *Aloft*, also attempts to maintain a precarious existential balance through a controlled and controlling distance from others in the few relationships he has, though as with Frank Bascombe and Doc Hata, it becomes clear that this is precipitated by a life-defining loss. His detachment, like theirs, becomes entrenched in the liminal space of suburbia, an environment in which, in Frederick R. Karl's terms, "space is evasion."[91] Solipsism, or rather its avoidance, is a key problem in Sartrean existentialism, and the three protagonists' refusal to clearly recognise others' consciousness and selfhood (their subjectivity) is interpreted here in Sartrean terms as an evasion of what Sartre calls "a primary relation between my consciousness and the Other's."[92]

In Chapter Three existential contingency, and suburban violence as an extreme reaction to it (or denial of it), is examined in four novels, Joyce Carol Oates' *Expensive People* (1968), John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969), John Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971), and Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place* (1980). In these texts the contradictory nature of the suburbs – their stolid uniformity, fixity, yet indeterminacy – creates increasing tension, leading the characters to deny their awareness of themselves as contingent, and indeterminate beings, lacking any existential necessity, a denial that only heightens their anguish and leads to explosive acts of violence. All of the novels were published in periods of social and political turbulence, and can be understood as exemplifying a kind of 'vulgar existentialism', reflecting, at least in part, the perceived existential crises of those periods. All include (explicit and implicit) references to European existentialism and each presents an adulterated (and distorted) version of it. Within Sartrean existentialism violence can be understood as a refusal or rejection of existential contingency, a disavowal of its implication that "existence precedes essence."[93] It is also futile and self-defeating, as is illustrated by the suburban violence in each of the four novels, which necessarily fails to provide any kind of resolution or greater existential awareness for the protagonists, since their acts of violence destroy the semblance of order and balance in their lives, heightening their awareness of the

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[90] Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1999 (London: Granta Books, 2001), p. 68.
[91] Frederick R. Karl, *American fictions, 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 41.
[92] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 253.
[93] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism' in Walter Kaufman, ed. *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1956 (New York: Plume, 2004), p. 353.

very contingency that incited them. In Oates' *Expensive People* the narrator decries suburban denial of contingency, the repression of existential unease, while also shamefully craving it, while in Cheever's *Bullet Park* two characters, one seemingly unaware and one near-hysterically aware of contingency, eventually confront each other. The suburbia of Updike's *Rabbit Redux* is similarly portrayed as the locus of violence in response to the existential anguish of indeterminate selfhood, and Beattie's *Falling in Place* depicts suburbanites who are neurotic and dysfunctional, and one who is pathologically violent in his existential denial.

Chapter Four addresses the contested concept of authenticity, examining the contributory factors and influences on the post-war concern with individualism, conformity and authenticity. Social critiques and commentaries, perhaps most significantly David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), both cited earlier, identified a loss of individuality in the characters of Americans with the advent of mass suburbia in the late 1940s and 1950s, though as Abigail Cheever notes, their concern was more with a perceived *uniformity* than conformity, with the possibility that suburbanites weren't simply acting the same way, but that they really were the same, so that "the problem as these writers understood it was less one of behaving than of being."[94] At this period then the notion of authentic selfhood was primarily an existential one, and was a key theme in many suburban novels published at the beginning of the 1960s, as illustrated by John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961), and Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), all of which are discussed in this chapter. The conflicted predicament of the protagonists of these novels causes existential anguish, in Sartrean terms, the result of what Jacob Golomb calls "treating oneself as an *other* instead of treating oneself as one's self," the sociological counterpart of which would be David Riesman's "other-directedness." The notion of a contrastingly authentic selfhood, with an awareness that the self is always in "the process of becoming, never of being," is explored in relation to the characters in search of a self in these suburban novels.[95] These themes and concerns are also central to the revisionist depiction of 1960s suburban culture presented in *Mad Men*, discussed in the second part of the chapter, and particularly in the first three seasons during which Don Draper and his family live in a New York suburb. Strongly influenced by John Cheever's stories, which

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[94] Abigail Cheever, *Real Phonies: Cultures of Authenticity in Post-World War II America* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2010), p. 5.
[95] Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 153, p. 154.

writer, executive producer and occasional director Mathew Weiner has described as being "in every aspect of *Mad Men*, starting with the fact that Don lives in Ossining on Bullet Park Road," the series documents the seismic societal changes of the 1960s, and the relation between such changes and the ongoing evolution of the main characters' sense of identity.[96] The problematic nature of authenticity, of authentic being, self or action, as depicted in *Mad Men* – and in the Cheever short stories that seem most clearly to have inspired Weiner – is explored with reference to Sartre's notion of authentic choice. Whilst *Mad Men*, as a television series, is clearly from a different genre, it is heavily influenced by Weiner's reading of US literature of the suburbs (in addition to Cheever, Weiner has acknowledged the influence of Richard Yates and J.D. Salinger amongst other writers), which is referenced both implicitly and explicitly in the writing for the show. Since authenticity is the only means, in Sartrean terms, of avoiding bad faith – of transcending entropic selfhood, countering solipsism, and accepting existential contingency – it is discussed in this chapter, even though the texts analysed were published before those considered in previous chapters. The significance of gender in relation to authenticity, and the related Sartrean concept of good faith, is also addressed in this chapter, since it is only female characters (in *The Moviegoer* and in *Mad Men*) who evince or approximate existential authenticity.[97]

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[96] Semi Chellas, 'The Art of Screenwriting No. 4: Matthew Weiner', *The Paris Review*, No. 208, Spring 2014.

[97] *Mad Men*, of course, was written after all of the texts discussed in this thesis were published, with the exception of Richard Ford's *Let Me Be Frank With You* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

Chapter One: Entropic Suburbia

The concept of entropy

Entropy has been defined in various ways, and with varying degrees of precision, but the term originates in theoretical physics and the Second Law of Thermodynamics, according to which, "the material world moves from orderly states to an ever-increasing disorder and…the final situation of the universe will be one of maximal disorder."[1] Rudolph Arnheim defines entropy as the "measure of the degree of disorder in a system" but as he points out, such a definition is necessarily open to interpretation. The terms order and disorder themselves require clarification. The "entropy principle" characterises order as "an improbable arrangement of elements, regardless of whether the macro-shape of this arrangement is beautifully structured or most arbitrarily deformed; and it calls disorder the dissolution of such an improbable arrangement."[2] Tony Tanner, discussing the appropriation and metaphorical use of the concept in post-war US literature, defines entropy more broadly as "the increasing disorder of energy moving at random within a closed system, finally arriving at total inertia." Significantly though, and crucial for the discussion that follows, order "if it is dedicated to the procuring of 'uniform motion', may in fact accelerate entropy and not counter it," if, that is, it is "that sort of mechanical 'order' which induces anaesthesia and ultimately irreversible torpor," and is thus symptomatic of "the tendency of all things towards eventual homogeneity."[3] In Arnheim's terms this would represent the dissolution of an "improbable arrangement."

The notion of suburbia as emblematic of 'cultural entropy' is addressed by Drew Austin, who argues that "the real threat of twentieth-century suburbanization was not its inefficiency or even the social limitations it imposed, but that it indicated a societal failure to resist entropy." This societal failure was marked by "the hollowing out of urban centers and the rebirth of those places as blandly repetitive bedroom communities," which "threatened more than just cities themselves as it suggested an

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[1] Rudolph Arnheim, *Entropy and Art. An Essay on Disorder and Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 7. The First Law of Thermodynamics states that although energy can change its form, it cannot be created or destroyed (Arnheim, p. 9).

[2] Ibid. p.13. These definitions are central to the notion of suburbia as inherently entropic in the discussion that follows.

[3] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970*, 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p. 142, p.p. 143-144, p. 144.

acceleration of civilizational heat death."[4] This view is echoed by James Howard Kunstler, who has described the suburbanization of the US as "a vast entropic enterprise." This enterprise, he claims, was made possible by "the economy of suburban sprawl…a systemic self-organizing response to the availability of inordinately cheap oil with ever-increasing entropy." This entropy has been "expressed in an ever-increasing variety of manifestations from the destruction of farmland to the decay of the cities, to widespread psychological depression, to the rash of school shooting sprees, to epidemic obesity."[5] Kunstler also suggests, however, that "it will be the failure of this entropic project that may rescue us," but in order for this to happen, "we will have to rescale and reorganize everything we do…We will have to rebuild local networks of economic interdependence and we will have to reconstruct real communities."[6] The prospect, however, of such 'real communities' replacing the entropic landscapes of suburbia seems less than likely.

In the texts I will discuss in this chapter the suburbs represent a tendency towards (cultural) homogenization and order, and it is precisely these tendencies – towards mechanical order and movement, uniformity of motion – that can be understood as hastening the process of entropic decline rather than arresting it. Indeed, suburbanites in these novels and stories are themselves becoming closed, or isolated, systems, within the closed system of suburbia, seeking a kind of entropic equilibrium.

Entropy as an existentialist concept and the Sartrean concept of bad faith

Sartre does not discuss the concept of entropy in any of his philosophical writing or literary texts, yet the process of entropic dissolution can be expressed, and understood, in existentialist, and specifically Sartrean terms. It is Sartre's view, as Walter Kaufman notes, that "man's basic wish is to fuse his openness and freedom with the impermeability of things, to achieve a state of being in which the *en-soi* [in-itself] and *pour-soi* [for-itself] are synthesized," in a process leading to a state of equilibrious yet conscious inertia, or 'thingness'.[7] Being-in-itself is complete and

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[4] Drew Austin, 'Civilization and the War on Entropy', *Ribbonfarm*, May 23rd, 2013, accessed 16/07/16 from: http://www.ribbonfarm.com/2013/05/23/civilization-and-the-war-on-entropy.

[5] James Howard Kunstler, *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), p. 222, p. 223.

[6] James Howard Kunstler, 'Virtual is No Refuge from Reality', *Michigan Land Institute News*, September 26th, 2003, accessed 16/07/16 from: http://www.mlui.org/mlui/news-views/articles-from-1995-to-2012.html?archive_id=274#.V4ufy-Akrcu.

[7] Walter Kaufman, ed. *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1956 (New York: Plume, 2004), p. 47.

without possibilities, and characterises an object such as a table or door, which cannot change its own state, whereas being-for-itself is in a perpetual state of existential flux, of change and therefore instability and inchoateness. Consciousness, the for-itself, experiences anguish because of the freedom its openness, its lack of fixity, implies, and its drive towards a degradation of its being, its desire to flee from its freedom, is, I argue, analogous to the process of entropy, of entropic decline ending in that final state of "mechanical order" discussed by Tanner. The anguish caused by indeterminacy of being, and the freedom that is its corollary (since human beings don't have fixed, unchangeable natures) is also recognised by Camus, who identifies "perpetual conflict, continually created and mastered by the intelligence" and the need to accept that "life…is only an impulse which endlessly pursues its form without ever finding it," and hence it cannot be experienced (or represented) solely as a process of entropy, of entropic diminishment.[8] For Camus, absurdity arises from this; it is a state in which there is a knowledge of the impossibility of permanence and order (an entropic fusing of the *en-soi* and *pour-soi* in Sartrean terms) but still, also, an irrational desire to attain that permanence and order, one which endures despite its irrationality. The absurd, then, is a state of consciousness, which necessarily causes existential anguish.[9] This anguish, however, cannot be experienced by being-in-itself because, Sartre claims, "there is not the slightest emptiness in being, not the tiniest crack through which nothingness might creep in." For being-for-itself, however, the self represents "a way of *not being* [its] *own coincidence*…of being in a perpetually unstable equilibrium," so that "an impalpable fissure has slipped into being…it is not wholly itself" and "there is never an instant at which we can assert that the for-itself *is*, precisely because the for-itself never is." Consciousness, the defining characteristic of being-for-itself, implies, and in fact constitutes, a lack, since "consciousness is not what it is," a state which gives rise to existential anguish.[10]

In the texts I discuss here the suburbs can be characterised as closed systems, subject to entropy, thus becoming the locus of existential anguish for the suburban protagonists, and representing the tension between being-in-itself (their desired entropic stasis which can provide a false identity and sense of self) and being-for-itself (the impossibility of this stasis). The protagonists of the novels and stories seek an impossible resolution of the conflict, the tension inherent in the indeterminate state of

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[8] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 1951 (London: Penguin Books, 1971), p.265, p. 228.
[9] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 32.
[10] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 74, p. 77, p. 149, p. 62.

being-for-itself, by attempting to gain a stable equilibrium of selfhood, one that is conscious yet also has the quality of fixed being i.e. the impossible state of what Sartre calls "being-in-itself-for-itself."[11] The entropy that pervades these texts is, then, primarily existential and, I will argue, can be understood within what Jonathan Webber interprets as Sartre's theory of character, developed in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). The dread that characterises Heller's, Updike's and Carver's texts originates in what Sartre calls 'bad faith' ('mauvaise foi'), a complex and ramified concept, exemplifying what he terms 'projects' – undertakings that motivate people's actions and determine their world views, and indeed their characters. Bad faith is a kind of ontological disavowal – the attempt to maintain a view of oneself and others as having fixed natures. Key to understanding these terms is the Sartrean notion of essence (something freely chosen) as opposed to nature (a fictive deterministic concept). Thus, Sartre's statement that "existence precedes essence" implies, Webber argues, that we chose our characters (not that we don't have characters), and that these characters are mutable essences not natures, and are a function of our projects – the most important of which, and the one underlying all others, is the desire to attain something ontologically impossible: being in-itself-for-itself.[12] Narrative fixation on a spurious sense of past stability (in Heller's novel especially), can be understood by what Sartre calls 'facticity', which, Webber suggests, includes "one's character as well as one's past and material body and surroundings, where this character consists in the set of projects that one is pursuing and that one can alter."[13] It should perhaps be stressed though, that facticity per se is not in any way indicative of bad faith (since it is an ontological inevitability), but rather it is the futile attempt at entrenchment in facticity, and denial of transcendence, that is illustrative of (one form of) bad faith. Heller's Bob Slocum, Updike's Rabbit Angstrom, and Carver's characters have unwanted intimations that, in Sartre's terms, "what the for-itself lacks is the self – or itself as in-itself," that this lack is what it *is*.[14]

If, as Webber suggests, bad faith is "self-distraction rather than self-deception", the narrators of the texts to be discussed can be viewed as distracting themselves from their own existential freedom.[15] The narrators and protagonists experience a

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[11] Ibid. p. 552.

[12] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism' in Walter Kaufman, ed. *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1956 (New York: Plume, 2004), p. 353.

[13] Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 76.

[14] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 89.

[15] Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 91.

dissolution of selfhood because they cannot accept the unstable, transitional nature of that self, or character, that it is, in Sartre's formulation, "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is."[16] Bad faith, in its denial of the mercurial nature of self, of the possibility (in fact, the inevitability) of one's transcendence of one's facticity, compounds their anguish (despite its aim of *escaping* that anguish), and underpins a desire for, but also a fear of, entropic stasis.[17] This entropic drive would seem to be inherent in consciousness because of its disintegrative, yet transcendent, nature, which, as Mark Meyers claims, is "perhaps best understood as a dualism in constant dissolution, as a dualism that is always in the process of slipping into a monism, yet which never fully slips. Indeed, such a full slippage would foreclose the process of becoming and result in totality (death)."[18] The paradoxical drive towards and away from entropy can be understood as the desire for an equilibrious state of stasis (towards), but one that is conscious (away from), in the impossible state of being-in-itself-for-itself, to avoid that totality and (heat/consciousness) death. This desire for stasis, by fusing the in-itself and the for-itself, has a corollary in an existential conception of suburbia. In its apparent (but false) placidity and unchangeability, its orderliness and insularity, suburbia arouses the very anguish it is intended to stem, its denial of contingency and existential flux heightening suburbanites' awareness of them: suburbia is itself a manifestation of bad faith.

The literary treatment of entropy

Although Tanner suggests there are "entropic hints" in early twentieth-century American fiction – notably the "valley of ashes" in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and the "painters of Decay and Mystery" which preoccupy Tod Hackett in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939) – he sees a concern with "the initiations and cessations of movement, the fate of all energy" as characteristic of post-war fiction, and novels of the 1960s in particular, since " the advanced stages of an industrial, even a post-industrial, society necessarily proliferate processes and actions based on mechanised movement."[19] Thomas Pynchon exemplifies this trend amongst

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[16] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 63.
[17] Jonathan Webber suggests that "we should understand transcendence as the ability to move beyond one's current situation into a new one…one's facticity includes one's essence and it is because this essence is not a nature that one can transcend one's facticity freely." (Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 76).
[18] Mark Meyers, 'Liminality and the Problem of Being-in-the-world: Reflections on Sartre and Merleau-Ponty', *Sartre Studies International*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2008), pp. 87-88.
[19] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970*, 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p. 143, p. 150.

US writers most clearly, and Tanner sees the short story 'Entropy', originally published in the *Kenyon Review* in 1960, as establishing the dominant theme of Pynchon's later work. The story is set in two city apartments, one upstairs and one downstairs, and is concerned, like many other post-war stories and novels, with "the chaos of waste…in contemporary urban landscapes."[20] The notion of entropy as an urban phenomenon is reflected in much of the fiction of the 1960s, though as the later discussion will show the fiction of the suburbs of this period demonstrates a deeper concern with the theme of entropy. In Pynchon's story there is a chaotic party in the downstairs apartment of a character called Meatball Mulligan, the party being "a relatively closed system of people," and one that is subject to exhaustion and dissipation of energy, eventually leading to inertia.[21] Two of the partygoers discuss communication theory and signal-to-noise-ratio in the process of informational entropy, one commenting that "leakage…noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit."[22] Upstairs, meanwhile, the middle aged intellectual Callisto attempts to restore life to a freezing bird, in a "hermetically sealed…tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos," from where he can observe

> The younger generation responding to Madison Avenue with the same spleen his own had once reserved for Wall Street: and in American 'consumerism' discovered a similar tendency from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos.[23]

Meatball struggles to contain and diminish the party chaos, but finally acquiesces and waits for the inertia that will come with the passing out of the drunken guests. Upstairs, Callisto is unable to transfer heat energy to the bird and it dies, while the temperature outside the apartment remains at 37 degrees Fahrenheit. Like Meatball, Callisto and his girlfriend also succumb to entropy, as she symbolically smashes the windows and they wait for "the moment of equilibrium…when 27 degrees Fahrenheit should prevail both inside and outside" and "their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion."[24] The two forms of entropy in the story, the chaotic disorder of Meatball's party and the ordered hermetic "enclave of

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[20] Ibid, p. 151. The urban novels cited in the introduction – Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947) and *Seize the Day* (1956), J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952), and Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953) – all portray cities as chaotic and dissolute environments.
[21] Ibid. p. 153.
[22] Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner*, 1984 (London: Picador, 1985), p. 87.
[23] Ibid, p. 79, p. 84.
[24] Ibid. p. 94.

regularity" of Callisto's apartment, correspond to the forms of entropy considered at the beginning of this chapter – Tanner's "increasing disorder of energy moving at random within a closed system" (the party) and "that sort of mechanical 'order' which induces anaesthesia and ultimately irreversible torpor" (Callisto's apartment). Significantly, the characters in Pynchon's story seem resigned to the inevitability of entropy, and perhaps even desire a kind of existential stasis. In keeping with a Sartrean understanding of the 'entropic drive' in terms of a conflict, or tension, between 'being-in-itself' and 'being-for-itself', Tanner sees Pynchon's characters as sharing "an aspiration to eradicate consciousness and revert to thing-status," that is, to being-in-itself, and to fuse this with being-for-itself into the ontologically unachievable state of being-in-itself-for-itself.[25]

There has been almost no literary or critical consideration of the notion of (fictive) suburbia as a closed system, an environment subject to entropy. It is, though, implicit in Pamela Zoline's story 'The Heat Death of The Universe', in which suburbanite housewife protagonist Sarah Boyle is "proud of her growing family which keeps her happy and busy around the house, involved in many hobbies and community activities, and only occasionally given to obsessions concerning Time/Entropy/Chaos and Death."[26] As Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint suggest, Sarah is "condemned to the closed system of suburbia," in which Zoline has her unceasingly "filling the great spaces of Space with a marvellous sweet smelling, deep cleansing foam."[27] The connection between the suburbs and entropy was also made by Paul Rambali, in an interview with J.G. Ballard for *The Face* magazine in April 1988. Discussing the theme of entropy in the author's work, he noted that Ballard had himself chosen to live in "the entropic cocoon of suburbia" in "a sort of self-imposed alienation," and suggested that "in this, he is like a character from one of his novels, accepting the entropy that surrounds him."[28] The insularity of suburbia is addressed by Lorraine Delia Kenny, in the introduction to her partly autobiographical study, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female*. Kenny describes the suburb she grew up in as "a closed system, one that feeds off itself feeding off itself, an insular community that

[25] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970*, 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p. 159.

[26] Pamela Zoline, *The Heat Death of the Universe and Other Stories* (New York: McPherson, 1988), pp. 137-138.

[27] Mark Bould and Cheryl Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 114; Pamela Zoline, *The Heat Death of the Universe and Other Stories* (New York: McPherson, 1988), p. 142.

[28] Paul Rambali, 'Visions of Dystopia', *The Face*, No.6, April 1988, accessed 15/07/16 from: http://jgballard.ca/media/1988_april_the_face_magazine.html.

doesn't see too far off its present condition and boundaries." In this 'community' "equilibrium depends on a closed rather than a permeable system and the known is always more manageable than the unknown."[29] Suburbia is clearly an exclusionary, homogenising environment (especially the suburban 'gated communities' of recent decades), one in which, as Robert Beuka observes, "architectural and landscape styles" demonstrate "a desire to elide the very notion of difference among suburban residents."[30] In this way it exemplifies the tendency "toward…eventual homogeneity" identified by Tanner, towards entropic equilibrium.[31]

Suburbia as entropic

"More and more things seem to be slipping into a state of dissolution": Informational, physical and existential entropy in *Something Happened*

In Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*, Bob Slocum's narrative is an entropic monologue obsessed with entropy – physical, metaphysical (existential) and informational. In information theory, as Patrick O'Neill observes, entropy can be understood as "a measure of disorganization, of randomness" but also as "a measure of *lack* of information…a measure of the *disruption* of information."[32] Lindsey Tucker discusses Heller's novel using concepts from information theory, and characterises Slocum's monologue as a kind of 'closed system', a term that could also be applied to his Connecticut suburb, and to suburbia more generally. Tucker's description of the language of *Catch-22* as "an artificial construct, divorced from any reality beyond its own self-reflective existence" describes equally well Bob Slocum's monologue, in which he seeks to stem the entropy that that monologue embodies. Tucker views Slocum as being "intent on establishing his own version of a closed system…working against what he sees as entropic signals coming from both his own consciousness and the outside world."[33] Those entropic signals reflect the narrator's society and culture, as various commentators have observed. Susan Strehle suggests that Slocum presents "a vision of America as both corollary and source for his own loss of energy

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[29] Lorraine Delia Kenny, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 5, p. 168.
[30] Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscapes in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.5.
[31] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970*, 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p.142.
[32] Patrick O'Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour, Narrative, Reading* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 9.
[33] Lindsey Tucker 'Entropy and Information Theory in Heller's *Something Happened*', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 25, No.3 (Autumn, 1984), p.326, p. 328.

and dissipation of ideals" and David Seed argues that "the polluted and junk-ridden landscape becomes a collective metaphor of his current state of mind."[34]

Slocum's job itself (it is not specified but it includes copywriting and promotional work) embodies informational redundancy, since he spends his working life "converting whole truths into half truths and half truths into whole ones." His first job, a recurring theme (as all the themes necessarily are within the reiterative structure of the narrative), was also emblematic of informational entropy. As a filing clerk in an accident insurance company, he was required to work in a "gloomy, silent, dingy mausoleum for dead and decaying records," while in his current job he sees "skeletons in decaying winding sheets as I study company reports."[35] Like Callisto in Pynchon's *Entropy*, he tries to create a closed system that is impervious to the disorder and chaos he dreads, and the language of enclosure pervades his narrative. He describes himself as "safely encapsulated" in corporate suburbia; when someone dies "her case is closed." The opening sentence of the novel – "I get the willies when I see closed doors" – establishes Slocum's obsession, and although he tells us that "the sight of a closed door is sometimes enough to make me dread that something horrible is happening behind it," what he dreads most is the *opening* of the door, the exposure to external information, thoughts, that threaten to undermine his entropic narrative.[36] "There are so many things I don't want to find out," he tells us, and he has "retreated into the suburbs" to avoid finding them out. In *Something Happened* suburbia as a closed system symbolises the desire for existential stasis, the fusion of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. The street Slocum lives on is called "Peapod Lane," suggesting both conformity and enclosure.[37] Whenever he is at home he stays in his study and keeps the door closed, avoiding contact with his family. He claims to be saddened by his son's "shutting me out," but being shut *in* is exactly what he desires, since

> I see the doors closed to his and my daughter's rooms and think of the closed
> doors at the company and am reminded squeamishly of all those closed
> cupboard and closet doors I had to open each morning and evening back in the

[34] Susan Strehle, "'A Permanent Game of Excuses": Determinism in Heller's *Something Happened'* in James Nagel, ed. *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*: Critical Essays on American Literature (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall and Co., 1984) p. 109; David Seed, *The Fiction of Joseph Heller: Against the Grain* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), pp. 103-105.

[35] Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, 1974 (London: Vintage Books, 1995), p.29, p. 94, p. 241.

[36] Ibid. p. 240, p. 88, p. 3.

[37] Ibid. p. 6, p.249, p. 359.

apartment in the city with those baited traps concealed behind them when we were trying to catch or kill those mice.[38]

What Slocum fears is the inevitability of decay and death symbolised by the dead mice, and in his narrative he associates the suburbs with that process of dissolution, of physical entropy. On his "choice country acre in Connecticut…grass grows under my feet…spring in our countryside smells of insect spray and horseshit." Slocum dreads spending holidays with his family in their suburban home, and Christmas festivities only heighten his alienation. Christmas dinner with them is transformed into a stark image of entropy, as

> They sit like ruins in a coffin in their high backed chairs. The turkey's carved; white meat, dark meat, second joints, wings, and legs lie laid out neatly like tools on a dentist's tray or surgical instruments of an ear-nose-and-throat man about to remove tonsils…There are spiced apples, chilled cranberry molds, and imported currant jams. It's a gelid feast, a scene of domesticity chiseled on cold and rotting stone.[39]

Slocum's desperate, farcical, attempts to avoid intimations of physical entropy only increase his obsession. "I never make hospital visits if I can avoid them," he confesses "because there's always the risk I might open the door of the private or semi-private room and come upon some awful sight for which I could not have prepared myself." When his mother becomes terminally ill he is appalled by her impending physical dissolution and refuses to acknowledge it – or her:

> I was silent…with my mother when she had the first of her brain strokes, and am silent also with everyone else I know in whom I begin to perceive the first signs of irreversible physical decay and approaching infirmity and death. (I write these people off rapidly. They become dead records in my filing system long before they are even gone, at the first indications that they have begun to go).[40]

Slocum is appalled that his mother eventually became a "bloodless pulp," is repelled by his son Derek's carer, who has "gnarled fingers on bloated hands and…a musty collapsing bodice… [a] thrusting front with no suggestion of anything else in back but

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[38] Ibid. p. 550.
[39] Ibid. p. 359, pp. 402-403.
[40] Ibid. p.6, p. 104.

stale and folding space" and his own inevitable physical demise fills him with unassuageable dread, as he imagines being "battered by continuing hurricane warnings of bursitis, arthritis, rheumatism, diabetes, varicose veins, dizziness, nausea, tumors, cysts, angina, polyps, the whole fucking shebang of physical dissolution," which will finally leave him "deaf, dumb, blind, paralyzed, and dead."[41]

Slocum, however, cannot avoid intimations of physical entropy because of the constant presence of a powerful symbolic reminder: his mentally handicapped son Derek. As Slocum's mother "faded away, speechless, in one direction, Derek emerged, speechless, from the other." For Slocum, Derek's muteness renders him atavistic, a primitive being, but also emblematic of the physical dissolution, incapacity and speechlessness that he will eventually have to face in old age. When Slocum imagines himself in a nursing home he also imagines "Derek out front…slobbering…with an incriminating resemblance to a secret me I know I have inside me…an inner visage" and later says, "he's a simulacrum" but one in which "the architecture's finished. The circuits can't be changed." In a foretelling of his killing of his other son Slocum's imagined murder of Derek is also an image of self-extinction:

> Derek I smother with a huge hand over his mouth to stifle his inarticulate noises and hide his drivelling eyes, nose, and mouth. (It is not to put him out of his misery that I do it; it is to put me out of mine).[42]

Slocum's primary narrative obsession however, is not informational entropy or even physical entropy, but metaphysical, or existential, entropy. For Slocum, as John Aldridge suggests, "we decline from our beginnings…they are only left behind in the meaningless drift of history in which at an indefinable moment something happened to make them unrecapturable."[43] The unrecapturable moment that Aldridge refers to is, of course, illusory, as is the entropic diminishment of self, since the self is in a constant process of change, of transition, with no conceivable end – except in death, which is why Slocum is death-obsessed. His thoughts reflect and embody a kind of amorphous dissolution, since for him they are "circular, spherical, orbicular, a wheel turning like the world in a basin of sediment into which so much of what I forget to think about separates and drops away into the bottom layers of murk and sludge."[44] Slocum

[41] Ibid. p. 268, pp. 451-452, p. 406.
[42] Ibid. p.209, p.391, p. 533, p. 392.
[43] John W. Aldridge, *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 41.
[44] Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, 1974 (London: Vintage Books, 1995), p.407.

experiences his consciousness as a bodily phenomenon, and in his dreams, he seems to "dissolve while dreaming them," being left afterwards with "nothing but my eyes and a puddle of tears." The mental and the physical are conflated as his narration unravels, itself subject to the entropy it seeks to forestall:

> Fungus, erosion, disease. The taste of flannel in your mouth. The smell of asbestos in your brain. A rock. A sinking heart, silence, taut limbs, a festering invasion from within, seeping subversion, and a dull pressure on the brow, and in the back regions of the skull. It starts like a fleeting whim, an airy, frivolous notion…it enlarges in space and force like a somber, inhuman form from whatever lightless pit inside you it abides in; it fills you up, spreading steadily throughout you like lava or a persistent miasmic cloud, an obscure, untouchable, implacable, domineering, vile presence.[45]

Bob Slocum's is a "horrible grotesque life," as Heller suggested in an interview with Per Winther in 1976; his self-contradictory language, as his consciousness begins breaking down, is markedly similar to the unravelling consciousness in Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1952), the last novel in the *Trilogy*, following *Molloy* (1950) and *Malone Dies* (1951), an influence Heller acknowledged in the same interview.[46] Beckett's narrating consciousness intones, "I think I must have blackouts, whole sentences lost, no, not whole. Perhaps I've missed the keyword to the whole business," while Slocum drones, "The cable of continuity is not unbroken; it is not thick and strong; it wavers and fades, wears away in places to slender, frayed strands, breaks. Much of what I remember about me does not seem to be mine…I do not always know where I am at present." Beckett's narrative consciousness jabbers, "I shall not be alone…I am of course alone…And how can one be sure, in such darkness? I shall have company", while Slocum babbles, "I have so many people to cope with at night. Many are made of varnished glass wax. There's no such thing."[47] As in what Thomas LeClair calls "the fused vitality and futility of Beckett's fiction," in Slocum's monologue "silence [is] feared and filled at any cost."[48] David Seed, however, notes an important difference in

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[45] Ibid. pp. 379-380, p. 493.

[46] Per Winther, 'Joseph Heller on *Something Happened*: An Interview', *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 8 (No.1, 1976), pp.17-31, p.30.

[47] Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy*, 1959 (London: Calder Publications, 2003), p. 372, p. 294; Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, 1974 (London: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 400-401.

[48] Thomas LeClair, 'Joseph Heller, *Something Happened* and the Art of Excess' in James Nagel, ed. *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*: Critical Essays on American Literature (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall and Co., 1984), p. 125.

Slocum's narrative, its momentum and final dissolution, and a resultant lessening of the monotony that characterises Beckett's *Trilogy*:

> Where Beckett presents a dwindling self whose physical exhaustion corresponds to the futility of narrating…Heller shows how Slocum's gradual admission of illicit thoughts increases his ambivalence to crisis point so that he begins to break down physically (headache, hallucinations, nightmares) and syntactically (ambiguous pronouns, shifting parentheses, inordinate digressions).[49]

The process Seed describes could be viewed as the ever-increasing drive towards entropy of Slocum's consciousness, which actually generates physical and informational entropy. Heller's narrator also differs from Beckett's narrator in his obsession with the 'something' he believes 'happened' in his life and in his refusal to face the something that is happening (and his responsibility for it). In this fixation Slocum exemplifies Sartre's "nostalgia of impermeability," fostered, or maintained by the apparent stasis of the suburbs; his response to his "being-in-the-world" is to affirm only the first of the two aspects of its "nihilating ambiguity…I am what I have been (the man who deliberately *arrests himself* at one period in his life and refuses to take into consideration the later changes)." In 'arresting himself' in his past and succumbing to nostalgia for impermeability, Slocum seeks a kind of entropic existential stasis, impermeability clearly being suggestive of a closed system. He can only endlessly repeat his bewildered disavowal of the second aspect of the "nihilating ambiguity", that "I am not what I have been (the man who in the face of reproaches or rancour dissociates himself from his past by insisting on his freedom and on his perpetual recreation)."[50] Bad faith (understood in Sartrean terms) cannot provide the solace Slocum is so desperate to find; rather in its denial of the mercurial nature of self, of the possibility (in fact, the inevitability) of one's transcendence of one's facticity, it compounds his anguish. Yet, paradoxically, because pain is the one constant in his sense of self, because it is *not* entropic, he cannot relinquish it. "There is so much liquid pain," Slocum intones, "It never grows less. It stores itself up. Unlike heat or energy, it does not dissipate. It all always remains."[51] This highlights Slocum's

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[49] David Seed, *The Fiction of Joseph Heller: Against the Grain* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 127.

[50] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58. Sartre's term 'nihilation' refers to negation, but this negation is the 'negative creation' of non-being.

[51] Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, 1974 (London: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 533-534.

contradictory state, since the reassuring constancy that he experiences solely through pain is of course generated by the inconstancy, the disequilibrium of his consciousness, a consciousness that, in seeking to escape its own state, is finally unable, in bad faith, to avoid anguish.

"Running out of gas": environmental, physical and metaphysical entropy in *Rabbit is Rich*

Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom, the twenty-six-year-old protagonist of *Rabbit, Run* (1960), is constantly on the move, seemingly afraid of succumbing to suburban normalcy and stasis, since he is afraid, as Zbigniew Lewicki suggests, that "immobility facilitates entropy and thus helps destroy human beings," yet his motion is without direction (alternately away from and towards both his wife Janice and his lover, Ruth).[52] In the first novel in Updike's Rabbit tetralogy, Harry could be seen as an example of the "increasing disorder of energy moving at random within a closed system" (the suburbs). His movements are impulsive, undertaken with no thought for his destination, and as the novel progresses, as Gerry Brenner suggests, "Rabbit's escapes become increasingly aimless, panicky, valueless," prompted by "instinctual fear."[53] In *Rabbit Redux* (1971), the second novel, Harry has ostensibly acquiesced at the age of thirty-six to suburban homogeneity (if not normalcy), and in his passivity appears to surrender to "that sort of mechanical 'order' which induces anaesthesia and ultimately irreversible torpor."[54] While the concept of entropy is an underlying concern of the first two novels, in *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) it is arguably *the* dominant theme from the opening sentence, as Harry, now forty-six, muses on decline and dissolution – of his body, his environment, and his country:

> Running out of gas, Rabbit Angstrom thinks as he stands behind the summer-dusty windows of the Springer Motors display room watching the traffic go by on Route 111, traffic somehow thin and scared compared to what it used to be…dollars are going rotten.[55]

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[52] Zbigniew Lewicki, *The Bang and the Whimper: Apocalypse and Entropy in American Literature* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 110.

[53] Gerry Brenner, '*Rabbit, Run*: John Updike's Criticism of the 'Return to Nature' in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Apr. 1966) p. 7.

[54] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970*, 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p. 142, pp. 143-144. I argue in Chapter Three that Harry's apparent passivity in *Rabbit Redux* can be better understood as a kind of narcissistic *im*passivity.

[55] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 417.

Rabbit is Rich is set in 1979, and is pervaded by a sense of cultural malaise and perilousness in the wake of events in the late 1970s in the US (and elsewhere), discussed in the introduction. Perhaps most notable among these were the hostage crisis in the US embassy in Tehran, which started in November 1979, and the ongoing oil crisis that precipitated an economic recession. In Rabbit's internal monologue these events compound his sense of existential dread and his fear of environmental, physical and metaphysical, or existential, entropy, which intermingle in his consciousness, and are often conflated. After noticing that traffic has become "thin and scared," Rabbit returns to the office of Springer Motors, where he is now the senior salesman, following the death of his wife's father, Fred Springer, and sees that the photographs and clippings on the office wall, reminders of his former glory as a high school basketball player, are themselves thinning and dissolving. The glass under which they are kept is no protection, since "the clippings keep yellowing…resurrected from the attic where his dead parents had long kept them, in scrapbooks whose mucilage had dried so they came loose like snakeskins."[56] The clippings then are reminders of physical decay and dissolution, of the loosening and weakening of flesh that Rabbit sees in his own body and the bodies of those around him.

The bleak tone of much of *Rabbit is Rich* seems at odds with the ostensible happiness Harry Angstrom has found in the material comfort and comparative security of middle age. Updike himself commented to Melvyn Bragg that this novel is "a happy book. I was happy, I was feeling rich. My own exuberance spilled over" but he also acknowledged in *The New York Times* that the novel was set against the backdrop of a "flimsy America" experiencing "a sort of deflation of expectations…[and] malaise," and pervaded by a "general sense of exhaustion."[57] It is of course precisely Harry's stolid contentment that gives him the time and space for reflection, inevitably leading to angst ('anguish' in Sartre's terminology), as his name suggests. Updike allows Rabbit's consciousness to dominate this novel far more than in *Rabbit, Run* or *Rabbit Redux*, a consequence in part of his affluent suburban slothfulness, as Peter J. Bailey observes:

> Rabbit is the author's preferred medium for the registering of sensations and perceptions, and the insularity of his prosperous middle-class existence

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[56] Ibid. pp. 417-418.
[57] Melvyn Bragg, 'Forty Years of Middle America with John Updike' in James Plath, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), pp. 225-226; John Updike, 'Why Rabbit Had to Go', *The New York Times*, 5th August 1990, accessed 12/03/13 from http://www.nytimes.com p. 2.

combined with his improved attitude toward the world allows *Rabbit is Rich*, to a greater extent than the previous novels do, to foreground rendering – the evocation of Harry's subjective impressions – by minimizing plot.[58]

The problem with this "improved attitude toward the world" though, is that it conflicts with the (spurious) identity Rabbit has cultivated as outsider in the first two novels, now that, in middle age, "his diminished energies threaten his idea of himself."[59] "Your selves die too," he reflects, thinking back to the turbulent events of his life ten years earlier, remembering the self of that time which "had shriveled and been overlaid." For Harry, this sense of depletion undermines all relationships and diminishes their reality, but especially that with his son Nelson, now aged twenty. In the overgrown vegetable plot in his garden, with Nelson just returned from college, Rabbit is forced to admit to himself that "he and Nelson have been through enough years together to turn a cedar post to rot and yet his son is less real to Harry than these crinkled leaves of lettuce he touches and plucks." The plot in the suburban garden, a symbol of tranquil retreat, only heightens Harry's dread of entropic dissolution, the nullifying effects of growth and decay:

> Grass that won't grow in the lawn where you plant it comes in here wild to multiply. Seed, so disgustingly much of it, Nature such a cruel smotherer. He thinks again of the dead he has known, the growingly many.[60]

Suburbia itself, closed and entropic, reminds Harry of the homogenising process of entropy and of death itself:

> Town after town numbingly demonstrated to him that his life was a paltry thing, roughly duplicated by the millions in settings where houses and porches and trees mocking those in Mt. Judge fed the illusion of other[s]…that their souls were central and dramatic and invisibly cherished.[61]

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[58] Peter J. Bailey, *Rabbit (Un)Redeemed: The Drama of Belief in John Updike's Fiction* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), p. 119.

[59] Matthew Wilson, 'The Rabbit Tetralogy: From Solitude to Society to Solitude Again', *Modern Fiction Studies,* Volume 37, Number 1, Spring 1991 pp. 5-24, p. 14.

[60] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), pp. 434-435, p. 444.

[61] Ibid. p. 498.

Any solace or comfort that Harry's newfound suburban wealth might bring to console him in this knowledge that life is "a paltry thing" is, as Marshall Boswell suggests, undercut by his imagining of "the inflationary cycle in entropic terms, with money as a closed system from which its buying power leaks," so that even "the dollar is bound to keep leaking."[62] When he buys thirty krugerrands and shows them to his wife Janice they make love amongst the coins on the bed, but Updike has them lose one, so that "the missing coin suggests a depletion of energy," another unwanted intimation for the narcissistic Harry that his fate and the planet's are intertwined, as "the world is running down fast" and "mother Earth is drying up."[63]

Rabbit Angstrom, like Bob Slocum in *Something Happened*, is virtually unable to see his environment, the people he knows, or himself *except* in entropic terms. As Harry drives through his suburban hometown of Mt. Judge and the city of Brewer he looks around and "everywhere…structures speak of expended energy." In closed gasoline stations there are "shrouded pumps…a new industry" and "the acres of dead railroad track and car stops and stockpiled wheels and empty boxcars stick in the heart of the city like a great rusting dagger." Even the car that Harry drives is an emblem of entropy, with its "tin getting dusty and rusty, the chrome developing pimples. Metal corrodes."[64] He thinks of his body, his physicality, in the same way, of "the face far behind him, crew-cut and thin-jawed…[which] exists in his present face like the chrome bones of a grille within the full front view of a car and its fenders." Now "a chaos of wattles and slack chords blooms beneath his chin," and in the morning he sometimes notices "an old man's sad sour body smell…[a] faraway odor like a corpse just beginning to sweeten." In bed with Janice, his wife, he hears "her voice sinking into the pillow like the dust of a mummy's face, so weak," and even the prospect of a new human life cannot divert Rabbit from his obsession, as he watches the heavily pregnant Pru, his future daughter in law, sleeping, "her belly shiny like one of those puffballs you find in the woods attached to a rotten stump."[65]

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[62] Marshall Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 137; John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 523.

[63] Marshall Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 143; John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 578, p. 420.

[64] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 435, p. 427, p. 435, p. 645.

[65] Ibid. p. 419, p. 556, p. 63, p. 610.

Harry's reaction to his intimations of mortality, to the images of the entropy he sees everywhere, is to withdraw and isolate himself still further, having already alienated those close to him in the earlier two novels. Driving, he "sits snug in his sealed and well-assembled car" and in bed with Janice asleep "he is not displeased to be thus stranded, another consciousness…is a responsibility, a snag in the flow of his thoughts."[66] Another consciousness, and specifically that of his wife, is more than a responsibility – it is an existential threat for Harry. His bad faith, like that of the other suburban male protagonists discussed here, their desire for the impossible state of being-in-itself-for-itself, requires an ontological negation of women; the potential threat they pose as separate consciousnesses with agency, with the potential for self-determination, is impermissible in the false idyll and refuge of normative patriarchal suburbia, where they are expected to be dutiful, self-abnegating wives, facilitating their husbands' retreat into feigned existential stasis, into entrenchment in facticity. For the suburban wife, as I will argue in Chapter Four, not only transcendence, but facticity too must be disavowed, since both signify consciousness, selfhood, and so the Other, a threat obviated and neutralised by her acceptance of what Sartre calls 'being-for-others', an inescapable and alienating aspect of being for both men and women. For women in suburbia of the 1950s and subsequent decades, however, being-for-others is not only disempowering, it is destructive of selfhood, a nullification of identity.

Seemingly paradoxically (and like Bob Slocum), Harry Angstrom tries to turn himself into a closed system, resisting entropic thoughts and images from his environment, yet seeking a kind of entropic stasis of self, an "inner dwindling" to assuage his anguish. Unlike Slocum, however, he falters in his bad faith, has momentary insights, recognising that "from a certain angle the most terrifying thing in the world is your own life, the fact that it's yours and nobody else's," and that his freedom, amorphous and transitional, cannot be nullified by an entropic equilibrium.[67] Despite the entropic drive of his consciousness, then, he has a nascent awareness that he is "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is."[68] Such insights are soon displaced by the relentless onslaught of imagery, sensations and thoughts that Rabbit seems to register impassively, unable though finally to "refute the world's rumors of universal death." He is obsessed with the past, with his former selves (his facticity in Sartrean terms) and the people he has known who are now dead: his mother and father, Becky, his baby

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[66] Ibid. p. 435, p. 449.
[67] Ibid. p. 475, pp. 526-527.
[68] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58.

daughter who drowned, Jill, his former lover, Skeeter, the black militant he briefly lived with, Janice's father Fred Springer, and Tothero, his former basketball coach – all become conflated with his self at different times of his life. His facticity becomes a source of frustration in its limitations on his selfhood, but one he cannot relinquish because to do so he would have to face constantly his fleeting recognition that "you have a life and there are these volumes on either side that go unvisited."[69]

The movement of the novel is towards immobility and stasis, and when Harry tells Nelson, "you've got to keep moving. That's the thing about you. You're not moving" his tone is almost plaintive, his son a mystery to him, so different from Harry at his age, "attempting to rediscover himself by running."[70] In *Rabbit is Rich*, his attempts at running are only a bleak reminder of his dwindling energy, and lead to thoughts of the ever-growing number of the dead, who "reach up…catch at his heels." Rabbit and Janice move at the end of the novel to an upper middle class, "overgrown, mature suburb" where "his life stretches emptily on all sides, and it seems that moving in any direction he's bound to take a fall." Harry has become stationary, still, and in the scene that ends the novel he is watching television and holding his granddaughter in his arms, "another nail in his coffin."[71] Frederick R. Karl describes the primacy of Rabbit's consciousness in *Rabbit is Rich* as "intense, almost claustrophobic" since "his inner life…is a wasteland" and he views this as a limitation, if not an actual failing of Updike's novel.[72] It is true that Harry's reflections never lead to greater understanding, or afford sustained insights into his own consciousness or his environment; subject to the entropic drive of that consciousness, they simply fade, dissipate, dissolve. This, though, is surely the point of foregrounding Harry's consciousness: the highlighting – and heightening – of his sense of entropic decline and nullity, his conviction throughout the novel that "there is nothing to know. We are each of us filled with a perfect blackness."[73]

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[69] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 460, p. 585.
[70] Ibid. p.648
[71] Ibid. p.532, pp. 690-691, p. 693, p. 700.
[72] Frederick R. Karl, *American fictions, 1940-1980: a Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 351.
[73] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 675.

"Everything Goes": Entropy and death in the stories of Raymond Carver

The suburbanites of Raymond Carver's stories have little in common with Updike's Rabbit or Heller's Slocum; Carver's lower-middle and working class characters mostly strive only for psychic and emotional survival, for a semblance of self-strong enough to withstand existential crises and, often, unrelenting material hardship. Carver's stories are almost always set indoors; his people exist in stark physical and emotional interiors, characterised by domestic drudgery and dread.[74] Flashes of insight, muted epiphanies, cause their lives to abruptly unravel, or bring an implacable but indeterminate sense of menace and uncertainty. In an interview with John Alton in 1986 Carver described the conflicts in his stories as "domestic" but acknowledged that "domestic conflicts can quickly escalate into existential conflicts." Although he claimed that in his writing he wasn't "emphasizing the dark side of things" he said in the same interview that the tone of his stories was "grave…and sometimes dark."[75] The suburbs of Carver's earlier fiction in particular, are usually quiet, almost silent environments, their inhabitants sometimes prone to angry or frightened outbursts, but more often to emotional implosions, though in either case life continues and little, if anything, changes. The setting of the stories is crucial in this, as Graham Clarke argues:

> The suburbs in which they [Carver's characters] seek resolution (or simply a way to get through their day) consist of vacant habitats where death exists as a kind of continuing reminder of personal limits. Death frames Carver's world and suggests an underlying nothingness: the existential terms of an America *sans* its transcendent possibilities.[76]

If Carver's suburban interiors suggest domestic confinement, transcending this confinement is both potentially liberating and frightening, though for most of his characters, finally impossible, since, as Clarke suggests, "in Carver's America there is nowhere to go. The culture has reached the limits of its own exhaustion. The entropic

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[74] The stories discussed here are mostly from the first two collections of Carver's work (excluding *Furious Seasons*, Santa Barbara, California: Capra Press, 1977), *Would You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), or from the "original version" (according to editors William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll in the *Editors' Preface*) of the stories in the latter volume, published in 2009 as *Beginners*. One of the stories discussed ('Preservation') is from *Cathedral* (1983).

[75] John Alton, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Literature: An Interview with Raymond Carver' in Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, eds. *Conversations with Raymond Carver* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), p. 154, p. 159, p. 156.

[76] Graham Clarke, 'Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence', in Graham Clarke, ed. *The New American Writing: Essays on American Literature Since 1970* (London: Vision Press, 1990), p. 100.

state…has been locked into the everyday atmosphere of suburban America."[77] There is undoubtedly a muted and stark interiority in Carver's suburbs. They are isolated, cut off not just from the outside world, but each house and its occupants from neighbouring houses and occupants, and each house's occupants from each other – closed systems within closed systems. Houses define and circumscribe characters' sense of self, household items comfort and oppress, suddenly become malign presences instead of being neutrally utilitarian.

Carver's concern with entropy, and in particular with what Margaret J. Downes calls "the inevitability of entropy and failure in love relationships between men and women" is apparent in many of his stories, and can be seen in his very early fiction, in the story 'Furious Seasons'.[78] The story concerns an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister, in which the brother murders his sister by slashing her throat after discovering she is pregnant, and is set against a backdrop of torrential rain, in a cold and dark winter landscape. The imagery is of watery dissolution and death, and airless claustrophobia. The brother watches his breath disappear "until only a tiny circle, a dot remained, then nothing," while the breakfast coffee he made "slopped over the cup and the brown drops ran slowly down the side onto the table." His memory of his father slaughtering a sheep – "the blood gushes out…the gray guts slide out of the steaming belly" – foreshadow the killing of his sister, and the story ends with the brother standing motionless in the rain, as "the gutter water rushed over his feet, swirled frothing into a great whirlpool at the drain on the corner and rushed down to the center of the earth."[79] Such stark imagery is strongly suggestive of entropy, matter being reduced to its original undifferentiated state through liquefaction. In a later story, 'Collectors', from the 1976 collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*? an out of work divorced man living alone receives a visit from a vacuum cleaner salesman, who tells the man that people are surrounded by their own decay in their homes, that "every day, every night of our lives, we're leaving little bits of ourselves, flakes of this and that, behind…you would be surprised how much of us gets lost," deposited into mattresses and onto car seats. The salesman demonstrates the effectiveness of the vacuum cleaner, afterwards showing the man the filter, now "alive with dust, hair, small grainy things," but the man tells the salesman he can't afford the machine, and he should write him

[77] Ibid, p. 107.
[78] Margaret M. Downes, 'Narrativity, Myth, and Metaphor: Louise Erdrich and Raymond Carver Talk About Love' in *MELUS*, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism, Vol. 21, No.2 (Summer 1996) p. 54.
[79] Raymond Carver, *Call If You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Prose* (London: The Harvill Press, 2000), p. 132, p. 133, p. 134, p. 145.

off as a "dead loss."[80] When the salesman leaves he picks up a letter addressed to Mr Slater, and puts it in his pocket, removing the man's decaying self along with his dust and hair.

The theme of entropy is developed more fully in Carver's 1981 collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.* In 'Why Don't You Dance?' a husband has transcended the limits of his suburban domesticity, but in the only way possible for most of Carver's characters – through its complete dissolution. He is finally *outside*, but the outside has become the inside in an ironic inversion, his yard full of the entire contents of his house, now for sale, and most significantly, the bed, or at least mattress, he shared with his wife. The man has recreated the interior faithfully, so that "things looked much the way they had in the bedroom – nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side."[81] He has even run an extension cord into the yard so that the lamps, the blender, the TV and stereo all work, and the young couple who stop and browse can enact their own future domestic life, which, Carver, suggests, is no more likely to withstand entropic dissolution than the man's: the first thing the boy does after getting out of their car is to plug in the blender and turn the dial to "MINCE"; the girl tries out the mattress and asks the boy to join her, but he just sits and stares at the TV, a preview of the future breakdown of communication between them.[82] The couple ask the man how much he wants for the bed and the TV, try to haggle, failing to understand his need simply to be rid of everything, and when the boy asks him how much he wants for the desk, the man waves his hand "at this preposterous question."[83] "Everything goes," he tells the couple, but they only see the items for sale in the yard.[84] The parodic staging of a mock-idyllic suburban domesticity (the neighbours are watching the spectacle) highlights its illusoriness and powerlessness to protect, or to endure, as Daniel Lehman notes:

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[80] Raymond Carver, *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 83, p. 85.
[81] Ibid, p. 187, p. 183.
[82] In the version of the story published in *Beginners* the man is named Max, and the boy is named Jack, but in the '*What We Talk About*…' version the characters are anonymously generic – 'the man', 'the boy' and 'the girl', 'he' and 'she'.
[83] Raymond Carver, *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 190.
[84] The 2004 short film adaptation of 'Why Don't You Dance?', directed by Andrew Kotatko, is entitled *Everything Goes*. However, Dan Rush's 2010 full length film adaptation, *Everything Must Go*, significantly changes the meaning from the original line in the story (perhaps because the film is closer in tone to Carver's later, more self-consciously hopeful and optimistic stories).

> Without a meaningful home to surround them, the domestic items arranged in the driveway lose their significance and disintegrate…Artificial light (the lamps) or pictures (television) or sound (the record-player) or intimacy (the bed and couch), Carver seems to be saying, can't hold back the darkness, even as the objects of a relationship can't create or sustain the relationship or stave off the despair of its dissolution.[85]

As the girl and the man dance drunkenly to music on the stereo (the man seems to be permanently drunk) she says he "must be desperate or something" but doesn't realise the significance of her question. She seems to have intimations of a possible understanding, perhaps experiences incipient dread and empathy, but telling her friends about the incident later, finds she cannot explain its significance, and "after a time, she quit trying."[86] As is so often the case in Carver's stories, there is a shift in perception, but the girl is denied an epiphany, or rather she has what Gunter Leypoldt calls an "arrested epiphany" characterised by

> A distinct disparity between the character's feeling of revelation and his or her lack of understanding of what sort of insight the revelation is supposed to provide. That is to say, the centers of consciousness realize, with an often disquieting sense of menace, that there is something out of joint in their world, that at some level they are on the brink of making a tremendous discovery, but they remain far from grasping what exactly it could be.[87]

Carver's preoccupation with entropy is even clearer in 'Preservation' from *Cathedral* (1983). The imagery and symbolism in this story are entirely concerned with decay and dissolution. Sandy's husband (unnamed) has hardly moved from the sofa since being "terminated" three months ago, and now, far from "putting roofs on new houses," cannot prevent the unravelling of his own domestic life. He has been reading the same book for three months, 'Mysteries of the Past', but Sandy sees that he isn't "making any progress"; he is still on the same page, with a story about a petrified man who was discovered after being buried in a peat bog for two thousand years, and in the accompanying photograph "the man's brow was furrowed, but there was a serene

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[85] Daniel W. Lehman, 'Symbolic Significance in the Stories of Raymond Carver', *Journal of the Short Story in English* [online], 46 (Spring 2006) p. 5 Online since 01 March 2006. Accessed 13/11/11 from: http://jsse.revues.org/index493.html.
[86] *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 191.
[87] Gunter Leypoldt, 'Raymond Carver's "Epiphanic Moments"', *Style*: Volume 35, No. 3, Fall 2001, p. 535.

expression to his face." Sandy comes home from work one day to find that their fridge freezer has broken down, its contents already thawing and liquefying, producing a stench that makes her "want to gag." One of the key symbols of suburban domesticity, of consumerist affluence and plenty, has become a harbinger of entropy, of irreversible decay. Her husband meanwhile, assumes a corpse-like form on the sofa: "he lay still…his arms down...[at] his sides", resembling the man buried in the peat bog for two thousand years.[88] The husband seems to be in a state of neither sleep nor wakefulness, but in a somnambulant trance, passively receding into near non-existence, attempting in Sartrean terms "to fuse his openness and freedom with the impermeability of things, to achieve a state of being in which the *en-soi* [in-itself] and *pour-soi* [for-itself] are synthesized," to become being in-itself-for-itself.[89] Sandy sees in a newspaper that there is an auction for fridges and other household appliances that evening and remembers going to auctions with her father, but these too are now associated with decay and death since at the last auction her father went to he bought a car that "leaked carbon monoxide up through the floorboards and caused him to pass out behind the wheel…The motor went on running until there was no more gas in the tank. He stayed in the car until somebody found him a few days later." The car, another emblem of suburban convenience and affluence (and without which there would be no suburbs) has also become a symbol of death, a force of entropy, which "went on running" but finally ran down, ran out of gas, as the man's body decomposed. Before going to the auction Sandy (sand being the chemically inert matter left after the slow decay and erosion of rocks) cooks all the rapidly perishing food but the meat no longer resembles food; like the fridge freezer and car it has also mutated symbolically into an image of death (her husband's), and "looked like part of an old shoulder blade." The final image of the story is of puddles of water from the thawed food collecting on the table and dripping onto the floor of the kitchen, matter returning to its original form. Sandy is transfixed by the sight of her husband's feet next to the water, but "she didn't know what to make of it yet," another of Carver's arrested (or at least delayed) epiphanies.[90] In Sartrean existentialism this can be understood in terms of bad faith, which prevents Sandy's full recognition of the 'entropic drive' of consciousness, its desire to flee from its freedom and achieve the permanence and stasis of being-in-itself-for-itself. Bad faith motivates 'self-distraction', as Jonathon Webber describes it, from the implications of that recognition:

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[88] *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 313, p. 314, p. 315, p. 319.
[89] Walter Kaufman, ed. *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1956 (New York: Plume, 2004), p. 47.
[90] *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), pp.319-320, p. 320, p321.

> Bad faith…is motivated by the dim awareness that we do not possess our qualities in the way that mere objects possess their properties, so it occurs only because we are aware of not having fixed natures.[91]

The images of dead meat, of foodstuffs become inanimate things, that is, (ontologically fixed) being-in-itself, contrasts with the image of her husband's feet, and his presence in the kitchen, as (ontologically unfixed) being-for-itself drained of volition, resembling being-in-itself in his immobility.

In the story 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', the imagery is less stark, but Carver again shows a movement towards dissolution and finally stasis; from light to darkness and from conversation to silence (and from sobriety to drunkenness). The interior is, as in 'Preservation', a suburban kitchen, and the conversation at the beginning of the story is animated, lively, as two couples discuss their experiences of love and find themselves incapable of communicating its essence, and eventually of communicating at all. At the beginning of the story Nick, the narrator, tells us that "sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink." In trying to agree on what "real love" is, the couples discuss domestic violence, suicide, a car crash, physical disfigurement, suffocation, as "the afternoon sun…the spacious light of ease and generosity" begins slowly "changing, getting thinner." The tone of the conversation grows menacing as Mel, the narrator's friend, becomes increasingly aggressive, telling his girlfriend Terri to "just shut up for once in your life".[92] Significantly, Mel says this very quietly; he is extremely controlled, but Carver shows his capacity for violence, like Terri's former partner, who abused her and eventually killed himself when she left. Nick tells us that Mel's movements when sober "were precise, very careful" but as he starts to get drunk his control lessens. His self-absorption and aggressive defensiveness exclude those around him and at one point he looks at Nick's partner Laura "as if he could not place her, as if she was not the woman she was."[93] As the light starts "draining out of the room, going back through the window to where it had come from" the conversation dwindles to silence and the characters, like Sandy's husband in 'Preservation', become inert, stuck in place at the kitchen table as the darkness envelops them. Earlier in the story Mel says that if he could come back in a different life he would be a knight, protected by armour (and so, of course, invulnerable

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[91] Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 84.

[92] *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 270, p. 274, p. 278, p. 275.

[93] Ibid. p.272, p.275.

and detached) but then realizes that knights, as well as serfs, were "vessels to someone…But then everyone is always a vessel to someone." Terri tells him the correct word is 'vassal', but the image is clear – the examples of love discussed by the couples involve some kind of subjugation and control, but also an attempt to fill an existential emptiness. At the end of the story the talking has stopped completely, and in the silence and emptiness the narrator "could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making."[94] As Margaret J. Downes observes, the story is "a narrative about unsuccessful narratives – about the uselessness of striving to know ourselves better through talking about love or through telling stories about love."[95]

Love leads to self-estrangement for Carver's characters, since they are 'subliminally aware' (the contradiction of bad faith) that the surety of that love is as illusory as their own fixed characters and the characters of those they love, and "being loved is therefore alienating." Yet for Mel especially, who can't understand how he could have loved his wife and now hate her, and for Terri's ex-husband Ed, as for the girl in 'Why Don't You Dance?', who cannot acknowledge that "everything goes," the denial of the entropic nature of love requires the objectifying of the loved one in what Sartre calls 'the look' (*le regard*). This, as Jonathan Webber observes, involves the attempt

> To get the other person to affirm that I do indeed have a fixed nature, which Sartre describes as an attempt to 'assimilate' the other to my project of seeing myself in a certain way' and…[to] focus attention on the other person and see them as having a fixed nature. Within the project of bad faith, my relationship with another person, according to Sartre, will continually oscillate between these two basic attitudes, looking at them and allowing myself to be looked at by them, each attitude being 'enriched by the failure of the other.'[96]

There is a kind of violence in this project of bad faith concerning love, a subjugation of selfhood, one's own and the Other's (turning ourselves into 'vessels' as well as 'vassals', as Carver's story expresses it). If, as Webber suggests, "the desire to be loved…is one way in which we try to pursue the project of bad faith, as it is one way in which we try to reassure ourselves of our fixed natures," this inevitably leads to inner

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[94] Ibid. p. 279, p. 277, p. 281.
[95] Margaret M. Downes, 'Narrativity, Myth, and Metaphor: Louise Erdrich and Raymond Carver Talk About Love' in *MELUS*, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism, Vol. 21, No.2 (Summer 1996) p. 58.
[96] Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 138, p. 137.

conflict because "the feeling of being loved…like the feeling of pride, contains within it the suggestion that people do not, or might not, really have fixed natures." This is because if we had fixed natures being 'loveable' or 'unloveable' would be neutral descriptions, and loving, or being loved, would be simply states of being dependent on the unchanging natures of the loved and the loving, having no value. Bad faith is therefore "stultifying" because "it conflicts with the value of being loved."[97] In Carver's story, Nick, the narrator, tells Mel "I think what you're saying is that love is an absolute" and Mel replies "The kind of love I'm talking about is…. physical love, that impulse that drives you to someone special, as well as love of the other person's being, his or her essence, as it were."[98] If existence precedes essence, as Sartre claims, characters (essences) are mutable, and Mel's anger at not being able to define love can be seen as being motivated by bad faith, since he believes love must be an absolute; the ontologically impossible fusing of being-in-itself and being-for-itself: being in-itself-for-itself. Mel can't accept that self, or character, is "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is."[99] The answer to his bellicose, hectoring question about his love for his former wife ("What happened to that love? What happened to it, is what I'd like to know") is: entropy.[100]

If imagery of physical and metaphysical entropy pervades many of Carver's stories, death and entropic decay, and the existential crises they precipitate, are the main narrative focus of others. Death is generally the result of dramatic acts of violence, and such acts, as Kirk Nesset suggests, "attest to the inevitable course of buried violence in Carver's stories – to the return of the repressed, and to the extremity at the heart of all conflicts, and of all stories."[101] Two stories that exemplify this are 'So Much Water So Close to Home' and 'Tell the Women We're Going'. Interestingly, it is the earlier, longer versions published posthumously in *Beginners* (2009) (the former story also in the 1977 *Furious Seasons* collection) rather than those in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) that demonstrate clearly this pattern of repression leading to explosions of violence. The later versions edited by Gordon Lish rely on implied connections, and in avoiding the more explicit depictions of violence (whether verbal or physical) and entropic decay and disfiguration of the *Beginners* versions, they

[97] Ibid. p. 138.
[98] Raymond Carver, *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 271, p. 274.
[99] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58.
[100] Raymond Carver, *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 274.
[101] Kirk Nesset, *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995), p. 33.

underplay their inevitability, suggesting an underlying randomness. In both stories characters actually leave oppressive suburban interiors, but Carver's narrative focuses on the characters' interiority – that of the first person narrator in 'So Much Water So Close to Home' and that of Jerry, the violent protagonist of 'Tell the Women We're Going'. For them, as for most characters, as Graham Clarke notes, "Carver's world never offers an escape route…no matter how or where his characters travel, the primary movement is inwards, towards a found emptiness: an interior condition beyond the words of its own naming."[102]

This "interior condition" described by Clarke can be understood as the entropic drive of consciousness towards the dissolution of selfhood, "beyond the words of its own naming" as Beckett's *The Unnamable* is, and as Bob Slocum's monologue is. In 'So Much Water So Close to Home' a group of male suburbanites go on a weekend fishing trip in a familiar suburban ritual, attempting to "play out the myth of a rugged America" but death intrudes shockingly when they discover the body of girl in a river in the woods.[103] Rather than abandoning their fishing trip and reporting their discovery to the police, the men decide to wait until after the weekend to inform the sheriff's office. Claire, the narrator, tells us that one of the men,

> It might have been Stuart [her husband], he could have done it, waded into the water, and then took the girl by the fingers and pulled her, still face down, closer to shore, into shallow water, and then took a piece of nylon cord and tied it around her wrist and then secured the cord to tree roots, all the while the flashlights of the other men played over the body.[104]

The man's touching and *binding* of the woman, and the other men's voyeuristic gazing at the body suggest prurience and physical threat, if not actual violence. His morbid fascination with the girl's body (he periodically returns to look at it, supposedly to check that it is still there) prefigures the entropic dissolution of his relationship with Claire. When Claire says her husband "could have done it," the implication seems to be that he might have been capable not just of binding the girl, but of killing her; earlier in their relationship Stuart had told Claire that "someday this affair…will end in violence", and when she rejects his sexual advances for the second time after the finding of the girl's

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[102] Graham Clarke, 'Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence', in Graham Clarke, ed. *The New American Writing: Essays on American Literature Since 1970* (London: Vision Press, 1990), p. 107.
[103] Ibid. p. 112.
[104] Raymond Carver, *Beginners*, 2009 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 116.

body, he throws her on the floor and tells her "I hope your cunt drops off before I touch it again." Like Mel in 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', Stuart is unable to conceal his anger and there is a constant threat of its erupting into psychological or physical violence, or both. Here, the ontological negation of women in bad faith (rendering them objects, being-in-itself) is even starker than in *Rabbit is Rich,* with an ever present risk of actual injury or even death. The threat of male sexual violence is also clear when Claire drives to the murdered girl's funeral; she pulls over to let a pick-up truck overtake, but the driver stops too, walks over to the car and asks Claire to open the window so they can talk. He looks at her breasts, stares at her legs, and tells her she's "going to smother in there." "I want to smother," Claire replies, "I am smothering, can't you see?" She increasingly comes to identify with the murdered girl, in an alienated and passive self-objectification: "I float toward the pond, eyes open, face down…I am carried into the lake where I am pushed by the breeze."[105] The girl's death has precipitated an existential crisis and in her anguish Claire experiences a heightened drive, in bad faith, towards denial of self and towards ontological depletion and stasis. In an impassive abrogation of selfhood, she experiences her life unravelling, with no sense of control or agency. Like Heller's Bob Slocum, who feels that "much of what I remember about me does not seem to be mine," Claire cannot make sense of her past and tells us "I cannot be sure that the things I remember happening really happened to me."[106]

In this story, as in *Something Happened* and *Rabbit is Rich*, the suburbs foster, or engender, a kind of somnambulant fatalism, and passivity; in Heller's novel (with Slocum's mother's demise and a girl's suicide) and Carver's story, death shatters the tenuous equilibrium, the precarious emotional balance, that the characters strive to maintain, forcing them to experience (though not always acknowledge) the forces of entropy to which their bodies and relationships (but *not* their consciousness) are subject. The violence in *Something Happened* (Slocum's killing of his son) and in Carver's story, does not (cannot) provide catharsis, cannot stem the inexorable progress of those forces. Claire comes to realise this in her identification with the dead girl, who she imagines drifting and directionless in the water, carried along by the river's current, and she reflects that "nothing will be any different. We will go on and on and on and on. We will go on even now, as if nothing had happened."[107] Stuart's

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[105] Ibid. p. 122, p. 132, p. 129, p. 120.
[106] Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, 1974 (London: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 505; Raymond Carver, *Beginners*, 2009 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 122.
[107] Raymond Carver, *Beginners*, 2009 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 120.

denial of this – and his resultant affective (and perhaps moral) numbness and obliviousness – is shown by his reaction to finding the girl, his fixation on her unchangeable facticity in the stasis of death, no longer subject to the process of entropy. It is Claire who, despite her bad faith, begins to understand the extent of her husband's alienation and self-estrangement, and the implications for their relationship.

In 'Tell the Women We're Going', as in 'So Much Water So Close to Home', the tranquil façade of suburban domesticity is shattered by physical and emotional violence, and a girl's murder is central to both. In 'Tell the Women We're Going' Bill and Jerry have been friends since junior high school, Jerry being the more dominant, since he "didn't like being told what to do," while "Bill didn't mind; he liked it that Jerry was the sort of take-charge guy he was." After Jerry got married, had two kids and dropped out of high school to work in the local shopping mall, the friends became more distant. When Bill got married Jerry was his best man, but he seemed to Bill prematurely old at twenty-two. Already Jerry's capacity for violence was clear at Bill's wedding when he got drunk and picked a fight with one of the ushers. The friends now are fellow suburbanites, Bill going regularly to Jerry's house for the suburban ritual of the barbeque. Jerry has grown increasingly withdrawn and "Bill had to do most of the talking…Jerry nodded now and then, but most of the time just stared at the clothesline or the garage."[108] These emblems of domesticity have become mutely oppressive for Jerry, who crushes his beer cans but says little to Bill, punching him lightly in the stomach in a strained display of male camaraderie. Jerry suggests the two friends go for a drive, and, as in 'So Much Water So Close to Home', the attempt to transcend domestic confinement only highlights inner emptiness, reveals a "central disfiguring blankness" in Jerry.[109] He tells Bill a "guy's got to get out now and then or he gets stale," but Jerry *can't* get out, his withdrawal is so absolute, his sense of self so diminished that he is as depersonalised as the clothesline he stares at absently.[110] He has become, like many of Carver's characters, a closed system, energies depleted as he seeks stasis, in Jerry's case the stasis of the facticity of his past.

For Jerry, others, but particularly women, are also utterly depersonalised, and when the friends drive past two girls cycling he tells Bill he wants "some of that…old enough to bleed, old enough to…You know that saying." He slows the car and asks Bill to

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[108] Ibid. p. 81, p. 83.
[109] This phrase is used to describe a character who later commits suicide in the film *Wetherby* (David Hare, 1995).
[110] Raymond Carver, *Beginners*, 2009 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 83.

"hustle 'em in for us," though Bill is uneasy and reluctantly engages the girls in conversation, as Jerry follows the girls to Painted Rock, a range of hills in an outcrop of rocks, where "the highway forked," though Jerry's decision is in no doubt. On the cliff side of the rock there are "announcements and warnings" but Jerry is oblivious as he waits for the girls to appear. The friends follow the girls into the hills at Painted Rock, Bill noticing "with a little shock his trembling fingers," and when the girls split up Jerry follows the older girl. She hides and tries to escape when he finds her, but he grabs her and rapes her, and when the girl starts to cry he hits her. Carver's description of Jerry's killing of the girl is almost clinical – Jerry hears "her teeth and bones crack" and when he drops a rock on her head it sounds "like a slap" – highlighting Jerry's utterly dissociative state. His violent act of self-definition in bad faith is in fact an act of absolute self-annihilation, his humanity lost in his dehumanisation of another.[111]

If Jerry's actions can be viewed (like Bob Slocum's) as a consequence of what Sartre calls the "nostalgia of impermeability," fostered in the stasis of the suburbs (represented here by Jerry's blank staring at the clothesline and the garage – being-in-itself) then they are the deadly result of his bad faith, his objectification of women pathologized in obliterative violence. Like Slocum in *Something Happened*, his response to his "being-in-the-world" is to violently reject its "nihilating ambiguity." He can only accept that "I am what I have been (the man who deliberately *arrests himself* at one period in his life and refuses to take into consideration the later changes)," and cannot allow himself to recognise that "I am not what I have been (the man who in the face of reproaches or rancour dissociates himself from his past by insisting on his freedom and on his perpetual recreation)."[112] Jerry identifies solely with his former self, unmarried and childless, and his objectifying of others reduces them to the semblance of being-in-itself, empty of volition, or of selfhood, while his own self-objectification provides, temporarily, an illusory state of being-in-itself-for-itself. When Bill finds him he feels "the awfulness closeness of their two bodies" and raises his hand "as if the distance now separating them deserved at least this." Like Claire in 'So Much Water So Close to Home' Bill has intimations of a terrible insight. Claire, though, articulates her intimations of the radical discontinuity of consciousness, as her bad faith falters. She is aware of the futility of seeking stasis, permanence of self, mirrored in the illusion of suburban tranquillity and permanence. Like her fellow suburbanites, though, she

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[111] Ibid. p. 85, p.87, p. 89, p. 92.
[112] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58.

feels the need to "continue to talk and act as if you were the same person as yesterday, or last night, or five minutes before."[113]

Winifried Fluck argues that "experience has no redeeming force of initiation or transformative potential for the weak identities of Carver's characters."[114] This assessment, though, discounts the often subtle shifts in perception those characters experience. In a 1983 interview Carver said of his characters that "It's their lives they've become uncomfortable with, lives they see breaking down" and in a later interview said that in his stories "things perish. Ideas and ideals and people's goals and visions – they perish." The characters may not understand the full significance of the forces of entropy, of things perishing and their lives breaking down, but they don't always reject or deny their muted existential insights, despite their striving in bad faith for fixity of self, for a kind of entropic stasis of consciousness. Whilst they may experience muted epiphanies though, they do not gain a sense of full agency and control over their lives, but instead feel that they have no choice but to "go on and on and on and on."[115]

The notion of entrapment is a familiar one in fiction about the suburbs and it is precisely the sense of being shut in – in the closed system of the suburb – that allows the development of the theme of entropy in the texts discussed here. The suburbs heighten and catalyse their inhabitants' drive towards ontological stasis, their desire to flee from ontological freedom through a kind of entropic diminishment. The protagonists of these novels and stories all experience a sense of existential depletion – Slocum's "festering invasion from within", and "lightless pit inside," Rabbit's "inner dwindling," Carver's characters' oppressive suburban interiors in which finally "everything goes" – and entropy is of course a kind of depletion, a dispersal and diminishment of energy within a closed system.[116] In each case suburbia provides an environment in which characters can isolate themselves, shut out others, and close

[113] Raymond Carver, *Beginners*, 2009 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 93, p. 94, p. 122.
[114] Winifried Fluck, 'Surface Knowledge and 'Deep' Knowledge: The New Realism in American Fiction', *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Kristiaan Versluys (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), pp. 65-85, p. 72.
[115] Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee, 'Raymond Carver' in Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, eds. *Conversations with Raymond Carver* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), p. 42; John Alton, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Literature: An Interview with Raymond Carver' in Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, eds. *Conversations with Raymond Carver* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), p. 161.
[116] Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, 1974 (London: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 493; John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 475; *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 190.

down. There is, though, an overwhelming irony here, since, whilst the body, the environment, relationships are all subject to entropy, consciousness is *not*, yet in the anguish experienced because of its mercurial, transitional, unstable quality, it seeks stasis, degradation of being analogous to the entropy it dreads in the world. Urban fiction, by contrast, is often characterised by explosive and cathartic actions of the protagonists in the midst of an energising excess of stimulation. In US urban literature considered existentialist, perhaps most notably in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956), and Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* (1965), protagonists' acts of (often violent) self-definition galvanise them, and allow some kind of epiphany or significant realization, an enrichment of self not a depletion. Ellison's nameless protagonist, narrating from his brightly-lit underground basement, has learned through his ordeals that " to be unaware of one's form is to live a death…the truth is the light and light is the truth"; Wright's Cross Damon comes "to a consciousness of having somehow fallen into a vast web of pledges and promises which he had not intended to make and whose implied obligations had been slowly smothering his spirit"; Mailer's Stephen Rojack has "a quick grasp of the secret to sanity…the ability to hold the maximum of possible combinations in one's mind"; and Bellow's Tommy Wilhelm attends a stranger's funeral and is convulsed by a purgative grief that allows him finally to move towards "the consummation of his heart's ultimate need."[117] For the suburbanite protagonists of the texts discussed here, however, each obsessed with entropy, no access of energy and insight is possible. For Heller's Bob Slocum there is only "stale and folding space" and "seepage …destroying my loved ones"; for Updike's Harry Angstrom there are increasingly "patches of burnt-out gray cells where there used to be lust and keen dreaming and wide-eyed dread…the self…all scattered and distributed"; and the lives of Carver's characters "have been set in motion, and they will go on and on until they stop."[118]

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[117] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 10; Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 1953 (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 503; Norman Mailer, *An American Dream*, 1965 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1979), p. 162; Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*, 1956 (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 118.
[118] Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, 1974 (London: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 268, p. 393; John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), pp. 422-423, p.531; Raymond Carver, *Beginners*, 2009 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 122.

Chapter Two: Suburban Solipsism

Solipsism and existentialism

For existentialism the problem of solipsism – the view that (or state in which) only one's own self, one's own mind and existence can be verified or known – is rooted in the primacy of subjectivity, its phenomenological foregrounding of subjective experience, and the impossibility of our experiencing the subjectivity of another. In Sartrean terms, as Joseph S. Catalano notes, this means that

> The for-itself cannot conceptualise its primary being-for-others, and it cannot conceptualise the other person as a for-itself…To 'know' how the other sees me would be to 'know' him as a free subject. But I 'know' the other only in the light of my own free subjectivity.[1]

This would appear to render the ontological problem of solipsism an insoluble one, since for Sartre "my original relation to the Other" is "a negation which posits the original distinction between the Other and myself as being such that it determines me by means of the Other and determines the Other by means of me."[2] The Other's subjectivity is inaccessible, if not actually unimaginable, because "consciousness is always intentionally directed towards an object," and so "anything that we are conscious of will seem to be an object," including the consciousness of another person.[3] It is perhaps ironic, then, that subjective experience, fundamental to existentialism and phenomenology more generally, both provides an intimation of the consciousness of others and precludes any knowledge of it. However, as Jonathon Webber argues

> This is a central aspect of [Sartre's] response to solipsism: our experience makes us aware that there are other conscious subjects, but we cannot formulate any explicit thought about or direct conscious attention to the subjectivity of other people.[4]

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[1] Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness'*, 1974 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 157.
[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 232.
[3] Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 126,
[4] Ibid. p. 127.

Sartre sees the means by which solipsism can be avoided as being based in recognising "a primary relation between my consciousness and the Other's" rather than through recourse to philosophical realism or idealism, neither of which he regards as adequate in avoiding solipsism.[5] Knowledge, then, as something objectively verifiable, is of little or no use here, and Sartre's 'solution' depends on a kind of inference that allows us to posit the subjectivity of another person – or rather, since inference is a cognitive operation, and Sartre's solution is ontological rather than cognitional, it might be more accurate to say that we are *exposed* to the Other. Sartre sees this as arising from what he calls 'the look' (*le regard*), discussed in Chapter One in reference to Raymond Carver's stories. If we have an existence as object as well as subject, this depends on the consciousness, and so subjectivity, of others, since we cannot be objects to ourselves; we cannot externalise our relation to ourselves. Sartre uses the concept of shame to illustrate this; in the situation in which I am absorbed in spying through a keyhole, as Catalano observes, "I am my possibility as one who is jealous," but the presence of another, or just the intimation of this through audible footsteps, creates an awareness formerly absent, since I am now "aware of myself because I am aware of being seen by another," thus "revealing my consciousness to myself as an object for the Other," and causing me to feel shame.[6] I cannot deny, or negate, the existence of the Other as subject since, Sartre states, "I cannot be object for an object."[7] As Kathleen V. Wider suggests, "the Other cannot be an object in this context. If she were, she could not make me into an object. Only a subject can do that." Whilst "the look of the Other creates for me a consciousness of myself as an object in the world," it is precisely this "dimension of self-consciousness that makes certain for me the existence of the Other as another consciousness."[8] Solipsism - as denial of others' consciousness – is thereby avoided because, Sartre claims, "it is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject." This knowledge (or intimation) then is phenomenological, is subjectively experienced rather than

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[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 253. Both the idealist and the realist "consider the relation of the self to others as an external relation. The realist considers consciousness within a body and sees the bodies of the self and the other as separated by the external relation of space. The idealist considers each mind locked in on itself and thus views the distance between minds as the external relation between two fixed or given nothings." (Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness'*, 1974, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 154-155).

[6] Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness'*, 1974 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 161.

[7] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 257.

[8] Kathleen V. Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness: Sartre and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 61, p.62.

empirically 'known' since "I experience the inapprehensible subjectivity of the Other directly and with my being." This awareness though is bound to cause anguish for the very reason that my rendering as object for the other nullifies my freedom, though this is through *my own consciousness* of this, and hence "the Other's look [is] at the very center of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities."[9] Through 'the look' we apprehend the inapprehensible, we experience rather than know the Other's consciousness.

Significantly for the discussion that follows, Sartre conceptualises the relation between our subjectivity and our apprehension of others' subjectivity in terms of space, and specifically in terms of a kind of nullifying invasion of each person's 'ontological space'. He views "the appearance of a man in my universe" as "the appearance among the objects of my universe of an element of disintegration in that universe," and a corresponding "alienation of the world which I organise."[10] He explains this further with reference to an oddly almost suburban sounding scenario:

> The Other is first the permanent flight of things toward a goal which I apprehend as an object at a certain distance from me but which escapes me inasmuch as it unfolds about itself its own distances. Moreover this disintegration grows by degrees; if there exists between the lawn and the Other a relation which is without distance and which creates distance, then there exists necessarily a relation between the Other and the statue which stands on a pedestal in the middle of the lawn, and a relation between the Other and the big chestnut trees which border the walk; there is a total space which is grouped around the Other, and this space is *made with my space*; there is a regrouping in which I take part but which escapes me, a regrouping of all the objects that people my universe.[11]

This regrouping (and the attempt to forestall it) is one of the key themes of the novels to be discussed in this chapter.

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[9] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 256, p. 270, p. 263.
[10] Ibid. p. 263.
[11] Ibid. p. 255.

Solipsism and literature

Literary criticism has at times used solipsism as a vague but pejorative term, meaning little more than wilful self-absorption or insularity, or to suggest a debilitating tortuous condition, a form of "metaphysical autism."[12] Tony Tanner, however, provides a cultural contextualization that views solipsism in US literature as a tendency borne of a need for "interior spaciousness." The significance of this interior spaciousness is often not, though, its provision of freedom, "that familiar American delight at feeling free from external control and shaping," as he suggests, but a fear of being free, a disavowal of existential freedom. For Tanner the "instinct to cultivate and protect an area of inner space" is exemplified by Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) in which the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, has the "inclination to escape into some private space away from the pressure of the moment," to become a "sealed-off spectator."[13] Tanner also sees this reflected in the novels of Susan Sontag, in which there is "a dread of environment, a suspicion of material impingements," but also a concern with "what happens if you do possess the dome for yourself and keep all others out," the risk of "a sharp diminishment in the dimensions of the architecture of consciousness," and of discovering that "the dome…is ultimately full of death."[14] Whilst the protagonists of the novels to be discussed do have a "dread of environment," and do experience a "sharp diminishment" of self, this can hardly be seen as "providing the space in which to be free." On the contrary, it is a means of withdrawal – from inwardness, from existential freedom, as well as from their environment and the people in it, since the interior spaciousness is a vacuum.

What distinguishes solipsistic fiction (or fiction concerned with solipsism as a problem) is its lack of action, or lack of concern with action, since it is the narrative consciousness that is foregrounded rather than action, plot, or dramatic development, which impinge minimally on that consciousness. Harold Kaplan views this as leading to an inevitable passivity for the solipsistic protagonist since

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[12] Mauric Natanson makes the comparison with autism to illustrate the notion of solipsism as a literary 'affliction'. (Maurice Natanson, 'Solipsism and Sociality', *New Literary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 'Changing Views of Character', Winter, 1974, pp. 237-244, p. 241); Reino Virtanen quotes J.P. Stern's description of the genre of *Bildungsroman* as "fundamentally solipsistic" in that it "leads the young hero from self-absorption into society, as though social life were a problematic task rather than a natural condition." (Reino Virtanen, 'The Spectre of Solipsism in Western Literature', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring, 1986, pp. 59-76, pp. 59-60).
[13] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970*, 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p. 262, p. 263.
[14] Ibid. p. 267, p. 268, p.267.

Action can be distinguished from movement only when choice, responsibility, or causation is clearly featured, and the further these are placed from the protagonist himself on the scene of action, the less he has to offer as a dramatic agent.[15]

Kaplan is obviously right to identify the significance of volition in turning movement into action, but his suggestion that a lack of volition diminishes a protagonist as a "dramatic agent" ignores the drama of solipsistic withdrawal, of a consciousness in active refusal to engage in the existentially threatening drama of the protagonist's own life. This can be understood as a form of denial in Sartrean terms, a resistance to the "regrouping of all the objects that people…[the protagonist's] universe" that Sartre identifies. This is particularly true of Bob Slocum in Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*, whose monologue confounds Frederick R. Karl's claim that "the American writer cannot posit an entire universe on withdrawal." Karl is surely right though to argue that there is a "Kafkan drift" in much post-war US fiction, at odds with a traditional narrative expansiveness, and that "even as Kafkan enclosure seems so seductive, most of our novelists slide away into space."[16] This is certainly an accurate description of the narrative voices in the novels to be discussed here (with the exception of *Something Happened*), though more importantly it is in "space they find…despair," the inner space of unreachable, and unbreachable, solipsism. Suburbia, an indeterminate, detached environmental space, promotes solipsism for the narrators/protagonists since it is "a spatial idea…it is order beyond chaos, and its quality is frequently measured…by its distance from real turmoil, the city. Space is evasion."[17]

It is useful for analytical clarity to distinguish three 'types' of solipsist in fiction, as identified by Rae Langton. She suggests there is the metaphysical solipsist "who believes he *is* the only person," the epistemic solipsist "who believes he is the only *knowable* person," and the moral solipsist, "who believes he is the only person who *matters*."[18] The second of these is the most important for my analysis of the novels in this chapter, though it should be stressed that within a Sartrean analysis epistemic solipsism is the refusal of the existential intimation of others' consciousness and

[15] Harold Kaplan, *The Passive Voice: An Approach to Modern Fiction*, 1966 (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979), p. 11.

[16] Frederick R. Karl, *American fictions, 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 21, p. 31, p. 37.

[17] Ibid. p. 31, p. 41.

[18] Rae Langton, 'Love and Solipsism', in Roger Lamb, ed. *Love Analyzed* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), p. 124.

selfhood, rather than any kind of objective 'knowledge' of these. The third type is arguably a possible *consequence* of epistemic solipsism, and it is this notion that is central to both Richard Ford's Bascombe novels and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* and *Aloft*.

However, it is the underlying reasons for the adoption of epistemic solipsism (and its moral implications) that is significant for an existentialist analysis. I will argue that the suburbs, understood as what Karl calls a "spatial idea," one in which "space is an evasion," are integral to the solipsistic (lack of) vision evinced by the narrators and protagonists of the novels of Heller, Ford and Lee. Suburbia promotes, or encourages, an evasion of the "primary relation between my consciousness and the Other's", and a resistance to the apprehension of others' subjectivity, understood *as space* (in Sartrean terms). Christopher Lasch, in his 1979 sociological treatise *The Culture of Narcissism*, viewed this resistance as an inevitable consequence of 1970s American corporate suburban culture in which people "hunger not for personal salvation, let alone the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security."[19] In such a culture others are a threat, but one that could increasingly be avoided in the suburbs of the late twentieth century. By the 1970s, changes in family life and socialization were occurring which involved the development of what Kenneth T. Jackson calls the "drive-in culture of contemporary America" in which "the automobile and the suburb have combined to create a drive-in culture that is part of the experience of most Americans."[20] Away from the densely populated cities, increasingly separated physically as well as psychologically from others, suburbanites could practice the evasion identified by Karl, their experiences of their environment and of others mediated through their windscreens or their picture windows. However, while the suburbs provide the environment in which solipsism can become entrenched – where protagonists can find Tanner's "interior spaciousness" and avoid others – its primary cause for Heller's, Ford's and Lee's narrators is the trauma of grief, as will be seen in the discussion that follows.

[19] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, 1979), p. 7.
[20] Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 246, p. 247.

Solipsistic suburbia

Something Happened: "The consolations of unreachable inwardness"

Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* is one of the most extreme examples of a solipsistic narrative in post-war US fiction, embodying the desire for what Tanner calls "the consolations of unreachable inwardness."[21] Bob Slocum's entropic narrative, discussed in Chapter One, is necessarily solipsistic, since it functions as a kind of closed system, seeking to forestall existential anguish caused by external sources (by the Other and 'the look' in Sartrean terms). Slocum works for a corporation, though the nature of his work as executive, or of the company and its products, is never specified. His narrative revolves around three aspects of his life, compulsively and repetitively – his suburban family life (with his wife, fifteen-year-old daughter, nine-year-old son and his youngest brain-damaged son), his company relations and his hopes and fears for his job, and his early and adolescent past.

In Slocum's obsessive revisiting of his past he fixates on Virginia Markowitz, a girl he worked with in his first job as filing clerk in an accident insurance company, and with whom he had his first fumbling, unfulfilled, sexual encounters. Virginia functions as a symbol of loss for Slocum, and in his misery he returns again and again to his flirtations with her, and to a time when, if he was not happy, there was at least the possibility of future imaginable happiness. Virginia represents a figure untarnished by adult life and its compromises, exigencies and disappointments.[22] She is also untouched by the slow, inevitable process of physical decay Slocum dreads, since she committed suicide. Slocum confesses, "I think I am still in love with her (and glad she's dead, because otherwise I might not be, and then I would have no one)." In Slocum's grief over Virginia he withdraws into an unreachable interiority, attempting to nullify that grief, but in his solipsism he refuses to grieve and so cannot overcome his grief. If, as Sartre seems to claim, solipsism can be a means of denying 'the look' - which forces us to recognise other's subjectivity and acknowledge its nullifying power since it renders us objects ontologically – then solipsism affords a kind of 'ontological protection' in its denial of 'the look'. However, it also necessarily renders others objects ontologically, and it is only through acknowledgement of others' subjectivity, their

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[21] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970*, 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p. 262.
[22] Much like Allie in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which arguably anticipated (and influenced) the thematic concerns of the literature of the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s – and indeed later fiction, for example David Gates' *Jernigan* (1991).

consciousness and self, that they can affect us, emotionally or psychologically. Since solipsism denies that subjectivity it forestalls emotions aroused by others, including grief, and so functions as a kind of psychological and emotional refuge or protection. Slocum, then, seeks solace in solipsism, but it paralyses him mentally and emotionally, resulting in a circular, iterative narrative.

Suburban life for Slocum has assumed the same character as corporate working life, in which others are a threat and must be subordinated, which he achieves through solipsism, denying their subjectivity, their consciousness and selfhood. In this way he seeks to nullify their power over him. His need to subordinate others at work is mirrored by this same need in his relations with his wife and his daughter, with both of whom he seeks to maintain power relations in which he is always dominant. He is utterly estranged from his wife, unloving sex functioning as the only contact between them that is not combative, manipulative or deceitful. The eliding of this distinction between corporate working life and corporate suburban home life is perhaps inevitable in the 'corporatization' of suburbia in the 1970s, with companies relocating from the cities to suburbs, as Jackson observes, pointing out that "corporate relocation in the post-war period" was "overwhelmingly a city-to-suburb phenomenon" so that by 1970 "about 78 per cent of the residents in the New York suburbs also worked in the suburbs."[23] Perhaps unsurprisingly then, Slocum describes work and home relations in the same way. At the beginning of the novel he tells us, "in the office in which I work there are five people of whom I am afraid," and "there are six people who are afraid of me," and later states, "in the family in which I live there are four people of whom I am afraid. Three of these four people are afraid of me."[24] "My wife," he says, "is afraid of me; I don't particularly want her that way, but it makes things easier." Others necessarily have a one-dimensional quality, they exist and have reality only insofar as they impinge on his own fragile sense of self. He claims that "I have never been sure I ever really cared for anyone in this whole world but myself and my little boy" and yet projects his fear and longings onto the child, believing that "our minds are very much alike, his and mine, in our humor and our foreboding."[25] Slocum's son represents a terrible vulnerability for him, one that he wishes to protect, but which ultimately enrages him because it reminds him of the residual (non-solipsistic) self he has, a self desperate

[23] Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 269, p. 267.
[24] Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, 1974 (London: Vintage Books, 1995), p.13, p.17, p.355.
[25] Ibid. p. 102, p. 206, p. 163.

for a breach in his self-imposed isolation, and one that cannot survive or even function in corporate suburbia.

Slocum inevitably refuses to recognise his wife's despair or that of Martha, the secretary in his office who finally has a breakdown, which Slocum is able to "handle suavely." If his solipsistic bad faith renders others ontological objects, women are more fully objectified than men, since his fear of male colleagues in the corporate world dominates his relations with them; Martha and his wife, however, do not impinge on his consciousness sufficiently to engender such a heightened sense of dread, and instead cause an intermittent but manageable unease, since their powerlessness in his corporatized world is disenfranchising if not entirely anonymising. The narcissistic Slocum cannot perceive any alternative to his hermetic corporate self and (fully) detached suburban situation, as he asks himself "is this *all* there is for me to do? Is this really the *most* I can get from the few years left in this one life of mine? And the answer I get, of course, is always… *Yes!*"[26] What threatens his continued corporate suburban existence is the persistent consciousness of unease, nameless dread, and shame, which, he externalises, attributing it to his own disembodied consciousness (of multiple selves) in and of the past:

> Where are those scattered, ripped pieces of that fragmented little boy and bewildered young man who turned out to be me? There are times now when it seems to me that I may not have been any place at all for long periods of time… There must have been a second person who grew up alongside me (or inside me) and filled in for me on occasions to experience things of which I did not wish to become a part.[27]

Slocum views his son as the manifestation of "that fragmented little boy," and in making him part of his myth of himself Slocum takes his solipsism to a new level of pathology that ultimately results in his killing the boy, ostensibly by accident. Slocum's often repeated fear in his narrative that his son will die before he does (that he is too vulnerable to live), finally comes true as he hugs and asphyxiates the boy following a traffic accident in which Slocum thinks he is fatally injured, though he is actually only slightly hurt. As Heller prepares us for the inevitable tragedy, Slocum's narrative grows increasingly disjointed, the parenthetical asides ever longer and unrelated. Slocum

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[26] Ibid. p. 569, p. 31.
[27] Ibid. pp. 134-135.

confesses that "real and imagined events overrun each other in my mind in hazy indistinction" and that "I'm not always sure I remember what I've imagined."[28] Since Slocum's mind is increasingly the only reality he recognises, the distinction between what he imagines and what actually occurs is no longer possible to distinguish clearly. With his son's death, which necessarily has limited reality for him, Slocum eradicates the final remnants of his vestigial self that do not fit into his corporate suburban life, and the final chapter sees him fully integrated in his new job, promoted to a position of higher authority within the corporation. Slocum has found a new equilibrium in identifying himself wholly with the company, closure of a kind, and with it the final cessation of his torrent of words.

Slocum's killing of his son then, can be understood as an attempt to extinguish external sources of existential disquiet, vulnerability, and despair, to bolster the spurious equilibrium he maintains through solipsism. Yet, as stated earlier, this false equilibrium, this sense of self, is necessarily fragile and has to be validated by the very existences external to Slocum that his solipsism denies. His narcissism, understood as the virtual absence of a sense of self, leaves him with an ontological void, since the absence of even the possibility of self-knowledge seems to nullify the possibility of even epistemic solipsism. "The problem," Slocum says, "is that I don't know who or what I really am" and that "there is now no one else I would rather be than me – even though I don't really like me and am not even sure who it is I am." Slocum takes on the attributes of others he encounters; when he meets a superior at work "his nature will be my nature until I come up against the next person who has more powerful personality traits than any of my own….I often wonder what my true nature is. Do I have one?" Unsurprisingly, Slocum is obsessed with speech, with voice, and inability to speak. He thinks he has always "been sandwiched between people who will not speak" and is subject to dreams in which "I often have trouble speaking. My tongue feels dead and dry and swollen enough to choke my mouth."[29] Communication threatens his equilibrium; he communicates little to others, yet seeks to ameliorate his alienation and isolation through his narrative. Slocum's solipsism then, creates an oppressive, claustrophobic narrative, stuck in a relentlessly and compulsively iterative locked groove.

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[28] Ibid. p. 429, p.486.
[29] Ibid. p. 74, p. 176, pp. 72-73, p. 354.

Slocum's isolation and solipsistic alienation are inevitable in the corporate suburban culture of the 1970s identified by Lasch, one in which the undermining of the American dream of success, its evisceration, necessarily leads to the erosion of self, since the dream of success has no meaning outside its own terms – success for success' sake, not for any other end or purpose. One could therefore argue, extending Lasch's analysis, that the self is eroded to the extent that it is invested solely in the pursuit of material success, since achievement can only be measured in relation to that of others. Lasch considers narcissism a near-pathological state, closer to self-hate than self-love, though since there is little if any sense of self for the narcissist to hate, the state of narcissism is perhaps more one of great anxiety or dread than self-hate. Lasch sees the prevalence of narcissism in the 1970s as the commonest form of psychiatric pathology as being the result of "quite specific changes in our society and culture – from bureaucracy, the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, the rationalization of the inner life, the cult of consumption, and in the last analysis from changes in family life and from changing patterns of socialization."[30] These developments (including the drive-in culture identified by Jackson), inevitably leading to greater suburban isolation, were underway by the time *Something Happened* was published in 1974, and corporate relocation to the suburbs from the cities was also occurring, a probable influence on the corporatization of the suburbs implicitly depicted in the novel. Fiction clearly reflected such changes, and though Lasch's description below of postmodernist writers conflates narrator and author, it accurately describes Slocum's solipsism. Confessional writing, he claims, no longer has anything meaningful to confess, since

> The voyage to the interior discloses nothing but a blank. The writer no longer sees life reflected in his own mind. Just the opposite: he sees the world, even in its emptiness, as a mirror of himself. In recording his 'inner' experiences, he seeks not to provide an objective account of a representative piece of reality but to seduce others into giving him attention, acclaim, or sympathy and thus to shore up a faltering sense of self.[31]

If Lasch's explanation of narcissism as a cultural phenomenon of the 1970s and after is credible, then it is likely that narcissists would also be solipsists in their attempt to establish the "psychic security" he claims they crave. The historical changes he

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[30] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, 1979), p. 7, p. 32.
[31] Ibid. p. 21.

identifies affected the middle class primarily, who, of course, lived in the suburbs, and clearly Slocum exemplifies Lasch's narcissist, for whom the world is a mirror of himself. The ongoing changes in the culture of the suburbs in the late twentieth century, leading to greater isolation and remoteness from others, make them increasingly significant in the depiction of solipsism, as the discussion of Richard Ford's Bascombe novels and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and *Aloft* (2004) will illustrate.

The Bascombe novels: "Disappearing into your own life"

The first of Richard Ford's Bascombe novels, *The Sportswriter*, published in 1986, has little obvious resemblance to Heller's novel, other than its first person narration. Frank Bascombe, approaching early middle age (he's thirty-eight), is an avowed optimist, claims to have little interest in his past and to be focused on the present, enjoys his job as a sportswriter and expresses contentment with his suburban environment (claims which are all undermined in the course of the novel). Ford, however, acknowledged the influence of *Something Happened* on *The Sportswriter* in an interview with Brian Duffy in 2008, and there are indeed similarities between the novels in both the narrative form and the dominant themes.[32] Like Bob Slocum, Frank Bascombe is an unreliable narrator, who manipulates people (including, of course, the reader) through language, and dissembles in his relations with others, even as he indulges in a kind of 'confessional' monologue, privileging his relationship with the reader. Like Slocum he is isolated and needs his isolation to maintain a delicate equilibrium and prevent his despair becoming manifest (to himself), and he similarly exemplifies Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism* in that, as W.G. Chernecky argues,

> People and events become less events experienced and more objects of speculation. But Frank's ability to abstract patterns from people and events only adds to his solipsistic worldview and alienates him from the world around him. Frank Bascombe's limited points of view emphasize the isolation of his individual consciousness.[33]

For Frank then, living in the fictional New Jersey suburb of Haddam, others have a limited reality, existing to validate or diminish him in his mercurial psychological states

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[32] Brain Duffy, *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 347.
[33] W.G. Chernecky, '"Nostalgia Ain't What It Used To Be": Isolation and Alienation in the Frank Bascombe Novels' in Huey Guagliardo, ed. *Perspectives on Richard Ford* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), p. 159.

and sense of self. Frank is divorced, and has a fractious relationship with his ex-wife, referred to as 'X' throughout the novel, signifying negation, a nullifying crossing out, as well, of course, as simply 'ex', though Ford maintains that he simply could not think of a name for her, and the initial provisional 'X' in place of a name remained in the final text.[34] Frank deflects his grief following the death of his first son at the age of nine from an untreatable illness, through withdrawal into solipsism, which he calls "a terrible dreaminess and the worst kind of abstraction and unreachableness." His grieving process has been arrested, following the moment of Ralph's death, when, he says, "I remember my mind stopping. No other thought occurred to me immediately. No association or memory latched onto the event, or to the next one." Frank has declared a moratorium on grieving, for fear that he will again be "unprotected from the emotions – vivid ones – of true death" and "suddenly feel…exactly as I did that morning [when Ralph died]: bereaved and in jeopardy of greater bereavement sweeping me up."[35] He is afraid, in other words, that he will succumb to despair in the face of his son's "absurd" death. Like Bob Slocum, Frank Bascombe reacts to grief by withdrawing into "unreachableness"; both seek refuge in solipsism, but discover the inevitable despair of being Tanner's "sealed-off spectator."

Bascombe's relations with his other two young children, Paul and Clarissa, are somewhat strained, his engagement with them limited, as is the case in all his relations. His detachment makes him well suited to his job as a sportswriter, however, since "to be a sportswriter…is to live your life mostly with your thoughts, and only the edge of others'." In fact, Frank mostly avoids even the edge of the thoughts (or selves) of others, and implicitly valorises solipsism. At the very beginning of *The Sportswriter* he states that "very early you come to the realization that nothing will ever take you away from yourself" and later says that "you don't have any business knowing what other people think."[36] After recounting an affair he had some years earlier he tells us that in the course of the relationship he "simply found out that you couldn't know another person's life and might as well not even try." He takes the same approach to 'friends' and claims that "the only badge of true friendship" is "not to be curious."[37]

[34] Kay Bonetti, 'An Interview with Richard Ford' in Huey Guagliardo, ed. *Conversations with Richard Ford* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 31.
[35] Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 1986 (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 130, p. 259, p.61.
[36] Ibid. p. 318, p. 348, p. 7, p. 77.
[37] Ibid. p. 229, p. 183.

Significantly, though, the isolation that Frank experiences as a sportswriter, is little different from that experienced by the subjects of his writing, in the corporate and bureaucratic world of sports in the early 1980s, the unregulated free market of 'Reaganomics'. As Lasch noted in 1979,

> The prevalent mode of social interaction today is antagonistic cooperation…in which a cult of teamwork conceals the struggle for survival within bureaucratic organizations. In sport, the rivalry among teams…reduces itself (like the rivalry among business corporations) to a struggle for shares of the market. The professional athlete does not care whether his team wins or loses (since losers share in the pot), as long as it stays in business.[38]

The monolithic corporate bureaucracy that dominates Slocum's world impinges too on Frank's life, though in his solipsism he does not recognise the inevitable despair such alienation creates, preferring to idealise athletes and believe they are "as literal and within themselves as the ancient Greeks…never likely to feel the least bit divided, or alienated, or one ounce of existential dread."[39] Frank aspires to this state, yet fails to recognise its Kierkegaardian implications, since as Ann Walker points out,

> According to at least one philosopher, the worst kind of despair occurs when a person does not recognise that he or she is in despair. Despair, in other words, is the catalyst for some higher state of mind because it makes its host seek something beyond the self. These athletes would then be in the worst kind of despair, if Frank's perception of them is accurate.[40]

Frank, then, fails to recognise his own despair in projecting his aspirant state onto athletes, but also, in the course of the novel, he projects his own despair onto others he meets, such as his girlfriend's father and an injured ex-athlete he describes as being "as alienated as Camus." Ironically though, he fails to recognise his friend Walter Luckett's despair, precisely because it threatens to make his own despair clear to him. Walter, also divorced, feels he is "impoverished just suddenly…and everything seems very bad to me. I've quit *becoming*, is what it feels like."[41] This mirrors Frank's own

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[38] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, 1979), p. 118.
[39] Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 1986 (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 63.
[40] Elinor Ann Walker, *Richard Ford*: Twayne's United States Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000), pp. 84-85.
[41] Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 1986 (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 208, p. 183.

emotional and psychological state, but his solipsism does not allow him to empathise with luckless Luckett; instead, after Walter's late night confessional visit, Frank unplugs his phone to avoid having to speak to him again, "Don't call, my silent message says, I'll be sleeping. Dreaming sweet dreams. Don't call. Friendship is a lie of life. Don't call." Walter commits suicide the following day, and leaves a suicide note addressed to Frank. As he finishes reading the note on a train to New York, the train enters a tunnel, "the lights go out and you can't see beyond your reflected self in gritty window glass and I have the sudden feeling of falling out of space and into a perilous dream." Walter's suicide undermines Frank's sense of self, sends it momentarily into freefall, his narcissism and solipsism revealed as frightening emptiness, the very thing he consistently seeks to avoid: "the essence of a small empty moment."[42] In Sartrean terms, Frank resists the "regrouping of all the objects that people…[his] universe" caused by Walter's attempt at intimacy, which Frank experiences as violation, the impingement of 'the look' of the Other: Ironically, this is exactly what Walter had tried to discuss with Frank, his anguish in recognising (paraphrasing Sartre's notion of the nullifying effect of 'the look') that "we all of a sudden become the thing viewed, not the viewer." Walter's intrusion into Frank's solitary life has the effect of nullifying Frank's hermetic sense of independence, his sense of his own character as stable in its imperviousness – and most fundamentally, nullifying his subjectivity (Walter wishes he could be more like Frank, though of course knows almost nothing about him).[43] Walter, though, does more than violate Frank's 'ontological space' – he violates his suburban space, calling late at night, being let in by Frank's lodger, and waiting for Frank in his study (the epicentre of his suburban solipsism to which no-one is allowed access). Frank's alienation, then, can hardly be overstated and the threat posed by others ('the look' of the Other) becomes clear when he tells us that he avoids his fellow sportswriters "like piranhas," since

> More than one drink with the boys from the office…and the dreads come right down out of the fake tin ceiling and the Tiffany hanging lamps like cyanide. My knees start to hop under the table, and in three minutes I'm emptied of all conviction and struck dumb as a shoe and want nothing but to sit and stare away

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[42] Ibid. p. 195, p. 351, p. 61.

[43] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 255; Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 1986 (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 185.

at the pictures on the wall, or at how the moldings fit the ceiling or how the mirrors in the back bar reflect a different room from the one I'm in.[44]

At the end of *The Sportswriter*, however, Frank's solipsism is challenged and Ford implies that he may yet transcend it; while Frank considers Walter's death to be, like Ralph's death, absurd, it has on him "the effect…that death means to have" – it forces him to recognise (too late) the reality of Walter's despair. The suburbs both contributed to and denied Walter's despair, the inadmissibility of that despair in solipsistic suburbia isolating him further, and heightening his alienation. Frank recognises this when he comments that the suburbs of New Jersey are "the perfect landscape for…loneliness," places where you can be "derailed by the spiky fact of being alone."[45] At the end of the novel Frank feels himself briefly out from under the "thin…residue or skin of all the things you've done and been and said and erred at" and, paraphrasing Kierkegaard, asks "Is life itself an illness or a syndrome? Who knows? We've all felt that way, I'm confident, since there's no way that I could feel what hundreds of millions of other citizens haven't."[46]

At the beginning of *Independence Day*, published in 1995, Frank (now forty-four) seems to have strived to overcome his debilitating solipsism and to have become more involved with others, both with his family, and with his fellow suburbanites in Haddam, in his new job as a realtor. A few pages into his narrative, however, we learn that Frank is now in what he calls the 'Existence Period', an indeterminate and mutable state in which he can "ignore much…that seems worrisome and embroiling," a period in which we (Frank extrapolates) can be content "spending quality time simply with ourselves." Dreaminess has been replaced by the Existence Period, anguished solipsism by torpid solipsism in the indolent indeterminacy of suburbia (and Frank's invention of a personal and private existential terminology could itself be seen as solipsistic). Frank implicitly acknowledges his sense of detachment and self-estrangement in confessing that "I try…to keep something finite and acceptably doable on my mind and not disappear. Though it's true that sometimes in the glide…I sense I am afloat and cannot always feel the sides of where I am."[47] The Existence Period stresses a form of

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[44] Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 1986 (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 82.
[45] Ibid. p. 366, p. 97, p. 238.
[46] Ibid. p. 375. ("Despair is the sickness unto death…this sickness in the self…to die and yet not to die," Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening by Anti-Climacus*, 1849, London: Penguin Books, 2004, p. 48).
[47] Richard Ford, *Independence Day*, 1995 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), p. 10, p. 95, p. 117.

independence from others and emotional cautiousness (perhaps more nuanced and seemingly less solipsistic than dreaminess) – a delicate balance in which "interest can mingle successfully with uninterest…intimacy with transience, caring with obdurate uncaring…maturity's balance." Frank's girlfriend, Sally Caldwell, is disbelieving of his protestations of strong feelings for her, knowing the tenets of the Existence Period by which he lives, particularly since Frank himself admits that "sometimes I feel beyond affection's grasp" but he thinks "that's just being human."[48] Sally though, is cautious herself, having been alone for much of her life since her war-traumatised husband Wally inexplicably abandoned her and her two very young children. Frank believes their relationship is "the Existence Period shared" since

> Sally superintends nothing, presupposes nothing and in essence promises to do nothing…except like me…And whereas in marriage there's the gnashing, cold but cozy fear that after a while there'll be no *me* left, only *me chemically amalgamated with another*, the proposition with Sally is that there's *just* me. Forever.[49]

The significance of the suburbs in fostering and maintaining solipsism is made clear in Frank's conceptualisation of his job as a realtor. Frank believes that he sells people a representation, or symbol, of independence, through home ownership and financial self-reliance – but he also sells them freedom to live unconnected to others, the dangers of which he comes to realise. For much of *Independence Day* Frank is in the detached and distancing comfort of his car, avoiding involvement and the need to make choices in his relationships, and in particular in his relationship with Sally. In this way his car provides a form of independence that is an analogue of exclusionary suburban independence. Ford discussed the risks of this in an interview in 1997 with Elinor Ann Walker, and specifically "the eventual sterility of cutting yourself off from liaisons with other people, from attachments, affinities, affiliations… finally the end of the line for independence is sterility." He seems though to view this as virtually inevitable in the suburbs, since "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…when I'm not somehow diluted by you'."[50] Far from overcoming his solipsism then, Frank has immersed himself further in it, through his virtual living in his car,

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[48] Ibid. p. 76, p. 171.
[49] Ibid. p. 177.
[50] Elinor Ann Walker, 'An Interview with Richard Ford' in Huey Guagliardo, ed. *Conversations with Richard Ford* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 139.

through his isolated and isolating suburban environment, and through his existential conceptualisation of his life. He claims to be "dismally aware how impossible it is ever to be 'with' another human being" and believes that "moving closer, even slightly, even for a heartbeat, is just another form of storytelling."[51] The Existence Period effectively justifies epistemic solipsism, as its recognition of others' unknowability leads to an emotional and psychological distancing, foreclosing the possibility of intimacy, or meaningful relationships with others – as Ford says, "the Existence Period is purchased at the price of isolation."[52] It therefore inevitably leads to a form of what Rae Langton calls moral solipsism. For Frank though there is no possibility of meaningful intimacy, since

> The truth is…we know little and can find out precious little more about others, even though we stand in their presence, hear their complaints, ride the roller coaster with them, sell them houses, consider the happiness of their children – only in a flash or a gasp or the slam of a car door to see them disappear and be gone forever. Perfect Strangers.[53]

Frank's epistemic solipsism can be seen in his relationship with his fifteen-year-old son, Paul. Frank discovers that Paul too is stuck in his own kind of hermetic solipsism; most of the time he finds himself "thinking he's thinking" and ceaselessly monitors his thoughts as a means of trying to understand himself, but has little conception of other people's emotions or thoughts, of the subjectivity of others.[54] Frank claims to want to build a closer relationship with Paul, and to this end the two go on a trip over Independence Day weekend from New River, Connecticut, to the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts and the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York (a trip which ends disastrously when Paul is hit full in the face by a baseball). Before the trip Frank gives Paul a copy of Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' (in which Emerson writes that "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind") hoping that they will be able to discuss it on the trip.[55] However, Frank's repeated attempts to engage Paul end in failure (Paul of course has not read 'Self-Reliance') and the Existence Period renders Frank virtually unable to engage

[51] Richard Ford, *Independence Day*, 1995 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), p. 93, p. 185.
[52] Richard Shea, 'Seeking Shelter From the Storm: Richard Ford Pays Homage to Central New Jersey', 1996, in Huey Guagliardo, ed. *Conversations With Richard Ford*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p. 129.
[53] Richard Ford, *Independence Day*, 1995 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), p. 76.
[54] Ibid. p. 14.
[55] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Self-Reliance' in *Nature and Selected Essays*, 1982 (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 178.

emotionally. Father and son cannot establish or maintain intimacy, and each remains entrenched in his isolation and alienation. The joking, pun-based exchanges the two have traditionally relied on as "a way of conducting father-son business" now fail them, and their words "get carried off in the breeze, with no one to care if we speak the intricate language of love or don't" (including, quite possibly, Frank). Frank's isolation is underscored by an arbitrary and absurd act of violence in a motel where he stays on his way to collect Paul for their trip. Frank watches as the police attend the scene of a fatal shooting of a man after a robbery in one of the motel rooms, and the escorting of the man's wife, with her daughter, from the room in which her husband has been murdered. Later, when Frank is in bed he has intimations of all that the Existence Period has allowed him to repress. Contingency and death force Frank to recognise that solipsism cannot finally assuage existential anguish, but can only intensify it:

> Suddenly my heart goes bangety-bang, bangety-bangety bang, as if I myself were about to exit life in a hurry. And if I could, I would spring up, switch on the light, dial someone and shout right down into the hard little receiver, 'It's okay. I got away. It was goddamned close, I'll tell ya. It didn't get me, though. I smelled its breath, saw its red eyes in the dark, shining. A clammy hand touched my mine. But I made it. I survived. Wait for me. Wait for me. Not that much is left to do.' Only there's no one. No one here or anywhere near to say any of this to. And I'm sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.[56]

Frank does seem to have changed by the end of *Independence Day*. Whereas in *The Sportswriter* he disconnects his phone after Walter's despairing visit, at the end of the second novel he is woken by the phone in the middle of the night and answers it, telling the silent caller "Now's not a bad time at all…Let me hear your thinking. I'll try to add a part to the puzzle." He now recognises that in the Existence Period there is a risk of simply "disappearing into your own life" and that "the physical isolation and emotional disengagement…cause trouble equal to or greater than the problems they ostensibly solve." In relinquishing the false refuge of the Existence Period Frank experiences "the re-emergence of some small hope (which is merely human)," and contemplates marriage to Sally Caldwell. The ending sees Frank out of his car, and in the crowd during the Fourth of July celebrations, energised and excited as he feels "the push, the pull, the weave and sway of others."[57]

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[56] Richard Ford, *Independence Day*, 1995 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), p. 265, pp. 265-266, p. 217.
[57] Ibid. p. 451, p. 156, p. 390, p. 451.

The third of the Bascombe novels, *The Lay of The Land,* published in 2006, is set at the start of the new millennium, just before Thanksgiving, with Frank (now fifty-five, living by the ocean in Sea-Clift, and recently abandoned by his second wife, Sally) musing over a shocking news report he recently read. The report is about a disgruntled student nurse and father of two in south Texas, who walked into an examination room and, aiming a gun between his teacher's eyes, asked her if she was ready to meet her maker, to which she replied: "Yes. Yes, I think I am." The man shot her and then himself. This sets the tone of the novel, with several other (seemingly random) acts of fatal violence underscoring contingency, heightening Frank's dread in facing his own mortality, since he now has prostate cancer and has endured treatment in the form of radioactive iodine-seed implants. Initially it seems that Frank's solipsism has been replaced with a greater openness to new experiences and a concern with others, despite their nullifying existential threat to his sense of self, his subjectivity in Sartrean terms; he seems 'grounded' in immanence but not debilitated by it. He is now in the Permanent Period, which is "specifically commissioned to make you quit worrying about your own existence and how everything devolves on your *self* (most things aren't about 'you' anyway, but about other people)." He is still a realtor, though now with his own business ('Realty-Wise') in Sea-Clift, having left the suburb of Haddam when "it stopped being subordinate to any other place and became *a place to itself*…a town of others, for others," in other words when it lost its indeterminacy and the existential threat of the Other became greater.[58] Space in Haddam was no longer, in Karl's terms, an evasion, for Frank, since it had lost that indeterminateness and mutability, the very qualities that enabled him to maintain his evasive solipsism, his distancing from others (and from 'the look' of the Other). Sea-Clift however, is a far more remote suburb and has far fewer inhabitants. Frank's solipsism is now so entrenched that his attempts at (nominally) overcoming it by reconceptualising his life (the Permanent Period) can only fail. Ironically, Frank has joined an organization called 'Sponsors', a "network of mostly central New Jersey citizens…whose goal is nothing more than to help people…[who] need nothing more than a little sound advice." Visits to such people last no more than an hour, with no follow-up visits or communication, and Frank of course meets the requirement that sponsors have "a capacity to be disengaged while staying sincerely focused." This is also the requirement for being a suburban realtor, and sponsoring cannot diminish his sense of alienation and isolation any more than his job can. Frank

[58] Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 2006 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), p. 2, p. 106, p. 129.

has a sensation of "constantly feeling offshore, a low-level, slightly removed-from-events, wooing-wind agitation that doing for others, in the frank, plain-talk way I was able to as a house seller, generally assuaged but never completely stilled." It is hardly surprising then that for Frank "sponsoring has never actually produced a greater sense of connectedness…a little connectedness, in fact, goes a long way…we might all do with a little less of it.[59]

Frank's pronouncements on relationships and the impossibility of intimacy suggest that in late middle-age his solipsism is more desolate than ever, as he now claims to believe that "life only happens to you and to you alone, and…any concept of togetherness, intimacy, union, abiding this and abiding that is a hoot and a holler into darkness." He describes his relationship with Sally as an example of "loving someone, but knowing with certainty you'll never, never, never (because neither of you remotely wants it) have that person except in…[a] sorry ersatz way," and wonders if his ten years with Sally were just "a matter of clammy reasons and practicalities, as though a life lived with another was just a matter of twin isolation booths in an old fifties quiz show." He avoids face-to-face conversations with Ann, his former wife, and thinks Alexander Graham Bell was a "great American" because he "foresaw how human we are and how much protection we need from others."[60] The suburbs though provide the ideal place to cultivate the kind of relations Frank believes possible, such as his 'friendship' with Carter Knott from Haddam, which is based on an "unspoken rule never to exchange dinner invitations or to meet for drinks or lunch, since neither of us would have the least interest in what the other was up to and would both get bored and depressed."[61]

Ironically, it is the cause of Frank's solipsism – his grief over his son Ralph's death – that is the means of his (possibly) overcoming it. Frank's "dreaminess" in his sportswriter days, his shutting down and shutting out in his moratorium on grief, evolves into the Existence Period and the Permanent Period, and with each stage Frank claims to have acquired a new existential insight and to have gained a heightened awareness – yet his moratorium continues through his increasingly entrenched detachment. At the end of *The Sportswriter* Frank claims that both his grief (relatively short) and mourning (much longer) for Ralph are over, yet all he has done is attempt to nullify their debilitating power. He cannot, however, maintain this

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[59] Ibid. pp. 12-13, p. 133, p. 73, p. 140.
[60] Ibid. p. 336, p. 205, pp. 341-342, p. 560.
[61] Richard Ford, *Independence Day*, 1995 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), p. 443.

solipsistic refuge indefinitely, and the grief he has tried to suppress erupts unexpectedly when he reads about the death of a fellow realtor's son in a magazine. Frank breaks down, is suddenly in tears, feeling "rage, frustration, sorrow, remorse, fatigue, self-reproach" and "a pain right where my heart ought to be…as if I'd done death *already*" – which of course he has figuratively through his benumbing isolation.[62] He wonders if it is possible to accept that "your life is founded on a lie, and you know what the lie is." Frank does finally accept the irrevocability of Ralph's death, but in doing so feels vulnerable, robbed of his "old, safe context." At the end of the novel Frank reflects on his relationship with his family and speculates that he might "come to know them better than I do," a possibility he would not have conceded previously. It seems that his acceptance of Ralph's death, which he now realises he "will never truly get over if I live to be a hundred" may have released him from his Other-denying solipsism.[63]

In the last of the Bascombe books, *Let Me Be Frank With You* (2014), a collection of four interrelated stories, it is clear that Frank, now sixty-eight, has *not* come to know his family better (his contact with his two children consists mostly of occasional bemused phone calls), though his grief and mourning for Ralph seem even greater – he mentions him seven times, telling us that he imagines him alive (he would be forty-three), working as a stockbroker and advising Frank on investments, that he tried and failed to write "something memoiristic" about Ralph's death many years before, and that although he hardly remembers him he "can hear his voice" still, twenty-five years after his death. Frank has not fully relinquished the false solace and refuge of solipsism, but it can no longer protect him from experiencing the constant presence of grief. He alternately seeks in detachment to nullify the lives, and subjectivity, of others, and through involvement to experience intimations of that subjectivity, of the immanent presence of others. As in the previous three Bascombe books Frank's engrained solipsism is repeatedly challenged, and he is forced to choose between avowal and avoidance in his encounters with others. The stories are all set just before Christmas 2012, in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, which devastated parts of the New Jersey shoreline, including Sea-Clift, and Frank's old house there, which he sold in 2004, moving back to Haddam with Sally, to whom he is still married. In the first story, 'I'm Here', Frank reflects (as he did in *The Lay of the Land*) that "Emerson was right – as he was about everything: an infinite remoteness underlies us all," which is "truly

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[62] Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 2006 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), p. 519, p. 520.
[63] Ibid. p. 521, p. 534, p. 707.

mysterious, yet completely adequate for the life ongoing."[64] Such infinite remoteness, however, is shown *not* to be adequate in the second story, 'Everything Could be Worse', in which Frank receives a visit from a middle-aged black woman, Charlotte Pines, who grew up in his house in the 1960s when it was an exclusively white neighbourhood. The trauma she experienced there unfolds slowly, as she begins falteringly to tell her life-disfiguring story, and he listens expectantly, recognising that "it's little enough to do for other humans – help them get their narrative straight." The violence of the trauma Charlotte recounts, however, leaves Frank without recourse to commiserative platitudes, as his visitor explains that her (black) father shot and killed her (Italian) mother, and her brother, and then shot himself, after his marriage disintegrated amidst intractable cultural and temperamental conflicts, and his wife began an affair. Before this disclosure Frank muses that "it would do any of us good to contemplate the house we live in being peopled by imperfect predecessors. It would encourage empathy and offer – when there's nothing left to want in life – perspective."[65]Afterwards, despite his lifelong belief that it's "better *not* to know many things," Frank comments that "it's a solid gain to experience significant life events for which no words or obvious gestures apply," and as Charlotte leaves he smiles what he hopes is a smile of mutual understanding, to express what he hadn't been able to express before in words but believes they shared. Grief again breaches Frank's solipsism, and in a kind of reverse flow of empathy, he acknowledges what Sartre calls being-for-others, wondering if our "complex mental picture of ourselves" should include "not just the image that smiles wryly back from the shaving mirror; but the solitary trudger glimpsed in the shop window, shoulders slumped, hairline backing away, neck flesh lapping, bent as if by winds" – ourselves as the unknowable and beleaguered Other.[66]

'The New Normal' recounts Frank's visit to his first wife, Ann Dykstra, who now has Parkinson's, at "a state-of-the-art, staged-care facility," uncomfortably close to where he lives in what was, when they first met, "the verdant Haddam hinterlands." Frank's intention is to "come before her portraying as close to human mass as I'm able – my Default Self." Since their marriage unravelled, as Frank retreated into his Other-denying solipsism, his period of what in *The Sportswriter* he called "dreaminess" – and now acknowledges was "near-institutional-grade distraction" – Ann cannot accept his

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[64] Richard Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), p. 193, p. 170, p. 58.
[65] Ibid. p. 74, pp. 103-104.
[66] Ibid. p. 102, p. 109, p. 111, p. 78.

Default Self, or the intention it signifies of trying to "seem a better, solider person."[67] Ann talks of her wish to be buried next to Ralph and Frank is relieved that she wants to talk about this rather than their failed marriage and his role (withdrawn, distancing, detached) in its failure, but the tone of neutral civility is ruptured when Ann tells him "I've had two. Two second marriages. Both better than when I married you." The statement is not, though, accusatory, as Frank initially thinks, but bewildered and mournful, as he realises when she calls him "sweetheart…her old pet name," and as, Frank observes poignantly, "her pale eyes stare at me as if she's lost the thread." Ann is quickly restored to her bristling, efficient and organised self (though there is now nothing to be efficient or organised for) and, when she asks Frank to leave he knows that her isolation is absolute, unbreachable, and, unlike his own, not chosen.[68] Frank's reluctance to let others impinge on his consciousness is most apparent though in 'Deaths of Others', the last story, in which he visits an acquaintance from early 1980s Haddam, who has now returned and is in the last stages of metastasised pancreatic cancer. Frank comments that "lived life, especially once you hit adulthood, is always a matter of superfluity leading on to less-ness," and believes both he and Eddie understand that "life is a matter of subtractions." He is consequently taken aback by Eddie's confession that he slept with Ann soon after Ralph's death and fell in love with her – unwelcome additional knowledge that can't be subtracted – though Frank tells Eddie it changes nothing for him because "a wound you don't feel is not a wound."[69] This sounds like the Frank of earlier years, seeking the nullifying comfort of solipsism, neutralizing the threat of others' subjectivity destabilising him (avoiding the "the essence of a small empty moment."[70]) In this story, as in each of the others, Frank's lifelong impulse to deny intimations of others' subjectivity, and the threat this poses to his emotional equilibrium, is in conflict with his need to experience grief and mourning, for Ralph, but also for all he and those he loves have lost – for Sally, her first husband, for Ann, her second and third husbands, and now her very self, for Paul and Clarissa, their brother Ralph. Significantly, the story – and Bascombe's narrative – ends with Frank meeting a former classmate of Paul's he both respects and likes, outside Eddie's house, who asks how Ralph is. Frank says, "He means my son Paul. They knew each other long ago in school. It is a sweetness that brings tears to my eyes." The trustful, open benevolence of the man, breaches Frank's guard, and "it becomes for us a moment to know the expanding largeness of it all," not less-ness, not subtraction, but

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[67] Ibid. p. 117, p. 145, p. 141, p. 146.
[68] Ibid. p. 173.
[69] Ibid. p. 187, p. 230, p. 234.
[70] Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*, 1986 (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 61.

a continuous expansion until death – of loss, of grief, but also, perhaps, of compassion and empathy.[71]

A Gesture Life and *Aloft:* "Modes of consciousness"

Chang-rae Lee's novels *A Gesture Life* (1999) and *Aloft* (2004) share some of the key themes of Ford's Bascombe novels, and perhaps most importantly, the dangers and consequences of suburban solipsism. Lee's narrators see the suburbs they live in as allowing an existential ambivalence, a tension between commitment and independence, between isolation and a sense of belonging or community. As in Ford's novels, "space is an evasion" in the suburbs, and they have a liminal, indeterminate essence, yet for Lee's protagonists there is no clear transition to a better understanding, a more insightful state, but rather a kind of suspension of volition, a passivity and near-paralysis of will that should in Kaplan's terms render them implausible as "dramatic agents." Yet it does not because their monologues, like Frank Bascombe's, create tension in their attempt to sustain solipsism through narrative. Since narration is obviously a form of communication (however unreliable the narrator), it necessarily undermines that attempt at solipsistic withdrawal. If monologue is, as John W. Aldridge suggests, "the natural solipsistic form," the suburbs are the natural solipsistic environment, one in which there is, as one of Lee's narrators eloquently describes it, "an unwritten covenant of conduct…a signet of cordiality and decorum, in whose ethic, if it can be called such a thing, the worst thing is to be drawn forth and disturbed" and "the most available freedom is to live alone."[72]

In *A Gesture Life* Doc Hata, the narrator, has gained acceptance in the wealthy New York suburb where he is now settled, making painstaking efforts to fit in and employing a civil but distancing politeness in all his relations. Now retired from his medical supply business, he reflects on his life, and in particular his three cultures (he is Korean, was adopted and brought up in Japan, and emigrated in adulthood to the US), his service as a medic in World War Two (in the Imperial Army of Japan), on a failed relationship with a suburban widow, and on his fraught relationship with his adoptive daughter. Like Frank Bascombe, Franklin 'Doc' Hata tries to repress the trauma and grief of his past, to neutralise it, by fashioning a new identity for himself, a new sense of self. In Sartrean terms his response to "being-in-the-world", like Bascombe's, is to affirm only the

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[71] Richard Ford, *Let Me Be Frank With You* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), p. 238.
[72] John W. Aldridge, *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 27; Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1999 (London: Granta Books, 2001), p. 44, p. 68.

second of its two aspects of "nihilating ambiguity… that I am not what I have been (the man who in the face of reproaches or rancour dissociates himself from his past by insisting on his freedom and on his perpetual recreation)." He cannot recognise the first aspect, that "I am what I have been", though this is *all* Bob Slocum in *Something Happened* can assert, since he exemplifies Sartre's "man who deliberately *arrests himself* at one period in his life and refuses to take into consideration the later change."[73] Doc Hata has the feeling of

> Being in a place and not being there, which seems…a chronic condition of my life, but then too its everyday unction, the trouble finding a remedy but not quite a cure, so that the problem naturally proliferates until it has become you through and through. Such is the cast of my belonging, molding to whatever is at hand.[74]

In this "being in a place and not being there…molding to whatever is at hand," Doc Hata exemplifies what Lorrain Delia Kenny calls suburbia's "insider-Other." Insider-Others "can appear fully ensconced on the inside, but upon closer examination there is something not quite normative enough about their identity or how they carry themselves in a normative world."[75] This ambivalent state and status, is what Hata calls "a chronic condition of my life," his traumatised alienation and isolation, but also "its everyday unction," affording a distancing self-protection in his adoptive suburban community. As an orphaned Korean boy immersed in Japanese culture, Hata would, perhaps, have been more Other than "insider-Other," but his enculturation would have been essential in order to approximate such insider-Other status. In the fictional New York suburb of Bedley Run his adaptiveness allows Hata to be superficially assimilated, integrated, and to avoid drawing attention to his being "not quite normative enough," what he calls "the cast of my belonging."

Lee acknowledges the literary mythology of the suburbs, having Doc Hata muse early in the novel over a story he read in one of his daughter's high-school books "about a man who decides one day to swim in other people's pools." He doesn't, of course tell us that it is Cheever's 'The Swimmer', but he says it makes him "think of many notions, the first being that the man has begun, whether knowing it or not, a sort of quest or journey, and ultimately finds himself, if in spiritual disillusion." Doc Hata of

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[73] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58.
[74] Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1999 (London: Granta Books, 2001), pp. 289-290.
[75] Lorraine Delia Kenny, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 3.

course has a swimming pool and Lee uses this essential trope of fiction of the suburbs to illustrate his solipsistic state, as the water "appears nearly lightless, whether in bright sun or dusk, and the feeling sometimes is that you are not swimming in water at all, in something material and true, but rather pulling yourself blindly through a mysterious resistance," and while swimming Hata feels that he is "gliding in the abyss." Lee has Hata use water and swimming imagery to suggest 'self-immersion' and the struggle to maintain what for him is a kind of discipline, but also to show the inevitable – and redemptive – breach in his solipsism near the end of the novel, when he is immersed in "a nightly pool of deep worry and remorse and unexpected comfort that I could wade into and do my long-distance crawl, for once not forgetting who I was, for once not blacking myself out." The final instance of such imagery serves as an admission by Hata that his attempts to forestall intimacy, to keep himself/ his self-immersed and unreachable, must finally fail, because "after you have pushed aside and pushed aside and pushed aside again, the old beacons will bob up once more, dotting the waters before you like a glowing ring of fire."[76]

Hata's description of Cheever's story then – of a man who "has begun…a sort of quest or journey, and ultimately finds himself, if in spiritual disillusion" – describes precisely the journey that he will embark on in the novel, as he is forced to confront the horror of his experiences as a young medic during World War Two, when his falling in love with one of the Korean 'comfort women' in his charge precipitated a moral crisis – and for Hata now an existential one. In the brutal conditions these women endured, raped and sometimes murdered, Hata was forced to make choices that he now finds unjustifiable. In facing these atrocities and his own actions, he recognises their effect on his relations with his estranged daughter, Sunny, and eventually achieves a kind of reconciliation with her. Doc Hata's solipsism is the cause of his estrangement not just from his daughter, who is exasperated by his self-estrangement and lack of engagement, his making "a whole life out of gestures and politeness," but from Mary Burns, the widow with whom he has a relationship. She finally ends the relationship in frustration at his implacable distancing politeness and refusal to take "certain issues to the necessary lengths," so that the couple "floated the deep waters, just barely treading." Doc Hata cannot relinquish his solipsism and so cannot love; he wonders if "love is forever victorious, truly conquering all, or if there are those who, like me, remain somehow whole and sovereign, still live unvanquished," a statement that would seem to contradict his claim that his life has consisted of "molding to whatever is at

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[76] Ibid. p. 23, p. 35, p. 275, p. 284.

hand," though does not because this is precisely the means of his disengagement, his "being in a place and not being there" made possible by the suburbs in which "space is an evasion." In Sartrean terms, Hata refuses to acknowledge 'the look', being-for-others, and the associated intimation of others' subjectivity – and for Hata especially, their pain. While Lee has us understand that this is at least in part caused by his guilt about his complicity in the war in the abuse of the 'comfort women', it can also be understood as the psychic disfigurement resulting from the trauma he experienced following the killing and mutilation of Kkutaeh, the girl he was in love with. Doc Hata's name – shortened from Kurohata – is itself emblematic of his self-imposed isolation, since "Hata is, literally, 'flag', and a 'black flag', or *kurohata*, is the banner a village would raise by its gate in olden times to warn of a contagion within. It is the signal of spreading death." It is through trauma and grief- induced solipsism that Doc Hata attempts to stem the contagion of what he views as his dehumanised and morally corrupted self. Yet, as for Bob Slocum and Frank Bacombe, his solipsism can only further dehumanise him in its shutting out of others' subjectivity, his imaginative and empathic paucity a protection that diminishes and bewilders him, as he tries to maintain an untenable equilibrium.[77]

In 'The Swimmer' Neddy Merill asks himself whether he has become "so disciplined in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth" and by the end of *A Gesture Life* Doc Hata has been forced to address this question too.[78] Near the beginning of the novel he states that "I've seen myself most clearly when I'm off on my own, without others in the mix" but by its close he has acknowledged that he has been "in the lonely dream of an oblivion, the nothing-of-nothing drift from one pulse beat to the next." Having established a tentative and tenuous reconciliation with Sunny, and been introduced to her five-year-old son as a family friend, he finds that contact with the boy serves to "elevate" him and produces the "naturally attendant hope of a familial continuation, an unpredictable, richly evolving *to be*," echoing Frank Bascombe's desire at the end of *The Lay of the Land* for "the extra beat – to live, to live, to live it out." Significantly, Doc Hata decides to leave the suburb where he lives, and to sell his house so he can help Sunny financially. He knows that when his former home is occupied, "when this house is full and alive," he will be "outside looking in,"

[77] Ibid. p. 95, p. 61, p. 216, p. 224.
[78] John Cheever, *The Stories of John Cheever*,1978 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 781.

but he has resolved not to shun involvement with others, however meagre, and instead to "fly a flag," and no longer seek to contain the imagined contagion.[79]

The Italian-American narrator of Lee's *Aloft*, Jerry Battle, also seeks to maintain a delicate existential equilibrium through a carefully calibrated detachment, though if, as Lee claims, Doc Hata is "both trying to tell you the story and trying not to tell you the story," Battle has no such qualms. As a second-generation immigrant Battle (shortened from Battaglia) has, Lee says, "never questioned his context in the same way that Henry Park [in *Native Speaker*] and Doc Hata have questioned their context" and consequently feels able to "go on…these long rifts on himself."[80] Battle resembles Ford's Frank Bascombe in *The Sportswriter*, since he has, as John Homans puts it, "temporarily forgotten how to want and so pretty much just watches."[81] He is retired from the family landscaping business, which his son Jack is in the process of bankrupting through ostentatious overspending, while his daughter Theresa, an academic, critiques the family, and Jerry in particular, from her post-structuralist/Barthesian perspective. Battle's isolation, in an unnamed Long Island suburb, like Bascombe's in a New Jersey suburb, is self-imposed. His favourite 'hobby' is escaping emotional entanglements, familial or otherwise, by taking his Cessna Skyhawk on leisurely flights above the Long Island suburbs, an obvious (if perhaps over-emphasised) metaphor for his detachment. Lee describes the Long Island of *Aloft* as "the first suburbs that were built on one acre lots…you could live your entire life – have children, grow old and die – without having much to do with your neighbours."[82] At fifty-nine, Jerry Battle has little to do not just with his neighbours, but with his family, or indeed with anyone else. He muses that

> In this new millennial life of instant and ubiquitous connection, you don't in fact communicate so much as leave messages for one another…and then when you do finally reach someone, everyone's so out of practice, or too hopeful, or else embittered, that you wonder if it would be better not to attempt contact at all.[83]

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[79] Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1999 (London: Granta Books, 2001), p. 68, p. 320, p.354; Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, 2001(London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), p. 726; Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1999 (London: Granta Books, 2001), p. 356.

[80] Asia Pacific Arts, 2004, 'Interview with Chang-rae Lee' 12th April 2004, accessed 24/01/11 from http://www.asiaarts.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=11432 p. 1.

[81] John Homans, 'Soft Aloft', March 8th 2004, accessed 04/06/11 from http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/reviews/n_9942/.

[82] Lorna Bradbury, 'Lorna Bradbury meets a Korean-American novelist who's obsessed with the suburbs', 20th June 2004, accessed 04/06/11 from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3619233/Chang-rae-Lee.html.

[83] Chang-rae Lee, *Aloft*, 2004 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), pp. 7-8.

Battle does not attempt much contact with others except on a superficial level, and, as with Frank Bascombe and Doc Hata, this can be understood as a psychological and emotional shutting down following a life-defining loss, in Battle's case the drowning of his manic-depressive Korean wife in their swimming pool (and earlier, the death of his brother Bobby in Vietnam). Lee use the trope of the swimming pool to suggest Jerry's failure to fully come to terms with or grieve over Daisy's death – he has the pool filled and a lawn laid down almost immediately after she dies – but it is his reliance on flying his Cessna Skyhawk, his need to be aloft, that is clearly indicative of his solipsism. Unlike Doc Hata, Jerry waxes lyrical about this, portraying it as almost an elevated state of being (rather than the immersion/submersion that Doc Hata recognises it to be):

> When you're up here and aloft…you don't want to engage in the familiar lingering intimations, allusions, narratives, all that compacted striated terra-firma consideration, but instead simply stir with this special velocity that is in itself worth the whole of any voyage, this alternating tug and weightlessness of your constant departure.[84]

It is precisely those "lingering intimations" that threaten to undermine Jerry's sense of self and which he refuses to acknowledge, never having been able (or willing) to "develop the necessary armature for the fallout from oneself," taking refuge instead in what he jokingly calls "self-absorption in the classical mode." This cannot, however, be dismissed as mere egotistical or selfish self-absorption, but is rather a kind of 'self-entrenchment', a near-hermetic state that seems virtually unbreachable. Daisy's death may have been the most significant reason for, or cause of, this self-entrenchment, though Jerry's solipsism and accompanying sense of unreality (perhaps comparable to Frank Bascombe's 'dreaminess' in *The Sportswriter*) were apparent long before she died. This "condition of disbelieving the Real…and feeling distinctly outside of things" is most pronounced when conflict occurs – and so *engagement* is required – as Jerry acknowledges in describing an argument he had with Daisy that turned violent. Daisy, drunk and angry, lunged at him with a knife and he "froze, not so much with fear…as with a kind of abstention, for the horror of what was happening was too realistic to even begin to consider; it was actually enough to make me say, *I must depart, I must*

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[84] Ibid. p. 312.

depart."[85] Departure, flight, is Jerry's first impulse when conflict arises, and one that he follows after Daisy's death, regularly taking trips to tourist destinations all over the world, enjoying "the constancy of serial arrivals and departures, and the comforting companion knowledge that you'll never quite get intimate enough for any trouble to start brewing." What makes his behaviour and attitude near-pathological though, is that Jerry never got intimate enough with his traumatised children, Jack and Theresa, either, following their mother's death, though he couldn't stop trouble brewing with *them* or their stepmother Rita, who tried to support them emotionally while he would indulge his "chronic habit of abstaining…sitting alone in my study poring over the travel guides to places I wanted to go." Rita finally leaves Jerry, exasperated at his chronic habit of abstention, though not before Jack and Theresa have grown up and left home, forcing him to recognise that their "post-Daisy troika has really been the loose association of three very separate, unconnected beings."[86]

Jerry then exemplifies Rae Langton's epistemic solipsist "who believes he is the only *knowable* person," and also (as a consequence) the moral solipsist, "who believes he is the only person who *matters*."[87] As for Frank Bascombe and Doc Hata, suburbia is an environment in which "space is an evasion" and "the worst thing is to be drawn forth and disturbed." For Battle, as for Hata, and Bascombe especially, US culture of the 1970s and 1980s serves to reinforce solipsism. In the late 1970s Jerry set up home (though as it turned out didn't 'settle down') with Daisy in the unnamed Long Island suburb where he still lives. This was the period in which US society was characterised by a culture of narcissism, as Christopher Lasch termed it, and if Heller's Bob Slocum was its representative in fiction, Jerry Battle exemplifies what Lasch called "the minimal self." As Philip Jenkins argues, the national sense of perilousness at this time – worsened by events such as the Jonestown massacre, the assassination of Harvey Milk, the murders and rapes committed by serial killer John Wayne Gacy, and in November 1979 the U.S. embassy hostage crisis in Tehran – created a national attitude of defensive insularity.[88] The New Right was in the ascendant by 1980 and the culture was one of (perceived) besiegement, and as Lasch argued in *The Minimal Self*,

[85] Ibid. p. 26, p. 272, p. 173, p.122.
[86] Ibid. p. 202, p. 68, p. 131.
[87] Rae Langton, 'Love and Solipsism', in Roger Lamb, ed. *Love Analyzed* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), p. 124.
[88] Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 150, p. 153. Occurring within a few weeks of each other (apart from the US embassy hostage crisis) these events, according to Jenkins, showed a society with "the tendency to random and sadistic violence, the presence of dangerous psychopaths, the vulnerability to fanaticism, and the need to explain what appeared to be pure moral evil." (p. 150).

"under siege, the self contracts to a defensive core, armed against adversity. Emotional equilibrium demands a minimal self, not the imperial self of yesteryear."[89] Jerry Battle attempted to maintain such equilibrium through the late 1970s and 1980s, even following Daisy's death, but seemingly at the cost of the contraction of self identified by Lasch. In one of his more candid moments he tells us "I am disappearing. But let me reveal a secret. I have been disappearing for years."[90]

Lee has Battle's Cessna Skyhawk, the primary symbol and instrument of his solipsism, become the means by which it is challenged, though not finally transcended. After his pregnant daughter is diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and decides against treatment, Jerry is distraught and, though she comes with her fiancé Paul to live with him, he is not included in, or even consulted about, her decisions regarding her health. He experiences the exclusion he has practised with others now directed at him, and, in the hope of being able to talk to her and persuade her to have treatment, takes her in his Cessna Skyhawk to Maine after she expresses "an intense hankering for lobster." Jerry breaks two of his rules of flying – always fly alone (obviously) and never fly in anything but fine weather – and on the return journey they fly into a storm. Theresa goes into labour prematurely (at twenty-five weeks) and although Jerry is finally able to land near to the hospital in New Haven where her doctor is, Theresa dies in the ambulance from blood loss. At the end of the novel Jerry's whole family are living with him – his father, son and daughter-in-law and their children (following bankruptcy) and Paul, who goes twice a day to the hospital in New Haven where his son is being kept alive in an incubator. Jerry seems to have adapted to his new cramped and crowded family life and home, and claims to see the futility of his trying to stay aloft, musing that "no matter how much I wished to disappear sometimes, to fly far off and away, I really couldn't, and maybe never did. Or will."[91] This echoes Doc Hata's recognition that "after you have pushed aside and pushed aside and pushed aside again, the old beacons will bob up once more," and like Doc Hata, who remains at the end of *A Gesture Life* "outside looking in," Jerry is "in the world and completely outside of it too" at the end of *Aloft*.[92] While the rest of his family are indoors he is in the swimming pool, or rather the preparatory pool trench that Jack has dug, where he comes "at least once or twice a day, standing and sitting and then leaning back against the steeply ramped dirt, gazing up at a perfect frame of firmament for flights endless,

[89] Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times,* 1984 (London: Picador, 1985), p. 15.
[90] Chang-rae Lee, *Aloft*, 2004 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), p. 22.
[91] Ibid. p. 310, p. 340.
[92] Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*, 1999 (London: Granta Books, 2001), p. 284.

unseen."[93] Whether Jerry has accepted a circumscribed horizon framed by familial relations, or will return to his exclusionary solace (submerged, immersed, where formerly he was aloft) is unclear, but as in *A Gesture Life*, Lee uses the swimming pool, emblematic of suburbia, to suggest solipsism, and, perhaps, its transcendence by his suburbanite protagonist.

For Frank Bascombe, Doc Hata and Jerry Battle, there is no clear resolution at the end of their narratives, as each experiences a kind of existential hiatus, with the suggestion of a reconfiguring of their lives. Ann's affliction with Parkinson's Disease and the ongoing uncertainty over Frank's health heighten and sharpen his emotional responsiveness, and grief – his own and his children's – may yet again challenge his solipsism; Doc Hata considers travelling and embarking on new experiences – and possibly relationships – having sold his house and decided to leave suburbia; and for Jerry Battle, freshly grieving for his daughter and now living with his entire extended family, the prospect of closeness, or even intimacy, no longer seems so threatening. Each one may be on the verge of recognising (or accepting their recognition of) the Other, and with it, all the emotion and pain that comes from acknowledging others' selves, consciousness, their subjectivity – and unknowability. For Sartre, recognition of this unknowability is not solipsism; rather solipsism entails the refusal to recognise 'the look' through which we become aware of others' unknowability, but *also* their subjectivity. 'The look' renders us ontological objects for others (and so unknowable) just as it renders others objects for us (and so equally unknowable). Living with this intimation can only cause existential anguish, but it does not deny others' subjectivity. For Bob Slocum, however, such denial is essential to maintain his existence in corporate suburbia, and the only resolution in Heller's novel is the ending of Slocum's existential unease through the killing of his boy, the Other thus nullified and solipsism the only possible existential state.

In the novels discussed in this chapter suburbia provides the "interior spaciousness" identified by Tanner as conducive to the retreat into solipsism. Suburban space engenders a narrative expansiveness, but also a diminishment of, and a retrenchment in, the self, and not just a distancing from, but a nullification of others. Space becomes evasion, as Karl suggests, and it is the pain of grief that the protagonists seek to evade in their denial of others' subjectivity. Each one has become Tanner's "sealed-off spectator," experiencing "a sharp diminishment in the dimensions of the architecture

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[93] Chang-rae Lee, *Aloft*, 2004 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), p. 8, p. 343.

of consciousness," in their denial of 'the look'.[94] This is ultimately futile, though, since such bad faith creates a kind of 'ontological contradiction': the pain that the characters wish to avoid is caused *by others*, and the need to deny others' subjectivity, agency, their full existential reality, is a tacit acknowledgement of that reality. With the exception of Bob Slocum, who finally withdraws into a state of near-psychotic denial, the protagonists are unable to maintain their bad faith unfalteringly, their willed but numbing impassivity. Their solipsism is finally *not* unbreachable, and it is in the suburban spaces emblematic of their evasion that the breaches occur. Frank Bascombe is overwhelmed by grief for his son Ralph when sitting alone at night in his car, a 'Suburban', the very means by which he has consistently avoided engagement with others. Doc Hata imagines himself outside, but looking into, the house in the suburbs he has sold so he can help his formerly estranged daughter financially, the symbol of his self-protective withdrawal become the means of familial inclusiveness, with emotional and psychological exposure now inevitable for the bereft and traumatised Hata. Jerry Battle, having initially reacted to his wife's death by filling in the swimming pool in which she died, is, at the end of *Aloft*, drawn to the freshly dug swimming pool trench in the grounds of his newly crowded family house, the void left by Daisy's death and his repressed grief exposed. That each of these key symbols of suburbia can become inverted, signify a receptive openness rather than a hermetic imperviousness, suggests the bad faith the suburbs embody may be impossible to sustain. Suburbia's contradictory nature – ordered, uniform and insular, yet indeterminate, liminal (and so potentially transitional) – may allow solipsistic withdrawal, but it can also undermine such a state, precipitate existential crises for the suburbanites who seek in bad faith to deny others' subjectivity.

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[94] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970*, 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p.262, p. 263, p. 268.

Chapter Three: Existential Contingency and Suburban Violence

Violence occurs at some point in all of the texts discussed in the preceding chapters, and is a manifestation of their existential themes: Bob Slocum's killing of his son in *Something Happened* is his final and definitive solipsistic act, marking the end of his narrative torrent, and his withdrawal into a hermetic consciousness; the various acts of violence in the Bascombe novels – the rape and murder of estate agent Clair Devane in *Independence Day*, the bombing of a hospital and Frank Bascombe's shooting in *The Lay of the Land* – underscore the false placidity of the suburbs and threaten Frank's solipsistic equilibrium;[1] in *A Gesture Life* the disfiguring trauma caused by the rape and murder of Kkutaeh leads Doc Hata to withdraw emotionally, while for Jerry Battle in *Aloft*, his wife Daisy's drowning in their swimming pool precipitates an emotional shutting down and exclusion of others; in Raymond Carver's short stories nihilistic violence erupts in impotent response to entropy and dissolution. However, the violence in all of these texts is not (with the exception of some of Carver's stories) central to the narrative themes, does not itself constitute a key theme, and does not appear principally as a response to the contingent nature of self and selfhood.[2]

The pivotal suburban violence in Joyce Carol Oates' *Expensive People* (1968), John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969), John Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971), and Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place* (1980), however, is an extreme reaction to existential contingency and indeterminacy, and so is integral to the development of this narrative theme. The protagonists see their own existential anxieties reflected in their environment, which is, as Robert Beuka suggests, "an enigma even to itself," since it, like its inhabitants, exists in a contradictory state, as "a sort of plotted, ordered…calculated, precise parcelling of the natural landscape," yet one that "lacks its own, self-contained sense of place identity…a 'place' and a 'noplace', a paradox."[3] In these texts the paradox of the suburbs – their orderliness and uniformity, fixity, yet indeterminacy – creates extreme tension. Characters repress their awareness of themselves as indeterminate

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[1] Walter Luckett's suicide in *The Sportswriter* is clearly different in existential terms from the other instances of violence in the trilogy, but its narrative importance lies in its challenge to Frank's narcissism and solipsism.

[2] Slocum's killing of his son in *Something Happened* occurs near the end of the novel, when his solipsism has become irreversible; it is not so much a response to existential contingency as the inevitable final act of a consciousness that has ceased to even recognise that contingency.

[3] Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscapes in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.20.

and contingent beings, but this repression cannot be maintained – and violence is the eventual result.

Decade of nightmares [4]

Expensive People and Bullet Park seem only obliquely to register the seismic societal changes taking place in the 1960s, though Rabbit Redux was a reaction to, and reflection of, the upheaval at the end of that decade. George W. Hunt describes this as "one of the darkest and most bitter periods in American history" in the wake of the Kennedy and King assassinations, and the continuing war in Vietnam, increasingly, and vehemently, opposed by many. As he argues, these events – clearly a continuation of the social and political change that started earlier in the decade – were necessarily reflected in the novels written in this period, of which he lists fifteen, including both Expensive People and Bullet Park. While Hunt may overstate the significance of these novels as barometers of social change (they were published in the years he views as seminal, 1968 and 1969 respectively, but written prior to those years) they do reflect a society in cultural flux, one in which

> The center could not hold: America's former, rather complacent image of itself was fragmented, and Americans of all ages were undergoing profound emotional and psychic displacement…the confluence of competing energetic angers and their unforeseen acceleration became allied with an intensive and highly publicized national self-analysis.[5]

The suburban culture portrayed in Bullet Park may be an attempt to deny these societal and existential forces, to provide a bulwark against them (a denial that actually leads to the disorder and violence it seeks to forestall), but Updike's Rabbit Redux – set in 1969 – addresses them directly. Updike commented in 1978 that the US was "a pleasanter country to live in now than it was 10 years ago...there's much less stress. That was a very difficult time, the late sixties here, as in Rabbit Redux. Everybody had to rethink where they were and what things meant."[6] Updike clearly intended to

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[4] The period of American history discussed in Philip Jenkins' *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) begins in the late 1960s, when *Expensive People* (1968) was published and ends in the early 1980s, shortly after the publication of *Falling in Place* (1980).

[5] George W. Hunt, *John Cheever: The Hobgoblin Company of Love* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), p. 150, p. 151.

[6] Iwao Iwamoto, 'A Visit to Mr Updike', 1978, in James Plath, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), p.119.

document these societal changes and their effect on his suburbanite protagonists, and *Rabbit Redux* is accordingly often discussed (far more than *Rabbit, Run*) as a socio-cultural novel, exploring the profound cultural changes of the time. In the novel Harry Angstrom's suburban house becomes a refuge for a young runaway hippie girl, and then a black militant Vietnam veteran, both of whom seem more representative than real, since, as George Hunt observes, "typology has replaced character here…as characters they are unrealized."[7] As the conflict in the house intensifies, leading to violence and eventually death, it becomes almost a microcosm of the US of the late 1960s. As Howard Brick notes, the US was a more violent country at the end of the decade than at the beginning (or certainly appeared to be) and a proclivity for violence was coming to be viewed as a defining feature of American culture. Brick cites various events and occurrences that contributed to this impression of the culture, specifically, urban protests by African Americans, the tendency towards violence amongst some members of the anti-war movement, along with advocacy of the use of arms by both black and white militants on the left, and in an increase in violent crime and assassinations.[8] These changes were not just the cultural backdrop to Updike's novel, they were its subject matter and they account for its sense of existential and cultural perilousness.

Despite Updike's comments about the US of the late 1970s being a pleasanter place than it had been a decade earlier, Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place* (1980), depicts a period similarly characterised by a heightened sense of existential perilousness and violence, as Philip Jenkins notes: in November 1979 the US embassy in Tehran had been occupied by thousands of students, who took all fifty-two Americans hostage (for over fourteen months), demanding the return from the U.S of the Shah for trial, and the Soviet Union had occupied Afghanistan, heightening fears of a military confrontation. In November of the previous year over 900 people had died in Californian James Jones' religious cult in Guyana, and in December of 1978 twenty-nine bodies were discovered under the house in Chicago of serial killer and rapist John Wayne Gacy. These events seemed to show that in US society there was now, perhaps even more than in the late 1960s, as Philip Jenkins suggests, a "tendency to random and sadistic violence."[9] Beattie herself has stated that *Falling in Place* was

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[7] George Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 171.

[8] Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s*, 1998 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 158.

[9] Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 150-15, p. 150.

intended to be "very much rooted in a place and time" and that it was "meant to be an 'historical' novel."[10] She has also said that it was strongly influenced by her own experience of living in Redding, Connecticut, while writing the novel in the summer of 1979 (motivated by an impending deadline to write "a chapter a day"). She described this period as one in which she felt a detached but extreme sense of existential disquiet, as "a year of very bad times and total isolation living in this wealthy commuter community" in which she "was watching the people at the market and it was like when you're sick and have a fever and everything seems in sharper focus."[11]

The 'vulgar existentialist' suburban novel

All four novels discussed in this chapter, then, were published in periods of social and political turbulence, and all were also examples of what might be called 'vulgar existentialism', reflections in part of the existential uncertainty of those periods. Each one explicitly invokes European existentialism, and three cite European existentialist writers. This direct influence, however, results not in a faithful literary representation, but in a vulgarised form of existentialism – a reduction of its complexities, an apparent conflation of Camusian absurdism and Sartrean existentialism, and a focus on one notion common to both: contingency, shown in each novel to be closely connected to violence.

Expensive People, published less than a decade after the peak of the literary fashionableness of Sartrean existentialism in the US, has four references to Sartre. The first occurs early on, when Richard Everett, the narrator, disparages his argumentative parents for having yet "another fight – I believe it was over Jean-Paul Sartre." In the second, Richard imagines a mocking review of his published memoir in *Time Magazine*, which suggests that "Everett sets out to prove that he can outsmartre Sartre but doesn't quite make it." In the third and fourth references Richard belittles his father for his literary and philosophical pretensions. He recalls Elwood asking his eleven-year-old self, "Have you done much reading in Sartre?" going on to tell him "Sartre is well worth reading" and "Sartre has something to say and I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt. I'm going to give him the time to say it to me."[12] Richard

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[10] Neila C. Seshachari, 'Picturing Ann Beattie: A Dialogue', 1989 p. 79; Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'A Conversation with Ann Beattie', 1982, p. 44, both in Dawn Trouard, ed. *Conversations with Ann Beattie*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2007).
[11] Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'A Conversation with Ann Beattie', 1982, in Dawn Trouard, ed. *Conversations with Ann Beattie*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 44, p. 49.
[12] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 69, p. 112, p.116.

later overhears a heated phone call in which his father is arguing with someone over the literary worth of Genet, who, he points out, "has been studied by Sartre and other intellectuals." The narrator also tells us early on that he can "promise violence, yes. VIOLENCE, VIOLENCE…ANGST…KIERKEGAARD."[13] The narration itself exemplifies the vulgar existentialism that it satirises, as Oates, through Everett, continually makes pseudo-Sartrean observations in disparaging suburbia. In an interview in 1969 Oates told Linda Kuehl that Swan – in *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) – and Everett are "rather autobiographical. I project my doubts, my metaphysical and philosophical doubts, into them." These doubts are related to key Sartrean concepts: 'being-for-others', or 'being-as-object', and 'being-as-subject' (discussed in Chapter Two), and even more fundamentally, the anguish caused by being in the indeterminate, contingent state that is 'being-for-itself' rather than 'being-in-itself'. Indeed, these are the subject of Richard Everett's narrative and, as Oates has suggested, the attendant heightened anguish is the reason Everett, and many of her other protagonists, "erupt into violence."[14] The suburban setting is also crucial in catalysing Everett's violence, and provides the focus for his pseudo-Sartrean tirades.

John Cheever's *Bullet Park* shares *Expensive People*'s concern with existential contingency, and its protagonists also erupt into violence, but it has only one reference to an existentialist writer; Cheever mocks a suburban wife who is "studying the works of Camus," which she "pronounced…Camooooo." Asked by a visitor which works she is studying she replies "Oh, I can't remember all the titles…we're studying all of Camus."[15] Camus was a more obvious reference for Cheever's satire than Sartre in this period, since, as George Cotkin notes,

> For a generation coming of age in the 1960s, confronting the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam, Albert Camus perhaps more than Jean-Paul Sartre offered intellectual inspiration and guidance…[and] Camus's appeal extended beyond the cohort of young people on college campuses.[16]

[13] Ibid. p. 125, p.73.
[14] Linda Kuehl, 'An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates', 1969, in Lee Milazzo, ed. *Conversations with Joyce carol Oates*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), p. 8.
[15] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1969 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p.33, p.112, p.96.
[16] George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 238-240.

Cheever's mocking of suburban pretensions to Camusian existentialism notwithstanding, the novel caused some consternation amongst critics in the late 1960s and early 1970s precisely because of its stark (and unequivocal) depiction of existential contingency. These critics interpreted the novel as very much an adaptation of Sartrean existentialism (rather than Camusian absurdism), rendered especially bleak by its suburban setting. Charles Nicol recognised that Cheever intended to "show that experiences today are fragmentary and that people no longer possess – if they ever did – a unified personality," but considered the motivation of characters to be unclear, if not unfathomable; Joyce Carol Oates described the characters as "disintegrating" and unable to find "a retreat from chaos and insanity" because "they have no permanent identities," and suggested that in the future the novel "will probably be incomprehensible" (though she presumably didn't think *Expensive People* would share the same fate); Louis Grant criticised Cheever's portrayal of "the temporariness, the provisionality…of the world," and did not think that any novelist should be "condemned to write about the humanoids" who live in Bullet Park; John Gardner conceded that the book was superior to "the many recent novels that wail and feed on Sartre" but considered it to be "disturbing…full of danger and offense" in its insistence that "the universe is gloomy and frightening, random" and "brute existence precedes essence." Only Samuel Coale seems to have praised Cheever's novel unreservedly, arguing that its portrayal of "a world at war with itself…a prison of self-confinement" in which "confrontation and division mark the core of all essential things" made it his "most visionary and ambiguous book."[17]

Though Cheever may have agreed with Coale's assessment, he felt that such critics had mostly misunderstood the novel, in viewing his suburbanite protagonists as wretched, as diminished by being symbolic of contingency and as exemplifying two possible responses to it. In an interview with Annette Grant in 1976, Cheever said of his protagonists, "Neither Hammer nor Nailles were meant to be either psychiatric or social metaphors; they were meant to be two men with their own risks."[18] Suburbia

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[17] Charles Nicol, 'Salvation in the Suburbs', *Atlantic Monthly* 223, May 1969, pp 96-98; Joyce Carol Oates, 'Cheever's People: The Retreat from Chaos', *Chicago Tribune Book World*, 20 April, 1969, pp. 1-3; Louis Grant, 'America's Nomads', *Ramparts 8*, September 1969, pp. 62-66; John Gardner, 'Witchcraft in Bullet Park', *The New York Times Book Review*, 24 October 1971, pp. 20-24; Samuel Coale, 'The Resurrection of *Bullet Park*: John Cheever's Curative Spell' pp. 113 – 121, all in Francis J. Bosha, ed. *The Critical Response to John Cheever* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 101-122

[18] Annette Grant, 'John Cheever: The Art of Fiction LXII', 1976, in Scott Donaldson, ed. *Conversations with John Cheever*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1987), p.111. It seems likely that the protagonists' names, Hammer and Nailles, are

provided a suitable setting to explore the two men's risks (of denying or of fully admitting provisionality and contingency) and their consequences, because it is "an improvisation…an improvisational way of life…an invention."[19] As in *Expensive People*, the setting underscores the theme of contingency and provokes extreme reactions in the suburbanites who espouse and evince pseudo-Sartrean existential views, views that resemble Cheever's own expressed in his *Journals*, where he wrote in 1966 of the anguish of confronting "the terrifying singularity of my own person" and in 1971 of "the terrifying insularity of a married man and woman," for which, he wrote in 1977, "alienation seems to be the word."[20]

Contingency and suburban violence are controlling themes in John Updike's *Rabbit Redux*. Updike, though, to a greater extent than either Cheever or Oates, cited the influence of existentialist writers on his work, particularly Kierkegaard because of his "insistence on the importance of the individual" and a "building upon terror" in his writing in confronting existence and selfhood. He also said that one of his "philosophical obsessions" was the fact "that there is a certain gratuitousness in existence," a particularly Sartrean obsession, gratuitousness being an unavoidable characteristic of contingent being, with no causal necessity or justification, only possibility.[21] However, as in Oates' and Cheever's novels, the existential philosophy in *Rabbit Redux* is a patchwork of ideas and terms from various writers, and the pseudo-Sartrean passages are possibly more marked than in either of those works.[22] Beattie's *Falling in Place*, like Cheever's *Bullet Park*, has only one reference to a European existentialist writer, and as in Cheever's novel it is to Camus; the violence in Beattie's novel, a near fratricide, is prefigured by repeated references to Camus' *The Outsider* (1942), which one of the characters read in college, as he tells both a friend and his son, the agent of violence in the novel. As in *The Outsider,* this violence is in the form of a shooting. Beattie, though, cites Beckett more than Camus as a major influence, reflected in her concern with characters who flounder, seem unable to act,

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slightly oblique references to Beckett's characters Hamm and Nell (and Nellie is the name of Nailles's wife) in *Endgame* (1957).

[19] John Callaway, 'Interview with John Cheever', 1985, in Scott Donaldson, ed. *Conversations with John Cheever*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1987), p. 245.

[20] John Cheever, *The Journals* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 222, p. 275, p. 329.

[21] Jeff Campbell, 'Interview with John Updike' in James Plath, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), p. 98, p. 100.

[22] Updike would later discuss and clarify his own existential and religious views in *Self-Consciousness*: *Memoirs*, published in 1989.

and seem to be in an unacknowledged state of waiting.[23] Such influences in *Falling in Place,* however, sometimes result in a vague existential posturing, without the specificity that would convince the reader of the validity of her ideas and their grounding in existentialist writing.

Violence and existentialism

The suburban violence in each of the four novels does not lead to any kind of resolution or understanding for the protagonists, since it locks them into a kind of vicious existential circle; their acts of violence are reactions to the perceived threat of existential contingency, but those acts precipitate crises since they irrevocably shatter the tenuous equilibrium of their lives, underscoring the very contingency that provoked them. It is the starkness and extremity of the violence in the novels – ostensibly so out of place in suburbia – that seems to cause the writers to invoke existentialism, and more specifically Sartre (directly or indirectly), for whom contingency is fundamental to ontology. The significance of violence, and its relation to contingency within his ontological system, is not discussed at any length in *Being and Nothingness*, but Sartre does address this issue in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, published posthumously in 1983.[24]

Within Sartrean existentialism violence can be understood as a refusal or rejection of existential contingency, a disavowal of its implication that "existence precedes essence."[25] It is therefore a form of bad faith (discussed in Chapter One in relation to entropy and in Chapter Two in relation to solipsism), and is a response to the arbitrariness of selfhood, to its nature as "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is."[26] For Sartre "the violent man's refusal to compose himself is equivalent to a refusal of being in the world" and reflects a desire for the impossible state of 'being-in-itself-for-itself'.[27] As discussed in Chapter One, bad faith may be a denial of either aspect of the "nihilating ambiguity…[that] I am what I have been (the man who

[23] Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'A Conversation with Ann Beattie', 1982, in Dawn Trouard, ed. *Conversations with Ann Beattie*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 43.

[24] Whilst the *Notebooks* were never finished, and so cannot be seen as representing definitive philosophical statements and positions, they do provide valuable insights into Sartre's ideas on subjects not addressed, or only briefly discussed, in *Being and Nothingness*. This is especially true of Sartre's notion of authenticity, and the related issue of ethics. These are discussed in Chapter Four.

[25] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism' in Walter Kaufman, ed. *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1956 (New York: Plume, 2004), p. 353.

[26] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58.

[27] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 173.

deliberately *arrests himself* at one period in his life and refuses to take into consideration the later changes) and that I am not what I have been (the man who in the face of reproaches or rancour dissociates himself from his past by insisting on his freedom and on his perpetual recreation)."[28] The first form of denial is an attempt to entrench oneself in one's facticity, to seek to assuage the anguish caused by being in a contingent and indeterminate ontological state with no stability. Someone who resorts to violence to allay this anguish is "always in quest of the irremediable, the irretrievable…[and] wants to define himself exclusively by an irretrievable past, by a state of the past that he is unable to change." The second form of denial asserts that one's transcendence is complete and unfettered by facticity, and so denies the reality of one's past self, since "what is negated is the fact of being in the world, of having a facticity." This also implies a refusal of 'the look', discussed in previous chapters, in that "my refusal of being-in-the-world is, *a fortiori*, a refusal of being in the midst of the world, that is, of being looked at, of being something other than pure transcendence. Violence is a refusal of being looked at."[29] In both types of denial "the flight of the for-itself is the refusal of contingency" which "cannot be annihilated since I am it," that is, the self and existence are entirely contingent.[30] Denial of *either* facticity or transcendence is bad faith since together and inseparably they constitute the contingent nature of freedom, our ontological unjustifiability. As Steven Hendley notes, it follows "that no conceptual intelligibility we find in the world is absolute," indeterminacy of being (more than any other conceptual indeterminacy) frustrating the desire for what Sartre calls in *Nausea* "a necessary, causal being."[31] There is, then, no teleological explanation for existence or selfhood, since "existence precedes essence" and "the essential thing is contingency…existence is not necessity." Recognition of this inevitably causes existential anguish, since the self is possibility rather than necessity, a being that is "amorphous and vague."[32]

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[28] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58. Sartre's term 'nihilation' refers to negation, but this negation is the 'negative creation' of non-being.

[29] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 182, p. 175, p. 176.

[30] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 149.

[31] Steven Hendley, 'Realism and Contingency: Elaborating a Viable Sartrean Response to Rorty's Anti-Realism', in Adrian van den Hoven and Adrian Mirvish, eds. *New Perspectives on Sartre* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), accessed 17/01/14 from: http://faculty.bsc.edu/shendley pp. 8-9; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982) p. 188.

[32] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 188.

The violent denial of either aspect of existential inchoateness represents a desire to destroy the "nihilating ambiguity" of selfhood, marked by perpetual division, and so seeks "the total unity of being through destruction."[33] It is, then, an extreme expression of bad faith. If the dissonance created by dissolute and divided selfhood is experienced as a form of violence, it would seem to increase the likelihood of this bad faith leading to violence as a response (violence begetting violence), suggesting the violent person is in a heightened state of existential anguish (and possibly of awareness).[34] I will argue that the violence of the protagonists in the four novels discussed in this chapter can be understood in these terms – as examples of faltering bad faith, with the attendant anguish leading each one to acts of violence that only heighten their awareness of contingency. As for the suburbanites discussed in Chapter One, the attempt to fuse being-for-itself with being-in-itself, to create the ontological impossibility of 'being-in-itself-for-itself', is a doomed project, the very consciousness desirous of such fusion indicative of its inevitable failure, and of the inescapability of existential contingency.

Violent suburbia

Expensive People: "Dreaming the dream"

Analyses of *Expensive People* have tended to view the novel in one of two ways: firstly, as writing about writing, as Greg Johnson notes, describing it as "relentlessly self-referential, calling attention to its own artifice and doubting its own reality." It has also been analysed as primarily a satire on post-war suburban uniformity and banality, on "America's paradise of materialism and a clear statement of the moral and psychological consequences of the American Dream at a particular moment in history."[35] Although the novel could also be interpreted from a Freudian perspective as an Oedipal tale, the first person narrative of an orally fixated boy who is in a permanent state of arrested development, Oates herself is not very sympathetic to this view; she told Robert Phillips that she has "always found Freud rather limited" and that "it may be the Nietzschean influence (which is certainly more provocative than Freud's)

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[33] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 186.

[34] In the second part of *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre offers an historical and political analysis of violence as a function of class relations and power, but I am concerned here with the ontological status and significance of violence – how it can be understood within his ontological system. The violence in the texts to be discussed occurs in suburban families and is an expression of extreme existential states.

[35] Greg Johnson, *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), p. 49, p. 50.

that characterises some of my work."[36] As Harold Bloom suggests, "her subject is contingency," and "her sense of facticity" is "as much hers as Freud's."[37] The two types of critical interpretation of the novel – as contradictory postmodernist fiction realised through an unreliable narrator, and as suburban satire – are both valid, but only partially so, since they fail to address these aspects of the novel as essentially means to an end, that end being the depiction of existential contingency (albeit in a kind of 'vulgarized' existentialism), as Bloom observes, and violence as a response to it. The digressive and self-doubting monologue of the narrator is not simply an ironic exercise in self-reflective literariness, since, as Gavin Cologne-Brookes argues, "its uncertainties stretch to the ontological. It draws specific attention to the problematic relationship between inner and outer worlds."[38] It can therefore be seen as a form of what Eileen Teper Bender calls "literary existentialism" since Richard Everett's reiterative narrative is an attempt to derive "his existential reality, his very identity, from the act of writing."[39] The choice of a suburban setting is also critical – the 'satire' is actually the increasingly angry (and disingenuous) decrying of suburban denial of contingency, the smothering of existential disquiet, which the narrator despises, but also, desperately and self-loathingly craves. Through the depiction of his explosive acts, Oates provides what G.F. Waller calls "the delicate ingredient without which no suburb would be complete – violence."[40]

The violence and societal upheaval in the US at this period are, however, curiously absent from Everett's narrative, though this underscores the distanced and distancing culture of the suburbs. He tells us that for his mother, "what was 'only real' couldn't be very important, and I have to confess to feeling this way myself. I have caught her solipsism from her." The one oblique reference to the "only real" societal changes occurring is his recollection of being driven to his high school by a friend of his mother's and on the way passing "a drive-in restaurant in front of which sullen Negro women, of middle age, were walking with picket signs."[41] Suburbia's exclusionary intent, and its racial homogeneity is highlighted by Richard's distance from the "sullen Negro

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[36] Robert Phillips, 'Joyce Carol Oates: The Art of Fiction' (Paris Review, 1978) in Greg Johnson, ed. *Joyce Carol Oates: Conversations 1970-2006* (Princeton, New Jersey: Ontario Review Press, 2006), p. 76.

[37] Harold Bloom (ed), *Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p.2.

[38] Gavin Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes on America: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p. 40.

[39] Eileen Teper Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates, Artist in Residence* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 31, p.38.

[40] G.F. Waller, *Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 117.

[41] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 70, p.179.

women" protesting about civil rights, seen only in passing, from his insular position in a car. This is, as Lorraine Delia Kenny argues, "the anti-Other America – a place intentionally built on imposing distance between white America and its Others... on the exclusion of the Other." Kenny describes white suburbanites as having an "anti-Other Self," one founded on "a system of disavowals that shelters the anti-Other Self from effectively living with differences both within and without."[42] My concern here is primarily with Richard's (and other characters') attempt to disavow the differences within the "anti-Other Self," though their need for a unified sense of self is mirrored in the need for a homogenous, undifferentiated and ostensibly unified suburban environment. This clearly precludes an acknowledgement of the racial Other, since, for Richard and other suburbanites, as Kenny observes, "knowing the Other means having to recognize the Self as part of a deliberate history of exclusions," exclusions, moreover, that in *Expensive People* are ontological as well as racial, political and cultural.[43]

At the very beginning of the novel Everett confesses "I was a child murderer," and goes on to explain "I don't mean child-murderer...I mean child murderer, that is, a murderer who happens to be a child, or a child who happens to be a murderer." He then immediately undermines his own clarification, by asking "Which am I? *Child* murderer? [or] child *murderer*?" As the narrative eventually makes clear, he is both, since he killed his mother at the age of eleven and in the process destroyed himself, or his sense of self (a self based on bad faith). His narrative, however, is a means of protracted denial of this loss of self (a loss he paradoxically freely admits). Richard (now, he claims, eighteen years old) tells us that the first eleven years of his life were spent living in one cloistered suburb or another, moving regularly, and often backwards and forwards between suburbs (underscoring the essential sameness of these environments). His descriptions of his family, of the suburbs (and of virtually everything outside his own consciousness) highlight nullity and a kind of somnambulant existential numbness: Fernwood is

A dream, and everyone in it dreaming the dream; all in conjunction, happy, so long as no one woke up. If one sleeper wakened, everything would...[be]

[42] Lorraine Delia Kenny, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 6, p. 195.
[43] Ibid. p. 195

stretched and jerked out of focus and so…the end of Fernwood…All of Fernwood is kind, nice, generous, lovely, and it means nothing, nothing.[44]

Richard's father, Elwood, a successful businessman, "with nerves buried far beneath fat and muscle, safe…knew nothing, but where his imagination should have been, in that emptiness…there was a crude common sense." It is Richard's mother Natashya, however, who is most emblematic of suburban nullity, of denial of contingency, because, like Richard, she is only acting as if she is "dreaming the dream," and conforms only to the image of banal uniformity, with all its blandishments, and for this he cannot forgive her (or himself for craving the same stilling of angst). He explains that when he was a small child she asked him to call her Nadia but "I must have been able to manage only the infantile 'Nada'," and, "hence Nada – strange name," he disingenuously claims (her 'name' meaning 'nothing' in Spanish, of course), subsequently only referring to her as Nada. Nada has a "suburban style" which is entirely fraudulent, rendering her almost inanimate, dehumanised, since it "dictated her hair, which was 'done' once or twice a week so that from behind or at a distance she looked like an ordinary resident of Fernwood…dictated her entire face, actually, because she wore nothing on her eyes."[45] Her appearance renders her as "American as the flag that rose above the frigid evergreens in the park," and Richard watches her "run through her routine like a rag doll inspired by clockwork, ticking and clicking." This routine is a passive pretence for his mother, a cultured intellectual and writer, though one she increasingly comes to identify herself with, so that "every word of hers, every gesture, was phony as hell, and as time passed in Fernwood this phoniness grew upon her steadily." Richard is complicit in his mother's deception, however, as he admits he "played healthy…played an eleven-year-old with some success."[46] Here, and later in his narrative, Richard's existential musings are similar to Holden Caulfield's angry adolescent disgust with phoniness and superficiality in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Richard's claims to existential insight are consequently somewhat undermined, since his teenage petulant critique is a social, and, at times, a pseudo-psychological one, which he confuses with existential (and so ontological) awareness.

Richard's narrative (his "memoir" as he calls it) charts what he describes as the process in which he "began to disintegrate" in Fernwood.[47] What he experiences, or

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[44] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p.119, p.101.
[45] Ibid. p.15, p.31, p.29, p.32.
[46] Ibid. p.12, p.55, pp.168-169.
[47] Ibid. p. 23.

has intimations of, in this process, is the contingent and indeterminate nature of self, the knowledge that he is not "a necessary, causal being" and that he is, in Sartrean terms, "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is."[48] Suburbia, ironically, both reflects this contingency and embodies its denial; suburbanites in the "tranquillity of Fernwood" make sure they "do not spill drinks, upset trays, burn holes in tables or rugs, because by doing such things they would come loose and these people never come loose."[49] Yet, as Bernice M. Murphy argues,

> The geography of the suburb has…tended to be intermediate between that of the town centre and of the countryside…the liminal status of this type of environment – neither one thing, nor another, but something in-between – is part of what helps make American suburbia the perfect breeding ground for fictional expressions of anguish and unease. Fear breeds in the cracks.[50]

Fear certainly does breed in the ontological cracks – Sartre's "nihilating ambiguity" – which Richard has a nascent awareness of, but falteringly attempts to deny, later confessing his fear of nothingness in near-hysterical anguish. Murphy contends that the gothic "often arises from the gaps between what something is and what it is not" and that consequently the suburban "milieu has proven a more than fitting venue for horror and gothic fictions."[51] The highlighting of the "gaps between what something is and what it is not" is also why suburbia has provided such a suitable environment for American existentialist fiction, why its liminality can provoke the anguish and unease Murphy identifies. It is precisely the 'gap', the nothingness at the core of being, but also in the space between being-for-itself and being-in-itself, that engenders anguish, and suburbia provides a kind of 'geographical analogue' to that nothingness. Mark Meyers suggests that for Sartre nothingness is "implicated in both consciousness (negativity) and its object (positivity)" and that it "operates as a figure of liminality." This is because "it functions as a category which, in straddling being and non-being (it is both something and nothing), allows us to conceive of the for-itself and the in-itself as at once united and separated."[52] It would perhaps be more accurate to characterise

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[48] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982), p.188; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58.
[49] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 99, pp. 45-46.
[50] Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 20.
[51] Ibid. p. 4
[52] Mark Meyers, 'Liminality and the Problem of Being-in-the-world: Reflections on Sartre and Merleau-Ponty', *Sartre Studies International*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2008), pp. 78-105, p. 87. In *Being and*

the two types of being as coexistent and separated, since unity would imply the impossible ontological state of being-in-itself-for-itself – and facticity, which belongs to the ontological category of being-in-itself, cannot merge with transcendence, being-for-itself, to form a stable unity of being. More central to Meyers' argument, however, is his claim that being-for-itself's awareness of the chasm between itself and the irreducibility of being-in-itself implies a nothingness that implicates the latter (since it has a contrastingly definitional relation to being-for-itself). In this way, "the liminality of nothingness…both reveals and maintains the paradoxical relationship between for-itself and in-itself."[53] Crucially, this relationship is formulated in spatial terms. Meyers argues that "the central paradox underpinning *Being and Nothingness*" arises because:

> Human consciousness (being-for-itself) and the world as it appears to consciousness (the being of the phenomenon, or being-in-itself) are at once utterly separated from each other at the same time they are inextricably bound. In fact, they are bound precisely by virtue of their separation. This interplay between proximity and distance animates the whole of Sartre's phenomenological ontology.[54]

It also engenders the tensions that animate Richard Everett (and the other suburbanite protagonists discussed in this chapter), since the existential nothingness they apprehend is partially mirrored in the nothingness of their suburban environment, defined negatively by its relation to an urban centre, often lacking clear proximity, so that suburbia is a non-place with ill-defined connectedness to a more determined and substantial, defined locational entity.[55] The anguish this causes compounds, and is inextricably bound up with, that created by the (unacknowledged) coexistence of these characters' facticity and transcendence, the latter constituting a nothingness in consciousness, being-for-itself, facticity constituting the only ontological stability, but

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Nothingness Sartre does not associate nothingness with liminality, and this is very much Meyer's interpretation, but one that seem entirely credible. Meyers suggests that nothingness "is never named as such [as liminal], mainly because of Sartre's desire to identify it wholly with the for-itself." (p.87) In stressing the dichotomous duality of being-for-itself and being-in-itself, that is, Sartre necessarily identifies consciousness, the for-itself, as a nothingness, and does not address what might be called the 'negative ontological space' between them, which Meyers describes as a liminal space.

[53] Ibid. p. 95.

[54] Ibid. p. 87.

[55] James Howard Kunstler states in his critique of suburbia, *The Geography of Nowhere*, that suburbanised Americans are now "living in places where nothing is connected." (*The Geography of Nowhere*: *The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*, 1993. New York: Touchstone, 1994, p. 246).

one that is chimerical, since it is constantly transcended. Denial of this, and freedom as its corollary, in bad faith, results, for Richard, and for others, in fixation with being-in-itself, with fixity and stasis.

Richard's narrative itself – its rendering of events and occurrences, people's actions and consciousness, as phenomena of the past, as unchangeable facticity – can be understood as a futile attempt at fusing the *en-soi* and *pour-soi* in Sartrean terms, to reconcile being-in-itself with being-for-itself, in order to achieve an impossible state, free from indeterminacy of being and the anguish it causes – that is, he seeks to deny the second aspect of Sartre's "nihilating ambiguity," transcendence, seeks to deny the consciousness that renders an ontological equilibrium founded on being impossible. This leads Richard to a fixation on stillness, the cessation of turbulent consciousness. His longing can be seen in a delusional claim to have achieved a state of 'being-in-itself-for-itself' near the end of his narrative, after he has been on two 'shooting sprees' (quite literally causing cessation of movement – physically, if not, in these instances, ontologically, since no-one dies). He says he "was in a suspended state some call waiting…I was 'waiting' in the way the frog (a statue that was also a sprinkler) on the lawn across the street is 'waiting' – that is, I just *was*. I wasn't existing in addition to anything else."[56]

This not existing in addition to anything else is of course impossible because of consciousness: as discussed in Chapter One, whilst for being-in-itself "there is not the slightest emptiness in being, not the tiniest crack through which nothingness might creep in," for being-for-itself the self represents "a way of *not being* [its] *own coincidence*…of being in a perpetually unstable equilibrium," so that "an impalpable fissure has slipped into being…it is not wholly itself." Richard tacitly recognises this and cannot maintain the pretence of ontological stillness, knows that "consciousness is not what it is," that the very consciousness that composes his memoir constitutes, embodies, nothingness.[57] This is apparent in his frequent asides on the nature of the memoir itself, which always stress nullity. At the beginning of the memoir he says it is "synonymous with my life, and no life begins anywhere," and shortly after this opines "everything I type out turns into a lie simply because it is not the truth." He also acknowledges his intimations of contingency and indeterminacy in tangential outbursts; he angrily berates his readers, using characteristically violent imagery,

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[56] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 210.
[57] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 74, p. 77, p. 62.

because "you think children are whole…and if you split them in two with a handy axe there would be all one substance inside," but instead, he says, there would be "a hopeless seething lava of all kinds of things, a turmoil, a mess." Richard tells us that "once the child starts thinking about this mess he begins to disintegrate as a child and turns into something else – an adult."[58] Holding adults, and especially Nada, responsible for both this intimation, and for their attempts at denying it in their suburban insularity and somnambulism, Richard seeks to avenge himself on them. Again, the comparisons with Holden Caulfield are obvious, but if Holden has imposed a kind of moratorium on growing up and entering adulthood, Richard's narrative is far more extreme, since it is an inverted, or arrested, bildungsroman, and embodies a kind of 'existential moratorium', not just a desire to avoid growing up; he disavows intimations of ontological freedom and the anguish these cause, seeking a kind of existential stasis, a suspension of the disequilibrium of consciousness. This further detracts from his pseudo-existential speculation, which again sounds more like psychologically disturbed adolescent anguish than perspicacious ontological insight (though he *does* have nascent, unwanted - and rejected - intimations of his ontological state).

Richard claims not to know anything of Sartre's work (presumably because Oates knew little of it), despite his pseudo-Sartrean descriptions of his existential state, of his acknowledgement that "you could inhabit the vacuum of your freedom," and wondering of his 'disintegration' if there is "something…transcendent about it." Richard experiences this 'disintegration' as a violent process, however, and his response to it is also violent.[59]After breaking into the student records office in his school and reading his file, which includes a "pathetic medical report, filled out by an indifferent quack," he "picked up a stool and sent it crashing into the flickering fluorescent tubing overhead with a strength I didn't know I had," and later, walking home across a village green he admits "an overpowering fury rose in me, and I jumped into the flowerbed so neatly kept up…and began kicking at them. I kicked violently, madly…I kicked their tiny faces." These violent acts have a soothing effect on him, and he falls into a "slumberous state."[60] In this way he exemplifies what Sartre calls "the violent man's refusal to compose himself," which is "equivalent to a refusal of being in the world." This leads him to a futile attempt to substitute an "ontological irreducibility" for the indeterminate nature of self, of being – and the only way to do this is through violence

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[58] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 5, p. 24, p.23.
[59] Ibid. p. 108.
[60] Ibid. p. 91, p. 187, p. 188.

in order to achieve "the total unity of being through destruction."[61] Richard's kicking of the flowers' "tiny faces" (highlighting his sense of enormity and power) creates such an illusory state of "ontological irreducibility", since it renders the flowers (anthropomorphized with their "tiny faces"), being-in-itself, and so stills anguish, induces a somnolent calmness (the very state he claims to detest in suburbanites).

This state cannot last, however, and his intimations of contingency return, which he experiences as "a hard, sharp kernel of fire in my stomach that had to be kept from bursting into flame." To prevent this existential conflagration – the 'disintegration' he is so afraid of – Richard decides to buy a gun. Having visited a sporting goods shop and "looked at some rifles, touched them, smelled them," experiencing "a rocking, nauseated sensation," he buys a deer rifle by mail order. The gun, "such a still, quiet object," is emblematic for Richard of the quality of being-in-itself, which is of course the state into which it can transform any being.[62] On the evening of his first 'shooting spree' he enters a pathologically dissociative state, which Oates highlights by having him wash himself in the bathroom, looking in the mirror and seeing a "strange child gazing at me, nearsighted without his glasses." Richard washes "slowly and dreamily," with "no thought of what was coming next." He later finds himself walking the streets, carrying the rifle "like any hunter out for humble sport in any suburban darkness." Eventually he reaches the house of his parents' lawyer in the nearby exclusive suburb of "Pools Moran," at which there is a party, with "energetic figures, three-dimensional shadows" in and around the vast swimming pool in the garden. The telescopic lens on the rifle intensifies his dissociative state, and others are rendered ontological objects by his (literally) nullifying 'look', which "brought them to me in a kind of haze." He adds (using pseudo-Sartrean language) "it pleased me to think of how they existed both for themselves and for me, their spy."[63] Richard sees the lawyer, Mr. Body through the living room window and, he says, he could neither explain why he pulled the trigger nor his choice of victim. Richard shoots repeatedly, each time aiming to miss Mr. Body and then walks home at a leisurely pace, temporarily free from anguish, and, as after his kicking of the "tiny faces" of the flowers, enters a state of soporific tranquillity, and sleeps peacefully.

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[61] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 173, p.182, p. 186.
[62] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p.84, p.154, p. 188.
[63] Ibid. p.196, p.197, p.189.

The second shooting occurs a few days later, and this time Richard's 'victims' are "two ordinary, attractive, anonymous people," and again he shoots to miss, firing at a nearby wall. This does not have the temporarily pacifying effect on him that the first shooting had; his anguish remains unassuaged, and, he says, "Wherever I sat there was the drizzling vacuum."[64] Since neither the first nor the second shooting actually kills anyone, there is no lasting negation of ontological indeterminacy (and so also of Richard's anguish), no transformation of the victims into being-in-itself, the means by which he seeks the stilling of his anguish. On the day Richard shoots his mother, however, he is in the "suspended state" referred to earlier, and claims that before he even raises the rifle to fire "she no longer existed for me." Nada of course is the primary focus of Richard's anguish, mirroring his own façade of contentment, her pretence of "dreaming the dream" of suburban somnambulism a charade he can neither forgive her for enacting, nor himself for being complicit in (in his craving for the same nullifying of contingency). His shooting of her – this time aiming to kill – is his final futile attempt to deny that contingency, rendering her being-in-itself, nada, extinguishing her consciousness in his need for an "ontological irreducibility." He tells us, ironically, "at such moments you think of nothing. Nothing." Such moments are, of course, precisely that, momentary, and his anguish is, if anything heightened. Earlier in his narrative he talks of "the desire to get rid of…the desire for any kind of desire at all," and this he achieves for Nada, but he is left with "this peculiar hollowness inside me that I had to fill," an impossible desire as he now admits, finally pleading at the very end of his monologue, "all I ask is the strength to fill the emptiness inside me, to stuff it once and for all!"[65]

What is problematic, though, about this rather neat narrative dénouement and the violence that precedes it, is that Oates seems to suggest that Richard has entered a pathologically dissociative state, unhinged by the unremitting conflict between the desire to resist suburban existential denial, and the desire to succumb, to give in to its comforting delusional calm. This would be a misconstruing by Oates of the essential and fundamental feature of Sartrean existentialism, namely the inevitable ontologically dissociative state of being, which is not a type of mental pathology, as Richard's narrative seems to exemplify. If his narrative can, as I believe, be understood as embodying bad faith, then the significance of the suburbs for him is, as I have suggested, precisely the opposite of what he claims – that is, their liminal state, as

[64] Ibid. p. 202, p. 210
[65] Ibid. p. 211, p. 102, p. 218, p. 219.

Murphy suggests, that allows fear to "breed in the cracks," rather than their dulling denial and conformity.[66] The vulgarization of Sartrean existentialism in Oates's novel results, at least in part, from its conflation of social, or sociological, critique, and existential exposition, combining polemical satire on the perils of suburban conformity and banality with anguished reflection on the isolated and divided self. Such reflection is engendered, ironically, by suburbia itself.

Given his unreliability as a narrator, and his apparently pathological state, Richard's shootings and his killing of his mother could be seen as delusional fantasy, particularly since he is unable to find the rifle he subsequently buries, and nobody believes his confession, viewing it as guilt over her death. Such an interpretation, however, would miss an essential point. Suburbia embodies denial of the "nihilating ambiguity" of ontological duality and division (whilst paradoxically reflecting this ambiguity) and so Richard's acts and the anguish that provoked them simply *cannot be allowed to exist*. There is a suggestion to this effect when Richard tells a detective about the rifle he used, hoping, again futilely, to allay his anguish through confession, the precursor to his narrative: he says that "for some reason I never heard from the detective again, and when I questioned Father desperately about him, Father cleared his throat and said it was 'coming along, coming along'." In suburbia "everyone is dreaming the dream, all in conjunction, happy, so long as no one woke up."[67] This cannot be permitted, and so, as G.F. Waller observes, "his confession is not believed, the surfaces of suburbia close over the deed."[68] However, it is Richard's complicity that is crucial here (rather than his apparent pathology), since his bad faith is bolstered by the denial of his violence; the illusion of a calm, steady state in a calm, steady environment is strengthened – even if only, inevitably, temporarily. Richard's vulgarized existentialism is, in its conflation of social critique and existential discourse, psychology with ontology, a form of befuddled distraction and so is the very means of maintaining bad faith, of avoiding ontological clarity. This is not the case with the main characters in John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (published a year after *Expensive People*, in 1969), one of whom is less aware than Richard Everett of existential contingency, while the other is fully aware of it. Yet in Cheever's novel too suburbia is the means of (futilely) denying or deflecting the knowledge of that contingency – and again this

[66] Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 20.
[67] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 215, p. 119.
[68] G.F. Waller, *Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 123.

results in extreme violence at the end of a confused existential treatise, another type of vulgar existentialism that obscures more than it clarifies.

Bullet Park: "A terrible kind of darkness"

On the first page of Cheever's novel he tells us "the setting seems in some way to be at the heart of the matter." Clearly the name of the suburb itself suggests violence, belying the putative safety of "this precinct of disinfected acoustics," one in which "the stranger might observe that the place seems very quiet; they seem to have come inland from the sounds of wilderness – gulls, trains, cries of pain and love, creaking things, hammerings, gunfire." Bullet Park however, only seems quiet, and the stranger only seems to have found a refuge from noise, discord and disharmony, and danger – both from within and without. In the first chapter a widow (using the services of a realtor named Hazzard) tells a prospective house buyer – Paul Hammer, the primary agent of existential violence in *Bullet Park* – that one day her husband said "I can't stand it any longer" and "then he went out into the garden and shot himself."[69] In the second chapter the seemingly ingenuous Eliot Nailles has to contend with random detritus that undermines his sense of suburban safety, a regular and repeated affront to his sensibilities, as every few months he "would find on his property a collection of broken refrigerators, television sets, maimed and unidentifiable automobiles and always a few mattresses, rent, stained, human and obscene." Nailles's intimation of contingency and threat is heightened further when he reads in the newspaper that "a maniac with a carbine had massacred seventeen people in a park in Dallas…[and] a hairdresser in Linden, New Jersey, had shot his wife, his four children, his poodle and himself." Nailles tries to assuage his anguish through denial, thinking of these atrocities as "news from another planet," one that he need not concern himself with in his suburban sanctuary. As in *Expensive People*, there is no reference to the immense social changes of the period, other than through the recounting of the shock experienced by Nailles's wife at seeing in New York "some students from the university…carrying picket signs on which were written Fuck, Prick and Cunt."[70]

The first part of *Bullet Park* – almost two thirds of the novel – concerns the uxorious Nailles, his wife Nellie, and his sixteen-year-old son Tony. Cheever mocks (but also seems sympathetic to) Nailles's love of suburban order and placidity. Nailles has an unexamined "belief in the fitness of things," assuming there is "purpose and order"

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[69] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1969 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 3, p. 9, p. 12.
[70] Ibid. pp. 21-22, p. 64, pp. 30-31.

underlying "the roofs, trees, river and streets that composed the landscape." This belief is challenged three times in Cheever's novel: firstly by his mother's "inert, uncomprehending…emaciated" state following a stroke; secondly by his son Tony's month-long depression during which he never leaves his bed, and thirdly by his neighbour Hammer's attempted murder of Tony. Since Nailles only sees his mother on his visits to the nursing home where she is slowly dying, he can mostly avoid facing the reality of her demise, though he cannot deny his own violent impulse to smother her, ostensibly to "end her pain in a few minutes," though more importantly to suppress his own existential disquiet caused by her state.[71] When Tony takes to bed, abruptly incapacitated because he feels "terribly sad…as if the house were made of cards," Nailles is bewildered and confesses to his son, "If you don't know anything about people it's like a terrible kind of darkness." Yet the darkness is within Nailles, his refusal to recognise that the trigger for Tony's depression was his own violent action: the night before Tony takes to bed he disparages his father's job marketing a brand of mouthwash and his equally sanitized suburban lifestyle, provoking Nailles to raise his golf club (a key symbol of suburbia) and try to "split his skull in two." Although Tony runs away he is subsequently felled by immobilising depression. The disingenuous Nailles claims not to understand how Tony could "make me want to kill him" but it is clear that his son's recognition of contingency (that the house is made of cards) and of the mutability of suburban identity challenges his father's belief in his own identity.[72] In Sartrean terms, Tony challenges Nailles's belief that he is "a necessary, causal being."[73] Significantly, it is after Tony says that he could be "a thief, or a saint or a drunkard or a garbage man or a gas pumper or a traffic cop or a hermit" that his father loses his temper and attempts to club him.[74] Nailles (as his name suggests) seeks fixity, the consolation of being in "a state of the past that he is unable to change," denies that "the essential thing is contingency," that "existence is not necessity," and so exemplifies Sartre's man entrenched in his own facticity, in his own past as facticity.[75] His bad faith is so entrenched that he seems almost comically unaware of his denial, in marked contrast to Richard Everett, whose nascent awareness constantly threatens his precarious and volatile state of mind.

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[71] Ibid. p. 27, p. 60, p. 27, p. 29.

[72] Ibid. p. 46, pp. 116-117, p. 118.

[73] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 188.

[74] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1969 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 118.

[75] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 182; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 188.

Nellie, Nailles's wife, is complicit in her husband's denial, though she seems to have more fully repressed any existential disquiet through "falsehood, confinement, exclusion and a kind of blindness…her only means of comprehension." Cheever shows her sense of self – as the loving, contented, faithful housewife – to be entirely contingent, since her fidelity has been assured only through random occurrences preventing infidelity; a fire in a dancehall just as she is about to leave with a man, food poisoning when she is about to make love to a stranger in an apartment, and Nailles's being ill at home with a cold when an intended lover comes to the house, so that "her chasteness, preserved by a fire, a runny nose and some spoiled sturgeon eggs was still intact, although she carried herself as if her virtue was a jewel – an emblem – of character, discipline and intelligence."[76] To underscore the ludicrousness of Nellie's assumed character Cheever has her read Camus; Camus, as mentioned in Chapter One, viewed the self as being in "perpetual conflict, continually created…an impulse which endlessly pursues its form without ever finding it."[77]

Paul Hammer embodies Camus' notion of selfhood, and this creates a near-psychotic conflict caused by what Camus calls "the metaphysical demand for unity [and] the impossibility of capturing it," the "nihilating ambiguity" of selfhood in Sartrean terms. He longs for "the total unity of being through destruction," for the state of 'being-in-itself-for-itself'– longs to be "individualized into facticity," and have a stable character, denying his inevitable transcendence.[78] The second part of *Bullet Park* consists of Hammer's first person narrative, in which he explains the circuitous journey – more panicked fleeing from one place to another than picaresque adventure – that finally leads him to the suburb where Nailles lives. Hammer is acutely aware of the provisionality and contingency of identity, since his own personal history consists of random events, including the one that decided his name. Abandoned as a baby by his mother, whose lover left her once she became pregnant, he is adopted by his grandmother; unsure of what to write on her grandson's birth certificate she consults a lawyer, and, Hammer explains, "While they were discussing what to call me a gardener passed the window, carrying a hammer, and so I was named." His narrative reveals a self in irresolvable conflict, seeking stability but rejecting its semblance as untenable when he finds it. Hammer's narcissism is threatened in each place he lives, in each situation where he is not in flight, when he cannot avoid facing his mercurial

[76] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1969 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 33, p. 112, p. 96.
[77] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 1951 (London: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 265, p. 228.
[78] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 1951 (London: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 221; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 186, p. 176.

nature. He suffers from a 'cafard' that drives him to move from one city to another, reaching a nadir in a hotel in Chicago, where he experiences "an intense emotional vertigo," and a fear "not of falling but of vanishing."[79] Like Richard Everett in *Expensive People*, he is desperate for an "ontological irreducibility…that nothing can change," but unlike Everett he is fully and constantly aware that this is an existential impossibility.[80] Because of this, he is drawn in New York to the Museum of Natural History since it assuages his anguish in its display of continuity, of permanence (of being-in-itself). He feels a sense of security viewing

> Eskimo women in glass cases…performing the same humble tasks they had been performing when I was a child, clutching Gretchen Oxencroft's [his mother's] hand…Here in the stale and cavernous dark was a thrilling sense of permanence. Here were landscapes, seasons, moments in time that had not changed by a leaf or a flake of snow during my life.[81]

This sense of permanence, though, is of course illusory, as Hammer knows, and his anguish is only briefly assuaged, eventually being expressed, like Everett's, through violence against a symbol of fixity and normalcy: suburbia. Hammer first learns of Nailles's existence when reading a magazine in a dentists' waiting room, which has an article on his "promotion to head of the Mouthwash Division" in his company. This chance event leads to his seemingly motiveless decision to kill Nailles. Hammer claims to be bemused by his decision himself, and suggests only "the coincidence of our names" by way of explanation. Soon after reading the article he decides "to crucify a man" and resolves to "settle in Bullet Park and murder Nailles." In the final line of his narrative he tells us, "sometime later I changed my victim to Tony," though does not suggest a possible motive for this seemingly arbitrary, random – and now clearly insane – thinking and action.[82]

The final, and brief, part of *Bullet Park*, documents the apparent friendship between Hammer and Nailles, as Hammer, now married, adopts with his wife the suburban rituals of his new neighbours. On a fishing trip with Nailles, Hammer, "looking at his victim…thought that he would like to leach from his indictment all the petulant clichés of complaint," so that randomness is its only characteristic. Hammer is determined to

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[79] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1969 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 151, p. 181, p.182.
[80] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 182.
[81] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1969 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), pp. 211- 212.
[82] Ibid. p. 145, p. 221.

show this exemplar of normative suburbia that the placidity and unchangeableness he craves is chimeric, that "the nature of man" is "terrifying and singular and man's environment" is "chaos." Hammer, though, is unable to resist telling 'Swami' Rutuola, the man who helped Tony through his depression, of his plans; while Hammer's cafard is unrelenting, Tony has learned to cope, for the present, with existential contingency, and this is abhorrent to Hammer, surely motivating his decision to kill Tony rather than his father. While Nailles and his wife attend a dinner party Hammer kidnaps Tony, who is directing traffic there, and takes him to a church, intending to immolate (not crucify) him on the altar. Before he can soak Tony in gasoline his plans are thwarted by Nailles, who, warned by Rutuola, drives to the church and cuts through the church door with a chain saw, freeing Tony while Hammer collapses sobbing. Hammer is committed to the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, where he claims he intended to "awaken the world," while life for Nailles, Nellie and Tony resumes its familiar suburban form, the placid façade in place once again and ostensible normalcy restored. Cheever though, ironizes his novel's ending, having Tony go back to school and Nailles go back to work so that "everything was as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been."[83]

Cheever's ending makes clear the precariousness of the suburban equilibrium the Nailles family have re-established, and by extension its ultimate untenability. The violence that characterises the novel in response to contingency is committed by both Hammer *and* Nailles, the latter's apparent ingenuousness masking a murderous anguish, so that, as Samuel Coale observes, "what looks like a clearly demarcated confrontation turns out to be much more complex and complicitous."[84] Just as Hammer self-medicates with alcohol in an attempt to cope with his anguish, Nailles takes tranquillizers to staunch "a quaking feeling in his gut and the dark rain [that] seemed to beat upon his heart." The apparent immutability of his suburban life and identity is challenged even by his daily commute, his journey to the city underscoring its illusory stability, the train rendered "a portable abyss."[85] This highlights for Nailles the "liminal status" of suburbia, the suburban indeterminacy identified by Murphy, since it is "neither one thing, nor another, but something in-between," and so mirrors ontological indeterminacy (and possibility).[86] Crucially, both Nailles and Hammer have violent

[83] Ibid. pp. 231-232, p. 232, p. 245.
[84] Samuel Coale, 'The Resurrection of Bullet Park: John Cheever's Curative Spell' pp. 113 – 121, in Francis J. Bosha, ed. *The Critical Response to John Cheever* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 119.
[85] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1969 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 64, p. 124.
[86] Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 20.

impulses, and commit acts of violence, as a result of their intimations of contingency – and both acts (one premeditated, one not) could have resulted in Tony's death.

As in *Expensive People* though, there is a conflation of social critique and existential exposition, and the cause of the violence is not made explicit, and could even be construed as random – an interpretation some of the critics cited earlier seem to have chosen (and criticised). Unlike Oates's novel however, *Bullet Park* is structured around these two aspects, with Cheever's suburban satire in the third person in Part One, and Paul Hammer's convoluted first person existential treatise in Part Two (and a brief dénouement in Part Three narrated in the third person).[87] The existentialism of the novel that critics considered Sartrean lacks clarity, and it is this, rather than the bleakness that is problematic; Paul Hammer opines the contingent nature of being and cannot accept it, while Cheever seems to view suburbia as a refuge, even if finally a temporary one, from the danger and violence of Hammer's vision. Hammer's narrative, like Everett's, is pathological, and this is inextricably linked to his reflections on contingency, not just his violent response to it. This is, though, a pathologizing of a kind of 'ontological inevitability' in Sartrean terms, that of contingent and divided selfhood, the discontinuity but coexistence of facticity and transcendence in being. Cheever, like the suburbanites he satirises, seems to almost disavow the inevitable indeterminacy and contingency of self and existence in his depiction of Hammer, yet he also seems to recognise that the liminal state of the suburban environment heightens the inevitable existential anguish of its inhabitants, even as they seek refuge from it in that environment. The suburbia of *Rabbit Redux* however, is shown quite explicitly to be both a source of existential anguish and anomie, and a site of violence in response to that anguish. Harry Angstrom's violence, though, is different from the violence of Richard Everett and Paul Hammer, both in its form and its motivation.

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[87] The first person narrative in Part Two is essential in showing Hammer's increasingly anguished and deranged state – in the form of a demented travelogue – but it also allows for a satirical contrast with the seemingly placid suburb of Bullet Park in the third person narratives of Parts One and Three. As Blake Bailey contends, "Hammer's incipient criminality is revealed by his long first-person rant in Part Two; afterward, when the narrative reverts to the third person, the reader sees – from outside – how strenuously Hammer works to impersonate a relatively 'normal' person such as Nailles." (Blake Bailey, *Cheever: A Life*, London: Picador, 2009, p.415) This is of course ironic in view of Nailles's (better-controlled) despairing violent impulses and the existential turmoil beneath the façade of tranquillity in Bullet Park.

Rabbit Redux: "Spinning in the void"

Whilst *Rabbit Redux* was a reflection of (and response to) the social and political upheaval of the late 1960s, its more fundamental themes, like those of Oates's and Cheever's novels, are existential. However, while the violence in *Expensive People* and *Bullet Park* is a denial of the second aspect of Sartre's "nihilating ambiguity," that is, of transcendence, the violence in *Rabbit Redux*, is more frequently a denial of the first aspect, facticity, and so is "a refusal of being in the midst of the world…of being something other than pure transcendence."[88] This violence arises in part because of the central tension between what George Hunt calls "the novel's resolute facticity [that] almost resists transformation" (in the form of rigidly normative suburbia) and its portrayal of what Marshall Boswell terms (in Kierkegaardian language) "Rabbit's quest for freedom's possibility," in Sartrean terms the anguish and conflict of being-for-itself, which is both transcendence and facticity.[89]

Harry is thirty-six years old, and seemingly reconciled with his wife Janice following his desertion after the death of their daughter ten years ago. They now live in Penn Villas, a suburban housing development outside the town of Brewer, and he works with his father as a linotyper at Verity Press. Harry's distinguishing physical characteristics, his "small nose and slightly lifted upper lip," which once gave him his nickname and identity as the quick-witted, light-footed and graceful athlete Rabbit, are now signs of a *lack* of self, are "clues to weakness, a weakness verging on anonymity" in the paunchy and pallid man approaching middle age.[90] Peter J. Bailey describes the Harry of *Rabbit Redux* as "thoroughly passive" and "completely incapacitated" by his ten years of conformity as a printer and suburban husband and father.[91] His defining characteristic, though – at least at the beginning of the novel – is more a kind of disengaged and narcissistic impassivity, a refusal to actively participate in his life situation and acknowledge his own facticity: Harry has become anonymized through this impassivity (narcissism being the near absence of self, as discussed in Chapter Two with reference to Christopher Lasch's, *The Culture of Narcissism*). This is

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[88] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 176.

[89] George Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 169; Marshall Boswell, *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 76.

[90] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 181.

[91] Peter J. Bailey, *Rabbit (Un)Redeemed: The Drama of Belief in John Updike's Fiction* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), p. 105, p. 93.

apparent from his reaction on hearing from his father the rumours of Janice's infidelity; rather than jealousy, anger, or fear, he feels "a hopeful coldness inside" which "grips his wrists inside his cuffs. The news isn't all in, a new combination might break it open, this stale peace."[92]

Harry's mother is dying of Parkinson's disease and Harry refuses to fully acknowledge this. When confronted with his mother's inexorable decline in his visits to his childhood home, he feels, like Eliot Nailles when he sees his stroke paralysed mother in hospital, an existential dread that he cannot admit to himself. Instead, "Harry's mind slides away from picturing her," and, significantly, from visualising her eyes, their "unblinking ungathering gaze into space" which "frightens Rabbit with a sense of ultimate blindness, of a blackboard from which they will all be wiped clean." Rabbit's anguish, though, is not just a fear of death, it is a fear of his being-for-others, of 'being in the world', in Sartrean terms, a refusal of 'the look' and its nullifying of his freedom. This is why he feels a "hopeful coldness" about the prospect of his wife's infidelity, why it "opens up possibilities" – without Janice's presence, a reminder and symbol of his facticity, his belief in his transcendence of his past (and his present) is easier to maintain. It is also why he has no friends or close acquaintances, rarely visits his parents, and dissembles in the face of his father's attempts at intimacy during their brief post-work drinks.[93] Harry denies the irrefutable intimations provided by his own consciousness, denies that "the Other's look [is] at the very center of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities."[94] This nullifying of self (and specifically of being-for-itself) was discussed in Chapter Two in relation to solipsism, but for Harry the futile denial of 'the look' is an inevitable result of his narcissism. The paradox is that while others threaten (by their very existence) his transcendent subjectivity, they are essential for Harry's narcissistic equilibrium, for his belief in himself as a being beyond the constraints they represent. This paradox eventually leads to violence against others – both directly and indirectly, which Updike makes clear at the beginning of the novel by having Harry tell his father after work that he should get home to his house in Penn Villas "in case it's burned down. In case a madman has moved in."[95] Both eventualities later occur and both are precipitated by

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[92] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 183.

[93] Ibid. p. 182, p. 233, p. 185.

[94] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 263.

[95] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 184.

Harry's insistence on his own transcendence (as a justified being, one that is not contingent) and refusal of his facticity, in the form of ostensible suburban normalcy and homogeneity.

Early on in the novel, after Janice confesses to an affair and (confounded by Harry's insistence that she shouldn't end it) leaves to live with her lover, Harry watches the news reports of the Apollo 11 Moon space expedition and lunar landing. The imagery suggests emptiness to Harry, the spacecraft seems forlorn and the astronauts seem to be drifting in space, mirroring his own sense of suburban drift and desolation, which is symbolised by his house itself, which "smells to Rabbit of preservative: of odors filming other odors, of layers of time, of wax and aerosol and death." The house, then, becomes the locus of his dread, emblematic of the constraints of facticity, and like the spacecraft it is "a long empty box" but "in the blackness of Penn Villas, slowly spinning in the void." Harry's reaction to his dread is inevitably to try to escape the suburbs that focus and catalyse that dread. With a fellow worker he goes to Jimbo's, a nightclub in Weiser, the poor, black district of Brewer, where, after a few drinks and a joint, his fantasy of unfettered existential transcendence becomes hallucinatory:[96]

> His inside space expands to include beyond Jimbo's the whole world with its arrowing wars and polychrome races, its continents shaped like ceiling stains, its strings of gravitational attraction attaching it to every star, its glory in space as of a blue marble swirled with clouds; everything is warm, wet, still coming to birth.[97]

Again, he thinks of his suburban home as "a strange dry place, dry and cold and emptily spinning in the void of Penn Villas like a cast-off space capsule." Harry can't leave his home, or Nelson, his twelve-year-old son, so instead he transforms it – and then destroys it. At Jimbo's he meets a twenty-one-year-old runaway girl, Jill, and invites her to stay with him. For Harry Jill is part of the "coming to birth" that he imagines himself experiencing, a process of destruction since he believes that "freedom means

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[96] Harry's "anti-Other Self," in Kenny's terms, welcomes the racial other as a distraction from his own 'Other' in the form of his facticity; his disavowal of that facticity is an attempt to shelter "the anti-Other Self from effectively living with differences," but these differences are very much within for Harry. This does not mean though that Harry acknowledges the racial – or gendered – Other's subjectivity, since throughout the novel his behaviour is indicative of a kind of narcissistic instrumentalism towards others. (Lorraine Delia Kenny, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000, p. 195).

[97] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 233, p. 236, p. 255.

murder. Rebirth means death." Harry and Jill become lovers and she tells him that she ran away from her wealthy Connecticut home to escape her junkie boyfriend, and that when you're with a junkie and taking heroin "you realize you're nothing." Jill almost succumbs to that nothingness, but manages to escape – only to meet the equally destructive force of Harry Angstrom, which will eventually lead to her death. Harry tells Jill "you're not scared of nothing" and the double negative seems deliberate and accurate; Jill almost died and her self-destructiveness is still apparent in her passivity and abrogation of selfhood and freedom, despite her specious talk of cosmic free love and tolerance.[98]Jill does not play the part assigned to her by Harry in his fantasy, does not aid him in his rebirth, but instead, because she is seemingly unafraid of nothingness (not the nothingness of consciousness but the nullity of death, which Sartre calls "a contingent fact which belongs to facticity") she only worsens his dread of his own facticity and his sense of existential entrapment (his unwanted intimations of his unnecessary, contingent state) something he feels as a physical oppressiveness.[99] At night he "lifts himself up the stairs, pushes himself through the underwater motions of undressing and dental care, sinks into bed…a weight crushes him."[100] His resentment of Jill quickly turns to anger and after she takes Nelson begging in the city centre for fun, he hits her, his anger ostensibly out of frustrated concern for his son. Even in his violence against her, however, he experiences a cold detachment as

> His slap feels like slapping plastic; stings his fingers, does no good. He slaps her again, gathers the dry flesh of her hair into his hand to hold her face steady, feels cold fury when she buckles and tries to slither away but, after a fist to the side of her neck, lets her drop onto the bed.[101]

Jill knows his claim to be concerned is false and tells him "you don't give a shit about me and Nelson hustling…you just wanted to hurt me."[102] Harry's violence against Jill is an act of attempted nullification, his objectification of her in his disengaged state a negation of her subjectivity and identity.

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[98] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 255, p. 294, p. 263, p. 278.
[99] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 546.
[100] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 194.
[101] Ibid. p. 277.
[102] Ibid. p. 277.

Harry's destructiveness increases when Skeeter, a black self-proclaimed political revolutionary, who claims to be "the black Jesus," moves into his house, uninvited by Harry, but known to him from Jimbo's as a friend of Jill's. Skeeter, arrested on a drugs charge, has jumped bail and so is a fugitive. Skeeter provokes Harry, telling him his "mamma's a whore" and his "daddy's a queer," inciting him to violence. Skeeter's insults continue and Harry finally loses his temper, "packed so solid with anger and fear…he wades towards the boy deliciously and feels his fists vanish, one in the region of the belly, the other below the throat." The fight is broken up when Nelson comes home with a friend, thinking there is a burglar in the house. Harry though, does not kick Skeeter out, but tells his son he will be staying with them for a few days. Harry questions himself as to why he made such a decision, but soon realises that he was motivated "by his curiosity, by his hope for a break in the combination, for catastrophe and deliverance" – in other words, by his need for transcendence.[103]

Skeeter's presence dominates Harry's house; he indulges in lengthy monologues on the history of slavery, racial politics, crime, the war in Vietnam (he is a veteran), religion – and his existentialist views, which resonate with Harry, since he thinks they justify him in his belief in transcendence and denial of his facticity. Skeeter tells him, "What happens to you, is all that happens, right? You are it, right? You. Are. It." and since "everybody [is] stuck inside his own skin, might as well make himself at home there, right?" Harry, though, fails to see the full significance of Skeeter's (vulgar) existentialism, which he explains in pseudo-Sartrean terms:

> There is a steady state, and though it is true everything is expanding outwards, it does not thin out to next to nothingness on account of the reason that through strange holes in this nothingness new somethingness comes pouring in from exactly nowhere.[104]

Harry acknowledges only the "new somethingness" (transcendence) and denies the "steady state" (facticity) because this would force him to recognise the restrictions imposed by his suburban situation and his past – both inimical to his delusional narcissism.

[103] Ibid. p. 301, p. 325.
[104] Ibid. p. 332, p. 374, p. 331.

With Jill and Skeeter in his house Harry believes he has freed himself from the "intensity of duplication" of households in Penn Villas, freed himself from the constraints of his suburban environment.[105] As Robert Beuka notes, it is through "internalizing the otherness represented by Jill and Skeeter" that Harry seeks to become "the antithesis of the kind of staid conformity epitomised by his house and his bland suburban development."[106] It is only through this internalising of their otherness that Harry can refute 'the look' and seek transcendence, denying Jill's and Skeeter's subjectivity in his narcissism. Ignoring threats from two racist neighbours about the damage he is doing to the "decent white neighbourhood," ignoring Jill's increasingly drug addled state, and clear evidence of her continued heavy heroin use, and ignoring Skeeter's increasingly erratic and aggressive behaviour, Harry becomes sexually involved with the mother of one of Nelson's friends. On the night that he decides to stay at her house he receives a call from Skeeter telling him that something has happened at the house, but only that "it's bad. Bad." Harry drives home and finds the house already gutted by fire, an act of arson by his neighbours, yet he "feels peripheral, removed, nostalgic, numb."[107] Even when the firemen bring out Jill's body his "inner admission that it did happen is muffled." When Harry leaves the scene "his house slips from him. He is free," a clear indication of his complicity in the destruction of the house, and by extension in Jill's death. Harry's sister Mim is the only person who sees the violence essential to Harry's delusory sense of existential freedom (that for him "freedom means murder. Rebirth means death"). Harry evinces bad faith in refusing to recognise that freedom as being contingent and unjustified, since to acknowledge this would undermine his narcissistic sense of specialness, and so nullify his sense of self. Mim tells him, "You like any disaster that might spring you free. You liked it when Janice left, and you liked it when your house burned down."[108] Harry exemplifies the bad faith, in Sartrean terms, of the perpetrator of violence, in refusing 'the look', and "being in the world" because he fails to see

> The contradiction…that the world is perpetually necessary as an obstacle to be
> nihilated. The violent man is therefore a person of bad faith because, however

[105] Ibid. p. 309.
[106] Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation:Reading Suburban Landscapes in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 126.
[107] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 346, p. 362, pp. 364-365.
[108] Ibid. p. 368, p. 372, p. 391.

far he carries his destructions, he counts on the richness of the world to support them and perpetually provide new things to be destroyed.[109]

Harry's narcissistic belief in unfettered existential freedom relies on the suburban environment that he tries to escape from, the facticity it represents for him undermining his claims to that freedom since he cannot acknowledge the first aspect of Sartre's "nihilating ambiguity…[that] I am what I have been."[110]

Updike's existential vision in *Rabbit Redux* is somewhat inchoate, and is so enmeshed with his socio-political commentary that it is difficult to extricate. Harry is presented as alternately receptive to the opposed existential states and ideas represented by Jill (her increasing passivity and eventual inertia suggesting oppressive facticity) and Skeeter (whose insistence on existential freedom to continually self-create suggests transcendence). The problem with this, however (aside from the use of characters to embody ideas) is that these are not alternative states that Harry can choose between, since they both constitute being, existence. Updike seems to confuse the notions of social and political individualism and freedom, with ontologically inevitable freedom (since existence is possibility not necessity, is contingent and indeterminate) and to conflate oppressive suburban conformity and ontological facticity, but the latter cannot be rebelled against because it is part of being. Rabbit's violence is a response to, or rather a refusal to recognise, facticity, and so is directed at Jill, but (apart from his initial fight) he does not direct any of that violence at Skeeter, who seems to Harry to facilitate his own transcendence. Neither character, though, is more than this for Harry, a possible existential state, and the ending of the novel, with Harry and Janice tentatively reconciled, seems to suggest that the destructive 'freedom' Harry has experienced was aberrant, and that he will return to some kind of suburban normalcy, more passive and acquiescent. This is in fact what happens, and ten years later, in *Rabbit is Rich* (discussed in Chapter One), in his obsession with entropy, he denies transcendence and recognises *only* facticity, seeking an "inner dwindling."[111] The suburbia of Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place*, however, is one in which such ostensible normalcy is highly tenuous, since her suburbanites are all neurotic and dysfunctional, and, as in *Expensive People* and

[109] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 173, p. 175.
[110] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58.
[111] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 435, p. 449, pp. 526-527, p. 475.

Bullet Park, one is sociopathic. The existential violence is also similar to that of Richard Everett and Paul Hammer, a response in part to the anguish created by the liminal, indeterminate suburban environment.

Falling in Place: "You disappear but can still be seen"

Reviews in 1980 of Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place* generally praised it as an insightful chronicle of its time, of the late 1970s culture of the self, the retreat into solipsism and passivity. Robert Towers considered the book to be "a fictional appendix to *The Culture of Narcissism*", and Richard Locke described its subject matter as "that low-grade depression Christopher Lasch has called the characteristic malaise of our time…tepid nihilism or defeated shopping-mall consumerism."[112] More significantly, however, it reflected the sense of existential perilousness of the period, caused by, among other factors, the events cited earlier – the hostage crisis in Iran, the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan, the 900 deaths in Californian James Jones' religious cult, and discovery of the bodies of twenty-eight victims of serial killer John Wayne Gacy: Beattie's novel is permeated with menace and the threat of violence. One of the characters has recurring dreams of an atomic fireball threatening to engulf him, and his girlfriend fears shooting stars may actually be debris from NASA's disintegrated space station, Skylab, falling to Earth. Another character reflects that in New York any one of its inhabitants "encountering some perverted mugger on the way back to his apartment, might later be found hanging on a meat hook in a deserted warehouse."[113]

The actual violence in the novel, however, occurs in the suburbs, and the most serious and significant violent act is committed by a child in a suburban garden. The child is ten-year-old John Joel, son of John and Louise Knapp. John works for an advertising agency in New York where he spends his time thinking of "preposterous ways to sell preposterous products" to support his wife, his teenage daughter Mary, John Joel, and his five-year-old son Brandt, who lives with John's mother. The Knapp family is riven by resentments and suspicion, communication reduced to barbed sarcasm and sardonic quips. John Knapp has a combative relationship with his wife and his teenage daughter; he tells his girlfriend Nina he is besieged in his own home and tells his wife and children, "I feel, when I am with my loving family, that everybody

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[112] Robert Powers, 'Period Fiction', *New York Times Book Review*, 15 May, 1980; Richard Locke, 'Keeping Cool', *The New York Times Book Review*, 11 May, 1980.
[113] Ann Beattie, *Falling in Place* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 32.

is conspiring to beat me down."[114] Mary and John Joel have a fractious relationship, each openly mocking and contemptuous of the other, while John and his wife Louise tolerate each other but have little, if any, affection left in their relationship. John is a distant figure in his children's lives, spending weekdays at his alcoholic mother's house in Rye where his youngest son Brandt lives, while Louise is treated with hostility by her daughter and son. The dysfunctional Knapps then, are a far cry from the Nailles family, whose façade of tranquil suburban happiness is maintained through all the events of *Bullet Park* up until the end of the novel, or indeed from the Everett family in *Expensive People*, for whom decorum and appearances are paramount, though the Knapps have not quite imploded through conflict in the way the Angstrom family has in *Rabbit Redux*.

As in *Expensive People*, *Bullet Park* and *Rabbit Redux*, the acts of violence in Beattie's novel are responses to existential contingency, to ontological disequilibrium, with the most dramatic act being John Joel's shooting of his sister Mary. Like Richard Everett in *Expensive People*, and Paul Hammer in *Bullet Park,* John Joel is attracted to stasis, to being-in-itself, to places where there is a cessation of all movement, and he spends most of his time in the school holidays lying on a branch high up on a tree in the garden, inert and distanced from all movement below. He and his friend Parker (both obese and constantly eating in an attempt to assuage their anguish) spend time in the Whitney Museum in New York, repeatedly visiting one exhibition, entranced by the sculptures on display. Like Holden Caulfield in The *Catcher in the Rye*, who finds the reconstructed Pharaonic tomb at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art "nice and peaceful" because "everything stayed right where it was", John Joel, remembering the white-plaster men and women in the Whitney Museum, thinks that "it would be wonderful to be so white and still."[115] However, while Richard Everett's pseudo-critique of suburban phoniness and superficiality may at times resemble Holden's, John Joel's surly and bellicose disdain seems sociopathic, devoid of either sociological or existential insight.

Unlike Paul Hammer in *Bullet Park*, drawn knowingly in New York to the Museum of Natural History where there are "Eskimo women in glass cases…performing the same humble tasks…moments in time that had not changed," John Joel is drawn almost somnambulistically to the plaster figures because their continuity and

[114] Ibid. p. 82, p. 81.
[115] J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951 (New York: Little Brown Books, 1991), p. 204; Ann Beattie, *Falling in Place* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 149.

permanence temporally allay his existential anguish.[116] He is also fascinated when Parker, after touching poison ivy, becomes swollen and disfigured; seeing Parker covered in white ointment, John Joel thinks he is "some huge swollen mummy of Parker…the whiteness…was like those plaster people at the museum."[117] John Joel then, shares Paul Hammer's and Richard Everett's overriding impulse to find an "ontological irreducibility…that nothing can change" through a futile attempt to nullify contingency (though he is the least aware of this impulse and what motivates it), and so exemplifies the denial of the second aspect of Sartre's "nihilating ambiguity," transcendence.[118] Like Everett, he makes this attempt with a gun (a powerful emblem of being-in-itself, a state it can render all being) shooting his sister from his vantage point in the tree.

Although the shooting occurs two thirds of the way through the novel, it is foreshadowed by John's repeated references to Camus' *The Outsider*, which he tells John Joel he read in college – a novel in which the protagonist feels little, if any, emotion after shooting someone dead. There is also a suggestion of John Joel's fantasies of powerfulness and propensity for violence in his obsession with the collection of canes at his grandmother's house, and in particular one with a lion's head carved on the handle. John Joel "liked to touch the tip of his tongue to the wooden tongue, to hold the cane away from his face and glare at it, to imagine that he was as powerful as the squinting, roaring lion." The carving of the lion is also, like the sculptures in the Whitney Museum in New York, a still image, a moment frozen in flux. John Joel's sister, Mary, continuously disturbs his desire for stillness and his sloth-like existence and in doing so causes him great anguish. At fifteen, post-pubescent and emotionally volatile, she is emblematic of the state of existential flux which he tries to deny. His response is impassivity, though he has the violent impulse to "push her from behind so that she would go through a wall," that is, to render her being-in-itself (a wall being inanimate and for John Joel a barrier, a means of mentally blocking out indeterminacy and contingency). Significantly, it is in the Whitney Museum that he expresses this impulse, amidst the stillness of the sculptures, embodying the "ontological irreducibility…that nothing can change." When Parker gives him a pistol stolen from his father, John Joel finally acts on his violent impulse, and, as Mary is walking home and into their garden, he looks down from the branch where he is lying

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[116] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1969 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), pp. 211 – 212.
[117] Ann Beattie, *Falling in Place* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 166.
[118] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 182.

and shoots her. Mary is taken to hospital and undergoes surgery, and though she doesn't die, John Joel assumes she has, telling his father at the hospital, "She was a bitch." John is appalled by his son's apparent sociopathic state, but John Joel, now "all in white" like the sculptures in the museum, becomes almost catatonic, his "breathing…the calm breathing of near-sleep," just as Richard Everett's shootings initially enable him to enter a becalmed slumberous state.[119]

Beattie leaves John Joel in this state and the remainder of the novel is concerned with the effects of the shooting on Louise and John, whose relationship finally unravels. Mary's shooting heightens John's awareness of contingency, and, in an ironic inversion of the notion of suburbia as a haven from urban danger, he moves to the city for safety, finally seeking refuge in Nina's tiny apartment, which is "small as a womb", and in which he feels "comfortable with the small movements he could make." There is an additional irony though, since John's relationship with Louise parallels John Joel's with Mary – he acts impassively towards her, but suppresses violent impulses; Louise tells him "you don't talk straight" but knows "you hate me. Hate all of us," and his final state mirrors his son's. He refuses to recognise this though, and believes that "it wasn't John Joel he identified with, but Mary. He was the victim, not the one who pulled the trigger."[120] Yet throughout the novel he is drawn to stillness, lifelessness; just as the sick and bedridden Parker appears mummified to John Joel, the sight of his mother in her garden under mosquito netting looks to John like "a mummy…more silent than anything else in nature." Entrenched in his own facticity, and resisting the inevitability of transcendence, the intimation that he is "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is," he experiences "a kind of anguish," the sense that he is "rushing forward, but leaving something behind" and the unwanted realisation that "he wasn't heavy, as he had thought, but light, speeding." John is finally immobilised in Nina's apartment, "hiding from himself," though knowing "you disappear but can still be seen."[121]

Beattie has commented that "the discord in that marriage and the kind of coercion that the characters exert on one another is...comparable to violence" and in Sartrean terms lies and deception, both perpetrated by John Knapp in his unacknowledged coercion of his wife Louise, do have the same effect as violence (and both originate in

[119] Ann Beattie, *Falling in Place* (New York: Random House, 1980), p.53, p. 121, p.225.
[120] Ibid. p. 296, p. 89, p. 302.
[121] Ibid. pp. 41-42, p. 60, p. 262, p. 324.

bad faith).[122] For Sartre "the lie transforms man into a thing," since it nullifies or invalidates the consciousness of the Other (the one lied to) – thus rendering that person an object. However, while in violence "one appropriates the freedom" of the Other "by crushing it with the world," affirming "the superiority of the world over consciousness," in lying "one appropriates this freedom…by destroying the world for-the-consciousness-of-the-Other," The destruction of the world for the Other is done "subtly" since it is accomplished by "hiding it by means of the imaginary."[123] This hiding of the world by the imaginary is what suburbia itself does, as Beattie suggests with an image of bland suburban conformity and placidity; John gazes at an old family photograph in which Mary is wearing a patterned bathing suit with

> Rows and rows of gingerbread men, arms outstretched, touching hands. A band of gingerbread men, and then another, and then another, as evenly spaced, as regular, as the gray bands of his mother's television screen, but not rolling - no movement. Just the line of them…expressionless.[124]

In *Falling in Place* John Joel's shooting of Mary does not undermine or even threaten the façade of the Connecticut suburb in which it happens; after Mary is taken to hospital the police wash away the blood, and clean up "as though somebody had made a faux pas…the polite host, passing no comment, silently mopping up spilled wine."[125] Beattie seems to suggest that there is a somnambulant despondency, passivity (or impassivity), a resigned fatalism (as the novel's title suggests) in the Knapp family and amongst the inhabitants of their Connecticut suburb, each of whom, as Christina Murphy observes, "exists in an affectless and self-contained universe."[126] Beattie has commented that in her writing "people often have more free will than they wish to exercise," yet while she clearly acknowledges the enervating effect of suburbia on that free will, she does not, except through the references to Camus' *The Outsider*, address the cause of the anguish and apparent paralysis underlying the existential conflicts she portrays.[127] If her reference to Camus is a tacit acknowledgement of his

[122] Neila C. Seshachari, 'Picturing Ann Beattie: A Dialogue', in Dawn Trouard, ed. *Conversations with Ann Beattie*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p.91.
[123] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 198, pp. 199-200.
[124] Ann Beattie, *Falling in Place* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 212.
[125] Ibid. p. 323.
[126] Christina Murphy, *Ann Beattie*:Twayne's United States Authors Series (Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p. 69.
[127] Steven R. Centola, 'An Interview with Ann Beattie', 1988, in Dawn Trouard, ed. *Conversations with Ann Beattie*: Literary Conversations Series (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p.67.

notion of the self as being in "perpetual conflict, continually created" and of "the metaphysical demand for unity [and] the impossibility of capturing it," then she leaves this recognition entirely implicit.[128] The anguish caused by the unrealisable desire for the state of 'being-in-itself-for-itself' is heightened in John Joel because of his suburban environment, yet Beattie's depiction of that environment highlights only its pacifying and dulling denial, not its indeterminacy, its state of being in-between, so his violence seems almost random, symptomatic of some kind of breakdown in family life and social order. Beattie's novel then, appears to present the existential alienation and anguish it portrays as arising from a detached and seemingly inviolable suburban isolation, and so offers a kind of social critique, suggesting a sociological explanation for an existential conflict.

Suburbia, of course, *is* a detached and potentially dulling environment, and it does nurture the development of bad faith through the illusion of regularity, uniformity and stasis, as the novels of Beattie, Updike, Cheever and Oates all show. Its denial of existential indeterminacy and contingency (a falsehood) can therefore be seen as having an effect comparable to violence, in Sartrean terms. It is also an environment in which violence in response to that contingency is likely to occur, when the bad faith suburbia engenders falters and suburbanites have intimations of the "nihilating ambiguity" of their being. The irony is that in all of the novels discussed in this chapter, the violent responses of the various protagonists are absorbed by the very suburban culture that promoted them, as if they had not occurred. In *Expensive People* suburbanites continue "dreaming the dream" even after Richard Everett kills his mother – "no one woke up" and, as G.F. Waller suggests, at the end of the novel "the surfaces of suburbia close over the deed."[129] At the end of *Bullet Park* "everything was as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been," and Nailles's bad faith is restored, bolstered by suburbia, his existential anguish unassuaged.[130] Harry Angstrom is unable to deny his facticity, tentatively reconciled with Janice at the end of *Rabbit Redux*, but will go on to become an affluent suburbanite in *Rabbit is Rich*, his violence a dim memory, all but forgotten by his family and fellow suburbanites. In *Falling in Place* John Joel's shooting of Mary is accommodated through a combination of suburban decorum and impassivity. Suburbia, then, denies the intimations experienced by the perpetrators of violence in these novels, that they are a "seething

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[128]Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 1951 (London: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 265, p. 228.

[129] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 119; G.F. Waller, *Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 123.

[130] John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, 1969 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 245.

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lava," not stable essences, that they are "spinning in the void," because "if one sleeper wakened, everything would…[be] stretched and jerked out of focus." This would mean the end of the illusion of fixity and permanence, and the recognition of "the drizzling vacuum" of suburbia.[131] This denial itself though, like the violence it causes, is ironic, because the liminal, indeterminate nature of suburbia exacerbates the existential anguish of each of the protagonists. There is then a Sisyphean futility in their existential denial, since their anguish may be temporally allayed, but can only recur, again and again, mirrored and catalysed by their environment. This aspect of the suburban environment is underplayed in all four novels, perhaps in part because the notion of suburbs as culturally homogenous, as promoting a dulling denial and conformity, enables the authors to contrast these characteristics, or states, with the anguished states of the violent protagonists. However, the denunciations and violent reactions of those protagonists, depicted as being against suburbia, are ultimately against themselves, against the ontologically dissociative state of being.

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[131] Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 23; John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 236; Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968 (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 119, p. 210.

Chapter Four: Suburban Inauthenticity

The concept of authenticity

Authenticity, as a post-war sociological concept, had a very particular and historically specific meaning. As Abigail Cheever observes, for sociologists and social commentators "authenticity in the post-war period is imagined as that which separates the individual from the social world," the qualities that make him or her unique, qualities that are not the product of socialisation, but are inherently part of the individual. The term also has behavioural implications, since to be authentic, an individual would need to be "a self-cognizant agent who can differentiate quickly between his or her immediate inclinations and the behavioural expectations of a larger group."[1] Sartre's notion of authenticity also stresses the individual's self-awareness, and behaviour, but for Sartre it is, of course, an ontological rather than a sociological concept, and "that fear and that anguish at the heart of all authenticity…are apprehensions *before life*."[2] Anguish arises with the recognition of ontological freedom, and if, as Thomas C. Anderson suggests, bad faith is primarily "a lie to oneself about the dual structure of his or her being," and a denial that we are "unsubstantial, unnecessary, unjustified, and free," then "authenticity, the escape from bad faith, will also primarily involve a relation to one's self, not to others nor to the socio-political structures and institutions of society."[3] Both the sociological and the existentialist notions of authenticity, then, are based on the primacy of the individual, one's relation to oneself, and each can provide significant insights into the concerns and preoccupations of the suburban novels of the early 1960s.

The post-war concept of authenticity

Social critiques and commentaries in the post-war years, perhaps most significantly David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), claimed that the advent of mass suburbia in the late 1940s and 1950s heralded (and partly caused) an erosion of individuality in American culture. This perceived loss of individualism, and a loss of individual 'authenticity' as a corollary, was attributed primarily to a culture of conformity fostered by the suburbs (though it

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[1] Abigail Cheever, *Real Phonies: Cultures of Authenticity in Post-World War II America* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2010), p. 3.

[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phony War November 1939-March 1940*, 1983 (London: Verso Editions, 1984), p. 221.

[3] Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), pp. 16-17, p. 55, p. 17.

could also be found in the burgeoning metropolitan areas). In order to understand the alarmist tone of such critiques it is important to stress the speed with which the new suburbia came into being, and spread, since this may partly explain such a heightened critical reaction. The 'Levittowns', built by real estate developers 'Levitt and Sons' quickly became synonymous with the suburbs, as Kenneth T. Jackson notes. Depression and war had led to stagnation in housing construction, and there was a dire housing shortage, with millions of soldiers returning from the war and a huge increase in the birth rate (22 per 1000 in 1943 – babies often conceived just prior to GIs being posted), with the result that by 1947 six million families were of necessity living with friends or relatives and an additional 500,000 were staying in temporary accommodation – and the less fortunate were forced to live in trolley cars and other scarcely habitable accommodation.[4] Levitt and Sons, already established as army contractors, were quick to see the commercial opportunities in meeting this unparalleled demand for housing by providing comparatively cheap, mass-produced houses. The high demand was fuelled by the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which provided a mortgage programme with considerable financial support for the sixteen million returning GIs. The Levitts produced a total of 17,400 assembly line houses, with thirty houses a day being put up at the height of production for the original Levittown on Long Island, after which additional 'Levittowns' were built in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.[5] The rapid increase in home ownership rates led to the commodification of the home, as Lizabeth Cohen observes, with the creation of the suburban house as "mass consumer commodity." Other contractors imitated the Levitt's production techniques, and between 1947 and 1953 the suburban population of the US increased by 43 percent.[6]

With this scale and speed of demographic change, it is perhaps not surprising that social and cultural commentators voiced concerns, though the stridency and extent of the criticism by suburbia's detractors suggests broader cultural anxieties. Before discussing Riesman's and Whyte's studies and the views they express, it is necessary to attempt to disentangle the post-war cultural notions of conformity, uniformity, autonomy and authenticity. As Abigail Cheever suggests, the concept of authenticity in this period "defined the self in opposition to, rather than as the product of, or even in symbiosis with, the cultural circumstances through which the self or subject came

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[4] Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 232.
[5] Ibid. p. 233, p. 234, p. 235.
[6] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 2003 (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 195.

into being." The term was thus an oppositional one, and the more fully socialised and fully integrated an individual was, the greater the likelihood of his or her self being an 'inauthentic' one. As Cheever notes, authenticity was something that "separated the self from a social realm, begrudged even a hint of cultural construction, and viewed individuals who appeared genuinely to be like their peers as inevitably mistaken about themselves and their wants – and as inevitably coerced." It follows from this that conformity is not necessarily a sign of inauthenticity, as long, that is, as the 'true' self remains individual, separate and different from the one that is presented socially, camouflaged by that social self, but untainted by it, and therefore autonomous. Uniformity, however, is inevitably a sign of inauthenticity, since, as Cheever argues, this suggests not just that people act the same way, but that they fundamentally *are* the same, without the separateness from others that is necessary for authentic selfhood to exist; authenticity *is* "what might be uniquely one's own rather than a consequence of social influence."[7]

If an ever-increasing uniformity, rather than conformity, in the new mass suburbia was what both Riesman and Whyte detected and warned against, their views implicitly valorised the notion of an autonomous authentic self, opposed to the perceived oppressive banality of the cultural environment in which it existed. Riesman identified three character types, socio-cultural evolutions in character, rather than universal types. The first (near extinct) type discussed by Riesman is the 'tradition-directed' individual, who "learns to understand and appreciate patterns which have endured for centuries," and for whom "important relationships of life may be controlled by careful and rigid etiquette, learned by the young during the years of intensive socialization that end with initiation into full adult membership." As potentially oppressive as this sounds, note that Riesman refers to etiquette and so behaviour – to conformity in behaving not being. The tradition-directed type perceives dominant cultural forces as expecting "not so much that he be a certain type of person but that he behave in the approved way"; this type, then, believes that conformity, not uniformity is expected.[8] The 'inner-directed' type, by contrast, "can manage to live socially without strict and self-evident tradition-direction." This is because "the source of direction for the individual is 'inner' in the sense that it is implanted early in life by the elders," though this type "must also spend his entire life in the internal production of his own character." Whilst not entirely

[7] Abigail Cheever, *Real Phonies: Cultures of Authenticity in Post-World War II America* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2010), p. 241, p. 3.
[8] David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, 1950 (London: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 11, p. 24.

autonomous or even independent, this type of person "has early incorporated a psychic gyroscope which is set going by his parents," and is able to live by "obeying this internal piloting."[9] The third, increasingly dominant, 'other-directed' type, however, has no such internal piloting. This type feels the need to respond to societal and cultural signals from wherever they come, not just from parents and family, and consequently is "at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a rapid if sometimes superficial intimacy with, and response to, everyone." Such an individual lacks a sense of self as distinct from others, has effectively elided self and other, and "seeks to have the character he is supposed to have, and the inner experiences as well as outer appurtenances that are supposed to go with it." Such a state is therefore one of uniformity, of being like others, rather than of conformity, of merely acting like others. The result is that the other-directed person has no sense of an inner existential core or being, but must always rely on others for a sense of self, causing anguish, or, as Riesman describes it, "a diffuse anxiety" since this type's "control equipment, instead of being like a gyroscope, is like a radar."[10] Within this broader formulation of character types Riesman identifies the adjusted, the 'anomic', and the autonomous, though there is no direct or automatic mapping of these onto tradition, inner and other-directed types (in fact rapidly dwindling numbers of tradition-directed types seems to warrant their exclusion from further discussion in the study). The other-directed individual attempts to become adjusted by acquiring "the character he is supposed to have," though if this attempt is perceived to have failed the individual becomes anomic (from Durkheim's notion of 'anomie') – uncomfortable, ill-at-ease and unable to conform to the "characterological pattern of the adjusted," effectively rendering them, Riesman suggests, maladjusted.[11] The inner-directed person may also become adjusted, or, because of this type's form of directedness, anomic. It is most likely though, that the most strongly inner-directed individuals will become autonomous, able to conform to societal and cultural conventions and expectations, but free to choose whether to do so or not. Such freedom and autonomy seems for Riesman to be synonymous with authenticity, precisely because, as noted earlier, in this period authenticity is that which "separates the individual from the social world."[12] While Riesman acknowledges that Sartre's philosophy is concerned with "the problems of the autonomous individual" he does not agree with Sartre's contention that "men – other than a few heroic individuals – can 'choose themselves' under conditions of extreme despotism," presumably

[9] Ibid. p. 14, p. 15, p. 126, p. 24.
[10] Ibid. p. 25, p. 24, p. 25.
[11] Ibid. p. 240, p. 242.
[12] Abigail Cheever, *Real Phonies: Cultures of Authenticity in Post-World War II America* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2010), p. 3.

though, in post-war America (if not in totalitarian societies) choosing oneself was possible, if existentially challenging in an increasingly other-directed societal culture.[13]

The Lonely Crowd was a highly influential study, and the notion of inauthentic other-directedness as primarily a suburban cultural phenomenon gained credence with the publication of William H. Whyte's study of Park Forrest, Illinois, The Organization Man, in 1956. Whyte considered Park Forest to be emblematic of the contemporary corporate suburb, inhabited by 'organization men', in which the individualistic Protestant work ethic has been superseded by what he calls the 'Social Ethic', a "contemporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual," creating a "tyranny of the majority." In "intensifying the social virtues at the expense of others, by making the individual come to regard himself as a hostage to prevailing opinion," suburban corporate culture had created a new kind of citizen in thrall to the purportedly benevolent patrician corporation (i.e. to the increasingly powerful bureaucracies of post-war life), one who "is not only other-directed," but also espouses "a philosophy which tells him it is right to be that way."[14] What was so worrisome for Whyte about Park Forest and similar suburbs was not so much "the suburbanites' group-mindedness," but rather their internalisation of this, the Social Ethic, as the highest value they could aspire to. In other-directedness Whyte identified a "vain quest for a utopian equilibrium," resulting from "the soft-minded denial that there is a conflict between the individual and society."[15] Again, the notion of an autonomous, authentic selfhood is oppositional, and must be cultivated *against* societal influences and cultural forces, which can only serve to diminish and emasculate it. Other-directedness, then, is self-destructive because "the quest for normalcy, as we have seen in suburbia, is one of the great breeders of neuroses, and the Social Ethic only serves to exacerbate them." For Whyte, as for Riesman, the autonomous individual is able to outwardly conform, to use "surface uniformities…as protective coloration."[16] By doing so he can retain control and freedom internally, and develop an authentic self, since authenticity is existential, rather than cultural.[17]

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[13] David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, 1950 (London: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 255, p. 250.

[14] William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 1956 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 7, p. 396.

[15] Ibid. p. 393, p.13.

[16] Ibid. pp. 397-398, p. 11.

[17] This conception of authentic selfhood was not of course entirely new in American culture, since, as R.W.B. Lewis argued in *The American Adam* (1955), in nineteenth-century philosophy, and in Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' (1841) in particular, the idealised self, the "authentic American" was "an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources." (R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence,*

The Sartrean concept of authenticity

In order to understand Sartre's notion of authenticity it is necessary to clarify the difference between bad faith and good faith, and their relation to that concept. Both good and bad faith are anterior to (the possibility of) authenticity because they are, initially, what Sartre calls 'pre-reflective' ontological states.[18] While "consciousness is always consciousness of something," at the pre-reflective ontological level there is "no knowledge but an implicit consciousness of being consciousness of an object."[19] Consciousness has 'intimations' of its undeniable existential freedom (that it is a nothingness separated from what it is conscious of), and this, even at the pre-reflective level is experienced as anguish. Consciousness, being-for-itself, nothingness, Sartre claims, is "always an elsewhere," is, as Ronald E. Santoni suggests, "always at a distance from itself; is metastable, mercurial, abruptly transitional…never one with itself."[20] As Joseph Catalano argues, "for Sartre, the attempts to flee freedom and to hide from anguish are pre-reflective projects of freedom."[21] This fleeing is bad faith, which, as Santoni notes, is *faith* insofar as it is "unwilling to be persuaded by critical evidence," evidence of its "abruptly transitional" ontological state. Good faith, however, is willing to be persuaded by that evidence; where bad faith is "a closed, uncritical attitude towards available evidence, the fundamental attitude or original determination of being in good faith is an open, critical attitude toward evidence."[22] Good faith, then, recognises the freedom and autonomy of consciousness. This is important because at the reflective ontological level it may allow the 'conversion' that Sartre argues is necessary to achieve, always temporarily and always concretely in situations, authenticity: when consciousness becomes reflective, when it becomes, as Jacob Golomb states, "consciousness whose object is itself," the 'I', the ego, the self is created (external to consciousness) and the reflection engaged in is what Sartre calls

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Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, p. 1, p. 5). The nineteenth-century authentic self, however, would clearly not have been outwardly conformist in order to retain an internal existential autonomy. The historically influential Emersonian conception of selfhood, however, may well partly account for the cultural receptivity to Sartre's ideas of freedom and authenticity in the US in the 1950s and 1960s.

[18] Critics do not agree on the definition and ontological characteristics of good faith, and some indeed see it as *a form of bad faith* – and Sartre himself is not always clear or consistent in his use of the term. I have tried to present an explanation that has, I believe, an explanatory validity and coherence.

[19] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 630.

[20] Ibid. p. 78; Ronald E. Santoni, *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 72.

[21] Joseph S. Catalano, 'On the Possibility of Good Faith, *Man and World* 13 (1980) 207-228, p. 218.

[22] Ronald E. Santoni, *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) p. 71.

'impure' or 'accessory' reflection.[23] Through such reflection, Sartre argues, the for-itself attempts to disavow its constantly changing, inherently unstable ontological state and to 'found' itself in itself, as if it possessed the stability and permanence of being-in-itself (its very desire for this underscoring its impossibility). Bad faith seeks to do this regardless of evidence; it is *bad* faith because it uses the impossibility of co-incidence, of belief, faith, fully being what is believed – since "to believe is to know that one believes, and to know that one believes is no longer to believe" – as a reason to disregard all evidence regarding what is believed. However, whilst "the ideal of good faith (to believe what one believes) is…an ideal of being-in-itself," good faith is open (where bad faith is closed) to the possibility – the evidence bad faith rejects – that such a state is impossible.[24] That is, good faith contains the possibility of acceptance of ontological freedom and the anguish that it causes. This possibility in turn makes what Sartre calls 'pure' reflection achievable – and this may lead to a kind of transformation, what he calls a 'conversion', following which authenticity becomes (always, and only, situationally) possible. Bad faith then, exists at the pre-reflective ontological level, but contains within it the possibility of good faith; in 'impure' reflection, Santoni suggests, consciousness may, in good faith, resist its inclination to bad faith to assuage anguish, and may, through eventually engaging in 'pure' reflection, undergo the conversion to authenticity.[25]

Despite the importance of authenticity to Sartre's ontological system, as the only means of transcending bad faith, it receives little attention in Sartre's writing, and in *Being and Nothingness* it is relegated to a footnote. He states that to "radically escape bad faith," there will need to be "a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted and that "this self-recovery we shall call authenticity, the description of which has no place here."[26] Such a description did have a place though in a future related work Sartre intended to write on how bad faith might be avoided, and on ethics – generally assumed to be the posthumously published and unfinished *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1983). Quite why Sartre did not finish the *Notebooks* is unclear, but, along with his early *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phony War November 1939-March 1940,*

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[23] Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 130.
[24] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 69.
[25] Santoni's interpretation of good faith and its relation to authenticity is expounded in chapters four and six of *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).
[26] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 70.

also published posthumously in 1983, and *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1944), they contain almost all of Sartre's discussion of the concept of authenticity.[27] In the *War Diaries* Sartre stresses the importance of the situation in being authentic, since "to be authentic is to realize fully one's being-in-situation, whatever this situation may happen to be." He reiterates and expands on this later in the diaries, stating that "the authenticity of your previous momentum doesn't protect you in any way against falling next instant into the inauthentic," and that "the situation is novel: a new authenticity has to be invented…the memory of the authentic, in inauthenticity, is itself inauthentic."[28] Again, in *Anti-Semite and Jew* Sartre stresses the importance of "having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, "and "having freedom within the limits of a situation," but it is only later in the *Notebooks* that he clearly relates authenticity to the ontological system developed in *Being and Nothingness* - and specifically to the notion of the for-itself, consciousness, as predisposed to the ontological disavowal that is bad faith, but also as capable of achieving authenticity.[29] Here he writes that "authenticity bears on what I will…pure and authentic reflection is a will for that which I will."[30] What is willed is ontological freedom, so that, as Thomas C. Anderson observes, "I accept my diasporic mode of being," accept "that I am not a substantial, necessary thing, which has a right to be, but a contingent, gratuitous freedom, which continually questions itself about the purpose of its existence."[31] Through pure reflection and the conversion it brings about I relinquish bad faith; I no longer pretend that I am a necessary, causal being, I do not attempt to unite my facticity and my transcendence, I recognise that I am both being-for-others and being-for-itself, and I no longer strive futilely for a synthesis of in-itself with for-itself, for the state of 'being-in-itself-for-itself.'[32] As Santoni points out, "although the awareness of bad faith implies a kind of ontological pre-comprehension of good faith, it is the *post-conversion* authentic life that marks for Sartre the mode of being that is opposite (or antithetical) to living in bad faith."[33] However, since the anguish caused by this post-conversion

[27] One could speculate that he was not entirely convinced that a coherent system of ethics was feasible within his ontology developed in *Being and Nothingness*.

[28] Jean-Paul Sartre, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phony War November 1939-March 1940*, 1983 (London: Verso Editions, 1984), p. 54, p. 219.

[29] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, 1944 (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 65, p. 64.

[30] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 495-496.

[31] Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), p. 54.

[32] Such an awareness, however, is necessarily provisional, since the risk of 'backsliding' into bad faith is constant.

[33] Ronald E. Santoni, *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 124.

state predisposes consciousness to bad faith to assuage it, and because every situation requires a new choice, authenticity has to be regained in each new situation. While the *Notebooks* could not be charged with the 'ontological pessimism' sometimes attributed to *Being and Nothingness*, any optimism they suggest concerning freedom and authenticity is tempered by Sartre's assertion that the "authentic individual cannot through conversion suppress his pursuit of being," and so conversion is never absolute.[34]

Since *Notebooks for an Ethics* was never completed and was published posthumously, it is perhaps doubtful whether Sartre believed his conceptions of authenticity and freedom could provide a viable foundation for an ethical system. It seems likely though that if, as Sartre claims in *Being and Nothingness*, solipsism can be avoided by "recognising a primary relation between my consciousness and the Other's", since this provides an intimation of the Other's transcendent subjectivity, the recognition of one's ontological freedom should presumably also entail the recognition of others' freedom through the same primary relation.[35] The key question, though, as Sebastian Gardner suggests, is whether "commitment to the value of *my* freedom must be shown to lead to affirmation of the *Other's* freedom" for Sartre to reach what he calls "an ethical destination." Gardner argues that this does not present "a logical gulf which needs to be bridged by argumentative means," since in pure reflection each for-itself "grasps its own freedom as indiscriminable from that of every other individual for-itself," so that "no affirmation of my freedom in opposition to that of other for-itselfs makes sense."[36] This grasping of freedom then is more a kind of ontological *apprehending* than a cognitive deduction, and in affirming my freedom I affirm that of others. In the *Notebooks* Sartre claims that we apprehend "the presence of the Other's freedom as a transcendence internalized into my own freedom. Its origin is the look. In the look, I am in communication (as looked at) with the Other's freedom. And I grasp myself as a transcended transcendence."[37] Consequently, as Linda A. Bell notes, since one's freedom "is inextricably connected with the freedom of others, one cannot will one's own freedom without willing the freedom of others."[38] Authenticity then, in its

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[34] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 42.

[35] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 253.

[36] Sebastian Gardner, 'Sartre's Ethics' (unpublished article, 2016) p.5.

[37] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 191.

[38] Linda A. Bell, *Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1989), p. 52.

recognition and valorising of freedom, does have ethical implications, and precludes the 'ontological oppression' of others that bad faith necessitates but refuses to acknowledge.

The novels to be discussed in this chapter were written at the height of American awareness (if not necessarily full understanding) of Sartrean existentialism and its concern with authenticity and freedom, and at a time when these, and the related notions of conformity and conformism, uniformity, individualism, and autonomy, informed much discussion of American culture, following the publication of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), and other similarly themed sociological texts. The prevailing conception of authenticity in the 1950s and early 1960s was then, essentially an existential one, and as Riesman's acknowledgment of Sartre illustrates, it was influenced by his existentialism. However, despite the cultural concern with authenticity (and avoidance of individual *in*authenticity), the protagonists of these novels are, just as much as those in previous chapters, inclined to bad faith in response to existential anguish (with two crucial exceptions). Indeed, bad faith is seemingly a 'natural' inclination, though the suburbanites in these texts are all living in a form, or aspect, of bad faith distinct from the two already discussed. The protagonists of Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), and Raymond Carver's short stories, discussed in Chapter One, are all in denial of the unstable, constantly transitional nature of self, and seek ontological fixity, a kind of entropic selfhood, denying the disequilibrium that being both facticity and free transcendence renders them, and seeking the impossible state of 'being-in-itself-for-itself'. In Chapter Three the suburbanites in Joyce Carol Oates's *Expensive People* (1968), John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969), and Anne Beattie's *Falling in Place* (1980), are all shown to be seeking a similar fixity, though their anguish is heightened by existential contingency, by their random, unjustified and gratuitous existence, possibility but not causal ontological necessity, which they crave. In Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971), however, Harry Angstrom denies his facticity, exemplifying what Jacob Golomb terms the individual who "regard[s] himself as pure transcendence, as forever beyond his 'situation'." Such an individual views himself as "neither part of nor responsible for choices he has made," and "not as possessing a situated freedom, but as having a ghostly, dislocated freedom that glides through the world untouched and untouching."[39] The suburbanite

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[39] Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 153.

narrators of *Something Happened*, Richard Ford's Bascombe novels, and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and *Aloft* (2004), all discussed in Chapter Two, meanwhile, exemplify bad faith in their denial of 'the look', of their 'being-for-others', deny not just their objectivity for others, but more significantly their intimation of others' subjectivity (and freedom), as a means of maintaining a protective solipsism. The characters in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961), and Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), however, are emblematic of a third type, or aspect, of bad faith. This, as Golomb notes, "consists in treating oneself as an other instead of treating oneself as one's self" in order to "deny transcendence and turn one's self…into pure facticity." Golomb suggests that "this pattern occurs through being-with-others and is the most fundamental of the three [forms of bad faith]."[40] This aspect of bad faith is comparable to David Riesman's sociological notion of 'other-directedness', the search for selfhood as constructed by others.[41]

In my analysis of these three novels I will argue that, in their 'other-directedness', the key characters welcome Sartre's 'the look', their being-for-others, as providing a character, a sense of self, an ontological fixedness that assuages their existential anguish and maintains their bad faith. Sartre's notion of bad faith and Riesman's concept of other-directedness can also provide insights into the characters and suburban milieu of *Mad Men*, as will be seen, though Sartre's "nostalgia of impermeability" (discussed in Chapter One) is also key in understanding the protagonists of the show.[42]

Suburbia as inauthentic

Rabbit, Run: "A pure open space in the middle of a dense net"

Updike's Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom exemplifies bad faith in its complex and various aspects and forms. In *Rabbit Redux* (1971) he cannot accept what Sartre calls the "nihilating ambiguity" of being both facticity and transcendence, and his denial of the former is "a refusal of being in the midst of the world…of being something other than pure transcendence."[43]   In *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) he denies his subjectivity, his

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[40] Ibid. p. 153.
[41] For Sartre though, of course, 'being-for-others', an objectified self-constructed by others, is an ontological inevitability, and it co-exists with the self as transcendent subjectivity, 'being-for-itself'.
[42] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58.
[43] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1983 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 176.

transcendence, and is obsessed with the past, with his former selves, his facticity, and the people he has known who are now dead (and so who are pure facticity, since "death is a contingent fact which belongs to facticity"): these people all become composite parts of his facticity, his past selves, for Harry.[44] The frustrations and limits on selfhood that this obsession with facticity causes is *precisely why* he cannot relinquish it, because to do so would be to experience acutely the anguish that comes with the recognition of the self as "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is," one that is constantly surpassing, transcending itself and so is free subjectivity (in the 'context' of its facticity).[45] This oscillation in relations with others (and so with oneself), between denial of subjectivity (being-for-itself) and denial of objectivity (being-for-others) is recognised by Sartre as typical of bad faith in the 'pre-conversion' state; as Linda A. Bell points out, "because, in an unconverted individual's awareness of the Other, the latter moves between the two poles of subjectivity and objectivity, the former has no alternative in the face of defeat of one way of relating to the Other but to adopt the other way."[46] For the twenty-six-year-old Harry of *Rabbit, Run* (1960), whose facticity, in the form of his past and other people within that past, is necessarily limited, the Other's subjectivity nullifies his own, through what Sartre calls 'the look'. The Sartrean notion of 'the look' was discussed in Chapters One and Two, but here I intend to show how it may be understood as a kind of 'self-alienation', a self-objectification, that is, a *willing* of the oppression that is 'being-for-others'. Such self-objectification, in its denial of subjectivity as transcendence, (partially and only temporarily) assuages existential anguish. It provides a chimeric selfhood, the self as fixity and objectivity for others, and so ontologically stable, and Rabbit, like the protagonists of *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and *The Moviegoer* (1961), having no sense of self, seeks such a stable, but chimerical, self. In this way all these characters are existentially inauthentic, both in Sartrean terms and in the cultural terms of the 1950s. Suburbia, moreover, was an environment that engendered and embodied personal inauthenticity.

Early on in *Rabbit, Run* Harry Angstrom leaves his wife, driving aimlessly away from the Mt. Judge suburb of Brewer, Pennsylvania, where they live, in the direction of Philadelphia, with no destination in mind, and it is clear that his aimlessness is actually a form of searching for some kind of bearings, a means of locating himself,

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[44] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 546.

[45] Ibid. p. 63.

[46] Linda A. Bell, *Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1989), p. 85.

exemplifying what Gerry Brenner calls his "directed identity." Brenner argues that "by accounting for the objects and places along a given route, Rabbit gains a false sense of identity by being able to place himself geographically," and further suggests that "if he knows where he is in space he can attribute a special identity to himself," one that will provide "a comforting sense of identifiable existence." This shows that Rabbit's identity "is not dependent upon himself, but upon the external objects he measures himself against."[47] There is clear textual evidence for Brenner's argument; as Rabbit begins his journey "he feels he's on a cliff, there is an abyss he will fall into," and shortly after this "senseless fear cakes over Rabbit's body." Once he reaches Lancaster, however, and buys a map at a diner, he is able to identify and name all the towns he passes through (with no destination in mind), and has the sensation that "things are better already."[48] Driving further still, though, he "feels some great confused system, Baltimore now instead of Philadelphia, reaching for him," so that "what he really wants is another map." With a new map (but still no destination) Rabbit's calm is restored, as he locates routes he can take and towns he passes through, but again his fear returns when he stops at a roadside café for coffee and senses that "he is unlike the other customers," who "sense it too," and the exaggerated politeness of the waitress "amplifies his strangeness." There are no objects, places, markers of identity for Harry to locate himself, and he craves the familiarity of the suburban culture he has left, thinking "he had read, that from shore to shore all America was the same." Seeking an illusory cultural uniformity, "he wonders, Is it just these people I'm outside, or is it all America?"[49] Being a cultural outsider is a frightening experience for Harry, suffering from Whyte's "soft-minded denial that there is a conflict between the individual and society," robbed of his directed identity, and soon after leaving the café he decides to drive back to suburban Mt. Judge.

Rabbit's directed identity can, I believe, be understood as an analogue of his other-directedness (in Riesman's terms), his need for a (suburban) self that is formed culturally from the societal expectations he perceives and which can provide a kind of reassurance or assuaging of the anguish he feels with so little sense of self. This interpretation is clearly at odds with readings of the novel which view Rabbit as a kind of (unsuccessful) rebel who repeatedly attempts to escape suburban conformity and uniformity – Sanford Pinsker, for example, interprets the novel as "the portrait of a

[47] Gerry Brenner, 'Rabbit, Run: John Updike's Criticism of the 'Return to Nature', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (April 1966) p. 6.
[48] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991) p. 15, p. 16, p. 18.
[49] Ibid. p. 19, p. 20.

would-be rebel's rise and fall, the story of an ordinary man's extraordinary effort to break out of the domestic trap as the 1950s defined it"; and Stanley Trachtenberg sees Rabbit's ongoing struggle as typifying the "unending and joyful American determination to leave the settled arrangements of society for the imagined if desperate release of personal freedom."[50] I would argue, however, that such personal freedom is precisely what Harry does *not* want and his repeated running away – from people and situations – is not a quest for autonomy, a rejection of suburban conformist culture, but a reflection and manifestation of his need for a stronger external source of identity and selfhood than those people and situations can provide. His pregnant wife Janice is an alcoholic who spends much of the day watching television, numbing herself to the oppressive suburban domesticity and isolation she feels trapped in, and who has even less sense of self than Harry – so being with her can only undermine his own other-directed identity; Janice does not provide the necessary expectations, the familial and patriarchal role for Harry to play, since such a role, like her own maternal and familial role (they have a two-year-old son, Nelson) has an unreality for her. Rabbit knows this, knows she has "a brittleness, an unconnectedness," and in a dream sees Janice crying uncontrollably, but then "to his horror her face begins to slide, the skin to slip slowly from the bone, but there is no bone, just more melting stuff underneath; he cups his hands with the idea of catching it and patting it back; as it drips in loops into his palms the air turns white with what is his own scream."[51] Janice, then, can only increase Rabbit's existential anguish, as he can only intensify hers. In a scene of ironic pathos Updike has them watch the children's TV programme 'The Mouseketeers', in which the adult Mouseketeer sings, "Proverbs, proverbs, they're so true…proverbs tell us what to do; proverbs help us all to *bee* – better Mouse-ke-teers." He then looks "straight out through the glass," and says "Know Thyself, a wise old Greek once said. Know Thyself…Don't try to be Sally or Johnny or Fred next door; be yourself."[52] Neither Harry nor Janice has a self to know or be, and clichéd proverbs on a banal television programme can only underscore this.

After Rabbit returns from his aimless and abortive journey he visits his former high school basketball coach, Marty Tothero, a source formerly of both special and 'normal'

[50] Sanford Pinsker, 'Restlessness in the 1950s: What Made Rabbit Run?' in Stanley Trachtenberg, ed. *New Essays on 'Rabbit, Run'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 54; Stanley Trachtenberg, 'Introduction' in Stanley Trachtenberg, ed. *New Essays on 'Rabbit, Run'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 22.

[51] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), pp.7-8, p. 52, p. 6.

[52] Ibid. p. 6.

identity; as a basketball player Harry had set records for points scored in state tournaments and beaten his own record, exceptional in his skills and ability, but unexceptional in his high school persona of "a big clean-living kid." Now, however, Tothero is a diminished, frail but hubristic, garrulous old man, "a clown and windbag," and far from bolstering Harry's sense of self, he undermines it further. Harry, though, unable to face returning to Janice and two-year-old Nelson, accepts the married Tothero's invitation to go to dinner with his girlfriend and a 'friend' of hers, Ruth, who Harry soon realises is an ex-prostitute in search of emotional and financial stability. It is Ruth who, temporarily, provides the sense of self Harry needs from others, used as she is to validating others; he welcomes, in Sartrean terms, 'the look', objectified and therefore rendered fixed in his identity for Ruth. Harry's sense of dread is thus allayed by his self-objectification, his identity through 'being-for-others'. When they first meet in a restaurant he experiences this being-for-others as he imagines that "a stranger passing outside the restaurant window, like himself outside that West Virginia diner, would see him with a woman. He seems to be that stranger, staring in, envying himself his body and his woman's body."[53] Significantly, it is the remembered sensation of lacking 'locatedness' at the diner that prompts this experience, as he now feels his anguish assuaged through his ostensible normalcy and 'other-founded' identity. Paradoxically, though, he knows that he is still self-alienated, since in his imagination he is both the one objectified by the look of the Other, but also the one looking; so as the looked at he is rendered an object, but as the one looking his subjectivity is *nullified through his consciousness of being looked at.* Updike also illustrates Harry's other-directed identity through the use of imagery that is, as Philip Stevick notes, "literally eye-centred," as Ruth's gaze (and that of others) fixes, locates Harry's identity in place and time.[54] When Harry and Ruth leave the restaurant and go to Ruth's apartment he is aware that "Ruth's eyes watch him out of shadows that also seem gaps in a surface," these gaps being facets of his own emptiness, as he tacitly recognises the nullity of his identity derived from "Ruth's blue-eyed nothing," but later thinks, and wants to believe, that "the blue of her eyes is no longer blank." When she asks Harry what he thinks makes him "so special," questioning his apparently unthinking (but actually panicked) behaviour, Harry feels incipient dread; as "she looks at him, squarely," he realises that "these aren't the eyes he met that night by the parking meters [outside the restaurant], flat pale discs like a doll might have. The blue of her irises has deepened inward and darkened with a richness that, singing the truth to his instincts,

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[53] Ibid. p. 38, p. 122, p. 33.
[54] Philip Stevick, 'The Full Range of Updike's Prose' in Stanley Trachtenberg, ed. *New Essays on 'Rabbit, Run'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 41.

disturbs him."[55] The truth he apprehends is that his sense of specialness (sense of *any* kind of self, special or otherwise) is founded on others, and Ruth, key now in sustaining it, threatens to undermine it by her questioning of it. While she initially provides the self-validation Harry expected to obtain from a dutiful, and self-abnegating wife, a role Janice could not perform, Ruth is finally even less able to sustain such a performance than Janice. Her societal status of 'mistress' is demeaning, but, as Tonya Krouse observes, a woman with this status "possesses sexual autonomy" and "challenges the patriarchal privilege to which her lovers feel entitled," refusing "her status as the 'property' of one man."[56]

Harry is always conscious of the gaze of others then, and seeks approval, self-validation, through this. When the ineffectual Episcopal priest, Jack Eccles, tries to reunite him with Janice, Rabbit senses the minister's own need to be validated by others, by their perception of the worthwhile role he plays as cleric, and his insubstantiality (Updike tells us "he seems unreal to Rabbit") causes Harry to seek the gaze of the minister's wife, Lucy, who is a strong component in Eccles' other-directed identity, and knows it as she makes clear when she tells him (in Harry's presence), "you're just afraid of being snubbed and don't quote scripture to justify yourself."[57] The eye-centred imagery is even more striking here; Rabbit watches her eyes and "as she adjusts her face to his height her eyes enlarge, displaying more of the vividly clear whites to which her moss-coloured irises are buttoned." When "recognition frosts her eyes," he is reassured and lets "his gaze go limp on the top of her head." Seeking approval from Lucy too, Rabbit is later "conscious of nothing but the little speckled section of her green irises like torn tissue paper around her black pupil-dots," her constricted pupils threatening his equilibrium, as he senses possible dislike or opprobrium in light of his behaviour, making him fearful since "he dreads being hated."[58]

When Janice gives birth to a daughter (Rebecca), however, Harry does return, but leaves again almost immediately, having tried to have sex with Janice on her return from hospital, his need to be absorbed, physically, emotionally, as he has been with

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[55] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 47, p. 56, p. 173, p. 83.
[56] Tonya Krouse, 'Every Woman is a Jackie or a Marilyn: The Problematics of Nostalgia', in Scott F. Stoddart, ed. *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), p. 192.
[57] John Updike, *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*, 1990 (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 113, p. 70.
[58] Ibid. p. 67, p. 70, p. 139, p. 140.

and by Ruth, almost pathological – but Janice tells him "I'm not your whore."[59] Left alone with the baby Janice struggles to manage practically and emotionally, drinking even more than before, and in a drunken stupor while attempting to bathe Rebecca, befuddled and uncoordinated, she accidentally drowns her, only realising she has done so when she sees the baby's lifeless features. On hearing of the baby's death Harry returns to Janice, now staying with her parents, and asks Eccles, who is visiting the family, "What shall I do?" The irony of Rabbit asking the minister, as insubstantial and other-directed as he is, for guidance, is clear, and Eccles' reply that he should "do what you are doing" is even more so, given that what Rabbit is doing, what he has done throughout the novel, is make panicked decisions, act on fear and seek any stability of selfhood through others. The minister also tells him to "be a good husband" and "be a good father," roles that Harry is hardly equipped for, and, fearfully contemplating his future in suburban Mt. Judge – as husband and father, good or otherwise – he feels the randomness, contingency, and anonymity of the suburb that is itself without cultural specificity, indistinguishable from so many other suburbs, without identity. Harry reflects that "the houses, many of them no longer lived in by the people whose faces he all knew, are like the houses in a town you see from the train, their brick faces blank in posing the riddle, Why does anyone live here?" The faces of the people he knew (who knew him) are replaced with the featureless 'faces' of the anonymous houses, unseeing, unable to *see,* to look at*,* Harry, presaging the feeling of being without a self, identityless, and "coldness spreads through his body and he feels detached, as if at last he is, what he dreaded, walking on air." No longer anchored, given weight and substance by others, "he is no one" and has "stepped into nothingness."[60]

At the funeral Rabbit experiences the gaze of others, but now it is universally condemnatory, inevitably belittling to one so other-directed, who "dreads being hated," his being-for-others now objectifying him in a contemptuous diminishing. Again, Rabbit runs, predictably to Ruth, who, he finds out, is pregnant. Ruth, however, only compounds Harry's sense of insubstantiality, asking him to leave and telling him "you're not just nothing, you're worse than nothing." In his final anguished fleeing Harry has, if not an epiphany, an intimation of the self-alienation caused by being-for-others, his other-directedness, and "feels his inside as very real suddenly, a pure open space in the middle of a blank net…a kind of sweet panic." Harry oscillates in his bad faith,

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[59] Ibid. p. 143.
[60] Ibid. p. 162, p. 163.

and we can see the nascent selfhood of the Harry of *Rabbit Redux* emerge, one whose relations with others are characterised by denial of their subjectivity, a denial of his being-for-others, the very source of his identity in *Rabbit, Run*, and a recognition solely of his own subjectivity, the transcendent being-for-itself. Already, Janice and Ruth are nullified, as with "thought he dissolves both of them," and he feels that "there is nothing outside, those things he was trying to balance have no weight," as "his smallness fills him like a vastness."[61] Harry has chosen bad faith over the possibility of existential authenticity, and in his other-denying subjectivity (and hence negation of others' freedom), will become an even more destructive force in *Rabbit Redux*.

*Revolutionary Road: "*An enormous, obscene delusion*"*

If Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit, Run* has only nascent self-awareness, or 'lack-of-self' awareness, Frank and April Wheeler in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961), set in 1955, are hyper-aware of their existential insubstantiality. Each one, though, strives desperately in their denial of this to maintain an entirely 'other-directed' selfhood, one in which 'being-for-others', the self-objectification inherent in the Sartrean look, is essential, and which the other-directed normative culture of the suburbs of the 1950s seemed to provide. Critics, however, have tended to see the Wheelers as, if not victims of the oppressive culture of conformity of 1950s suburbia, then compromised by it, rather than as manifestations of it. David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf, for example, view the couple's "deep yearning for personal authenticity" as thwarted by their inimical cultural environment, the "vacuous and chilling suburban landscape" of which they become a composite part.[62] Frank, who commutes from their Connecticut suburb to New York for his job writing copy at Knox Business Machines, wants to be "an authentic self and a memorable character," but in his quest has "turned to vague bits of existentialism – notably ideas about the nauseating quality of life, the liberation to be found in risk, and the essential absurdity of living." In the other-directed culture of the 1950s, Castronovo and Goldleaf suggest, Frank, but also April, are inevitably "caught up in managing impressions of themselves," and as a consequence "these characters lose their identities."[63] A similar view is expressed by Brian Rajski, who describes the Wheelers as "resigned to producing and maintaining a fragile distinction between their selves and their mainstream American environment." Rajski also

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[61] Ibid. p. 140, p. 174, p. 177.
[62] David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*: Twayne's United States Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 37, p. 36.
[63] Ibid. p. 42, p. 50.

suggests that "in the terms David Riesman laid out in *The Lonely Crowd*, the tedium of Frank's job makes it easy for him to picture himself as inner-directed, able to stand upright in any context due to his inner 'gyroscope' and a strong boundary surrounding his self."[64] For Jerome Klinkowitz, Frank's and April's ostensible belief in individualism and defiance of suburban conformity "places an impossible burden upon the self," and eventually "the compelling weight of reality…frustrates their hopes."[65]

These views, however, assume that the protagonists of *Revolutionary Road* are culturally, societally, besieged and coerced, that each has an identity, a self, that *can* be burdened, become fragile, or even lost. Yates, though, seems to suggest that they have no such identity, that their selfhood is only mirrored identity, as he illustrates by having them both 'perform' actions and parts self-consciously (but without self-awareness), and by the use of pervasive imagery of reflection, which undercuts their delusional sense of self. Near the beginning of the novel he describes Frank as having a face which "for all its lack of structural distinction…did have an unusual mobility: it was able to suggest wholly different personalities with each flickering change of expression." In adolescence Frank had believed that "all he would ever need…was the time and the freedom to find himself" and in his twenties "loose strands of his character…seemed suddenly to have coalesced into a substantial and attractive whole."[66] Yates, though, has by this point already shown any such character to be illusory, with an image suggesting both vacuous performance and mocking, nullifying reflection; after April, a member of the local amateur dramatics group, has performed risibly in the part of Gabrielle in Robert E. Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest*, alternating between "false theatrical gestures and a white-knuckled immobility," Frank embarrassedly commiserates, but is himself limited to such theatrical gestures, as Yates makes clear when afterwards in April's dressing room

> He looked at himself in the mirror, tightening his jaw and turning his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look, the face he had given himself in mirrors since boyhood and which no photograph had ever quite achieved, until with a start he found that she was watching him. Her own eyes

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[64] Brian Rajski, 'Writing Systems: Richard Yates, Remington Rand, and the Univac', *Contemporary Literature*, Volume 54, Number 3, Fall 2013, p. 550, p. 558.

[65] Jerome Klinkowitz, *The New American Novel of Manners: The Fiction of Richard Yates, Dan Wakefield and Thomas McGuane* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 18.

[66] Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 1961 (London: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 12, p. 21.

were there in the mirror, trained on his for an uncomfortable moment before she lowered them to stare at the middle button of his coat.[67]

This is the first textual hint of April's unwanted intimations of her and Frank's reflected identities, their insubstantiality, with her disavowal of such knowledge signalled by her averted gaze. Frank, however, considers himself "an intense, nicotine-stained Jean-Paul-Sartre sort of man," which ironically he is, but only insofar as he exemplifies bad faith through his adoption of an other-directed self, a self based solely on his being-for-others. Accepting the "simple logic…that he'd be limited to intense, nicotine-stained, Jean-Paul Sartre sorts of women," Frank finds such a woman in April Johnson, and in describing their meeting Yates uses eye-centred reflective imagery that is reminiscent of *Rabbit, Run*, as Frank discovers "that he could not only hold the steady attention of her wide gray eyes but could make their pupils dart up and down and around in little arcs while he talked to her, as if the very shape and texture of his face were matters of absorbing interest."[68] Initially living in Frank's Greenwich Village apartment, the couple decide to move to a more spacious one after April tells Frank she's pregnant, and he tries to deny feeling "chagrin instead of joy" at what he thinks is the "first authentic involvement" of his life. After having a second child the Wheelers move to the suburbs, with Frank jokingly telling April, "I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities."[69] The joke though is of course on them, as neither has a personality other than their reflected identities and, far from destroying their personalities, the picture window symbolically creates them, or rather allows them to maintain the illusion of *having* personalities. Yates highlights this irony, after Frank has disingenuously lambasted suburban conformity and reassured himself and April of their own authenticity and superiority, commenting that "if he'd looked at the window at that moment he would have seen the picture of a frightened liar."[70]

The Wheelers then, view themselves as living in a suburb without *being* suburban, a term that represents for Frank the worst kind of "optimistic, smiling-through, easy-way-out sentimentality." April, though, becomes increasingly dissatisfied, and then despondent, as a housewife and mother, with no means of self-validation other than through Frank, whose own other-directed identity requires constant validation from

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[67] Ibid. p. 9, p. 15.
[68] Ibid. p. 23.
[69] Ibid. p. 48, p. 49, p. 29.
[70] Ibid. p. 131.

her, and, though he cannot admit it, from his colleagues and superiors at Knox Business Machines. Unaware of the extent of April's distress and necessarily incapable of empathy, Frank feels undermined by what he perceives as the withdrawal of her affirmation, a key part of his identity without which he feels destabilised. Seeking an alternative source of validation he embarks on an affair with a secretary at Knox, since through her he can bolster his idea of himself as, ironically, a "decent but disillusioned young family man, sadly and bravely at war with his environment," unable to recognise that he is entirely reliant on that environment for his sense of self. April, meanwhile, unaware of her husband's affair, is also unable to accept her lack of self, and seeks respite from her anguished state, her existential emptiness; in an attempt to strengthen her bad faith, she resolves to change their environment and so provide an alternative source of other-directed identity. In doing so, however, she abrogates her freedom, her subjectivity, convincing herself that Frank's talents, his artistic abilities, are stifled in the banality of American suburban culture, and that Europe, and specifically Paris, would be the appropriate environment to cultivate and nurture those talents while she works to support him financially (thus mirroring the wistful yearnings of the character she played in *The Petrified Forest*, who dreams of going to France). April, then, in terms of the oscillation in relations with others identified by Sartre, has chosen denial of subjectivity (being-for-itself) and in recognising Frank's subjectivity she experiences self-objectification, with the temporary assuaging of anguish that this brings.[71]

When Frank returns from work (and his affair) he is taken aback by April's unexpectedly buoyant and forgiving mood. She tells him, with post-epiphanic zeal, that without quite realising it

> We both got committed to this enormous delusion – because that's what it is, an enormous, obscene delusion – this idea that people have to resign from real life and 'settle down' when they have families. It's the great sentimental lie of the suburbs, and I've been making you subscribe to it all this time. I've been making you live by it![72]

April reminds Frank of what he had said recently about "the whole idea of suburbia being to keep reality at bay," and, expanding eulogistically on the idea that moving to

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[71] Ibid. p. 129, p. 97.
[72] Ibid. p. 112.

Europe will afford an intellectual and spiritual freedom, she tells him that "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." Although he is "instantly frightened" by April's proposal, Frank is of course soon convinced by this version of himself since it is what he tries to project, the young man "bravely at war with his environment," that he presented to the secretary with whom his is having an affair.[73] While formerly, "catching sight of his walking reflection in the black picture window, he had to admit that his appearance was not yet as accomplished as hers" with only "the brave beginnings of a personage," he now notices that "his face in the mirror looked ruddier and better than he'd seen it look in months," with "a new maturity and manliness in the kindly, resolute face that nodded back at him in the mirror." Believing that "the past could dissolve at his will and so could the future" he announces the plan to emigrate to their neighbours and his pompous and vituperative tirades against the suburbs continue with a renewed intensity.[74] In their evangelical euphoria the couple also tell their two children about the proposed move, and, expecting them to be as enraptured as the couple themselves, are confounded by the children's anxiety and confusion.

As I have argued in previous chapters, suburbia engenders and embodies bad faith, and so existential inauthenticity, which Frank and April Wheeler typify, yet in their delusional and absurdly overweening hubris they decry such inauthenticity, in an irony that Yates underscores here and throughout the novel. The couple's euphoria over their plan inevitably does not last, with each separately and secretly increasingly plagued by anxieties. For Frank such anxieties arise from his intimations of the existential threat posed by the move to Paris, since he will no longer be able to maintain the illusion of being "painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture," and it will be clear to both him and April that, as she told him, "it's what you are that's being denied" – a denial that Frank is at least complicit in, suburbia ensuring that he *doesn't* feel "painfully alive," doesn't have to recognise that he lacks the "very *essence*" April believes is being stifled by suburban culture.[75] April's unease, meanwhile, slowly mounts as the unreality of the intended move to Paris becomes clear, not for her (she has applied for passports, and bought travel brochures and French language guides) but for Frank, so that her belief, her bad faith falters, reliant as it is on the plan and Frank's gaining (*wanting* to gain) his freedom (at the expense of hers). Frank has been offered promotion at Knox, and is drawn to the security of the other-directed identity

[73] Ibid. p. 110, p. 115, p. 109, p. 97.
[74] Ibid. p. 127, p. 208, p. 115.
[75] Ibid. p. 60, p. 115.

the company can provide, its all-pervasive influence and affirmation of his character embodying "a completely new kind of talent," one that will allow his full incorporation within the company, a corporate identity. He is consequently relieved when April tells him she is pregnant, the birth of a third child ensuring the abandonment of the planned move to Europe. April, however, has decided to have an abortion, and there follows a protracted campaign by Frank to dissuade her (despite his not actually wanting another child), in which he acts the reasonable, attentive, and supportive husband, successfully he believes, when she agrees to see a psychiatrist about her conflicted maternal feelings and a childhood characterised by absent parents. Their children, Jennifer and Michael, are once again confused when April tells them, with no explanation, that the family will not be moving to France after all, and Frank mistakenly and complacently - and with fatal results – interprets her impassivity as relenting passivity. Having resumed his affair with the secretary Frank experiences "a renewal of self-esteem, so that the face he saw in passing mirrors these days gave him back a level, unembarrassed glance," and imagines that he has restored existential equilibrium, that his identity is no longer in jeopardy.[76]

April's increasingly detached complaisance is ominous, suggesting a dissociative state, to which Frank is oblivious. After a drunken night out, April has sex with a besotted neighbour, who declares his love for her, to which she reacts by telling him inexpressively, "I really don't know who you are…And even if I did…I'm afraid it wouldn't help, because you see I don't know who I am, either." Recognising the inner emptiness she has tried so hard to forestall, she also recognises the emptiness of her relationship with Frank, and tells him she doesn't love him, which he simply refuses to believe and flatly contradicts ("Wrong…you do love me") unable to acknowledge the implications for his dependent identity. A final argument is followed the next morning by what will be a final breakfast together, which Yates makes clear through April's exaggerated, near-robotic attentiveness and submissiveness. It is also apparent from the final reflective, but now nullifying, imagery as April watches Frank drive away from their house on Revolutionary Road and sees "the crumpled shape of the old Ford get smaller and smaller," until "at the end of the driveway…a gleam of sun on the windshield eclipsed his face."[77] Frank has ceased to exist for April in her resolved dissociative state, but this image also portentously prefigures the eclipsing of Frank's own identity. Moving around the house with a calculated deliberation April makes final

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[76] Ibid. p. 202, p. 250.
[77] Ibid. p. 262, p. 290, p. 300.

preparations, including writing a note to Frank telling him "Whatever happens don't blame yourself" and then performs an abortion on herself. In the penultimate chapter Yates describes the reaction of the Wheelers' suburban neighbours to seeing an ambulance pull up outside their house and April's being taken to hospital, and Frank's reaction to the news (his voice "insubstantial"), his bewilderment at discovering at the hospital that she has haemorrhaged severely and is now unconscious. A neighbour describes "the awful blankness of his eyes" when Frank is told that April has died, and later in his benumbed state he sits in the house on Revolutionary Road "in the darkness by the picture window," his reflected identity extinguished.[78]

In the final chapter of the novel neighbour Milly Campbell recounts the aftermath of April's death to the new residents of the Wheelers' house, a dull young couple who listen attentively, while her husband Shep tries to contain his anger at her asinine description of Frank several months after April's death as "courageous." He remembers "a walking, talking, lifeless man," and reflects that after he "felt the light, dry press of his handshake," he "began to see how the life had gone out of him." Frank, though, had talked expansively about his full commitment to his job with a new company specialising in "industrial relations in the electronics field," one of the newly emergent corporate businesses William Whyte wrote about in *The Organization Man*, and Frank is now such a man, compliant and complaisant, "so damned mild!" Shep thinks contemptuously, someone "you could walk up to and take a swing at and knock down, and all he'd do would be to lie there and apologise for getting in your way."[79] Frank then, has acquired a new other-directed identity, a corporatized self. As Brian Rajski argues, with such an ending "Yates bleakly lays out two possible dead ends for the 'revolutionary road' of individualism: the conformist hypocrisies of the suburb…or an identification with corporate modernity (for which Frank is now professionally the voice)."[80] In the post-war theorising of sociologists such as Riesman and Whyte, both alternatives denote existential inauthenticity in their other-directedness, while in Sartrean existentialism they are also both inauthentic ontological states in their recognition solely of being-for-others, and their disavowal of the co-existing and transcendent being-for-itself.

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[78] Ibid. p. 310, p. 315, p. 321, p. 325.
[79] Ibid. p. 329, p. 330, p. 329, pp. 330-331.
[80] Brian Rajski, 'Writing Systems: Richard Yates, Remington Rand, and the Univac', *Contemporary Literature*, Volume 54, Number 3, Fall 2013, p. 571.

The Moviegoer: "The worst kind of self-deception"

Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961) is very different from both *Rabbit, Run* and *Revolutionary Road*: it is set in the south, in a suburb of New Orleans, rather than in the northeast, its protagonist, John Bickerson 'Binx' Bolling, is single and singularly well-off, and the narration is in the effusively analytical first person voice of Bolling. Like Updike's and Yates' novels, though, its key thematic concern is existential authenticity and it shares their historical and cultural context, the (perceived) conformity and consumerism of the 1950s. Binx Bolling, like Harry Angstrom and Frank and April Wheeler, exemplifies bad faith, and while he is perhaps more similar to Frank Wheeler than Harry Angstrom in his highly self-conscious (but not self-aware) expostulatory tirades and existential musings, he is markedly different from both in his use of an all-pervasive irony to reinforce, but simultaneously disavow, his bad faith. As Mary Thale noted in 1968, just seven years after the publication of *The Moviegoer*, the 1950s were "the decade when most people thought of themselves as 'inner-directed' 'non-conformists' in a society of 'conformists' who had suppressed their 'spontaneity'," and Percy "created a world where everyone sees himself as a unique person but acts just like everyone else," but more significantly "it is a world where most people are types, easily identified by the narrator, Binx."[81] From his dismissive classifications of the people he sees (but rarely meets) it is clear that Binx thinks he is an inner-directed individualist, and his tone is highly ironic, as it is when describing himself, as if to undercut the truthfulness of his self-descriptions, through a disingenuous and deceitful narrative strategy. The greatest irony of the book, however, is that it is Binx's cousin and eventual fiancé Kate Cutrer who exemplifies authenticity, or, in Sartrean terms, the good faith that is the precursor to authenticity, since she does not deny her intimations of ontological freedom and recognises the oppressiveness of her being-for-others and the unviability of an identity based on other-directedness.

At the beginning of the novel Binx, citing, as the attraction of the suburb, its 'placelessness', or environmental indeterminacy, explains that "for the past four years now I have been living uneventfully in Gentilly, a middle-class suburb of New Orleans. Except for the banana plants in the patios and the curlicues of iron on the Walgreen drugstore one would never guess it was part of New Orleans…But this is what I like about it." He also likes the apparent anonymity, and the tranquillity, the peacefulness of the suburb, particularly at dawn, and thinks "it is good to walk in the suburbs at this

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hour. No one ever uses the sidewalks anyhow," so he can "muse along as quietly as a ghost."[82] Binx's ghostly uneventful life seems insubstantial, and it is, though not, as he seems to think, in an existentially detached, insightfully observant way, but in a passively other-directed way. Binx derives his sense of identity from the films he sees regularly and obsessively, the protagonists having (unlike Binx) a "peculiar reality which astounds me." The importance of an adoptive identity for Binx, one that can be acquired circumstantially, its source external and other-determined, is signalled through his very first description of a movie, one in which a man suffers amnesia in an accident and as a consequence loses "everything: his family, his friends, his money." Binx goes on to explain that the man was now "a stranger in a strange city" and "had to make a fresh start," which was "supposed to be a tragedy, his losing all this, and he seemed to suffer a great deal." In Binx's view though, "things were not so bad after all. In no time he found a very picturesque place to live, a houseboat on the river, and a very handsome girl."[83] The acquisition of one externally constructed identity can almost seamlessly replace another that has been lost, since what is essential is the validation of self from others, a self-constructed through external societal markers of identity. Bolling describes himself in such terms, albeit ironically (and seemingly in self-mockery), claiming that "I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards," all sources of external validation of course, as he points out, stating that "it is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist."[84]

For all his arch ironizing of (inauthentic) conformism, such a certifying is exactly what Binx seeks, though through the movies rather than the objectifying paraphernalia of consumerism. He goes to see Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* (1950), filmed in New Orleans, with his cousin Kate, to whom he has explained that the movies provide what he calls "certification" and after seeing the film Kate understands this phenomenon, which she indicates by looking around the neighbourhood and telling him, "Yes, it is certified now." Binx then explains the need for such certification since

> Nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not
> certified for him. More than likely he will live there sadly and the emptiness which
> is inside him will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood. But if he

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[82] Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 1961 (New York: Ivy Books, 1989), p. 3, pp. 72-73, p. 74.

[83] Ibid. p. 13, p. 2.

[84] Ibid. p. 4.

sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere.[85]

This highlights an apparent contradiction in Binx's thinking about a sense of place, of 'locatedness', as a source of identity. If certification provides a kind of validation of place, and indirectly of self, so that it is possible to live as "a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere," his choosing to live in the geographical indeterminacy of a suburb, anywhere rather than somewhere, would suggest a need to be 'uncertified', to avoid the conferring of an identity. Binx does indeed feel the need both for an other-directed, externally 'certified' identity and, paradoxically, for its nullification, but it is the *source* of such an identity that is crucial to understanding this conflict, and his abrogation of freedom in seeking 'certification' from the unreality of the movies. The Bollings are a traditional southern aristocratic family dominated by noblewoman and matriarch, Aunt Emily. She is a powerful and oppressive force in Binx's life and constantly reminds him of his failure to meet his familial obligations, to uphold the family traditions, most notably by resisting his calling, as she believes, to become a doctor, which would represent the fulfilment of his talents, something his job as a stockbroker manifestly does not do, and which in addition discredits the Bolling family name. Aunt Emily's objectification of others is absolute and Binx's move to the suburb, placing himself outside her geographical and cultural orbit of influence, New Orleans, is one means of resisting this nullification of selfhood, through which

All the stray bits and pieces of the past, all that is feckless and gray about people, she pulls together into an unmistakable visage of the heroic or the craven, the noble or the ignoble. So strong is she that sometimes the person and the past are in fact transfigured by her. They become what she sees them to be.[86]

Binx resists Aunt Emily's transfiguring of him into craven and ignoble nephew, resists her implicit injunction to be what David Riesman calls the 'tradition-directed' type of individual, who "learns to understand and appreciate patterns which have endured for centuries," and for whom "important relationships of life may be controlled by careful and rigid etiquette."[87] Far from being inner-directed however, he corresponds to Riesman's other-directed type who is "at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of

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[85] Ibid. p. 53.
[86] Ibid. p. 41.
[87] David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, 1950 (London: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 11.

a rapid if sometimes superficial intimacy with, and response to, everyone."[88] This is apparent in his abortive and emotionally disengaged affairs with his secretaries, Linda, Marcia and now prospectively Sharon, and from his matter-of-fact admission that "for years now I have had no friends. I spend my entire time working, making money, going to movies and seeking the company of women."[89]

Binx's rejection of his being-for-others for Aunt Emily, of her tyrannical objectifying look, entails the nullifying of his familial culture and history through his anonymising of place and self. This he does by living in Gentilly, anywhere not somewhere, as an anyone not a someone, but this represents a perilous existential threat (the risk he has already recognised that "the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood"). He therefore needs a means of locating himself, and his self, the certification he describes, which the movies provide, and which extends to movie theatres themselves, the need for a geographical specificity attached to the films he sees. The extent of his existential precariousness becomes clear when he explains that

> If I did not talk to the theater owner or the ticket seller, I should be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking. I should be seeing one copy of a film which might be shown anywhere and at any time. There is a danger of slipping clean out of space and time. It is possible to become a ghost and not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or suburban Bijou in Jacksonville.[90]

In Binx's musings, however, there seems to be self-conscious posturing as much as self-awareness, as if his recognition of his ghostly anonymity was the very existential insight that gave *substance* to his otherwise blankly anonymous self, and this is where his bad faith becomes clearest. It is manifest in two ways, firstly in his failure to recognise his dependence on the movie actors and stars he constantly refers to (and later addresses his narrative to) as sources of his other-directed identity, and secondly in his disingenuous claim to have discovered "the possibility of a search," a heightened existential awareness, which is "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life." The search seems to be a way of lessening what he calls "the malaise," which is "the pain of loss," since "the world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world." The search is

[88] Ibid. p. 25.
[89] Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 1961 (New York: Ivy Books, 1989), p. 34.
[90] Ibid. p. 64.

supposedly ontological, his previous searching for a scientific understanding of the world already achieved, the "only difficulty" with such a search having been he says "that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over."[91] This possibility of a search though remains just that, a possibility, and it seems to function as a means of bolstering his bad faith, believing he is somehow inner-directed, distinguished from the hordes of other-directed types in his perspicacity. The search, then, seems to be a disavowal, a reimagining of his need for externally validated identity, as a need for an internally generated and autonomous one.

The need for the former type of identity is apparent in his numerous references to actors and his addressing them personally in the latter part of his narration. The significance of actors for his sense of self is crucial, and, as Virginia Nickles Osborne notes, "Binx not only perceives the world on film as somehow more authentic and memorable than his own, but also adapts his behavior to imitate certain actors."[92] Those actors are numerous and include John Wayne, Orson Welles, Richard Widmark, William Holden, Paul Newman, Tony Curtis, Akim Tamiroff, Gregory Peck, and, most importantly, Rory Calhoun, to whom he addresses most of the final part of his narrative. Binx's imitative self is entrenched and integral, indissociable from any other aspect of his selfhood, and is valued by him as crucially formative to that selfhood, as is clear from his (disingenuously) ironic observation that "during my last year in college I discovered that I was picking up the mannerisms of Akim Tamiroff, the only useful thing, in fact, that I learned in the entire four years." Intending to make himself attractive to his new secretary, and assuming they will have an affair, he keeps "a Gregory Peckish sort of distance. I am a tall black-headed fellow and I know as well as he how to keep to myself."[93] On receiving a phone call and, knowing that Sharon is watching him, he is careful to "think it over Gregory-Peckishly," and on discovering that she is dating someone else he becomes "Gregory-grim." Later, on an excursion he is able to impress Sharon with a bullet wound in his shoulder from the Korean War, "a decent wound, as decent as any ever inflicted on Rory Calhoun or Tony Curtis."[94] In constructing his identity in this way Binx, as Richard Pindell suggests, "pretends, with much of the actor's perfection of gesture, to be a somebody somewhere."[95] This

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[91] Ibid. p. 7, p. 9, p. 106, p. 60.

[92] Virginia Nickles Osborne, ''The Most Ordinary Life Imaginable': Cold War Culture in Walker Percy's The Moviegoer', *The Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 41, Number 2, Spring 2009, p. 118.

[93] Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 1961 (New York: Ivy Books, 1989), p. 145, p. 58.

[94] Ibid. p. 60, p. 61, p. 111.

[95] Richard Pindell, 'Basking in the Eye of the Storm: The Esthetics of Loss in Walker Percy's The Moviegoer', *Boundary 2*, Volume 4, No. 1 (Autumn, 1975), p. 221.

underscores the irony in Binx's conflating the identity of the actors he emulates with the identity of the characters they play, the actors having supplanted any inner identity with an externally constructed one, just as Binx himself does, but while their identity is of course only a celluloid one, his constitutes the very (lack of) substance of his self. This irony is particularly disturbing (and near-pathological), when he recounts an initial abortive sexual encounter with his cousin Kate to Rory Calhoun, addressing him directly ("I'll have to tell you the truth, Rory, painful though it is.") and continues to address Calhoun for the remainder of his narrative.[96]

It is Kate's own existential anguish and failure to assuage it through bad faith, however, that highlights most clearly Binx's bad faith in assuming an other-directed identity based solely on being-for-others. Kate is considered by her step mother, Aunt Emily (and seemingly by Binx too) to be mentally and emotionally unbalanced as a result of her fiancé's death in a car accident several years previously, and she *is* unbalanced insofar as she recognises her (and everyone else's) ontological disequilibrium, the inherent instability of being and impossibility of balance. It was through the crash itself that this recognition occurred, in a kind of epiphany. Kate tells Binx, that "at the time of the wreck people were so kind and helpful and *solid*." No-one could acknowledge "the truth… that our reality had been purchased only by Lyell's death," or the broader truth that it is "only in times of illness or disaster or death," that such solidity of presence, such reality, is possible – or rather the semblance of it.[97] Extreme events and occurrences provide a heightened sense of reality and a concomitant diminishing of existential anguish as they are distractions from the constancy of our existential flux, our inevitably inchoate and free ontological state. The consequence of this realisation for Kate is an inability to form, or assume, an identity that she knows to be her being-for-others, an objectified self that nullifies her transcendent subjectivity. Binx fails to understand this, and when she breaks off her engagement with her current fiancé he interprets this as indicative of Kate's "trapping herself too often: hitting upon a way out, then slamming the door upon herself." She tries to explain to him that the relationship was untenable because she was often "as nervous as an actress," and although "there were moments when I succeeded in being myself…so brilliantly that I think he loved me," these were just that, momentary, and impossible to sustain.[98] Binx's failure to understand this, part of the denial implicit in his bad faith, is signalled by the opacity of Kate's gaze, the traumatised blankness he

[96] Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 1961 (New York: Ivy Books, 1989), p. 175.
[97] Ibid. p. 70.
[98] Ibid. p. 56, p. 100.

believes he sees in her eyes. He describes them as "pools of darkness" and repeatedly comments that frequently "her irises turn to discs." Binx is "wary of Kate's revelations," what he calls her "exalted moments," though what he takes to be exaltation seems more anguished fearfulness and panicked frustration at his incomprehension that she had lived "twenty-five years…through a misunderstanding," and then "had discovered that a person does not have to *be* this or *be* that or be anything, not even oneself. One is free."[99]

The anguish this causes is finally unbearable for Kate, and, renouncing her freedom, she asks Binx to be with her, even though she is "frightened…[and] not merely of marriage," accepting her being-for-others identity, an identity that casts her as emotionally unstable and needing psychotherapeutic help to 'cure' her. Kate therefore renounces her good faith, succumbs to bad faith, and Binx is complicit in her capitulation, which bolsters his own bad faith. He in turn capitulates to his Aunt's view of him, her objectification of his identity, deciding to train to be a doctor and to marry Kate, and so is now another one of the people who "become what she sees them to be."[100] He has exchanged one other-directed identity for another, and there are no more references to movies in the novel. The final irony however, is that Kate's future is likely to be what she had earlier described as "monstrous," envisioning (and refusing) an oppressive suburban domestic life with Binx, one in which, she tells him

> You would be hubby, dearest Binx…Seeing hubby off in the morning, having lunch with the girls, getting tight at Eddie's and Nell's house and having a little humbug with somebody else's hubby, wearing my little diaphragm and raising my two lovely boys and worrying for the next twenty years about whether they will make Princeton.[101]

Binx had himself at the beginning of his narrative remarked sardonically, on meeting a friend living just such a suburban life, "This is how one lives! My exile in Gentilly has been the worst kind of self-deception," in his irony unwittingly revealing an unpalatable truth.[102] Despite, though, the likelihood of Kate Cutrer acquiescing to an other-directed identity, she is the only protagonist of all the novels discussed in this thesis who evinces good faith, if not, finally, authenticity, and this is perhaps all the more

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[99] Ibid. p. 98, p. 26, p. 99, p. 100.
[100] Ibid. p. 205, p. 41.
[101] Ibid. p. 170.
[102] Ibid. p. 14.

remarkable given the "monstrous" oppression of women in the 1950s, the difficulty of escaping the domestic drudgery of their societally sanctioned being-for-others identity.[103] Binx Bolling, far from helping her resist such an inauthentic identity, compounds her (and his own) oppression, allowing her bad faith to subsume the possibility of good faith, and thus in his denial also chooses an inauthentic self. This is particularly egregious in view of Bolling's disingenuous claim throughout his narration to have intimations of "the possibility of a search," to have avoided being "sunk in the everydayness" of life, and therefore to have achieved a kind of existential authenticity. Believing himself to be distinguished from those around him by his insight and awareness, he fails to see that Kate's 'illness' is actually existential anguish caused precisely by the awareness he lacks, the recognition of the existential freedom he disavows. At the end of the novel Kate, boarding a streetcar, tells Binx where she will be sitting and exactly how she will position herself, needing him to "be thinking of me just that way." Binx, complicit in Kate's self-objectification, reassures her, grants her a fixity of self she knows to be chimeric, but which he, ironically, does not.[104]

Mad Men, suburbia and (in)authentic identity: "And who are you supposed to be?"

Mad Men is generally considered to be a revisionist depiction of the epochal societal changes of the 1960s, and the relation between these changes, in a newly burgeoning consumerist culture saturated with advertising, and the evolving identities of the characters who were both influential in creating, and influenced by, that culture. This is not entirely accurate however, for two reasons. The first is that the series (at least for the first three seasons, and arguably up until the fifth season) is far more concerned with the 1950s than the 1960s. Commenting on the genesis of *Mad Men* at the Austin Film Festival in October 2009, executive producer, occasional director and writer Mathew Weiner explained, "I was not interested in the Sixties. I was interested in the Fifties. It's an important distinction."[105] It clearly is a significant distinction, and if, as Philip Jenkins argues, the 1960s as a distinct cultural and political period, began with the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and ended with the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974, then the first three seasons focus *solely* on the 1950s.[106] The

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[103] It is, however, precisely this oppression that renders bad faith, and consequently the possibility of authenticity, undeniable, as I argue in the final section of this chapter.
[104] Ibid. p. 7, p. 9, p. 212.
[105] Gary Edgerton, 'Mad Men Fatigue and the Obstinacy of Art TV', 09/05/14, accessed 26/02/15 from: http://cstonline.tv/mad-men-fatigue-and-the-obstinacy-of-art-tv.
[106] Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 4.

fourth and fifth seasons depict the emergence of early 1960s culture within a resistant and consternated oppressive post-war culture of conformism, not just conformity, and seemingly unassailable white patriarchal hegemony. It is only the sixth and seventh seasons then that are fully focused on the 1960s, and, even though the last episode ends in 1970 (projecting forward to the famous McCann Erickson 1971 Coke advertisement in the final scene), this is still very much the 1960s, if Jenkins' decadal delineation is accepted. Secondly, the consumerist culture of the 1960s, based on the notion of an identifiable mass public with measurable indicators of conformity, was an evolution rather than a revolution, a cultural continuity from the 1920s rather than a discontinuity. In *The Averaged American* (2007) Sarah E. Igo traces the development of the concept of American averageness, and so normalcy and uniformity, within which Robert S. Lynd's and Helen Merrell Lynd's sociological (or 'anthropological') *Middletown* (1929) survey was of seminal importance. The Lynd's study of Muncie in Indiana identified "the triumph of an artificial consumer society…a worrisome standardization of work and family life…[and] the demise of an earlier, seemingly more authentic, American community." The Lynds viewed the town as "a distorted but resonant icon of American modernity," one that in its 'distortion' was becoming the norm.[107] If this survey provided a kind of benchmark for Americans to assess how far they, or their towns, conformed to typical or average characteristics, the rise of market research and the use of opinion polls (perhaps most notably by George Gallup and Elmo Roper), encouraged them to self-assess extensively on various aspects of their lives publicly. Such polls devised by Gallup and Roper had the express intention of identifying the 'average' American, and, as Igo notes, "pollsters were convinced that only by silencing some voices could they reach the most representative ones." The increasing ubiquity of polls and fledgling market research in the 1930s and 1940s then, *created* rather than reflected a conception of averageness, normalcy, and having created a demand for knowledge about majority views and characteristics, were themselves the only way to satisfy that demand. The clear implication of this, as Igo suggests, was that "in a society constantly seeking information about itself…statistical means could themselves become normative."[108]

The culture of *Mad Men* is that critically depicted in Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), and although the Lynds' description of Middletown may sound remarkably similar to those studies' portrayal of an

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[107] Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 39-40, p. 67.
[108] Ibid. p. 137, p. 262.

inauthentic cultural conformity, or even uniformity, the difference, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, was the rapid development of mass suburbia in the post-war years, as well as more generally the increasing bureaucratisation, corporatisation and commodification of culture of which it was a part. By the 1950s, as Igo observes, the survey saturated American public's "knowledge about itself was at once highly intrusive and completely anonymous, self-scrutinizing and other-directed, familiar and impersonal." This 'knowledge' engendered "peculiar tensions of life in a 'mass' society: between being 'oneself' and being known as a member of a group, between being an individual and being a statistic."[109] These characteristics distinguish 1950s suburbanites from the inhabitants of the *Middletown* of 1929 (and their portrayal in fictional satires of 1920s suburbia, most notably Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, published in 1922). The knowledge and tensions identified by Igo are central to the depictions of character in Weiner's *Mad Men*, and they underlie the conflicted dynamics of the series, the personal and interpersonal crises and changes the characters undergo. Some critics have interpreted these changes and crises through direct acknowledgement of the corporate culture identified by Riesman and Whyte; Gary R. Edgerton, for example, classifies the key characters according to Riesman's typology in a (perhaps slightly overly schematic) way, suggesting that

> The traditionalists (Bertram Cooper, Roger Sterling) resist change and rigorously follow time-honoured beliefs and practices; the inner-directeds (Don Draper, Peggy Olson) are far more self-made, stubbornly self-reliant, and goal-oriented, while the other-directeds (Betty Draper, Pete Campbell) tend to obsessively seek approval, prefer group over individual action, and freely sublimate their own needs and desires to the will of the crowd.[110]

The characters in *Mad Men*, however, do not always fit quite so neatly into these categories – especially Don Draper and Peggy Olson – and there is a risk in such classification of eliding some of the complexities and conflicts that characterise the show. The organisational culture depicted in the show is though, as Maura Grady contends, within "Whyte's parameters," since the men who work for Sterling Cooper (in its various incarnations) "are invested in identifying as ad men and operate strictly within the terms of Sterling Cooper's existing hierarchy," all, that is, except for Don Draper (and Peggy Olson, who refuses to become an honorary 'mad man') whose

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[109] Ibid. pp. 281-282, p. 282.
[110] Gary R. Edgerton 'Introduction: When Our Parents Became Us' in Gary R. Edgerton, ed. *Mad Men: Dream Come True TV* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2011), p. xxiv.

interest as a character lies precisely in his apparent adherence to those hierarchical norms and yet also his transgression and subversion of them. Crucially however, as Grady observes, "a kind of nervous energy pervades the office and its workers, suggesting they are far from the sense of security Whyte's study suggested the organization man felt he was receiving in exchange for his loyalty," though Whyte seems to suggest that allegiance to the organisation is in part a response to *insecurity* rather than an indication of a sense of security.[111] Any such sense of security would necessarily be oppressive in Sterling Cooper, a company which is, as David P. Pierson notes, "rigidly hierarchical, numbingly conformist, and generally resistant to change."[112] Working for such an organisation, and commuting to and from the suburbs, would inevitably exacerbate the tensions and anxieties identified by Igo concerning personal authenticity, the sense of being "completely anonymous, self-scrutinizing and other-directed," and the conflict "between being 'oneself' and being known as a member of a group."

Mad Men's concern with authentic selfhood and the suburban culture of the 1950s (and earlier) is also apparent from the influence of John Cheever's stories, cited by Weiner as pivotal in the show's creation.[113] This influence can be seen in the key characters, some of whom seem based on Cheever's protagonists. Blake, in 'The Five-Forty-Eight' (1954) is strikingly similar to Pete Campbell in his insecure bullying of a secretary and exploitation of her, believing she is powerless and is therefore ideal for an affair, since "her diffidence, the feeling of deprivation in her point of view, promised to protect him from any consequences," much like other women he had "picked for their lack of self-esteem."[114] Following his discarding of the secretary, whose name he can't remember, he is humiliated by her at gun point on his commute to the suburbs (fittingly) and made to grovel on the ground, just as Pete Campbell is humiliated (rather differently) in his misjudgement of Peggy, his admonishing by the employer of the au pair Gudrun, who he manipulates into sleeping with him out of gratitude, and by the woman beaten up by her husband after he sleeps with her at his

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[111] Maura Grady, 'The Fall of the Organization Man: Loyalty and Conflict in the First Season', in Scott F. Stoddart, ed. *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), p. 49.

[112] David P. Pierson, 'Unleashing a Flow of Desire: Sterling Cooper, Desiring-Production, and the Tenets of Late Capitalism', in Scott F. Stoddart, ed. *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), p. 90.

[113] Weiner told Semi Chellas in an interview for *The Paris Review* that Cheever's stories are "in every aspect of *Mad Men*, starting with the fact that Don lives in Ossining on Bullet Park Road," (Semi Chellas, 'The Art of Screenwriting No. 4: Matthew Weiner', *The Paris Review*, No. 208, Spring 2014).

[114] John Cheever, *The Stories of John Cheever*, 1978 (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 311.

New York apartment, who arrives bruised and bloody at his suburban home. Similarly, Jack Lorey in 'Torch Song' (1947) who has a lifelong infatuation with the "serene…big, splendid" Joan Harris, resembles Roger Sterling in his relationship with the (almost) identically named Joan (Holloway) Harris, as does the ill-disciplined, chain-smoking Mr Bradish in 'Metamorphoses' (1963), who "had never had any occasion to experience self-righteousness other than the self-righteousness of the sinner," and whose disdain had generally been for people "who drank clam juice and cultivated restrained tastes," until he decided to give up smoking and, in his obsessional craving attacked a young woman he "mistook for a Lucky Strike," which was "his undoing."[115] Marcie in 'The Trouble of Marcie Flint' (1957), seems much like Betty Draper, in her Junior League of Tarrytown civic-mindedness, as she seeks to keep herself occupied during her husband's extended absence on an unexplained business trip, joining a madrigal group, becoming a committeewoman, and accepting a position on the village council, so that "virtuousness, reason, civic zeal, and loneliness all contributed to poor Marcie's trouble."[116]

'The Swimmer' (1964), however, is probably the most important of all the Cheever stories for *Mad Men*, in its charting of a wealthy and successful suburban man's psychological breakdown and the resultant dissolution of his identity. While in *Mad Men* the various scenes of Don Draper swimming are associated with crisis and attempted resolution and renewal, in Cheever's story Neddy Merrill's mental disintegration becomes apparent as he swims across one suburban swimming pool after another, ostensibly on his way home from a party. Early on in his journey he is dismayed to discover the inexplicably drained pool of a couple he knows, subsequently realising that the couple had moved long ago, yet he was oddly unaware of this. Doubting his own senses and judgement he asks himself whether he has become "so disciplined in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth." Soon after this episode we learn that "he had covered a distance that made his return impossible" and he feels an increasing sense of foreboding when a couple commiserate with him over his misfortunes, mentioning the loss of his house and his "poor children," and a bemused Merrill succumbs to fatigue, stopping to rest at a neighbourhood party, only to be physically ejected as a gate crasher who has committed some unmentionable former transgression against the hosts.[117] On finally arriving at his house he finds it is locked, dark and deserted, and when he looks

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[115] Ibid. pp. 130-131, p. 709, p. 711.
[116] Ibid. p. 376.
[117] Ibid. p. 781, p. 782, p. 784.

through the windows its forlorn emptiness reflects his own emotional dissolution and desolation. Neddy Merill's journey from successful suburban businessman to ostracised social pariah, his identity unravelling, is clearly comparable to Don Draper's odyssey over seven seasons of *Mad Men* and his eventual disintegrative drifting, breaking down in a countercultural retreat. As with Cheever's story, and the other stories mentioned above, the suburbs are the locus of existential unease about identity, a cultural environment characterised by self-deception and personal inauthenticity. This post-war 1950s notion of suburban inauthenticity is central to *Mad Men*, most clearly evident in the first three seasons, but present throughout the series, and is exemplified most fully by Don Draper, but also indirectly and contrastingly by Peggy Olson, the two characters I will discuss in illustrating the development of this theme through the series.

The suburbs are the ideal environment for Don in their indeterminate identity, and as Maura Grady suggests, "Draper is himself analogous to the 'great package suburbs' [as William H. Whyte termed them]; he is beautiful to look at but his identity is entirely constructed."[118] Although both the suburbs and Draper have a fabricated identity it is its indeterminacy that is of crucial importance in each case, since the former is neither the city nor the country but rather geographically and culturally 'placeless', and the latter is neither Don Draper nor Dick Whitman, but rather 'identityless' in his conflicted state. While critics have generally viewed this conflict as pivoting around his constructed identity as Draper and his actual or 'real' identity as Whitman, I would argue that *Mad Men*'s key protagonist has *three* identities that are unreconciled – Dick Whitman up until the Korean War (and his CO's death), Don Draper, (who loves and is loved by Betty Draper in the New York suburb of Ossining, Westchester), and Dick Whitman since the Korean War (who loves and is loved by Anna Draper in the suburb of San Pedro, California) - and consideration of each of these and how they interrelate may provide a more nuanced understanding of the character(s).

Before discussing these identities though, it is important to consider the significance of *Mad Men* as a 'revisionist' depiction of the 1950s and 1960s, since it inevitably influences the portrayal of those identities. Many critics have analysed the nostalgia inherent in the series, or the nostalgia it (ironically or otherwise) seeks to evoke in viewers, implicitly establishing comparisons and parallels with the equally epochal

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[118] Maura Grady, 'The Fall of the Organization Man: Loyalty and Conflict in the First Season', in Scott F. Stoddart, ed. *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), p. 50.

early twenty-first century present.[119] Clearly the interplay of the past and present occurs on multiple levels in *Mad Men* – the tensions and conflicts between Don Draper's/Dick Whitman's past and present are played out against the backdrop of the past and present within the series, and against the past and present of individual viewers, watching from the contemporary present as it relates to the past of the period depicted in the series. There is perhaps inevitably a form of nostalgia within such multi-layered relations between past and present, but these relations can be understood more specifically with reference to what Sartre calls the "nostalgia of impermeability." Sartre uses this term in discussing the person whose response to "being-in-the-world," and so his being-for-others, and 'the look', is to reject its "nihilating ambiguity." This rejection, a manifestation of bad faith, will, as noted in previous chapters, lead such a person to avow either that "I am what I have been (the man who deliberately *arrests himself* at one period in his life and refuses to take into consideration the later changes)," or that "I am not what I have been (the man who in the face of reproaches or rancour dissociates himself from his past by insisting on his freedom and on his perpetual recreation)."[120] These forms of bad faith are for Sartre equivalences, or reformulations of, in the first instance, entrenchment solely in one's facticity, and in the second, belief only in one's unfettered transcendence, unimpeded by that facticity.

Clearly Don Draper exemplifies the latter form of bad faith, though very falteringly, and this, I believe, can be seen in his failure to reconcile his identity as Dick Whitman as a child and young man, with his identity as Dick Whitman in the present. The series appears to posit an 'authentic' Dick Whitman in California, with Anna Draper, and a conflicted 'inauthentic' Don Draper in New York, though in Sartrean terms these two selves are both inauthentic, since both seek to renounce a past self (the young Dick Whitman), but are unable to do so. When in the first season Don tells Midge, his lover, that he can't decide whether she has everything or nothing, she tells him "I live in the moment. Nothing is everything," a poignantly ironic remark since this is precisely what Don cannot do.[121] This is apparent when his half-brother Adam visits him at Sterling Cooper, having seen his photograph in a newspaper and recognised him as Dick. Throughout *Mad Men* Don has anguished flashbacks to his childhood in a brothel, his

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[119] Scott F. Stoddart and Christine Sprengler, for example, both contribute articles in a section entitled 'The Nostalgia of Mad Men' in Scott F. Stoddart, ed. *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), and cultural nostalgia is the unifying theme of all the articles in Linda Beail and Lilly J. Goren, eds. *Mad Men and Politics: Nostalgia and the Remaking of Modern America* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2015).

[120] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 1943 (Bristol: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1984), p. 58.

[121] *Mad Men*, 1.2: 'Ladies Room'.

mother having been a prostitute who died in childbirth, so that he was brought up harshly by his father (one of her clients) and later following his father's death, by his step-mother and her second husband. In his attempt to jettison this past he behaves with nullifying cruelty towards Adam (who later commits suicide), telling him "I have a life and it only goes in one direction – forward," a statement which, given his repeated flashbacks, is obviously delusional.[122] This is a compounding of the initial betrayal of Adam by post-Korean War Dick, and the significance of the suburbs in Dick's/Don's subterfuge is clear from a flashback scene in a later episode. Following a scene in Korea in which Dick Whitman's CO, Donald Draper, is killed in an explosion, and Dick switches name tags with the dead man, we see a coffin with, supposedly, Dick's body inside, taken off a train at a station. Adam sees Dick on the train and tells his father, who tells him Dick is in the coffin. The scene on the train transforms into a scene on a suburban commuter train, Don alighting with all the other commuters, his past elided in the anonymised mass of suburban normalcy, the commute rendered transformative (though he is later recognised as Dick on his commute to New York).[123]

If suburbia's 'placelessness' is a protective environment for Don, it more typically symbolises domestic contentment, if not bliss, and an existential stability and comfort, and he exploits this through his job as creative director at the advertising company Sterling Cooper, most notably in an advertisement for Kodak, renaming a slide projector originally called 'The Wheel' as 'The Carousel'. Showing slides from his own (Draper) family as he makes a pitch to Kodak, he explains that "nostalgia literally means the pain from an old wound. It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone," and the Carousel "takes us to a place where we ache to go again."[124] In this way he uses advertising to 'sell' the "nostalgia of impermeability," though in this case this is a desire for each of us to be able to believe "I am what I have been" and to renounce the "nihilating ambiguity" that arises from acknowledging also that "I am not what I have been." Don's advertisements may seek to assuage consumers' anguish about the present and the future, nullifying the socio-cultural anxieties of the 1950s and early 1960s, and offering suburbanites a sentimentalised vision of themselves, but the series clearly does not offer viewers such tranquilising nostalgia. As Rebecca Colton Josephson observes, "though *Mad Men* masks itself as a show about memory and nostalgia, it actually addresses the fundamental issue that a freely constructed identity is always realised in the context of memory and society," though

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[122] *Mad Men*, 1.5: '5G'.
[123] *Mad Men*, 1.12: 'Nixon vs Kennedy'.
[124] *Mad Men,* 1.13 'The Wheel'.

this issue is one that Don Draper and post-Korea Dick Whitman consistently refuse to acknowledge.[125] For Don, moreover, the "context of memory" is inadmissible because, as Melanie Hernandez and David Thomas Holmberg point out, "his metaphorical 'killing' of his past is not a simple 'self-forgetting' but an active erasure of his history, an attempted regeneration of self."[126] The fact that Don tells Rachel Menken about his early life (though not his name change and its circumstances) near the end of the first season, should not then be seen as a fraught attempt at reconciling his past with his present since his affair with Rachel, like most of his affairs, is compartmentalised as a kind of adjunctive fantasy, fleetingly parallel to his self-created life as Don Draper happily married to Betty Draper.

In subsequent seasons the dynamics of Don Draper's (and we find out near the end of the second season, post-Korea Dick Whitman's) conflicted identity are developed and become more complex, though they do not fundamentally change. Most illuminative in the second season is the revelation of the relationship post-Korea Dick has with Anna Draper, the widow of Dick's former CO, who he eventually 'divorces' to marry Betty Hofstadt. Anna lives in the Californian suburb of San Pedro, and the relationship she has is with Dick Whitman, who is a calmer, warmer, more relaxed and open character than Don Draper, in a West Coast suburban environment that appears to nebulously mirror those traits. He is no more 'authentic' however, since he disavows the pre-Korean War Dick, who, significantly, they never talk about (nor about exactly what Dick did to become Don). Dick tells Anna, "I have been watching my life. It's right there. And I keep…scratching at it, trying to get into it. I can't."[127] As Maura Grady suggests, Don's "present existence exists precisely because his past does not," though it might be more accurate to say his present existences, or selves (since it is Dick telling Anna about Don's life) neither of which can be authentically and fully 'inhabited' because they embody a denial of the "nihilating ambiguity" that "I am what I have been," and are predicated solely on the notion that "I am not what I have been",

[125] Rebecca Colton Josephson, 'Tomorrowland: Contemporary Visions, Past Indiscretions' in Linda Beail and Lilly J. Goren, eds. *Mad Men and Politics: Nostalgia and the Remaking of Modern America* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 265.
[126] Melanie Hernandez and David Thomas Holmberg, "We'll start over like Adam and Eve": The Subversion of Classic American Mythology' in Scott F. Stoddart, ed. *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), p. 22.
[127] *Mad Men*, 2.12: 'The Mountain King'.

so Dick and Don can only partially inhabit themselves and must observe those selves.[128]

There does, though, seem to be a possibility of Dick's/Don's past being recognised and reconciled in the third season, when, at their suburban home in Ossining, Betty finds Don's key to a drawer with a box of photos and other mementoes from the young Dick's life, saved by Adam and sent to Don before his suicide. In the confrontation that ensues Don claims that after his CO died in Korea "they made a mistake" which resulted in his being given Draper's identity, disavowing his own action and choice to adopt that identity, suggesting rather that he passively accepted it because "it was easier to be him." Don tells Betty about his childhood and the familial figures in the photographs, breaking down when he tells her of Adam's suicide, and at this point he seems transformed into post-Korea Dick grieving not just for Adam but for his entire childhood. Such a nascent reconciliation would potentially undermine his seemingly autonomous identity as Don Draper however, and the next day both his normative suburban family image and briskly competent organisational demeanour at Sterling Copper seem restored. Whilst the defining moment of the third season is the assassination of John F. Kennedy, it is prefigured by this momentous scene and by an incident which both addresses the recurring question of Don's and Dick's identities, and underscores the seismic cultural loss of identity that is imminent. On Halloween Don's daughter Sally dresses as a gypsy and his elder son Bobby as a hobo to go trick or treating with their parents (a shared familial ritual that already seems antiquated in 1963). After they knock at the door of a house, a man answers, and, looking down at the children, says "We've got a gypsy… and a hobo," and, ignoring Betty and their baby but looking up at Don measuredly, asks "And who are you supposed to be?"[129] In the final episode Don tries to persuade Peggy to join him in setting up a new advertising company, as Sterling Cooper faces an imminent takeover by McCann Erickson, and he tells her "there are people out there who buy things, people like you and me, and something happened. Something terrible. And the way that they saw themselves…is gone. And nobody understands that. But you do. And that's very valuable."[130] The way people saw themselves was of course influenced by Don and advertising companies such as Sterling Cooper, but Don/Dick is obviously able to understand the experience of identity loss (as, perhaps to an even greater extent, is

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[128] Maura Grady, 'The Fall of the Organization Man: Loyalty and Conflict in the First Season', in Scott F. Stoddart, ed. *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), p. 60.

[129] *Mad Men*, 3.11: 'The Gypsy and the Hobo'.

[130] *Mad Men*, 3.13: 'Shut the Door, Have a Seat'.

Peggy), and the need to acquire a new creditable identity in post-Kennedy America, in what is now unquestionably the 1960s.

With Don Draper's separation from Betty and Anna Draper's death from cancer in the fourth season, Don's/Dick's identities begin to go into disintegrative freefall, and are less clearly distinct from each other. Don, attempting to restore both his identity and physical health, cuts down on his drinking and starts a journal to regain control over his own narrative. When he writes, "we're flawed because we want so much more. We're ruined because we get these things and wish for what we had," his nostalgia is, ironically, for the false stability and externally validated identity of the suburban self that he fabricated, and the image of which he sells in his job as creative director at Sterling Cooper.[131] The irreversible demise of the myth of 1950s suburbia, ostensibly tranquil, idyllic, restorative, and near-hermetically protective, is signalled by the penultimate scene in the final episode in which Don and Betty are standing in the empty kitchen of their house in Ossining, which is soon to be sold; they leave from opposite doors and we see the starkly tired looking furnishings, 1950s décor, in the dim overhead lights, a bottle of whisky standing solitarily on the kitchen table. When Don breaks off his relationship with Faye Miller (a strategist for a consumer-research company) and tells her he is marrying (his secretary) Megan Calvert, she says, displaying her insight as a strategist, "I hope she knows you only like the beginnings of things." Beginnings of relationships do not threaten to expose the conflicted and unreconciled identities of Dick and Don, allow for the projection of an unsustainable image of integrated solidity of self. The seeds of their marital dissolution are already apparent, then, when Megan, lacking Faye's insight, tells Don "I know who you are now."[132] Don has intimations of the unsustainability of his marriage throughout the fifth season, most starkly in a scene in which he calls the elevator at Sterling Cooper, and as he is about to step in, looks down and sees the exposed elevator shaft, a reflection of the chasmic breach in his identities, underscored by his subsequently seeing Adam entering an elevator and, on a visit to the dentist, seeing Adam as the dentist while under anaesthetic, who tells him, "You're in bad shape, Dick…I'm gonna do you a favor and take it out. But it's not your tooth that's rotten."[133]

It is not until the end of the sixth season, however, that Dick's/Don's identity unravels, his two selves no longer distinct and carefully compartmentalised, the need

[131] *Mad Men*, 4.8: 'The Summer Man'.
[132] *Mad Men*, 4.13: 'Tomorrowland'.
[133] *Mad Men*, 5.13: 'The Phantom'.

to reconcile them with the earlier self of the young Dick Whitman destabilising both. In a meeting with Hershey's the conflict between the nostalgic lies Don tells the company representatives about his own childhood association with Hershey's for the ad campaign, and the reality of Dick's actual childhood memories of Hershey's is exposed, because Dick deliberately exposes them, in a matter-of-fact confession. Pitching the ad, Don tells them that Hershey's "relationship with America is so overwhelmingly positive that everyone in this room has their own story to tell" from their childhood, his being the chocolate bar's symbolic value as evidence of his father's love, so that "forever his love and the chocolate were tied together," Hershey's being for him like everyone else "the currency of affection." Affection and fatherly love were of course singularly absent from Dick's childhood and the mordant irony of the tale Don has just told prompts Dick moments later to tell the representatives the real significance of Hershey's for his younger self. Dick recounts that "I was an orphan. I grew up in Pennsylvania in a whorehouse…Closest I got to feeling wanted was from a girl who made me go through her John's pockets while they screwed. If I collected more than a dollar, she'd buy me a Hershey bar. And I would eat it alone in my room with great ceremony feeling like a normal kid." Now the power of the chocolate bar is its association with normalcy, precisely, ironically, the association that sells so many of the products he and the company advertise – and one that explains Don's motivation to assume a normative suburban identity in Ossining. Following the meeting Don is called to a meeting of the company partners and told by Roger Sterling that they all think he needs to "take some time off and regroup," refusing to give him a return date, suggesting he is effectively being fired by deferral. In the very last scene of the season it seems there is for the first time a very real possibility that Dick will reconcile his past as the young Dick Whitman with his current self and achieve a form of personal authenticity; Don takes all three of his children to the dilapidated remains of his whorehouse home (the cultural antithesis of cloistered and normative suburbia) and tells them "This is where I grew up." Nothing further is said, but Don and Sally exchange looks, and both look back at the house, Sally's understanding of her father definitively and irreparably altered, Dick's reconciliation of selves now seemingly realisable.[134]

From the beginning of the final season though it is clear that no such reconciliation has occurred, with Don eventually being reemployed at Sterling Cooper and Partners in a severely circumscribed role. Separated from Megan who now lives in California,

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[134] *Mad Men*, 6.13: 'In Care Of'.

Don sells their Manhattan apartment, and, when Sterling Cooper and Partners is finally "absorbed" by McCann Erikson, goes on a road trip, ostensibly in search of a woman with whom he had a brief affair. The trip eventually takes him to California and to the home of Anna Draper, where Stephanie, her niece, is now staying. It is clear to Stephanie that Dick (as she knows him) is in crisis, and she insists that he goes with her to a countercultural retreat. Here, the identities of post-Korea Dick and Don become confused, as an increasingly disorientated and distraught Dick speaks to Stephanie as Don, confounding and upsetting her. After she leaves a session crying, feeling judged for having given up her baby, Dick follows her, but it is Don who talks to her, re-enacting an episode in the past with Peggy. She tells him "You're not my family. What's the matter with you?" but Don insists, "I just know how people work. You can put this behind you. It'll get easier as you move forward," to which Stephanie replies, "Oh, Dick, I don't think you're right about that." Dick/Don looks utterly lost and bereft at this point and, when he phones Peggy and tells her "I'm not the man you think I am," it is clear that he is speaking as Dick, as he oscillates between identities in a state of near psychic meltdown, finally entering a semi-catatonic state after Stephanie leaves the retreat without him.[135] He only overcomes this through the help of a woman who takes him to another session at the retreat where he is jolted out of his benumbed state by a stranger's confession that "It's like no one cares that I'm gone." Intensely moved by the weeping stranger's feeling of abandonment and neglect, Dick hugs him and breaks down himself, grieving for his own diminished identities and for the abandonment of the young (self) ostracised Dick. Perhaps the final irony though is that in the last scene of the final episode we see an apparently reconciled Dick/Don at a yoga session, sitting cross-legged in the lotus position, as the yoga leader intones, "The new day brings new hope. The lives we've led, the lives we've yet to lead. New day, new ideas, a new you."[136] As the group chant "Om" repeatedly a beatific smile (or smirk) crosses Don's/Dick's face, and the scene cuts to the 'I'd like to buy the world a Coke' McCann Erickson 1971 Coke advertisement. The implication is clearly that Don will return to McCann Erikson and create the advertisement from his experience of the counterculture that, as shown by the yoga leader's vacuous intoning of "a new day, new ideas, new you," functions exactly as advertising does, to mollify people's sense of personal inadequacy and to assuage their existential anguish. Any hope of post-Korea Dick's reconciliation with, and integration of, the young Dick Whitman, and so of authentic selfhood, is therefore irrevocably lost. As Don gains ascendancy, Dick

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[135] *Mad Men*, 7.14: 'Person to Person'.
[136] Ibid.

(both the post-Korea and childhood self) is repressed, sublimated, so that the "new ideas, new you" Don Draper can succeed in his self-mythologising and the mythologising of the advertising industry.

Although Don Draper/Dick Whitman is the central character in *Mad Men*, Peggy Olson is also of crucial importance in the series, and the dynamic of their evolving (and often combative) relationship is pivotal in its development. Peggy's changing, self-generated identity, created within an oppressive and belittling organisational culture of male entitlement, highlights the fear, complacency and hierarchical rigidity of that culture as it resists the societal changes of the early 1960s. As Lilly J. Goren suggests, "Don may be the tragic figure at the center of *Mad Men*, but Peggy is the character who engages with and, in many ways, adapts to the shifting cultural environments that surround her."[137] Peggy's successful strivings for power and autonomy, for transcendent subjectivity and authentic selfhood, are remarkable, since all the cultural odds are stacked against her, and, as Kim Akass and Janet McCabe argue, "the 'Mad Men' may busy themselves constructing identities and telling women what they want, but it is how women like Peggy struggle for identity *in* and *through* those representations that is at stake here."[138] Expected to acquiesce passively in and to an other-directed identity based solely on her being-for-others, Peggy refuses to accept such an imposition and, over the course of the series, transforms herself, despite such oppression. As Fiona E. Cox notes, "the women of *Mad Men* are repeatedly shown to suffer because of their position within a gendered hierarchy that positions females primarily as the tantalizing focus of a desiring male gaze." Peggy, however, refuses her designated position within that hierarchy, and subverts the gender stereotyping that causes such suffering. Rather than rely "on femininity to gain power… Peggy transgresses gender," succeeding because of intellectual and creative merit, refusing to behave either like her female *or* her male colleagues.[139] She is one of Lorraine Delia Kenny's "insider-Others," who "can appear fully ensconced on the inside, though "upon closer examination" it becomes apparent that "there is something not quite normative

[137] Lilly J. Goren, 'If You Don't Like What They are Saying, Change the Conversation: The Grifter, Don Draper, and the Iconic American Hero' in Linda Beail and Lilly J. Goren, eds. *Mad Men and Politics: Nostalgia and the Remaking of Modern America* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 38.
[138] Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, '*The Best of Everything*: The Limits of Being a Working Girl in *Mad Men*' in in Gary R. Edgerton, ed. *Mad Men: Dream Come True TV* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2011), p. 187.
[139] Fiona E. Cox, 'So Much Woman: Female Objectification, Narrative Complexity, and Feminist Temporality in AMC's *Mad Men*', *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Studies*. Issue 17, Spring 2012. Visual & Cultural Studies Program, University of Rochester, accessed 29/07/16 from: http://hdl.handle.net/1802/26875. p. 1, p. 11.

enough about their identity or how they carry themselves in a normative world."[140] In rejecting her prescribed normative gender identity, Peggy necessarily accepts her insider-outsider status, neither part of the objectifying patriarchal culture of her male colleagues (and, initially, superiors), or accepted fully by her female colleagues, objectified and disempowered in the tyranny of the typing pool. It may seem, as Natalie Fuehrer Taylor suggests, that while Betty Draper, like many other women in *Mad Men*, "cannot – or does not want to – become Don, Peggy can and does," but this notion is problematic for two reasons; firstly, she succeeds in her self-creation in a way that Don does not and cannot, and secondly, Peggy does not, as I have suggested, "behave like a man" as Taylor claims, but rather (within the societal constraints of the period) avoids adopting either a narrowly prescriptive female code of behaviour or a self-alienating male behavioural code, both of which would result in further belittlement by the men with whom she works.[141] Also, significantly, while those men retreat to the false idyll of suburbia, she moves independently *away* from (semi)suburban Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, and into the city, eventually buying an apartment in New York's Upper West Side, antithetical to the idyllic, tranquil, suburban ideal cultivated by her colleagues.

Initially the innocent and ingenuous Peggy is employed as Don Draper's secretary at Sterling Cooper, but her creativity – and refusal to accept a patriarchal other-directed identity – soon becomes apparent. In a focus group for 'Belle Jolie' lipstick in which secretaries are asked to choose their favourite shade of colour, Peggy refrains from doing so, telling one of the executives, "I don't think anyone wants to be one of a hundred colors in a box," and suggesting an inventive caption for the Belle Jolie ad, resulting in her being given copywriting work for the campaign, and subsequently being promoted (by Don) to junior copywriter.[142] In this period she gains considerable weight, only realising she is pregnant when she is admitted to hospital with severe abdominal pains caused by her going into labour. That Peggy was in denial for the entire length of her pregnancy suggests a determination to create an identity as a successful copywriter unencumbered by oppressive gender restrictions, and shows, as Natalie Fuehrer Taylor argues, that "she was able to free herself, not only from

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[140] Lorraine Delia Kenny, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 3.
[141] Natalie Fuehrer Taylor, "You Can't Be a Man, So Don't Even Try": Femininity and Feminism in *Mad Men*' in Linda Beail and Lilly J. Goren, eds. *Mad Men and Politics: Nostalgia and the Remaking of Modern America* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 214, p. 215.
[142] *Mad Men*, 1.6: 'Babylon'.

tradition and authority, but also from biology, in order to create a self."[143] It also highlights the oppressiveness of the identity and lifestyle she rejects; Peggy was pregnant by account executive Pete Campbell, whose suburban dream, far from being fulfilling, is rendered vacuous and purposeless for his wife Trudy when she discovers she is seemingly infertile. She asks Pete "What is all this for?" to which he replies lamely, "I don't know."[144] The only person apart from her mother and sister who visits Peggy in hospital after she gives birth to a baby boy (she has been put in a psychiatric ward, her sister caring for the baby, her denial of maternity deemed pathological) is Don, who tells her, "Get out of here and move forward. This never happened. It will shock you how much it never happened."[145] This is of course ironic, given Dick's inability to reconcile his young self with his post-Korean War self, his conflicted insistence that his childhood "never happened," which repeatedly stops *him* (and so Don) moving forward. Peggy, however, is able to do precisely that, because she does not deny that she has given birth (even though she was in denial during her pregnancy), and does not deny her past, but accepts it in order to release herself from its determinative power. At the end of the second season, by which time Peggy has consolidated her position as copywriter and left the Catholic Church, freeing herself from the most oppressive force of her childhood and early adulthood, she tells Pete Campbell that she had his baby and gave the child up for adoption. Following his panicked protestations of love for her and crassly clichéd claim that his wife Trudy doesn't know him, she tells him "I could have had you in my life forever if I wanted to…I could have shamed you into being with me. But I didn't want to…You got me pregnant. I had a baby, and I gave it away…I wanted other things." Pete is uncomprehending and she tells him "Well…one day you're there and then all of a sudden, there's less of you. And you wonder where that part went, if it's living somewhere outside of you. And you keep thinking maybe you'll get it back. And then you realise it's just gone."[146] It is easy to imagine Don Draper saying this, but from him such a statement would be disingenuous and mendacious, a forlorn desire for release from his childhood self as Dick Whitman. Peggy, however, experiences fully the pain of her choice, does not try to flee her anguish, and so can relinquish a painful past, as is apparent when in a later season she tells her colleague (and eventual lover and

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[143] Natalie Fuehrer Taylor, "You Can't Be a Man, So Don't Even Try": Femininity and Feminism in *Mad Men*' in Linda Beail and Lilly J. Goren, eds. *Mad Men and Politics: Nostalgia and the Remaking of Modern America* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 217.
[144] *Mad Men*, 2.5: 'The New Girl'.
[145] Ibid.
[146] *Mad Men*, 2.13: 'Meditations in an Emergency'.

partner) Stan Rizzo, "I've had loss in my life. You have to let yourself feel it. You can't dampen it with drugs and sex. It won't get you through."[147]

It is ironic then that while Don acts, initially at least, as a kind of mentor for Peggy, both existentially and in her advertising career, he cannot achieve a chosen authentic selfhood in his false (and failing) suburban idyll, in the ways she does, in a process that, she knows, is continual, and unending. While it is true, as Sara Rogers argues, that "Peggy becomes a symbol of autonomy as she struggles to maintain belief in herself and to enact her own choices despite contrary pressure from her peers and her male superiors," her relationship with Don is far more complex than with any of her other peers, and he is only nominally her superior, understanding as he does from his own experience her sense of being dispossessed and disenfranchised.[148] As Mary Beth Haralovich notes, Don "tends to treat her as a genderless individual," partially 're-enfranchising' her, though there are also "moments that reveal his awareness that she is a female in male world," some of this momentary awareness evident from gender-based abuse of Peggy by Don himself.[149] However, he more often treats her as an equal, to a greater extent than the men she has relationships with, both at work and in her private life (which she endeavours to keep private) and recognises the strength and determination in her self-creation. Trying to persuade Peggy to join him in establishing a break-away company after Sterling Cooper has been bought by a British advertising company, which is itself being bought by McCann Erickson, he tells her "I've taken you for granted and I've been hard on you, but only because I think I see you as an extension of myself. And you're not." It is difficult to imagine a woman (then or now) seeing a man as an extension of herself, in view of gender inequalities, and Don's comment would seem to be an admission of instrumentalism towards women. He may be suggesting, however, that he does not think of her as different from him because she's a woman, and (seemingly paradoxically) that he recognises her sovereign selfhood and identity. The problem though, is that Don seems to think at times that *he* is responsible for bestowing that sovereignty, and also for her career, resulting in an arrogance that can only alienate Peggy, and when he shouts at her, "You should be thanking me every morning when you wake up, along with Jesus, for

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[147] *Mad Men*, 6.8: 'The Crash'.
[148] Sara Rogers, 'Mad Men/Mad Women: Autonomous Images of Women' in Scott F. Stoddart, ed. *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), p. 159.
[149] Mary Beth Haralovich, 'Women on the Verge of the Second Wave', in Gary R. Edgerton, ed. *Mad Men: Dream Come True TV* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2011), p. 170.

giving you another day!" it seems inevitable that she will seek to build her career, and identity, elsewhere.[150]

Even when Peggy tells Don she is leaving to take up a position with a higher salary and more autonomy at another company, Don's arrogance is unabated, as he blusters, "Let's pretend I'm not responsible for every single good thing that's ever happened to you," and offers to beat the competitor's salary. As Don really knows, however, and as Peggy tells him, "there is no number," since her freedom to choose herself, her identity is at stake.[151] In starting a sexual relationship with her new boss though, Peggy compromises that identity, and, when he promises to leave his wife to set up a home with her she is forced once again to disavow suburban domesticity as a meaningful life goal, telling him "I'm not that girl." On hearing that he is relocating to California to save the (façade of) his happy suburban home life she says caustically, "Well, aren't you lucky to have decisions?" knowing his to be a retreat into a form of domestic sanctuary she would never choose precisely because it would *deny* her choice, her autonomy.[152] The harmonious and happy suburban nuclear family (with a successful commuting husband and father and a dutiful housewife and mother) is in any case more a cultural fiction (one perpetrated by the advertising industry) than a reality, and American family structure and norms are already changing, as Peggy knows. She is able to use this knowledge when she wins a Burger Chef account for Sterling, Cooper and Partners. Peggy, now Don's boss at SC&P, in an inversion that is also reflected in their personal relationship, tells him to work on ideas for a strategy. Their working and reworking of an idea featuring a nuclear family (mom, dad and two kids) stopping off for burgers and fries and eating together at home fails to convince *them*, and it is Peggy who finally understands why during a brainstorming session, asking Don, "Does this family exist anymore? Are there people who eat dinner and smile at each other instead of watching TV? Did you ever do that with your family?" Don replies that he doesn't remember, and Peggy realises that the traditional suburban family, chimeric or real, is not who their ad should address, but rather the people (like her and, now, Don) who don't have such a family and who see the societal and familial fragmentation that is occurring, for whom the tired nostalgia of advertising no longer resonates. Now it is her rather than Don who has the inspiration to break the creative impasse, asking "What if there was a place where you could go where there was no TV and you could break bread and whoever you were sitting with was family?" Suggesting they should

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[150] *Mad Men*, 4.7: 'The Suitcase'.
[151] *Mad Men*, 5.11: 'The Other Woman'.
[152] *Mad Men*, 6.13: 'In Care Of'.

film the ad at a Burger Chef restaurant, she replies to Pete Campbell's protestation that "it's not a home," by telling him, "it's better. It's a clean, well-lighted place."[153]

Such a familial and cultural environment is less inimical to Peggy's inner-directed and self-created identity and when Sterling, Cooper and Partners are 'absorbed' by McCann Erickson and lose their status as an independent subsidiary, she takes up her new position with a transformative confidence and authority. When Dick/Don phones her from California, after a self-nullifying month-long road trip, he tells her he "messed everything up," and that he "took another man's name and made nothing of it," but she replies, "That's not true," acknowledging his constant struggle to establish a credible and creditable identity.[154] Where his struggle, though, leads to a disintegrative crisis, in the attempt to maintain a conflicted identity that cannot finally be sustained, her own self-creation (in what is also, of course, a fraught struggle) is successful and ongoing, adaptive and dynamic. It is Peggy who holds out the possibility of a kind of redemption for Dick/Don, mentee become (existential) mentor, even if, finally, such a redemption seems unlikely. She acts ethically, in Sartrean terms, willing Dick's/Don's freedom as she wills her own. As Aviva Dove-Viebahn suggests, "through Peggy, Don may see a possibility for looking forward and not back, but it is one he is not able to fully adopt for himself. Peggy's refusal to follow traditional feminine inclinations – motherhood, marriage, domesticity – predicates her willingness to sidestep the status quo and make her own future in spite of her past."[155] In doing so Peggy chooses not just independence, but existential authenticity, and the challenge of self-creation, recognising her being-for-others, her facticity, an injurious but not determinative past, but also her transcendent subjectivity and freedom.

The theme of existential authenticity, and the related concerns with conformity, uniformity, and personal autonomy, is paramount in the three novels discussed in this chapter, and in Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men*, and it is inextricably linked to 1950s (and early 1960s) suburbia. Emblematic of a spurious normalcy, yet inchoate in its liminality, in its geographical indeterminacy and amorphous identity, suburbia both offers an other-directed and apparently secure, stable identity, yet problematizes that identity through its liminal nature, causing unease and anxiety in its inhabitants. Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom in *Rabbit, Run* needs the external validation of suburban Mt. Judge for a

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[153] *Mad Men*, 7.6: 'The Strategy'.
[154] *Mad Men*, 7.14: 'Person to Person'.
[155] Aviva Dove-Viebahn, 'Mourning Becomes the Mad Men: Notes on Nostalgia', *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, March 18, 2012, p. 6, accessed 02/08/15 from: https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/mourning-becomes-the-mad-men-notes-on-nostalgia.

sense of 'locatedness', seeks the self-objectification and oppression of Sartre's 'the look' from others in order to feel *any* sense of self, and, until the end of the novel, finds comfort in an illusory cultural uniformity. Frank and April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road* seem initially to be more self-aware than Harry Angstrom, but their self-deception is soon apparent in their disavowal of the suburban conformity and uniformity they need for their other-directed, reflected identities, these identities symbolically bestowed, not diminished, as they believe, by the picture window in their suburban house. Binx Bolling, in *The Moviegoer*, however, anonymised in the New Orleans suburb of Gentilly, is the most disingenuous of all the protagonists in these novels, his ironic dissembling concealing an anguished desire for an externally validated identity, and a consequent negation of his freedom, a selfhood founded on his being-for-others.

While the 'inner-directed' Don Draper/Dick Whitman is perhaps the only one of the male protagonists in these literary texts (if *Mad Men* can be considered a literary as well as a filmic text) who actively struggles with and for existential authenticity, in his conflicted and irreconcilable identities, it is Peggy Olson in Matthew Weiner's series, and Kate Cutrer in *The Moviegoer*, who recognise most fully their existential freedom and who strive for personal authenticity and autonomy. Kate, in her extreme anguish, cannot accept her being-for-others as an inevitable facet of her identity, coexisting with her being-for-itself, her transcendent subjectivity, but finally, in order to assuage that anguish, capitulates to an oppressive identity based *only* on her being-for-others, her good faith subsumed by bad faith. Peggy, however, is able to acknowledge *both* her self-objectification through her being-for-others, and her past as facticity, but also her freedom and transcendence. In a culture based on a rigid and conformist patriarchal hierarchy, with a seeming uniformity of aspiration, this recognition, and the resultant determination to forge a self-created and processive identity, sets Peggy apart from her male counterparts, who, in bad faith, acquiesce in their other-directedness, bolstering their bad faith in normative suburbia. For women, of course, an imposed other-directed identity would be especially oppressive and restrictive, with none of the (sexual or financial) licence that a societally sanctioned identity might grant men, and suburbia could only heighten that oppressiveness.

In such a culture, it may seem remarkable that it is only women who evince good faith and achieve a form of existential authenticity. However, it is precisely its oppressiveness that necessarily heightens Kate Cutrer's and Peggy Olson's awareness of bad faith, which does not provide the same assuaging of anguish for

them that it does for men; objectification of women is fundamental to men's bad faith, a negation of the potential threat they pose to male hegemony, one that is neutralised through women's acceptance of a gendered being-for-others identity. Although Sartre does not directly address this in any of his writing, Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's societal position in *The Second Sex* (1949) is in part an application of Sartre's philosophy in *Being and Nothingness* to gender relations.[156] The ideas and arguments presented in this seminal text are clearly Beauvoir's rather than Sartre's, but his ontological system informs them, and the concepts of being-in-itself, being-for-itself, being-for-others, and bad faith in relation to oneself and others, are key in her analysis. Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" encapsulates the complex arguments she makes at length, identifying gender as constructed, and women as aware of, if not complicit in, their objectification. "Man," she suggests, "wants woman to be object: she *makes* herself object; at the very moment when she does that, she is exercising a free activity."[157] Clearly, when the men in the texts discussed here accept an other-directed identity, their being-for-others, this can provide a false refuge in bad faith from the anguish caused by existential indeterminacy and freedom; however, this does not deprive them entirely of agency, whereas for Kate and Peggy (and of course for other women in the 1950s) such an acceptance entails a forfeiture of any semblance of autonomy or self-determination.

Beauvoir's analysis has a particular relevance and resonance with respect to gender relations in 1950s American corporate culture, and the significance of suburbia for each gender within that culture. Betty Friedan acknowledged this in *The Feminine Mystique* (1962), a study of American women's political and social-economic position in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one very much concerned with the plight of suburban housewives in particular. Friedan cites Beauvoir's influence on her study and her thought, but the analysis in *The Feminine Mystique* is certainly not informed by Beauvoir's existentialism, and in places seems to be a repudiation of it. George Cotkin notes that although both writers "approach women's questions largely through an existential perspective…there is no indication" that Friedan "gained any theoretical structure or essential interpretive thrust from her reading of *The Second Sex*."[158]

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[156] I refer here to the translation by H.M. Parshley, first published in 1953. Although a fuller, unabridged, translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier was published in 2010 (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949, New York: Vintage, 2010), I have cited the first translation because the textual additions to this in the subsequent translation are not particularly germane to the discussion here, and because I think the wording in places detracts from, rather than enhancing, the clarity of Beauvoir's exposition as translated by Parshley.

[157] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 295, p. 626.

[158] George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 253.

Indeed, Friedan "consigned Beauvoir to the briefest, inessential reference," refusing "to see herself as either an acolyte of Beauvoir or a footnote to *The Second Sex.*" Because she considered Beauvoir's thinking "abstract and theoretical, in contrast to her own brand of pragmatic existentialism, fully in the American grain," she necessarily discounted the essential philosophical foundations of that thinking, and their implications for women's societal position and for gender relations.[159] "It is my thesis," she claims in *The Feminine Mystique*, "that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity – a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique."[160] Friedan goes on to argue that many women, and suburban housewives especially, "have become dependent, passive, childlike; they have given up their adult frame of reference to live at the lower human level of food and things. The work they do does not require adult capabilities; it is endless, monotonous, unrewarding."[161] Women's liberation from such demeaning work and from the "stunting or evasion of growth" of the feminine mystique, would require "men as well as women, scared liberals, disillusioned radicals, conservatives bewildered and frustrated by change – the whole nation" to reject "this mystique of feminine fulfilment…the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture."[162] For this change to occur and for sexual equality to be possible, relationships would need to be built on "the love of self-actualizing people" which is "not motivated by need, to make up a deficiency in the self." Such relationships would require "the transcendence of self," which "can only be attained by one who is himself, or herself, complete, by one who has realized his or her own identity."[163] Such completeness would, however, be an impossible fusing of transcendence and facticity in Beauvoir's terms. Moreover, the desire to realise one's identity as something complete, the desire to *be* complete, unchanging, is an impulse towards inauthenticity. Such an impulse, Beauvoir claims, is futile, and "want of authenticity does not pay: each blames the other for the unhappiness he or she has incurred in yielding to the temptations of the easy way; what man and woman loathe in each other is the shattering frustration of each one's own bad faith."[164] The want of authenticity also denies the inevitability of 'the look', objectification by others, and one's objectification of others, and so does not recognise the (for Beauvoir) inevitability of conflict in all human relationships, not just those between men and women. "Mutually recognizing

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[159] Ibid. p. 254, p. 255.
[160] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 68.
[161] Ibid. p. 266.
[162] Ibid. p. 164, p. 16.
[163] Ibid. p.280, pp. 281-282, p. 282.
[164] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 728.

each other as subject," Beauvoir writes, "each will yet remain for the other an *other*."[165] Even if two people recognise each other's subjectivity, if "two human beings [are] associated in their transcendence," this would not mean that each has a complete and fully realised identity, independent of each other. This is an essential tenet of Beauvoir's philosophy, one Friedan either tacitly rejects or fails to acknowledge. It is perhaps not surprising then, as Cotkin suggests, that a meeting between the two women in Paris in 1975, "proved to be chilly." Friedan found Beauvoir to be "curt, distracted, and abstract in her thinking," whilst Beauvoir would have considered Friedan's "pragmatic existentialism," so clearly "in the American grain," to be "hopelessly bourgeois."[166]

In *The Second Sex*, then, Beauvoir's feminist philosophical analysis is unequivocally founded on the existentialism Friedan failed to engage with, and, crucially, the notions of authenticity and freedom. With other men, she contends, man is "a free agent confronting other free agents under laws fully recognised by all; but with woman – she was invented for this purpose – he casts off the responsibility of existence, he abandons himself to the mirage of his *en-soi* [being-in-itself], he puts himself on the plane of inauthenticity."[167] If the environment in which this occurs is normative suburbia, man's retreat from the corporate world is dependent on a dutiful, self-abnegating wife. Such a retreat into a kind of feigned existential stasis, into a denial of transcendence and entrenchment in the 'security' of facticity, depends on the suburban wife being deprived even of such facticity. This would indicate a past and a form of selfhood, which she must relinquish in order to accept her being-for-others, a self-negation, obviating for man the potential existential threat posed by the Other. Consequently, as Beauvoir argues, "her whole existence is waiting, since she is confined in the limbo of immanence and contingence, and since her justification is always in the hands of others."[168] In this way, suburban woman in particular can only exist in a present, unable to transcend her immediate experience, the significance of which is determined by man. Conformity, acceptance of an other-directed identity and being-for-others, does not actually *negate* that identity, or self, for men; for women, however, it is obliterative of selfhood. For a woman to be independent in the 1950s, then, as Kate Cutrer attempts to be, and Peggy Olson succeeds in being, conformity to the suburban ideal for women can *only* be disempowering; as Beauvoir suggests,

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[165] Ibid. p. 740.
[166] George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p.252, p. 255.
[167] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 624.
[168] Ibid. pp. 621-622.

"whereas conformity is quite natural for a man – custom being based on his needs as an independent and active individual – it will be necessary for the woman who also is subject, activity, to insinuate herself into a world that has doomed her to passivity."[169] In doing so, such a woman can hardly be unaware of men's bad faith, and, by extension, her own, since she is complicit in the construction of the being-for-others identity she strives to transcend, and this implies awareness of all identity as a construct, as mutable and contingent. With this recognition comes the possibility of good faith, and of existential authenticity, so it is perhaps not surprising that women may be able to achieve these in a way that men cannot (or believe they cannot).

Beauvoir argues that woman is "suspicious of the principle of constant identity," senses that fixity of self is chimeric, and so "does not entertain the positive belief that the truth is something *other* than men claim; she recognises, rather, that there is *not* any fixed truth."[170] She can consequently see "the contingent, absurd, unnecessary inverse of the imposing structure built by the males" and in regard to that structure "has a sense of misgiving…which is nearer to authenticity than is the self-important assurance of her husband."[171] This is not, of course, to suggest that achieving good faith or authenticity would be any less daunting for Kate, Peggy or other women in the 1950s than for men; such an attainment would be far more difficult in many ways because of the rigidity of women's being-for-others identity and the negation of *both* their facticity and transcendence. Consciousness of bad faith would, however, be harder for them to constantly and consistently disavow. That Kate, already cloistered, almost completely isolated, *does* finally founder, acquiesce in bad faith to (as seems inevitable) suburban oppression and nullification, while Peggy steadfastly refuses such self-abnegation, may perhaps be attributed to Peggy's incremental self-empowerment, and hence self-determination, in corporate culture, rendering an identity based solely on being-for-others untenable, and, possibly, unimaginable.

This is clearly not true, however, of the male protagonists of the three novels discussed in this chapter; their failure to allow good faith to supplant bad faith, and so to allow the possibility of acceptance of ontological freedom and the anguish that it causes, leading to existential authenticity, has dire implications for the fictional suburbanites of later decades. If suburbia is already associated with bad faith in these novels set in the mid-to-late 1950s, in the 1960s and throughout the following decades,

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[169] Ibid. p. 692.
[170] Ibid. p. 624.
[171] Ibid. p. 637, p. 638.

bad faith becomes pathological in an increasingly suburbanised culture. It is manifest, as seen in the previous three chapters, through the desire for a kind of entropic state of being, a retreat into Other-denying solipsism in what Christopher Lasch calls the "culture of narcissism" (prefigured in the last scene of *Mad Men*) and through extreme violence in response to existential contingency.[172] Fictive suburbia is now emblematic of, and even analogous to, bad faith, a cultural landscape that is inimical to the recognition or realisation of existential authenticity.

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[172] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, 1979).

Conclusion: America's influence on Sartre and the Americanisation of existentialism

The preceding chapters have discussed the literary impact and influence of Sartre's philosophy on US fiction of the suburbs in the second half of the twentieth century, the Americanisation and suburbanisation of existentialism. His influence on US culture and thought more broadly has been documented in Ann Fulton's *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945 – 1963* (1999), and George Cotkin's *Existential America* (2003), discussed in the introduction. Yet the influence of American culture on Sartre has received little attention, which seems curious given his visits to America in the 1940s and his commentaries on various aspects of the country in the 1940s and 1950s – its architecture, education, media, music, literature, and its ostensibly conformist culture. The influence here was clearly not unidirectional; indeed, American culture had a profound effect on Sartre and, to some extent, on the evolution of his ideas in the 1950s and 1960s. It is important, then, to consider the interplay of influence when assessing this period in US literary culture, one in which Sartre's influence on suburban literature grew, and was concomitant, perhaps ironically, with the rise of his increasingly entrenched anti-Americanism. My aim here is to address, firstly, how Sartre's thinking was influenced by US society and culture, and then to consider what Americanisation and suburbanisation did to Sartre's philosophy, expounded in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and developed in later works. In particular I will focus on the significance of recurrent existential themes and their reworking in the American context. In doing so I will suggest that a reading of the preceding chapters in reverse order – from the preoccupation with authenticity in the 1950s and 1960s discussed in Chapter Four, to the concern with contingency in the late 1960s, analysed in Chapter Three, and the prevalence of solipsism and an obsession with entropy in the 1970s and 1980s, identified in the first two chapters – provides an insight into a society in (deepening) cultural and existential crisis. I will also consider the legacy of the existentialist suburban fiction of the late twentieth century, one that has largely been renounced, or at least ignored, in favour of social satire and societal critique in early twenty-first-century fiction of the suburbs.

Sartre's attitude to US culture in the 1940s and 1950s was, to say the least, ambivalent. As Marie-Christine Granjon observes, he, like Simone de Beauvoir, "combined a love for jazz and Hollywood films…with a burning enthusiasm for the American novel – Dos Passos, Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Caldwell – which

they saw as revolutionising narrative techniques."[1] Even when Sartre became highly critical of the US he continued to praise such writers, refusing, as Richard Pells notes, to "repudiate his earlier infatuation with American culture and, above all, with American literature," describing in 1946 "how exciting it had been a decade before to encounter the work of a new generation of American writers."[2] What is particularly striking though about Sartre's early writing on America is his preoccupation with physical space, and the cultural and psychological significance he attributes to the openness and homogeneity of public spaces, lacking clear boundaries and borders. Sartre wrote about cities, but the features he identified were more characteristic of the newly burgeoning suburbs. In an article for *Le Figaro* ('American Cities') in 1945 he describes American city streets as "frail and temporary, formless and unfinished…haunted by the presence of the immense geographical space surrounding them…nothing in them is definitive." Emblematic of a cultural sense of optimistic expectancy, the city is, for Americans, "mainly a future; what they like in the city is everything it has not yet become and everything it can be." American houses were notable precisely for "the uniformity of their patterns," which "give one the feeling, when in the middle of the city, of walking through the suburbs of a watering town, like Trouville or Cabourg or La Baule."[3] In 'New York, the Colonial City', published in *Town and Country* in 1946, Sartre's unease and sense of disorientation in such open and ill-defined spaces is clear. In New York his "gaze met nothing but space. It slid over blocks of identical houses, with nothing to arrest it; it was about to lose itself in empty space, at the horizon." He "could only find filmy atmospheres, longitudinally stretched masses with nothing to mark a beginning or an end." Although Sartre's "position is marked out in longitude and latitude," there is "no valid reason" justifying his "presence in this place rather than in any other, since this one is so like another." In such spaces "you never lose your way, and you are always lost," so that, Sartre suggests, "you can experience the anguish of solitude here, but never that of oppression."[4]

Sartre considered homogenous (and homogenising) American architecture to be illustrative of a kind, and degree, of conformity peculiar to the US. In 'Individualism and

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[1] Marie-Christine Granjon, 'Sartre, Beauvoir, Aron: An Ambiguous Affair' in Denis Lacorne, Jacques Rupnik and Marie-France Toinet, eds. *The Rise and Fall of Anti-Americanism: A Century of French Perception* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 117.

[2] Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 248.

[3] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'American Cities' in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (London: Rider and Company, 1955), p. 117, p. 112, pp. 112-113.

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'New York, the Colonial City' in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (London: Rider and Company, 1955), p. 119, p. 121, p. 123.

Conformism in the United States', originally published in *Le Figaro* in February 1945, he suggests that "the American…makes it a point of honour to do as he is asked. It is when he is acting like everyone else that he feels most reasonable and most American; it is in displaying his conformism that he feels freest." It is this apparent cultural valorisation of conformity, the ideological commitment to it as conformism – and the paradoxical sense of freedom that seemingly accompanies it – which interests Sartre. By performing the same actions as everyone else, such as buying a ticket for the subway every day, the American supposedly *feels* 'just like everyone else. Not like an anonymous unit, but like a man who has divested himself of his individuality and raised himself to the impersonality of the Universal."[5] Sartre's understanding of this seems to be that selfhood and individualism are (if they are not to become burdensome afflictions) *manifestations* of that conformism, since belief in individualism is a *collective* creed, and being – or at least feeling – like everyone else is both a token of cultural allegiance and belonging, and an indicator of one's individual, separate identity, one the individual is free to create precisely through the same validation from others, who also feel like everyone else. "American individualism," Sartre argues, "is not incompatible with conformism, but, on the contrary, implies it." This, he suggests, is entirely alien to French culture (and history), since for the French (and presumably other Europeans) "individualism has retained the old, classical form of 'the individual's struggle against society, and more particularly against the state'. There is no question of this in America."[6] The suggestion here seems to be that while individualism, the ideological privileging of the individual over the group (or society), may be a fundamental tenet of US culture, individuality, the actual solitary experience and recognition of difference from others as constitutive of selfhood, ironically, is not. As a consequence, the American "feels lulled by an immense solicitude that never leaves him helpless or abandoned." While "the solitary person arouses suspicion," a "hedged-in individualism is encouraged," one that is not antagonistic or antisocial, since "personality must be won," and is "a social function or the affirmation of society."[7]

What is interesting about this in the context of this study, is that Americans, or American socio-political commentators at least, were (contrary to Sartre's inference) well aware by the mid to late 1940s of the societal tendency towards conformism, and by the 1950s it was precisely oppositional individualism – the putative absence of

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[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Individualism and Conformism in the United States' in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (London: Rider and Company, 1955), p. 101, p. 102.
[6] Ibid. p. 103, p. 102.
[7] Ibid. p. 100, p. 105, p. 106.

which struck Sartre – that was increasingly valorised as a marker of integrity and personal authenticity, as discussed in Chapter Four. If Sartre's antipathy to America was not yet entrenched by the mid-1940s, when the articles for *Le Figaro* and *Town and Country* were published, he was nonetheless predisposed, as discussed in the introduction, to view Americans as lacking reflective depth and as unsusceptible to existential anguish, encouraged by a superficial US culture to pursue "a life of rosy ease" and to be "conventionally happy."[8] In adopting this perspective Sartre was, Philippe Roger argues, attempting to "translate 'Americanism' culturally… by analysing it as the psychological key to the way Americans are socialized," though he also suggests that in doing so Sartre was (perhaps unintentionally) reinvigorating an historical (European, and specifically French) prejudice, "continuing the anti-American discourse…by conferring on old phobias the prestige of original nauseas." Americanism, Roger claims, was an empty, or at best nebulous, concept, a "false antonym" to anti-Americanism that "has nothing to do with it, either historically or logically"; rather, he suggests, with a wry allusion to, and extrapolation from, Sartre's maxim, "anti-Americanism's existence always preceded any essence of America."[9] While it seems unlikely that Sartre would have knowingly reinforced "old phobias" it does seem that, despite his wish to "translate 'Americanism' culturally," something was not so much lost in that translation as superimposed. The imposition, or assumption, of determinative cultural traits may have disinclined Sartre to concede, or even consider, the receptiveness of Americans to existentialism, and it seems doubtful that he would have been aware of the continued influence of his ideas on literature of the 1960s and later decades of the twentieth century. Yet in his early writing in the 1940s he identifies features of American society that are likely to engender the anguish that is so central to an understanding of his ontological system: the sense of spatial and conceptual indeterminacy and liminality, the precariousness and ephemeralness of constructs, architectural and cultural, the enculturation through comprehensive organizational membership and ostensible belonging, underscoring a potential loss of personal autonomy – an autonomy that, if strived for and attained, might render an individual "free to escape into an almost Nietzschean individualism, the kind symbolized by the skyscrapers in the bright sky of New York"; and the geographical

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[8] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Americans and Their Myths', *The Nation*, October 18, 1947, accessed 08/01/15 from: http://www.thenation.com/article/americans-and-their-myths.
[9] Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xiii, pp. 361-362, p. xiv.

openness that can alienate, diminish, through its sheer expansiveness, so that the individual may "experience the anguish of solitude."[10]

By reading the chapters in this study in reverse order, however, it is possible to chart an historical failure in US culture to address the existential challenges that successive decades posed – challenges that were both personal, concerning the anguish of individual existence and identity, identified by Sartre, and national, as that anguish was mirrored in a collective societal loss of assumptive identity, one that was repeatedly and profoundly challenged. Morris Dickstein argues that "if social suffering, poverty, and exploitation topped the agenda of the arts in the 1930s, neurosis, anxiety, and alienation played the same role in the forties and fifties when economic fears were largely put to rest."[11] Though this is perhaps an overstatement of artistic trends (and societal ones, since anxieties concerning economics – and suffering, poverty and exploitation themselves – were hardly absent in the 1940s and 50s), it does identify the beginnings of a shift in the arts (and certainly in literature) towards existential themes and concerns. Dickstein goes on to discuss American literature specifically in the post-war years and subsequent decades of the twentieth century, noting that the world of writers who began publishing after the war was one of "material comfort and its dissatisfactions, including anomie, alienation, and a nagging sense of weightlessness; of a turn inward towards the self and its problems of identity; a world dominated by the utopian ease and abundance made possible by technology." More importantly though, "by cultivating the self, not entirely without a certain narcissism, these writers found new ways of writing the history of their times, an age of prosperity and therapy when the exigent, imperial self became the obsessive concern of many Americans."[12]

This obsession, or overriding preoccupation, is apparent in all of the novels discussed in this study, and suburbia was, of course, the key symbol of prosperity at this time, of "material comfort and its dissatisfactions." The first of these dissatisfactions to emerge was with the very circumstances and environment that made such material comfort possible, was actually with the *form* it took, its manifestation; that is, suburbia. The self-conscious awareness of, and discourse

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[10] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Individualism and Conformism in the United States', p.106; Jean-Paul Sartre, 'New York, the Colonial City', p.123, both in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (London: Rider and Company, 1955).
[11] Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction 1945-1970*, 1999 (London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 6.
[12] Ibid. p. 17, p.18.

about, the newly burgeoning suburbs of the 1950s as an environment that was existentially threatening, as one that was inimical to its inhabitants' individuality and personal authenticity, is largely limited to this period.[13] Its social commentaries present alarmist critiques of the encroaching, and numbing, cultural and existential homogenization the suburbs foster; suburbia also provides the *substance*, not just the setting, of many of its novels (and, in part, of the first three seasons of the revisionist TV series *Mad Men*). Such novels are more explicitly *about* the suburbs than in later decades, when their ubiquity was established and the debilitating effects they had on suburbanite protagonists were less clearly definable, when the sense of malaise and ill-defined dread was all-pervasive but nebulously enervating, as illustrated by suburbanites' retreat into solipsism and their obsession with entropy. In the 1950s, by contrast, suburbanite protagonists had a (self-consciously) oppositional relation to their environment, which (ironically) was definitional for them, vital to their sense of self, though as discussed in Chapter Four, Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit Run* (1960), Frank and April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road* (1961), and Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* (1962), all believe that their identities are internally generated, indicative of their individuality; all deny that those identities are actually other-directed, founded on their being-for-others, and that rather than undermining their sense of self, suburbia is *constitutive* of it. In this way they exemplify Sartrean bad faith and inauthenticity, but such faith seems faltering, less entrenched than that of the suburban protagonists of novels of the late 1960s and subsequent decades.

By 1969, when Cheever's *Bullet Park* was published (and a year after the publication of Oates' *Expensive People*), the American suburbs already seemed to be besieged, no longer a safe and comfortable refuge from the tumultuous societal upheaval of the period. Rather than bemoaning the dulling, numbing effects of suburbia, Cheever's Eliot Nailles resents the encroachment of urban life on Bullet Park, and, in his fearful, anguished state, desperately craves a tranquility the suburbs cannot now provide, wants to feel more numbed, not less, which the murderous, but equally anguished, Paul Hammer is determined to prevent. While Richard Everett in Oates' novel sneeringly and disingenuously disparages the tranquilizing calm both Hammer and Nailles seek, he is no less desperate for such a state, his self-defeating violence failing to becalm him more than momentarily. These characters' bad faith is

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[13] Although suburbia is presented as an environment that encourages conformism and lack of individuality in some late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century suburban fiction (discussed in the final part of this chapter), it is not depicted as an existential threat to its inhabitants, but rather as an environment that encourages a concern with social status, consumerist aspiration, and that affords an ultimately unfulfilling materialistic lifestyle.

all pervasive, central to who they are, or can allow themselves to be, and a concern with personal authenticity is now inadmissible, since this would only heighten their existential dread, as they seek to deny contingency, to believe in a reassuring, but bogus, causality to explain their identity and selfhood, randomness and chance events undermining that bad faith. Both novels reflect the anxiety caused by the events of the mid-to-late 1960s, and the changes occurring throughout US society – including an increase in violent crime, the assassinations of Kennedy and King, the burgeoning civil rights movement, the continuing war in Vietnam and the (sometimes violent) anti-war movement – but they register them obliquely, through heightened existential anguish and an extremity of violence in response to intimations of contingency, intimations (and violence) that are seemingly incongruous in such an environment, an affront to the very notion of ordered, purposeful and placid suburbia. While this incongruity is repeatedly highlighted in *Bullet Park*, Cheever also seems to suggest that urban disorder is impinging on suburban culture, though there was at this time a form of urban displacement rather than an intrusion; as Philip Jenkins notes, since the 1940s increasing numbers of city residents had been moving to suburbs, a demographic change hastened by fears of rising crime and urban violence.[14] Suburban, rather than urban, crime and violence are central to Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971), which, unlike Oates' and Cheever's novels, does explicitly address societal changes, yet again the vision is of existential crisis and denial, as Harry Angstrom's bad faith, tenuously maintained in *Rabbit, Run*, is transformed into an almost pathological nullification of others and his own past. Harry, more than any other character discussed in this study, exemplifies the oscillation in Sartrean bad faith between self-objectification (being-for-others), central to *Rabbit, Run*, and, in *Rabbit Redux*, objectification of others through 'the look', so that the young runaway hippie girl and the black militant Vietnam veteran in the novel are denied full subjectivity, enabling Harry to maintain a cold detachment from them, and to commit impassive acts of violence against them, almost indifferent to the societal change of which they are emblematic. Like Eliot Nailles and Richard Everett, Harry Angstrom responds to his existential anguish, heightened by the social tumult of the 1960s, by attempting to deny both; since bad faith is an attempt to assuage, to nullify, anguish, it also necessitates the nullification, through denial, of the societal changes that impinge on suburban life and intensify that anguish. Such denial is also apparent in Ann Beattie's later *Falling in Place* (1980) though the principal characters in the novel are less able to insulate (and isolate) themselves against (and

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[14] Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 65.

from) the national sense of an ever-present existential threat, in the wake of crises that contributed to the sense of besiegement in the US, including the taking hostage of fifty-two Americans in the November 1979 occupation of the US embassy in Tehran, the Soviet Union's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, potentially catalyzing a military confrontation that always seemed imminent, the mass suicide in November of the previous year of over 900 people in Californian James Jones' religious cult in Guyana, and the general perception of increasing, and increasingly random, violence throughout society. As NASA's disintegrated space station, Skylab, falls to Earth, its atomized debris scattered, Beattie's suburbanites nonetheless manage to exist, if only temporarily, in a state of somnambulant impassivity – except, that is, for a child of eleven, whose anguished violence against his sister (like Richard Everett's violence in *Expensive People*) can only provoke a momentary, muted recognition of suburban bad faith, its denial in existential inauthenticity of contingency.

Such recognition, if fully acknowledged, would undermine the (self-defeating) project of bad faith and heighten the anguish it seeks to forestall. It is unsurprising then, that in Beattie's novel and in other late twentieth-century suburban fiction, bad faith is entrenched, strengthened rather than diminished, as suburbia becomes an increasingly insular environment. This insularity is reflected in suburbanite protagonists' near-hermetic withdrawal into an alienated and isolated solipsism, the attempted nullification of all external sources of existential disquiet, but also, in some of the fiction of this period, in a preoccupation with entropy, as the suburb becomes a 'closed system'. This can be seen in Updike's suburbia, as Tony Tanner suggests, and especially in *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) a novel in which "death and decay are subtly pervasive."[15] Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), however, exemplifies, more than any other novel, this thematic concern with entropy, but also with the retreat into Other-denying solipsism, depicted through the relentless monologue of its protagonist, Bob Slocum, who, as John W. Aldridge observes, "lives a life deodorized of want and contingency," yet is "entombed in isolation," existing only as "a mind encapsulated in a bubble of self-awareness afloat in a void."[16] These concerns are, of course, interrelated (and each seems to bolster the other in Heller's novel), so that, as Tanner notes, in reference to Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963), with "the acceleration of entropy" there is a concomitant "avoidance of human relationships based on reciprocal

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[15] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970,* 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), pp. 288-289.
[16] John W. Aldridge, *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 38, p. 35.

recognition of the reality of the partner." Tanner suggests that "entropy and the dread of love may well be linked in some way, for they show a parallel movement towards the state of lasting inanimateness, and share an aspiration to eradicate consciousness and revert to thing-status."[17] The desire of a consciousness for "thing-status", for the unrealizable state of being-in-itself-for-itself, is bad faith, and the confluence of the themes of entropy (the entropic drive of consciousness) and solipsism is the defining feature of American existentialist fiction, indicative of a profound cultural and psychological sense of indeterminacy, of a lack of fixity, stability, or permanence. Sartre commented on these fundamental aspects of US culture in his writing on America in the 1940s, yet he did not acknowledge the receptiveness they engendered to existentialism, perhaps as a result of his own European enculturation and his nascent anti-Americanism. Tanner, however, identifies insubstantiality of identity, at both personal and institutional level, as a defining feature of American, rather than European, culture and literature, since

> The American writer has much less sense of a stable society which his hero encounters and enters – the process by which the European hero usually gains an identity. The institutions, even the buildings, of American society have never had this stability, and the American writer is more likely to express through his hero his own sense of their bewildering fluidity…and the sense of moving among insubstantial ephemera.[18]

In their indeterminacy and liminality, isolated and isolating, the suburbs are an illuminating environment in which to explore this sense of bewilderment, which, in the late 1970s and 1980s, became more a sense of beleaguered exhaustion, with a process of seemingly irreversible entropic national decline and decay well underway. Phillip Jenkins notes that "the condition of American cities promoted a sense of economic decay…In just eight years in the 1970s, New York City lost half a million private sector jobs. As downtowns deteriorated, new malls and suburban shopping centers flourished, revolutionising concepts of social space." Such lower middle-class suburban spaces are often the location of Raymond Carver's stories, which frequently depict entropic dissolution, though Carver's stories generally take place in suburban interiors, reflecting a diminishment rather than a revolutionising of the concept of social space. Jenkins further suggests that "in the summer of 1977, it did not seem far-

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[17] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950 – 1970,* 1971 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1976), p. 159.
[18] Ibid. p. 151.

fetched to imagine a systematic collapse of US influence much along the lines of what befell the Soviet bloc in 1989," since "with Communist parties seeking inclusion in several European governments," amongst other political developments, "the future of NATO and the Western Alliance seemed shaky," provoking fears that "the West would be politically and militarily castrated."[19] Rather less dramatically, Edward D. Berkowitz characterizes the 1970s as "a painful decade of transition," one in which

> The previously accepted dogma of urban renewal no longer enjoyed universal acceptance and would undergo a major change in the eighties. In general, the nation no longer possessed the postwar sense of confidence that economic growth and a steady national purpose would set things right in the cities, the suburbs or elsewhere.[20]

This uncertainty, and the resultant individual and collective retrenchment, is apparent in Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* (1986) and in the subsequent Frank Bascombe novels, and also in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and *Aloft* (2004), whose narrator protagonists are detached and distant from others, yet present their disengaged alienation as a form of sovereign individualism, as a privileging of selfhood over interpersonal relations. Christopher Lasch sees such solipsistic withdrawal as an ongoing reaction to "the turmoil of the sixties," following which Americans "retreated to purely personal preoccupations, and "having no hope of improving their lives …convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement." Lasch argues that the "consciousness movement…arising out of a pervasive dissatisfaction with the quality of personal relations," provided "self-defeating solutions" since it advised people "not to make too large an investment in love and friendship, to avoid excessive dependence on others."[21] The narrators of Ford's and Lee's novels are illustrative of the consequences of adopting such advice, in an environment that countenances an isolated, affectless disconnectedness.

Whilst in the 1990s and early twenty-first century Richard Ford and Chang-rae Lee continued to develop the existential novel of suburbia, this period also saw the re-emergence, and dominance, of social critiques and satires of the suburbs, novels that

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[19] Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 65-66, p. 62.

[20] E.D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 226-227.

[21] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, 1979), p. 4, p. 27.

could be seen, in part at least, as updates of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.[22] T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), James Kaplan's *Two Guys From Verona: a novel of suburbia* (1998), A.M. Homes' *Music for Torching* (1999), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010), and Tom Perrotta's *Little Children* (2004) and *The Leftovers* (2011), all offer social and political analyses of the state of the American Dream in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century suburbia. Heather J. Hicks describes *The Tortilla Curtain* as "Boyles's attempt to map the social dynamics between upper-middle-class Southern Californians and the illegal Mexican immigrants flooding into the Los Angeles area," a novel "which satirically suffuses the Southern Californian landscape with whiteness," Boyle's aim being the "satirizing [of] white fears about being overtaken by nonwhite populations."[23] In the novel Delaney Mossbacher reflects on his material comfort and security in a Los Angeles suburb, commenting that in "his exclusive private community in the hills, composed entirely of Spanish Mission-style homes with orange tile roofs…the children grew into bigots, the incomes swelled and the property values rose disproportionately," while his wife Kyra observes that "everything [is] new out here, a burgeoning, bustling, mini-mall-building testimonial to white flight, the megalopolis encroaching on the countryside."[24] The couple want to believe they are different from their neighbours, and Delaney believes

> He…[isn't] materialistic, not really, and he never bought anything on impulse, but when he did make a major purchase he felt good about it, good about himself, the future of the country and the state of the world. That was the American way. Buy something. Feel good. But he didn't feel good, not at all. He felt like a victim.[25]

Kaplan's modern morality tale sees a kind of reversal of fortune in which the far wealthier, highly materialistic and ostensibly better adjusted of the eponymous two guys, Will, inevitably loses everything, while the emotionally damaged, anti-materialistic Joel, who works in a sandwich shop, ends up buying out the owner and

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[22] Clearly, there are not two mutually exclusive sub-genres, the 'existential suburban novel' and the 'satirical suburban novel', but the difference between the novels discussed in this study and the suburban social critiques of the 1990s and after (and their predecessors in the 1950s), is more than one of thematic emphasis; their understanding of the very meaning and significance of the suburbs is different, and their concerns are primarily existential, not sociological.

[23] Heather J. Hicks, 'On Whiteness in T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 45:1, 43-64, 2003, p. 46, p. 60.

[24] T.C. Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain*, 1995 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997), p. 225, p. 336.

[25] Ibid. p. 149.

becoming a small businessman. Joel's integrity ensures his eventual success; it is he and not Will who sees the insular uniformity of the suburbs, the "houses each with a world inside…subtle variations of the same world, a world built, essentially, around going out and coming back and watching TV." Each "nothing little suburban side street," he reflects, is "lined with postwar ticky-tack boxes, albeit boxes enjoying a certain amount of separation from each other."[26] In some ways less dramatic than the corrective in Boyle's novel (which finishes with a landslide), the ending of *Two Guys From Verona*, like that of *The Tortilla Curtain*, provides a kind of moral resolution. Reviewing Kaplan's novel for *The Booklist* in 1997, Donna Seaman suggests that although it "appears to be yet another dissection of suburban life and white male midlife crises…a closer reading reveals its depth and complexity"; its tone and intent is nonetheless primarily satirical, social commentary in the form of a "witty, sexy, and wise comedy of errors and corrections."[27] Tom Perrotta acknowledges this in his review for *The New York Times*, commenting that "as in any self-respecting suburban novel, the plot revolves around parties and adultery," a description that could, ironically, also be applied to his own 2004 novel, *Little Children*, set in a Boston suburb, in which adulterous and deluded mother Sarah views herself as "a researcher studying the behavior of boring suburban women," telling herself, "I am not a boring suburban woman myself."[28] Critical of the suburban conformism she has embraced, she distances herself from all the other people who "just fell in line like obedient little children, doing exactly what society expected of them at any given moment, all the while pretending that they'd actually made some kind of choice."[29] All of the other main characters are shown to be equally deluded "obedient little children" in one way or another, and each eventually faces some kind of crisis of self-belief as a result. Charles Taylor's review of Perrotta's novel for *Salon* magazine places it firmly in the category of satire, albeit "compassionate satire," the novelist's "take on the gnawing dissatisfactions of family life, the tyrannical control small kids exert over their parents."[30] It has also, though, been viewed as a revealing cultural critique; Charles Hatton considers it indicative of "cultural anxiety about the nature of masculine

[26] James Kaplan, *Two Guys from Verona: A novel of suburbia* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), p. 262, p. 5.

[27] Donna Seaman, 'Review of *Two Guys from Verona*', *The Booklist*, November 15, 1997; 94, 6; *ProQuest*, p. 541.

[28] Tom Perrotta, 'The Boys in the Burbs', *The New York Times*, February 22, 1998, accessed 27/03/16 from: https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/22/reviews/980222.22perrott.html; Tom Perrotta, *Little Children*, 2004 (London: Allison and Busby Limited, 2006), p. 3.

[29] Tom Perrotta, *Little Children*, 2004 (London: Allison and Busby Limited, 2006), p. 9.

[30] Charles Taylor, 'Review of *Little Children*', April 15, 2004, *Salon*, accessed 27/03/16 from: http://www.salon.com/2004/04/15/perrotta_3/.

identity," a narrative in which "contemporary gender redefinition and moral laxity are symbolically resolved through the ambivalent endorsement of an image of reactionary masculinity," the novel's "satiric distance" only serving to underscore its "moral didacticism."[31] Perrotta's *The Leftovers* (2011), is also set in an affluent suburb (of New York not Boston), but it initially seems to be a departure from the themes and tone of *Little Children*, since it focuses on the aftermath of a seemingly random and inexplicable event (similar to the biblical 'Rapture' of Christian belief) in which millions of people worldwide simultaneously seem to 'evaporate', disappear into thin air, leaving no trace. The existential ramifications of this, however, are not Perrotta's main concern; rather, as David L. Ulin observes in his review for the *Los Angeles Times*, he chooses to focus "more on the human story than the metaphysical, which is essentially beside the point."[32] Perrotta has protagonist Kevin Garvey reflect that, despite the enormity of the loss, "eventually people got tired of brooding about it. Time moved on, seasons changed, individuals withdrew into their private lives," lives typically circumscribed by dull conformity, by "a shabby little place, a generic suburban box with a concrete stoop and a picture window to the left of the front door."[33] Ulin describes the novel as "vintage Perrotta" as it shows that "he's a satirist who likes to poke fun at the vagaries of contemporary life," in this case, individual and collective cultural responses to "the idea of a Rapture that may not be the Rapture," responses that include the adoption of new alliances and conformist group identities.[34] More specifically, Stephen King views the depiction of "the slow, sad drift of this suburban world into various forms of cultic extremism as a response to upheaval" as "a metaphor for the social and political splintering of American society after 9/11," again underscoring the social critique central to Perrotta's novel.

Whilst A.M. Homes' *Music for Torching* is dissimilar in its (near) grotesquery to Boyle's, Kaplan's and Perrotta's novels, its critique of suburban conformity is similar, and familiar from the novels of the 1950s. Paul and Elaine Weiss are a disaffected couple living in a Westchester suburb; Paul inevitably commutes to New York and "every day he rides back and forth with the same people. He knows what towns they live in, what kinds of coats they wear, what they eat for breakfast, but he has no idea

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[31] Charles Hatton, 'Bad Mommies and Boy-Men: Postfeminism and Reactionary Masculinity in Tom Perrotta's *Little Children*', Critique: *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, August 2010, 48:3, 230-249, p. 236, p. 232.
[32] David L. Ulin, 'Book review: The Leftovers by Tom Perrotta', *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 2011.
[33] Tom Perrotta, *The Leftovers*, 2011 (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), p. 297, p. 284.
[34] David L. Ulin, 'Book review: The Leftovers by Tom Perrotta', *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 2011.

who they are."[35] In case we fail to see the intended satirical edge, Homes explains that

> Every morning the streets are filled with Pauls – scrubbed and polished men in thousand-dollar suits thinking they are something. One hundred thousand offices, a million window-less cubicles, creativity and commerce. The metropolis hums – sings of the spirit, of the romance of trade, of the glory of the great game – things bought and sold.[36]

Despite the novel's dramatic and violent ending (a siege at a school in which one of the couple's sons is taken hostage and shot), it doesn't depart significantly from the suburban novel as social commentary and satire. Mary Holland describes it as "postmodern realism", in that "postmodern problems" of "an estranging culture" result in "narcissism, consumerism and media images" replacing "socially directed behaviours and qualities like responsibility and belief"; but Homes' novel could equally be considered another morality tale, one in which, as Holland points out, "adults pay" for a fleetingly brief "transgressive freedom from the strictures of suburban life," from its "numbing predictability and safety," indicating the author's "sentimental attachment to moral meaningfulness."[37]

The title of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* makes clear its thematic preoccupations, and the correctives that occur in the novel are on a number of levels; economic, social, familial and personal, as it charts the impact of the 'market corrective' in the US at the end of the twentieth century, and its wider societal impact, exploring, as James Annesley notes, "the inter-relationships between private life and wider social and economic forces", in a rather laboured and perhaps reductive critique that highlights, Annesley argues, "the hollow circularity of Franzen's sociology."[38] More generous in her assessment of the novel, but discussing it in similarly sociological terms, Catherine Toal suggests that in *The Corrections* Franzen "explicitly theorizes the problem of critique and judgement in the relationship between individual

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[35] A.M. Homes, *Music for Torching*, 1999 (London: Granta Books, 2006), p. 88.
[36] Ibid. p. 325.
[37] Mary Holland, 'A Lamb in Wolf's Clothing: Postmodern Realism in A. M. Homes's *Music for Torching* and *This Book Will Save Your Life*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 53:3, 214-237, May 2012, p. 216, p. 217, p. 231.
[38] James Annesley, 'Market Corrections: Jonathan Franzen and the "Novel of Globalization"', *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 29, No.2, 'Making Corrections' (Winter, 2006), pp. 111-128, p. 116, p. 123.

(psychological) and cultural dysfunction."[39] It is not quite clear, however, what theory Franzen is propounding (unless positing the interconnectedness of individual and cultural neurosis and pathologies is a theory). What is clear is the satirical intent, though, as Andrew O' Hehir notes in his review for *Salon* magazine, "Franzen's handling of the book's difficult narrative balance between satire and realism is not always graceful."[40] Franzen contrasts the older generation of Lamberts living in the fictional Midwestern suburb of St. Jude, with their adult children, all of whom live on the East Coast, and the oldest of whom, despite wanting, like both his siblings, to be a corrective to the Midwestern suburban culture of his parents, has established himself as an ostentatiously wealthy banker in the Philadelphia suburb of Chestnut Hill. Gary Lambert reassures himself that he has "a spring in his step", has "an agreeable awareness of his above-average height" and "late-summer suntan," whilst "his resentment of his wife" is "moderate and well contained." He is chagrined, however, to see that "shoppers at the mall near his parents' house had an air of entitlement offputtingly similar to his own, and the electronic consumer goods for sale in St. Jude were every bit as cool and powerful as those in Chestnut Hill."[41] Lambert's attempt at a corrective, like those of other characters in the novel, is shown to be dubious and highly questionable.

If *The Corrections* is an overambitious attempt at a suburban state-of-the-nation novel, Franzen's novelistic canvas is broader still in *Freedom*, which again focuses principally on a family from the Midwest, and, in charting the lives of two generations, as James Phelan comments, "connects their travails to the larger contemporary socio-political history of the country."[42] As in *The Corrections*, Franzen draws parallels between socio-economic, familial and personal upheaval and turmoil, and so the novel is, as Sam Anderson suggests in his review for *The New York Times Magazine*, "a close cousin to *The Corrections:* a social-realist epic about a depressive, entropic Midwestern family being swallowed and digested by the insatiable anaconda of modernity," one that is "heavy on psychology and extramarital affairs and earnest speechifying."[43] At the beginning of *Freedom*, we learn that Walter and Patty Berglund, living in Ramsey Hill, a formerly rundown urban part of the Minnesotan city of St. Paul,

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[39] Catherine Toal, 'Corrections: Contemporary American melancholy', *Journal of European Studies*, 33(3/4); 305-322, 2003, p. 311.

[40] Andrew O' Hehir, '*The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen', *Salon*, September 7, 2001, accessed 12/04/16 from: http://www.salon.com/2001/09/07/franzen_2/.

[41] Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*, 2001 (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), p. 160, p. 226.

[42] James Phelan, *Reading the American Novel 1920-2010* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 238.

[43] Sam Anderson, 'The Precisionist', *The New York Times Magazine*, August 12, 2010, accessed 09/04/16 from: http://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/67497/index1.html.

and now a gentrified suburb, had bought their Victorian house before gentrification occurred, intending to "relearn certain life skills" that Patty's parents had "fled to the suburbs specifically to unlearn." The life skills to be relearned include "how to protect a bike from a motivated thief, and when to bother rousting a drunk from your lawn furniture, and how to encourage feral cats to shit in somebody else's children's sandbox." Now though, such skills are hardly necessary in affluent, suburbanised Ramsey Hill, and Patty Berglund's lifestyle is not so different from that of her parents. On seeing the impoverished conditions in which Walter grew up in Hibbing, Minnesota, however, Patty acknowledges that they are "indeed a long way from Westchester," from her "previously invisible world of…suburban privilege," causing her to have "an unexpected pang of homesickness."[44] Patty's guilt about her suburban privileges is equalled only by Walter's anger about "how crowded the exurbs are already," and about "the traffic and sprawl, and the environmental degradation, and the dependence on foreign oil," despite which he decides to live in an exclusive suburban housing development named Canterbridge Estates when separated from her, and, following their reconciliation, the Berglunds become an exemplary suburban couple. They "hosted several barbeques and were much sought after socially in return" but Patty finally decides to return to her prestigious job, and the novel ends with the couple's imminent move to New York, and, presumably, yet another suburb.[45]

All of these novels share a thematic concern with social critique, with the specific cultural, political and socio-economic circumstances in which they were written, and which form their subject matter. What distinguishes the novels discussed in this study from such fiction is their preoccupation with much broader, if not universal, philosophical questions about the nature of human existence – with what constitutes being, selfhood and identity, with the mutability of character, and if such a concept is really chimeric, with teleology, and the possibility that there is no directional purpose or inherent meaning in human societal development. To be sure, these novels were no less products of their time and culture, but it was, after the end of World War Two and the entrenchment of the Cold War, a time and (literary) culture that foregrounded such questions in its discourse, with the 1960s constituting what Mark Greif calls "a big bang for the intellectual and literary history of the twentieth century." Sartrean philosophy was perhaps the most important of the "individual pieces rocketing apart" in the big bang, and afterglow, of what Greif calls "the discourse of the crisis of man,"

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[44] Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), p. 4, p. 125.
[45] Ibid. p. 220, p. 561.

a discourse concerned with "totalitarianism, Enlightenment, universalism, existentialism, human rights, relativism, Cold War unity, technology, and critique."[46] Indeed, *Being and Nothingness* and Sartre's later works address all of these concerns and ideas, explicitly or implicitly. This may be why Sartre had, briefly, such a marked influence on US literature, at a time when seismic societal changes occurred, amongst them the demographic upheaval that the advent of mass suburbia caused, and the insular isolationism that suburbanisation came to represent. Greif suggests that in the US, between the early 1950s and 1970s there was a "phase of philosophical demand and rethinking, turning inward toward America," a trend that is certainly apparent in existentialist suburban fiction, though, almost paradoxically, such fiction also addresses universal themes, an incongruity that seems to have heightened its literary impact.[47] In November 2014, following the publication of *Let Me Be Frank With You,* John Banville, in an article for *The Guardian* on the four Frank Bascombe novels, described Richard Ford, seemingly oxymoronically, as "a relaxed existentialist," one who "recognises the essentially contingent and slippery nature of our being here," and whilst contingency is certainly central to the Bascombe novels, Ford's authorial voice suggests calm forbearance more than relaxed acceptance, surely a necessity over the three decades in which he has presented his existentialist vision in and of suburbia.[48] It seems unlikely that any current or future novelists of the suburbs will have such a vision of this mutable, liminal environment, one in which existential anxieties and concerns, highlighted by Ford, Heller, Updike, and other late twentieth-century authors, have been elided in favour of those that are, perhaps, more easily explicated and understood.

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[46] Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. xiii, p. xi.
[47] Ibid. p. 16.
[48] John Banville, 'John Banville celebrates Richard Ford's Bascombe books: the story of an American Everyman', *The Guardian*, November 8th 2014, accessed 15/05/16 from:
http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/08/john-banville-richard-ford-bascombe-novels.

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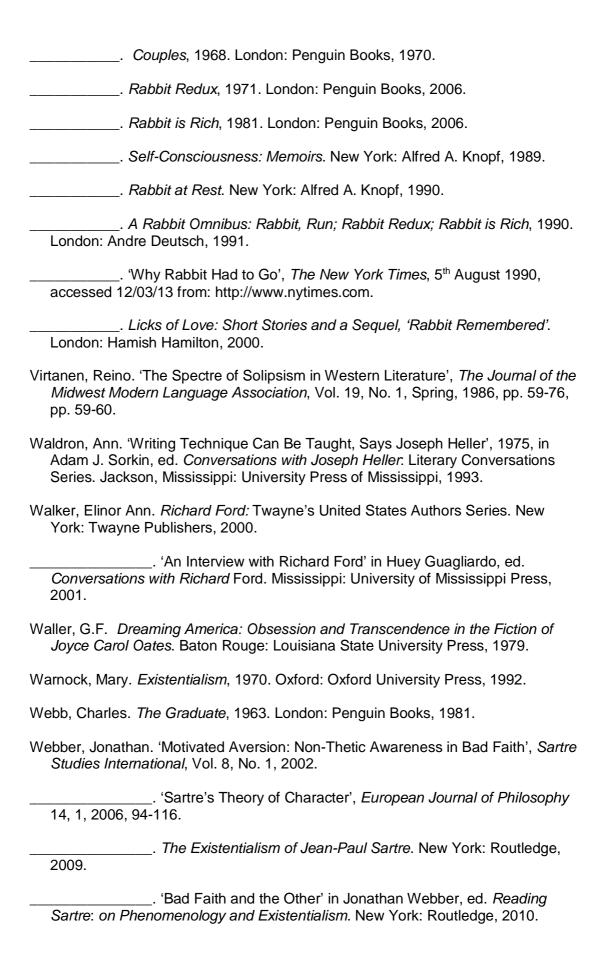
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