Constructing Masculinity: Suburbia as an Agent of Emasculation in *The Shrinking Man* by Richard Matheson and *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates.

Dr Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh

This essay will adopt a literal approach to the theme of "constructing masculinities" and examine *The Shrinking Man* by Richard Matheson and *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates, two novels set in 1950s America, that use the built environment of suburbia to reinforce the disempowerment, frustration and ultimately emasculation of their central protagonists, and by extension, a generation of disaffected American men. The authors criticize postwar American ideology for continuing to define the American male in traditional active, heroic terms, while confining him in low status, low respect jobs, which offer him no opportunity to develop an enriching and empowering sense of identity. This contradiction between the image of the American hero defined by freedom, adventure and the wide open spaces of the frontier, and the confining, identikit lives available in the sprawling suburban estates is at the heart of the social critique offered in the novels.

Suburbia has long been regarded by feminist critics as a socially constructed space designed to marginalize women from the public world of work and confine them within the home. Research highlights the gendered nature of suburbia as a social space, operating as a mechanism of exclusion for women. These findings will be discussed later in the essay. However, little attention has been paid to the impact suburbia has had on its male inhabitants. The main reason for this is perhaps the perception that because women have most visibly been the targets of patriarchy, they are also its primary victims. It is only in recent decades that critical attention has begun to assess the impact patriarchal assumptions have on men, particularly in a period when many of those assumptions, clustered around the roles of protector and provider, have begun to disintegrate. This essay will investigate the use of suburbia as a metaphor for the undermining of traditional male social roles and status in two novels set in the 1950s, the decade during which many traditional gendered assumptions and roles began to change. Living in suburbia excludes the male protagonists from the vibrancy of the city, with its access to political and economic power. It also excludes them from the traditional rural spaces which facilitated the expression of a kind of heroic masculinity in the past. The suburban male is thus rendered impotent by his inscription within the limiting narratives of the domestic spaces in which he finds himself trapped. The essay will begin with an overview of theories which illustrate the gendered nature of suburban spaces, before moving on to analyze how Matheson and Yates use these spaces to illustrate the emasculation of their male protagonists.

A key theme in contemporary cultural studies is the extent to which our built environment - in other words the spaces we inhabit and work in - shapes and controls our lives. Henri Lefebvre argues that space is a social construct which is designed to produce social meanings. When space is structured in a certain way, he claims, it affects the experiences and perceptions of those living within it: "(Social) space is a (social) product….the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (*The Production of Space* 26). As a Marxist, Lefebvre is particularly concerned with the ways in which social spaces replicate and reinforce the hegemonic values of the dominant group in society. He explains that the shaping of urban spaces in particular is fundamental to the operation of Capitalism, which has produced a workforce alienated and exploited by bureaucratic

structures. Forced by the dictates of the workplace to live together in large cities, contemporary workers are subject to homogenizing and numbing routines, which leave them: "Lost in routines, feeling helpless, estranged from themselves and others, experiencing anger and despair (even 'crises' in mid-life) about their jobs and future" (Lefebvre in Wander xvi). It suits the needs of Capitalism, in other words, to have its workers living in sprawling suburbs where they are separated both from each other and from the centres of economic power and influence. The helplessness and frustration of the workers trapped in these numbing routines is evident in the physical and mental breakdowns experienced by the male protagonists in the two novels.

Michel Foucault is also interested in the ways in which space can be structured to reinforce the power of those who are dominant in a society. He states that: "Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (Foucault in Rabinow 252). He echoes Lefebvre's argument that space should never be regarded as neutral, but always as a specifically structured social text: "We do not live inside a void, inside of which we could place individuals and things….we live inside a set of relations" ("Of Other Spaces" 23). Foucault wrote several books tracing the evolution of the institutions of the state in Europe and is particularly interested in the role of a society's architecture in structuring and regulating the space and thus its inhabitants. He states that the rulers of society began to take an active interest in the structuring of social space once cities began to be built in the 18th century: "Architecture becomes political at the end of the eighteenth century….One sees the development of reflection upon architecture as a function of the aims and techniques of the government of societies" (Foucault in Rabinow 239). Foucault did extensive research into the role of a society's architecture in structuring and regulating the space and thus its inhabitants, concluding that the organization of space is best understood as an exercise in control: "It is true that for me, architecture, in the very vague analysis of it that I have been able to conduct, is only taken as an element of support, to ensure a certain allocation of people in space, a *canalization* of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations. So it is not only considered as an element of space. But is especially thought of as a plunge into a field of social relations in which it brings about some specific effects" (Foucault in Rabinow 253). The novels considered in this essay both suggest that suburbia operates as precisely the kind of ordering mechanism described by Foucault, moulding its inhabitants into a conformist, easily manipulated mass.

Foucault's most famous case study was on the development of the modern prison. He claims that the role of the prison in medieval Europe was not so much to punish those who broke the rules of the state, but rather to separate from society – and thus marginalize and silence – those who refused to conform to imposed hegemonic norms. He was particularly interested in a form of prison developed in the late 18th century by Jeremy Bentham, the English social reformer. Bentham's Panopticon was a prison in which all the cells were built around a central observation tower, so that the prisoners were visible to the authorities at all times (the name comes from the Greek for "all-seeing"). Because prisoners could not see into the observation tower, they never knew when they were actually being observed (Bentham 39-44). The prison thus worked through psychological means: the prisoners behaved themselves because of the possibility that they were being watched. The design of the Panopticon thus induces in its inmates: "A state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 201). This sense of being constantly observed is at the heart of many dystopian works of literature such as George Orwell's *1984*, which brought us the famous catchphrase "Big Brother is watching you". Surveillance as a form of control is also a significant theme in novels based in suburbia,

where the inhabitants, aware that they are being observed from behind the twitching curtains of their neighbours, place themselves under huge pressure to behave in socially acceptable ways.

What is crucial about space as a form of control, as evidenced in the examples above, is that it naturalizes structures of power and in doing so renders them invisible. Edward Soja comments that: "We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparent innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies are filled with politics and ideology" (6). In other words, because the built environment appears natural, we tend not to question its role in structuring and determining our sense of identity. This idea that space functions to perpetuate systems of dominance has long been a concern for feminist critics who widely regard suburbia as a physical manifestation of the patriarchal desire to confine women in the domestic setting.

Suburbs began to be built in America in the late 1940s and were primarily associated with middle-class families who wanted to move from the increasingly crowded, dirty and mixed-race cities in search of the American Dream of independence, fresh air and owning one's own plot of land (Mitchell 126-7). Supporters of this new, planned environment emphasized its egalitarian, utopian character, but right from the start it was clear that suburbia is permeated by contradictions and inscribed many of its inhabitants – women especially – within the kind of panoptic environment described above by Foucault. As their husbands commuted every day to their jobs in the cities, women found themselves stuck in suburbia, marginalized from access to the channels and institutions of power, with the result that the public and private spaces became strictly delineated. Suburbia thus closely aligns the demands of Capitalism with the patriarchal inscription of women in domestic spaces. As Don Mitchell comments: "The suburban boom created massive tracts of housing in Europe and Australia, as well as North America, designed precisely to enshrine the 'wife and mother' both in the house and as the chief provider of purposely privatised 'services' (such as transportation, family shopping, community building, etc.)" (203). The development of suburbia and its inscription at the heart of the American Dream is, therefore, a deeply ideological phenomenon.

It is unsurprising that suburbia thus became a significant target of Second Wave Feminists, determined to make visible the previously unacknowledged restrictions that shaped the lives of women. Echoing the work of Lefebvre and Foucault cited above, Leslie Weisman indicts the construction of suburbia for the perpetuation of the gendered division of social roles that structures contemporary urban life: "Space, like language, is socially constructed; and like the syntax of language, the spatial arrangements of our buildings and communities reflect and reinforce the nature of gender, race, and class relations in society. The uses of both language and space contribute to the power of some groups over others and the maintenance of human inequality" (2). Because cities are to a very large degree designed and built by men, they embody patriarchal values and power relations that are predicated upon the exclusion of women. Patriarchy operates by dividing men and women into two groups, with seemingly opposing values, characteristics and skills, a division replicated in the dichotomy between the city and suburbia: "In Western society, geographic space associated with women is also characterized by a deadening torpor while male space is characteristically vivifying. The dichotomization of American cities and suburbs provides a recognizable example. We tend to associate urban life with cultural and intellectual activities, power, aggression, danger, meaningful work, important world events, and with men. Feminine suburbia is comparatively safe, domestic, tranquil, close to nature, and mindless" (Weisman 10, 11-13) This symbolic

dichotomization of city and suburbia clearly reinforces the system of binary oppositions on which patriarchy establishes the primacy of men and intendant marginalization of women, making suburbia a useful shorthand in feminist texts for mechanisms of entrapment and exclusion. This essay will argue that Matheson and Yates deliberately draw on these tropes of suburbia to highlight the plight of their protagonists, Scott Carey and Frank Wheeler. The fact that these characters are male facilitates an additional layer of critique, for not only do they experience the same feelings of frustration and boredom as their female counterparts, they are also forced to cede their claims to the more active, heroic characteristics traditionally associated with men. Suburbia, in these novels, thus becomes a means of emasculation. Before turning to examine the novels, it is worth examining in a little more detail how the city/suburbia dichotomy has informed the development of feminist theories of space and power.

It was notably to suburbia that Betty Frieden, founder of the National Organization for Women, turned in search of an explanation for the significant increase in middle-class American women seeking medical help for depression in the early 1960s. In her ground-breaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan locates their problem firmly in their inscription within the suburban myth, which claimed that women would – and indeed should - find all sources for fulfilment and happiness in domestic life:

"In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfilment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor. They baked their own bread, sewed their own and their children's clothes, kept their own new washing machines and dryers running all day….Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers, their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home, they wanted the men to make the major decisions. They gloried in their role as women" (8).

And yet, as Friedan's research indicated, these ostensibly contented American housewives were being prescribed Valium in unprecedented amounts just to be able to cope with their seemingly idyllic, carefree lives. Her investigation into what she initially characterized as "the problem that has no name" soon uncovered multiple stories of women feeling trapped, empty, unfulfilled and increasingly desperately unhappy in the gilded lives in which they were feeling trapped (Friedan 5). This realization that they had been conned into accepting what Friedan called the "Feminine Mystique", gave huge impetus to the Second Wave Feminist movement and women began to resist their marginalization from the public spaces of power and influence. As Susan Faludi puts it: "Women began to free themselves from the box in which they were trapped by feeling their way along its contours, figuring out how it had been constructed around them, how it was shaped and how it shaped them, how their reflections on its mirrored walls distorted who they were or might be. Women were able to take action, paradoxically, by understanding how they were acted upon" (13). This determination to identify and then deconstruct both the physical barriers to their freedom and the ideologies that they reinforce is evident in Weisman's research into the impact of the built environment on women's lives: "I hope this book will contribute to furthering our understanding of why the acts of building and controlling space have been a male prerogative; how our physical surroundings reflect and create reality; and how we can begin

to challenge and change the forms and values encoded in the man-made (by which I mean, throughout this book, *male-made*) environment, thereby fostering the transformation of the sexist and racist conditions that define our lives" (2).

It has taken men significantly longer to realize and acknowledge that these restrictive narratives predicated on division and exclusion have also shaped their lives, limiting their choices and subjecting them too to the hegemonic gender roles society has designed for them. Faludi is critical of men for not emulating women and identifying such gendered visions of social roles as the constructs they are. The majority of men, she suggests, prefer instead to lash out at their perceived vilification by feminism: "They would rather see themselves as battered by feminism than shaped by the larger culture. Feminism can be demonized as just an 'unnatural' force trying to wrest men's natural power and control from their grasp. Culture, by contrast, is the whole environment we live in; to acknowledge its sway is to admit that men never had the power they imagined" (14). In other words, women have no problem identifying the power structures that govern every aspect of the spaces, physical and ideological they inhabit, but for men to do the same would mean acknowledging that they are not in charge of their own destinies as cultural texts have always promised them, but are equally subject to the machinations of an invisible but unassailable system of control. This refusal to acknowledge the source of their repression thus precludes them from fighting to overthrow it. As Faludi argues: "Men feel the contours of a box, too, but they are told that the box is of their own manufacture, designed to their own specifications. Who are they to complain? The box is there to showcase the man, not to confine him….For men to say they feel boxed in is regarded not as laudable political protest but as childish and indecent whining. How dare the kings complain about their castles?" (13) The problem, she explains, is that much in the same way as a significant contradiction became clear at the heart of the narratives of domestic bliss being sold to women, a clear disjunction was also opening up between the narratives through which masculinity was constructed and the reality of life for the majority of its supposedly empowered suburban workers. While women were beginning to mobilize themselves behind a range of feminist causes, men were still being assured by cultural texts and political leaders that they retained their position of independence and authority.

Faludi cites John F. Kennedy's rallying call to American men at the 1960 Democratic National Convention as an example of this disjunction. Addressing the young men of America, Kennedy uses traditional images of American male heroism to suggest that a life of adventure and self-definition was still the destiny they could expect to fulfil:

"It is time, in short, for a new generation of leadership. All over the world, particularly in the newer nations, young men are coming to power, men who are not bound by the traditions of the past, men who are not blinded by the old fears and hates and rivalries -- young men who can cast off the old slogans and the old delusions.

For I stand here tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind us, the pioneers gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build our new West. They were not the captives of their own doubts, nor the prisoners of their own price tags. They were determined to make the new world strong and free -- an example to the world, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from within and without.

….we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier -- the frontier of the 1960s, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats" (Kennedy).

A number of themes are prominent in this visualization of American life at the start of the 1960s. Kennedy emphasises the role the "young men" will play in leading America into the modern era. Although these young men may not necessarily have continents to settle or World Wars to win – the primary means through which preceding generations publically performed their manhood – they are armed by Kennedy with the traditionally heroic language of the Frontier and assured that the challenges of the coming age of technology and global diplomacy will offer them no fewer opportunities to conquer "enemies" and overcome "hazards" and "hardships". Notably, although they are now graduating from universities and entering the workplace in unprecedented numbers, the young women of America are excluded from Kennedy's vision, their role like that of the generations before them presumably to provide loyal, invisible support in the home. This contradiction between the perpetuation of patriarchal assumptions and the increasing opportunities for women in the public sphere of employment and politics provided much of the impetus for the growth of feminism throughout the decade. Women had always been excluded from narratives such as Kennedy's anyway so they had little impact on their career progression and growing self-esteem. The problem for the American male was that no number of inspiring speeches could cover up the impact changing workplace practices were having on their perceived roles as the masters of their own destinies. Faludi notes that the promise of honour and influence at the heart of Kennedy's speech was a false one that did not tally with the increasingly unstable job prospects being offered by corporate America: "What these corporations were offering was a secure job, not a vital role. And ultimately even that would prove a lie. There was to be no lifetime security…..The institutions that men had identified with no longer identified with them….the frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection – all the elements of the old formula for attaining manhood had vanished in short order. The boy who had been told he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing" (29-30).

A central focus of the social critique in the novels by Matheson and Yates is the dislocation between, on the one hand, the grandiose and expansionist vision of masculinity embodied in speeches such as Kennedy's, with its assumption that the American male is the inheritor of a tradition of privilege and opportunity, and on the other hand, the increasingly conscribed and limiting existence on offer to the vast majority of workers. Both male protagonists have, at least on the surface, achieved the American Dream: they have jobs, families, nice homes and the pride that goes with belonging to the richest, most influential and powerful country in the world. And yet in spite of all of that, like Friedan's housewives, they are unhappy, apathetic, frustrated and increasingly powerless. They epitomize, in other words, what Henry David Thoreau describes as the "lives of quiet desperation" lived by the majority of men (1638), who have been forced – or perhaps have inadvertently allowed - their individual dreams and ambitions to be subjugated to the homogenizing needs of industrialized society.

Richard Matheson's novel *The Shrinking Man* was published in 1956. Although primarily associated with the science fiction genre, Matheson's impact as a writer stems primarily from his message that the battles faced by ordinary Americans as they go about their everyday lives are as frightening and deadly as those involving aliens and monsters. As William P. Simmons notes: "Matheson took the art of fear from the Gothic castles and battlements of its melodramatic ancestry and placed it in the modern American home. Matheson's monsters

were just as often human as they were supernatural" (Simmons np). Mark Jancovich also reads the novel as a warning about developments in 1950s American society, in particular the rationalization that was increasingly sublimating individuality to the needs of the corporate world: "Here rationalization is understood as the process through which scientific-technical rationality is applied to the management of social, economic and cultural life….this new system of organization was seen by many as an inherently totalitarian system which both created conformity and repressed dissent" (2-3). The novel tells the story of Scott Carey, a typical American male in conservative postwar America, who is exposed to a cloud of radioactive gas and realizes that it has caused him to start shrinking. It is interesting to note that in most cultural texts in this period exposure to radiation has the opposite effect: both Hulk and Spiderman attain their superpowers after similar accidents, so right from the start Matheson's novel challenges the dominant assumption that American men would be empowered rather than diminished by developments in science.

The novel follows Carey's loss of status and identity as he gets smaller and smaller, until he eventually falls through a crack in the floorboards and ends up in the basement where he has to defend himself against violent attacks by insects, including most pointedly the black widow spider, which creates an interesting parallel to the struggle he also has to retain his sense of masculinity. The novel is widely interpreted as an observation on the pressures under which American men found themselves in the 1950s. Living the suburban dream, they were supposed to provide for their families, build their careers and earn the respect of their friends and neighbours. The biggest social fear was of not being "manly" and thus figuratively shrinking in the eyes of the community. At the start of the novel, Scott Carey very obviously defines his masculinity through his successful career, provision of a nice home and the feelings of superiority these give him over his wife and other women he encounters, such as their babysitter whom he ogles openly in front of his wife and daughter. When he begins to shrink, he is forced to confront his loss of control over every aspect of his life, but most painfully within his home and in his sexual relationship with his wife.

The psychological pressure that the relentless shrinking imposes on Carey is reflected in the novel's use of his diminishing height as its chapter titles, the protagonist shrinking from the relatively unexceptional height of 68 inches in Chapter 2 to the tiny 7 inches by Chapter 15. Right from the very start of the novel, it is evident that Carey's height is intrinsically linked to his sense of masculinity and the perceived authority this gives him both within and outside the home. He attributes the change he notes in his relationship with his wife at least partly to his diminishing stature: "When it had begun, he was a six-footer. Now he looked straight across into his wife's eyes; and his wife was five feet, eight inches tall" (Matheson 9). The loss of status traditionally associated with the symbolic height of 6 foot means that he is forced to engage with his wife as an equal, a very resistant concept for the traditional male head of the house. Matheson's novel closely reflects the systematic attack on traditional ideas of American masculinity noted above by Faludi, as Carey's diminishing height forces him to confront his increasing lack of control both in the workplace and in the home. Like the young men in Kennedy's speech, Carey had always presumed that he was in charge of his own destiny, describing his career as a "plan" that he was actively involved in managing: "It had been part of the plan in coming East. First working for his brother, then applying for a GI loan with the idea of becoming a partner in Marty's business. Acquiring life and medical insurance, a bank account, a decent car, clothes, eventually a house. Building a structure of security around himself and his family" (Matheson 10). The active verbs in this quote – "working….acquiring….building" - epitomize the narrative of the self-sufficient, independent American male, whose control in the workplace was reflected in his role as

provider of a home for his family. That Carey is now losing his sense of control is indicated by the passive verbs used in the following sentence, his inability to finish his statement reflecting his helplessness and vulnerability: "A month away from work. Marty's already upset as it is. How can I expect him to go on paying me my salary when I don't even—" (Matheson 9).

Carey's despair that he is no longer in a position to perform his designated role as provider for his family is heightened by the claustrophobic spaces of the small house in which he is now confined for much of the day: "He lowered his head, teeth clenched behind drawn lips. Every bill was a chain that weighed him down. He could almost feel the heavy links forged around his limbs. 'And what do we—' he began, stopping as he noticed Beth staring at him, her supper forgotten" (Matheson 9). His inarticulate panic is further evidence of the erosion of his masculinity, his helpless dread preventing him from expressing his anger, which he feels would at least be an empowering emotion: "The undertow of nagging, unspoken dread in him swallowed all attempts at concentrated rage. Temper could only come in sporadic bursts to a man living with consistent horror" (Matheson 14). His loss of control is contrasted with his wife's growing stature as the decision maker in the family. Although he refuses initially to countenance the thought of his wife working to provide for the family: "'There's no use arguing about it,' he said. 'Your working wouldn't help any. We'd still go under'" (Matheson 14); he is forced to acknowledge that he is losing his authority over his family: "His wife and daughter. Were they still that to him? Or had the element of size removed him from their sphere?" (Matheson 6). Carey acknowledges here that he has lost the linguistic control he once enjoyed as patriarch of the family, and that women in the household are no longer defined solely through their relationship to the dominant male.

Of particular torment to Carey is the loss of his sexual dominance, a loss outlined in excruciating detail by Matheson in a scene in which Carey, now a paltry 49 inches, tries to assure himself of his continuing role as a husband by seducing his wife. From the very start of the interaction, however, he is aware of the extent to which his virility was linked to his superior height – size, as the old adage goes, matters. As soon as he sits beside his wife on the sofa, he is at a physical disadvantage, the disparity in their relative heights stripping from him any perceived sense of control: "Then, impulsively, he laid his cheek against her shoulder. Wrong move, his mind said instantly. It made him feel even smaller, like a young boy leaning on his mother" (Matheson 32). The diminishing of his status from man to boy is also evident in his seemingly softer voice, a change he notes as another signifier of his loss of power: "Imagination again? Or was his voice as frail as it sounded to him, as devoid of masculinity" (Matheson 32). This link between masculinity and traditional stereotypes of strength and gruffness is significant as Carey begins to lose his automatic right to define himself as a man. When his wife misinterprets his body language as tiredness and suggests he helps himself to an ice-cream, Carey finds himself unable to correct her, his loss of control over language neatly conflated with his inability to arouse sexual desire in his wife: "Imagination it might be, but that didn't prevent him from feeling like a boy – indecisive, withdrawn, much as though he'd conceived the ridiculous notion that he could somehow arouse the physical desire of this full-grown woman" (Matheson 32). Matheson's choice of adjectives here – "indecisive, withdrawn….ridiculous" – are in stark contrast to the decisive, assertive language traditionally associated with the American male.

Carey does temporarily manage to assert his power over his wife, in a scene that is both violent and pathetic in his attempts to overcome the limitations imposed on his virility by his size: "He leaned over to kiss her, but he couldn't reach her lips. With an angry, desperate

motion he pushed up on one knee on the couch and thrust his right hand into the silky tangle of her hair, fingertips pressing at her skull. Pulling back her head with a tug, he jammed his lips on hers and forced her back against the pillow" (Matheson 34). Matheson's choice of verbs reflects a hegemonic model of male sexual dominance, with Carey taking control of the interaction and asserting his desire with force and vigour. Initially, Carey's wife succumbs to his superior force with "yielding softness", seemingly playing the allotted female role in the sexual act (Matheson 34). Before long, however, it becomes apparent to Carey that this yielding indicates strength rather than vulnerability, and that his wife is playing along with his performance of masculinity in order to sooth what she clearly perceives as a childish cry for attention and reassurance: "The caress and the tone of the voice and the kiss – they were not the passionate caress and tone and kiss of a woman who craved her husband's want. They were the sounds and touches of a woman who felt only loving pity for a poor creature who desired her" (Matheson 34). Again the phrasing here is worth noting. Matheson is suggesting a significant transformation in the wife's role in the sexual act from a passive participant "craving" her husband's attention in order to validate her place as wife, to the active agent in the exchange who is willing to perform her socially expected role if it will help her husband to feel validated. Interestingly, when he reflects on the episode later, Carey describes his loss of masculinity as a form of "inversion" (Matheson 37), suggesting that his emasculation is akin to a form of femininity, an interesting use of the gender binary. Reflecting on his loss of status, he emphasizes the central role physical size plays in traditional American ideas of the hero: "Poets and philosophers could talk all they wanted about a man's being more than fleshly form, about his essential worth, about the immeasurable stature of his soul. It was rubbish. Had they ever tried to hold a woman with arms that couldn't reach around her? Had they ever told another man they were as good as he – and said it to his belt buckle?" (37). As the two questions clearly indicate, Carey's shrinking height has robbed him of the two central performative characteristics expected of an American hero: he is unable to assert his sexual authority over his wife and is equally unable to square up to a male challenger, the reference to the belt buckle a clear nod to the cowboy. Matheson's novel thus communicates a significant concern about the loss of status of the American male, a loss inextricably linked with his confinement in the domestic spaces of suburbia where opportunities to assert his masculinity are increasingly rare. His loss of authority within the family is signified both through his sexual impotence but more significantly through his inability to contain the growing independence of his wife, whose empowerment he inevitably sees as linked to the diminishment of his own status as a man.

A very similar dynamic is at the heart of Richard Yates' novel *Revolutionary Road*, written in 1961 and set in 1955. The novel tells the story of Frank and April Wheeler, a bright young couple who move to the suburbs as newlyweds to live a life free of the constraints of the city, only to discover that the ironically named Revolutionary Road offers a stagnant, banal, controlled existence significantly at odds with the vision of freedom that brought them to suburbia in pursuit of the American Dream. In an interview, Yates explains the central theme of the novel: "I think I meant it more as an indictment of American life in the 1950s. Because during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity all over this country, by no means only in the suburbs – a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price" (Yates in Clark and Henry np). This conformity, he notes, was what led to the American people choosing the perceived security offered by paternalistic presidents like Eisenhower and supporting the mindless populism of Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunts rather than facing their anxieties and trying to resolve them on their own. The faith invested in conformity throughout the decade, he suggests, is a betrayal of the revolutionary spirit on which America

was ostensibly built: "I meant the title to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the fifties" (Yates in Clark and Henry np).

Complaining that his novel is often described as an "antisuburban novel" (Yates in Clark and Henry np), Yates asserts that he employs the claustrophobic spaces of suburbia to highlight rather than cause the frustration and entrapment experienced by his characters. Indeed the ways in which the characters project their own failings onto their surrounding environments is a particularly interesting element in the novel. The first time we meet the central protagonists is as they first view the house on Revolutionary Road that will become their family home. It is clear that the Wheelers do not see themselves as typical, conformist suburban dwellers but rather as an upwardly mobile, ambitious couple who will impose their own style on the blank rooms of their new house: "Their sofa could go there and their big table there; their solid wall of books…." (Yates 30). The implication in this vision of their future life is that it will be sociable and fulfilling, their evenings spent cosily together on the sofa, gathered around their table hosting dinner parties and of course reading through their impressive library of books. Living in suburbia will offer them a sense that they have embraced adult life and all the control and stability that goes with it: "The gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made to fit these rooms" (Yates 30). Although expressing their optimism about the future, this statement introduces a discordant note into the scene, epitomizing the passive outsourcing of control suggested by Yates in the interview cited above. There is a sense that the Wheelers will depend on the structures of their suburban home to shield them from looming threats rather than taking control of their own destinies. The failure of their home to act in lieu of their own self-determination is perhaps inevitable. When we revisit the home several years after they have moved in, what is most evident is its temporary feel, as though the Wheelers have failed to assert any control or order over their surroundings: "In the first shock of light it seemed to be floating, all its contents adrift, and even after it held still it had a tentative look" (Yates 30). The planned sofa and big table are indeed present, as is the wall of books, but they fail to communicate any sense of convivial, sociable living. Notably the only corner of the room that signifies active use is the space surrounding the television set, whose air of disarray "carpet worn, cushions dented, ash trays full" (Yates 31) may suggest that the family habitually gathers there together, but only to passively watch television rather than interacting with each other in any meaningful way.

As the attempt by the Wheelers to convey a certain lifestyle through the arrangement of their furniture suggests, the public performance of identity is a key theme in the novel. It is particularly obvious in Frank Wheeler's determination to project a stereotypically masculine persona, even if this public performance is at the expense of his personal relationships. Wheeler is constantly monitoring himself to ensure that he is living up to the idealized masculinity he has internalized. In the opening scene, for example, instead of comforting his wife who is embarrassed after a shambolic performance in a local drama, Frank's focus is on his own reaction to her plight, which he objectively evaluates as though it was his performance that was the focus of the critique: "He closed the door and started towards her with the corners of his mouth stretched tight in a look that he hoped would be full of love and humor and compassion….He looked at himself in the mirror, tightening his jaw and turning his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look" (Yates 15). Later on at a dinner party, Frank attempts to atone for his earlier lack of empathy by throwing himself wholeheartedly into the role of host, regaling his guests with jokes and participating enthusiastically in political debates, reassuring himself that by so doing he was making it very clear that he had not descended into the stereotypically boring and conventional suburban dweller: "without it, the evening might then degenerate into the dreariest kind of

suburban time filler" (Yates 64). Frank's efforts are in vain and his realization that his guests have heard his stories and jokes on previous occasions and are laughing only out of pity has a devastating impact on his self-esteem: "It haunted him all night, while he slept alone; it was still there in the morning, when he swallowed his coffee and backed down the driveway in the crumpled old Ford he used for a station car. And riding to work, one of the youngest and healthiest passengers on the train, he sat with a look of a man condemned to a very slow, painless death. He felt middle-aged" (68). This quote clearly links Frank's anxiety with his perceived failure to perform the characteristics associated with the American male: he arouses pity rather than admiration from his friends, his wife refuses to sleep with him, his car is old and he can no longer delude himself that he is as young and energetic as he would like to believe.

Frank's identity as a father is equally hollow, a persona he plays because it is socially expected rather than because he loves or even feels a sense of connection with his family. Throughout the novel, it is clear that he regards his children as the primary agents of his entrapment. Some of the most claustrophobic scenes in the novel take place at home at weekends when there is no escaping his family. Trying to convince himself that he is a good father, he agrees to read cartoons strips for his children and is initially filled with a sense of satisfaction as well he is performing his role: "He found it hard to keep his voice from thickening into a sentimental husk as he began to read aloud, with their two heads pressed close to his ribs on either side and their thin legs lying straight out on the sofa cushions, warm against his own" (Yates 55-6). The fulfilment he experiences from giving his children this attention soon begins to dissipate, however, and he becomes overwhelmed by the crushing domesticity of the scene: "He felt as if he were sinking helplessly into the cushions and the papers and bodies of his children like a man in quicksand" (Yates 56). This is a wonderfully vivid insight into Frank's loss of identity, his sense of individuality completely subsumed by the weight of the domestic setting. His helpless despair: "What the hell kind of life was this? What in God's name was the point or meaning or the purpose of a life like this?" (Yates 57) closely echoes Thoreau's critique of the social conformity demanded in post-industrial society. Frank's inability to assert control over his surroundings is the ultimate betrayal of American masculinity. In fact, he can pinpoint his loss of control over his destiny to the moment April fell pregnant and he was obliged to sacrifice his individual desires in order to play the role of the responsible family man: "Wasn't it true, then, that everything in his life from that point on had been a succession of things he hadn't really wanted to do? Taking a hopelessly dull job to prove he could be as responsible as any other family man, moving to an overpriced, genteel apartment to prove his mature belief in the fundamentals of orderliness and good health….buying a house in the country because that was the next logical step and he had to prove himself capable of taking it" (Yates 51). This admission is far more significant than perhaps even Frank himself realizes: in acknowledging that none of his major life decisions were really his own, he is confirming Faludi's argument that although most men do not like to admit, they are as much the victims of constructed patriarchal gender assumptions as women (Faludi (13). It is not so much that the American male has lost control over his destiny, rather that he never really had any control over it in the first place.

Much like the young men whose roles in American life were misrepresented in Kennedy's speech, Frank's problems stem at least in part from the dislocation between the myths of masculinity he has internalized and the realities of his daily life. Reflecting on his commute home from work, Frank distinguishes between the conformity expected of workers as they go through their prescribed daily routines and the autonomy which is constitutionally the inheritance of the American male:

"Could a man ride home in the rear smoker, primly adjusting his pants at the knees to protect their crease and rattling his evening paper to give his neighbour elbow room?....Hell, no. The way for a man to ride was erect and out in the open, out in the loud iron passageway where the wind whipped his necktie, standing with his feet set wide apart….taking deep pulls from a pinched cigarette…and then snapping it straight as a bullet into the roaring speed of the roadbed….And when he came to his own station, the way for a man to alight was to swing down the iron steps and leap before the train had stopped and slow down to an easy, athletic stride as he made for his parked automobile" (102).

This quote beautifully exemplifies the dichotomous gender assumptions that inform Frank's sense of self. The cordial, respectful behaviour suggested in the first sentence is disparaged as unmanly, with very gendered references made to the "prim" and thus controlled body language suggested in the image. In contrast, Frank's idealized masculinity requires the use of expletives to linguistically move himself beyond the restrictions of civilized society. His use of more active verbs and aggressive stance mimics that of the cowboy, whose natural environment is outside in the open air rather than in the stuffy carriages of the train. His vision of himself leaping from the still moving train suggests a conquering hero, triumphantly returning home after a successful day of physical activity, an image in stark contrast to Frank's job as bookkeeper. Like Scott Carey in Matteson's *The Shrinking Man*, Frank is diminished rather than nourished by the cultural representations of masculinity he has no hope of fulfilling.

Both Richard Matheson and Richard Yates use the apparent entrapment of their male protagonists in the traditionally feminine spaces of suburbia to explore the contradictions that exist between the vision of masculinity promoted in American ideology and based on the traditional figure of the self-made, independent, outdoorsy hero; and the reality of being a worker in contemporary society, worried about job security, losing one's role as the head of the household and being diminished sexually. Masculinity suggests the culturally constructed qualities and characteristics associated with ideal male behaviour, characteristics strongly linked in American cultural texts to strength, self-assurance, vigour and virility. Men who fail to live up to such expected norms are diminished, often through binary oppositions, so that they are decreed to be unmanly or even effeminate. By locating their male protagonists within the domestic spaces traditionally associated with the disempowerment of women, the authors discussed in this essay very cleverly use suburbia as a metaphor for the emasculation of the contemporary man.

Works Cited

Bentham, Jeremy. *Works*, vol. iv, Thoemmes Press: England, 1988.

Clark, Geoffrey and DeWitt Henry. "From the Archive: An Interview with Richard Yates", in *Ploughshares*, issue 3, Winter 1972. https://www.pshares.org/issues/fall-2011/archive-interview-richard-yates

Faludi, Susan. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*. GB: Chatto and Windus, 1999.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin Books, 1977.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 22-27.

Foucault, Michel. "Space, Knowledge, and Power", in Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader*. London: Penguin Books, 1984.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. UK: Penguin Classics, 2010.

Jancovich, Mark. *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s.* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Kennedy, John F. Excerpt, 1960 Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960…. https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/acceptance-of-democratic-nomination-for-president

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991.

Matheson, Richard. *The Shrinking Man*. Great Britain: Gollancz, 2002.

Mitchell, Don. *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000.

Simmons, William P. "A Conversation with Richard Matheson", in *Cemetery Dance*, #49, 2004. https://www.rodserling.com/wsimmons/Richard_Matheson.htm

Soja, Edward. *Postmodern Geographies*. London: Verso, 1989.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden, Or Life in the Woods,* in Nina Baym et al, eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature,* vol. 1. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989, 1635-1808.

Wander, Philip. "Introduction to the Transaction Edition", in Henri Lefebvre. *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. London: The Anthlone Press, 1984, vii-xxiii.

Weisman, Leslie Kane. *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.

Yates, Richard. *Revolutionary Road*. London: Vintage, 2009.