

UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLMOUCI
FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Petr Chromec

**Fifty Years of American Suburbia:
A Comparison of the Social Roles of Men and Women in
Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives***

Bakalářská práce

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr.

Olomouc 2020

Podklad pro zadání BAKALÁŘSKÉ práce studenta

PŘEDKLÁDÁ:	ADRESA	OSOBNÍ ČÍSLO
CHROMEČ Petr	Republikánská 8/138, Olomouc - Nové Sady	F14025

TÉMA ČESKY:

Porovnání společenských rolí mužů a žen v Literatuře Amerických předměstí před a po druhé světové válce.

TÉMA ANGLICKY:

Comparison of Social Roles of Men and Women in pre and post World War two American Suburban Literature

VEDOUcí PRÁCE:

prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr. - KAA

ZÁSADY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:

1. Introduction
2. Historical background of Suburbia
 - 2.1. Development of Suburbia
3. Babbitt and the early Suburbs
 - 3.1. Roles and influence of Men in Babbitt
 - 3.2. Roles and influence of women in Babbitt
4. World War Two effect on social norms in American Society
 - 4.1. The reversal of roles during the interwar period
5. Roles of Men and Women in post war suburban literature
 - 5.1. The Swimmer
 - 5.2. The Stepford Wives
6. Comparison of the characters
7. Conclusion

SEZNAM DOPORUČENÉ LITERATURY:

Primární literatura:

- Cheever, John. *The Swimmer*. 1964.
Levin, Ira. *The Stepford Wives: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1972.
Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. 1922.

Sekundární literatura:

- Beuka, Robert. *Suburbanization: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*. New York: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2004.
Bowers, Terence. "John Cheever's Mock-Epic: "The Swimmer," the "Odyssey", and America's Pursuit of Happiness." *CEA Critic* 70, no. 1 (2007): 17-34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44378348>.
Hutchisson, James M. "'All of Us Americans at 46': The Making of Sinclair Lewis' "Babbitt"." *Journal of Modern Literature* 18, no. 1 (1992): 95-114. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831549>.
JURCA, CATHERINE. *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*. PRINCETON; OXFORD: Princeton University Press, 2001. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sp44>.
Lundberg, Ferdinand, and Marynia F. Farnham. *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*. New York: New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1947.
Wylie, Philip. *Generation of Vipers*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.

Podpis studenta:



Datum:

12.12.2018

Podpis vedoucího práce:



Datum:

12.12.2018

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma „Fifty Years of American Suburbia: A Comparison of the Social Roles of Men and Women in Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* and Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives*“ vypracoval samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedl jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne 2.5.2020

.....

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr. for his time, advice and patience, and Mrs. Alena Vinklerová and Ing. Kamila Večeřová for their invaluable help during my studies.

I would also like thank my family for providing me with everything I could ask for, for more than two decades; my friends from the University, Anežka for walking and exploring the northern lands with me and Evička for infecting us all her contagious smile; the members of the Olomouc airsoft community, especially Jakub Strašík and Jindra Walla; and my airsoft team, the Sabertooth, for always watching my six; and all my friends I have met living one of my thousand other lives. My guild “The Vengeful Ancients,” Matouš Ředina, Pavel Bruckner, Vasyl Kapustej, and Ondřej Bečička for helping me usher the Sith Empire to greatness. The members of “The Winter” clan for helping me defend The Last City of humanity, namely Faolan my buddy and the only other member of our fireteam “The Winds of Winter.” John Moore, for sharing some of his Academic talents with me and Oskar Paul Schulz for still thinking about me and wishing me all the best even though he is on the other side of this planet now.

Lastly, I would like to thank Mgr. Šárka Dvořáková for establishing the KAA Student Support Group and co-founding the Mentoring Group, where I found help when I needed it most.

Dedicated to my late mother Ivana.

There is not a single day in my life when I do not miss you.

“Everything in moderation, including moderation.”

Guild Wars II – The Asura

When I first entered the University grounds, I did not know what I could expect. Some people claimed it is all fun and games and some people claim it is blood sweat and tears. I skeptically took the middle ground and tried to approach my studies carefully. I attended a secondary school for medical staff instead of a grammar school and though I was fairly ill-equipped for my upcoming battles, I won nevertheless.

Now I am headed into the fray of the last battle.

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	9
2	Historical Background of Suburbia.....	12
	2.1 Development of American Suburbia.....	13
3	<i>Babbitt</i> and the Early Suburbs	16
	3.1 Roles and Influence of Men in <i>Babbitt</i>	19
	3.2 Roles and Influence of Women in <i>Babbitt</i>	23
4	World War II and Its Effect on American Society	26
5	Roles of Men and Women in the Post-War Suburbia	28
	5.1 <i>The Stepford Wives</i>	29
	5.2 Roles and Influence of Men in <i>The Stepford Wives</i>	31
	5.3 Roles and Influence of Women in <i>The Stepford Wives</i>	35
6	Comparison of the Characters	38
7	Conclusion	42
8	Resumé	44
9	Bibliography	47
10	Annotation	50
11	Anotace.....	51

1 Introduction

This thesis looks at the social roles of men and women in pre- and post-World War II American suburban fiction. Suburbs are a cultural phenomenon which has accompanied humanity for more than two millennia, but in the United States suburbia came to prominence mostly during the twentieth century, more specifically during the forties and fifties, when the demand for new housing was substantial. Affordable housing as well as security and privacy of the new settlements attracted many middle-class American families that desired to improve their living conditions. Naturally, the suburbs developed a specific culture which was later portrayed in various works of fiction, whether it would be literature, cinematography or other media. The two chosen examples discussed in this thesis are *Babbitt* (1922) by Harry Sinclair Lewis and *The Stepford Wives* (1972) by Ira Marvin Levin. Both novels are set in suburban setting, but in different time periods.

There are several reasons I believe these novels can be compared to one another even though they were written fifty years apart. Firstly, both are set in suburbia. Robert Beuka, Professor of English at New York City University, sees suburbia as a “dynamic, often defining element” instead of being just a simple setting.¹ It could prove difficult to find another place where the women would feel equally trapped in a “comfortable” cage which is, as I will argue, an important theme in both novels.

Secondly, both texts portray the American suburban culture satirically. Gordon Hutner, literary scholar and founding editor of the journal *American Literary History*, writes in his introduction to *Babbitt* that “Lewis’s satiric gifts are never more fully on display than in this novel, perhaps all of his fiction.”² Natalie Neill, a literary scholar specializing in satire and women’s studies described *The Stepford Wives* as “marked by destabilizing satire and irony, which has the effect of opening the meanings of the text.”³

Another reason why these novels are eligible for comparison is that both extensively examine the issues of women. *Babbitt*, even though it is set in the nineteen-twenties, already deals with the discontent of the suburban housewives which was

¹ Robert Beuka, *Suburbanation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2.

² Gordon Hutner, introduction to *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xiv.

³ Natalie Neill, “The Stepford Frankensteins: Feminism, *Frankenstein*, and *The Stepford Wives*,” *The Journal of American Culture* 41, no. 3 (2018): 265, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jacc.12934.265>.

identified by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* only forty years later. *The Stepford Wives* also portrays the aforementioned discontent, but it represents the era after World War II and the beginnings of second wave feminism.

I will be using feminist theory, namely Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949, in English 1953) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The reason I chose these texts is the fact that they deal with women's position in the society as well as in the home and in relation to men. Both of the feminist works were important in determining the direction of this analysis. *The Stepford Wives* makes direct references to both *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Second Sex*. A quotation from *The Second Sex* is used as an epigraph of the novel.

Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority. She sets about mutilating, dominating man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and his values . . . *Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavours to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go . . .* Here two transcendences are face to face; instead of displaying mutual recognition, each free being wishes to dominate the other.⁴

The epigraph (in italics) is taken from the conclusion of *The Second Sex* and deals with the two types of women de Beauvoir refers to as "the feminine woman," the one who wants to destroy the man's superiority, and "the emancipated woman," who considers herself the man's equal. In *Babbitt*, men mostly deal with the toxic, feminine women, such as Zilla Riesling, however in *The Stepford Wives*, men deal with emancipated women. *The Stepford Wives* could be said to present the definite solution for the suburban dilemma which is the replacement of the unhappy emancipated woman housewife with an artificial happy non-destructive feminine woman.

All of this led to my conviction that even though World War II meant that women's status in society got better and they were more appreciated because it was

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 674. The epigraph of *The Stepford Wives* is in italics to distinguish it from its context.

obvious they could and were willing to contribute to the economy, the ideal woman in both *Babbitt* and *The Stepford Wives* is the same: a stereotypically feminine and submissive one. Simone de Beauvoir proposed in *The Second Sex* that the position of women cannot be improved by a change in society such as the war because the oppression of women was not caused by a historical event: it has always existed because it is based on biology which cannot be subverted.⁵

Lastly, I would like to present the division of my thesis and its contents. In the second chapter, I introduce the concept of suburbs, outskirt settlements and their history with special attention dedicated to the American suburb. The third chapter covers Lewis's *Babbitt* and focuses on its characters and their social roles and statuses. Chapter four discusses the various effects that World War II had on the American society and the changes it caused in social roles and power balance between men and women, creating employment dilemmas which caught the returning soldiers by surprise. The fifth chapter concerns the roles of men and women in suburbia as depicted in Levin's *The Stepford Wives*. Similarly to chapter three, it assesses the initial reaction of the literary critics to the novel and describes the social roles and statures of both male and female characters. In chapter six, I look at the two texts in the context of feminist criticism and compare them. I argue that there are more similarities between them than it may seem and that the changes brought by the war had a smaller impact on men's and women's social roles than is generally thought.

⁵ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 18–19.

2 Historical Background of Suburbia

When suburbia is mentioned, people associate the image with the massive satellite cities of the United States or the famous aerial photo of Mexico City, where the settlements create an optical illusion of never-ending ocean waves. Since the suburbia is an important concept for this thesis, this chapter will provide a brief history of its development. According to United States Census Bureau a suburb is “a community within a metropolitan area outside the core city.”⁶ While cities are known and well documented centers of culture and trade throughout the history of mankind, suburbs did not receive equal amount of attention which eventually led to the belief that suburbs are a modern concept. That is clearly not the case, because the suburbs have accompanied humanity through time. In his article on the history of suburbs, Colin Stief mentions a “539 BCE clay tablet letter from an early suburbanite to the king of Persia . . . ‘Our property seems to me the most beautiful in the world. It is so close to Babylon that we enjoy all the advantages of the city, and yet when we come home we stay away from all the noise and dust.’”⁷ Ancient suburbia, however comes from even further in the past. Lois Craig, former Associate Dean at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writes in her study of suburbs that “historically, the suburb as an ensemble of dwellings outside the city walls goes back to the beginning of urban history, perhaps to a 2000 B.C. settlement adjacent to the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia.”⁸ As civilization progressed forward, the concept of suburbia has spread to various parts of the world. Europe is a perfect example of this development, where “at the beginning of the nineteenth century certain suburban areas of London and Paris became known for the increasing population of the artists and the wealthy.”⁹

Early American suburbs were still fairly similar to their European counterparts and have not yet become the monstrous Levittowns that even the general public is familiar with. The causation of this phenomena is the creative process behind the development of these settlements. Lois Craig noted in her study of suburbia the 1853 efforts of the landscape designer Andrew Jackson to create a copy a European-style suburb. He “gave form to his ideals born of English gardens and transformed by

⁶ Lois Craig, "Suburbs," *Design Quarterly*, no. 132 (1986), accessed May 2019, doi:10.2307/4091157, 6

⁷ "The History and Evolution of Suburbs," Colin Stief, Thoughtco., August 15, 2018, accessed February 24, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/overview-of-suburbs-1435799>.

⁸ Craig, "Suburbs," 14.

⁹ Craig, "Suburbs," 14.

American notions of arcadia.”¹⁰ This era of more original suburbs met an unfortunate and abrupt end after the World War II, when it was replaced by massive, rapid suburbanization efforts created by the monumental demand for new, affordable housing by American servicemen returning home from the war.

2.1 Development of American Suburbia

While the study conducted by David Ames and Flint McClelland for the American National Park Service divides the development of suburbs into four distinct eras with regard to the transportation methods, for the purpose of this thesis, it can be narrowed down to the two basic eras, namely suburbs before World War II and suburbs after World War II. The suburbia which developed in the United States before the war was constructed for three basic reasons. First, the hygienic and living conditions in the city were less than ideal. As Craig discusses in her study of suburbs, “no justification was needed to seek a suburban setting for domestic life away from the disease, muck and clamor of the industrial city.”¹¹ The suboptimal living conditions in nineteenth-century cities were caused by the influx of immigrants searching for a better life in the United States.

The second impulse for the development of suburbia before World War II was the evolution of the means of transportation throughout and outside the city. This development was examined by Ames and McClelland in “Historic Residential Suburbs,” where they claim that, “the laying out of new transportation routes, using new technologies, spurred the outward movement of suburban development.”¹² One of these technologies was, the horse-drawn car, the precursor of the modern streetcar, which, as they write, “provided the first mass transit systems by offering regularly scheduled operations along a fixed route.”¹³ These horse-drawn cars made traveling larger distances much faster and it made it considerably easier to commute every day to the workplace. Another impulse for the development of suburbs came in the late nineteenth century, when the streetcar lines became popular form of transportation and they cultivated massive suburban growth all over United States.¹⁴ The ability to commute

¹⁰ Craig, “Suburbs,” 14.

¹¹ Craig, “Suburbs,” 15.

¹² David L. Ames and Linda Flint McClelland, “Historic Residential Suburbs,” *National Register Bulletin*, September 2002, 16, accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/suburbs>.

¹³ Ames, McClelland, “Historic Residential Suburbs,” 16.

¹⁴ Ames, McClelland, “Historic Residential Suburbs,” 16.

even faster further encouraged the people to move into the suburbs outside the core city, and so did the price of the land which was not as large as in the city. The last impulse for the development of suburbia before the World War II was the private ownership of the automobile. This was also one of the suburban aspects investigated by Ames and McClelland. They uncovered the fact that “the rapid adoption of the mass-produced automobile by Americans led to the creation of the automobile-oriented suburb of single-family houses on spacious lots that has become the quintessential American landscape of the twentieth century.”¹⁵ These automobile-oriented suburbs eventually led to the construction of freeway suburbs later in the twentieth century. The primary causes of the development of American suburbia before the Second World War II were the situation in the crowded cities and most importantly, the development of the means of mass and personal transportation.

The second period of American suburbanization began with the end of World War II, more specifically it began with the return of millions of American servicemen from various theatres of war. Once again there is multiple reasons for the rapid suburbanization during the 1940s and 1950s. The first cause of the massive construction efforts was the lack of housing and general chaos after the great conflict as is described by historians Andrew Wiese and Becky Nicolaides:

This history originated in the chaotic transition to peacetime society after 1945. World War II migrations, military deployment, and demobilization compounded a housing shortage that dated back to the Depression. In 1945, experts estimated a shortage of 5 million homes nationwide. Veterans returned to “no vacancy” signs and high rents. As late as 1947, one-third were still living doubled up with relatives, friends, and strangers. American family life was on hold.¹⁶

While this was a long-term problem that caused problems for the United States even before World War II the solution came unexpectedly late in the form of support from the American government, namely Federal Housing Agency (FHA) and Veterans’ Administration (VA). These two agencies provided American citizens, especially the

¹⁵ Ames, McClelland, “Historic Residential Suburbs,” 21.

¹⁶ Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, April 2017, 2, doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.64.

veterans returning from the war, with various benefits. The policy of the FHA was “a mortgage insurance program that took the risk out of home lending and made the long term (25–30 years), low-interest home mortgage the national standard.”¹⁷ The Veterans’ Administration provided various forms of support through the GI Bill of Rights, specifically unemployment support, educational support and loan guaranties. These loan guaranties were the impulse for the massive increase in home ownership, however “the government did not give veterans money to purchase homes, businesses, or farms, it pledged to back veterans’ borrowing, making it much easier for them to get credit.”¹⁸ When the demand for housing increased, the solution was to use private companies to aid with the construction. This was the moment when the famous construction company Levitt & Sons appeared on the market and began raising the modern suburbia as we know it. Robert Beuka commented on their innovative ways of construction: “their revolutionary decision to use assembly-line techniques to produce quickly some 17,000 essentially identical houses on identical plots of land.”¹⁹ This suburb, later known as “the Levittown,” provided a template for future American suburbs consisting of perfectly symmetrical neighborhoods with small, minimal houses which were often blamed for creating the feeling of placelessness in their inhabitants.

¹⁷ Nicolaidis, Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945,” 2.

¹⁸ “The GI Bill,” Khan Academy, 1, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/postwar-era/a/the-gi-bill>.

¹⁹ Beuka, *Suburbanation*, 8.

3 *Babbitt* and the Early Suburbs

Harry Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951) was an American novelist, short story writer and the first American laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature writer. He was born in Minnesota, which according to his own words is the “most Scandinavian part of America,” which is observable in his famous novel *Main Street*, where one can find numerous characters of Scandinavian origin. He attended a regular public school and later on he continued his studies at Yale University. After finishing his studies, he began his literary career. He was initially a magazine editor, but eventually sold enough short stories to magazines to make a decent living and focus on his novels. Between years 1914 and 1919 Lewis published several novels, *Our Mr. Wrenn*, *The Trail of the Hawk*, *The Job*, *The Innocents*, and *Free Air*. These novels, however did not receive the attention Lewis hoped for. In 1920 Lewis finally rose to fame thanks to his novel *Main Street*, that satirized the change from old, frontier portrayals of American west into new age of small-mindedness and lobbying.²⁰ Thanks to *Main Street*, Lewis is often grouped with Sherwood Anderson as representing the “revolt from the village,” the “reaction against small-town values which characterized many American writers early in the twentieth century.”²¹ In 1922, he continued his criticism of the American society in his novel *Babbitt*.

Lewis’s popularity grew and in 1930 he became the first American author to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature for “his vigorous and graphic art of description and his ability to create, with wit and humor, new types of characters.”²² This spread Lewis’s popularity even further and the literature of the American Midwest attracted audiences around the world. Lewis continued writing novels and published several, most notably: *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935). Lewis was both admired and resented by readers and scholars alike. Richard Gray, Professor Emeritus at University of Essex summarized these attitudes: “Lewis has been called one of the worst writers in modern American literature, yet someone without whose books that literature cannot be imagined, not least because he opened up a new world, that of the middle-class Midwest, to American literature.”²³

²⁰ Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: a History of American Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 274.

²¹ Richard John. Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 368.

²² “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1930,” NobelPrize.org, Nobel Media AB, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1930/summary/>.

²³ Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 371.

Babbitt (1922) is known for its satirical depiction of American society and culture. While the novel does not depict American society positively, critics welcomed the novel and considered it a success. In one of the earliest reviews, a notable critic, H.L. Mencken wrote that, “the plain truth is, indeed, that ‘*Babbitt*’ is at least twice as good a novel as ‘*Main Street*’ was—that it avoids all the more obvious faults of that celebrated work, and shows a number of virtues that, are quite new.”²⁴ Although Mencken praised *Babbitt*, he also identified certain shortcomings; “there is no plot whatever,” he wrote “and very little of the hocus-pocus commonly called development of character. *Babbitt* simply grows two years older as the tale unfolds; otherwise he doesn’t change at all.”²⁵ This would normally be devastating and the novel would be labeled unreadable, however *Babbitt* as well as other works of Sinclair Lewis have another redeeming quality: rigorous social analysis. Lewis was truly dedicated to the sociological side of his works, which also defined him as an author. For Lewis, “the social section always came first; systematic research, sometimes conducted by research assistants and carrying Lewis himself into ‘the field’ like any cultural anthropologist, followed; the story came last, devised to carry home and usually limping under the burden of data.”²⁶

Lewis’s approach towards this work was steadfast and diligent. During one interview Lewis said about himself: “I am the diagnostician.”²⁷ This highlights the aforementioned weakness of *Babbitt*, but it also explains why his works give the impression of being a documentary, rather than a work of fiction. This leads us back to the initial review of the novel by Mencken. In case of *Babbitt*, Lewis created entire backstories for the region of Zenith, starting with its discovery. James M. Hutchisson, who was reviewing Lewis’s notes on *Babbitt*, also lamented the negative influence of Lewis’s sociological obsession on the qualitative aspect of the novel, which is quite ironic, since most of the characters in *Babbitt* had their own family trees and history well thought through. “The documentation in the notebook may suggest,” Hutchisson write, “that Lewis was something of a slave to his research and therefore unable to allow the characters, plot, and theme to evolve freely.”²⁸ One of the possible reasons for

²⁴ Henry Lois Mencken, “Portrait of an American Citizen,” *The Smart Set* 69, no. 2 (October 1922): 138.

²⁵ Mencken, “Portrait of an American Citizen,” 138.

²⁶ Stephen S. Conroy, “Sinclair Lewis’ Sociological Imagination,” *American Literature* 42, no. 3 (1970): 348, accessed June 2019, doi:10.2307/2923910.

²⁷ Conroy, “Sinclair Lewis’ Sociological Imagination,” 423.

²⁸ James M. Hutchisson, “All of Us Americans at 46”: The Making of Sinclair Lewis’ ‘*Babbitt*,’ *Journal of Modern Literature* 18, no. 1 (1992): 101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3831549>.

this lack of evolution may be the intent behind the author's creation. The novel is written in simple language and Lewis avoids the usage of overly complicated terms, and the protagonist uses colloquial language. This indicates that the novel is aimed at the average American reader. Consequently, the author's intention was not to create a work of fiction, that would inspire the reader with memorable plot or characters, but to create a satirical portrait of the culture of the United States in the twentieth century with its strengths and weaknesses and there is no doubt Lewis did accomplish this. Shadi Neimneh, Associate Professor at Hashemite University, who wrote: "Lewis satirizes American enterprise culture and its lack of spirituality/morality. The novel satirizes American values like commercialism, boosterism, consumerism, salesmanship, success worship, and spiritual void."²⁹

Interestingly, the legacy of *Babbitt* was preserved in the English language as a way to signify conformity: "Babbitt becomes an American type, an idea of 'Babbitry' associated with conformity to standards, slavery to machines, and loss of distinctive personalities in a consumerist business-driven culture."³⁰ The entire novel is satirical, but the satire is "normative/corrective because the novel's titular hero and people like him are the specific butts of satire," Neimneh writes. "By satirizing [*Babbitt*], the novel also satirizes his conforming type of individuals without denying us a better lot in life."³¹ George Babbitt is, in other words, the nineteen-twenties' white middle-class American everyman.³²

As was noted above, *Babbitt* was received positively by the critics. This happened even though Lewis' novels, especially *Babbitt*, may be brilliant with regard to the sociological aspect of the novel that the author paid so much attention to. This however took the toll on the development of the plot, which was regarded as overly linear as well as the development of the characters that appear to be to some extent missing. This was pointed out by both critics and academics. Lastly it was established that *Babbitt* is a satirical novel that is supposed to expose and ridicule the lack of

²⁹ Shadi Neimneh, "Modern Times, Modern Satire, and Modern 'Babbitt,'" Research Gate, 2013, 84, accessed June 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260024085_Modern_Times_Modern_Satire_and_Modern_Babbitt.

³⁰ Neimneh, "Modern Times, Modern Satire, and Modern 'Babbitt,'" 84.

³¹ Neimneh, "Modern Times, Modern Satire, and Modern 'Babbitt,'" 84.

³² Kenneth Kraus, introduction to *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2005), xiv.

morality, spirituality of American middle class, salesmen and other citizens of the early twentieth century.

3.1 Roles and Influence of Men in *Babbitt*

The focus of this chapter will be the male characters in *Babbitt*, their power dynamics and position in the novel. Lewis presents every character in the novel with a sufficient amount of background information to present them as realistic human beings, but thanks to the social study aspect of the novel, they still appear as types. Since the novel is set in a suburban environment, possible characters are restricted to well-off white people. Because of this the most frequent adult male characters in the novel are conformist, white middle- and upper-class men, some of whom are esteemed businessmen and some of them have white collar professions. There are of course exceptions for example their younger generation which is nearing their twenties at the beginning of the novel as well as some disruptive elements, namely Seneca Doane.

There is a specific group of men that frequently dines in Zenith's Athletic Club and they call themselves "the Roughnecks." The Roughnecks consist of the coal baron Vergil Gunch, the owner of Business College Professor Joseph K. Pumphrey, the department store co-owner Sidney Finkelstein, the scholar Howard Littlefield, laundry owner Orville Jones, poet and advertiser Chum Frink, finally the protagonist, real estate broker George Follansbee Babbitt himself. Each of these men is influential in his own area of expertise. Some Roughnecks appear more frequently in the novel, most of them are not central characters. While there is no official hierarchical structure within the dining group, one can observe a naturally formed hierarchy between its members. The possible basis of this hierarchy could be wealth, intelligence, success or perhaps it was a combination of the above. I however, hypothesize that another important factor is the engagement of oneself in the community. This can be seen when Babbitt is more esteemed by his friends after he gives several successful speeches which are reported in the newspaper.

Babbitt is only one of two people in his household who has a regular income. The other is his oldest single daughter Verona who works as a secretary but she is supposed to stop working once she gets married (*Babbitt*, 15). Babbitt makes approximately eight thousand dollars per year which is almost triple salary of the

average Midwesterner in the nineteen-twenties.³³ This allows him to own a large house in the suburbs and a car which can use outside of commuting to his work. Additionally, Babbitt owns a great number of various gadgets and other symbols of his social status. For example, he has “the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks” and every morning he is “proud of being awakened by such a rich device” (*Babbitt*, 5) and a phonograph with a collection of records which makes him feel “wealthy and cultured” (*Babbitt*, 77). At the beginning, he is a prominent businessman, but when he begins to sympathize with the Labor movement and rebels against the conformity and expectations of the Floral Heights suburb, he is bullied into submission by the Good Citizens’ League. The Good Citizens’ League is an anti-communist, anti-socialist and anti-Labor organization, which intends to keep in power only chosen individuals who share their opinions on politics and conformity.

The unofficial leader of the Roughnecks, Vergil Gunch, is arguably the most accomplished member of the group. He is the president of the Boosters’ Club and holds a high position in the Protective Order of Elks. He owns a successful coal business, and engages in charity work as well as in civic duties. Gunch is also an authoritarian who is not afraid to intimidate people in order to achieve his goals and he judges and observes Babbitt during his rebellion against conformity. All of these activities are quite possibly the reason, why the rest of the Roughnecks see him as their leader and initiator. Another good example of people respecting him would be the fact, that the praise from him has an additional value. When he compliments Babbitt’s oratorical skills, Babbitt “expands with delight” (*Babbitt*, 158). On the other end of the hierarchical structure are those people, who are not as engaged in various activities and merely allow themselves to be swayed by the flow. One of them is Sidney Finkelstein, who is employed as a buyer for the ladies’ section of a local department store which might also influence his position in the hierarchical structure. Vergil Gunch even describes him as a “poor galoot” (*Babbitt*, 285), a clear proof that he sees him as a lesser member. Orville Jones, the laundry owner, is also considered inferior, mainly because of the nature of his business (*Babbitt*, 86). Determining the exact hierarchy of the other members of the Roughnecks is much harder and the placement in the hierarchical structure of the dining group is very fluid in

³³ United States Government & United States Internal Revenue, *Statistics of Income*, Statistical Division, Income Tax Unit. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925. GPO, <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/22soirepar.pdf> (23.9.2019).

the case of George Babbitt. Babbitt co-owns a real-estate office and is very successful at selling the houses for an inflated price. He is very engaged with the local politics and during the mayoral election in Zenith, he is the precinct-leader for Floral Heights and gives fiery speeches in support of the anti-Labor representative, which earns him fame throughout not only Floral Heights but the entire city of Zenith.

Along with the Roughnecks there are two more men of interest, Dr. Dilling who is a surgeon and one of the more notable members of the Boosters' Club. The second person would be Colonel Rutherford Snow, the owner of the Zenith newspaper, the *Advocate-Times*. For sake of peace and security of the suburban community and Zenith, some members of the Floral Heights community formed what is known as the Good Citizens' League, which as I mentioned earlier, an anti-Labor movement created to maintain status quo in Zenith. The problem is that one has to be absolutely obedient conformist and must not deviate from social norms and requirements of the community and enforced by the League. The members of Good Citizens' League acquire political power through lobbying and boosting. Such practices allow them to blackmail the non-conforming individuals. This may be observed later in the novel, when Babbitt was a victim of this unfortunate power play which resulted in losing real estate deals from Zenith Street Traction Company. This absolute control of the societal norms and expectations of the Floral Heights suburb results in class as well as racial homogeneity, which according to Catherine Jurca, a literary scholar whose research focuses on suburbia, is the condition which "affords Babbitt the luxury of experimenting with resistance to his privileges."³⁴

Theodor Roosevelt Babbitt, the son of George Babbitt who is presumably inspired by his father's insurgency against Floral Heights, decides to terminate his college studies, which his parents, especially Babbitt wanted him to finish (*Babbitt*, 329). Ted sacrifices the chance to get a degree in order to pursue his interest in mechanics and intends to join one of the local factories, however he would only receive twenty dollars per week, which is approximately one third of an average salary in 1922.³⁵ Another aspect of Ted's non-conformist approach is his sudden marriage to his girlfriend Eunice Littlefield. What is more, they get married in secret and neither of the

³⁴ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-century American Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2001). 75.

³⁵ United States Government & United States Internal Revenue, *Statistics of Income*, Statistical Division, Income Tax Unit. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925. GPO, <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/22soirepar.pdf> (23.9.2019).

married couple have asked their parents for permission, which made all of them angry, with the exception of Babbitt who privately applauds his son's rebellion and approves of his career change, telling him that the world is his (*Babbitt*, 329).

The next character is Paul Riesling, George Babbitt's closest friend whom he always considered his little brother. Similarly to Babbitt, he is dissatisfied with the way his life unraveled and especially his employment. After college, Paul chose to build a stable career instead of pursuing his artistic passion. Although Paul is dissatisfied, he is a successful businessman and the members of the Athletic Club hold him in high esteem. Paul's income is the only source of money in his household, since his wife, Zilla is an unemployed housewife. During one argument, Paul shoot his Zilla, is arrested and sent to jail. Afterwards, he is branded a criminal, loses his social position and recognition in Floral Heights.

The last important male character, who appears in the novel is Seneca Doane, who, during the aforementioned elections is the Labor Party candidate. This shocked the Floral Heights and Doane was ostracized by the Roughnecks and the Good Citizen's League. Doane, is a lawyer and was in the same class at the State University as Babbitt. The fact that he has university education and a respected profession might be the reason people are surprised he chooses to be the candidate for the labor party and even marches with striking workers (*Babbitt*, 260). Doane is well respected among the workers of Zenith since he is one of the few middle-class men, who dares to support them.

To conclude, it is apparent that the almost every male character presented in the novel is a member of the suburban middle class. The majority of the men in *Babbitt* have high income, respected employments and are the main source of income for their families.

3.2 Roles and Influence of Women in *Babbitt*

In this chapter the focus will shift from the male inhabitants of Floral Heights to the female characters of the novel, their attitudes and social standing. This chapter will examine Myra Babbitt, Zilla Riesling and Tanis Judique, who will be compared to their younger contemporaries such as Verona Babbitt and Eunice Littlefield. I consider Myra, Zilla and Tanis to be the representatives of the older generation of women which can be designated as the “keepers” or “guardians” of the social norms, conventions and etiquette. This may be observed especially in Myra’s behavior when she urges George to wear a dinner-jacket instead of a regular suit for the occasion of dinner with distinguished guests (*Babbitt*, 11). This control over etiquette is the greatest power the women possess in the Floral Heights. Myra Babbitt is described as a good, kind, diligent woman, but ultimately nobody is interested in her and her life, which possibly is one of the reasons she becomes dissatisfied. Myra’s position as a member of the middle class is derived from Babbitt’s, she does not have a job and is fatigued by her role of a housewife in the homogenous environment of the Floral Heights suburb. She confesses to Babbitt:

I get so bored with ordering three meals a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, and ruining my eyes over that horrid sewing-machine, and looking after your clothes and Rone’s and Ted’s and Tinka’s and everybody’s, and the laundry, and darning socks, and going down to the Piggly Wiggly to market, and bringing my basket home to save money on the cash-and-carry and —*everything* (*Babbitt*, 291).

Not only is Myra bored with her role, but she is also dissatisfied with her everyday routine similarly to Babbitt and decides to start her own rebellion in search of empowerment. As was noted by Catherine Jurca, “although Myra has the chance to articulate her discontent with a busy and boring routine, her ‘small’ protest isn’t taken seriously.”³⁶ It is shut down by George who raises his voice at her. Her rebellion is not as impactful as her husband’s. Another way Myra has protested against the social expectations is telling her husband she is not content with the way he is free to roam around contrary to her. “You can run around with anybody you please, but I’m supposed to sit here and wait for you. You have the chance to get all sorts of culture and

³⁶ Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 59.

everything, and I just stay home” (*Babbitt*, 292). In other words, Myra is dissatisfied with the amount of personal freedom and personal responsibilities. She is expected to devote her entire being to the housework and family and as a result sacrifice her own aspirations.

Another character on the female list is Zilla Riesling, the wife of Paul Riesling. Zilla, similarly to other characters of the novel, is dissatisfied and fatigued by her stay-at-home lifestyle. This is observed by George Babbitt: “Poor Zilla, she’s so unhappy. She takes it out on Paul. She hasn’t a single thing to do, in that little flat. And she broods too much. And she used to be so pretty and gay, and she resents losing it” (*Babbitt*, 114). From the information presented to us by the narrator it is apparent that Zilla is a middle-class housewife, who however as a possible form of a protest decides not to partake in certain housekeeping activities, especially cooking. There is a specific scene, where Paul Riesling laments her attitude towards housework:

I don’t mind sitting down to burnt steak, with canned peaches and store cake for a thrilling little dessert afterwards, but I do draw the line at having to sympathize with Zilla because she’s so rotten bad-tempered that the cook has quit, and she’s been so busy sitting in a dirty lace negligée all afternoon, reading about some brave manly Western hero, that she hasn’t had time to do any cooking (*Babbitt*, 53).

Zilla appears to be arguably exploiting her good social position, which she acquired thanks to her husband. This luxury life ends for Zilla the moment Paul tries to take her life during one of their fights. The incident has taken a great toll on both her physical and mental state. In further parts of the book Zilla may be observed wearing cheap lace, when she has lost her middleclass position after separating from her husband.

The last female of the older generation that wish to discuss will be Tanis Judique. Tanis is a widow who Babbitt initially helped to find a new place to stay after her husband passed away. As to her social standing and position, her late husband left her a considerable sum, so she has not need to get a job. She has old-school opinions on women who “try to imitate men, and play golf and everything, and ruin their complexions and spoil their hands” (*Babbitt*, 234). On the one hand, she admires such emancipated women, but she considers them “mannish” and feels “weak and useless” next to them (*Babbitt*, 234). From these statements in the novel it may be observed that

she does not have any feminist or empowering opinions and she accepts her place at the late husband's side as any woman was supposed to according to social expectations of the early twentieth century.

Next character in question is Verona Babbitt, George Babbitt's oldest daughter. Since she received college education and is legally an adult, it is safe to assume she can make her own decisions, however all the manifestations of her individuality are constrained by her parents who press her into submission to societal norms. This may be observed in the description of her job. "Verona had for six months been filing-clerk at the Gruensberg Leather Company offices, with a prospect of becoming secretary to Mr. Gruensberg and thus, as Babbitt defined it, 'getting some good out of your expensive college education till you're ready to marry and settle down'" (*Babbitt*, 15). Verona's parents expect her to become fully diligent housewife once she finds a suitable husband, but she wishes to pursue a career path where she is able to help her community, specifically working at a charity. She presents this idea to her parents during one breakfast: "I was talking to a classmate of mine that's working for the Associated Charities — oh, Dad, there's the sweetest little babies that come to the milk-station there! — and I feel as though I ought to be doing something worth while like that" (*Babbitt*, 15). At the end, she did not apply for this job and eventually married a reporter who cooperated with Babbitt on one of his projects.

Lastly, there is Eunice Littlefield, a young, film-crazed girl with aspirations to become a movie star. At the beginning of the novel, Eunice is only sixteen years old at the beginning of the novel and her occupation is not mentioned, therefore it may be only assumed that she is still at school. When it comes to her social attitudes, she describes herself as a feminist, although she does not mention supporting emancipated women. She marries Theodor Roosevelt Babbitt without the consent of their parents.

The older generation of women act like de Beauvoir's "feminine women." While Myra and Tannis are dissatisfied with the lack of activities available to them, Zilla is the epitome of the destructive feminine woman who subconsciously forces her man to experience the same distress as she does.³⁷ On the other hand, the women of the younger generation act more emancipated than their mothers because they have more opportunities. Eunice calls herself a feminist, but she still expects to perform the role of a caretaker. (*Babbitt*, 312).

³⁷ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 674.

4 World War II and Its Effect on American Society

The Second World War was a traumatizing experience for humanity in ways the people could not even fathom before. The conflict was global in scale and it influenced every aspect of each and every country involved, no matter what is taken into consideration, whether it was art, social structures, industry or simple family bonds. The United States of America directly entered World War II on the 8th of December 1941 after the combined attack of Japanese Imperial Navy and Airforce on Pearl Harbor. This very act of aggression started massive industrial growth since United States Navy suffered most of the losses and the Pacific war effort absolutely depended on construction of new ships. After the surprise attack and the declaration of war, the men in the United States were subjected to massive draft. Around the year 1940, the United States Armed Forces were composed of mostly young men who grew up during the era of Great Depression.³⁸ What is more, after the Japanese attacks the draft numbers were exponentially increased: Bernard Rostker, former United States Under Secretary of the Army wrote: “On June 28, 1941, the President ordered that, during FY 1942, an additional 900,000 men would be “selected and inducted.”³⁹

This massive draft emptied the assembly halls and other industrial plants in America which resulted in an alarming lack of work force to feed the ever-hungry war machine. This is where the American women joined the course of the war. There were many ways women were allowed to join the war effort. At the time of war, women would collect scrap metal that would be used in various industries, they would be employed in the positions of the missing males for the time being or they would simply be recruited by the various branches of the armed forces. Every single way that was just mentioned offered the women of United States various benefits. The first benefit was a stable employment for the entire duration of the war and perhaps even after the war has ended. The second benefit women would enjoy is the empowerment of their own sex as well as the improvement of their social roles in the war period, since many of the women not only earned substantial amount of money but without excessive amount of males in the immediate vicinity they would find it much easier to keep their improved social statuses. Melissa McEuen a Professor of History at Transylvania University

³⁸ Bernard Rostker, “World War II,” chap. 8 in *Providing for the Casualties of War* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation 2013) 176. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt2tt90p.17>.

³⁹ Rostker, “Providing for the Casualties of War,” 177.

wrote: “Wage work in war industries offered hourly pay rates much higher than those to which most women had been accustomed.”⁴⁰ Drafting women to workplaces also introduced several, female specific problems, such as who would care for the children while the women are working. “Working women, especially mothers, faced great challenges during World War II. To try to address the dual role of women as workers and mothers, Eleanor Roosevelt urged her husband Franklin Delano Roosevelt to approve the first US government childcare facilities under the Community Facilities Act of 1942.”⁴¹ Except for the dual nature of being a mother, as well as a worker, there were other adversities women had to face such as regular stigma. “There was also some cultural resistance to women going to work in such male-dominated environments.”⁴² Fortunately, there was little people could do to dissuade women from helping the War effort. While American women worked diligently and with great passion, many of them retreated from their newly achieved social position after the war had ended and soldiers returned home. This unfortunate turn of events was discussed by Kossoudji and Dresser: “Women were heavily recruited into industry during war conversion (after Pearl Harbor) and returned to more traditional jobs or to homemaker status during and after reconversion (late 1944 and 1945). Forty-five years later we still do not understand why and how women gave up these lucrative industrial jobs.”⁴³

In conclusion it is important to note that social roles and standing of men and women drastically changed during the world war two for several reasons. First the men were drafted in massive numbers which had severe impact on the heavy industries such as construction of aircraft or ships that were essential for the United States armed forces. This resulted in shortage of workforce and increasing number of employed women. Women were high on the social ladder for the duration of the war but at the end many women were made redundant and males simply returned to their original positions.

⁴⁰ Melissa A. McEuen, “Women, Gender, and World War II,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, June 08, 2017, accessed April 24, 2019, <http://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-55>.

⁴¹ “American Women and World War II,” Khan Academy, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/rise-to-world-power/us-wwii/a/american-women-and-world-war-ii>.

⁴² “American Women and World War II,” Khan Academy.

⁴³ Sherrie A. Kossoudji and Laura J. Dresser, “Working Class Rosies: Women Industrial Workers during World War II,” *The Journal of Economic History* 52, no. 2 (June 1992): 431, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2123119>.

5 Roles of Men and Women in the Post-War Suburbia

Literature, similarly to any other form of art, gains inspiration from the geopolitical situation in its respective time period. This phenomenon naturally occurred in the case of post-war American literature. The United States ended the World War II in August 1945 and, except some reconstruction and occupation units in Japan, most of American servicemen including those in the European theatre of war returned home. It is imperative to mention that every soldier fighting for the United States had a salary, which allowed them to receive a mortgage and own land or a house. Thanks to the ownership of houses, the service men and their spouses could start families, which led to the phenomenon known as the “Baby Boom,” a massive increase in population which toppled the balance of power between men and women. Beuka notes, that the Baby Boom had the greatest influence on the gender roles after the World War II because by its nature it confined women to the newly acquired suburban houses and overloaded them with maternal responsibilities that the American public idolized. Women who were previously in much better socio-economic situation were ushered into the suburbs and expected to accept the life of house-wives. This started a new period which Beuka described as “significant for marking the return of ‘traditional’ family structure and gender identities”⁴⁴ It is also worth noting that “the suburbs isolated [women] from political, social, and financial power and segregated them from opportunities for employment, education, and cooperative parenting.”⁴⁵ The new suburban house-wives became an icon of American society, which many people hold dear even up to this day. In order to maintain this phenomenon of imbalance “the married woman of suburbia was at once a highly visible, even ‘targeted’ social phenomenon, while at the same time being conditioned to accept a role characterized by confinement and estrangement from the world outside the home.”⁴⁶ Beuka also made certain remarks about usage of various media and other new technologies: “As much as television helped to facilitate America’s psychic migration to suburbia, shaping gendered identities for decades to come, worth considering is the fact that the socialization of American women in the direction of this “new traditionalism” occurred in other discourses as well, in a process that had been ongoing since the war years.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Beuka, *Suburbanation*, 151.

⁴⁵ Beuka, *Suburbanation*, 151.

⁴⁶ Beuka, *Suburbanation*, 153.

⁴⁷ Beuka, *Suburbanation*, 153.

After the women were welcomed in their new containment it was possible for the males to return to their working stations and post which they had occupied before the Second World War. The male paranoia concluded with the Baby Boom, women were trapped in newly built Suburbs and their social roles vastly changed from factory workers that fueled the American war machine to house-wives with little to no aspirations.

5.1 *The Stepford Wives*

Ira Marvin Levin (1929–2007) was a New York-born American writer, who as one of the few found success not only in his novels, but in other fields of writing as well. The characteristics of his works were fittingly summarized by Steven Powell, a literary scholar specializing in crime fiction, who claims Levin was “an expert at the suspense thriller which contained elements of gothic horror and fantasy.”⁴⁸ Levin began his college studies at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa and later transferred to New York University. During his college studies, he attempted to begin his writing career by entering a screenwriting competition, which he did not win, but the National Broadcasting Company showed interest in his script, which was used in the *Lights Out* series, an American radio program dedicated to horror stories, but was also brought to television by the NBC. Two years after finishing his studies, Levin already had a comfortable income from writing television scripts. His first novel, *A Kiss Before Dying*, was published in 1953 and in 1954 he received the Edgar Allan Poe award for the Best First Novel. According to Powell, *A Kiss Before Dying* “establishes many of the motifs that feature in [Levin’s] later fiction, even those works which could be more easily categorised as horror and science fiction.”⁴⁹ This is especially true of *The Stepford Wives* in which shares with *A Kiss Before Dying* the motif of males stopping at nothing (including their wives’ lives) also. Levin went on to publish several other successful novels including, *Rosemary’s Baby* (1967), famously adapted one year later by Roman Polanski, *The Boys from Brazil* (1976), *Son of Rosemary* (1997) and his most famous novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972). Levin is considered an influential author especially in the genres of fantasy and horror.

⁴⁸ Steven Powell, ed., *100 American Crime Writers* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 204.

⁴⁹ Powell, ed., *100 American Crime Writers*, 204.

The Stepford Wives is a popular work of fiction that withstood the test of time and even received two movie adaptations, first in 1975 and then in 2004. One of the distinctive features of the novel is the fact that it was published during the beginning of the era of second wave feminism, which without a doubt influenced both the creation and the reception of the novel. While the novel was written with the feminist movement in mind, the critics did not accept it as easily as they accepted *Babbitt*. It was just after the publication of the novel when Shaun O’Connell, a critic with an unsympathetic attitude towards the novel wrote that “the Women’s Liberation movement, like other legitimate social grievances ranging from black exploitation to ecological devastation, has been subjected to media rip-offs, hustlers who make a buck selling pieces of the true cross they pretend to bear. Perhaps Ira Levin is the worst offender, so his novel should be called to testify first, tried, quickly taken out and shot.”⁵⁰ This quotation makes it apparent that *The Stepford Wives* induced unprecedented response amongst literary critics and in feminist circles.

But the novel did not receive only negative feedback. Jane Elliott, notable educator, feminist and anti-racism activist raises two very good points about the novel. Firstly, she states that “*The Stepford Wives* was in fact rather more faithful to the popular feminist discourse of its day than its critics were willing to accept at the time.”⁵¹ Secondly, she tries to identify the cause behind the backlash. In her opinion, the causation of the initial backlash of the novel was quite possibly the one-sided view of the discourse. Even though Elliott’s paper discusses the 1975 adaptation, I believe her opinion is true for the novel as well. “The decidedly mainstream *Stepford Wives* . . . took evident pains to present itself as a genuine participant in the controversial discourse of second-wave feminism.”⁵² This is the example of the claims that appeared after the initial backlash from the women liberation movement subsided and as one can see these claims are much less emotional and try to provide constructive criticism of the novel. Natalie Neill, a literary scholar specializing in satire and women’s studies, offers plausible explanation of the conflicting public opinions on the novel. According to her, *The Stepford Wives* is “marked by destabilizing satire and irony, which has the effect of

⁵⁰ Shaun O’Connell, “American Fiction, 1972: The Void in the Mirror,” *The Massachusetts Review* 14, no. 1 (1973): 191, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25088333>.

⁵¹ Jane Elliott, “Stepford U.S.A: Second-Wave Feminism, Domestic Labor, and the Representation of National Time,” *Cultural Critique* 70, no. 1 (2008): 35, doi:10.1353/cul.0.0022.

⁵² Elliott, “Stepford U.S.A”, 35.

opening the meanings of the text.”⁵³ She uses the “extravagantly villainous” portrayal of the Men’s Association and the artificiality of the wives she describes as “horrifyingly vacuous” as examples of Levin’s usage of satire, which for her is the reason why the novel was accused of being both anti-male and anti-feminist at the same time.⁵⁴

The Stepford Wives stirred some unexpected negative responses immediately after its publication, however the novel does possess some redeeming qualities, such as phenomenal usage of satire. As Jane Elliott wrote: “Fittingly enough, *The Stepford Wives* generates its horror-story double of women’s lib politics primarily through suggestive use of the uncanny. When heroine Joanna Ingalls moves from New York City to the suburb of Stepford with her husband and two kids, a certain eerie sameness soon suggests to her that something is rotten in the state of Stepford.”⁵⁵

5.2 Roles and Influence of Men in *The Stepford Wives*

The portrayals of men in *The Stepford Wives* are fairly limited, even though the novel deals with the topic of coexistence of the two sexes. This subchapter will deal with social influence of men in the town as well as selected members of the Stepford’s male-exclusive association, namely Walter Eberhart, Ike Mazzard, Dale Coba, Claude Axhelm, Herb Sundersen and Frank Roddenberry. It is important to note that the lives of men are much less examined in the novel as opposed to the lives of women. Most men who live in Stepford have a prestigious occupation in one of the various technological companies in the vicinity of the suburb. Men spend their leisure time in the Men’s Association, while their wives dedicate their entire time to various toil around the household. I perceive the Men’s Association of Stepford to be one of Levin’s tools he uses to make the men of Stepford look united and more threatening to self-aware individuals. The Association uses secrecy in form of isolation from women, and deception in order to achieve their goals. The good example would be Claude Axhelm tricking the women into recording their voices for their robots and camouflage it as a side project of his.

Similarly to Axhelm, Ike Mazzard hides his true intentions while sketching Joanna, which makes her uncomfortable, she feels “naked,” as if he was “drawing her in

⁵³ Neill, “The Stepford Frankensteins,” 265.

⁵⁴ Neill, “Frankensteins,” 265.

⁵⁵ Elliott, “Stepford U.S.A.,” 36.

obscene poses.”⁵⁶ It is possible, that he is not just sketching her, but her robotic replacement. Such is the work of Men’s Association, which I consider to be antagonistic force in this novel. Diana Meyers, professor of philosophy at the University of Connecticut noted that, the men of Stepford “spare themselves the bother of loving and engaging with women who have their own points of view.”⁵⁷ This claim by Meyers may be supported by the fact that Dale Coba did not even bother looking at Joanna when she was making her contributions to the discussion in her and Walter’s house. “She took part in the talk about them, and the men (except Coba, damn him) paid close attention to her” (*Wives*, 31).

I will now introduce several male characters, who are critical to the novel and are worth examining. The first character worth noting is Walter Eberhart, the husband of the protagonist, Joanna Eberhart. His physical appearance is mostly unknown with the exception of his eye color which is blue. Walter is a lawyer, most likely a corporate lawyer, and has an office in one of the large companies that surround the suburb of Stepford. Walter’s occupation grants him elevated social status and considerable amount of money, which he and Joanna use for acquiring their house in Stepford. He is presented as a loving father and devoted husband and his and Joanna’s marriage initially appears very idyllic from her description: “How many times had she gone to bed alone since they were married? . . . Maybe twenty or twenty-five times in all, in the ten years and a little more” (*Wives*, 16). As the novel progresses, Walter expresses his dissatisfaction with Joanna’s appearance: “It wouldn’t hurt you to look in a mirror once in a while” (*Wives*, 98). This statement ignites Joanna’s mistrust, since it was Walter’s idea to move into Stepford. Walter could be potentially unhappy in his marriage which could let one to believe that he had orchestrated Joanna’s change in advance. This could be supported by the fact that Walter was dismissive of Joanna’s every theory on what is going on in the suburb. He says that there is “nothing in the water,” and “nothing in the air,” all the women merely changed because they realized their laziness and negligence (*Wives*, 97). While Walter Eberhart initially appears as a good father and a partner it seems he has kept all his dissatisfactions to himself and created a plan to turn Joanna into a robot, so they achieve their “happily ever after” from Walter’s twisted point of view.

⁵⁶ Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (London: Corsair, 2011), 33. From now on cited in text as *Wives*.

⁵⁷ Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Whos There? Selfhood, Self-Regard, and Social Relations," *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (2005): 208, accessed April 24, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810896>.

The next person for examination will be the magazine illustrator Ike Mazzard. While he is portrayed as unthreatening and unlike other men listens to what Joanna has to say, he is arguably the creator of the blueprints according to which the other males construct the robots in the Men's Association. His sketches of the women of Stepford are rather flattering and improve certain features of them. Women get to keep the small sketches which hint their impending forceful turn.

Next character for discussion is Herbert Sundersen. From some old newspapers the Joanna learns, it is mentioned that "Mr. Sundersen designs optical sensors for Ulitz Optics, Inc." (*Wives*, 112). It appears that Sundersen's occupation is a form of engineering. During his introduction, the reader was presented with peculiar detail, where Sundersen has trouble maintaining eye contact when he speaks with Joanna, instead "looking elsewhere" (*Wives*, 30). This could indicate he simply has no interest in talking to Joanna, who is still herself which corresponds to Meyers's aforementioned claims. Additionally, Sundersen is one of the core members of the Stepford's Men's Association and is almost certainly related to the process of turning the women into robots as can be seen when he and other men search for escaping Joanna.

Another notable male character is Dale Coba, the president of the Stepford's Men's Association. Coba is described as tall, dark haired and laxly arrogant (*Wives*, 29). He moved to Stepford with his wife and two sons, Dale and Darren. Coba is very well educated, in one of the old local newspapers read by the protagonist it is mentioned that "Mr. Coba did postgraduate work at the California Institute of Technology. For the past six years he worked in 'audioanimatronics' at Disneyland, helping to create the moving and talking presidential figures featured in the August number of National Geographic" (*Wives*, 112). At the time of the novel, Coba is employed at Burnham-Massey-Microtech, one of the corporations neighboring Stepford. The reader is also presented with Coba's leisure pursuits such as piano playing and hunting. This creates the image of a rather sophisticated individual. Coba also takes part in community activities and civic duties, such as helping Stepford's Historical Society with construction of a historical cottage and acquiring resources for charity. In this respect, Dale Coba's position and influence is very similar to that of Vergil Gunch from Lewis's *Babbitt*. Similarly to Gunch, he is the leader of a secular group of men and his leadership comes most probably from initiating various actions around the suburb. Given his profession it is entirely possible that the entire Stepford robot program was initiated by Dale Coba.

Next senior member of the Stepford Men's Association is Frank Roddenberry. Roddenberry, is one of the few male characters, whose physical appearance is described, he has rather unthreatening visage, flat nose and a minor speech impediment. Roddenberry works for the CompuTech Corporation's systems development laboratory as an associate chief. His prestigious engineering occupation and the fact that he was one of the men, who were searching for Joanna when she ran away, indicates that Frank is another crucial element in Men's Association alteration program.

Lastly, there is Claud Axhelm. Axhelm is described as thin, blond, bright-eyed and restless. Axhelm, like Dale Coba, is employed at Burnham-Massey-Microtech. Axhelm visits the Stepford women, including Bobbie and Joanna, asking them to record themselves reading various sentences. He is masking this as a hobby project of his, yet it is apparent, he is recording the women in order to receive enough data so he could replicate their voices for the fembots the Association replaces them with. If one takes his engineering occupation and his side project into account, it is possible to conclude Axhelm is a key figure in this alteration program.

It is apparent that the men of Stepford are afraid of their self-aware partners and that is the reason they try to change them into robots. There is one particular scene at the beginning of the novel, where the Men's Association visits Joannas and Walter's house. Some members, namely Herb Sundersen and Claude Axhelm are described as restless and "nervous-seeming" (*Wives*, 30). It is as if the members of the Men's Association are no longer used to interacting with normal women and have troubles maintaining their composure in order not to compromise their master plan.

The lives of men are much less examined in the novel as opposed to the lives of women. Levin possibly decided not to reveal as much to maintain the eerie atmosphere as long as possible. The men are hiding beyond the veil of the Men's Association a secretive, anti-women organization that changes all women into robots. Men of Stepford usually have high-paying jobs in the vicinity of the suburb, own large houses and cars and therefore have a high social status. What is more, their wives are not employed which makes the men the sole bread-winners of the families. However, unlike the changed, robotized women, men still attend to their hobbies and habits but most importantly, men as opposed to women have a free will. All of the above indicates, that the men of Stepford have much better occupation, social standing and quality of life as opposed to women of Stepford.

5.3 Roles and Influence of Women in *The Stepford Wives*

There is an alarming difference between the social roles and standing of men and women in Stepford. Most women of Stepford were stripped of any privileges and even the most emancipated ones somehow turned into obedient housewives or replaced by robotic doppelgängers. Levin does not describe how exactly the women are changed in the novel. My interpretation is that the women are replaced by human-like robots and the professions and skills of the members of the Men's Association listed in the chapter above suggest as much. The turned women all behave in the same way, they lack interest in politics, feminism and everything else except activities stereotypically associated with being a mother and housewife. In the opening of the novel, the protagonist encounters several women, yet all give her the same impression: "The women she had met in the past few days, the ones in the nearby houses, were pleasant and helpful enough, but they seemed completely absorbed in their household duties" (*Wives*, 2). The women of Stepford even look all the same, Joanna describes them as "actresses in commercials, pleased with detergents and floor wax, with cleansers, shampoos, and deodorants" (*Wives*, 49). When Joanna wants to organize the women to potentially storm the Men's Association for excluding women, the women of Stepford use the same excuse: that they have too much housework to do (*Wives*, 25). There are also women in *The Stepford Wives* that have yet to be turned into robots. These women, unlike the fembots show healthy initiative, have hobbies and are interested in politics. Among these women belong Joanna Eberhart, Bobbie Markowe and Charmaine Wimperis.

Joanna Eberhart is the protagonist of the novel. She is a quite capable, unorthodox woman that only recently moved into the Stepford. Joanna makes her living as a semi-professional photographer and a number of her photos were printed in notable press or sold. In her spare time, she likes to tend to her hobbies such as tennis or photography. Joanna is also avid supporter of the Women's Liberation Movement and likes to divide household duties equally between herself and her husband. This may be observed since the very beginning of the novel where it is clearly stated that "it was Walter's turn to do the dishes" (*Wives*, 5). Joanna is naturally inquisitive person. From the beginning she notices the unnatural dedication of local women to their housekeeping duties and she launches her own investigation. Another of Joanna's virtues is that she is a very good conversationalist and she is not afraid to tackle difficult topics. During the visit of several Men's Association members in her home, Joanna gladly takes over the

conversation and suggests organizing evening lectures or programs for parents and teenagers “on any subject there's general interest in” (*Wives*, 31). Joana struggles bravely against the Men’s Association, but in the end she is turned into a robot as well. After the change, she gives up her part time job as a photographer. When she was questioned why, she simply states, “I wasn’t especially talented, and I was wasting a lot of time I really have better uses for” (*Wives*, 137). Since Joanna’s photos were used by notable press as well as sold frequently, it can be deduced that this statement absolutely untrue. Joanna’s response is suddenly the same as the other Stepford women’s, similar to an automated.

Next character in the novel is Bobbie Markowe. She, along with Charmaine Wimperis, expresses her surprise to see another “unorthodox” female in the suburb and helps Joanna become friends with Charmaine. Bobbie has no occupation other than maintaining the house and care for her children, but unlike her neighbors, Bobbie does not possess the cleaning spirit of the Stepford housewives. “What a pleasure to see a messy kitchen!” Bobbie says when she first visits Joanna’s house. “It doesn’t quite come up to mine—you don’t have the little peanut-butter handprints on the cabinets—but it’s good, it’s very good. Congratulations” (*Wives*, 20). It could be argued that Bobbie chooses this attitude towards cleaning as some sort of protest since she was thrown into the suburban environment. Bobbie is a mother of two boys Adam and Kenny, who after she changed simply came to terms with it since in this state she is more attentive, “doesn’t shout” and “makes hot breakfasts” (*Wives*, 103). Before she changes, Bobbie is a member of the National Organization for Women, similarly to Joanna and helps Joanna with uncovering the secrets of Stepford. After Bobbie changes, the reader may observe a drastic difference, between her laidback self and the new fembot, obsessed with housework. She tells Joanna, “Yes, I’ve changed. I realized I was being awfully sloppy and self-indulgent. It’s no disgrace to be a good homemaker” (*Wives*, 93). Then she no longer shows any interest in the Women’s Movement and she breaks contact with Joanna.

Next woman which appeared in the novel is Charmaine Wimperis. Charmaine is a wife to a television producer and a mother to a nine-year-old son. She is an ardent tennis player with her very own court where plays with either local teenagers or rarely some Stepford women that have yet to change, such as Joanna and Bobbie. Her big interest is astrology and she religiously recites the horoscopes to her guests with witty remarks and other commentary. As opposed to Joanna, Charmaine is not as interested in

the Women's Liberation Movement and politics and prefers her relaxed, occasionally sporty lifestyle. She spends most of her time in her and her husband's villa. Charmaine has a maid who does the housework, cooking or preparing beverages for the guests. This indicates a high social status of their family and that Charmaine does not have to do housework or take care for her own guests. Halfway through the novel Charmaine's behavior unexpectedly changes because she is replaced by a fembot. Similarly to other women who were turned into robots, she completely loses interest in her previous hobbies. She even gives up her tennis court because her husband, who she previously did not have a very good relationship with, wants a putting green (*Wives*, 61).

To conclude, women in Stepford lead stereotypical lives. The majority is obsessed with housework and had no interest in any leisure activities. Bobby and Charmaine used to spend most of their time at their homes, since they have no profession to keep them busy, yet did not zealously clean the house like the majority of the female population. Given the fact, the women of Stepford usually had no careers to pursue unlike the men, which had prestigious careers it is apparent the women had lesser, submissive social positions as housekeepers and because they did not want to submit to it willingly, they were replaced with robots by the Men's Association.

6 Comparison of the Characters

As the reader may have noticed, the characters in *Babbitt* and *The Stepford Wives* share several similarities and differences. In this chapter, I will compare the two texts in terms of their portrayal of the relationships between men and women.

In his introduction to *Babbitt*, Kenneth Krauss identifies the need for men to assert themselves as men as an important theme of the novel.⁵⁸ However, the men in both *Babbitt* and *The Stepford Wives* seek to assert dominance over anyone, but it is easiest for them to assert dominance over women. As Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, men tend to compare themselves to women, in order to boost their egos and it makes them feel as if they are “demigods.”⁵⁹

The men in both novels also share their image of the ideal woman. She should be young, beautiful, well dressed, unambitious and submissive and most importantly, she only gives and requires nothing in return. This type of woman is something Betty Friedan calls the “truly feminine woman.”⁶⁰ An illustrative example of such a woman is the fairy child who appears in Babbitt’s dreams and who admires him and considers him “valiant” (*Babbitt*, 4). Later on, Babbitt breaks contact with his lover Tanis Judique after she begins to make demands his wife (who he escaped from to Tanis) would make. The fembots in *The Stepford Wives* are also great examples of such image since most of them look like “actresses in TV commercials” (*Wives*, 107).

Another similarity between the texts is that men tend to meet in various organizations as opposed to women. Such organizations boost their confidence so they can feel like “he-men,” (*Babbitt*, 158) they smoke together and trade stories (*Babbitt*, 143) or they plot the downfall of the other sex as the Stepford men do in their Men’s Association. In *Babbitt*, the narrator claims that “of a decent man in Zenith it was required that he should belong to one, preferably two or three, of the innumerable ‘lodges’” (*Babbitt*, 170). The influence of these organizations is inescapable. If a man is not a member of an organization, he should be because it is expected of a good citizen and because the organizations will use drastic methods to force individuals into submission. A great example of this would be Babbitt losing the trade opportunities after he initially refuses to join the Good Citizens’ League. Walter in *The Stepford*

⁵⁸ Kenneth Kraus, Introduction, xxvii.

⁵⁹ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 23.

⁶⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1974), 11.

Wives initially does not want to join the Men's Association but is soon persuaded by the members that there are "too many important things centered there" (*Wives*, 6). Those who already are members must act and even think in accordance with the organization's ideals. In *Babbitt*, the suburbanites and club members are expected to read the *Advocate-Times*, owned by the conformists, and Babbitt's rebellion is cut short by the members of the Good Citizens' League which he is later forced to join. In *The Stepford Wives*, Walter is quickly persuaded to join and at the end of the novel, the newest male inhabitant of Stepford is described as reading Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups*, a 1969 book on male bonding, possibly a required reading assigned to new members by the Association (*Wives*, 138). Additionally, all these men's organizations in *Babbitt* and *The Stepford Wives* hold alarmingly great power. The Men's Association is able to create robots which cannot be distinguished from human beings and the Good Citizens' League effectively controls the entire city of Zenith through their political influence.

Men are bullied into conformity by these powerful organizations and women are forced to conform by their husbands. Absolute submission to the husband and complete devotion to homemaking is expected of married women and those who do not conform have a miserable time in both texts. Paul loses his temper with Zilla's maladjustment to her housewife role and nearly kills her. Myra, in comparison, allows her husband to have his way. In *The Stepford Wives*, all independent thinking women, including those that are university-educated or members of emancipation organizations, are replaced by fembots. They are forced by drastic methods to be happy in their total submission and fulfil the unrealistic ideal. Friedan says that the women who would conform so fully are basically crossing the line between "the human being and the machine,"⁶¹ which, in the case of *The Stepford Wives*, is what literally happens.

Simone de Beauvoir states a similar point in her comparison of the "feminine" woman and the "emancipated" woman.⁶² Neither of these women is happy. The feminine woman wants to deprive her partner of his freedom by being unpleasant and demanding and the emancipated woman "prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men."⁶³ The emancipated woman is threatening the man's superiority because she sees herself as an individual who has the right to have all the freedom he does. According to Beauvoir's terminology, the women in *The*

⁶¹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 301.

⁶² De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 674.

⁶³ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 675.

Stepford Wives, like Joanna, are emancipated. They threaten their husbands' superiority by expecting them to share housework duties (*Wives*, 5) and creating private spaces, like Joanna's dark room in the cellar or Charmaine's tennis court, where they can work or do their hobbies. In *Babbitt*, there are more examples of the feminine women. Unlike Friedan, de Beauvoir perceives this type of woman negatively as destructive. Zilla Riesling is an example of such a woman. She repeatedly argues with Paul and accuses him of infidelity until Paul loses his temper and shoots her. Babbitt later comments that she "got what was coming to her" (*Babbitt*, 221).

As there are similarities between each of the two sexes across the texts, there are also differences. In *Babbitt*, the male has enough authority to dismiss and silence his wife by himself, however in *The Stepford Wives*, the husband needs the help of the Men's Association to deal with his wife, because the emancipation and independence of the women is more advanced. One of de Beauvoir's claims can be applied here: the "woman [is] ordered back into the home the more harshly as her emancipation [becomes] a real menace."⁶⁴ Additionally, in *Babbitt* it may be observed, that the ideal middle-class way of life in the suburbs is simply unachievable due to the fact that women will be inherently dissatisfied with the roles they were forced into. *The Stepford Wives* amplifies this fact by removing the free will of the woman and replacing her with Friedan's "the truly feminine woman." Now the man is happy, the wife is satisfied by default and there are no arguments or fights. The ideal life is achieved but only because the individuality of the woman is sacrificed and she is replaced by a robot.

As it was established earlier, both men and women are in the end forced into conformity. Both sexes also think their daily tasks are repetitive and wish to live different lives, ideally that of their partners. This can be observed for example in Babbitt's argument with Myra (*Babbitt*, 291–292). Women need to deal with housework, meeting the same people in the neighborhood, and they perceive the man's life as much more eventful. On the other hand, men need to spend considerable time at work where they meet the same types of people. Babbitt envies Myra her peaceful life. De Beauvoir comments on these arguments that men see women as privileged because they do not have to carry as much responsibility as them.⁶⁵ Babbitt laments that he is tired of being responsible for his wife, his children and his mother because he thinks they are ungrateful and only call him "an old grouch" (*Babbitt*, 194).

⁶⁴ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 22.

⁶⁵ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 677.

Even though *Babbitt* and *The Stepford Wives* were written fifty years apart, it can be seen that in both novels the men and women face the same or very similar challenges. The submissive unambitious female is still the ideal in spite of the changes in employment and women's social status which were brought by World War II and second wave feminism. In other words, their social status might have improved during those fifty years but their social roles did not change. I argue that this happened for the reason stated by de Beauvoir: a historical event cannot change how a woman is expected to behave because her subordination to man is seen as a "natural condition."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 18.

7 Conclusion

Conformity is a crucial theme in both *Babbitt* and *The Stepford Wives* and it is the key element in the dissatisfaction of the females as well as males.⁶⁷ The women are forced to conform by men and men are forced to conform by the men-only organizations they themselves create which results in widespread dissatisfaction in suburbanites and gives birth to Betty Friedan's "mystique." In *Babbitt*, the life of the "ideal citizen" (*Babbitt*, 152) that is revered is ultimately unachievable. In his popular speeches on the ideal citizen, Babbitt describes a man who is fulfilled by his business job and domestic life but in reality, not even Babbitt himself is actually happy living such a life. He is truly happy only in the company of other men, especially his best friend Paul. He feels the same as the man he meets at a party who when he gets drunk, confesses that he gave up on his dream job, settled down with a wife and gets "so tired of going home every evening, and nothing to see but the movies" (*Babbitt*, 143). *The Stepford Wives* imply that the ideal life can be achieved but only after the woman is turned into an obedient robot, therefore it is unachievable by regular means.

Although both authors are men, they have incredible understanding of women's plights and feminist issues of their respective periods. When it comes to Sinclair Lewis, it could be even said that he was ahead of his time because Myra already suffers from the feminine mystique described forty years later by Betty Friedan. *The Stepford Wives* engages with the insecurities surrounding what Kate Millett in 1970 famously called "sexual politics" and what second wave feminists discussed in their many theoretical writings: the "power-structured relationships" or "arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another."⁶⁸

Men tend to gather in various clubs and associations because they believe it is the right thing to do and it was always done this way. These groups and associations enforce conformity on them and in return the men enforce conformity on their wives. Example of this is the men insisting on their wives' dressing up as when Walter tells Joanna she should "put on a little lipstick once in a while" (*Wives*, 100) or complaining to their friends that they do not, for example when Paul complains about his wife's habit of "sitting in a dirty lace negligée all afternoon" (*Babbitt*, 53). Since men tend to force

⁶⁷ Beuka, *Suburbanation*, 6.

⁶⁸ Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 23.

everyone even themselves into submission only because they believe it is a norm and the right thing to do then they are not that different from the robotic wives in Stepford.

It could be said that while the social status of middle-class women improved after World War II because they are no longer second-class citizens and can vote and work, the social role women are supposed to perform remained the same: a home-maker zealously dedicated to her husband and children with no aspirations and dreams of her own. Before World War II, Babbitt can force his wife to conform to his domestic ideals by shouting at her and Zilla who refuses to do so lives in poverty after Paul leaves her. Because of the changes in social structure after World War II, women's status is much more similar to men's and a secretive organization like the Men's Association has to step in and deal with the Stepford's men's emancipated, free thinking wives for them in order to keep the social roles identical to those before the war, under the pressure of second wave feminism.

8 Resumé

Předměstí či satelitní města (v angličtině suburbs) jsou fenomén, který není v České republice tak rozšířený jako ve Spojených státech. Když jsem kolem roku 2010 setkal s několika americkými studenty na výměnném pobytu vyslovili své překvapení z náhlého konce měst, které nebyly lemovány předměstími, jako to je v jejich rodné zemi. Je to převážně tím, že v Česku se místo satelitních měst vystavovaly panelové domy v brutalistickém stylu. Tato vzpomínka a seminář Mgr. Jiřího Flajšara, Ph.D. o předměstské literatuře mě inspirovaly, abych se věnoval tomuto tématu.

V této práci se zaměřuji na porovnání sociálních rolí mužů a žen v americké předměstské literatuře před a po druhé světové válce. Jako primární zdroje jsem zvolil román Sinclaira Lewise, *Babbitt* (1922, česky 1928) a *Stepfordské Paničky* od Iry Levina (1972, česky 1975). Tyto romány mají značný časový rozestup, ale je mezi nimi více podobností, než se na první pohled může zdát.

Nejdříve, je nutno podotknout, že oba romány se odehrávají v předměstském prostředí, o kterém akademici tvrdí, že to je definující element těchto příběhů, a oba americkou předměstskou kulturu silně satirizují. I když jsou napsány muži, mají výborný přehled o ženské a feministické problematice svojí doby. Jako výborný pozorovatel dění ve společnosti, Lewis popsal u svých ženských postav nespokojenost s rolí ženy v domácnosti, kterou Betty Friedanová identifikovala až o čtyři dekády později.

Metodu, kterou jsem zvolil, je porovnání mých poznatků z primární literatury s významnými feministickými texty, především *Druhé pohlaví* Simone de Beauvoirové (1949, česky 1966) a *Feminine mystique* Betty Friedanové (1963, česky 2002). Tyto texty jsem zvolil, protože jsou oba důležité pro americkou druhou vlnu feminismu, zabývají jak rolí ženy ve společnosti tak jejím vztahem s mužem a *Stepfordské paničky* přímo zmiňují oba tyto feministické texty. Levin použil jako epigraf ke *Stepfordským paničkám* citát z *Druhého pohlaví*, ve kterém de Beauvoirová srovnává „emancipovanou“ ženu, která se považuje za muže rovnou, s ženou „femininní“, která vnímá mužovu nadřazenost a chce ji zničit.

V práci jsem došel k závěru, že konformita, tedy podléhání jedince sociálnímu tlaku, který představuje všeobecně rozšířené normy, pravidla apod. je důležitou součástí obou románů a také má důležitý vliv na sociální role v nich popisované. Ženy jsou nuceny podlehnout společenským normám a stereotypům svými muži, zatímco muži

jsou donuceni ke konformitě různými organizacemi, které sami vytvářejí. Tato konformita je důležitým faktorem, způsobujícím nespokojenost obou pohlaví s předměstským životem střední třídy.

Sociální status žen střední třídy se po druhé světové válce značně zlepšil a již nebyly považovány za druhořadé občany, protože již mohly volit a pracovat, avšak sociální role, kterou mají ženy podle společnosti splňovat, je stále stejná: rodině oddaná „hospodyňka“, která nemá žádné vlastní sny a ambice. Před druhou světovou válkou, mohl George Babbitt svoji ženu poměrně snadno přinutit, aby se podřídila jeho představě o životě v domácnosti, protože na něm byla závislá, neměla vlastní příjem a často ani vzdělání k tomu, aby se sama uživila, což se pro vdanou ženu ze střední třídy ani nehodilo. Díky změnám v sociální struktuře způsobených druhou světovou válkou se sociální status žen zlepšil téměř na mužskou úroveň, proto se muži ve *Stepfordských paničkách* rozhodnout své emancipované manželky nahradit roboty, aby mohli snadněji zachovat předválečné role v domácnosti a nemuseli např. vykonávat část domácích prací, na které jejich zaměstnaná manželka nemá čas.

Tato práce je rozdělená na několik kapitol. V druhé kapitole představují koncept předměstí, či satelitních měst a jejich evoluci ve světě a ve Spojených státech amerických. Předměstí jsou daleko starší, než si lidé myslí, právě v druhé kapitole poukazují na studie, které dokazují přítomnost předměstí až v pátém století př.n.l. Ani americká satelitní města nebyla vždy tak homogenní jak dnes. Popravdě prvotní stavby na okrajích města měly imitovat Evropské vilové čtvrti, avšak nedostatek volných bytů po druhé světové válce způsobil rapidní výstavbu unifikovaných satelitních měst.

Třetí kapitola pojednává o mužích a ženách v románu Harryho Sinclaire Lewise *Babbitt*. Tento román je satirickým portrétem Americké maloměstské kultury a podle některých kritiků i Lewisovým nejlepším satirickým dílem. Čtvrtá kapitola pojednává o efektech druhé světové války na americkou společnost. Když muži byly naverbováni do armády a rozesláni na frontu, ženy dostaly podnět k tomu, aby se ve velkém nechaly zaměstnat v továrnách a přispívaly tak válečné produkci. Jejich nově nabyté zaměstnání a vyšší platy jsou právě to, co zajistilo nárůst ženského sociálního statusu. Pátá kapitola pojednává o mužích a ženách v románu Iry Levina *Stepfordské paničky*. Tato kniha je stejně jako *Babbitt* značně satirická, avšak má unikátní hororovou atmosféru, která čtenáře napne po celou dobu četby. Šestá kapitola porovnává muže a ženy z výše zmíněných románů a porovnává je s feministickými texty de Beauvoirové a Friedanové.

Právě v této kapitole odhaluji, že žádná historická událost nejspíše neovlivní rozdělení společenských rolí mezi muži a ženami, jelikož tyto role jsou i podle de Beauvoirové rozděleny na základě Fyziologických rozdílů mezi pohlavími a ne jinak.

9 Bibliography

Primary Sources

Levin, Ira. *The Stepford Wives*. London: Corsair, 2011.

Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. Edited by Gordon Hutner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Secondary Sources

“American Women and World War II.” Khan Academy. Accessed April 24, 2019.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/rise-to-world-power/us-wwii/a/american-women-and-world-war-ii>.

Ames, David L., and Linda Flint McClelland. “Historic Residential Suburbs.” *National Register Bulletin*, September 2002, 1–22.

<https://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/suburbs>.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by M.H. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956.

Beuka, Robert. *Suburbanation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Connell, Shaun. “American Fiction, 1972: The Void in the Mirror.” *The Massachusetts Review* 14, no. 1 (1973): 190–207. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25088333>.

Conroy, Stephen S. “Sinclair Lewis' Sociological Imagination.” *American Literature* 42, no. 3 (1970): 348–362. doi:10.2307/2923910.

Cowan, Ruth Schwartz. “Two Washes in the Morning and a Bridge Party at Night: The American Housewife between the Wars.” *Women's Studies* 3, no. 2 (1976): 147–171. doi: 10.1080/00497878.1976.9978384.

Craig, Lois. “Suburbs.” *Design Quarterly*, no. 132 (1986): 1–15. doi:10.2307/4091157.

Elliott, Jane. “Stepford U.S.A: Second-Wave Feminism, Domestic Labor, and the Representation of National Time.” *Cultural Critique* 70, no. 1 (2008): 32–62. doi:10.1353/cul.0.0022.

Fisher, Joel. “Sinclair Lewis and the Diagnostic Novel: Main Street and Babbitt.” *Journal of American Studies* 20, no. 3 (1986): 421–433. doi:10.1017/s0021875800012755.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1974.

- “The GI Bill.” Khan Academy. Accessed May 10, 2019.
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/postwarera/a/the-gi-bill>.
- Gray, Richard John. *A History of American Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008.
- “The History and Evolution of Suburbs.” Colin Stief. Thoughtco. August 15, 2018.
 Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/overview-of-suburbs-1435799>.
- Hutchisson, James M. “All of Us Americans at 46”: The Making of Sinclair Lewis' “Babbitt.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 18, no. 1 (1992). 95–114.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3831549>.
- Hutner, Gordon. Introduction to *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis, vii–xviii. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Jurca, Catherine. *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-century American Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Kossoudji, Sherrie A., and Laura J. Dresser. “Working Class Rosies: Women Industrial Workers during World War II.” *The Journal of Economic History* 52, no. 2 (June 1992): 431–46. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2123119>.
- Krauss, Kenneth. Introduction to *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis, xiii–xxx. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2005.
- McEuen, Melissa A. “Women, Gender, and World War II.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. June 08, 2017.
<http://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-55>.
- Mencken, Henry Lois. “Portrait of an American Citizen.” *The Smart Set* 69, no. 2 (October 1922): 138–40.
- Meyers, Diana Tietjens. “Whos There? Selfhood, Self-Regard, and Social Relations.” *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (2005): 200–215.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810896>.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Neill, Natalie. “The Stepford Frankensteins: Feminism, Frankenstein, and The Stepford Wives.” *The Journal of American Culture* 41, no. 3 (2018): 257–266.

- Neimneh, Shadi. "Modern Times, Modern Satire, and Modern 'Babbitt.'" *Research Gate*. 2013.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260024085_Modern_Times_Modern_Satire_and_Modern_Babbitt. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jacc.12934>.
- Nicolaides, Becky, and Andrew Wiese. "Suburbanization in the United States after 1945." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, April 2017.
[doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.64](https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.64).
- "The Nobel Prize in Literature 1930." NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB. Accessed October 30, 2019. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1930/summary/>.
- Powell, Steven, ed. *100 American Crime Writers*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Rostker, Bernard. "World War II." Chapter 8 in *Providing for the Casualties of War*, 175–177. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt2tt90p.17>.
- Ruland, Richard, and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: a History of American Literature*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1992.

10 Annotation

Name: Petr Chromec

Department: Department of English and American Studies

Title: Fifty Years of American Suburbia: A Comparison of the Social Roles of Men and Women in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*

Supervisor: Prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr.

Number of pages: 51

Number of attachments: 0

Number of characters (Bibliography excluded): 81 395

Keywords: Men, women, suburbs, Stepford Wives, Babbitt, social roles, social status.

Characteristics: The aim of this thesis is to determine how the social roles and social statuses of men and women changed in American suburban literature before and after World War II. I consulted notable feminist texts *The Second Sex* and *The Feminine Mystique* and compared them to my findings in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922) and Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972). I discovered that although the social status of women improved after World War II, the social role they are expected to perform remained the same - dedicated home-maker.

11 Anotace

Jméno: Petr Chromec

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: Padesát let amerického předměstí: Porovnání společenských rolí mužů a žen v románech *Babbitt* Sinclaira Lewise a *Stepfordské paničky* Iry Levina.

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr.

Počet stran: 51

Počet příloh: 0

Počet znaků (bez bibliografie): 81 395

Klíčová slova: Muži, ženy, předměstí, Stepfordské paničky, Babbitt, sociální role, sociální status.

Charakteristika: Cílem této práce, je vyhodnotit jak se měnily sociální role a statusy mužů a žen v Americké předměstské literatuře, před a po druhé Světové válce. Metoda, kterou jsem využil je porovnání významných feministických textů *Druhé pohlaví* a *The Feminine mystique*, které jsem porovnal se svými primárními zdroji, *Babbitt* (1922) od Sinclaira Lewise a *Stepfordské Paničky* (1972) od Iry Levina. Došel jsem k závěru, že sociální status žen se zlepšil po druhé světové válce, avšak sociální role, kterou by žena měla vykonávat, zůstala nadále stejná, tedy oddaná hospodyně.