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"The Land That He Saw Looked Like a Paradise. It Was Not, He Knew": Suburbia and the Maladjusted American Male in John Cheever's *Bullet Park*

Harriet Poppy Stilley

¹Often pictured as a time of exceptional stability by the popular culture of later generations, the postwar American epoch of 1950s complacency and consensus placidity in reality marked a moment of rapid social change. Certainly for white, middle-class men the period connoted one of expeditious adjustment, as a pervading managerial, service-based and family-orientated template of masculinity emerged, respectively reducing the influence of any traditional delineations of American manhood based on production or control. Rather than welcoming these societal changes, however, social commentators of the 1950s still clung to the self-made man type as the only acceptable form of hegemonic masculinity. A combination of sociologists, psychologists, historians and literary critics took umbrage with the materializing managerial mold in the belief that such abrupt alterations in work and community had diminished the public space for the performance of masculinity and, as such, caused men to subject themselves to the control of other men and institutions.

²William Whyte's study of postwar middle-class consciousness affirms this belief, claiming that the decline

of the free entrepreneur and the rise of the dependent employee on the American scene paralleled the withdrawal of the independent individual and the ascent of a conformist "organizational man" in the American mind. Like so many professional men in the postwar era, Whyte's organization man worked in middle management within a large corporation. He was characteristically a "committee" man, who assumed as a matter of habit that "the group," a committee of compatible members committed to cooperation with one another in pursuit of some mutually conceived project, could accomplish more in the way of progress and proficiency than the individual acting alone. Whyte attributed such a presumption to the "social ethic," a contemporary body of thought defined by its belief in "belongingness" as the ultimate need of the individual; a belief which not only resulted in a decline in individuality central to self-made man masculinity, but moreover made "morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual" (Whyte 7).

³Whyte's contemporary characterological profiling, to this end, highlights a level of organization fealty that subsumes the individual to a group while simultaneously "[converting] what would seem in other times a bill of no rights into a restatement of individualism" (Whyte 6). It is important to recognize, therefore, that while Depression era thinkers had largely been concerned with issues of economic deprivation and social injustice, mid-century social critics like Whyte were increasingly turning their attentions to the cultural malaise at the heart of American self-making, together with the distinct emotional discontents that sprang directly from the blind pursuit of a marketplace masculinity. K.A. Cuordileone maintains that, "never before had the self come under such scrutiny," a measure of the debilitating psychological implications of a modern "mass society" in which the individual, "unloosed from traditional social kinship or spiritual moorings," became ever more overwhelmed by the impersonal, self-crushing forces of a mass-produced homogenous culture (98). The fear and neurosis surrounding the issue of autonomy, namely the achievement of an "independent, well-fortified sense of self within [such a] society," was, Cuordileone states, the "single most compelling problem for postwar intellectuals and social critics" (99). Of course, this step away from "public institutions and their limitations" toward more "private ailments and inner dissatisfaction" ultimately reflected the postwar economic recovery and the arrival of an affluent society (Cuordileone 98). In addition, prosperity, far from delivering a sense of personal liberation

from the constraints and deprivations of the past, seemed only to "augment the psychic burdens of being a man," with the great retreat into private life generating chronic concerns about the psychological effects of consumerism, materialism, and widespread suburbanization on the American character (Cuordileone 138).

⁴Appearing as it did in this period of economic ease and monopoly capitalism, the suburban landscape thereby stands as the material counterpart to specific wants and tendencies in American culture apparent from the postwar years onward. Instantly recognizable from what Robert Beuka describes as its "uniform architectural [style] and landscape designs," the American suburb routinely calls to mind a familiar "string of images," of "loaded signifiers" that, taken together, denote a contemporary American vision of the 'good life,' or what passes for it (2-4). From the postwar years onwards, people hence flocked to the promised land of suburbia in pursuit of a utopian perfectibility, ultimately representative of a patriotic and innocent bygone era in America. Yet given the Fordist commercial climate of this postwar period, meant any utopian morals associated with suburban living were in effect reduced to paying off a mortgage.

⁵For suburban historians Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, such fostering of a "suburbanization," in truth, served only to facilitate the emergence of a new, landed middle-class, amid which "property [could transform] greenhorns into middle-class Americans" (147). It was the satisfaction of prestige—the "keeping up with the Joneses," if you will—by way of socially conditioned consumption, not production, that was paramount, with the suburban terrain acting as the "new illusory frontier of consumption" (Potter xxiii). Needless to say, these suburban homes and their abundant consumer contents could nonetheless never be authentically associated with the consolations of ownership, or the productive function of property to mark, even constitute, identity that has been branded "possessive individualism." Catherine Jurca usefully identifies, instead, the postwar ascendancy of a suburban "sentimental dispossession," wherein middle-class identity was grounded, not so much in these safe havens or homes, but in its "alienation from the very environments, artifacts, and institutions that have generally been regarded as central to its identity" (7). Emerging as the immediate by-product of modern advertising and consumer culture, this sentimental dispossession principally refers to the "affective dislocation" by which suburbanites

began to then experience themselves as "spiritually and culturally impoverished by prosperity" (Jurca 6).

⁶An effective "organisation man at home" in this "dormitory of the new managerial class," the male suburbanite, exchanging personality, privacy, and the certain satisfactions of pride of craftsmanship for something abstrusely defined as the social ethic, thus quickly became the object of sociological scrutiny (Whyte 267). Indeed, the plight of the suburban male was a prominent theme for numerous postwar novelists, providing them with the means to explore the specific social and economic conditions that informed and created this sense of existential crisis in the politics of subjectivity. Whether it be Richard Yates' Frank Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road* (1961), one such "neat and solid" (12) corporate drone whose "lack of structural distinction" leaves him awash in a shallow bath of "adjustment... and togetherness" (129); or else Eliot Nailles, the exemplary suburban "henpecked" husband and father of John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969), whose sentimental dispossession and executive alienation consign him to "[living] a life... without any genuine emotion or value" (168); the growing disparity between an authentic masculine ideal and the avenues available for white, middle-class men to realize that ideal, fuelled the contentious social dynamics of the century's major works of suburban fiction.

⁷Certainly, with few other American writers of the twentieth-century remaining more directly or definitively associated with a narrative of the suburban middle-class, it is the "definitely commercial... showroom... quality" of John Cheever's fiction that frames the suburbs as a perfect picture window through to the grey flannel world (100). In his calling attention to this inevitable conflict between the demands of the corporate organization and the dormant desires of the atomized suburbanite in texts like *Bullet Park*, Cheever's literary brand of suburban disillusionment effectively conceives the dysfunctional dimensions of masculine dejection as being somehow derivative of suburbia's larger malady, which is rooted in the very impossibility of the imaginative "apple pie order" it represents (11). Accordingly consumed by suburbia's "artificial structure of acceptable reality" and "stubbornly [refusing] to admit the terms by which [he] [lives]," Eliot Nailles, a commercial chemist and apparently model family man dedicated to the "intenseness of his monogamy," thus

fittingly reprises the final endpoint of capitalism's pursuit of happiness (23). His central status as a "henpecked doormat" serves to highlight the "domesticated" ideology of the Bullet Park suburbs, while further underscoring the suburban subordination of what could have once been Nailles' heroic and pioneering "migratory [instinct]," into the regimented and largely "painful experience of being forced into the role of a bystander" (89-90). Yet despite this "immutable emptiness" (61) he expectedly experiences at the hands of the social ethic, Nailles nevertheless continues to "sell himself" the uniformly "adjusted" character one is supposed to have, and the appropriate inner experiences as well as the outer appearances that go with it (65). The emasculating effects of such a "commodious and efficient" (65) existence in this numbingly materialistic setting result, then, in the outright reduction of the typical Eliot Nailles suburbanite to little more than a depersonalized civic cog, who "[mows] his lawns" while the neighbors watch and think, "what a nice man [Mr. Nailles] must be" (235).

⁸ Viewed together in a doppelganger narrative with Paul Hammer, the illegitimate, "maladjusted" son of a socialist kleptomaniac, and chaotic antithesis to the "happily married... simple life" the suburbs stand for, the two men signify halves of the overburdened American psyche (95). Like his counterpart, Hammer wants nothing more than to fit in and *belong*. Yet amid the suburban social ethic, "one seldom saw a lonely man," and so Hammer's "bastardy [appears] a threat to organized society" (173). As a result he accredits *belongingness* to the illusory, commercial suburban "way of life" epitomized by Nailles (52). For Hammer, Nailles did not "[arrive] [in] Bullet Park [so much] as to have been planted and grown there," but this is, of course, "untrue," with "disorder, moving vans, bank loans at high interest, tears and desperation... [characterizing] most of [the residents] arrivals and departures" (4). To this end, Cheever posits a dislocation at the heart of the postwar suburban experience, exposing any organic idea(l) of the suburbs for the utterly self-centered materialism that it is. Throughout the novel, the author in fact specifically seeks to challenge this prevailing view of suburbia as a pillar of security, stability, and social adjustment through disclosing a disturbing reality of insecurity, instability and maladjustment. Subsequently, Cheever succeeds in estranging his readers from this environment they thought they knew so well, by means of stressing that essentially

inescapable hammer and nail bond between affluence and abjection.

⁹However, more than mere "comedies of suburban manners" or "didactic essays on the 'dystopian' aspects of suburbia," such works by Cheever adopt this elusive dream of 1960s American suburbanization so as to foreground the psychological and cultural construction of suburbia as a theoretical ideal, revealing in the process the "consequent tensions that underlie the suburban experience" (Beuka 15). *Bullet Park* hence not only considers the moral dislocations of the second half of the twentieth century, but also directly addresses the fractured principles of America's traditional values and beliefs. It is important to recognize, therefore, that while in many ways the new suburban landscape certainly disrupted traditional national conceptions of American manhood, it also equally resembled the principal nature of such conceptions. Indeed, given that masculinity is about power and the exhibition of that power, it remains a construct that is demonstrated for other men's approval. With masculine worth always reliant on external authorization, suburban masculinity evolves, then, merely as another manifestation of a hegemonic masculine ideology grounded in surface performances defined by cultural ideals. By way of considering this late sixties text by Cheever as such, the rest of this essay will hence proceed to examine both Nailles and then Hammer, so as to explore in what ways, and to what extent, the author's portrayal of a disenchanted suburban ennui in *Bullet Park* treads the fault lines of laissez-faire capitalism, whilst furthermore succeeding in uncovering the sources of masculine dissatisfaction in their more true and underground origins.

¹⁰The overall structure of the novel is divided into three parts. Part One deals with the shrink-wrapped life of socialite suburbanite Eliot Nailles and the standardized formulation of his "rigid," yet essentially apathetic "sense of social fitness" (52). Part Two, on the other hand, offers an internalized "insight into how lonely and horny mankind is" through its more detailed account of Paul Hammer's neurotic mind, as well as the various sources of his masculine discontent (133). Though they occasionally run into one another in the first two parts of the novel—along with their numerous other disaffected *Bullet Park* neighbors—it is in Part Three that their dual narratives ceremoniously coincide. Respectively "bound together" in this antagonist

structural *doubling* between stereotypical middle-class conformity and anomic non-conformity, the two men and their split narratives significantly evoke a sense of division to which the individual mind in conflict with itself is susceptible (19). As Paul Coates suggests, "the double" exists in literature due to our "inchoate knowledge that we are incomplete and that we cannot master ourselves" (18). Moreover, it implies that identity is a "false category," for if two men are comparable, or in a simplified "Hammer and Nailles; side by side" (Cheever 19) relationship, neither has a "unique, well-defined identity of his own" (Coates 18-19). Compelled to satisfy the life plan that society deems "honest, reliable, clean and happy" (Cheever 53), and with excessive emphasis thereby placed on social stability, domestic harmony, and corporate responsibility, the fractured perspective of Hammer and Nailles—two neighboring men who were "the same weight, height and age" (230)—eludes, then, to the male suburbanite's inability to maintain a "balanced" or "united view" within this contemporary homogenous culture (Coates 19). Thus, whereas select critics such as Benjamin DeMott have dismissed Cheever's "flawed novelistic structure" as nothing else but a "broken-backed," unconvincingly "tacked together" attempt to "[stretch] a short story into a novel" (40), it seems far fairer to argue that, through this very three-part configuration, the author in fact succeeds in creating an allegorical format in which the suburban male emerges as a locus of contradictions in a reality of conflicting discourses and discursive practices; with "the setting in some way at the heart of the matter" (Cheever 3).

¹¹Outwardly obliging and sociable inasmuch as he sees "utility" in "[manufacturing] and merchandising" the spirit of community (100), the novel's opening elucidation of Nailles and his character's mandatory sense of "responsibility to... the [social] fitness of things," can be read as first of all documenting performance in the known and perceptible surface world of suburbia (27). Despite the "utter artificiality of [his] sentiments" (33), the perpetual need to "[work] out a reasonable and patient character like a character in a play... and then [to] [try] and act the part," underscores this faithful suburbanite's excessive sensitivity, if not "self-conscious" anxiety, over the opinions and attitudes of his neighbors (114). Such dread of disapproval and the respective damage it could prove to Nailles' social standing corroborates the tormented social subjectivity that was particularly pertinent in the postwar American suburb.

For with its more fluid social mobilities and pervasive topographical connotations of economic success and individual achievement, the loss of suburban status becomes all the more fearful, while the imperative to *belong* and get along with others grows even more profound.

¹²It is, of course, important to appreciate from the outset, the extent to which Nailles, and his innate "belief in the fitness of things," is directly synonymous with the precepts of his culture, so much so that any individual agency or autonomous characterization effectively evaporates into a generic classification (Cheever 27). His narrative is likewise so deliberately devoid of any clear sense of personality or plot other than suburban conformity, that the succeeding discussion of his opening section almost exclusively parallels the leading critical literature on American masculinity in suburbia at the time. Indeed, taking his social 'cues' from others—peers, bosses, teachers, advertisers—Nailles essentially embodies a new characterological adjustment, whereby the individual "no longer follows the dictates of conscience," but, instead, becomes highly responsive to the "fluctuations and crosscurrents of the day-to-day" (Potter 54). In other words, Cheever's Nailles deliberately "[discounts] the wilderness of the human spirit" in favor of the approbation of his suburban community (5), and proceeds to externally manipulate his entire "way of life" (52) just so he can measure up to the inordinate "display of elegance [and] friendly talk [of those] well-dressed men and women" around him (238). Such socialized behavior, in which his contemporaries are a constant source of guidance, in turn, aptly correlates Nailles with David Riesman's astute portrait of the "other-directed" personality type as outlined in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). A "shallower... friendlier" person, who is "freer with his money [and] more uncertain of himself and his values," Riesman coined this term "other-directed" to describe white-collar men of the fifties (*Lonely* 19). In stark contrast to the highly individualized, "inner-directed" (*Lonely* 19) masculinity of the previous century—whose self-assured sense of self drove him as he ventured into unexplored frontiers—Nailles symbolizes this kind of "marketer, ... middle-class male child" masculinity which, "[presenting] [itself]... with the air of [a] [salesman] pointing out the merits of a new car in a showroom," was

understood as developing in contemporary, bureaucratic America (Cheever 100).

¹³An indiscernibly "plain man dressed plainly in grey" (171), Nailles' claim to "rectitude and uniformity" (239) is similarly indicative of what Fromm identifies as a contemporaneous "escape from freedom" (61). According to Fromm, human beings naturally tend to fear freedom and the terrifying sense of ambiguity it inspires in the individual. Hence, when acting independently in a democratic American society and confronted with the existential anguish of making choices and exercising responsibility, Nailles adopts a new "herd" mentality in which any "gratification" or "sense of identity" (Fromm 61) depends on his acting in line with the "requirements of the culture" (77). Indeed, attuned to others but never to himself, such capitulation through "compulsive conforming" (Fromm 19) allows Nailles to hide in a hierarchy within which his place and his role seem certain, and to withhold the "agony, confusion and humiliation," all those "symptoms of panic" (Cheever 123) freedom effects, by paradoxically "frustrating [all] other urges" and fusing himself with the "lonely crowd" (*Lonely* 3). Thus, when he claims, "what I wear, what I eat, my sex life and a lot of my thinking is pretty well regimented but there are times when I like being told what to do," he exhibits an essentially conventionalized, if not contrived desire which applies extensively to all the intimate areas of his life, for the order and certainty authoritarianism offers; because "[he] can't figure out what's right and what's wrong in every situation" (Cheever 67).

¹⁴In this regard, the "moderate, calm, a little bored and absentminded" character in the interest of which Nailles acts verifies the prototypical, "other-directed" social self of suburbia (Cheever 126); a self which does not perform "of [its] own volition" (217), but is essentially constituted by "the [role] written for [him]" (34) by the social ethic and which, in reality, is simply a "subjective disguise for the objective social function of man" in a given society (Fromm 101). The term "other-directed" itself notably suggest such "shallowness and superficiality," with direction "coming from the outside" and simply being "internalized" (*Lonely* 159). Nailles' "principal occupation with the merchandising of Spang," a commercial mouthwash, as being "[reflective] of his dignity," no doubt then serves to give credence to this claim (Cheever 103). According to Nailles, "bad breath was

a human infirmity like obeseness and melancholy... [which] came between young lovers, friends, husbands and wives. [It] could lead to divorce, alimony and custody suits, [or] sap a man's self-esteem, posture and appearance" (104). His central concern with "[curing] it," so as to save the "victim who would mumble into his shirt, hoping to divert the fumes downward," is, as such, based on Spang's possible surface result, that is, on how the recipient social *other* would receive and respond to it, as opposed to how the individual sufferer may directly experience it (104). This externally oriented, people-minded process is, of course, principally "other-directed," however, the belief that the "sales of Spang would increase if its taste was more unpleasant," furthermore suggests the disturbingly synthetic preoccupations of this suburban community (Cheever 105).

¹⁵Sure enough, with its patent connotations of cosmetic pain and torturous intrusion, the analogous metaphoric reference to a "dentist [turning] on the light above his drills" (193), or "preparing utensils for an extraction" (198), embellishes the notion of exterior "cleanliness" being associated here with an uncomfortable, interior "bitterness" (105). Nailles' foremost "anger... and unease [toward any] [obscenely]... intimate... human allusions" (21), be it "[stains]... domestic rubbish," or the "faint unfreshness of humanity... exhaled... at the end of the day" (79), similarly figures this suburban environment as an artificial "precinct of disinfected acoustics" (9), one so inauthentically "crude, flagrant and repulsive that it [amounts] to an irony" (124). Indeed, with the somewhat hostile veneer of "success" very much to be desired, and in many cases favored to any human substance, anything remotely "vagrant" from Nailles' rigid and sanitized "sense of the fitness of things," proceeds to directly "[offend] his nose [and] his sight" (86), until all that is left is "nothing, nothing, nothing at all except the blandness of the scene," which, after a while, would "[get] so [boring]... [it] would [itself] be offensive" (238).

¹⁶Cheever further explicates this notion through his repeated reference to "wax flowers," which serve as a subtle symbol for the beautifully preserved and polished, pristine world of suburbia, at the same time as a demonstrative indication of its inert and imitational, commoditized nature (26). Given that "wax flowers meant death" (130) and Nailles often "dreamed [of]... his own... funeral" as if he were dead already (57), foregrounds the

contrived conservation of this style of life as derivative of the deadening, "no good for anything" materialism that governs affluent middle-class American society (88). Consistently "weighted down with rugs and chairs" (32) and "[tables] set [with] wax flowers" (12), Cheever in effect allegorizes the suburban locale as a pale imitation of the *real thing*, a counterfeit community where nature itself becomes merely another element of maintaining visual evidence of dominant class status. The direct parallel made between the customary household "display of wax flowers" (130) and the male "principal member" being described as a "discouraged and unwatered flower" (30), likewise, suggests a sense of alienation from nature occasioned by the commodification of the suburban environment. Such imagery, moreover, discloses the essentially castrating atmosphere of this sterile environment, which ensues to "transform the organic into the inorganic," so as to render all "living persons" into "things [which] can be controlled and ordered," if not *displayed* (Fromm 41).

¹⁷Certainly amid these contemporary postwar conditions, the resolve to externally *keep up appearances* usurps the internal struggle for existence every time, thereby generating a sort of false consciousness in which "falsehood, confinement, exclusion and a kind of blindness [seem] to be [the] only means of comprehension" (Cheever 33). As Mills explains, "in dressing people up and changing the scenery of their lives," the exclusive suburban experience effectively cultivated a "great faith in the religion of appearance" (169). Just like a "masquerade party," all Cheever's suburbanites have to really do, therefore, is to "get [their] clothes at Brooks, catch the train and show up in church once a week and no one will ever ask a question about [their] identity" (54). For above all else, these suburbanites who "look like people and yet they're really not" (Cheever 26), exemplify "a new cast of actors performing the major routines of twentieth-century society" (Mills ix). Of course, within the narcissistically immersive "commercial center" that is Bullet Park (Cheever 5), this performance principally involves the acquisition of appropriate props, for if you "don't have a pool [yourself], frankly it's something of a limitation" (13).

¹⁸Not wanting to "find [themselves] left out of the conversation... when people start talking about pool chemicals and so forth" (13), Cheever's characters consistently maintain a position of superiority in what

Pierre Bourdieu calls the "culture game" (1). According to Bourdieu, there exists at the center of modern affluent societies an "economy of cultural goods" that function in accordance with a "specific logic" (1).ⁱ One's "place" in the social landscape is dictated, as such, by their ability to demonstrate possession of discriminating tastes and propriety, or what Bourdieu refers to as "cultural capital" (1). Following this contention, Cheever presents the "well-bred, beautiful, wealthy" (55) citizens of Bullet Park as subject to the "symbolic ecology" of suburbia, in which evidentiary display of cultural distinction through inconspicuous consumption serves not only as the surveyor of social status, but as a measure of individual worth.ⁱⁱ Certainly Nailles' sense of his own significance is frequently experienced by means of socio-economic factors extraneous to himself, as if his life in suburbia rests solely on some "substructure of talismans" which determine human value in the same way the market determines the price of a commodity (241). The allegorical reference to Nailles' house being "made of cards" effectually substantiates this idea, by way of alluding to his home in the idiom of a game, and so factoring its worth in the same tenuous terms as a card's figurative value within a card game (46). Amidst this vain "game of culture" (Bourdieu 3), the material reality of any object to which Nailles can relate with the reality of his own person is, therefore, exchanged for what Fromm terms, "phenomenon of abstractification" (61).

¹⁹When "[relating] oneself to an object in an abstract way" (61), namely, "emphasizing only those qualities which it has in common with all other objects of the same genus," Fromm argues that objects can only ever be "experienced as commodities," that is, "as [embodiments] of exchange value" (112). Thus, when the citizens of Bullet Park repeatedly refer their neighbor's house according to its "estimated resale price" (Cheever 6), they are not centrally concerned with its use as a home, that is to say, "with its concrete qualities," but are speaking of it only in other-directed terms as a relative product, the main quality of which is its exchange value (Fromm 111). Indeed, with Cheever's suburban population conditioned to prioritize the abstract form of "the Howestons (7 bedrooms, 5 baths, \$65,000) and the Welchers (3 bedrooms, 1 ½ baths, \$31,000)" (Cheever 9), they demonstrate a receptive marketing orientation whereby they must respond to the given object even if it "poorly serves their actual needs" (Whyte 324). Chiefly acquisitive for the *good life* inferred

from the socio-economic structure of suburbia, money itself becomes, then, secondary. As Karl Marx explains, "money" works only inasmuch as it "transforms real human and natural powers into... abstract ideas, and... imperfections and imaginings, the powers which only exist in the imagination of the individual, into real powers" (300-301).ⁱⁱⁱ For Nailles, consumerism is therefore essentially the "satisfaction of artificially stimulated phantasies" (Fromm 130); that is, a fantasy "extension of [his] [affairs]" (Cheever 201) whose reality is mainly the fiction the advertising campaign has created, "like the 'healthy' dental paste," or, in this case, mouthwash (Fromm 61).

²⁰Rather than an effective means to an end, the social pressure to excessively consume hence comes to be the aim in itself; specifically, an irresponsibly displaced pursuit of happiness in which the materialistic "suburban rhythm" of a newly affluent America obeys the profitable investment pattern of capital (Whyte 316). To this end, Elaine Tyler May's definition of the postwar suburban home as a "secure, private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world" is rendered somewhat problematic, for what May understands to be the ideal version of "American home," namely a domestic "bastion of safety in an insecure world," has from the outset been but an abstract stage on which a drama of perfect nuclear family life should ideally be played out (9). Nonetheless, it seems still necessary to acknowledge the suburban autonomy May describes, specifically its complacent contentment with itself, as an allegorical expression for the situation of postwar America in Cheever's work, as well as in the outside world as a whole. As Fredric Jameson explains, to shift from the "realities" of a period such as the 1960s, to the "representation" of that rather different thing, *the sixties*, obligates us in addition to underscore the "cultural sources of all attributes with which we have endowed the period," many of which seem very precisely to derive from "its own representation of itself" (281). The both intensely personal, and extensively abstract, image-saturated space of Cheever's *Bullet Park* therefore seeks to highlight that normatively held "happy picture... of a man and a woman and two children" (Cheever 134), which not only was a "staple of the... sitcoms of the 1950s," but indeed of postwar American culture's homogenous "vision of suburbia" (Beuka 108). In this way, Cheever denotes the extent to which that over determined "sense of permanence" (181) so characteristic of suburban

representation, expresses a cultural tendency to misread and misremember the suburbs, a tendency which suggests a fundamental desire "to be immortal" (69). This commodification of history, or "nostalgia for the present" if you will (Jameson 279), moreover, allows Cheever to offer a "corrective vision" to those mass cultural representations of congenial community and "stable patriarchal domesticity" (Beuka 107-108)—namely those comforting, codified narratives of the suburbs in the era's image of itself—which were so simplistically, and yet forcefully promulgated in an attempt to dissociate the postwar American present from sites of conflict and trauma, as if "nothing bad has ever or will ever happen here" (Cheever 186).

²¹The notable absence of any rudimentary explanation regarding Eliot Nailles' past, that is to say, his narrative's clear disregard for any account of his personal history, serves to then juxtapose his character against the cultural presumption that the postwar suburbs were rootless and "free of trouble" (186), by way of presenting him as having been "grown there... [in] Bullet Park" (4). As Arthur Kroker expounds, the suburban inhabitant like Nailles personifies the "colonial subject" of suburbia, who is "tied umbilically" to a way of life that "grows on [him], feeds on [him], parasites [him]" (Kroker 214), with the aim of turning him into something "repulsively unlike his nature" (Cheever 239). With this, the "quite literal promise" (168) that "if [you] could only possess this [life] [you] would be [yourself] ... industrious and decent," that individuals could, indeed, finally realize their deepest desires here, in a zone of supposed security and comfort, is essentially subverted (185). Cheever intimates, instead, that by the very anaesthetizing nature of its physical space, the suburban reality was for all genuine expressions of desire to not just be blocked, but uprooted in their very conception.

²²In this sense, the foregoing discussion of the process of abstractification extends "far beyond the realm of objects," with the people of Bullet Park experienced, too, as the personification of a "quantitative exchange value" (Fromm 113). What this means is the way in which the "[commercially] handsome" personality package of suburbia became an instrument for capitalist purposes, and sentiments mere "hallowed" tokens by which societal status is obtained (Cheever 100). Removed from the inner feelings they supposedly express, Nailles' relationship with his fellow man hence becomes a superficial interaction to which there was "less dimension than a comic strip" (25). Indeed, despite his investment in the personality market of

the culture game, Nailles is markedly aware that his "society had become... automative and nomadic," with "means of communication [being] established by the use of... suitable signals" (21). Nevertheless, consisting of the correct commodities, appropriate apparel and proper participation in social activities, these essentially empty signifiers deemed "suitable" continue to formulate a "prized image of self" which permits Nailles to cling to the false consciousness of his status position (Mills 258). The extent to which Nailles is correspondingly intended as the poster-boy for suburbia is made clear when Paul Hammer finds a "photograph and a brief article about his promotion to head of the Mouthwash Division at Saffron" (Cheever 145), which convinces Hammer "whoever lived there [in Bullet Park] lived a useful and illustrious life" (179). Certainly as a "member of the Bullet Park Volunteer Fire Department and the Gorey Brook Country Club," Nailles offers an engaging image of suburban success (45). However, the fact that this ubiquitous surface image of "exceptional innocence and purity" is the principal portrait we have of Nailles' character, even with his first person narrative voice, suggests the degree to which he is wholly trapped by his public persona (198).

²³The use of rhetorical questions across the novel's opening section no doubt serves as an astute literary indication of Nailles' cumulative vacancy and self-estrangement. Having acquired an organizational, outward numbness, Nailles has grown equally out of touch with his internal self. So while may be experiencing a feeling, he is incapable of identifying neither "what" it is nor "why" he is feeling it (61). This abstractly disorientating "force of separateness" (128) is innately symptomatic of a contemporary American male malaise, or what Roger Horrocks loosely terms "male autism" (107). For Horrocks, the autistic male is "deeply ashamed" of himself, of feeling "vulnerable" or "enthusiastic" over anything since it threatens his self-control (107). It is, of course, Nailles' ceremonial duty to the social ethic of suburbia that produces such shame, as it obliges him to favor self-respectability over self-respect.

²⁴So as to manage the "[profound] loneliness" which logically accompanies such repression, Nailles therefore adopts an "outer deadness" (Horrocks 107) by means of removing himself from true experience, and masking the "black [abyss] at the edge of everything" with the repeated use of a "massive tranquilizer" (Cheever 128, 121). Cheever's allusion to drug addiction here is allegorically indicative of suburbia's larger capitalistic dependencies

which, both "mercenary and dishonest," made "any reflection—any sort of thoughtfulness or emotional depth—impossible" (167). Needless to say, Nailles is so completely invested in the social system of suburbia that, "just like a drug addict [dependent] on his drug" (Fromm 155), he renounces any experience of his self as an autonomous entity with "any genuine emotion or value," or as anything more than a saleable commodity reliant on the external approval of others (Cheever 168). Even though consciously trapped in this "position that [seems] desperate and abject" (61), Nailles cannot fathom a life beyond the "rosy nimbus" (121) of his "white house and his office" (65). Hence, in an effort to pretend that "[everything] was the way it was when it was so wonderful" (59), and satisfy that elemental nostalgia for the present, Nailles utilizes the apathetic "guise of forgetfulness" (176) through quite literally "drugging [himself]" (168). Whilst this may evidently prevent any sense of a specifically masculine "valor" from ever being seen or effectively realized (138), if Nailles were to even begin to discover the despairing depths of his deprivation, that is to say, "why [he is] so disappointed... why everything [seems] to have passed [him] by... why... there [is] no brilliance or promise in [his] affairs" despite the fact "[he] tried, [and] tried, [and] did the best [he] knew how to," it would surely lead to a great crisis (10).

²⁵In consequence, other than that his "sense of being alive was to bridge or link the disparate environments and rhythms of his world," we are purposely denied any full or immediate access to Nailles' emotional state (65). In order to gain a frank insight into what happens to the male psyche when "one of [those] principle bridges... collapses" (65), we have to hence look to the other side of the tracks from middle-class conformity, specifically to the "maladjusted... parasite" that is Paul Hammer (207). Introduced as both bachelor and bastard "at a time when the regard for domesticity had gotten so intense" (145), Hammer is constitutionally inept in his adjustment to the commercially normative, socio-psychological fit of sixties suburbia, whereby an "amiable man" would, for example, "play some golf" (208), and always appear "perforce with one's wife [and] one's children" (145). Supposedly too unstable to fulfill this life trajectory deemed "clean and happy" (Cheever 53), and with no room on "the golf course [of]... the good life" for what Barbara Ehrenreich dubs "the mature bachelor" (44, 14), Hammer is considered to be a "threat to organized society" (Cheever 173). A "pervert... with severe emotional problems" (Ehrenreich 14), his "best

defense" (Cheever 174), or else his "only defense" against the "cruel injustice... [of] illegitimacy" (163), is to hence incessantly "[prey] on the happiness of others" (207). Accordingly, Scott Donaldson insists that, if Nailles is the passive "preserver of family and community," then Hammer represents the otherwise "obsessed and deranged destroyer" (243). It is important to realize, however, that whilst there is certainly justification in Donaldson's determination of Hammer and Nailles as respective "fragments of a single divided psyche," he critically undercuts this contention by claiming that, "hate rules [Hammer's] existence as love dominates that of Nailles'" (Donaldson 247). Indeed, whereas Donaldson maintains that Nailles is fundamentally "content with his lot" (246), it would be far sounder to argue that, in fact, Hammer emerges half way through the novel as the anomic by-product of the "grey miasma of conformity that gripped... men" like Nailles, and beneath the surface of which there had always resided a latent residue of inarticulate pain and masculine terror (Ehrenreich 44).

²⁶It is obvious that the compulsion for conformity provides a "source of anxiety" for Nailles (Cheever 102). Thus, to read "the love [Nailles] felt for his wife"—that "seemed like some limitless discharge of a clear amber fluid that would *surround* [her], *cover* [her], *preserve* [her] and leave [her] *insulated* but *visible* like the contents of an aspic" (Cheever 25; emphasis my own)—in the same way as Donaldson, namely as demonstrative of Nailles' individual "capacity to... love... admire [and] protect," neglects to consider the anxiously commoditized temperament of Nailles' descriptive language (Donaldson 25). In truth, this vivid detail directly corroborates the duplicitously *covered*, *preserved*, *insular*, and *visible* surface principles of suburbia. This is made further evident when Nailles professes that it was his "manifest destiny... to love [his wife] Nellie" (Cheever 23). Here Nailles ensues to distort the conventional rhetoric of American imperialism within the domestic context of suburbia so as suggest the extent to which the "hallowed institution of holy matrimony" had become the new national doctrine of success, at the same time as detracting any emotional or affectionate, spousal association (Cheever 100). It is not "love" as such that therefore governs Nailles' existence, but rather the precarious American pursuit of suburban happiness that limits Nailles' masculine influence to the close-up scenes of job, family and neighborhood, whilst ultimately denying him

any human capacity to either "fall in love" (55) or to "have... hate" (193).

²⁷As a result, given that he is initially presented as a societal outcast, Hammer's isolated version of events offer a window onto what lies outside these rigid structures of suburbia's dominant value system, and onto the "savage and unnatural... appetites" which contradict the "visionary... summit of [Nailles'] perfection" (18). Cheever's use of doubling here is, however, less a transgression from, and more an explicit emphasis of the oppressive nature of fixed suburban male role patterns. For despite deviating from the dictates of the social ethic, Hammer is nevertheless unable to escape their emasculating impact as he "[begins] to suffer from... a form of despair that seemed to have a tangible approach" (174). Described as a pathological "cafard [that] followed him" (182), this "profound... melancholy," which gave Hammer "difficulty breathing" or "getting out of bed" (219), can be seen as the affliction of a culture in which expectations for self-realization were greater than ever before. With an "adequate income" (174), Hammer certainly believes he is entitled to individual self-fulfillment, and hence he articulates a solipsistic "sublime feeling of rightness" (235), whereby he regards the "earth" as "[his] property," fittingly "paved" and "ready" for his "occupancy... [and] contentment" (183-188). But of course, this notion of individual aspiration is only attainable in terms of one's adjustment to society's "normal spectrum" (219), thereby fostering Hammer's sense of masculine "ridicule and despair" (174) by promoting "normative, *mature* male role expectations" and pathologizing those who seek a lifestyle "outside of the conventions of the time" (Cuordileone 138). It is through the subsequent autobiographical account of Hammer's "intolerable sense of his aloneness" that the reader is able, then, to observe the actuality of "squalor, spiritual poverty and [monotonous] selfishness" compressed behind the façade of Nailles' cohesive suburban selfhood (Cheever 149).

²⁸As Riesman portends, "in a society of any size there will be some who are pushed out of that tight web" (*Lonely* 241). Within the "aggressively hostile," heteronormative *gated* community of suburbia this is a particularly prominent phenomenon (*Lonely* 212), and it is precisely Hammer's "inability to cope with the social demands of modern [suburban] culture" (*Lonely* 244) that respectively

vilifies him with the "incriminating... judgment" of homosexuality (Cheever 146). Having failed to adjust to normative and mature male role requirements—which involved "attaining a respectable job, getting married, maintaining a home, and establishing a family" (Cuordileone 146)—Hammer is assumed to suffer from the same combination of "infantile fixation, dread of responsibility, and fear of the opposite sex" (Cuordileone 146) which supposedly compel the "deviant homosexual" into "an unnatural way of life" (Cheever 177). Hence, when visiting a psychiatrist in the hope of locating the "source of [his] cafard," Hammer is informed that, without an adequately "efficient disposition," he must be a "repressed transvestite homosexual," acutely "ashamed of, ... [and] intimidated... [by his] sexual guilt" (Cheever 177-179). Of course, what this overtone essentially underscores is the extent to which, in postwar therapeutic culture, the male homosexual and the bachelor were condemnably equated as "fundamentally immature and maladjusted," but unlike the bachelor, the homosexual had allegedly "given up entirely on fulfilling a normative masculine role in society" (Cuordileone 146-7). What is more, through this episode Cheever conveys the way in which contemporaneous psychiatric judgment localized the "catalyst" for male homosexuality within "external sociological factors," as opposed to "innate biological drives," in an attempt to rationalize the apparent increase in the incidence of homosexuality (Cuordileone 147).

²⁹The notion that male homosexuality was on the rise certainly distinguishes the sexual anxieties of this period from others before it. Nailles in point of fact states that, "[he] [didn't] dislike boys like that..., it's just that they [mystified] [him], they [frightened] [him] because [he] didn't know where they [came] [or] where they're going" (Cheever 116). Following the same line of contention, writers of the fifties such as Abram Kardiner recognized the specific social drifts and disorders of the postwar period as providing the basis for what he described to be this "large-scale flight from masculinity" (164). Kardiner candidly points to the existing external circumstances of suburban affluence, particularly one's "inability to keep up with the Joneses" (Kardiner 170), as that which subsequently affected a man's ability to "prove that [he] was truthful and manly" (Cheever 177), along with his "voluntary" sex-object choice (Kardiner 170). To this end, Hammer comes to signify what was then popularly believed to be "the [man]"

who [is] overwhelmed by the increasing demands to fulfill the specifications of masculinity," and who has to "flee from competition because [he fears] the increased pressure on what [he] [considers] [his] very limited resources" (Kardiner 175). It is, of course, through this very prevalent view of homosexuality as a socially assimilated trait that Cheever actually succeeds in calling attention to the diminishing sense of options available for men in postwar America; for despite the growing perception of entitlement to personal freedom and self-fulfillment, the "division between [the] two forces [of] [natural] instinct [and] [social] duty... seemed [to Hammer] like a broad river without bridges" (Cheever 128).

³⁰Significantly, Hammer encounters numerous potential homoerotic incidences as a "direct consequence of [his] being alone" (146), which all together suggests that, in suburbia, the only "other [way] of doing it besides being joined in holy matrimony and filling up the cradle" is to be "queer" (117). Most notably on the beach, where one was expected to "[appear] with [his] wife, [his] children, sometimes [his] parents or a brace of house guests," but never as a "lonely man," Hammer meets the "amorous and slightly cross-eyed gaze... [of] a comely and tanned... faggot" (145-146). At the same time, however, Hammer spots another man on the scene, "a conscientious desk worker with a natural stoop and a backside broadened by years of honest toil" (146). While the "faggot" advances to "[hook] his thumbs into his trunks and [lower] them to show [Hammer] an inch or two of [his] backside," this "honest... desk worker," who was "in no way muscular or comely," attempts to "fly a kite... with his wife and two children" (146). No doubt Cheever is chiefly concerned here with exploiting a closely interrelated set of contradictory attitudes, which, Bernice Murphy contends, "can most clearly be expressed as a set of binary oppositions" (3). The juxtaposition of these two men is, therefore, particularly interesting, for it forces Hammer to overtly "[declare] [which] world [he]... [chooses] to live in," whilst congruently accentuating the abundant lack of options available to the middle-class male beyond the dichotomous paradigm of suburban adjustment or maladjustment (Cheever 147).

³¹For fear he be further outcast, Hammer hence dismisses "the [faggot's] [throw] [of] another sidelong glance," together with the additional "absentminded pull of his trunks," and resolves to "[get] to [his] feet and [join] the man with the kite," at which point the "faggot [wanders] off

as [Hammer] intended that he should" (147). In this respect, the "filament of kite line" proves to be an important metaphor inasmuch as it "succinctly [declares] [Hammer's] intentions to the faggot," as if to "possess some extraordinary moral force" (147). Sure enough, as Hammer "[helps] to unsnarl the line" it unfolds into a symbolic boundary marker of community, albeit one, like the garden gate, which is inherently permeable (147). Hammer quickly realizes as such, that there is little, if nothing more than this synthetically "fine... line" (147) to separate suburban *normality* from the "baser qualities" that lurk "under the... brilliant... grass... and fir trees" (58). The standardized "two-car family" (53) kind of existence he has not much choice but to try to emulate, likewise, is essentially "bound together by just such a length of string—cheap and colorless" (147). Thus, when Hammer does eventually marry his wife Marietta, he similarly identifies her as "always [wearing] a white thread on her clothing" (204). He alleges that, "even if [he] bought her a mink coat there would be a white thread on it," and it is this very "white thread," in the same manner as the kite string, that holds the "mysterious [catalytic] power... [to] [clarify] [Hammer's] susceptibilities" (205). Of course, the fact that Hammer nevertheless still "[longs] for a moral creation whose mandates were heftier than the delight of children, the trusting smiles of strangers and a length of string," confirms the fragility of newly established suburban identities, as well as the visionary vacuousness upon which their verities are founded (147).

³²It is important to note, therefore, the way in which, following this scene, Hammer comes to appreciate the "hopeful gaze of a faggot on the make" (181) as that of "all lonely men" (217), who have been "driven by the sameness of [their environment] to authenticate [their] identity by unnatural sexual practices" (181). The fact that Hammer disappoints to greet this gaze all the same, "[lowering] [his] eyes chastely to the floor" (181), furthermore reiterates just how hard it is for the individual male suburbanite, even at the expense of his own "honor, passion, ... intelligence, [and] [genuineness]," to justify to himself a departure from the social norm (26). The "[serious]... doubt" (202) Hammer expresses over the tenuous tenets of suburban normality even as he "[retires] in defeat" (102), in this regard, corroborates the "fractured personality" of the male suburbanite, who is perpetually torn, as Cheever's novel is divided, between the "paradoxical comforts and perils of

conformity" (Murphy 4). Indeed, whereas Nailles is firmly indoctrinated in the togetherness ethos of suburbia, to the extent that he associates conformism with the security and certainty of *belonging*, Hammer cannot help interpreting the cultural lack of "uniqueness" as a "[serious] [threat] to [his] own uniqueness" (Cheever 181). With nothing in the homogenously tepid, artificial landscape of Bullet Park to "distinguish it from a hundred, hundred others" (181), Hammer fears there "might be nothing about [him]" (181), that is to say, nothing "true to life" (30) left in him, to "set [him] apart from other men" (181). This leads us then back to this idea of identity as a "false category," and Cheever's narrative employment of the doppelganger as a means to underscore the break down of any "well defined [male] identity" in contemporary American society (Coates 18).

³³For Gordon Slethaug, in the contemporary doppelganger text such as *Bullet Park*, the double starts to "[take] on a new identity" removed from the "universal absolutes" of an "indivisible, unified, continuous, and fixed identity," and toward the representation of a "divided and discontinuous self in a fragmented universe" (3). It was the principle "mission" of the author of the double, as such, to "decenter the concept of the self," to view "human reality as a construct," and to explore the "inevitable drift of signifiers away from their referents" (Slethaug 3). Rather than a division wherein "[different] characters represent opposing qualities" (Slethaug 12), the split narratives of Hammer and Nailles - apportioned like "spaghetti and meatballs, salt and pepper, oil and vinegar" (Cheever 56-7) - thereby work to "raise questions about fixed categories and constructs," especially about the notion that any human being has a "unified identity" (Slethaug 5). Thus, what appears in Nailles' conditioned surface account like an interrelated identity and communal *belonging*, Hammer's "intense emotional vertigo" (Cheever 181) no doubt purposefully serves to conclude as a "faulty first person [narrative]" (Slethaug 5); within which the then questionable basis of human perception has been caught in the culturally "monotonous [regulation] [and] dehumanization of man" (Whyte 398).

³⁴Hammer's neurotic fear, "not of falling but of vanishing" (Cheever 181), in this sense, critically reproaches the embittered "spiritual conformity" and personal disintegration that are the "unavoidable consequence of [organized] society" (Whyte 396). It is, however, Hammer's

subsequent desire to get "back [to] the mountains" (Cheever 60), and "back" in touch with the "most natural [of] human [conditions]" so as to "[fend] off [his] cafard" (182) and reclaim the original "excellence and beauty [he] had lost" (174), which couples this suburban disillusionment, crucially, with a much deeper false consciousness regarding American masculinity. Throughout his narrative, Hammer diagnoses the anaesthetized climate of suburbia as fatefully affronting the "[arduous]... natural man" of hegemonic masculine ideology (171); that is he, "the hardy man," who according to Riesman's study, *Individualism Reconsidered* (1954), "pioneered on the frontiers of production, exploration, and colonization" (27). Nina Baym correspondingly illuminates how this idea of an essential Americanness—and within that, an essential American manhood—expounded with the emergence of such influential mid-century works of criticism as Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950) and R.W.B Lewis' *The American Adam* (1955). According to Baym, these works consistently maintained that, "as something artificial and secondary to human nature," society exerts an "unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality" (126). They likewise narrate a confrontation of the American individual, "the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances," with the "promise" offered by "the idea of America" (Baym 126). Behind this promise is, of course, the assurance that "individuals come before society, that they exist in some meaningful sense prior to, and apart from, societies in which they happen to find themselves" (Baym 127).

³⁵The best prescription or *defense* against effective suburban castration, in Hammer's mind, therefore lies in rediscovering the "[frightening] massiveness" of nature (Cheever 102), for like Michael Kimmel suggests, "if the fate of twentieth-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to... live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, [and] to set out on that uncharted territory into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (Kimmel 144). This prescription, or *promise*, is, needless to say, a "deeply romantic one," wherein the natural landscape of America, "untrammelled by history and social accident," purportedly permits the American individual to achieve "complete self-definition" (Baym 126). It is, thus, important to recognize the fact that, instead of physically venturing into nature, Hammer chooses to

"summon those images that represented for [him] the excellence... that he had lost," the first of which was "a snow-covered mountain [that] seemed to represent beauty, enthusiasm and love," thereby demonstrating the extent to which American masculinity, in truth, consistently relies on a reservoir of mythological and romanticized images with which men sustain themselves in proving their manhood (Cheever 174-5).

³⁶In a sense, this supposed promise of America and its manhood has, for a number or recent feminists at least, "always been known to be delusory" (Baym 127). Certainly for Baym, by the twentieth century this mythic "melodrama of beset manhood" had been transmuted into the evocation of an infantile "flight for its own sake" (127), as seen in contemporaneous suburban works such as John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960). Not unlike Hammer, Harry Rabbit Angstrom knows the truth, that "the thing that has left his life has left irrevocably; no search would recover it, no flight would reach it" (208), and yet Harry continues to "run, run, run," to run across Updike's tetralogy as he is repeatedly told, "You can't run enough" (54). Like Baym, Annette Kolodny, too, theorizes how the American pastoral concedes a "landscape of the mind to be projected upon and perceived as an objective and external 'real world' landscape" (156). No longer subject to the correcting influence of everyday experience, what occurs, then, is a kind of "communal act of imagination" (Kolodny 156). In these regards, given that Cheever's reader is presented early on in the novel with an advertising billboard, wherein a "great big colored picture of... mountains covered with snow" promotes "[looking] at the mountain" to take one's "mind off his troubles" (134), implies that Hammer's masculinist fantasy, sure enough, does not derive from the real authentic experience that he believes, as a man, he is entitled to and "[has] lost," but rather precedes reality with the intent of "corresponding to [that] vision," as if by some perverse consumer obligation (182).

³⁷It becomes necessary to distinguish, therefore, that it is not so much the "flagrant... imitation" facet of suburbia which hinders Hammer from retrieving his masculine potential, but rather that these precepts of American masculinity, like a "disinfectant... advertised to smell of mountain pine woods," are themselves insincerely concocted, and so never there for him to 'lose' in the first place (Cheever 124). This outlook, needless to say, critically

undercuts traditional essentialist conceptions of American manhood by inferring that the original "inner directed" frontiersman, in the same way as the suburban organization man, acted merely in accordance to a social code. Nonetheless, it is credible to deduce that these *original* men were, in effect, simply guided by "internalized ideals," which made them "appear to be more individualistic than they actually were" (*Individualism* 27). The extent to which Hammer is continually "condemned to exile" (Cheever 190) as the result of his inability to societally perform to the dictates of the suburban ethic, in consequence, directly mimics the masculine prerequisite to constantly reaffirm one is inherently "man enough" through outward "public display" (Kimmel 1).

³⁸Whether through the gendered capital of money or muscles, perpetually proving one's maleness for hope of other men's approval was, and is, "one of the defining experiences of men's lives" (Kimmel 1). It is always other men, as such, who then evaluate the performance of masculinity, which resolves American masculinity as a historical and changing, "other-directed" construct, and suburban masculinity, too, as just another manifestation of a hegemonic masculine ideology that is fundamentally based on a surface performance defined by concomitant cultural ideals. For this reason, Nailles' pronunciation of Nellie as "his deliverer" evocatively distinguishes suburban manhood in relation to a woman, and thereby within a relative sociological power structure as opposed to upon a masculinist *essence* (Cheever 241). As his wife and housewife, Nellie's "pleasant... composure" (31-32), deferentially "freed from the mortal bonds of grossness and aspiration," permits Nailles to uphold the hierarchical male image of suburban patriarch at the same time as *delivering* him from an otherwise "contemptible" bachelorhood (241). Conversely, as the maladjusted *other*, Hammer is not delivered but rather stagnated by his "[frequent]... groping" for this "procrustean" masculine mythology (230) that he feels "he [has] lost" (191)—so much so that, ironically, he cannot conform to the prevailing male ideals of suburbia and has to seek delivery through destruction. As Patrick Meanor explains, "once [Hammer] is released from his habitual condition of spiritual stasis" and into an awareness of the "nihilistic [bleakness]" of his life, he unsurprisingly "loses control," and any sense of "real freedom" is "immediately transformed into the most obvious self-destructive behavior" (Meanor 145). It is, of course, this

subsequent "provoked rage" (Cheever 234) that provides an alternate view onto the depraved "psychological... disorder and illegality" hiding behind the calm exterior of Nailles' suburban façade, and which has been waiting to erupt in the pathological form of Hammer's wanton devastation of either himself or his society (Slethaug 19).

³⁹Interestingly enough, the closing section of the novel, wherein Hammer conjures "[his] crazy old... plan to crucify... and murder Nailles" (219), later changing his victim to Nailles' son Tony, succeeds to cumulatively deploy the uncannily familiar tropes of the suburban gothic, which are only mildly insinuated across the first two thirds of the novel in the shape of Mrs Wickwires' unexplained "arm in a sling" (6) or Harry Shinglehouse's "highly polished brown loafer lying on the cinders [of] the [train] track" (61). In his study of the suburban gothic, Martin Dines describes its literary potential for "formal and epistemological disturbance" through the gothic use of "doublings... and ruination," which altogether serve "to disrupt the overly familiar way in which stories about the suburbs tend to be told," whilst furthermore "[saying] something unsettling about the most familiar of American spaces" (961). What is most "unsettling" about the conclusion of the novel, however, is not so much the disruptive terror Hammer reigns on Bullet Park, but rather the "overly familiar" way in which such perturbation is stylistically expressed. There is scarce detail or emotion as Nailles breaks through the door of Christ Church with a chain saw, nor resolute explanation as to why Hammer is just "sitting in a front pew, crying" (Cheever 244). Moreover, once Nailles "[lifts] his son off the alter and [carries] him out in to the rain," the novel concludes in an objective journalistic reporting of the facts: "Paul Hammer, also of Bullet Park, confessed to attempted homicide and was remanded to the State Hospital for the criminally Insane.... He carried Nailles to the church with the object of immolating him in the chancel. He intended, he claimed, to awaken the world" (244).

⁴⁰This anti-epiphanic close to the novel is, in turn, most significant, as it succeeds to undercut the view that either literary character must of necessity "learn something new [or] grow to maturity and psychological wholeness" (Slethaug 5). What is more, it simultaneously confirms that, in suburbia, you can either adjust and nail yourself to the inescapable set of narrow default options, or let yourself be hammered out of the system and perish - but there are no other alternatives. Ominously, Nailles therefore continues

to drug himself, and "naively" dismiss "the news in the paper... [of] a maniac with a carbine [massacring] seventeen people in a park..., [of] wars... raging, ... [of] a hairdresser [shooting] his wife, his four children, his poodle and himself," as merely "news from another planet" (Cheever 64). Cheever's suburb, that looks "like a paradise" although we know "it [is] not" (58), as a result, persists as a haunting trope for the unresolvable and uncanny horrors of normality; which, like the matter of fact "news in the paper" (64), are in constant danger of entering and contaminating your "beautiful happy [suburban] picture" (134). Indeed, of turning you into an Eliot Nailles, insidiously ensconced into a slow death by conformity, whereby you must nonetheless incessantly refrain "everything [is] as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it [has] [ever] been" (245).

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NOTES

- i. Although Bourdieu's work is of course about the French rather than the American culture and society, his insights clearly can and do apply to other cultural contexts.
- ii. Albert Hunter defines the "symbolic ecology" of a particular landscape as the collection of "processes by which symbolic meanings of environment [are] developed" (199).
- iii. Karl Marx, "Nationalökonomie und Philosophie" (1844). *Die Frühschriften*, Alfred Kröner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1953, pp. 300, 301 (Translation by Erich Fromm, *Sane Society*, pp. 128).

ABSTRACTS

This essay explores the issue of masculinity in John Cheever's somewhat critically overlooked novel, *Bullet Park* (1969), so as to call attention to the inevitable conflict between the conformist ideologies of the postwar corporate world and the dormant desires of the atomized male suburbanite. By way of an interrelated interpretation of contemporaneous sociological and psychological theory, this essay foreparts the dysfunctional dimensions of masculine dejection as being derivative of suburbia's larger malady, which is rooted in the very impossibility of the imaginative "apple pie order" it represents. A detailed interpretation of Cheever's use of the doppelganger narrative will moreover allow for an assessment of the dislocation at the heart of the postwar suburban experience. *Bullet Park* may be read this way as not only critiquing the prevailing cultural view of suburbia as a pillar of postwar American security, stability, and social adjustment through its portrayal of a disturbing reality of insecurity, instability and maladjustment, but also as directly addressing the fractured principles of America's traditional values and beliefs. Considering this late sixties text by Cheever as such, this essay hence works to highlight in what ways, and to what extent, the author's portrayal of a disenchanting suburban ennui in *Bullet Park* treads the fault lines of laissez-faire capitalism, whilst furthermore succeeding in uncovering the sources of masculine dissatisfaction in their more true and underground origins.

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