



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

GRAO EN LINGUA E LITERATURA INGLESAS

CURSO 2018/2019

TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

**THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE 1950s AND
1960s: THE IMPORTANCE OF SUBURBAN
LIFESTYLE**

Daniel Álvarez Cillero

Titora: Susana M^a Jiménez Placer



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This work will deal with the topic of the American suburban mentality and its values after the Second World War, more concretely in the fifties and sixties. The suburban lifestyle, which changed the conception of the American Dream into a life goal based on outward appearance and material success, will be studied in an attempt to show its darkest side. The prototypical white middle class family of the suburbia of that time, leading a superficial life of purely materialistic comfort and conformity, will be analyzed with the purpose of showing the failure of this suburban version of the American Dream to guarantee fulfillment and happiness to the human being. This idea will be supported by studies on the topic, as well as by some sociological data of the time that show the impact that the suburban lifestyle had on the middle-class society. Finally, references from literature and cinema will be provided in order to show how this conception of the American Dream has been depicted in American fiction and how the suburban mentality originates an atmosphere that is used to cover the misfortunes of life.

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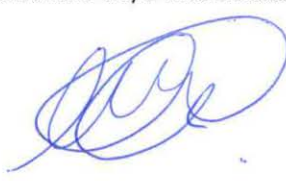


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0. INTRODUCTION

This degree project deals with the topic of the American Dream, concretely with the meaning that the concept got in the twentieth century, when the USA became a “suburban nation”, in the sense that this lifestyle supposedly characterized the way in which average Americans lived. The main aim is to show how and why the American Dream has transformed from being associated to a lifestyle based on individual freedom and equal opportunities to everyone to becoming a synonym for a lifestyle based on consumerism and social acceptance, where conformism and prosperity at any cost were the main purpose, without considering moral or ethical principles. Concerning its contents, the essay is structured in two parts. The first one (chapters 1 and 2) consists of a theoretical description of the American Dream, focusing on the evolution of the concept over time until the twentieth century, when the process of suburbanization changed the lifestyle of American society. The second part (including chapters 3 and 4), which conforms the analytical part of the work, explains and shows different attitudes towards the main features and values associated to the suburban lifestyle. This aim is pursued by contrasting the idealized treatment that suburbs received in mass media and popular culture and literature, on the one hand, and other deeper and more critical literary depictions that tried to show a negative conception of the suburban lifestyle, following the path opened by scholars who were critical towards the materialism and social exclusion that ruled the suburban American society, on the other.

“Chapter 1” functions as a general overview of the American Dream and explains how the concept was conformed and developed over time and what values were linked to it. In this case, the most important reference material is Cal Jilson’s *The American Dream in History, Politics and Fiction*, a study that accounts for the different socio-historical, economic and

political events and figures that influenced the formation of the topic. Following Jilson's ideas, the American Dream is described in this chapter considering such important values as the conception of America as a land of freedom or the importance of individualism. Moreover, it is explained how these values were promoted by the elites as the core ideas of the American lifestyle.

"Chapter 2" focuses on how the economic and social events of the beginning of the twentieth century affected the traditional conception of the American Dream and changed it into what could be called "the Suburban Dream". First of all, this chapter highlights the importance of the industrialization and modernization of daily life as the main reason for the process of suburbanization. Mauk and Oakland's *The American Civilization: An Introduction* illustrates the importance of the technological advances, while Jon C. Teaford's *The American Suburb: The Basics* is used in order to show the main features of the suburban space, as this book provides a statistical description on the territorial organization of the suburbs and the reasons why they became the predominant place of establishment for the American society. Moreover, World War II is taken as turning point in the outbreak of the white middle-class, as through propaganda, the different governments spread the wish to return home among the troops by showing an idealized familiar and suburban vision of post-war America. Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* analyzes the importance that institutional advertisement and commercials had on the process of suburbanization as well as on the consolidation of the white-middle class family as the most representative instance of the American life. Moreover, Cohen's work also shows how the American society became a mass-consumption society due to the investments and politics that promoted not only the mass-production of goods but also the importance of purchase.

About the second part of the work, "Chapter 3" analyzes in more detail the suburban lifestyle and the values and principles associated to it. This analysis is organized by focusing

on “the pros and cons” of the suburban lifestyle, as there were different attitudes towards it. While most citizens, governors and some elites seemed to concur with the idealized vision of the suburban lifestyle, there was a completely different vision that conceived the suburban lifestyle as dull, monotonous and unethical due to the strong importance that material benefits had for the individual growth. The first part of this chapter focuses on the main features that characterizes the American Dream in the postwar period and how it was shown and portrayed in mass media. Teaford’s work is useful in this part too, as it shows the different features and values of the suburbs and how commodity, convenience and efficiency attracted the new white middle-class. The second part of the chapter deals with the critical vision of the suburban lifestyle that some scholars and writers tried to show. Several elements of criticism as social exclusion and gender segregation are highlighted by Nicholas Lemann in his *The Big Test: The Secret History of American Meritocracy*. Moreover, the chapter focuses also on the criticism that material life and outward appearance received, as some authors like Elizabeth Cohen and Catherine Jurca shows.

Finally, Chapter 4 includes representative examples of suburban literature and cinema that clearly show how the negative side of the suburban lifestyle is exposed in fiction. Works by John Updike, Sinclair Lewis and John Cheever, as well the film “The Graduate”, are analyzed and compared, focusing on the depiction of their characters and suburban landscapes and how, through them, writers were able to represent a vision of the white-middle class completely different from the one represented in advertisements, mass media and popular culture. Catherine Jurca’s *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* is vital for this part, as she studies some of the most prominent suburban novels and characters, showing the emotional and spiritual consequences that the dullness and homogeneity of suburban lifestyle can produce on the individual.

1. “THE AMERICAN DREAM”: CONCEPT, HISTORY AND CHANGES

“The American Dream” is one of the most prominent notions about United States’ culture and lifestyle. It’s not only the ideological engine that moves and has moved the life of millions of American citizens, but it is also the reason why waves of immigrants went into the United States with the purpose of finding a better and more comfortable life. Even though it is difficult to establish a definition of the term, due to the changes and developments that it suffered over the time, it seems that there is a popular and predominant conception. It is said that the American Dream is that lifestyle based on upward mobility through hard work and economic competition between citizens in the United States of America, conceived as a land of freedom and equal opportunity to everyone. This idea has been considered the nuclear point of the American values, since it is and has been strongly promoted by the different governments and politicians throughout the history of the nation.

Cal Jilson’s *The American Dream in history, politics and fiction* makes an overview about the formation of the concept and its values along the history of the United States. He describes each period in order to show how the different socio-historical and economical events have influenced the creation of what nowadays is known as “the American Dream”. The work shows that even though the idealism that covers the concept was not representative in public life until the twentieth century, there were several intentions by the elites of establishing a common thinking since the colonial period. The development from the first settlements to the contemporary period could be described as a string of ideas that all together conformed the American ethos.

The origin of the concept is linked with the arrival of the Englishmen to the American continent in the early 17th century. The colonial period had to do as much as others in the

process of creation of the American values. Jilson explains that the Protestant communities, due to its social organization and the conception that they shared of America as a land of opportunities, constitute the first step in the formation of the idea of the American Dream:

The vision of America's place in the world that still defines the American Dream has deep roots in John Winthrop's promise to the Puritan faithful that they would be as "a city upon a hill". Winthrop reminded his brethren that their reason for leaving England to settle in the howling wilderness that was then North America was to build a society that the world could emulate. Later generations of Americans have been just as certain that the world would do well to follow their example. (17)

Winthrop's "city upon a hill" exemplifies the conception of North America as a promised land: the Englishmen coming to the New World in order to achieve the freedom that they couldn't enjoy in England because of the strong power of religion. This could be considered a prototype of the American Dream, since North America gained the status of a place where they could start and create a new society far away from religious oppression, a true "dream" for the Protestants that reached the continent. At the beginning, these groups were organized as communities that still carried strong religious values, so they did not put so much emphasis on individualism, an essential value in "the American Dream". Social organization had priority in order to maintain religion and religious beliefs as the basis of society. However, the interest about individual rights started to grow as the possibilities of individual wealth became a reality for the lower classes as well as the accumulation of wealth became an element of distinction. Lizabeth Cohen talks about the "consumer interest" in her *A Consumer's Republic. The politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. This work will be mentioned in more detail in the following sections. With regard so far, she explains that, although the

massive consumerism did not break out until the twentieth century, this materialistic culture began to develop previously, going as far back in time as the colonial period.

Almost from its initial European settlement, America participated in an economy of commercial exchange, and gradually over the centuries a market revolution increased the amount of goods that Americans purchased rather than made at home (or did without). Not only did people consume more ready-made products as time passed, but the accumulation of luxury goods – at first, imported china and textiles, later fineries manufactured domestically – marked distinctions among Americans, such as between urban and rural dwellers and among social classes. (21)

Jilson links the opportunity that America gave to the Protestants for the accumulation of wealth and material success with the raising of the individual values. As he states, “Before long, the social hierarchy that Puritans and Quakers thought necessary to assure order and stability was compromised because wealth often seemed to flow toward new men rather than toward the traditional elite.” (31). This raising of individualism led some governors and authorities William Penn (1644-1718) and Cotton Maher (1663-1728) to highlight the importance of values like diligence, discipline and perseverance as a way for preparing and educating the citizens for the incoming ages. As well as Penn and Maher, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) tried to educate the American citizen with the intention of showing his own vision and ideas about the path that man should take in order to achieve wealth and success. He was, besides one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, one of the main personalities, perhaps the most important one, that helped to build the American Dream. His *Poor Richard's Almanack* is considered one of the first references to individualism in the American culture, as well as one of the main works that conformed the American ethos:

Poor Richard and Father Abraham, taken up in McGuffey's Readers, were taught and recited as the nation's common wisdom throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. They were and are the moral core of the American Dream: education, work, thrift, dedication, and a dash of good fortune will put an honest man in a position to thrive and prosper. (Jilson 36-37)

Other founders of the nation, like Thomas Jefferson (1743-1828) and Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804) also contributed to the formation of the American Dream. While Franklin was responsible for conforming the individual core of citizens in order to enrich themselves, Jefferson and Hamilton conformed the economic ideas of the nation: the former with a more equalitarian vision, and the later with a vision closer to the self-interest of individuals. According to Jilson, "...[H]ow government should be designed remained uncertain. In the standard telling, two elite visions predominated; one was the liberal, egalitarian, agrarian vision of Thomas Jefferson, and the other was the individualistic, competitive, commercial vision of Alexander Hamilton" (50). With the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the ideas of these intellectuals merged into several values that started to be associated with the national feeling. Terms like "liberty", "equality" and "opportunity" were introduced in the Declaration as the basis of the new nation, what Jilson calls "The American Creed". This creed represented the model that American citizens were supposed to follow in order to prosper as individuals in society.

The conception of American Dream can't be explained without the value of upward mobility through economic competition between individuals. According to Jilson, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) entailed a deep change on the American Dream,

since it explains that the competition between the members of the species is the motive of progress, displacing at the same time the ideas of equality into a second place:

Darwin and his acolytes said that nature knew nothing of rights and equality. Nature was a field of competition, red in tooth and claw, in which only the strong survived. These ideas, that competition led to the survival of the fittest and the steady progress of the species, were elaborated by scholars like Sumner, promoters like Barnum, and confident robber barons like Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Morgan. The best science and social science of the day pointed to them as the great benefactors of mankind, and they rose proudly to accept the accolades. (151)

It seems that this idea of “the survival of the fittest” started to be exemplified in the most successful personalities. They served as model of upward mobility to the later generations and to the incoming middle-classes. Moreover, these elites were conceived as the perfect examples of the realization of the American Dream, a fact that, added to their condition of social models, contributed to spread the concept and its values widely.

As already mentioned, the formation of the concept “the American Dream” has an important background throughout the history of the United States, and several writers have referred to this ideal with different terms, meanings and visions, but it was not until 1931 that, as Jilson argues, the concept itself was popularized by James Truslow Adams (1878-1949) in his *Epic of America*: “While the exact phrase “the American Dream” may have been popularized by Adams, the idea, the insight, and the feeling have been present from first settlement” (5). What Truslow Adams states is “[T]here has been also the American Dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.” (404) According to this, it can

be argued that all elements mentioned above like the land of opportunities, freedom, individualism, meritocracy, wealth and upward mobility converged into the term “American Dream” which became the most representative notion of the United States until nowadays.

However, it is important to mention that there has not been a generalized consent about the American Dream among intellectuals and writers. Several of them have denounced the pervasive exclusion of the poor, women and black people from the established American values. Slavery, religious and social oppression on women, and a materialistic conception of life that segregated the population into the wealthy and the poor have led intellectuals, writers and scholars to state a continuous criticism of the American Dream:

[T]here has always been a Greek chorus of skepticism toward, even outright rejection of, the American Dream. Our most prominent novelists... have warned of the dangerous implausibility of the American Dream. The great characters of our national fiction... remind us that victories and defeats, dreams and nightmares all are common to the human experience”. (Jilson “Preface”)

This idea of rejection was very significant in the post-World War II period, concretely during the fifties and sixties, when the American society turned on a mass-consumption society and upward social mobility became the main purpose of life. This new materialistic conception led some prominent novelists, such as Cheever or Updike into writing against the corruption of the moral values that society was suffering because of the massive consumerism that characterized the American lifestyle during the second part of the twentieth century.

2. THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE POST WAR PERIOD: THE “SUBURBAN DREAM”

As it was mentioned in the previous section, during the first half of the twentieth century, the American conception of life started to change into a lifestyle based on mass-consumption and upward social mobility. This fifty-year period was decisive for the formation of this new American Dream, in which the white-middle class family living in the suburban areas outbroke as the most representative realization of what started to be named as “the Suburban Dream.” Moreover, this period was mainly characterized by a strong modernization and technological innovation of daily life, by two World Wars and by a constant economic instability, as the change from the “Roaring Twenties” to the “Great Depression” in the thirties shows. These events had an enormous influence on the consolidation of the mass-consumption society that characterized the Suburban Dream.

2.1. CREATING THE SUBURBAN SPACE

With the beginning of the new century, a new daily life appeared, and the technological advances as well as the modernization on different sectors produced a radical change in the way the United States’ citizens lived. According to David Mauk and John Oakland in their *American Civilization. An introduction*, “Between the Civil War and the First World War (1914-18), the US rapidly industrialized and became an increasingly urban country. Expansion was based on natural resources, iron, steam and electrical power. It was later helped by technical advances” (237). These new conditions of life were crucial for the outbreak of the suburbs as the most representative residential space of the American society. John C. Teaford’s

The American Suburb: The Basics makes an exhaustive analysis of the suburbs in the United States. In this work, he links the massification of the suburban areas with the earlier modernization and technological development of daily life, going as far back as to the appearance of the railroad:

The railroad [...] was the primary progenitor of mid-nineteenth-century commuter suburbs. Offering Americans an unprecedented degree of mobility, the railroad opened the possibility of a semirural lifestyle to those urban toilers who could afford the fare. The result was cluster of suburban homes around outlying depots in urban areas throughout the United States. (4)

To understand this process of suburbanization and what it meant for the American society it is important to contrast the meaning of the concept *suburb* with the meaning of the word in other western countries. While in most of European countries the notion is used to talk about the outskirts and slums of the towns, which usually implies negative connotation due to the fact that these places are generally associated with communities in social exclusion, as the poor or immigrants, in America the meaning is different: the suburban area is an entity that fit the independent nature of the American society, as well as its individualism:

For Americans the notion of city limits has been vital to the concept of suburbia. Unlike in Britain, where the term *suburb* refers to a peripheral area whether inside or beyond a major city's boundaries, in the United States the federal census bureau and most commentators have defined suburbia as that zone within metropolitan areas but beyond central city limits. Because of the strong traditional of local self-rule in the United

States, this political distinction between suburb and central city has been vital to discussions of suburban development, lifestyle and, policy. (Teaford "Preface").

The process of suburbanization meant not only the opportunity of owning a house in a more comfortable way, but also better opportunities for the creation and development of business. Teaford links this outbreak of the big business with the suburbanization of the society, He describes suburbia as "the preeminent zone for business in the United States" (87) and he argues that "With much-traveled highways, wealth, and talent, the most favored suburbs have become dynamic centers of American business. They offer maximum access, money, and skills, and that is what attracts business" (101). Mauk and Oakland show how business became a distinctive feature of American lifestyle, as it constitutes the realization of the capitalist and liberal ideals that had prominence through the American economy:

Since there were no trade restrictions in the internal US market, economies of production and distribution were possible and large-scale manufacturing developed. The export of manufactured goods became more important than raw materials. Economic activity was based on an ethos of commercial life free from restrictions, which led to a fierce unregulated capitalism. Big business became a central feature of American life. (237)

Hence, it seems clear that the suburbs offered a new way of economic independence that really attracted the young American society which carried a strong entrepreneurial spirit. As soon as this lifestyle became a real possibility, the suburban areas as well as the suburban houses quickly became the life goal of most of American citizens. As Teaford states, "A house in the suburbs – that has long been regarded as the American Dream [...] Americans have

aspired and saved for suburban manse, and a large portion of the population has realized that goal” (159). Supporting this idea, U.S. Department of Commerce data shows that the percentage of householders who owned their homes increased from 43.6% in 1940 to 55% in 1950, the biggest increase in the history of the country. The second-biggest increase was produced in the next decade, which set the percentage 61.9 % in 1960.

2.2. THE NEW VISION OF AMERICA AS A “PROMISED LAND”

The United States was not just one of the winners of the World War II, but also the country that has benefited most from it. The status of winner added to the fact that the war was not fought in American territory and to the technological boost that wars usually cause helped to create the image of the United States as “the greatest nation in the world”. Such a distinction was clearly accepted among the American society, and a strong patriotic feeling began to develop. But it was not without the help of propaganda that this patriotism started to grow and how the image of post-war America was idealized around the world.

Lizabeth Cohen shows in her *A Consumer's Republic: The politics of mass consumption in postwar America*, a broad study of consumerism in the American society during the second half of the twentieth century, how institutional advertising was used in order to create and show and idealized post-war America. This image was characterized by a familiar environment in a country of economic prosperity and abundance of goods, something that spread the desire of returning among the soldiers (GIs) as well as the desire of living that way for the citizens that stayed at home. This is a crucial point in the new conception of the American Dream. America was still regarded as a desired land, as a land of freedom and opportunities, but not with the sense of the political and religion freedom. What people tried to find in the post-war United States was the amenities and convenience of the familiar life in the suburbs.

By 1945 a decade of depression and half decade of war had left the country with an acute housing shortage. Hence, it was not surprising that the GIs bunking in close quarters and civilians doubled up with relatives would fantasize a peacetime prosperity built around more spacious and modern dwellings. But images in government publications, advertisements, and popular culture were even more specific: they overwhelmingly depicted “home” as a detached single-family house in a suburban setting. To some extent, traditional American symbolism of “home sweet home” was being invoked, but the message was more specifically geared to the times. (Cohen 73)

Apart from advertising, the United States’ government employed other mechanisms to attract the American citizens to the Suburban lifestyle. For example, the *New Deal*, a series of public programs for the intervention of the economy had already been applied between 1936 and 1939 by president Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945). This had implied a stronger presence of the government in the economic situation of the country, and it had promoted, for example, the building of highways and houses, which undoubtedly had contributed to the massive movement from the city center to the suburban areas.

Immediately after World War II, the *Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944*, also known as the G.I. Bill, produced a boost for the soldiers that wanted to start the promised post-war life. With this law, the GIs that came back home after the war could enjoy an economic compensation for their service defending the country. Some of the foremost measures provided by the G.I. Bill were financial assistance for mortgages, house purchase and education or training. Although it was primarily passed to improve the economy of the country by animating people to the purchase massively, it also had other effects. Perhaps the most important one was the so-called “baby-boom”, without which the family context of the period cannot be explained.

The comeback of soldiers, of course, caused an increment in the birth rate in most of the countries, but it was in the United States where this increase was more notable, as the economic situation was a boost for young couples in having children and becoming a “desired” suburban family.

2.3. THE MASS-CONSUMPTION SOCIETY

Propaganda was important for the creation and expansion of the Suburban Dream during the World War II, but it was also important in the post-war period, when it helped to promote consumerism. American citizens started to be attracted not only by the suburban lifestyle but also by the materialism and consumerism that characterized it and that could improve the amenity of their life. The organization of the suburban areas into a commercialized space was also important for the creation of the mass-consumption society. According to Cohen, “The landscape of mass consumption created a metropolitan society where people no longer left their residential enclaves to enter central marketplaces and the parks, streets, and public buildings that surrounded them” (288). Suburbia became a comfortable place to purchase a home as soon as a great part of American society established in it. Commercial centers and shops became parts of the daily life as they were attached to the suburban space and they were frequented by citizens in order to find the most modern electrical household appliance to improve the comfort of their suburban home.

Buying homes, particularly new ones, motivated consumers to purchase things to put in them, and thereby helped stoke the crucial consumer durables market. Billions of dollars were transacted in the sale of household appliances and furnishings, as

refrigerators, washing machines, televisions, and the like became standard features in postwar American homes. (Cohen 123)

The mass-production of goods and the massive advertising of them made that every type of electric appliance was well-regarded as it meant a continuous modernization of everyone's life. The new possibilities that technology provided led to the mass-consumption of some appliances that rapidly became indispensable: “[R]emarkable was the jump in American families owning a mechanical refrigerator: from 44 to 80 percent between 1940 and 1950 ... Automobile sales boomed as well, with new-car sales quadrupling between 1946 and 1955, until three-quarters of American households owned at least one car by the end of the 1950s” (Cohen 123). But perhaps the most representative appliance of this period is the TV. The massive selling of this device can be considered one of the main reasons for the appearance or creation of the mass-consumption society during the post-war, as it worked as the transmission media of massive advertising and propaganda:

The emergence of television as a beckoning new frontier for advertising also helped foster a climate receptive to market segmentation. As early as 1953, two-thirds of American households owned televisions; by the mid-1960s, 94 percent had at least one, and many had more. Given that the average American watched TV five hours a day [...] By the end of the 1950s, that confidence made TV the source of more than half of all revenues at most big advertising firms, where total earnings mushroomed with television. Selling commodities was critical to the new technology's viability, more important to broadcasters and advertisers than the entertainment itself. (Cohen 302)

The role that TV plays in the creation of consumers is unquestionable. With a TV in every living room, all suburban families were exposed to the massive advertising of household goods, furnishing, decorations or cars that upgraded their living standards. Moreover, the image of the suburban family was idealized by TV, as it starred in most programs and spots. In this way, “real families” could visualize themselves in the “families on the screen” and see how their lives and their house would be with all type of modern equipment.

As it was discussed, suburbia and the suburban family changed the conception of the American Dream. Big data show how, and in which terms, the United States became a suburban nation, but they also reflect how the Suburban Dream was clearly accepted among the citizens as the lifegoal. For years, the image of America was linked with a land of freedom and individual opportunities in contrast with other nations, but after the first half of the twentieth century most of the world regarded the American society as a fashionable society that enjoyed a family life in the comfort that economic prosperity guaranteed. The benefits of the suburban life became the “quest” for citizens in America at the expense of traditional values as the individual freedom and the raising of the individual.

3. THE SUBURBAN MENTALITY: LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

Since the suburban lifestyle became the most representative lifestyle in the United States and was widely promoted not only in the U.S.A but also in the rest of the Western World, most of the attitudes towards the Suburban Dream were positive. This is basically what the millions of citizens that accepted it as a lifestyle demonstrates. Even though, suburban values were not free of criticism. While a large part of the American society and its governors appeared to agree with the new white-middle class lifestyle, some writers tried to show the “dark side” of the suburban lifestyle. They focused their works on demystifying the greatness of the American Dream, as others had already done in past, since economic success became the reason for the recognition of the personal success.

3.1. SUBURBAN LIFESTYLE: MAIN FEATURES

As soon as the United States became a suburban nation, the new white middle-class living in the suburbs started to develop a common lifestyle that entailed several values as commodity, conformity and convenience. Everything around the suburbs was organized in order to guarantee the amenity of the families living there. Assuming this, it is not surprising that a great number of American citizens had chosen this lifestyle after years of economic depression and wars. There was an ideal and prosperous life waiting for them, where they could conduct the new American Dream that their governors had planned and promised to them.

As Cohen argues, talking about a propagandist film of the 1950s, “Although *In the Suburbs* was an unambiguous marketing tool that simplistically stereotyped suburbanites, the link it identified between mass consumption and suburbanization was broadly recognized in

postwar American society” (195). Through propaganda, the image and mentality of the suburban life was idealized as well as stereotyped and the ideal portrait of the suburban family and lifestyle became rapidly recognizable all over the country and the rest of Western world. The repeated term “white middle-class family” is illustrative since, with suburbanization, this group became the most representative of the American society statistically talking. But images on commercials and institutional advertisements not only showed a consumer family characterized by its race and social position, but also by its members, clothing, appearance, manners, and perhaps most important, its role both inside the family and in society.

The standardized white middle-class family was conformed, fundamentally, by a married couple with more than one child. The man was considered the head of the family due to having a job, usually in the financial or entrepreneur sector. In the case of the woman, she was basically in charge of the domestic chores, which implied a new position as consumer as well. Woman cared for the children, carried out the domestic tasks and purchased all kinds of new sales items in order to represent the new honorable and fashionable suburban house, as well as to improve its outputs. As men and women were conceived as financial producers and consumers respectively, they easily found their place thanks to suburbanization. Cohen links the growth of suburbs in the USA with the opportunities that they gave to the new middle-class, not only as massive consumers, but also as entrepreneurs and worker class:

[A]s existing suburban, town centers proved inadequate to support all the consumption desired by the influx of new residents, as suburbanites more and more attached to their cars increasingly viewed returning to urban downtowns to shop as inconvenient, and as retailers came to realize that suburban residents, with their young families, new homes, and vast consumer appetites, offered a lucrative frontier ripe for conquer, the regional shopping center emerged as a new form of community marketplace (257) .

Perhaps the most important aspect that the Suburban Dream offered to the citizens was convenience. The continuous expansion of the suburban areas gave the new families the opportunities of living and enjoying all aspects of modern life almost in a more comfortable way, without the stressed atmosphere of the overcrowded cities. Apart from easily purchasing, citizens in the suburbs had the possibilities of enjoying their free time with the uncondensed leisure activities that the new spaces offered to them.

Before World War II the central cities had dominated retailing, and downtown department stores were unequalled purveyors of a wide range of merchandise, but especially clothing and accessories [...] During the postwar decades, however, this rapidly changed as an increasing number of suburban shoppers abandoned downtown and satisfied their retailing needs along the metropolitan fringe. This change became apparent in the mid-1950s when a number of pioneering retail behemoths opened for business (Teaford 34-35).

Houses were idealized as well, as convenient places for the development of the family life. A home gave the opportunity to their dwellers of purchasing things to improve it. For the consumer, the idea of owning a house was associated with some elements that made the house fashionable and efficient. Modern and electric appliances were a constant in the suburban houses, but there were also several elements, as swimming pools, that were commonly linked to houses in order to improve the standard conditions of the houses or to give provide them with some elements that could be admired by the surrounding neighbors. Catherine Jurca in her *White Diaspora: The Suburbs and the Twentieth-Century American novel* explains the attractions of the suburban houses as commodities:

The suburban house was also treated as a commodity that housed other commodities; advertisements and feature articles in popular periodicals and home-management literature, and a government- and business-sponsored “Own your Own House” campaign, marketed the suburban home as the natural site of white middle-class family life and the proficient consumption of mass-produced good of all kinds (Jurca 45).

The suburban environment created in their inhabitants the sense of a larger community, intensified by the fact that most of the families were similar regarding their race, religion, economic position, concerns and prospects. Uninterrupted contact among neighbors was usual and social life was prominent. Thus, the USA became a suburban nation since most of their citizens embraced this, assuming this new lifestyle, identity and purposes. According to Jurca, “Unlike the term city dweller, which designates only a place of residence, suburbanite implies that where you live has something to do with who you are” (148). Suburbanization meant both the creation of the suburb but also the creation of a mentality associated to it.

3.2. THE DARK SIDE OF THE SUBURBAN LIFESTYLE.

All features of the white middle-class lifestyle mentioned above are presented according to the idealized image showed in advertisers and commercials. But at the same time, these values were regarded by a part of the American society and some scholars as a corruption of the traditional values that conformed the American Dream. Nevertheless, the criticism on the materialistic conception of life was not new and it was not the first time the American Dream caused controversy. As pointed out in the first chapter, several scholars, intellectuals and writers have denounced the different patterns of exclusion against women, blacks, Native-

Americans, immigrants and different social minorities existing in the American civilization. As Jilson argues, it is true that these groups have gained more presence in social life as they gradually achieved their fundamental rights, but it is also true that this achievement was possible because the groups made their own struggle against conventions, not because the elites had promoted their inclusion:

Exclusion has been a persistent and destructive fact of American social life, but it has not been a permanent and unchanging fact. Over time, the right to dream the American Dream has been opened, at least formally, to new and increasingly diverse groups. Critically, the core ideas of the American Creed – liberty, equality, opportunity – were always available to be claimed by the excluded. Not every claim was honored or even acknowledged immediately; [...] Poor white men, women, and minorities achieved rights incrementally and over time as they doggedly pressed for the right to share in the promise of the American Dream. (14-15)

The position of women in the suburban lifestyle meant another instance of oppression and exclusion since the role of housewife was promoted and idealized as the best (and the only) for women. Criticism tried to denounce the promotion and idealization of this image of women, which led to a gender segregation between the working man and the house and housekeeping woman. As Nicholas Lemann explains in his *The Big Test: The Secret History of American Meritocracy*, this image clearly underrated femininity's importance for society as women were pushed aside from finance and business, but also as they were enclosed in the world of the house: "The idea that women should devote themselves to housekeeping and child rearing and volunteer work, no matter how talented they were, was so deeply ingrained in the American leadership class in the mid-twentieth century that calls for greater opportunity for women are

just above impossible to find – even though the air was thick with calls for greater opportunity generally” (156). Moreover, suburbanization favored the social and gender segmentation already since infancy. As Cohen states, “Not accidentally, advertisements targeting children as a segment in the 1950s and 1960s sought to lay the groundwork for a lifetime of consumption, preparing the way for their voyage from child to teen to adult male or female segment” (320). Thus, since their childhood, women were defined as housewives and consumers, something that clearly infringes upon women’s aspirations.

African Americans, Native Americans and immigrants in general were also minorities usually excluded from the standardization of the ideal American life, Middle-classes moved massively from the city centers to the suburbs producing an urban sprawl on a large scale. Investment in the suburbs grew and left the cities, mostly inhabited by the lower classes, which are usually associated with immigration, unfunded and in decline, a fact that produced a growth in inequality, social exclusion and crime rates inside the city boundaries. In this way, suburbanization not only excluded the lower classes but also headed them towards the complete social exclusion, as they couldn’t find a prosperous place for living neither in the stereotyped suburbs nor in the collapsed cities. For example, in the field of education, black population were adversely affected by the creation of the standardized educational test (Leman 156-165). Focusing on suburbanization What concerns to propaganda, stereotypes created by the media around the family environment of the suburbs didn’t include any sign of inclusion towards the black families. As Cohen states, “[A]dvertisers and marketers would reinforce these divisions as they, too, forsook the mass market for the greater profits to be made segmenting it into distinctive submarkets built around differences of gender, class, race, age, and lifestyle” (253). Moreover, the generalized term “white middle-class” clearly reflects certain degree of exclusion against the large number of black people living in the USA.

Suburbanization could be also criticized because of the strong environmental impact that it produced. The massive construction of houses, shopping-centers and different commercial buildings produced an important waste of natural resources and changed the suburban landscape into a space with no place for nature. This widened the gap between the individual and nature, a fact that breaks with the pre-settlement's values, when Native Americans lived in harmony and spiritual connection with the land.

At the individual level, the importance of upward mobility was one of the main reasons for the criticism of the "Suburban Dream". Reaching upper positions in the social ladder was the purpose of society, and the fact that the suburbs constituted a large community of people under the same lifestyle produced the segregation of those considered different. As soon as wealth and property became symbols of success, they started to be the reason why people were well-regarded or not in the neighborhood atmosphere, a fact that gives extra importance to the outward appearance. Residents were judged according to their properties, which depending on their modernity, size or price could guarantee more social prestige. In this way, social acceptance became more important than acceptance as individuals, which is usually led by moral values instead of richness and influences. It can be argued that this search for convenience led to personal stagnation. Satisfaction resided in material values like the acquisition of new and luxurious possessions and there was no place in the middle-class society for art or literature, for example. Individual minds were on purchasing and growing economically, and society became obsessed with prosperity with no regards to moral and ethical principles, spiritualism or human condition. According to Jurca, "The materiality of suburban life ... generates a definitively white middle-class affect – the feeling of homelessness – that is characterized by an irresolvable physic split between the material delights of affluence and its corresponding spiritual horrors" (47).

The obsession for the material benefits affected everyone equally, in the sense that everyone was obsessed with the same material benefits and was motivated to follow the same ways to achieve them. Assuming this, the new American Dream didn't guarantee people the opportunity to create their own destiny. Lifegoals were imposed by governments, companies, firms, etc. through the mass media. People had similar houses, cars and definitely, they conformed to the same stereotype, which clearly characterizes the suburban lifestyle as monotonous. This lack of "originality" produces at the same time a lack of individual identity, since they lived in neighborhoods where everyone looked alike. In this sense, the Suburban Dream has been regarded as an attack to the individual nature of the nation. Jilson states that "While intellectuals struggled to explain and common citizens strove to understand the changes taking place in American society, politicians articulated a familiar vision of America's past accomplishments and future prospects." (193). Since the suburban lifestyle was promoted and idealized by governments and media, life seemed to be fully planned which left no space for individual freedom. According to this idea, suburbanization can be considered a break or disconnection with the past, with the traditional individualistic mentality of the nation. Citizens embraced the suburban lifestyle guided by the mass ideals, disregarding their own interests or concerns as individuals.

Scholars have argued that the monotony of the white-middle class lifestyle produced emotional emptiness, and problems such as depression, desire of scape or dissatisfaction began to appear. Living in suburbs surrounded by similar people led some individuals to question his/her own identity. Outward appearance was so important in the suburban mentality that it was almost an obligation to pretend happiness and success in public with the purpose of forging a good social reputation. No matter how many personal problems someone was suffering, the only important thing was to make and maintain a positive impression on neighbors. Having in such consideration the social image of the self, the individual finds difficulties to define himself

in an independent way, since this may cause rejection and exclusion from neighbors and friends. This idea is well-exemplified in literature, showing characters that represent the traditional idea that wealth and power don't make the individual immune to failure, a moral principle, spread by some historical figures such as Benjamin Franklin, that seemed to be forgotten in the suburban mentality. These characters cannot assume failure and cope with the misfortunes and, as a consequence, they develop unstable and problematic behaviors that highlight their desire to escape from conventions. For example, some of them find support in alcohol as a way of evading from personal problems.

Thus, suburbanization can be conceived in two different ways, the one promoted by media and governments and that clearly influenced most part of the American society, and the one that deals more with the criticism towards the suburban lifestyle and its amorality, which was supported by several intellectuals and was depicted in the most prominent literature of the period, as Jurca states: "While suburbs obviously do not guarantee familia[r] perfection, just as slums do not ensure familia[r] failure, it is possible to take the former insight too far and remythologize the suburb as the parodic antithesis of the good life, where gratification on every level is nonexistent" (166).

4. SUBURBAN LITERATURE AND REPRESENTATIONS OF SUBURBS IN FICTION

Suburban literature has worked as a counterpart to the propaganda as it gave society a new and critical vision of the suburban lifestyle. Through fiction, writers and scholars have created the image of the Suburban Dream as a “nightmare” for society. Suburbanization and the suburban environment were depicted as dark spaces because of their monotony and stereotypical features. At the same time, characters represent different realizations or visions of the American Dream, but they also share some features such as emotional emptiness, dissatisfaction, stagnation or desire to run away from conventional life.

During the nineteenth century, when capitalism and sales started to grow, materialism was already criticized. The American lifestyle started to be regarded as immoral due to its acceptance of material success as its main life goal. Furthermore, slavery symbolized the most immoral behavior of the American society, while social limitations of women due to strong religious and socioeconomic conventions evident its flaws. Some of the well-known and most prominent writers denounced these elements through their fiction, as it is the case of Mark Twain and Theodore Dreiser. Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) tells the story of Huck Finn, “an outsider” who wants to run away from the repression and lack of ethical values of his society. Through the perspective of a naïve *picaro* as Huck and his journey next to Jim, a black slave, across the Mississippi River searching for freedom, Twain is able to state a criticism on slavery and religious and social conventions. Jilson argues that “Readers fondly remember Jim for his determination to be free and to free his family, but also for his kindhearted dedication to Huck [...] Huck struggled against the legal and social conventions of the day and against his own conscience to help Jim escape” (108). The case of *Sister Carrie*

(1900) is also remarkable. According to Jilson, the little initial success of the novel – a fact that could be interpreted as a reflect of the little consideration towards women in that time – does not diminish the importance that it has on criticizing the role of women in society: “*Sister Carrie* had miserable initial sales ... but its reputation grew, and it now is seen as an important window on the ambiguous place of women in urban America at the turn of the century” (147). With this novel, Dreiser denounces the limitations women were exposed to in order to succeed in a male dominated society, as Carrie is regarded not by her abilities but by her sex-appeal. Moreover, she represents the dissatisfaction that materialism produces: “When she did succeed on her own ... she was alone, empty and disconsolate” (Jilson 152).

Concerning suburban literature, the way in which suburbanites are treated in literature can be considered a reaction to the mediatic imposition of the suburban lifestyle. Some literary works tried to denounce the amorality of the divine conception that the modern society had of materialism and the quest for richness at all cost. In *White Diaspora: The Suburbs and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*, Catherine Jurca analyzes the treatment of the suburbanization and the suburban lifestyle in fiction by studying and considering a list of novels that became symbols of criticism against the Suburban Dream. She emphasizes that, since suburban novels constituted truly representations of the white middle-class society, they can be regarded as “sociologically important” because they “ha[ve] been cast in terms of the truth and utility of their insights into and assessments of American society rather more often than in terms of aesthetics” (15). This clearly highlights the importance that fiction had on offering American society a more profound reflection of itself, apart from the one standardized and idealized in commercials.

According to this, the descriptions of the suburban environment and the depiction of characters, as well as the interaction among them take on importance in analyzing how suburbs are depicted in literature. Both space and characters are represented by places and citizens that

could be real, in order to give veracity to the story as readers can easily recognize the elements as part of their society. In the case of the space, the suburban environment is usually linked with emotional emptiness due to its monotony. Jurca explains how, due to the monotony of a neighborhood full of stereotypes, the landscapes and residences depicted in suburban literature are linked with “homelessness”:

In other words, houses that contain mass-produced and -consumed goods and department-store living rooms or that are built *en masse* in post-World War II developments are associated with homelessness not because they have been improperly penetrated by an abstraction called the market. Rather, the association comes through the undesirable multiplication of houses and furnishings, interiors and exteriors, that look exactly alike. (Jurca 12)

On the other hand, characters function as human representations of all white middle-class values as well as all of the emotions and misfortunes that suburbs cause in society. They are symbols of how the idealized image of the American Dream can turn against society. Regarding suburban lifestyle from a critical point of view, the authors create anodyne lives that show constant desires of rebellion against the conventions they are immersed in in order to reflect the millions of Americans that were immersed in the suburban lifestyle. Moreover, there is a common feature that the suburban literature characters usually share, apart from their belonging to the white middle-class and its lifestyle and values: their desire of escape from it, something that can be perceived especially in their main concerns. Jurca emphasizes this importance on the interaction among characters as representations of the truly American society:

The representation of the suburb in the American novel points to men's and women's participation in consumer and work cultures; it articulates the relations between individuals and a dense network of local and national affiliations that mass production, standardization, and, by the fifties, the specter of conformity served to clarify and reinforce. (13)

Perhaps the two most representative novels dealing with the topic of the American Dream during the twentieth century are Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1920) and John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960). The latter is part of a series of novels by the author about the life of the same character, Harry "Rabbit" Armstrong. This group includes four more works – *Rabbit, Redux* (1971); *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), *Rabbit Remembered* (2001) – but it is the first one, written in the peak of suburbanization, that best reflects the concerns addressed in this paper. Despite the fact that there are several differences among them (time of the story, age and features of the characters...) both novels represent the meaninglessness of the material and conventional American lifestyle. Regarding *Babbitt*, even though it was published in 1923, Lewis is able to anticipate in this novel the constant monotony and emptiness of the suburban lifestyle that was characteristic in the post-war period. Both the characters and the environment where they live can be extrapolated to the fifties and sixties, the "boom" of suburbanization:

With *Babbitt* Lewis sought to portray the "Tired Business Man" in a city of three or four hundred thousand people, but as we meet Babbitt the novel reveals that to accomplish this project was also, already, to produce an anatomy of suburban life. [...] Lewis conducted his analysis of the suburb as an attack on the modern consumer culture from which it soon could not be disentangled. (Jurca 44-45)

The first description of the protagonist in *Babbitt* stereotypes his character according to the society in which he lived and highlights the meaninglessness of his role: “His name was George F. Babbitt. He was forty-six years old now, in April, 1920, and he made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay” (*Babbitt* 8). Regarding his attitudes and concerns, he can be considered a dual character in the sense that his behavior changes when he passes from his family life, which he detests, to his business life, which produces satisfaction and vanity on him. Moreover, the “fairy child” (*Babbitt* 8) that he encounters in his dreams before waking up represents what could be considered a third side of his life. This oneiric element represents George’s desire of rebellion against his conventional life. “He escaped from reality till the alarm-clock rang, at seven-twenty” (*Babbitt* 9). He exemplifies the prototypical white-collar man that only finds satisfaction in his material benefits but that, at same time, is not fulfilled with his familiar, personal or spiritual life. However, George does not only show discontentment with his personal and family life but he develops also a displeasure with his business affairs. Influenced by “rebel” relatives and friends, like his friend Paul Riesling, which questions the meaning of materialism, he starts to be conscious of the dullness of his life and starts to question his satisfactions as well:

“Ever feel that way, Paul? Kind of comes over me: here I’ve pretty much done all the things I ought to; supported my family, and got a good house and a six-cylinder car, and built up a nice little business, and I haven’t any vices ‘specially, except smoking – and I’m practically cutting that out, by the way. And I belong to the church, and play enough golf to keep in trim, and I only associate with good decent fellows. And yet, even so, I don’t know that I’m entirely satisfied! (*Babbitt* 52)

His wife Myra is as important as George for the total representation of the suburban lifestyle, as she is described according to her position as an enclosed housemaker and how this role has lessened her vitality and aspirations: “She had become so dully habituated to married life that in her full matronliness she was as sexless as an anaemic nun. She was a good woman, a kind woman, a diligent woman, but no one, save perhaps, Tinka, her ten-year-old, was at all interested in her or entirely aware that she was alive” (*Babbitt* 11). At the end of the novel, before going to hospital for a serious case of appendicitis, her assumption of her as self-meaningless is emphasized as she questions her own meaning in life: “I was thinking, lying here, maybe it would be a good thing if I just went. I was wondering if anybody really needed me. Or wanted me. I was wondering what was the use of my living. I’ve been getting so stupid and ugly” (*Babbitt* 292-293). Myra comes to represent how the limited role of women in the suburban lifestyle clearly harms her, as she, after having followed conventions and embraced them, finds herself useless. In this final speech, she also shows helplessness to rebel against her devoted life, as the only solution she finds is to pass away. Housewives were usually depicted in suburban literature as isolated characters due to their social limitations. They question their identity and social importance as they feel pushed apart. As Jurca argues, “Middle class-women feel bad insofar as their status limits their aspirations, while with men, the satisfaction of aspirations deadens into discontent” (59).

Lewis’ detailed description of the house where George and his family live can be resumed in one sentence: “In fact there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home” (*Babbitt* 18). The family residence is depicted as a space with lack of originality or personality, which intensifies the lack of identity that the characters develop along the novel. Moreover, George and Myra’s bedroom is described in the same way as the house, with no references to personal elements, which symbolizes monotony in their marital life:

The “desire to escape” does not “challenge middle-class society in America,” but rather expresses the tensions between affluence and diffidence, self-appreciation and self-loathing, complacency and revolt, which Lewis understood to be the structural underpinnings of white male middle-class identity in and after *Babbit* (46).

Rabbit, Run is the first of Updike’s novels about the life of Harry “Rabbit” Armstrong. Both the title and the nickname “Rabbit” reflects the idea of a character who is continuously running away and escaping, as Harry is depicted. Updike creates this character in order to represent the prototypical teenager that finds his vitality ruined by the Suburban Dream, which he tries to avoid. As Jilson states, “The Rabbit series followed the life of Harry “Rabbit” Armstrong from his midtwenties to his death in his midsixties. The series explored in fiction the concerns ... that the prosperity of middle-class life has sapped the drive and danger, or at least insecurity, from American life” (Jilson 195). Harry himself symbolizes the anxiety of rebellion against conventions but also the inexperience and the impulsivity of an individual who is unready to face family life but who has no choice due to the pressure of society. Donald J. Grenier makes an analysis of this novel in his *John Updike’s Novels* focusing on Rabbit’s struggle for freedom from of suburban conventions: “In *Rabbit, Run* Updike poses a dilemma that results in the ambiguity he aspires to: Should Rabbit define himself by social convention, or should he indulge his yearning toward individual belief? Harry sees the conflict as either a nine-to-five job and dinner in the kitchen or the freedom to run but with no place to go” (55).

Rabbit’s desires of escape appear soon in the novel when, after his argument with Janice, he realizes that he’s living a monotony that is really a “trap”: “Janice calls from the kitchen, ‘And honey pick up a pack of cigarettes could you?’ in a normal voice that says everything is forgiven, everything is the same. Rabbit freezes, standing looking at his faint

yellow shadow on the with door that leads to the hall, and senses he is in a trap. It seems certain. In disgust he goes out” (*Rabbit, Run*¹ 15). Even though conformity should characterize Rabbit as he is a member of the suburban lifestyle, he is really an unstable and divergent individual, and his way to front his adult affairs is running away. By this impulsive behavior, the character obviously shows a strong longing for liberating himself from marital and social conventions, but it also shows how innocent and immature he is. Rabbit’s lack of maturation to assume adult life represents the unreadiness of American society. When achieving the American Dream, citizens can be regarded as impulsive individuals moved by the mediatic attraction of the suburban lifestyle which, due to its idealization condition, does not prepare citizens for failure:

Although this choice is made early in the novel, the reader understands that Harry Angstrom is a simple man with a limited value system, a decent but flawed adult who finds the little complexities of life – a boring job, a dreary wife, a dingy apartment – too much to handle. His problems are not those of poverty, politics, and the nuances of keeping up with Joneses; rather, they are how to sell junk he does not believe in while returning home each night to a marriage that drains his spirit, that insists on finality instead of fluidity. (Greiner 55)

The narrative style contributes to the atmosphere of continuous escapism that characterizes the novel. First, it is narrated in present tense which gives dynamism to the narration and provides it with a presentism that helps to connect the novel with its own times and to intensify the criticism that Updike makes about the post-war American society. But the importance of the narrator resides in the fact that he uses the third person but with a selective

¹ Hereafter cited as *RR*

or limited omniscience showing the perspective of different characters, so the story can be interpreted from more perspectives than from Rabbit's one. This is the case of Janice, Rabbit's wife. Through free indirect speech, Janice's tiredness with her position as a devoted wife is highlighted. As Myra, Janice represents the destruction of the aspirations in women because of the male-dominant conception of business and successful life:

She moves into the kitchen, angry but not angry enough. She should be really sore, or not sore at all, since all he had said was what he had done a couple hundred times. Maybe a thousand times. Say, on the average once every three days since 1956. What's that? Three hundred. That often? Then why is it always an effort? She used to make it easier before they got married. She could be sudden then. Just a girl. Nerves like new thread. (RR 12)

Marital tensions are a constant in the novel. They are seen as a consequence of the encounter between partners that are both disenchanted with their matrimony. This is reflected in the first argument between Harry and Janice: “‘What the hell ails you? Other women *like* being pregnant. What's so damn fancy about you? Just tell me. What is so frigging fancy.’ She opens her brown eyes and tears fill them and break over the lower lids and drop down her cheeks, pink with injury, while she looks at him and says, ‘You bastard’ with drunken care” (RR 11). In this passage, alcohol is present as Janice is drunken, something that symbolizes the depression that her role produces on her. Alcoholism is a recurrent characteristic in suburban literature, as it represents a way of escaping the depressive conventional reality.

At the end of the novel, the circularity of the story is highlighted. Harry discovers that Ruth, the woman with whom he is having an affair, is pregnant and wants him to stay with her and the new baby, and he runs again. Jurca talks about the rebel nature of Harry: “Harry

“Rabbit” Angstrom “is in a trap.” He runs. He returns. Having discovered that home and family are inescapable, he runs again, and some thirteen hundred additional pages record his enduring fantasies of flight. Once his fortunes have improved and he stays put, Rabbit nonetheless rebels against the constraints of his environment” (RR 161). The fact that the novel begins, develops and ends with the motive of Harry running away represents how impossible it is for him to assume a responsible life. He seems too young for undertaking the suburban lifestyle and too naïve to rebel against conventions. As Grenier argues, “Rabbit needs advice, but no one knows what to tell him. All he hears are clichés and catch-phrases” (55).

Jurca also mentions some other novels that are clearly representations of the suburban lifestyle too, as Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in a Grey Flannel Suit* (1955) and Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road* (1961). In the case of the former, the depiction of the prototypical suburban houses and the relations between the characters and their home are especially relevant: “What differentiates *Man in Gray Flannel* from the suburban novels we have encountered so far is the Rath’s own immediate, unmistakable, and almost hopeless opposition to it as well. Ownership of a suburban house is treated here as a sign of economic weakness, suspended ambition, the failure of the American Dream instead of its fruition. (Jurca 134) Concerning *Revolutionary Road*, she states that “[I]n *Revolutionary Road*, the suburb is treated as a living space that is in constant danger of contaminating you, of turning something you’re not – someone who belongs there ... [it] brilliantly defines the postwar suburbanite as the antisuburbanite, whose existence is a protest against everyone else’s putative conformity” (148). This novel deals with one of the most recurrent topics in suburban literature as it is the marital life whose vitality is diminished by the effects that suburban lifestyle and mentality has on it.

Moreover, not only novels, but also short stories have depicted the topic of the suburbs and suburban lifestyle. Some writers have been able to compress magnificent representations

of the suburban depression in their short stories. One of the most prominent in this area is John Cheever. Lynne Waldeland in *John Cheever*, analyzes the importance of Cheever's short stories on treating the topic of the suburban lifestyle by showing the connection between suburban characters and the suburban space and mentality:

The ground where these dual interests in the internal dynamics of the person and the external convulsions of the world meet is in Cheever's attention to the dailiness of American life, the focus that often gets him characterized as a novelist of manners. Generally, however, in the novel form, he deals with the more extreme experiences of human life; it is more often his stories that really work out the relationships between the inner person and outer world, the present and the past, the best that we dream of being and the compromises we continually make. (Waldeland 42)

"The Swimmer" (1959) published in the New York Times in 1964, narrates Neddy's journey swimming across the pools of his neighborhood. He represents the stereotype of the white middle-class man living in the suburbs. His road – the string of pools – is named by him as the "Lucinda River" ("The Swimmer"² 727), something that recalls Huck's journey along the Mississippi River in Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. However, Huck's journey represents a spiritual and moral awakening of the character, while the case of Neddy is completely different. Neddy's journey symbolizes the vanity and the grade of abstraction from reality that the suburban lifestyle produces on the self. By swimming the pools, he traverses his neighborhood from a glorified and idealized beginning to a disastrous and tragic end, when he realizes about the emptiness of his life. His different encounters with neighbors

² Hereafter cited as "TS"

not only intensify to what extent Neddy is immersed in his suburban lifestyle, as he knows all of them, but it also represents the importance of outward appearance. As Waldeland argues, “[T]he real subject of his work – the characters’ interactions with each other and with the daily challenges of their lives, from commuter trains to zoning restrictions to divorce to job transfers to country-club dances to nervous breakdowns” (20).

Cheever also alludes to the eroded natural environment of the suburbs by deteriorating the weather conditions at the same time Neddy crosses it. “It would storm. The stand of cumulus cloud – that city – had risen and darkened, and while he sat there he heard the percussiveness on thunder again” (“TS” 729). The further he goes, the darker the environment is depicted. This fact represents the decline of the suburbs as emotional places but it also creates the dramatic sensation of surrounding tragedies. At the end of the story, Neddy arrives at his house and finds it, as well as himself, abandoned by her wife and her daughters. He realizes at this time that while he was crossing the neighborhood, his family ran away from him. “He shouted, pounded on the door, tried to force it with his shoulder, and then, looking in at the windows, saw that the place was empty” (“TS” 737). The appearance of a destroyed personal and family life represents how the material life is dangerous as it puts the individual far away from giving importance to concerns as enjoying familiar love. In this story, Neddy’s family and personal life is conspicuous by its absence. As Waldeland argues, “... Cheever sees most successful human relationships as surviving on sustained efforts of will and imagination. Marriage and family relationships are perhaps his most frequently chosen subjects ...” (19). The landscape described at the beginning, characterized by luxury, amenity and vitality, is at the end of the story a dark and empty space that represents Neddy’s failure. This interpretation clearly emphasizes Cheever’s intentions on showing that the American Dream is just an illusion that works as a mask for misadventures of life. What Neddy comes to represent in “The

Swimmer” is the dullness and triviality of the suburban lifestyle, since it is so overestimated by society that it prevents them from being aware of personal failure.

In addition, some suburban novels have been taken to the big screen. One remarkable example is Charles Webb’s *The Graduate* (1963). It was adapted to film with the same title in 1967 and it became one of the best-known films about the suburban lifestyle. The story is similar to *Rabbit, Run*, since the main character Benjamin, as Harry, represents a young American man who regards the expected adult life as nonsense and excessively conventional. After graduating, his major concern is the uncertain future in a society whose materialistic mentality he doesn’t respect. The multiple close-ups of Benjamin with serious, apathetic and emotionless expression that are repeated along the whole film intensify his attitude of rejection towards his parents and related persons, as his countenance represents the emptiness of his life and how different he finds himself from his social environment. As a symbol of escaping conventions, he has an affair with Mrs. Robinson, his parent’s friend, who also represents the rebellion against conventions as she complains about her dull and loveless marital life. Both find in the other a way of intensifying the insufficient emotions that their particular lives gives them. Nevertheless, Benjamin is supposed to marry Elaine, Mrs. Robinson’s daughter. The storyline revolves around the repercussions and setbacks derived from this love triangle.

Perhaps the most representative and famous part of the movie is its end, which can be considered as a host of symbols that represent Benjamin’s desire of freedom. As he realizes that Elaine is the only person with whom he connects completely, he tries to stop the wedding between Elaine and her new fiancé Carl, as Mr. Robinson, after being aware of the affair between Benjamin and her wife, forbids Benjamin to marry Elaine. On his way to the church, he has to run as his car breaks down. While during the whole film Benjamin is depicted as a quiet and cool character, he is now running as a symbol of a more intense act of escaping. When he arrives at the church, the emotional distance between him and the rest of his

community is represented by the glass that separates the hall where he is and the rest of the ceremony. This image of him as enclosed, separated from the rest of society, creates a sharp contrast between the social atmosphere of the conventional ceremony and Benjamin's solitude. When Benjamin decides to interrupt the wedding, Elaine accepts to go with him and both are able to escape together by getting into a public bus. This final scene can be interpreted as a symbol of the difficulty of liberating the self from conventional life, as they are able to run away but at the same time, they find themselves in a bus, surrounded by the same standard of people from whom they are trying to escape. This sensation is intensified by the fact that their excitement and visible happiness at entering in the bus is diminished gradually and both stay in silence. They seem to realize that they don't have a place to go. In addition, the soundtrack selected for this moment, the popularized "The Sound of Silence" (1965) by Simon & Garfunkel, which is also the opening song of the movie, fits perfectly with the idea of loneliness that the scene comes to represent.

In the light of the above said, it can be concluded that fiction is vitally important for representing the conventional of the American Dream. Suburban literature and movies were able to combat the idealized vision of a lifestyle based on materialism by presenting characters that questions the meaning and importance of conventions, or that basically are ruined by them. Somehow, the images of suburbs in fiction can be regarded as a type of propaganda as well, as the readers could see their own image reflected in the different characters in the same way that they could see it reflected in commercial and institutional advertisements. The range of writers and works that have denounced the wrong way, according to them, that the American society was taken to materialism and material conformity contributed to spread this critical vision of the American Dream not only within the limits of the USA, but also all over the Western World, where the powerful institutional propaganda had already show the idealized vision.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Suburban lifestyle can be considered one of the main reasons for the fashionable conception towards USA. The mass-consumption lifestyle that characterizes the American society was soon recognized all over the western world as a consequence of the media resonance that the powerful American propaganda produced. Suburban images in media were stereotyped and super idealized not only to attract the American citizens to the suburban lifestyle, but also with the purpose of elevating the image of the American society and to globalize it, a fact that clearly contributed to create the positive consideration towards the American Dream. However, the fact that the American society and its values have never been free of criticism by a sector of its citizens, the ones who tried to denounce its materialism and its effects of social, racial and gender exclusion, clearly reflects the controversial nature of the Dream. Hence, it can be said that the American Dream is an ambiguous concept, not only by the constant change of its meaning over time, but also by the different attitudes towards it.

According to the critical perspective, materialism provides neither overall happiness and prosperity nor individual freedom. Massive consumerism led the individual to find relish only in the continuous purchase of goods, the more opulent the better, a fact that reflects how outward appearance gives importance to social acceptance at the expense of one's acceptance as an individual, which seems to be a more ethical consideration. In addition, this excessive emphasis on materialism displaced other activities such as artistic creations. Literature, music and art were far from constituting an essential part of the stereotyped suburban lifestyle, and they had no place even in the free time of the massive consumers, something that produces emotional and spiritual stagnation. The function of fiction is significant in order to support this critical vision of the American Dream. Through their works, writers like Updike or Cheever

were able to make their readers reflect on the suburban lifestyle and on how misfortunes and tragedies of life are common to everyone. What the characters in the suburban fiction represent is the idea that each human is exposed to depression and failure, no matter their material or economic success.

It is important to mention that despite the fact that much literature and fiction dealing with the topic of the American Dream and suburban lifestyle are concerned with the denunciation and criticism of its material values, there are also scholars whose ideals promote the elevated vision of the Dream and who regard it as the lifestyle of individual freedom. They didn't support the idea that the American lifestyle was corrupted by materialism and tried to respond to the wave of negative by regarding the union between materialism and individual success in a positive light. For example, James Truslow Adams argues that the American Dream "has not been a dream of merely material plenty" but "a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class" (405). Another example is Teaford, who tries to analyze the suburbanization from the point of view of the territorial and political organization but stating at the same a positive criticism. He doesn't agree with the approaches that show suburbia as a homogeneous and stereotyped land with no place to social inclusion. What he sees in this new lifestyle is the opportunity for everybody to live his/her own way, as he states that "Americans have exploited the governmental fragmentation of suburbia to carve niches for the lifestyle of their choice. American suburbia thus offers a broad range of people the option of being different, of joining with like-minded devotees of alternative lifestyles to pursue their version of the American dream" (71).

Nevertheless, if the importance of upward mobility in the society of the twentieth century is taken into account, the suburban lifestyle can't be regarded as a free choice of the

individual, a fact that diminishes the freedom associated to it. The great presence that propaganda had on the conformation of the “Suburban Dream” and its values suggests that a great number of American citizens followed the national trend towards the new white-middle class lifestyle inspired by the impact and not by their own instinct or morals. Propaganda created the stereotype that served society to find a “real” reflection of what the American Dream is, something that clearly boosted the intentions of millions of citizens into embracing the suburban lifestyle. Far from being an option or desired life, the Suburban Dream represents almost an imposition from governments and the social echo.

Moreover, positive criticism towards the Dream seems to be biased as it doesn't notice the different cases of discrimination related to it. While citizens who accept the suburban lifestyle were exposed to live a monotonous and unethical life, as shows the different look-alike spaces and the questionable morals of the massive consumerism lifestyle, the ones who didn't it were in risk of social exclusion. As a consequence of the strong standardization of daily life, social minorities were systematically excluded from the ideal life showed in in the field of promotional and advertisers gifts, a fact that implied racial and class segregation between the white middle-class and the rest of communities. Last but not least, the suburban mentality not only entails an unfair social hierarchy, but also an unfair domestic hierarchy clearly reflected on the devoted role of housewife that women were supposed to develop. For all these reasons, the American Dream that suburban society tried to follow and achieve can be considered a series of social conventions that overestimated the massive purchase and acquisition of material benefits and that seemed to corrupt the traditional moral principles of individualism, freedom and hard work through which the American nation was conformed.

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