

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

A HEIDEGGERIAN READING OF 'REVOLUTIONARY ROAD':
UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN-TECHNOLOGY RELATIONSHIP IN
1950s SUBURBIA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PREVIEW

BY

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GRADUATE STUDIES

This dissertation of Claudine Pelissier Perreault entitled "A Heideggerian Reading of 'Revolutionary Road:' Understanding the Human-Technology Relationship in 1950s Suburbia" submitted to the Ph.D. Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Salve Regina University has been read and approved by the following individuals:

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PREVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The 1950s was a time of great advances in technology with the increased accessibility of modern technology. This study will investigate the human-technology relationship in 1950s suburbia looking through the lens of Martin Heidegger's philosophy. This dissertation will also examine Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, which explores a literary snapshot of the period. Both the philosophy and literature contribute their own unique perspectives in our age of advanced technology, while leaving open the possibility of further exploration.

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Introduction

This dissertation examines the 1950s through the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and fiction of Richard Yates. While Heidegger reveals his philosophy of humanity's relationship with technology, Yates' *Revolutionary Road* provides a literary snapshot of the period. Heidegger argues that despite being surrounded by technology, society must establish a balanced and free relationship with it. Through *Revolutionary Road's* main characters, April and Frank Wheeler, Yates presents a portrayal of the struggles and alienation of the 1950s by revealing the characters' thoughts to the reader. Heidegger's philosophy can help explain Yates' literary prose and the 1950s suburban situation experienced by the main characters, the Wheelers.

Chapter 1, "The Historical Context of American Post-World War II Suburbanization," establishes the suburbs of the 1950s in a historical context. Even before families moved to suburbia, to such places as Greenwich, Connecticut and Levittown, New York, the U.S. had been experiencing changes in society after World War II. However, during this time, advanced technology presented additional changes and challenges. American society was changed by the war and manufacturing became increasingly technological. After the war, even with the G.I. Bill and other financial benefits, the middle class experienced disillusionment and alienation. Individuals living in the suburbs of America were trying to find some truth in their lives and some momentary escapes in the family car to leisure destinations, such as Disneyland. This study will argue that historians provide the roadmap for understanding the cultural environment of suburbia. Middle-class American families faced challenges from their surroundings because of the enormous

presence of modern technology and the physical and spiritual conformity of the neighborhoods in which they lived. Furthermore, I will contend that historians help us not only to visualize the actual setting, but also show us what these new suburbanites did in pursuit of their own authenticity in American culture.

In Chapter 2, “Richard Yates’ Lens of the 1950s,” I show how his novel’s character development, scenes and dialogue contribute to his portrayal of the struggles and alienation of the 1950s. I will argue that Yates demonstrates through his fictional prose that April and Frank Wheeler’s gender roles and responsibilities result in dissatisfaction and frustration. April is trapped in her suburban role as a housewife and unsuccessful role as an actress at a local play; Frank is isolated with his commute to the Knox Company on the train and the expectations of him to mow the lawn. Nonetheless, these main characters focus only on their own problems. In the novel, Yates provides a snapshot of 1950s suburbia, and provides a window into the suburban lifestyle that a purely historical account might miss.

Chapter 3, “*Martin Heidegger’s Human-Technology Relationship*,” presents a starting point for exploring the 1950s. The chapter begins with Heidegger’s definition of technology and his definition of technology as representing tools, devices and efficiency. Heidegger shows how people use technology in their own lives and argues how technology continually affects society regardless of whether we want to recognize it or not. I will also argue that Heidegger calls for a balance with technology whether an individual is at home or in the office, and he wants society to examine art and nature by finding time to meditate and think, similar to his own life experiences in his hut. Furthermore, Heidegger provides the definition and

philosophy of the human-technology relationships, whether simple or complex, and shows even though technology existed in the past and is ever present in the present, it still represents a challenge for humanity. I will further contend that he sets the groundwork and foundation for learning about the individual and his or her relationship with technology as progress continues and technology becomes more accessible to meet the increasing demands of society. Heidegger's interpretation of modern technology is a worldview that limits our encounter with the world.

In Chapter 4, "A Heideggerian Reading of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*," I will argue that Heidegger's philosophy regarding technology can help in an analysis of Yates' novel and make sense of society's struggle with modern technology. A key area of exploration will be the search or struggle for Heidegger's authentic world. This section of the chapter will examine the authentic foundation of understanding the self, everydayness, and dwelling. I will further argue that Heidegger's principle of authenticity can be used to answer "What does it mean to be human in an age of advanced technology." Heidegger's concept of an authentic life will be analyzed by looking at the sense of home shared by Yates' characters in *Revolutionary Road*, and by examining Heidegger's notion of meditative and reflective thinking. Heidegger's possible interpretation of the novel's fictional world will also be explored and passages will be identified that demonstrate the characters' dissatisfaction and unhappiness as well as those that make connections with Heidegger's philosophy of how individuals can live authentic lives. This Heideggerian interpretation of Yates' novel will provide an explanation for the issues raised by Yates' depiction of the 1950s and allow for an exploration of the

relationship between his characters and technology. Furthermore, in this chapter, the combination of the interdisciplinary areas of history, literature and philosophy will allow us to wrestle constructively with the question of what it means to be human in the age of advanced technology. These three areas are essential elements to this work. The answer to this fundamental question of humanity in an age of advancement can be explained by first looking at the separate approaches of the individual disciplines, and then at how they inter-relate.

Chapter 5, “1950s America: Heidegger’s Views, Gender Roles and the Human-Technology Relationship in Modern Society,” investigates some remaining questions regarding the 1950s and the relationship middle-class Americans had with technology. The prevailing argument is that Heidegger’s vision of the human-technology relationship is a model for society as a whole. Heidegger’s philosophy helps people to question technology and its dominance in their lives. Three Heideggerian strategies will be identified: thinking about technology, being with technology and finding time to meditate. Heidegger’s view of 1950s America and his description of Americans’ relationship with technology will be explored. I will further argue that even though Heidegger never traveled to the American suburbs, his view of 1950s America looks at how Americans overuse technology and he wants Americans to think more about their relationship with technology. Some may contest the validity of his views on Americans’ relationship with technology because he never set foot on American soil, but he explains their relationship with technology well. This chapter will also address the role of gender in the 1950s. Despite the improvements technology brought to the home and the workplace, it also created

dissatisfaction and frustration. Yates' characters, April and Frank Wheeler, illustrate both of these emotions in *Revolutionary Road*. The novel shows how women's work becomes more exhausting and demanding while men's work was becoming more pressure-filled and challenging with the expectation of having to learn new technology and skill sets in the corporate world. While Yates provides a fictional portrayal of the 1950s, he is writing against a realistic backdrop. The issues of suburbia and gender roles may have escaped Heidegger to some extent. His insights may still be valuable, but there are some aspects of the human-technology relationship that Heidegger did not speak to specifically.

The main argument of this study is that the alienation of the Wheelers can be fully understood within the context of Heidegger's critique of modern technology. Yates' literary prose contributes to the historical evidence of the 1950s. In turn, Heidegger's philosophy solidifies a better understanding of 1950s' isolation with the presence of modern technology. The combination of history, literature and philosophy in this study encourages the reader's quest for authenticity in the face of modern technology. The 1950s situation is similar to the challenges encountered by humanity today and Heidegger's ideas and Yates' prose provide a useful reference guide for future generations.

Chapter 1 – The Historical Context of American Post-World War II Suburbanization

Thesis: Post-World War II suburbanization came to embody the growing influence of modern technologies and increasing consumerism that shaped middle-class American culture during the 1950s.

I. Introduction

During the 1950s, many middle-class Americans lived in suburbs, such as Greenwich, Connecticut or Levittown, New York. The suburbs were a popular place to live for bringing up families, and the middle class took the opportunity to build their homes there. With the help of builders, such as Levitt and Sons, American families selected the inside features of the home and personalized the appliances in their kitchen. Americans lived in suburban developments with sculpted tree-lined streets and houses that had similar architecture throughout the suburban communities. Unbeknownst to them at the time, their perfectly decorated homes would become an artifact of the 1950s and a discussion point for historians as they detailed American culture.

The 1950s American family now relied on and used the latest technological gadgets in their homes to accomplish chores. Modern technology included the sewing machine and lawnmower, which were typically assigned to each spouse to complete household tasks. In suburbia, gender roles were assigned. The middle-class women experienced an easier life because of these advancements, but there was a sense of similar isolation for the breadwinner using technology at the workplace. He experienced many workdays when automation was necessary to get the job done but left him dissatisfied. The corporate man of the 1950s was isolated because the

dominance of technology in the workplace disguised his true authenticity and even his identity.

Suburbanites, many of whom in the past had been in the working class and lived in cities, moved up to the middle class and lived in the suburbs in the 1950s. Because the suburbs were expanding, more Americans desired household appliances that were particularly useful in suburban living, such as modern vacuum cleaners for larger suburban houses and lawnmowers for larger suburban lawns.

Because suburbs were spread out with little or no public transportation available, a car became a virtual necessity for residents of suburbs. Automobile consumers had much more choice in the 1950s because car companies were responding to consumer demands with a much greater degree of choice and availability. As more cars were purchased, more roads were developed in order to travel to work and arrive home to the suburbs. This demand created the increase of highways built across America, reaching their suburban destinations in such places as Greenwich and Levittown. They enjoyed these trips because of highway legislation created by President Dwight Eisenhower and Congress. According to Kenneth Jackson, “The Interstate Highway Act became law in 1956 when Congress provided for a 41,000-mile (eventually expanded to a 42,500-mile) system, with the federal government paying 90 percent of the cost.”¹

As roadways were built at a record speed, these passageways allowed access to and from suburbia. Life was changing in America because of the developers of suburbia, such as Levitt and Sons. With their developments, the middle class could

¹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 249.

not only drive down the highways, but they could drive to complete their everyday errands, such as shopping for cigarettes, TV dinners and the latest kitchen appliance. New suburbanites were now spending more time in **automobiles** than they did when they lived in cities and used other means of transportation because they could afford automobiles and it was the easiest access to and from the suburbs.

The suburbs during post-WW II cultivated a certain aura of excitement, but middle-class Americans still felt a sense of isolation. According to Kenneth Jackson, “Places like Greenwich, CT; Englewood, NJ; Evanston, IL; and Chestnut Hill, MA maintained an exclusive image despite the presence of low-income or minority groups living in slums near or within the community.”² Those middle-class suburbanites were overwhelmed in a negative sense with consumerism and the new technology they could buy, such as the television. The opportunity to buy more technological devices did not necessarily meet all their needs and hopes in fulfilling the American Dream but rather resulted in a sense of alienation, according to historians, such as John Staudt and Kenneth Jackson.

II. Living the American Dream: Origins of 1950s Suburban Affluence

With the Spanish American War of 1898, the U.S. spearheaded an expansion by adding more territories.³ This war was the reason why the U.S. acquired more territories in addition to the fifty states. These territories included tropical locations, such as Puerto Rico and the Philippines.⁴ The U.S. continued to be pressured by

² Ibid., 241.

³ Frederick Jackson Turner, *Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1996), 246.

⁴ John Staudt, "The United States in the Spanish-American War." *Social Science Docket* 10 (2010), no. 1: 26.

foreign nations to expand the country, even before this particular conflict.⁵ In John Staudt's viewpoint, "By the 1890s, however, there rose a call for a 'new manifest destiny,' the idea that the U.S. must now assume its proper place among the world's great powers."⁶ This historical moment led the United States into even more prosperity until the events of 1929. With the introduction of imperialism, the U.S. continued financial growth from the 1900s to 1930s. For example, events such as the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago brought growth because of planners, such as Daniel Burnham. "It was he who, through the medium of grandiose architectural and spatial design, pioneered modern urban design practices and granted new opportunities to display national might and cultural progress in both America and, by the early 1900s, in colonial cities as well," Ian Morley writes.⁷

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s laid the foundation for a significant expansion of the middle class after World War II. The government became more involved with the regulation of banks and housing. According to Akira Iriye, in this final stage of the New Deal legislation, "The government intervened more actively as an agent of societal and global transformation in the interest of the United States."⁸ Its involvement paved the way for Americans to obtain a mortgage and buy a house in 1950s suburbia.⁹

Even with this opportunity, American families were affected by the Great Depression's lasting influence with thousands penniless and without employment.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ian Morley, "The Cultural Expansion of America: Imperialism, Civic Design and the Philippines in the Early 1900s." *European Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 3 (October 2010): 235.

⁸ Akira Iriye, "The Americanized Century." *Reviews in American History* 11, no. 1 (March 1983): 124.

⁹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books (1992), 195.

These families were suffering “the turmoil of the Depression and the New Deal politics,” but they also kept “alive visions of peace, freedom, and human dignity, all essential parts of the American dream, in every corner of the globe.”¹⁰

As the middle class bought homes with a mortgage, the lower classes did not share in the purchase of a brand-new home in the suburbs. “The poor in America,” writes Kenneth Jackson, “[did not share] in the post-war real estate boom in most of the major highway improvements, in property and income-tax write-offs and in mortgage insurance programs.”¹¹ As the U.S. went into World War II, manufacturers built guns, jeeps and aircraft to assist in the military battle of the war. More specifically, the U.S. government allocated more expenditures on war initiatives to assist in creating a more prosperous economy. The upholding of these promises allowed the United States and the American middle class to witness the financial benefits of the war.

During World War II, the increase in manufacturing created more jobs and more money. After World War II, when a majority of GIs returned to America, they looked forward to their lives with their families in the suburbs and new co-workers in the workplace. GIs discovered that the suburbs were the best choice to bring up their children. According to Jackson, “The GIs looked upon Levittown as the answer to their most pressing needs.”¹²

When American soldiers returned from war, they were given federal funding to attend college and locate gainful employment. The G.I. Bill provided these stipends that led to greater economic means, and the opportunity to buy houses.

¹⁰ Iriye, 127.

¹¹ Jackson, 218.

¹² Ibid., 235.

Heads of the American middle-class households with decent jobs and extra cash were motivated to become first-time homebuyers in the suburbs. As their wealth increased, families bought more consumer goods for their household. According to Elaine Tyler May, “Family centered spending reassured Americans that affluences would strengthen the American way of life. The goods purchased by middle-class consumers, like a modern refrigerator or a house in the suburbs, were intended to foster traditional values.”¹³ These types of commodities in suburban homes were required for a household to function in a suburban neighborhood. Commodities included items from the grocery store and shopping centers. Some of the popular items were washing machines, facial creams and baking essentials.¹⁴

III.Americans’ Workplace and Family Experiences in 1950s Suburbia

While middle-class suburban wives and mothers were busy managing the home, their husbands faced challenges presented by the latest post-World War II technology in the workplace. The male worker would leave suburbia and work full days in the city. As automation became more plentiful in the corporate world, the responsibilities of the office worker expanded to include learning about new technologies, such as early computers like the Univac. The typical hours in a workday were expanded because of training for the male worker, who still encountered additional time commuting to and from the company. These changes in technology made the workplace environment more stressful and required corporate workers to adjust. As new technological devices, such as the computer and desk calculator, were introduced in the corporate world, workers needed to possess more

¹³ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1999), 166.

¹⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 126.

skills and tools. The male worker soon learned that such powerful technology could make life easier, but at the same time create new problems.

Wage earners began to use electronics at their desk on a consistent basis, and jobs could not be completed without machines. Even though there were no Mac or PC computers in the 1950s, the office workers used the Dictaphone, typewriter and the Univac. The male worker's escape was the family automobile, leisure destinations and hobbies. Suburbanites needed transportation in order to travel to the office, the supermarket and leisure locations. Before the enjoyment of riding together in one's car, middle-income groups typically walked or used public transportation to get to their destinations, especially in the cities where they had subways, streetcars and buses. In some cases, the more affluent suburbanites would take the train to commute to work instead of the automobile.¹⁵ As suburbanites relied on their car to travel, "automobile transportation and rapid transit made it possible for many thousands of people to live at a considerable distance from their work and to commute into the city each day."¹⁶

The American family car paved the way for middle-class Americans to also arrive to popular vacation destinations in the 1950s. The middle class enjoyed traveling in their automobiles, while feeling a sense of camaraderie in their cars. Karal Ann Marling suggested, "If the highway and the habit of 'automobility' were major factors in Disneyland's success, the outing in the family car was also a key element in the standardized creation story [Walt] Disney

¹⁵ Jackson, 102.

¹⁶ Donald Bogue, "Urbanism in the United States, 1950." *The American Journal of Sociology* 60, no. 5 World Urbanism (March 1955): 474.

used to explain how he had come to build America's first theme park."¹⁷ Disney's attractions, such as Main Street USA and the E.P. Ripley railroad, appealed to Americans, because these automated attractions showed how much technology was not only developing, but how it was utilized for American entertainment and leisure. As it became more popular, the number of middle-class Americans enjoying California's Disney increased, and these park goers originated from other states across the U.S.¹⁸ Americans enjoyed these leisure moments, which ultimately resulted in the economic success of the attractions with repeat customers.

Leisure destinations were an outlet for the middle class to escape the pressures of living in suburbia with its consumerism and conformity. According to Marling, Disneyland "liberated the family from the conformity of the suburbs, from rows of identical houses, rigid social rituals, unspoken codes of conduct and written rules governing the proper trimming of lawns."¹⁹ American families crowded destinations, like Disneyland to experience life's memories away from suburbia.

In addition to vacation escapes, the man of the house spent his free time with household hobbies. Middle-class men, in fact, designed and created projects in their free time. According to Marling, "The use of leisure for craftsmanlike activities by these same nine-to-five conformists struck him as anomalous, an expression of autonomy and individual competence that ran counter to the workday norm."²⁰ For a genuine dad of the 1950s, hobbies were his ultimate satisfaction in life because he

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 174.

¹⁹ Marling, Karal Ann Disneyland. "1955: Just Take the Santa Ana Freeway to the American Dream." *American Art* 5, No. 1/2 (Winter - Spring, 1991): 176.

²⁰ Ibid., 193.

had the opportunity to break from the demands and responsibilities of his workplace.²¹

IV. Impact of Modern Technology in the 1950s and How it Created Change for Suburbanites

As middle-class Americans moved to the suburbs, their appearances changed, which made their aesthetics unique for this decade. For example, Americans changed their clothes and cars to keep up with the 1950s image. Changing buying habits, expectations, advertising, consumerism, wealth in the U.S., as well as technology, were the reasons why new clothes and cars were constantly produced and more readily available. During this time, Americans' salaries **increased** and disposable income was plentiful, so buying new items regularly was an option.²² With money, individuals could change their appearances by purchasing more expensive fashion apparel and the latest automobile on the sales floor. The middle class wanted to wear the same clothing as famous public figures of the 1950s, so the advertising industry created images, such as movie stars driving in fancy cars.

In the 1950s, as more manufacturers created more textiles, consumers had more choices for their wardrobe on a daily basis. In addition to marketing, automation for clothing design offered more alternatives to the American consumer. Modern factories and manufacturing were faster and cheaper than textile mills producing cotton goods during the industrial revolution.

In addition to textiles production increasing, American suburbanites were introduced to new products from television commercials. Soon, they learned about

²¹ May, 148.

²² Ibid., 175.

the state-of-the art automobile from a single commercial advertising the benefits of a new Ford car. The middle-class American would soon learn from these advertisements that a car promised “freedom to come and go as we please in this big country of ours.”²³ Advertisements also allowed the viewer to duplicate the lives of actors with more consumption of goods, such as cigarettes and televisions. By purchasing advertised goods, American consumers appeared to be satisfied because they fit into the image of the American suburbanite, which was the intention of the marketers.

In the past, the middle class enjoyed window shopping and listening to a commercial on the radio, but in the 1950s, commercials were brought to life on television. Radio ads did not allow listeners to see products. The middle class of the 1950s viewed television commercials as **examples of supposedly** authentic living in American culture. Along with the television, there were newspaper and magazine advertisements for the consumer. These advertisements allowed consumers to make choices about the next modern, technological gadget they might purchase. According to Kenneth Jackson, Levitt and Sons’ “full page advertisements offered a sweetener to eliminate lingering resistance—a Bendix washer was included in the purchase price” of new houses.”²⁴ In some communities, Levitt and Sons also offered consumers other choices such as “an eight-inch television set,” which was an option to choose when designing their 1950s house.²⁵ So, advertisements ,whether televised or in print, invited consumers to purchase anything from cars to **the** specific kitchen appliances that they wanted in their newly, constructed homes.

²³ Marling, 176.

²⁴ Jackson, 236.

²⁵ Ibid.

Most Americans owned a television by the end of the 1950s. The entire family enjoyed its entertainment, which was the utmost benefit of this advanced technology. Parents and children relished these moments together. Marling wrote, “Togetherness legitimized the new post war suburban family—affluent, isolated, reared on a bland diet of TV and TV dinners.”²⁶ The television defined family time for the all-American family living in the suburbs.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have reviewed historical scholarship of the 1950s to set a foundation of how suburbanites relied on technology in their homes and workplace. These advancements took precedence in their lives as they consumed goods. The automobile allowed them to go on family excursions to planned destinations such as Disneyland, but sometimes, their destinations were unplanned or unknown because sometimes families would drive for miles on the highways. This expansion of the national interstate highway program and rapid growth of the suburbs changed the way people could travel to and from work and the store. Americans enjoyed the convenience of the automobile that was parked in their suburban driveway, and they could also drive for miles down the U.S. freeways.

As technology advanced and progressed, middle-class Americans in the 1950s suffered symptoms of alienation in their neighborhoods. They suffered from disunity because they were conforming to the suburban lifestyle of the 1950s, which in part caused middle-class Americans to lose sight of their self and individualism as they were exposed to the same American cultural artifacts as their neighbors. Their suburban homes were surrounded by picket fences, which symbolized the distance

²⁶ Marling, 176.

between neighbors. The culture of tight-knit neighborhoods and neighbors were a way of the past. There was less getting together frequently on frontdoor steps discussing politics and news. As Anthony Ferri wrote, “Prior to the suburbs, many Americans had neighbors who could take in real time and space next door from stoop to stoop, from porch to porch; the suburban home was outside of this neighborly environment.”²⁷

In the next chapter, we will transition from the history of the 1950s to Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road* as a snapshot of the 1950s American culture in the Cold War era. Yates captured a moment in time with the portrayal of middle-class Americans dealing with a constant struggle coming home from the war, building a life in the conformed suburbs and dealing with a transition into a Cold War era. This era created elevated fears and challenges with the onset of advanced technology and a height of consumerism brought on by more wealth for middle-class America. We will also turn to how scholars look to technology of the 1950s. In the novel, Yates offers character development, detailed scenes and dialogue and specific word choices, such as “Revolutionary Hills Estates” and “mirrored face.” This chapter will discuss how Yates is moving us from a description of the 1950s to an evaluation of it.

²⁷ Anthony J. Ferri, “Emergence of the Entertainment Age?” *Symposium: Celebrity in America Today* 47 (2010): 405.