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In suburbia

LE VILLAGE, LE QUARTIER, LA VILLE

How was suburban life connected
to the American Dream of the 1950s?



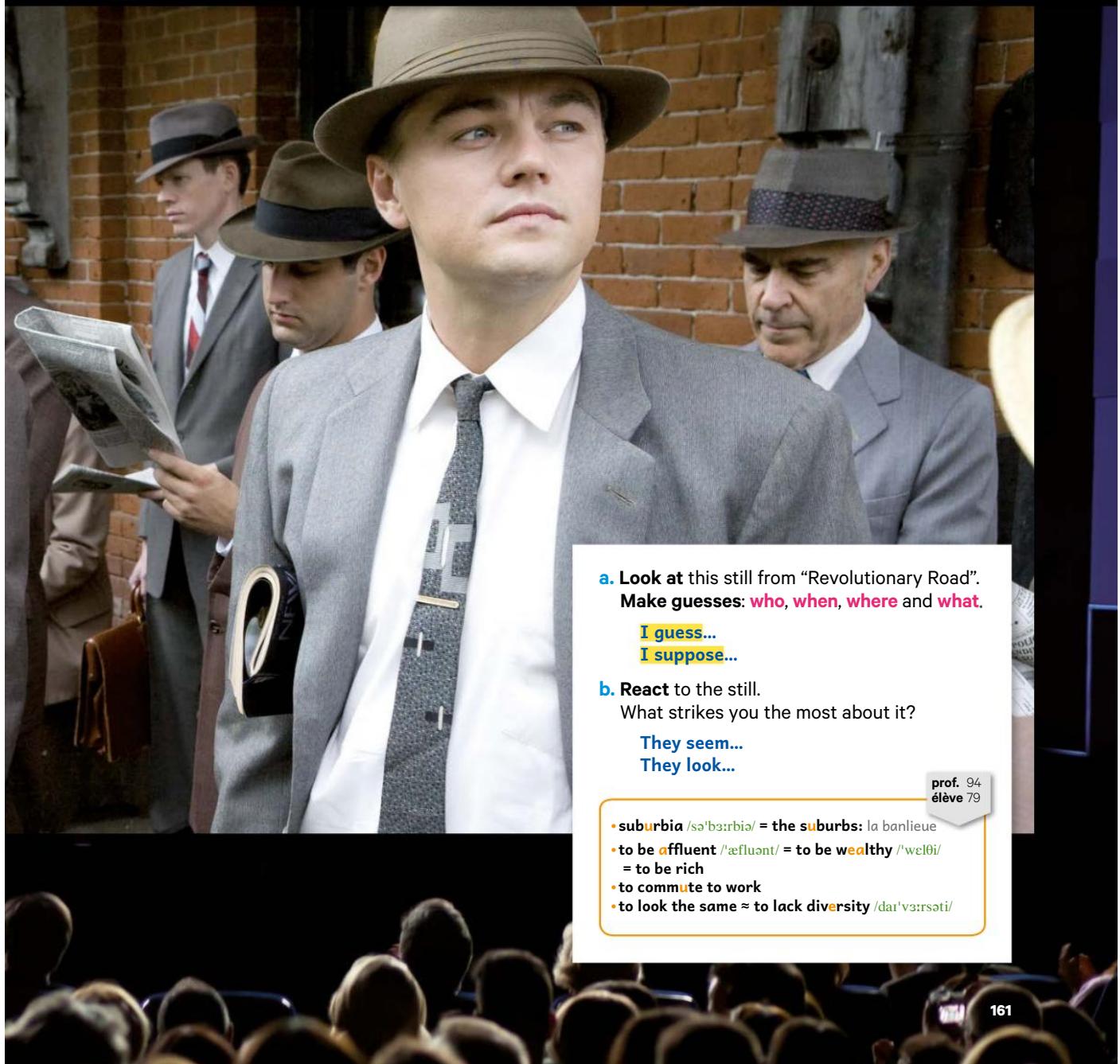
↑ Revolutionary Road, Sam Mendes (2009)

SCENARIO

Almost half the American population lives in the suburbs nowadays. This is not a new trend: American couples started to move away from city centres in the 1950s, after the Second World War. But did everyone perceive the suburbs as an idyllic place where they could make their dream come true?

FINAL TASK

Write a letter to “Life Magazine” about your daily life in the suburbs



- a. Look at this still from “Revolutionary Road”. Make guesses: **who**, **when**, **where** and **what**.

I guess...
I suppose...

- b. React to the still.
What strikes you the most about it?

They seem...
They look...

prof. 94
élève 79

- **suburbia** /sə'bɜ:rbiə/ = the **suburbs**: la banlieue
- to be **affluent** /æfluənt/ = to be **wealthy** /'weɪlθi/ = to be rich
- to **commute to work**
- to look the same ≈ to lack **diversity** /dɑ:vɜ:səti/

DOCUMENTS



1 Building the American Dream

- Watch the first part of the documentary.
Summarise what happened after World War II.
- Watch the second part.
Explain Bill Levitt's role in the development of suburban areas.
Levitt figured out how to...
He was able to...
- Watch the third part.
Sum up Philip and Sophie Morris's impressions and opinions about their new way of living.
List the elements they had in common with their neighbours.
- Discuss: What does the documentary reveal about the American suburban dream?



VIDEO

vidéo
35-37



↑ The rise of suburban areas during the 1950s,
AP US History (2012)

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TRAIN YOUR VOICE



Les voyelles courtes et longues

- Écoutez ces mots.
married boom cost dream
- Concentrez-vous sur les voyelles en vert.
Le son est-il court ou long ?



2 Suburban bliss

- Read the text.
Present the narrator and the main topic of the excerpt.
- Focus on the second paragraph.
Take notes about the activities that mums, dads and children did in the suburbs.
- Focus on paragraphs 3 and 4.
Write down the main advantages of living in Lombard.
Compared to Chicago, Lombard...
Living in Lombard was...
Unlike / Contrary to the people who lived in Chicago...
- Discuss: Would you enjoy living in the suburbs? Why (not)?
- Imagine you are Tom.
Write a postcard to a friend who lives in Chicago.
Tell him or her about your life in Lombard.



I grew up just after the war, in Chicago. My family didn't get out of our apartment until 1950, when my father bought a house on the edge of west suburban Lombard.

Lombard was an easy place in which to live, especially in the early 1950s. There was a comfortable feeling to the town, what planners would now call pedestrian scale. Moms stayed home to raise a family, and chatted with other moms over morning coffee. Dads built elaborate stone backyard barbecues to grill hamburgers. Children had lots of friends nearby. And for many of us, there was the novel experience of having space.

In Lombard we knew just about everyone in the neighborhood and you could run through backyards, across vacant lots, or bike the few blocks into the downtown. To someone like me who was barely into grade school there was an exhilarating sense of personal freedom to suburban living.

Even at the most superficial level, suburban life was a lot more convenient than living in the city. We could carry groceries right into the kitchen. Our car was parked next to the back door, rather than in a rented garage stall at the other end of the block. And we didn't have to worry about disturbing (or being disturbed by) the neighbors on the other side of the wall.

↑ American Dreamscape, Tom Martinson (2000)



3 Little boxes all the same

ANTICIPATE

- a. **Read** the title of the activity.
Look at the picture. How are they linked?

The little boxes may refer to / allude to...

- b. **Listen to** the song on www.espacelangues.emdl.fr.
Decide which adjectives that best describe the rhythm: **joyful, repetitive, catchy, calm, lively, exciting.**

- c. **Read** the lyrics of this song.
List the words that are repeated several times.
Compare the rhythm with the message conveyed.
d. **Summarise** the author's intention.



- e. **Compare** the singer's vision of the suburbs with the one described in "Suburban bliss".

Contrary to Martinson, Malvina Reynolds...
The text deals with... whereas the song...



↑ Aerial view of a suburban housing development in Rego Park, Queens, New York (1958)

Little boxes on the hillside
Little boxes made of ticky tacky
Little boxes on the hillside
Little boxes all the same
There's a pink one and a green one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses
All went to the university
Where they were put in boxes
And they came out all the same.
And there's doctors and lawyers
And business executives
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.

And they all play on the golf course...
And drink their martinis dry
And they all have pretty children
And the children go to school
And the children go to summer camp
And then to the university
Where they are put in boxes
And they come out all the same.

And the boys go into business
And marry and raise a family
In boxes made of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.

Little Boxes, Malvina Reynolds (1962)

prof. 96
élève 81

- affordable < cheap
- boring = dull = monotonous
- identical /aɪ'dentɪkl/
- safe ≠ dangerous /'deɪndʒərəs/
- bliss > happiness
- heaven on earth /'hevnən/: le paradis sur terre
- a home owner
- a middle-class family
- a standard of living: un niveau de vie
- ticky tacky = low quality material
- uniformity
- to afford: avoir les moyens financiers
- to buy = to purchase /'pɜːrtʃəs/
- to make a dream come true
- to own a house
- to start / raise a family

• L'expression du contraste → p. 223

Unlike / Contrary to / As opposed to her friend, she lives in the city.
She likes city life whereas / while her friend hates it.



4 The golden cage



The problem was a sense of dissatisfaction that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this all?"

By the end of the nineteen-fifties, the average marriage age of women in America dropped to 20, and was still dropping, into the teens. By the mid-fifties, 60 percent of women dropped out of college to marry. (...) Women who had once wanted careers were now making careers out of having babies. Interior decorators were designing kitchens, for kitchens were the center of women's lives.

Girls were growing up without ever having jobs outside the home. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife. Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house.

But, on an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a suburban development fifteen miles from New York, say in a tone of quiet desperation, "the problem." And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name.

↑ **The Feminine Mystique**, Betty Friedan (1963)



a. Look at the magazine cover.

Who is the target group of the magazine?
What does it say about women in the 1950s?

b. Read the text.

Sum up what happened to women in the 1950s.

c. Focus on the first and last paragraphs.

Compare and **contrast** the magazine cover with the situation described in the text.

While the woman in the picture looks..., most women felt...

d. Explain the title of the activity.

e. Imagine you are a dissatisfied suburban housewife in the 1950s.

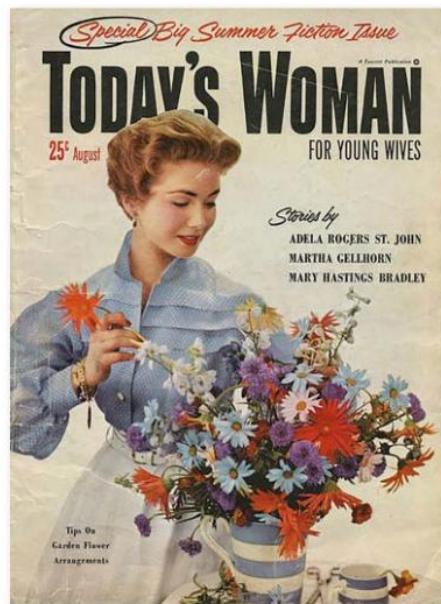
Write in your diary what you regret.

**I wish I hadn't dropped out of...
If only I had...**



prof. 97
élève 82

- **bored** /bɔːrd/: ennuyé(e)
- **devoted to sth** /dɪ'veotɪd/
- **dissatisfied ≠ satisfied**
- **miserable** /mɪzrəbl/ = **extremely sad**
- **trapped** /træpt/: piégé
- **a fulfilling life:** une vie épanouissante
- **a full-time homemaker:** femme au foyer à temps plein
- **a housewife**
- **to be stuck in a daily routine**
- **to do household chores** /tʃɔːz/ = **to do the housework:** faire le ménage
- **to drop out of college** = **to quit college**
- **to bring up children** = **to raise children**



↑ Today's Woman magazine (1953)

• **L'expression du regret** → p. 224

I **wish I had studied** at college.

If only I **had decided** to study.

I **should have bought** a house in the suburbs.

VOCABULARY

→ Banque d'exercices p. 193



affordable housing
the baby boom
the end of the war
mass production of houses
to be affluent
rich
wealthy

to achieve a dream
fulfil
to escape from
flee
to make a dream come true
to own a house
purchase

CAUSES

GOALS

CONS

SUBURBIA

PROS

SUBURBAN LIFE

to chat with other neighbors
to have your car close at hand
to have freedom
privacy
space
to live a safe
an easy life

to know everybody in the neighborhood
to raise kids = children
a family
to run through backyards

FEELINGS

blissful
cheerful
delighted
enchanted
joyful
thrilled
to be over the moon

Make your own mind map

Make a mind map with words and expressions that you can use in the Final Task.

PREPARATION TIME

How to write a letter to a magazine

Vous vivez dans les États-Unis des années 50 et vous êtes installé(e) à Levittown, petite ville américaine de banlieue. « Life Magazine » a décidé de consacrer son prochain numéro à ce nouveau mode de vie américain, et vous souhaitez envoyer votre témoignage. Pour y parvenir, suivez le guide !

• Choisissez un point de vue

- a. Réfléchissez à ce que vous avez appris sur les banlieues américaines des années 50. Quel point de vue allez-vous adopter sur ces dernières : positif, négatif ou nuancé ?
- b. Pour entrer dans la peau de votre personnage, définissez votre nouvelle identité. Êtes-vous un homme, une femme, un(e) adolescent(e) ? Depuis combien de temps vivez-vous à Levittown ?

• Organisez vos idées

- a. Faites un tableau et listez-y les aspects positifs et négatifs de la vie en banlieue.
- b. Faites la liste des raisons qui vous ont poussé(e) à emménager à Levittown.
- c. Imaginez votre quotidien et donnez des exemples concrets (*Yesterday, my neighbor...*). Cela rendra votre lettre plus vivante et convaincante.
- d. Souvenez-vous qu'il s'agit d'un témoignage personnel : faites une liste d'adjectifs utiles pour transmettre vos émotions et sentiments.

• Rédigez votre lettre au brouillon

- a. Inventez-vous une adresse à Levittown. Faites en sorte qu'elle semble authentique.
- b. Choisissez la date de rédaction de votre lettre.
- c. Dans le premier paragraphe, présentez-vous et expliquez pourquoi vous avez décidé d'écrire à « Life Magazine ».
- d. Dans le deuxième paragraphe, dites quand et pourquoi vous avez décidé d'emménager à Levittown. Expliquez comment vous avez vécu cette expérience, ce que vous avez ressenti et pourquoi.

- e. Dans le troisième paragraphe, racontez votre vie quotidienne à Levittown et dites comment vous vous sentez dans cette ville.

- f. Rédigez un dernier paragraphe pour convaincre « Life Magazine » de choisir votre témoignage pour son prochain numéro.

Quelle phrase est la plus appropriée et convaincante pour conclure votre lettre ? Pourquoi ?

1. I am sure that you have enjoyed my letter and will publish it in your next issue.

2. If you are interested in showing your readers what life in the suburbs is really like, select my letter.

3. I hope that you will find my story interesting and that you will decide to publish it in your next issue.

- g. Concluez en utilisant une formule de politesse appropriée.

- h. Relisez votre texte pour en corriger l'orthographe et la grammaire et demandez à un(e) camarade de vous relire une dernière fois afin de vérifier que votre lettre est prête à être envoyée.

• Recopiez votre lettre au propre

- a. Respectez bien le format de la lettre (voir p. 167).
- b. Écrivez votre lettre avec votre plus belle écriture manuscrite : les ordinateurs n'existaient pas dans les années 1950 !
- c. Relisez-vous une dernière fois et glissez votre lettre dans une enveloppe timbrée (vous pouvez dessiner ou coller l'image d'un timbre américain). Ajoutez l'adresse de « Life Magazine ».

FINAL TASK



WRITE A LETTER TO “LIFE MAGAZINE” ABOUT YOUR DAILY LIFE IN THE SUBURBS



You are living in Levittown, a famous suburb of New York, in the 1950s. Write a letter to “Life Magazine” about your daily life in suburbia.

a. Create a new identity for yourself: gender, name, age, marital status...

b. Imagine your daily life.

Give details about:

- why you moved into the suburbs;
- your new lifestyle: your house, your neighbours;
- your feelings and emotions.

c. Write your letter to “Life Magazine” on a piece of paper.

Put it in an envelope with the right address on it.



Your address

→ Mr. Johnson
15 Butternut Lane
Levittown, NY, 19057

Date

→ January 7, 1955

Recipient's address

→ Robert E. Sherwood
Life Magazine
19 West 31st Street, New York, NY

Greetings

→ Dear Sir,

Body of the letter

I am Jim Johnson a regular reader of your magazine. I'm writing this letter...
I moved into Levittown 5 years ago as I couldn't bear living in New York City anymore.
Indeed, the constant noise... I dreamt of having a house of my own in... That's the
reason why my wife and I made the decision to... Today our life is... Life is so peaceful
in the suburbs, I wish I had known it before...

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Greetings

→ Yours faithfully,

Signature

→ Jim Johnson