

Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci

Filozofická fakulta

Role of Women in Suburban Literature: A Study of Selected Novels

Bakalářská práce

Studijní program: Anglická filologie

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Olomouc 2018

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma Role of Women in Suburban Literature vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucí práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V..... dne.....

Podpis.....

Poděkování

Ráda bych poděkovala vedoucí práce, Mgr. Pavlíně Flajšarové Ph.D., za odborné vedení práce, ochotu, rady a především za trpělivost a čas, který mi věnovala.

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1. Introduction

The vast stretches of suburbia surrounding ever-growing cities are a setting typical for North America from the twentieth century onwards. Families seeking a calmer environment are moving out from the city and among the lines of mass-produced, barely distinguishable houses equipped with the same furniture and appliances, an interesting new branch of society starts to form. These people, caught somewhere on the border between the city and the open country, set new values and goals for themselves as the era of economic boom allows for consumerism to blossom. However, the surface happiness and prosperity are only temporary and inevitably, there are various problems arising within the community of suburbanites.

This bachelor's thesis intends to study mainly the issues of women – particularly the so-called housewives – in American suburbs, based on the analysis of three works of fiction and their female protagonists, namely the character of Mildred Pierce from a novel of the same name written by James M. Cain, the character of April Wheeler from Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* and the infamous Mrs. Robinson in Charles Webb's novella *The Graduate*. Illustrating the problems these women were facing, this essay will discuss the way they chose to handle their situation and the reaction of society upon seeing them stepping outside of the stereotypes the role of a typical suburban housewife entails.

2. History

2.1. Suburbia in reality and fiction

Though we often consider suburbia an invention of the twentieth century, its history is much older than that. Lewis Mumford, in his book on urban history, argues that “the suburb becomes visible almost as early as the city itself.”¹ These historic suburbs around cities all around the world are however mostly a natural progression of the expansion of a metropolis. The suburbs which are the subject of this essay are the artificially planned infinite streets of mass-produced, identical houses, the vast stretches of land packed with houses of people who each wanted to escape the crowded city and find some peace and quiet at a piece of land reasonably far from others. “To be your own unique self; to build your unique house, mid a unique landscape [...], this was the purpose of the original creators of the suburb.”² Mumford points out that the original vision has been lost due to the popularity and commercialization of the idea, turning the intended uniqueness into mere standardized housing for the masses.

The first suburbs in North America as we know them today started appearing as the population was concentrating in large cities and families wanted to find a compromise between settling down in the busy city and in the worse accessible rural areas. Massive suburban areas were built and successfully sold during the real estate boom of 1920s. The Great Depression era slowed the suburban expansion, but the popularity came back after World War II, a period known as the post-war suburbanization.

As a distinct part of the American culture, the life in the suburbs is reflected in a wide variety of literary works. Jurca notes, that rather than praising the positives of suburban households, “twentieth-century novelists who have written about the suburb present their work as a critique of its culture.”³ Novels such as Webb’s *The Graduate*, Caine’s *Mildred Pierce* or Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*, which will be the focus of this thesis, offer a critical image of the downfalls of suburban society in its various forms.

¹ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 483.

² Mumford, *City*, 485-6.

³ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

2.2. Suburban housewives

The suburbanization had an inevitable effect on the average American family. “According to feminist historians, in the last decades of the industrializing nineteenth century ‘the cult of home and motherhood ... reached its pinnacle’ in the freestanding, single-family suburban house.”⁴ Unlike in the city, the suburban housewives and mothers lived a rather isolated life and taking care of their homes was often the only activity available to them for the long hours before their husbands returned from work.

The unhappy American housewife is an unfortunate product of a society prosperous enough for families to survive comfortably on the husband’s pay check only. Forgetting about the basic human need for personal fulfilment, the society has left women with the task to take care of the household and while some of them found it satisfying, a notable portion of women felt that being a housewife is merely a romanticized version of house arrest.

Betty Friedan, a feminist advocate and writer of the twentieth century, devoted an entire chapter of her book to the women suffering from depression, loneliness and boredom in their seemingly perfect suburban households. She questions the fact that women, often considered the more talkative gender, prefer to suffer alone quietly, instead of confiding in their friends or families. “Why have so many American wives suffered this nameless aching and dissatisfaction for so many years, each one thinking she was alone?”⁵ The answer lies in the social pressure and expectations. The suburbs were supposed to be a perfect neighbourhood, a peaceful place where people escape the rush and stress of the city, a place where nice middle-class families live in harmony with each other and hopefully raise a new generation of successful, well-educated and good-mannered people. Therefore, there is considerable pressure to hide problems away, keep unhappiness under the wraps and deal with it alone, so as not to disturb the carefully feigned happiness of others.

Happiness can admittedly be difficult to find, when one feels as a mere part of the household, a kitchen appliance, babysitter, cleaner and servant in one, with little to no space for self-actualisation. The other problem is that due to their upbringing, these women often have no idea what to do with themselves, even if they are given the time and freedom. “The tragedy was, nobody ever looked us in the eye and said you have to

⁴ Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 5.

⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 61.

decide what you want to do with your life, besides being your husband's wife and children's mother."⁶ With the prospect of a happy marriage, two children and a house with a white picket fence ingrained into them by the society since early childhood, there is no wonder that many women never even thought of the possibilities outside of this bubble and started developing either unhealthy co-dependency on their partners, or the opposite, an inexplicable frustration with their limited freedom and the pressing need to escape their everyday routines.

⁶ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 96.

3. Search for happiness in the Depression era: *Mildred Pierce* by James M. Cain

Set in 1930s in the town of Glendale, California, the novel “Mildred Pierce” offers its readers a look into the life of a young woman facing the aftermath of the Black Thursday of 1929. As a result of the Stock Market Crash, Bromhead states that up to one third of the people in America lost their jobs, many unable to find a new one for long periods of time, which lead even the formerly prosperous people to lose most of their wealth and property.⁷ Herbert Pierce, husband of Mildred, is an example of such businessman.

Once successful in the estate business due to sheer luck, he now fails to seek a job when he loses all his money and his company. While he passes the time lounging, doing odd jobs round the house and spending time with his lover, Mildred is willing to do almost anything in her abilities to keep their heads above water. Finding that her husband does not appreciate her efforts, lacks any will to find work for himself and does not even bother to try and hide his affair, she loses patience and expels Bert from the house. When it dawns upon her that now she will truly have to become the provider for herself and her two daughters, she quickly realizes that her small business of selling homemade pies and cakes, which brings in a few dollars a week, is just not enough to support them for any length of time.

When Mildred’s daughters learn that their father has left for good, their reactions are distinctly different. Younger Ray starts crying and needs to be comforted by her mother, whereas older Veda is the one to offer comfort to Mildred by saying conceitedly that she considers Mrs. Biederhof, her father’s lover, “distinctly middle class.”⁸ This is a statement that distinguishes Veda Pierce from the other women in her family, as she considers herself a member of higher society and always carries herself with an air of superiority, speaking in a way that reminds her mother of stage children reciting the words they have learned by heart.⁹ There is a clear contrast between the playful naïve innocence of Ray and the sense of privilege and entitlement coming from Veda, who seems to be the spoiled child, since her parents see an unspecific talent

⁷ Peter Bromhead, *Life in Modern America* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1970), 124.

⁸ James M. Caine, *Mildred Pierce* (London: Orion Books, 2008), 13.

⁹ Caine, *Mildred*, 12.

in her and though they are struggling financially, they still pay for the cultivation of Veda's talent in the form of piano lessons.

Even though Veda seems initially supportive of her mother's decision to get rid of her unfaithful husband, she gradually changes sides. "Father and daughter were strongly attached and the struggle between mother and daughter became intense after the father was ejected."¹⁰ Veda, who used to be impressed with her father's businessman appearance and attitude, now struggles with the possibility of losing her position on the social ladder, since the family breadwinner is apparently gone.

With no work in sight for several days and money quickly running out, Mildred sees an opportunity when a former business partner of her husband stops by and asks her on a date. She reckons that if she cannot support her family herself, she might as well try and latch onto a man who is clearly interested in her and does, unlike Bert, have a well-paid job. When Wally comes to pick her up the next day, she follows the advice of her friend and suggests having dinner at her house instead, under the pretext of avoiding bad weather, while intending to get him drunk and seduce him. Despite her nerves, the plan is successful, and Wally seems impressed with her, but when the evening ends and they are lying in bed together, he starts having second thoughts about starting an affair with his friend's wife. They get into a quarrel about Bert and Wally flees, leaving Mildred feeling used and questioning her morals.¹¹

Unsuccessful in obtaining a man that would support her and with unpaid bills looming over her head, Mildred starts a serious search for a full-time job. As newspaper advertisements and personal applications seem to go nowhere, she registers at an employment agency, but is told that without any work experience and with two children she has very little chance of success. "Beneath the ebb and flow of boom and recession, [economists] found an absolute, spiraling decline in employment possibilities for the uneducated and the unskilled."¹² Mildred feels it is unfair that for some reason the society decided to penalise her for starting a family early on and would not allow her to even apply for some positions.¹³

When she is finally offered a job of a waitress or a live-in housekeeper, she turns them down, considering them beneath her and a threat to the social status of her

¹⁰ James H. Barnett and Rhoda Gruen, "Recent American Divorce Novels, 1938-45: A Study in the Sociology of Literature," *Social Forces* 26, no.3 (1948): 325.

¹¹ Caine, *Mildred*, 33.

¹² Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 189.

¹³ Caine, *Mildred*, 40.

children, thinking about snobbish Veda's reaction if she learned her mother was a servant. However, in a moment of victory of reason over pride, she finds herself walking into the kitchen of a restaurant obviously in need of help. Despite her struggle to meet the demands of the job, the restaurant lets her stay as a waitress. She keeps her work a secret, still embarrassed.

Eventually, understandably unadjusted to a life of independence¹⁴, she rekindles her relationship with Wally. One evening when Bert comes over unexpectedly, and Wally appears later, they share a few drinks. Mildred manages to steal the car key from Bert to regain the freedom a car allows, seeing as she is the one working and caring for the children, therefore in a more serious need of a means of a vehicle. In a way typical of the Los Angeles suburbanites, she considers "public transport by bus or train an unsatisfactory means of moving people between home, work, shops and social activity."¹⁵ She reckons Bert would have no use for the car since he is neither working, nor taking care of the family.

Mildred's financial struggles are resolved as she works steadily and in time she even offers to make her homemade pies for the restaurant. The word gets around and soon she is making pies for several restaurants and even people from the neighbourhood, suddenly so busy that she employs a girl, Letty, to help around the house. One day she comes back from work to find Letty in one of her waitress uniforms and the girl reveals that Veda instructed her to put it on. When she confronts her daughter about it, she must reveal what her job is and faces the contempt from her ungrateful child. Trying to save the situation, Mildred informs Veda that she is only learning the trade because she is planning to open a place of her own. The prospect of her mother being a prosperous business owner causes a sudden turn in the behaviour towards her and Mildred, suddenly intrigued by the idea, starts thinking of ways to make it happen.

She goes to Wally for advice and they come up with a plan to buy the model house of her husband's bankrupt company and rebuild it into a restaurant with a bakery. Passing the obstacle of having to divorce Bert for legal reason regarding the purchase of the property, she works on turning it from a home into a business, albeit with a new burden of debt.

¹⁴ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 154.

¹⁵ Bromhead, *Life*, 218.

During the last day of her working at the old restaurant, a customer asks her out and she, finding no reason to refuse, agrees to leave early. The man, Monty Beragon, turns out to have a cottage near a lake, where they spend the next few days before Mildred has to come back. Once she does, however, bad news is awaiting her. During her stay with her grandparents, her younger daughter Ray got a high fever and had to be admitted to a hospital. Mildred spends most of her time with her but unfortunately in the end, Ray does not survive the illness. The loss is hard on the entire family, even Veda lets her pride go and becomes a normal child for a moment as she mourns her little sister.

After Ray's funeral, Mildred devotes her life to her work and to Veda, showing her even more love than before. The restaurant opening is a success, most of Mildred's friends show up to support her and are impressed with the quality of the service. To her surprise, Monty appears among the guests and Veda is excited to find out about his relationship with her mother, because she knows him to be a member of the higher Los Angeles society she is so eager to become a part of. Gradually, Mildred starts to realize how unequal she is feeling in a relationship with Monty, as he seems to keep her away from his family and friends, only ever taking Veda to meet them.

One day he suggests that Veda's musical talent might flourish if she got a proper tutor. Mildred agrees to take her to a prestigious teacher in Pasadena and even though he is not convinced she will become a pianist, he agrees to give her lessons based on the general musical talent she shows. Mildred is under the impression that Veda has stopped merely pretending she is above the middle-class people of the suburbs and instead is becoming her true, above-average self.

Mildred decides that she will save up money to buy Veda a proper piano for Christmas and starts making monthly deposits at the bank. With an unfortunate timing, Monty's family suffers a large financial loss and she now also starts supporting him, therefore missing the money to save up for Veda's gift. Monty becomes gradually more unpleasant and soon, Mildred must face another breakup with a man who does not appreciate her.

With the repeal of the prohibition, Mildred must adjust her restaurant's services to meet the demand for newly legal alcohol. Since she knows nothing about drinking, she decides to employ her friend Lucy Gessler as a bartender. This means another large investment and to pay for it, Mildred uses the money she has managed to save for Veda's piano. This unfortunately means that Veda does not receive her gift and is

suddenly upset with her mother. “Christ, but I hate this dump,”¹⁶ she starts to insult her home, the town she grew up in and her mother. Their argument turns to Monty, whom Veda still holds in high regard.

“After all, Mother, even in his darkest days, Monty’s shoes are custom made.”

“They ought to be. They cost me enough.”¹⁷

Veda is shocked to learn that Monty is currently financially dependent on her mother just like she is. In rage, Mildred finally stands up to her daughter and stops giving her spending money to make her see how privileged she was. This seems to work and with her wounded ego, Veda starts playing nice again.

Mildred finally breaks things off with Monty and focuses on her growing business. She pays off her debt and with the help of her friends and employees, she opens two new branches of her restaurant. She becomes a true businesswoman, buying expensive clothes and a new car for her and Veda. She starts spending less time in the kitchen and instead devotes it to marketing and management.

Veda is allowed to quit high school to pursue music and spends her days practising. However, her old teacher dies and a new one she has been recommended as an expert, refuses to take her on. Mildred tries to comfort her by offering to look for other teachers in the area, but Veda refuses and all but gives up. Instead, she starts spending Mildred’s money on expensive clothes and parties with her friends, until she falls pregnant. Both her parents and the parents of the father agree that their children are not ready to start a family. Veda’s parents discuss legal steps to be taken, since she is still a minor, even skirting around the possibility of abortion, but soon enough it is revealed that Veda is not in fact pregnant at all and she has only been trying to get some money from the boy’s rich family. Mildred is horrified, even more so when she learns why Veda needed the money.

“Well, [...] with enough money, I can get away from you, you poor, half-witted mope. From you and your pie wagon and your chickens, and your waffles, and your kitchens, and every thing that smells of grease. And from this shack, that you

¹⁶ Caine, *Mildred*, 169.

¹⁷ Caine, *Mildred*, 171.

blackmailed out of my father [...] From every rotten, stinking thing that even reminds me of the place – or you.”¹⁸

Offended and upset to see what her precious child has grown up to be, she throws her daughter out of the house immediately.

Months later, Mildred learns that Veda has become a fairly successful singer. She decides to win her daughter back and make her apologize. To get to Veda, she uses Monty Beragon. She buys the Beragon mansion to get him out of debt and decides to marry him. She finally gets to meet Veda after coming home to her new house and finding a rather large group of people having a party. She and Veda talk pleasantly about her musical career, as if there never was a disagreement between them. Mildred becomes a member of the higher society and is treated well by all of Monty’s friends, but she begins to feel distant from him.

Veda’s career flourishes, but Mildred is in financial problems again. With her reckless spending and buying the Beragon mansion she could not afford without a loan, she ends up in debt she is unable to pay due to her restaurants slowly losing business. She is advised to ask Veda for money but cannot bring herself to do it.

To make matters worse, one evening she comes home to find Veda in bed with Monty. Losing her wits, she attacks her daughter and in an attempt to throttle her, she damages Veda’s throat to the point that she loses her singing voice and therefore her career.

In the end they make peace and Mildred decides that the only thing she can reliably provide Veda with is a home and a loving family. She divorces Monty, remarries Bert and moves back into Glendale.

When a taxi arrives at their house, Veda informs them that she is leaving. “I decided some time ago that the place for me is New York, and I’m leaving in a little while from Union Air Terminal, in Burbank. I meant to tell you.”¹⁹ Her parents are shocked at hearing her normal, undamaged voice and even more at the fact that she has fooled them again and is leaving for New York with Monty Beragon. Mildred realizes she has been manipulated and throws Veda out for the final time. Now, middle-aged, poor and unsuccessful, she curses her daughter and proceeds to drown her sorrow in liquor with her husband.

¹⁸ Caine, *Mildred*, 224.

¹⁹ Caine, *Mildred*, 280.

3.1. Mildred Pierce

Considering the fact that she started out as a young and naïve housewife, Mildred Pierce achieves a notable success through her dedication and hard work. Struggling financially, she learns to be money savvy. “I’m making this cake for Mrs Whitley, and she’s going to pay me three dollars for it. Now if you’re going to be home I’ll spend part of that money on lamb chops for your supper. if you’re not, I’ll buy something the children will like better.”²⁰ Even in the worst of times, she tries her best to provide for her family, making sure they are not deprived of anything. “Mildred always managed to have money for Veda’s piano lessons, and for all the milk the children could drink.”²¹

Though everyone in her family except for little Ray keeps hurting her, she forgives them time and time again, caring for others’ happiness more than for her own. Her daughters both receive unconditional love, even though older Veda often behaves inappropriately and does not respect her privacy. She is even charitable toward her unfaithful husband, willing to admit her part in making him leave her.

Initially, she thinks she ought to become something her children could look up to and turns down jobs that she feels are beneath her but later she overcomes her pride and builds her career up from being a simple waitress to eventually becoming a restaurant chain owner. However, she cannot be the only one given credit for her success, since before making any major decisions she always consults her friends who have more experience in the field of business, law and critical thinking in general. Whenever she can, she leaves the responsibility to others.

Mildred is not an ambitious woman but rather a dreamer and she has trouble accepting the realities of her success. This results in her spending money on things she wishes to have but does not need, and on people who do nothing to deserve it. Her previous efforts to manage her money reasonably, when she had almost none, are forgotten as soon as she gets used to an increased income.

Used to the comfort of suburban life with a nice house and a successful husband, Mildred is not one of the bored women who crave a way to escape their routines. She enjoys having dependable structure in her life. Dependent on always having some man next to her, she alternates between several lovers, although she shows no strong feelings

²⁰ Caine, *Mildred*, 3.

²¹ Caine, *Mildred*, 20.

for either of them and her relationships seem to be a matter of reason and mutual convenience, more than emotion. She is a rather submissive person and lets many people treat her unjustly.

She is friendly towards anybody, regardless of their social standing, and treats her inferiors well, willing even to stand up for them against her family. “Well, hereafter there’ll be no more Miss Veda. And if [Letty] goes with you to the pool, she goes in her own clothes, and she has a swim. If she hasn’t a suit, I’ll get her one,”²² Mildred reacts when she learns that Veda has been using her helper as a personal servant and making her wear one of Mildred’s waitress uniforms.

She is strong-willed and brave, which can sometimes lead to her taking reckless risks. When determined to break up with Monty, she drives to his house in a dangerous storm, even though most roads are blocked by water. On her way back her car gets stranded, but instead of letting Monty help her, she decides to walk home at night, on her own.

Even though she attacked her own daughter, Mildred cannot be considered an aggressive person, but rather someone who has been pushed to her limit by the circumstances. “The few times she had tried beating, she had got exactly nowhere. [...] she was afraid of something that seemed always lurking under Veda’s bland, phony toniness: a cold, cruel, coarse desire to torture her mother, to humiliate her, above everything else, to hurt her.”²³ Veda is the only recipient of her mother’s anger, since she is the person Mildred treasures the most, despite Veda’s lack of respect and affection. When upset by anybody else, Mildred reacts with coldness and prefers to push people away, rather than get into loud arguments or resort to physical attacks.

Afraid of disappointing others, she tries to hide her struggles instead of seeking help. While she wants to blame others for the eventual loss of her company, it is her fault for trying to cover up problems instead of giving up her pride and asking for assistance or advice like she used to.

The end of the novel finds Mildred defeated, feeling used and tired. For the first time she fails to put on a brave face and move on with her life. “Yes, let’s get stinko,”²⁴ she agrees with Bert and decides to drink away the pain of her failure.

²² Caine, *Mildred*, 77.

²³ Caine, *Mildred*, 79.

²⁴ Caine, *Mildred*, 281.

4. Escaping the paradise: *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates

Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates is a novel set in 1955 in a suburb in western Connecticut, near New York City. The story revolves around the family of Franklin and April Wheeler, a young couple who has moved from the city into a small house in the suburbia, and like many other Americans, are seeking a calm, secure environment to raise their children in. They made this choice despite their contempt for the whole concept of suburban life, which was in their opinion full of boring domesticity and tiresome conformity to social expectations.

The problem with a stable lifestyle, as Brown mentions in his book on modern America, is that “[the] terms ‘stability’ and ‘security’ imply predictability, sameness, lack of change.”²⁵ While the Wheelers are perhaps looking for a place that would ground their modern, adventurous minds, they have difficulty dealing with the sudden inescapable lack of action once they leave the city. This is especially hard on April, since Frank visits the city daily to go to work. “The chronic fatigue of many housewives is brought on by the repetition of their jobs, the monotony of the setting, the isolation and the lack of stimulation,”²⁶ Friedan comments on the fact that it is generally the women of the suburbs, not men, who seem to suffer from loneliness and depression. This stems from the lack of exposure to activities that would make women’s lives feel more interesting and worthwhile, interrupting the endless periods of waiting for the husband and children to come home. “Outside the home American towns do not provide very much in the way of public attractions for their inhabitants.”²⁷

The story opens with an unsuccessful amateur production of a theatre play, which shakes the confidence of April Wheeler who stars in the lead role. As a former drama school graduate, she fails to fulfil everybody’s expectations including her own and causes a quarrel between her and her husband as they try to get home, all the while dodging the other members of the theatre group and their cheerful comforting words.

Finding an excuse to start an argument, April directs all her frustration towards Frank. “[...] do you think I’ve forgotten the time you hit me in the face because I said I wouldn’t forgive you? Oh, I’ve always known I had to be your conscience and your guts – and your punching bag. Just because you’ve got me safely in a trap you think

²⁵ Harrison Brown, “Patterns of the Future,” in *America The Vanishing*, ed. Samuel R. Ogden (Brattleboro: The Stephen Greene Press, 1969), 231.

²⁶ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 271.

²⁷ Bromhead, *Life*, 200.

you—”²⁸ The argument escalates and starts to reveal cracks in the peaceful façade of their relationship as Frank struggles to comfort April while she chooses to blame him for her feeling trapped in the simple and comfortable life they lead. She expresses her need to distance herself from Frank to process her emotions, since during their argument she seems to be fighting something within herself, more than her husband.

The fight haunts them both for a long time after, but to the public eye they try to look like the model couple they were considered before. In a few days, while Frank finally breaks and finds some comfort in the arms of a girl he meets at work, Maureen Grube, April awaits him at home with an apology and a birthday party she prepared with the help of their children.

Later that evening she reveals to her husband that she has planned for them to move away to Europe, where she will find work as a secretary in Paris, while Frank will finally have the time to find himself, instead of wasting his life at a mind-numbingly tiresome office job at Knox Business Machines. At the same time, April stresses that she is “not making any big altruistic sacrifice”²⁹ and acknowledges that she herself wants to leave the life of a suburban housewife and become a provider for her family, while hopefully regaining some independence, relieving her boredom and depression.

The craving for a change of scenery is not uncommon, as Friedan describes encountering many such cases. “Sometimes she thought the problem was with her husband, or her children, or that what she really needed was to redecorate her house, or move to a better neighborhood, or have an affair, or another baby,”³⁰ she describes the struggle of one of the women she interviewed. This longing for change can be a way of escapism, or simply grasping at straws in an attempt to stay sane in the everlasting sameness of the daily housewife routine.

Frank remembers his years-old ambition to become something more than a mundane office worker and agrees with April on her plan to relocate. This seems to bring the peace and equilibrium back into their household and they slowly start to make arrangements, so that they are ready to leave in a few months.

One day, when April brings him a book of advanced French to polish his foreign language skills, Frank suddenly wakes up from the peaceful, comforting lull of abstract

²⁸ Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Penguin Random House, 2007), 28.

²⁹ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 109.

³⁰ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 48-49.

plans for the future and starts to realize that moving to live on a different continent with a wife and two fairly young children will be no easy task.

Gradually, the Wheelers start announcing their plans to their friends, as if seeking validation and approval of their peers. “Americans invite their friends to their homes more than most people in Europe. Parties for children and for grown-ups are constantly occupying the leisure hours, usually with something to drink. In their new suburbs Americans are extremely friendly and hospitable.”³¹ The following section of the novel describes two such dinner party visits. However, we can see that Frank and April are not the typical cheerful and welcoming hosts or chatty guests and in fact, this role makes them both quite uncomfortable. They are invited over for dinner to the Campbells, a family similar to the Wheelers in age, but unlike them, fully content with the suburban lifestyle, which is why Frank and April have always somewhat struggled to understand them. The visit starts with a tense atmosphere and apprehension, but once the Wheelers reveal their plans, they all begin to loosen up. The Campbells seem supportive but once the Wheelers leave, they both agree that their plan is immature and irresponsible.

The next night April and Frank have dinner with their former estate agent and friend, Mrs. Helen Givings. During the dinner, Mrs. Givings proposes to introduce the Wheelers to her son John, who is currently at a mental hospital. To her surprise April and Frank agree to meet him next Sunday, seemingly without any prejudice. Then they inform her they are moving in the fall and would like to arrange the sale of their house. Later that night Mrs. Givings confesses to her husband how disappointed she is with the Wheelers and how ungrateful it is, wanting to leave a place that to other people would be a dream home, while “all [she hears] about is young couples *dying* to come and settle [there].”³² She does not notice, however, that Frank and especially April are dying in the suburbs, and that rather than being ungrateful, they simply find it impossible to function in this environment. This section of the novel is a good example of the pretence in the friendships between suburbanites, who prefer to be on good terms with everybody, often putting aside their honest opinions in favour of the “correct” ones.

With each passing day Frank grows more and more worried and is almost desperate for any excuse to abort their plans or at least postpone them indefinitely. He senses a chance when his superior at Knox offers him the possibility of a new position, more creative work with a better salary, but when he tells April of this proposal, she

³¹ Bromhead, *Life*, 199.

³² Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 167.

automatically assumes he is going to turn the offer down, as she is set on not letting anything impede their plans to leave.

While explaining the move to their children, April loses patience as Jennifer and Michael complain about having to leave favourite toys behind. She does not understand what about the move upsets them so much, and instead of trying to talk it through, she and Frank agree that the children will get over it in time, even though Frank seems to be concerned about the way the children could be affected. The problem with relating to the children is another common issue among the unhappy housewives. “I get so angry with the children it scares me,”³³ one of them confesses in Friedan’s book. “Or her children tell her a joke, and she doesn’t laugh because she doesn’t hear it,”³⁴ Friedan adds another example of a situation where mothers are completely alienated from their children and are unable to even communicate effectively.

On Sunday, Mr. and Mrs. Givings arrive with John, who to the Wheelers seems surprisingly normal, the only thing giving away his mental problems being the way he reacts irritably to his parents, his overly caring mother especially. While getting to know each other, Frank mentions his job not being interesting, but John dismisses him disappointedly and says that only women and boys care about jobs being interesting. On the other hand, he agrees that unfortunately not many people do the job they like, but the one that pays for their comfortable lifestyle. John and Frank talk about the Wheelers leaving for France. John approves of the plan, agreeing that staying happy and sane in the peaceful American suburbia can sometimes be extremely challenging to people who expect more from life.³⁵ When the visit is over, both parties are surprised to see it was a relative success. Frank and April agree that while possibly mentally unstable, John was the first person who seemed to understand their motivation and need to leave.

Throughout the next days April seems distant, tense and nervous. When Frank demands to know what troubles her this time around, she confesses she is pregnant again. Struck by this revelation, Frank goes through a mix of conflicting emotions and finally arrives at the conclusion that he is glad, because having another child would mean not being able to leave, since the whole point of the move was based on the decision that April would leave her role of a housewife and find a job. However, the wave of relief washing over him is suddenly stopped when he finds a rubber syringe

³³ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 49.

³⁴ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 49.

³⁵ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 190.

hidden away in the bathroom closet and remembers when April wanted to use it for a home abortion years ago, the time she was pregnant with Jennifer. In the 1950s abortions were still illegal but have been performed by both medical professionals and the pregnant women themselves. “Finally, the U.S. Supreme Court declared restrictive abortion laws unconstitutional in two separate decisions in 1973, essentially legalizing elective abortion.”³⁶ This was however too late for April Wheeler, who had no other choice than to take matters in her own hands.

Frank confronts his wife and they get into a long-lasting argument about keeping or aborting the child. Over the next weeks, they try to rationally exchange ideas and opinions, but neither of them is willing to give in. To perform the procedure, they have limited time since it is only safe to do during the first trimester. After another visit by John Givings and his parents, the Wheelers discuss April’s childhood and the way it may have affected her perception of having children of her own. She seems to take that in mind and later they decide to tell the children that the move is cancelled.

To their friends and acquaintances this is mostly good news. Days pass and the time for a safe abortion runs out, so Frank is pleased with the overall outcome. The Wheelers revert to their old ways of quiet comfort, with Frank occasionally cheating on his wife with Maureen from the office, and April having a one-time spur-of-the-moment affair with Shep Campbell, which is never fully understood by either of them. To the readers, this can be understood as another one of April’s rebellious attempts to break out of the role of a nice, respectable wife.

One of these strangely quiet afternoons, April stoically informs Frank that she does not love him. They have a tense talk about their relationship, about the fact that Frank had an affair that he just broke off, and about the fact that April cannot bring herself to feel anything about it. Frank is offended by the lack of hurt and anger on her part and tries to persuade her that she does in fact have feelings for him, but April is cold, distant and unapproachable.

The strained atmosphere is interrupted by another visit from the Givings family. When John learns about the change of plans and the baby, he gets upset and starts demanding a real reason why they decided not to leave. He brings to light the uncomfortable truth that Frank is the one who made them back out, as April would not be stopped by such a minor inconvenience. He starts insulting them both, so his parents

³⁶ Richard S. Krannich, “Abortion in the United States: Past, Present and Future Trends,” *Family Relations* 29, no. 3 (1980): 366.

take him away, apologizing for his hurtful words. Strangely, the moments when everybody thinks John is insane and needs to be restrained are exactly the moments when he cannot keep the obvious, uncomfortable truth to himself and politely look the other way.

After their guests leave, the fight between April and Frank continues to escalate, until Frank says he wishes she had gone through with the abortion, stunning her into silence. She leaves him for the night, to gain some distance. He wakes up in the morning into a surprisingly peaceful home, as if the argument of the previous day burned out all their anger and disdain. When he leaves for work, she arranges for the children to stay over at the Campbells' house, writes a note addressed to her husband and in spite of knowing how big of a risk she is taking this late into the pregnancy, prepares everything and goes through with the abortion procedure.

The Campbells find out when an ambulance disrupts the quiet day in the suburbs. Shep calls Frank and takes him to hospital where they wait for the doctor to tell him what happened. However, when the doctor comes hours later, he informs them that she did not survive. Frank is trying to process his feelings but struggles to understand why she would hurt herself.

Over time, everybody comes up with their own ideas and stories about the specific reason that made April break. Frank moves away. Unable or unwilling to take care of the children himself, he leaves them with his brother's family. The Wheelers' house is sold to a new family and the life in the suburban streets moves on, the brief chapter that was April Wheeler almost forgotten.

4.1. April Wheeler

There are two ways to describe April Wheeler. The first would be to interpret her as the wife of Franklin H. Wheeler, as a housewife with all the pleasures and duties that come with having a small house in the suburbia and two young children. This would be the way April presents herself when others are watching, trying to please them by being ordinary and doing the expected housework. "She had spent the day at a kind of work she had always hated and lately allowed herself to neglect: cleaning the parts of the house that didn't show."³⁷ This quote captures the essence of April Wheeler's suburban

³⁷ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 206.

existence. She only does things for show, for others to appreciate, but does not derive any pleasure from them herself.

Only when she is on her own or with Frank does she allow herself to be a different, more intricate character with dreams and aspirations that would not be considered fit for the typical suburban wife and mother. She craves excitement and independence and the events of the story show how trapped she feels in her current role, searching for an escape route desperately.

The beginning of the novel shows April as a shining star of a theatre show slowly letting herself be dragged down by the others' amateurism. In the end when all the actors comfort each other by saying that at least they enjoyed themselves working on the play, April cannot help feeling defeated and humiliated by the fiasco the play turned out to be, wanting nothing more than to go home and not have to speak to anyone. She holds herself to a high standard, thinking that she is somehow different and better than the other suburbanites, which results in shock and hurt when she fails just like they did.

She refuses the comfort offered to her by her husband and when confronted by Frank about the reason she is upset, she tries to avoid discussing the issue but as her husband insists, she becomes frustrated and angry at him, suddenly focusing all of her pain and hostility at him. She blames him for trapping her in this lifestyle and forcing her to play the role of a happy loving housewife. She brings to light old injustices accumulated over the years they have spent together, in what seems to be an overdue argument. Here we can again see an example of an unhappy housewife who has been holding her feelings back, only to inevitably burst into a scene, letting out her pent-up frustration. Back at their house she avoids her husband, refusing to even sleep next to him, escape and isolation being her preferred ways of dealing with a conflict.

April is not a woman afraid to step into a male role and when her husband seems to be failing at doing his part of the housework, for example mowing the lawn around the house, she takes care of it herself, possibly trying to embarrass Frank in the eyes of the neighbours and himself by showing he is incapable of doing his part of work or unwilling to help his wife around the house. She shows that she has not forgiven him after their argument and even though they try to keep up appearances when meeting their friends, there is still the air of an underlying conflict once they are alone again.

On Frank's birthday April unexpectedly apologizes for everything and brings up the idea that they could move to Europe, expressing her wish to become the provider for the family while her husband stays at home and works on finding himself. She hopes

that the change of scenery will get them away from the conservative, judgemental suburbanites, as well as grant her more freedom for self-actualization, a need deeply repressed for the fear of looking self-centred, yet essential, considering its position on the top of Maslow's hierarchy of basic human needs. She has a strong need to matter, in more than the superficial way of being a caring mother and wife. By trying to find personal fulfilment, she makes the last attempt to save her family which would otherwise likely be torn apart by her growing frustration and unhappiness.

She is very active in organizing the family's departure, the steadily approaching date of escape giving her new energy and willpower to deal with the current issues, which are suddenly made to look less daunting by knowing that everything is only temporary. Her attempts to be in charge can however border on being too hasty and impulsive, demonstrating her inexperience in serious, thought-out planning of any kind. We can see her naivety in the way she expects to build a successful life in Paris with only Frank's brief memory of the place and his scarce remaining knowledge of the language. If she is aware of these issues, she chooses to disregard them for the time being and only deal with problems once they occur.

In terms of true empathy and general understanding of others, April lacks the stereotypical feminine concern for other people's wellbeing. From frustration with her children when they are not supportive and happy about leaving their current home, to cheating on Frank with Shep Campbell, to getting an abortion knowing it will put her relationship with Frank and even her own life at risk, she tends to be driven by her own momentary feelings and desires, paying little attention to the way it affects the people around her. The fear of not being in control of situations and the manipulative tendencies she exhibits most likely stem from her childhood experience with abandonment, when both of her parents left her to live with other relatives.

Towards the end of the novel, April deems her life not worth living unless she gets the freedom she desires, although in her note "Dear Frank, whatever happens please don't blame yourself,"³⁸ she finally acknowledges that the negative impact her choices have cannot be blamed on anybody else. While Frank may be given more space in the story and is supposedly the head of the family, it is in fact April who is the driving force behind any action and who seems to always get her way eventually, even if the only way to end her suffering is death itself.

³⁸ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 311.

5. Values, ethics and morals: *The Graduate* by Charles Webb

The Graduate, a 1963 novella by Charles Webb, was written shortly after his own graduation from university. According to the author, although some of the events in the book were inspired by his life, it is a work of fiction and is in no way autobiographical.

Benjamin Braddock, a recent successful graduate of a small Eastern college, comes back home to a quiet suburb of Los Angeles. Despite his overall academic success and being offered a prestigious teaching award that would put him through the next two years of school, he arrives at his parents' house in a state of frustration and disillusionment, wanting nothing more than to be left alone, give up the idea of a superficially successful life ahead of him and instead wishes to find himself, process his feelings and become somebody who does things that would matter to the real world. His parents throw a party, meaning to welcome their son home, while simultaneously showing off their accomplished offspring to their friends and neighbours. Benjamin does his best to avoid the guests and when unsuccessful, he confronts them about their fake interest in his university achievements, trying to fight the adherence to social rules and expectations of the middle class.

After a while, he loses interest and retreats to his bedroom, letting the adults have their party. Mrs. Robinson, one of the guests whose husband left the party earlier to attend a meeting in Los Angeles, comes into the room seemingly looking for the bathroom but when Benjamin directs her to it, she ignores him, instead invading his personal space, kissing Ben on the cheek and sitting down on his bed, wanting to talk. Benjamin explains he is too distraught and not in the mood for conversation, but Mrs. Robinson is adamant and since her husband left, she convinces him to at least drive her back home.

Once at the Robinsons' house, Mrs. Robinson asks Benjamin to come inside with her, feigning fear of staying in the empty house alone. Inside, she puts on music, makes him a drink and makes her first attempt at seducing the young man. Benjamin rejects her and is about to leave, but in the end, he's persuaded to stay at least until Mr. Robinson returns from his meeting. When he does and finds the shaken-up boy in his house, they strike up a conversation about Benjamin's concerns for his future. Mr. Robinson advises to enjoy his youth while he can, then try to find a nice girl to settle down with. He asks Benjamin to call their daughter Elaine once she's back from college and then he is finally free to leave.

Benjamin's twenty first birthday comes up and his parents are once again throwing him a party. This time, he is asked to show off his present, a set of diving gear, and "perform spectacular and amazing feats of skill and daring under water"³⁹ in the backyard swimming pool. He does not understand what makes snorkelling in the pool so compelling. Benjamin suffers through the experience to entertain his parents' guests but it is the last straw before he decides he needs to escape.

The next day he informs his parents he is leaving for some time, without money or his car, going hitchhiking in an attempt to talk to some "real people". This shows an interesting, uncommon phenomenon where it is a man who is dissatisfied with his middle-class suburban existence and seeks an alternative to the way of life he had been brought up in. However, less than three weeks later he is back, exhausted and disappointed, not having found himself or anybody who could be considered interesting, nor coming up with concrete plans for his future. For the first time since Ben returned from school, Mr Braddock notices and acknowledges the worrying disillusionment of his son.

One evening a few days after his return Benjamin drives up to Hotel Taft, calls Mrs. Robinson to join him and once she arrives and they share a few drinks in the bar, they go up to one of the rooms and start their affair. It becomes a habit that Ben stays up late, drinking and watching television until his parents fall asleep and then he leaves to meet Mrs. Robinson at the Taft. After some time, his parents become increasingly worried about their son's wellbeing and start questioning his behaviour, his late-night drinking and sneaking out of the house, but Benjamin dismisses their concerns.

The Braddocks share an uncomfortable dinner with the Robinsons, the atmosphere strangely tense since Mrs. Robinson and Ben are doing their best to avoid each other without raising any suspicion. Later that evening both of his parents try again to ask Benjamin where his strange behaviour is coming from. Distressed by the possibility that his mother might be onto him, Ben writes a letter to Mrs. Robinson explaining that it would be best if they cease their affair. However, they meet several evenings later and only briefly mention the letter before they resume their usual activities. They meet several times a week depending on Mrs. Robinson's schedule, but they never hold a proper conversation. One night, Benjamin tries to find a common interest they could speak about, but Mrs. Robinson shows no interest in talking. She

³⁹ Charles Webb, *The Graduate* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 35.

answers some of Ben's questions about her family and without an explanation demands him to promise he will not take out her daughter Elaine. The conversation is strained and uncomfortable, so they decide to end it and get back to their regular programme.

During one family dinner at the Braddocks' house his father informs Ben that Elaine has come back from school for the holidays and reminds him of Mr. Robinson's wish that Benjamin call her and ask her on a date. Ben tries to refuse, but in the name of keeping the relationship between his family and the family of his father's business partner smooth, he finally agrees to meet Elaine for one evening.

The date starts by Ben picking Elaine up at the house of friendly Mr. Robinson and Mrs. Robinson who is very upset that he ignored her request. Elaine tries to be pleasant in the beginning but gets frustrated by Ben's standoffish behaviour and then just suffers in silence. When she starts crying, upset about the way she is treated, Ben's behaviour finally changes and he apologizes. She demands to go home but Ben does not let her and kisses her instead. Later they end up at the Taft Hotel where a waitress mistakes Elaine for Mrs. Robinson and brings them the drinks Ben would usually order with Elaine's mother. Benjamin tries unsuccessfully to cover for that mistake, but while driving her home, Elaine persists with her questioning. Benjamin reveals he is having an affair with a married woman and is surprised when Elaine seems not to condemn his behaviour, saying that it is somewhat excusable to comfort a bored and lonely woman.

The next day Ben comes to pick Elaine up again but is met with Mrs. Robinson who forbids him to ever see her again and threatens to tell Elaine everything to stop her from seeing him. Ben decides on the spur of a moment to tell Elaine himself but when he does, throws him out of the house. He stays at home for weeks doing nothing. Then, figuring she could bring the much needed change and real adulthood into his life, "he decided to marry Elaine."⁴⁰ He packs his bags and moves to Berkeley, selling his car and moving into a house near her college dormitory. When he finally gets to meet her, she is in a relationship with someone else but he is still set on making her marry him.

Mrs. Robinson finds out Benjamin is in Berkeley.

UNDERSTAND FROM YOUR PARENTS YOU ARE IN BERKELEY STOP
WANT YOU TO LEAVE IMMEDIATELY AND PHONE ME TODAY THAT

⁴⁰ Webb, *Graduate*, 114.

YOU HAVE STOP SERIOUS TROUBLE IF I DO NOT HEAR FROM YOU
TODAY⁴¹

She sends a threatening telegraph, urging him to leave. Benjamin wants to rush into marriage with Elaine before anyone gets a chance to stop them, but Elaine is not cooperating, although she admits she does love him. She receives a letter from her father saying that his wife has informed him of her affair with Ben and they will be getting a divorce. It is obvious from the letter that Mrs. Robinson made up a story about being coerced, instead of admitting she was the one to initiate her and Ben's secret relationship. Mr. Robinson warns his daughter to stay away from Ben until he takes her home.

Elaine is taken away by her father and Ben cannot get into contact with her, so he resolves to breaking into the Robinsons' house, but Elaine is not there. Her parents hint at her getting married soon and ask him to leave, before finally calling the police. Benjamin manages to escape and the following day he tracks Elaine down. At the church in Santa Barbara he disrupts the wedding and though Mr. Robinson tries to stop her, Elaine lets herself be kidnapped from her own wedding ceremony. Benjamin gets them onto the nearest bus and they drive away, leaving everybody behind them.

5.1. Mrs. Robinson

Though playing an important role, Mrs. Robinson is a side character often acting as a plot device and influencing the events of the novel without necessarily being present for the majority of it. As such, she only gets limited attention. Therefore, her analysis is based on not only her own actions, but also on other characters' impressions of her.

Mrs. Robinson is the wife of a successful Los Angeles businessman and a mother of one child, a daughter who is studying in Berkeley. In spite of this, she is not a happy and relaxed person as one could expect of someone who seems to be living a comfortable life without worries. Instead, she is bored and lonely, dealing with the disinterest of her husband in any resemblance of affection. "Strangely, a number of psychiatrists stated that, in their experience, unmarried women patients were happier than married ones."⁴² This suggests that what makes depression and loneliness even

⁴¹ Webb, *Graduate*, 151.

⁴² Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 53.

more difficult is the impression that life should be better. Unmarried women simply have lower expectations and therefore are less prone to disappointment.

Mrs. Robinson masks her hurt under a facade of cold composure, which to other people comes across as a lack of emotions and personality, or even downright rudeness. “She’s not really much of a person, [...] She’s damn attractive. [...] But she’s not honest. [...] I think she’s devious. I don’t think she was ever taught the difference between right and wrong the way you and I were. It’s just a feeling I get about her.”⁴³ Benjamin’s father expresses what he has gathered about her in the many years they have known each other. Her not recognizing what is right and wrong suggests that she fights for what she wants and does not necessarily always play by the rules. She is definitely not a character to be victimized. She is very insistent, on occasion seeming almost detached from the reality, for example when she completely disregards any of Benjamin's protests against her attempts at seducing him. She does not hesitate to hold him captive or manipulate him. Apart from being a skilled manipulator, Ben also notes she is a “broken-down alcoholic.”⁴⁴

She chooses Benjamin as her secret lover based on reason, more than feelings. He is young and naive, in an emotionally vulnerable state, so likely to accept her as a form of comfort. Furthermore, based on the age difference between them, there is not much likelihood that Benjamin would fall in love with her and try to interfere with her family life. He is purely the convenient choice to relieve her domestic boredom and provide the physical intimacy she is missing from her husband.

When she learns Benjamin is about to take her daughter on a date, she is clear about her disapproval, for which she has two reasons. Firstly, as an overprotective mother she says she does not wish for her child to associate with a man with such low morals that he would be having an affair with a married woman. The second, less hypocritical and more practical reason is that her affair is less likely to be discovered if she keeps Benjamin at a safe distance from her family.

Though normally she would deal with an uncomfortable situation by giving in to her drinking habit or forcibly ignoring the issue at hand, when she is met with the possibility of Benjamin and Elaine dating, she goes straight to threats and blackmail. She does not hesitate to bend the truth in her favour and depict herself as the victim of a wicked manipulator. Nonetheless, she cannot save her reputation and marriage in the

⁴³ Webb, *Graduate*, 76.

⁴⁴ Webb, *Graduate*, 88.

face of such a scandal and while it does probably not cause her much emotional distress, her marriage results in an inevitable divorce when she and her husband refuse to try and keep up appearances anymore, as it is quite clear that neither of them is being fulfilled by their relationship.

Mrs. Robinson, who is throughout the novel referred to in this specific way, defining her as a wife belonging to her husband, Mr. Robinson, ends the novel as the exact opposite. A woman who has caused the fall of her own marriage and who, by trying to distract herself from the comfortable quiet of her life, has likely lost it all for good.

6. Character comparison and analysis

To analyse and compare the lives of the female protagonists of these novels, we first must consider the time they were living in to better understand what troubles each of them was facing. Mildred Pierce acquired the role of a housewife in the 1920s when suburbanization was booming and thanks to her husband being in the estate business, she had no worries about money or having to work. This was of course only true until the Black Thursday of 1929, which started the era of Great Depression when “people who had been prosperous could survive only by queuing at charity soup kitchens.”⁴⁵ April Wheeler, struggling in the suburbia near New York City in 1955 and Mrs. Robinson, bored in the 1960s suburban California were certainly luckier in the respect of money.

Both Mildred and Mrs. Robinson had to marry their husbands as quite young because of unexpected pregnancy. Mildred, as a mere seventeen-year-old, dropped out of high school two days prior to her expected graduation, Mrs. Robinson became pregnant during her days of studying art in college, where Mr. Robinson was a law student at the time. April was already a drama college graduate in a long-term relationship with Frank when it happened, and as a couple they even discussed abortion, but eventually agreed to start a family and so, in spite of her ambition to become an actress and see the world, she also ends up in a house in the suburbs, with a husband and children to take care of and all of her ambitions put on hold.

While Mildred is an unambitious person content with spending the rest of her life as a housewife, both April and Mrs. Robinson are dissatisfied with their situation and their unhappiness slowly culminates into fights that tear their entire families apart. In desperation to escape the boredom and loneliness, they are willing to sacrifice their marriages, April eventually putting even her own life on the line.

Though they are all connected by the role of a suburban housewife, these three characters lead different lifestyles. Mildred is a happy homemaker who is forced to also take on the role of a breadwinner, but despite being busy with fulfilling the stereotypical roles of both husband and wife, she still makes time for her family and even builds somewhat successful romantic relationships. April Wheeler is the opposite, hating having to stay at home doing chores all day and not enjoying even the company of her

⁴⁵ Bromhead, *Life*, 124.

family or friends. Mrs. Robinson, already in her 40s with an adult daughter and a busy husband, considers her position of a housewife a convenient choice and is willing to undergo a certain amount of emotional suffering to keep her status, being the wife of a well-to-do lawyer. Albeit not happy in her marriage, she is protective of it and reacts aggressively when she feels something is threatening its future.

Unfortunately for any feminist critics, the fates of all three women are to a large extent dictated by the men in their lives. Mildred's life is turned upside down when the business of her husband fails and reveals him to be a lazy, pretentious infidel. She then moves on to two lovers who mostly use her for sex and money, without actually valuing her as a person. April is only entrapped because of Frank's vague moral problem with her getting an abortion when she got pregnant for the first time. He uses their children as an excuse for the lack of change and excitement in their lives, while the true reason is the fact that he is a coward who has built a considerable portion of his respect on lies or embellished stories from his past and is afraid he could not live up to any higher expectations. April's affection for him can be summarised by her saying "I love you when you're nice,"⁴⁶ which suggests that she only feels a connection to him when it's beneficial to her in some way. Mrs. Robinson only starts an affair because of the complete disinterest of her husband in her. She seduces an emotionally vulnerable young man whom she sees as an easy, harmless target. She only realizes she has misjudged Benjamin when he disagrees with following her orders, stands up to her and eventually owns up to their affair, thus ruining her marriage and depriving her of her privileged life.

As mothers, they all certainly attempt to raise their children well, with varying levels of success. Mildred unfortunately loses one of her children to a disease and is left with a snobbish conceited daughter, to whom she devotes all her love and affection anyway, even though she receives none back. April struggles with bringing up children, since she did not want a family in the first place and is often unable to relate to them, considering them more of a burden than something to be proud of. Her children play a very minor role in both her life and the novel itself. "I'm glad I'm not gonna be that kid,"⁴⁷ reacts John Givings when he learns what kind of a negative relationship April and Frank have to their children in general, and especially to the one April is pregnant with at the time. Mrs. Robinson wants her daughter to grow up into a respectable

⁴⁶ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 47.

⁴⁷ Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 289.

woman and not end up irresponsibly pregnant at college like she did herself. In an attempt to protect her daughter, she shows hypocrisy when she states that Benjamin would ruin Elaine because he has no morals, while she is the one who seduced him, not the other way around.

The general morals and values addressed in each novel reflect the differing priorities of these women. While Mildred, arguably the simplest in character, values love, hard work and manners, April prefers freedom, independence and her sense of uniqueness. Mrs. Robinson, as a member of the upper middle class, considers education and success to be among the most important issues, followed by strong morals and a sense for forming business relationships.

As housewives, they are all faced with the fact that other's happiness depends on them. While Mrs. Robinson is to some degree relieved of this pressure by her husband's cold disinterest, both Mildred and April give all they have got to keep their families happy and together, but alas, their efforts are in vain and all three of them must eventually deal with failure.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis on the topic of *Role of Women in Suburban Literature* was to explore the stereotypical housewife role and the different ways it affected women during the twentieth century. Many secondary sources on related topics agree that the relative social isolation these women spent most of their time in often had a negative impact on their psychological well-being.

I decided to study the housewife role on the female protagonists of three selected novels, namely *Mildred Pierce*, *Revolutionary Road* and *The Graduate*. These novels provide the suburban setting, all in slightly different eras, and the characters themselves come from different backgrounds in order to explore the universality of the stereotypes of life in suburbia. My essay focuses on the struggle of women in the suburban setting, and on the negatives and difficulties they encountered in their daily lives.

The essay is sectioned into several chapters, starting with a brief introduction to the suburbia and its history and proceeding to introduce the issue of being a woman, wife and mother in the suburbs. The following three chapters examine the three selected novels and main characters, analysing the way the protagonists interact with their surroundings and finding both the sources and the outlets of their frustration. The last part of the thesis analyses and compares the characters, explaining the motivation behind their thinking, their feelings and actions.

8. Resumé

Cílem této bakalářské práce je prozkoumání role žen v domácnosti, se zaměřením na prostředí amerického předměstí ve dvacátém století na základě hlavních ženských postav románů *Mildred Pierceová* z pera Jamese M. Caina, *Nouzový východ* od Richarda Yatese a *Absolvent* Charlese Webba. Analýza je založena na rozboru zápletky románů a jednotlivých ženských hrdinek, s ohledem na sociálně-historický kontext.

První část této eseje je věnována představení prostředí amerického předměstí a jeho historii a dále se věnuje problematice žen v domácnosti a možným úskalím tohoto postavení. Následují kapitoly věnované analýze jednotlivých románů a jejich protagonistek. Poslední část je pak věnována srovnání jednotlivých postav, zaměřenému na odlišnosti jejich interakce s problémy, kterým musely všechny tři kvůli svému postavení čelit, jako je například partnerská krize, nenaplněné ambice či otázka závazků a nezávislosti. Tato sekce má ilustrovat univerzálnost dopadu tohoto specifického životního stylu a drobné odlišnosti v jeho formě, odvíjející se od doby, ale také od různých úrovní střední třídy, které americká předměstí obývaly především.

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10. Annotation

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Title of the thesis: Role of Women in Suburban Literature

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Number of pages: 39

Year: 2018

10.1. Abstract

This thesis focuses on the issue of women's position in the American suburbs and the stereotypes and problems of women in the role of a suburban housewife. The analysis focuses on the 20th century American suburbia, which is illustrated in three selected works of fiction. The novels *Mildred Pierce*, *Revolutionary Road* and *The Graduate* all have a prominent female character with her own way to fulfil the role of a housewife in the 20th century suburbia. This essay provides an analysis of the novels and their characters, inspecting the struggle of the middle-class society in the suburban utopia.

Key words: American literature, American society, suburbia, stereotypes, middle class, feminism, housewife

11. Anotace

Jméno: Michaela Čudová

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Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Pavlína Flajšarová, Ph.D.

Počet stran: 39

Rok: 2018

11.1. Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na problematiku postavení žen na americkém předměstí a na stereotypy a problémy kterým čelí takzvané ženy v domácnosti. Práce se věnuje konkrétně americkému předměstí 20. století, ilustrovaného pomocí tří vybraných románů. *Mildred Pierceová*, *Nouzový východ* i *Absolvent* obsahují výrazné ženské hrdinky, z nichž každá má odlišný způsob vyrovnávání se se svým společenským postavením a rolí ženy v domácnosti na americkém předměstí minulého století. Tato esej poskytuje analýzu zápletek jednotlivých románů a jejich hlavních ženských postav, čímž zkoumá rozličná úskalí obyvatel střední třídy, žijících ve zdánlivém ráji předměstí.

Klíčová slova: americká literatura, americká společnost, předměstí, stereotypy, střední třída, feminismus, žena v domácnosti