Son of Depression, Man of Anxiety: Frank Wheeler's American Patriarchal Masculinity in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*

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Introduction: Venturing into *Revolutionary Road*

In 2010, as a second-year student of English, I enrolled in the elective course *Narració Curta en Llengua Anglesa* attracted by its wide selection of 19th and 20th century American short stories. I thought that this subject would give me the perfect opportunity to become more familiar with American texts since, until then, I had mainly read British authors. The outcome was far better than I expected: I completely fell in love with American literature. As a matter of fact, when the course was reaching its ending I already knew that I would focus whatever future research I could do on American literature. Thus, I spent my free time reading the works of the authors we studied in this course (Henry James, Kate Chopin, Herman Melville…) and also authors of the 1950s and 1960s such as J.D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac. Since I would not hesitate to call myself a feminist, I grew especially interested in this period because of the changes in gender relationships that occurred after World War II and, later, after Betty Friedan's groundbreaking *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)

It was not until May 2012 that I was first introduced to Richard Yates (February 3, 1926 – November 7, 1992) and to his work *Revolutionary Road* by recommendation of Professor Andrew Monnickendam, who knew of my interest in US Literature. I must admit that neither the author's name nor the novel's were especially familiar to me. Thus, without really knowing what I could expect, I ventured into the world of *Revolutionary Road*. The experience could not have been more satisfying. I was completely mesmerized by the novel, its main characters and its tragic ending.

After finishing the novel there was one thing that still bothered me: I could not understand why I had not heard before of Yates and his works. I first thought that it was probably because of my particular lack of knowledge about American Literature. Thus,

I began to search for information about Yates and his novels, taking for granted that I would find a considerable body of research about both. I soon realized that it was not surprising that I had found only scant information for he has remained, much to my dismay, a relatively unknown writer for a long time. Nonetheless, *Revolutionary Road*, his debut novel, and probably his best-known work, was actually a finalist for the National Book Award in 1962 and has also received "generous reviews" by literary critics since its publication in 1961 (Bradfield 1992). Yet, despite this early fame, soon after Yates' death in 1992 his work went out of print (O'Nan 1999; Shinagel, 2003: 50) and it was not until 2000, and especially after the film adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* (2008) directed by Sam Mendes that his work became, once again, available in most bookstores.

This lack of popularity is especially remarkable when taking into account how well considered Richard Yates was (and still is) among writers and non-academic literary critics. As a matter of fact, the British playwright David Hare claimed that "Yates belongs with Fitzgerald and Hemingway as the three unarguably great American novelists of the 20th century [sic]" (cited in Fraser 2008). Likewise, Richard Ford, in the acknowledgments section of the novella collection *Women With Men* (1998), expresses his admiration for Yates and for his talent while lamenting that he has been "a writer too little appreciated" (cited in O'Nan 1999). Yates has also been hailed as "America's finest post-war novelist and short story writer" (Bradfield 1992). In January 2006, the magazine *Time* considered Yates' first novel as one of the "All-Time 100 Best Novels" written in English (Lacayo 2013)[1].

[1] It must be taken into account that the novels considered for this list, published on January 6 2006, were those written between 1923, the year the magazine *Time* was launched, until 2005, the year this list began to be compiled.

Apart from his literary quality, which would be reason enough to try to recover him and his works, Yates had a gift to portray the patriarchal American society of his time and the problems that American men and women had to face from the 1930s until the 1950s. This is the timeframe for *Revolutionary Road*, which focuses in particular on the 1950s. Indeed, as Richard Ford claims, this novel portrays a series of characters, especially the protagonists Frank and April Wheeler, which can be regarded as "types" of their time (Ford 2000). Similarly Anthony Giardina argues that anyone who has been raised or lives in the suburbs can easily "recognize Frank and April's world" since the novel "render[s] in brilliant detail" the 1950s culture (Giardina 2007). Thus, for us, 2013 Gender Studies readers, it is especially important to recover Yates' work for it allows us to see the misogynistic monsters which 1930s, 1940s and 1950s American patriarchy, Frank Wheeler included, as I will argue.

Furthermore, since 2007 there seems to have been a revival of 1930s, 1940s and 1950s American literature and culture, of which the 2008 film adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* is part. Three years later, in 2011 James M. Cain's 1941 novel *Mildred Pierce* (set in the 1930s) was adapted into a successful four-episode TV series. The following year, a film adaptation of Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road* was produced. It must also be taken into account that *Mad Men*, a TV series set on the 1950s and 1960s, began running in 2007 and is currently on its sixth season due to its massive success all around the world. This interest in the mentioned decades could be linked to an intention, which usually occurs in times of recession such as ours, to recover a more conservative and even patriarchal society. Analyzing *Revolutionary Road*, one of the few novels that perfectly portrays these three decades, allows us to see, therefore, how dangerous it would be for men and women to return to the patriarchal society that existed in those times and amply justifies my own personal interest in Yates'.

Sadly, the academic world has not given Richard Yates and his works the attention both deserve. Database searches reveal that, apart from Bailey's extraordinary biography of Richard Yates, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (2003), there are barely ten studies about the author and his works. These studies can be divided into groups; one which focuses on Richard Yates' literary style, usually regarded as realistic (Castronovo and Goldleaf 1996), mannerist (Klinkowitz 1986) or a mixture of post-modern and realistic (Bull 2010a; 2010b), and another which examines his different works. Regarding the latter group, the studies on *Revolutionary Road*, have focused on discussing what the novel is about and what the reasons for its tragic ending are.

At this point, I believe it is necessary to provide a summary of the novel and a short description of the two main characters to clarify why the ending has elicited such interest from scholars. Although published as has been mentioned in 1961, *Revolutionary Road* is set in 1955 in the eponymous suburban road of west Connecticut. The novel narrates the decadence of Frank Wheeler, a 29-year-old (he turns 30 near the beginning of the novel), middle-class, clever, talented and, for a while, ambitious man who becomes a misogynistic, cowardly, overconformist and distraught character because of his insane obsession to prove his manliness and conform to the expectations of his patriarchal society. The novel also narrates how Frank makes his wife April, a 29-year-old, (upper) middle-class, pay for his bitterness. He abuses her both physically and psychologically as well as forcing her to have children (they have two and he tries to force her to have a third one) and, so, prevents her from fulfilling her dreams. This abuse results in her death at the end of the novel, caused by a self-induced abortion. Thus April becomes an innocent victim whose brutal and horrific death shows the

reader the abominable patriarchal society of the 1950s and its dangers for both men and women.

The novel is divided into three parts. In all of them, there are a series of flashbacks to Frank's and April's childhood and adolescence which provide vital information about their upbringing and how they eventually met and married. Even more importantly, these flashbacks show what Frank was like before he became obsessed by trying to prove his manliness and also the reasons for his obsession. The first chapter opens with the amateur Laurel Players performing Robert E. Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* with April playing the role of Gabrielle Maple, the play's female protagonist. The fact that the Laurel Players perform *The Petrified Forest* and that April plays the role of Gabrielle is not a coincidence. The main couples in *Revolutionary Road* and *The Petrified Forest* share many similarities. April and Gabrielle are amateur artists (April an actress, Gabrielle a painter) and both wish to abandon the emptiness and hopelessness of the places where they live and start a new life in Paris. Both of them are in love with allegedly talented men who have been to France. When April and Gabrielle explain to their beloved their intention to go to Paris and maintain them, both Frank and Alan Squier initially try to convince their couples that moving to Paris is not the best idea. The main difference is the ending: Alan finally realizes that the best thing Gabrielle can do is, effectively, moving to Paris, and he willingly gives up his life to make her dream come true (he makes Duke Mantee, the play's villain, kill him so that Gabrielle can receive the money of Alan's life insurance). Frank, in contrast, prevents April from going to Paris, an act which ends up in April killing herself. Furthermore, both works criticise America's patriarchal society of their time in a similar way. Indeed, the narrator of *Revolutionary Road* states that *The Petrified Forest* is a play "with a

basic point of view that was every bit as valid today as in the thirties " or "[e]ven more valid" (8) [2].

The performance of *The Petrified Forest* by the Laurel Players is a complete fiasco due to the actors' lack of experience and talent. Frank decides nonetheless to cheer April up to show what a great man he is, but what he actually does, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, is to insult and humiliate her. He even comes close to punching her savagely. As a result they end up not talking to each other. During this time of silence, Frank begins an affair with his workmate Maureen, a twenty-two year old secretary, in an attempt to boost his sense of manliness. The day Frank turns 30, and after having had sex with Maureen, Frank goes back home where April explains to him her plan of moving to Paris with him and their two children. April tells Frank that the purpose of going to Paris is to allow him to have the chance of discovering what he really wants and develop his intellectual abilities while April works as a secretary and adopts the role of the breadwinner. In the multiple flashbacks of his childhood and boyhood, Frank is presented as someone with great expectations and, according to different characters in the novel, with talent, as I have already mentioned. After hesitating for a while, for he initially believes that moving to Paris would somehow diminish his manliness, Frank accepts April's plan and, actually, becomes very enthusiastic about it.

In the second part of the novel, Frank and April reveal their plan to go to Paris to their neighbors and friends: Shep and Mily Campbell, a couple slightly older than Frank and April, and the Givingses, a senior couple with an allegedly mad son, in his thirties, John. Both married couples show their skepticism about the plan, especially due to the fact that Frank will allow his wife to maintain him. The only one who seems to

[2] I am using here the UAB English Department's style of referencing throughout this dissertation.

understand the motivations for their moving to Paris is the not so mad John Givings. As a result of this skepticism, Frank begins to entertain doubts about moving to Paris. He will finally decide against this plan when Bart Pollock, one of the most important members of Knox Business Machines, the company he works for, offers him a very prestigious and well-paid job at a new branch of the company which Pollock plans to start. As I'll discuss in detail in the second chapter of the present dissertation, Pollock easily convinces Frank that by accepting this job he will reaffirm his manliness. Since Frank is obsessed with this, he immediately begins thinking about excuses to remain in the suburbs. April's third pregnancy becomes then the perfect excuse. Indeed, Frank decides that he will force her to have the third child for the sake of his patriarchal manliness.

In the third and final part of the novel, Frank constantly abuses April. He tries as hard as he can to prevent April from aborting, an aim he achieves, although only for a while. When Frank informs April about his affair with Maureen, she claims that she does not care at all about who Frank sleeps with and tells him that she does not love him. Frank immediately tries to force her to tell him she loves him and seems willing to use violence if she refuses to do so. Before a fight starts, the Givingses show up for lunch. The meeting turns out to be a complete fiasco when Frank explains to the Givingses that they will not move to Paris, since John Givings reprimands Frank and even mocks his manliness, as I will explain in Chapter Two, for lacking the courage and to go to Paris. Just after this meeting, April and Frank have their ever most destructive quarrel which ends in Frank humiliating April to an unbearable extreme and wishing she would have aborted. As a result, April decides to provoke herself the abortion, which causes a severe hemorrhage that leads to her untimely death, thus becoming the

tragic victim of the novel. Finally, Frank leaves Revolutionary Road with his two children.

Naparsteck, using a naturalistic and philosophical reading, claims that the novel is about "failed dreams and the inevitability of unhappiness" (2012: 30). In his study, which summarizes rather than analyzes the novel, Naparsteck argues that *Revolutionary Road* shows how "typical American suburban life denies people lives of their own" (Naparsteck: 35). Thus, any attempt to escape from this life without leaving the suburbs can only end in tragedy, which is, according to him, exactly what happens to Frank and April Wheeler. What is perhaps most shocking about his interpretation of the novel is his claim that those who believe *Revolutionary Road* is about abortion are actually "misreading" the novel (Naparsteck: 30). I disagree with this interpretation, since I believe that con(tra)ception and abortion play a key role in the novel. As a matter of fact, Yates himself explained in an interview that *Revolutionary Road* was, ultimately, a "novel about abortions" (in DeWitt and Clark 1972). Indeed, Yates argued "Everything gets aborted in the book . . . an aborted play, several aborted careers, any number of aborted ambitions and aborted plans and aborted dreams - all leading up to a real, physical abortion, and a death at the end" (in DeWitt and Clark 1972). This idea of aborted ambitions and dreams and even the real physical abortion becomes especially important when analyzing Frank's actions and his need to prove his manliness, for his ambitions and dreams will lead to April's deadly abortion and to his own spiritual abortion, for after his wife's death he will become an empty shell of a man, as I will argue in the second chapter of the present dissertation.

The other available readings of *Revolutionary Road* are based rather on the changes that occurred in 1950s American society, and more specifically in the suburbs. Thus, Moreno argues that *Revolutionary Road* "typifies th[e] displacement experienced

in the 1950s between the waning era of manual industry and the emerging computer age" showing that that "this transformation firmly reifies [and] re-manufactures the suburban male from the 'GI Joe' image of masculinity to an emasculated body" (2004: 85). That is, Moreno rightly claims that *Revolutionary Road* portrays the de-masculinizing effect of the 1950s on World War II ex-combatants when trying to adapt to the consumerist American society of the 1950s.

García-Avello, adopting a feminist perspective, claims that *Revolutionary Road* "denuncia la alteridad de la mujer en este [1950s] periodo" (291). She develops an interesting argument in which she claims that the trigger of the catastrophic events in the novel is nothing but April's attempt to break free from the subordinated position in which women like her were at the time. He also regards April as a perfect representation of the 'female malady' as theorized in 1963 by Betty Friedan in her ground-breaking study *The Feminine Mystique*. Although I find García-Avello's contribution an excellent piece of research and I, overall, agree with her, I doubt that *Revolutionary Road* tries to denounce the situation of women during the 1950s. The reason for this is that such claim suggests that Richard Yates was, at least to some extent, a feminist. Yet, as Bailey (2009) and Fraser (2008) have pointed out, Yates was, in fact, an antifeminist; some of his works perfectly reflect this ideology. Perhaps the one that can be regarded as most misogynistic is *The Easter Parade*, Yates' fourth novel published in 1976, in which the author mocks several times feminist women and the feminist movement itself.

These interpretations, enriching and important as they are, seem to me to be insufficient to fully understand the complexities of *Revolutionary Road* for two reasons. First, none of them seem to completely capture the obsession regarding manliness that Frank experiences in order to fit into America's patriarchal normative masculinity. This

obsession is, I believe, one of the key themes of the novel, especially since the perspective the reader is given is Frank's. It is true that Moreno's study is partially based on Masculinities Studies, but, as has been mentioned, he focuses on the idea of consumerism, which, I believe, is not as important in *Revolutionary Road* as it might be in other novels dealing with the same period, such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955). In Sloan Wilson's most famous novel, the obsession with consumerism comes not so much from Tom Rath, who seems to me the epitome of overconformism, but rather from his wife, Betsy, who is constantly demanding Tom to bring more money home so they are able to afford more and more luxuries. This longing for consumerism triggers the main events in Wilson's novel, but not in the case of Yates' *Revolutionary Road.* Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there are many similarities between Frank Wheeler and Tom Rath. Both live with their families in the suburbs of West Connecticut, work as salesmen, have two children at the beginning of the novel, have taken part in World War II and have been deeply affected by it with the difference that Frank regards it as his zenith of manliness, whereas Tom tries to forget about it. These similarities are not a mere coincidence for a 1956 draft of *Revolutionary Road* was regarded as an "another version of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*" (Castronovo 1996: 36) and we need to assume that Yates' was aware of Wilson's best-selling work.

Second, these readings focus on changes in society occurring in the 1950s, thus ignoring what happened both to America's society and to Frank himself in the previous two decades. This neglect seems to me a flaw, since I believe that considering the 1930s and the 1940s is a condition *sine qua non* in order to fully comprehend Frank's (obsessive) need to prove his manliness and the difficulties he has in adapting to the hegemonic masculinity of the 1950s. I believe this because, as I will show in Chapter One, Frank's father becomes underemployed in 1935, that is to say, gets demoted to a

less prestigious job. For the society of the time, being underemployed was a synonym for being a failed breadwinner. It was even believed, absurd as this may seem today, that the sons of these men, as I will explain in detail in this first chapter, had a greater chance of becoming homosexual when they became adults. Thus, since his childhood, Frank faces society's demands to behave in the manliest possible way to avoid ostracism and being regarded as effeminate. As a consequence of this, he becomes obsessed with proving his masculinity for the rest of his life, especially after his participation in World War II. Hence the importance of taking into account the 1930s and 1940s.

To sum up, two are the reasons that compelled me to write this dissertation: first, my desire to contribute to the academic revival of Richard Yates and his work. Second, my intention to provide an analysis of Yates' debut novel, *Revolutionary Road* which differs from the existing ones and which can hopefully help to fill in the gap that I believe exist in the current studies of this novel.

This dissertation will defend the thesis that *Revolutionary Road* and its tragic main event, that is, April's death, should be read as a criticism both against the 1930s-1950s (especially the last decade) American patriarchal society and men like Frank who became obsessed by proving their manliness. Thus, I will argue that April's death in *Revolutionary Road* is triggered by two factors: first by the social pressure and expectations on masculinity that Frank endures since 1935, the year when he feels compelled to behave in a more manly way due to his father's failure at being a breadwinner, until 1955, the year when the tragic events narrated in *Revolutionary Road* take place. The second factor is the fact that Frank willingly conforms to these expectations even though they are in total opposition to his principles and his ideology, as I will explain throughout the dissertation. In order to support my argument I will

show that because of his father's failure, Frank feels haunted by accusations of homosexuality since his childhood, which lead him to behave in the manliest possible way to erase any kind of suspicion. This need to affirm his manhood increases as time goes by and, especially after his participation in World War II because thanks to it he satisfies, for the first time in his life, his craving for being an example of authentic and virile manliness. The problem is that in the 1950s he is once again forced to prove his manliness and the ghosts of the 1930s and his longing for the fulfilment he experienced in the 1940s become a burden too heavy for Frank, preventing him from happily adapting to the 1950s changes in hegemonic masculinity. I will finally claim that this obsessive craving to adapt, along with his never-ending need to prove his manliness, will drive him to give up his dreams and aspirations, becoming thus a soulless, jaded white-collar worker, and also a domestic abuser. As a consequence of this transformation, April dies in a horrific and unfair way due to her self-induced abortion.

I am aware that my thesis might seem to be in opposition to my previous comment on Yates' antifeminism. Indeed, it might seem difficult to believe that someone who is an antifeminist can be at the same time a man who attacks patriarchy in his works. However, Yates had a very good reason to be anti-patriarchal, since this type of society destroyed his childhood and his family. Vincent Yates, Richard Yates' father, was an assistant regional sales manager. He was so absorbed by this job and by his obligation to be a proper breadwinner that he barely had time to spend with his little son Richard, who was extremely hurt by his father's absence and missed him terribly throughout his childhood (Bailey 2003:17). Vincent was also a relative talented tenor singer, but he eventually gave up his talent because of his job. This also hurt Richard, for he loved and admired his father's voice above all things. Ruth Walden, Richard's mother whom he deeply loved, was likewise affected by the patriarchal society she lived

in. She was a sculptor but was never taken seriously, not even by her patriarchal husband. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that she could not avoid feeling "stifled" (Bailey: 14) by her society. As a result of this situation, Vincent and Ruth divorced in 1929, when Richard was only three years old. Ruth was the one to keep Richard, since Vincent was too concerned with his job to take care of his son, and took him with her to Paris, where she was able to improve her talent. However, she was not very successful and therefore did not earn much money. Furthermore, Vincent barely give Ruth and Richard any money. Thus, Ruth and Richard lived in poverty for many years. Ruth then began to binge drink and to have many lovers, which hurt Richard Yates deeply. There is no doubt, therefore, that Richard Yates had a traumatic and very harsh childhood. In view of all this, it should come as no surprise that Richard Yates despised American patriarchal society and that his novels were, to some extent, an attack against it and against the men who, like his father, conformed to it. In fact, as can be inferred from what has hitherto been explained, Frank and April Wheeler seem to be based on Vincent and Ruth. In fact, it could be argued that it is precisely by fictionalizing his parents' lives and his own childhood that Yates criticizes American patriarchal society.

Regarding the methodology of this dissertation, I will examine the novel through the lens of Masculinities Studies. This perspective studies how and why patriarchal society has imposed on men a series of rules –including specific behaviors and roles– which all men must follow in order to prove their manliness (Brannon and David 1976). It also attempts to "distinguir entre lo masculino y lo patriarchal" (Martín 2007: 90). This perspective is, therefore, appropriate for my analysis, as I have mentioned, for I will focus on 1930s, 1940s and 1950s American society, proving that it was no doubt

patriarchal. I will also analyze how Frank tries to proves his manliness by performing a series of roles and by carrying out a series of actions pre-determined for him.

I will also use the concept, coined by R.W. Connell (1987; 1995), of "hegemonic" and "subordinate" masculinity, mainly in Chapter Two, where I analyze America's society during the 1950s. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is the socially acceptable and demanded model for a man to follow. It is hierarchically superior to other forms of masculinity (namely subordinate masculinity) and to all forms of femininity. Hegemonic masculinity is not, statistically, the predominant one since, as a matter of fact, only a very small percentage of men act along the lines it sets. This masculinity is hegemonic because most men try to behave along most of its ideals or, at least, they are complicit to it and benefit from it. Hegemonic masculinity is white, heterosexual, constitutes the core of patriarchy and can vary depending on cultural context or on time. That is, what is considered hegemonic in one decade might not be exactly the same in the following one.

I am aware that this concept has been under a much needed revision by scholars such as Demetriou (2001) and Seidler (2006a; 2006b) and that it has a series of evident flaws some of which Connell herself tried to amend (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, I believe it is important to use this concept when examining America's society in the 1950s since, as Cohan (1997: 35) and Baker (2006: 5) argue the patriarchal society of the time imposed a normative or hegemonic masculinity based on heterosexuality and whiteness which defended and exalted the traditional roles of men as breadwinners and women as housewives. Men who deviated from these norms were automatically looked down on and regarded as effeminate. Thus, I believe that using Connell's concept will allow me to put forward a better analysis of 1950s America's society and will also help me to better examine Frank Wheeler's attitude.

As regards the structure, this dissertation is divided into four parts: the introduction ‘Venturing into *Revolutionary Road*’, Chapter One ‘Sowing the Seeds of Tragedy: The Catatonic Effect of the Great Depression on Frank Wheeler and the Masculine Drug of World War II’, Chapter Two ‘Reaping the Tragedy: Frank’s Incapacity to Adapt to the New Masculinity of the 1950s Due to the Burden of his Past’, and the conclusion ‘What Lies beyond *Revolutionary Road*’. The division of the chapters is chronological. That is, the first chapter deals with Frank’s childhood and boyhood. The second chapter begins when Frank learns that April is pregnant with their first child in 1948, a year after the beginning of the Cold War which also introduced changes in normative masculinity, and ends with April’s death in 1955. I am aware that the novel is not structured in this way for, as has been mentioned, it is mainly set in 1955 and information about previous years is presented in short flashbacks. However, I believe that the optimum way to show how Frank is affected by the experiences he underwent in the 1930s and 1940s and thus becomes more and more obsessed with proving his manliness is, precisely, by organizing the chapters chronologically.

Chapter One will argue that the changes in society and the events Frank lived in the 1930s and in the 1940s made him extremely concerned with showing his manliness since he was a child and especially after World War II. In order to do so, the chapter is divided into two parts. The first one analyzes the effects, some of which I have already pointed out, of the Great Depression on men’s and their sons sense of manhood. I will show that it was believed that the sons of underemployed men might become delinquents or effeminates when they grew up (Scheibach 1985: 738). This, as I will argue , is a key issue for Frank, since he is the son of an underemployed breadwinner. I will thus show how Frank becomes progressively more obsessed about proving his manliness as he grows up, reaching a point in which he is willing to demonstrate it by

using violence. In the second part of Chapter One, I examine how the Second World War was presented by government propaganda as the perfect occasion for young men to prove their manliness and come back home as "kings" and "saviors" of masculinity (Grandstaff 2004). I will finally argue that Frank considers this experience at the front, and the immediate time afterwards as the zenith of his manliness. However, this experience also makes him become even more paranoiacally concerned with his manliness, which leads him to be willing to give up his originality and dreams of becoming a great man and begin a relationship with April just to feel manlier. This attitude and these actions effectively sow the seeds of *Revolutionary Road*'s tragedy.

Chapter Two focuses on the changes in hegemonic masculinities during the 1950s, the decade when the main action of *Revolutionary Road* occurs, and its effects on Frank and April. The aim of this chapter is to show that the patriarchal society of 1950s America created monsters out of men like Frank Wheeler and how they both victimized women. In order to support my argument, I have divided the chapter into two parts. The first one explains how the start of the Cold War in 1947 brought about a series of changes in America's society. In order to be part of the hegemonic masculinity, and especially avoid being labeled as homosexual, men were required to adapt to the new changes, which were especially hard in the middle-class suburbs. The second part of this chapter will examine how Frank Wheeler deals with these changes in the private and public sphere which go against his ideology. I will argue that preoccupation with getting rid of the suspicious lack of manliness that has haunted him since his childhood leads him to voluntarily embrace a lifestyle and job he loathes. I will finally claim that the decisions he makes to prove his masculinity and his patronizing and misogynist attitude with April brings about her death.

With this analysis, I will reach two conclusions. First, that examining Frank's life and America's society prior the 1950s provides a more sophisticated and convincing answer to the question of why Frank is obsessed with his masculinity and for the motifs behind his acts, which lead him and April to a tragic ending. Second, that a Masculinities Studies approach is necessary in order to comprehend the novel's criticism of and attack against the patriarchal society of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s which was the cause of many tragedies for men like Frank and Vincent Yates, and women like April and Ruth Walden. I will thus, conclude, that the novel narrates the tragic story of the Wheelers in an attempt to make the reader realize that these patriarchal societies can bring about nothing but destruction and dissatisfaction, not only to women but also to men.

Chapter 1: Sowing the Seeds of Tragedy: The Numbing Effect of the Great Depression and World War II on Frank Wheeler (and its Consequences for April)

Masculinity, like femininity, has historically been a complex concept. As David Gilmore argues in his 1990 study *Manhood in the Making*, "real manhood is different from simple anatomical maleness" (11) since in order to be fully recognized as a 'true man', one must go through a series of tests imposed by his particular culture (17). If a man successfully passes the ordeals his society demands, he becomes part of the normative masculinity. Otherwise, he is regarded as an unmanly man and is, therefore, ostracized by his milieu. That is, as Judith Butler rightly argues in her ground-breaking study *Gender Trouble*, gender, and of course masculinity, is "always a doing", a "performative" act (1990: 35).

The requirements men must fulfill in order to achieve true manhood depend on their own culture since the tests a male American must face are not the same as the ones a man in an African tribe has to undergo. Psychologists Brannon and David, in their 1976 study *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority*, were able to establish four basic rules, based on what are regarded as traditional male roles, which Americans must follow in order to be part of the normative masculinity. The first one, "No Sissy Stuff", states that any trait, action or attitude that could be remotely related to femininity must be avoided at all costs. The second one, "Be a Big Wheel" argues that manhood is to a large extent measured by both success and "the size of the paycheck" (Brannon and David 113). That is, the more powerful and wealthier a man is, the manlier he becomes. This is intrinsically related to the concept of the breadwinner, which has been traditionally regarded as the 'natural' role of man, especially for the Americans, as I will explain later on. The third rule, "Be a Sturdy Oak", stipulates that a man must be impassive and

self-assured. That is, a man should never let a situation overwhelm him. Instead, he must always keep cool, especially in front of others. Finally, the fourth rule, "Give 'em Hell" claims that true men must show a daring and aggressive behavior towards those who threaten their position as patriarchs.

Of these four rules, the most important one for Americans has historically been the second one. Indeed, the idea of the "American Dream" and the "self-made man" are ultimately based on the notion of the 'Big Wheel'. Moreover, as Armengol argues, "the mainstream model of American masculinity has traditionally linked men's identity to their breadwinning role" (2013: 31). In view of this, it should come as no surprise, therefore, than in times when being a breadwinner was complicated, men had difficulties in proving their manliness and much more so in being a 'big wheel'. This is exactly what happened in America after the stock market crash of 1929, the event that triggered the Great Depression.

As Mark Grandstaff argues, masculinity "received a devastating blow" (2004) during the Great Depression. Not surprisingly, historians and scholars argue that the second crisis of masculinity took place, precisely, during the 1930s (Breu 2005: 2; Faucette 2010: 15, 34-35; Pendergast 2000: 159-160). Throughout this time of recession, jobs were scarce and, therefore, unemployment, especially male, rose drastically. Indeed, by 1933 nearly 25 percent of American males were unemployed (Kimmel 2006: 128; Scheibach 1985: 732). Men were, therefore, unable to be breadwinners, which meant that they were likewise incapable of proving their manhood in the traditional way. Hence, they became 'emasculated' (Pendergast 2000: 159; Armengol 2013: 33). Even those who were still employed faced hard times because competition for jobs "was increasingly fierce" (Kimmel 2006: 128). Thus, they were

under the constant threat of seeing how other men took their jobs, leaving them unemployed and with the feeling of having been deprived of their sense of manhood and even humiliated by these other men (Kimmel: 133). Adding insult to injury, unemployed men witnessed how women occupied the jobs they once had and that they needed so desperately in order to prove themselves.

Indeed, women workers were "the chief problem" for manhood during the Great Depression (Kimmel: 131). The main reason for this was that women's employment rose significantly throughout the Great Depression (Collins 2003: 363). As a matter of fact, by the end of the 1930s, almost 40 percent of married women were employed (Filene 1974: 161; May 1998: 50). Actually, nearly 30 percent of women workers were often "the sole wage earner in her family" (Filene: 161). Therefore, their work became "crucial to the economic well-being of their families" (Anderson 2002: 367). Thus, in many cases the traditional roles (i.e., the role of the provider and that of the housekeeper) were inverted, leaving men with a deeper sense of their own emasculation.

Being unemployed, though, was not the only fear men endured. Underemployment, that is, "taking jobs beneath . . . previous standards" (Scheibach 1985: 732), also had a "harsh effect" (Scheibach: 732) on men. Indeed, men who were demoted or who had to accept second-rate jobs were regarded as failed breadwinners. The reason for this is that, as has been mentioned, wealth and status (i.e., being a 'Big Wheel') were indicators of manhood. Thus, underemployment also had an emasculating or de-maculinizing effect on men.

In view of this, it was clear enough that the workplace was no longer a "reliable arena for the demonstration and proof of one's manhood" (Kimmel 2006: 133). Therefore, men needed other ways through which they could prove their masculinity.

There were basically two alternatives: one was through their body; the other by becoming proper parents. If during the 1920s the beauty and manliness of a body resided in their 'wholeness' and in their similarity to the proportionate, symmetrical and fit corporality of the classical Greek bodies (Requena 2013: 16-20), in the 1930s ideal manly body was one with big muscles. This new, hypermasculine, image of the body was promoted by political propaganda. As a matter of fact, Roosevelt's administration attempted to 'remasculinize' America by flooding its landscape with murals and images of tough, muscular bodies at work (Armengol 2013: 31). The intention of these murals was, as Armengol argues, to "promot[e] American's self-esteem and faith in their country" while "celebrat[ing] the muscular potency of the working-class male body" which was considered the new ideal body (34-35).

This cult of the muscular body was emphasized by men like Charles Atlas[3] who, to a certain extent, achieved the American Dream through his body, since he went from 'rags to riches' by transforming himself from a "weakling" into "the world's most perfectly developed man"; a "he-man . . . capable of heroic feats" (Kimmel 2006: 139). His hypermusculated and hypermasculine body was immediately regarded both as an example to follow by the rest of American men and as a "route to national salvation" (Kimmel: 140). His massive success "turned bodybuilding into one of the most successful business even . . . during the Depression" (Kimmel: 152-153) and also helped to develop an increasing obsession with "muscular . . . manifestations of masculinity" (Armengol 2013: 34).

[3] Charles Atlas, born Angelo Siciliano (October 30, 1892 - December 23, 1972) was an Italian bodybuilder who became famous for transforming his skinny 97-pound body into one with massive muscles thanks to a bodybuilding training system he developed. His spectacular body not only allowed him to win the 1921 'World's Most Perfectly Developed Man' contest, but also to be envied and imitated by most of the American men in the 1930s. He created the famous 'Hey Skinny!' and '97-Pound Weakling' advertisements which appeared mainly in comic books and tried to make adolescents of the time realize how important having a muscular body was for them and for their sense of masculinity.

In view of the success of this new strategy to prove masculinity, most of the literature of the time quickly established a dichotomy between muscularity/manliness and lack of muscles/femininity. Popular fiction such as comics and hard-boiled detective stories portrayed characters whose muscled bodies were vital for their success. Regarding comics, the most well-known and important character of the time was Clark Kent, who, just like Atlas, could transform his not especially attractive or virile body, into an object of envy by becoming the muscular and powerful Superman[4]. He did this by getting rid of his boring and unmanly flannel suit and wearing a tight blue and red costume. This pumping-up transformation allowed him to gain fame all around his beloved country, defeat evil forces, bring about peace and prosperity and, also, obtain the love of his beautiful companion Lois Lane. Likewise, Sam Spade[5], the hard-boiled detective *per se* (Kimmel: 141; Gates 2008: 7; Cassuto 2009: 4), had a "body like a bear's" due to his "smooth" and "thick" arms and his "big rounded shoulders" (Hammett 1930: 6). These characters provided American men with a sense of "escapism" and also flooded their minds with a lust for "heroism" (Kimmel: 140-141). This latter aspect would be of vital importance, as I will later on explain, in order to understand the link established by the government propaganda between masculinity and taking part as a combatant in World War II.

The second alternative place to prove men's manliness was right at home. Men could theoretically redeem themselves for being unsuccessful breadwinners and, at the same time, prove their manliness by teaching their sons how to be real men. However, at a practical level, this was not an easy task. Society tended to regard unemployed or underemployed fathers as inappropriate role models for their sons (Kimmel 2006: 133; Scheibach, 1985: 731), since their failure to be a proper breadwinner was intrinsically

[4] Superman first appeared in *Action Comics#1* (June 1938).
[5] Sam Spade first appeared in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930).

related to the failure of being a real man and, as a consequence, a proper role model. Moreover, unemployed and underemployed fathers often lost the respect they had enjoyed at home (Filene 1974: 165) and were considered both by their wives and children as "impotent patriarchs" (Kimmel 2006: 132). Because of this, the relationship between fathers and sons was often tense (Scheibach 1985:738). Indeed, fathers were under the constant threat of witnessing their sons leaving home in search of a job or because they could not withstand the subordinate situation of the father at home

As can be inferred from what has been explained, the Great Depression had an even greater impact on the sons of unsuccessful breadwinners (Scheibach: 731). Indeed, due to their father's failure, sons were under intense social pressure to assume the traditional male role of family provider "even if this meant abandoning [their] personal goals" (Scheibach: 731), which is what Frank will do when April becomes pregnant with their first child. Moreover, it was believed that those sons who refused to adopt the adult male roles would become delinquents or homosexuals once they were adults (Scheibach: 738). This ever-lurking suspicion forced them to be especially self-aware of their actions and try, as hard as possible, to perform as many manly tasks as possible in order to prove both that they were 'real men' and also to avoid being ostracized. Thus, boys did not merely seek employment actively (Scheibach: 735), but also tried to prove their masculinity by "exhibiting physical prowess" and by having a "defiant" attitude (Scheibach: 734). That is, boys adopted "Give 'em Hell" behaviors to show their virility and assume the traditional, normative male roles.

Frank Wheeler's childhood is marked by his father's failure to be a "big wheel" and a proper breadwinner. Prior to Earl Wheeler's demotion in 1935 Frank's

relationship with his father is perfectly normal. Indeed, when he is "five or six" (48)[6], Frank deeply admires his father and his job as a salesman at Knox Business Machines (47-8) and they joyfully play and laugh together and live happily.

This idyllic relationship does not last long. In the summer of 1935, when he is ten years old, Frank is taken to New York by his father, Earl Wheeler, for the first time in his life. The reason for this extraordinary event is that his father is to have lunch with Mr. Oats Field in order to be given a job promotion at Knox Business Machines. Earl is supposed to become Fields' right-hand man at the company. This promotion would greatly benefit Earl for he would go from working as an assistant branch manager to having a steady, more qualified and more admirable job in a much more prestigious company. That is, he would go from being a common breadwinner to becoming a relatively Big Wheel, which would grant him the admiration of his family and of society as well as it will increase his own sense of manhood.

Unfortunately for Earl, the meeting with Oat Fields turns out to be a disaster; Earl is not promoted since "higher authority ha[s] decreed that Oat Fields c[an] get along without a right-hand man" (101). This failure triggers Earl's "decline" (101). He begins to be "transferred from one field assignment to another until his retirement" (101) and even gets "slipped from the assistant-manager level to that of an ordinary salesman" (101). That is, he progressively becomes more and more underemployed. This not only affects his health (101) but also his manliness, since his demotion is also a degradation of his manhood, proving him to be an unsuccessful breadwinner in the eyes of society. And of his own son.

[6] This and all the following quotations are from the 2009 edition of RichardYates *Revolutionary Road*, New York: Vintage Books.

The other victim of this failure is, of course, Frank, who becomes the object of Earl's wrath and impotency for his failure. Indeed, when he is "ten or twelve" (48) he starts being reprimanded constantly by his father. The worst times are when Earl tries to teach Frank how to handle tools, since Frank's inability to properly carry out the manual tasks he is given causes him to be shouted at and feel humiliated (49). As a result of this, Frank starts to dislike his father and his precarious job:

> Who, for that matter, wanted to be good with hobbyist's tools? And who wanted to be a dopey salesman in the first place, acting like a big deal with a briefcase full of boring catalogues, talking about machines all day to a bunch of dumb executives with cigars? (49)

This feeling of humiliation when handling tools, which persists still twenty years later (49), and Frank's bitter feelings about his father's job should be taken into account, for, as will be argued in the following chapter, during the 1950s Frank is compelled to carry out 'do-it-yourself' tasks and work as a salesman to prove his masculinity. That is, he will have to carry out a series of tasks and work in a type of job that, since his childhood, have been the cause of his misery and humiliation. Hence, Frank's failure to properly tackle domestic and professional issues is mainly due to his disappointing childhood and not because he is "a lazy, directionless drunk who cannot perform the simple duties around the house", as Moreno (2004: 89) claims.

Being constantly scolded and nursing disdain for his father is not the only problem Frank has to face as a child. As it is suggested in his flashbacks, Frank is not a popular child and seems to have, in fact, very few friends. Frank is regarded as a "jerk" (24) by all the rest of the children in his school except by Krebs, who is the "closest thing to a best friend" Frank had (24). The reason why Frank is so looked down on and despised by his classmates is not overtly stated in the novel. However, taking into account both that children always make fun of someone who has some kind of

abnormality, especially if it is related to sexuality, and that being the son of an underemployed man is, as I have explained, linked to homosexuality, it could be argued that children make fun of Frank for being a 'sissy' or for his father's failure. Or at least this is what Frank might think. This would explain why, soon after his father's failure, he enrolls in the Boy Scouts, an institution whose main goal was to "make big men of little boys" and vindicate their manliness (Filene 1974: 19) by fostering "an independent manhood" (Gilmore 1990: 18). The exact time when Frank enrols in the Boy Scouts is not stated in the novel. However, one can deduce, from posterior flashbacks, that he must have joined in when he was between ten and fourteen, since by this time he already has the boy scout mark (23). Thus, Frank's enrolment in this institution seems to be caused by a desire to prove to his classmates that he does not lack manliness regardless of his father's failure at work. His constant obsession with manliness would, therefore, have already started at this early stage.

When he becomes fourteen Frank begins dreaming about going to the West Coast on a freight train. This desire to leave home and start an adventure could be regarded as his endeavor to escape from the difficult situation he is living at home or to find a job and start a new life there. During this adventure, Frank is ready to use violence "if necessary" in the "hobo jungles along the way" (23). This aggressive attitude seems to go along the lines of the "Give 'em Hell" rule, which further emphasizes Frank's need to behave in a normative manly manner. He also hides his Boy Scout badge (23) probably in order to show that he has already become an adult and that he is manlier than anyone of his age. This idea seems to be reinforced by his passion for army-type clothes (23), which bespeaks a desire to resemble a virile, daring and self-sufficient adult. Thus, as can be seen, Frank begins to develop an especially violent side which he associates with proper manliness. This obscure and aggressive side increases

as he grows up. Frank finally refrains from carrying out the plan after Krebs (24) laughs at it. Ashamed, Frank does not leave home and therefore keeps living under suspicion but still willing to prove how perfectly straight and manly he can be.

The Second World War presents Frank with a perfect occasion to show those around him that despite the lack of a proper role model, he is a 'real' man. Traditionally, war has been regarded as an activity "that has often served to *define* manhood itself" (Ehrenreich 2011: 127, original emphasis). Similarly, Glover and Kaplan claim that the battlefield has historically been the "quintessentia[l] . . . male arena" (2009: 86). That is, taking part in war has been traditionally regarded as a "crucial index of masculinity" (Braudy 2003: 495) which allows men to "distance" themselves from "feminine traits" (Mangan and Walving 1987: 222). Military training also helps men to develop a more muscular body which, as has been explained, was a way to prove one's manliness throughout the 1930s. Furthermore, there was the myth that "while it was boys who went to [World War II], it was men who came back" (Bruzzi 2005: 1). Thus, in the 1940s if one wanted to become a manly man, he was compelled to go to war.

Moreover, as Grandstaff points out, the American government and its propaganda machinery wasted no time in spreading the idea that the World War II "provided the means for the American male as soldier to redeem manhood from the crises of economic modernity" (2004). As a matter of fact, personages such as Jonathan Daniels declared that the war was a perfect opportunity for America to become "magnificently male again" (cited in Grandstaff). Public services bombarded men with advertisements in which they compared going to the front to a mythological rite of passage, similar to Parsifal's, by which Americans would be able to prove that they were not boys anymore but had actually become 'true', heroic men. That is, the lust for heroism created by 1930s and 1940s fictional heroes was used as pro-war propaganda to

bait men into going to war to become ideal heroes just like the ones in the stories they read.

However, the alleged benefits of serving at the front in the Second World War were not merely based on enhancing one's manhood. Men were promised a very succulent prize for their victory: the return to 'normalcy' in gender relationships (Grandstaff 2004; Filene 1974: 174). That is, the government propaganda lured soldiers into believing that by defeating the enemy, the problems caused by the Great Depression would disappear. Thus, on their return, men would presumably recover their position as "kings" at home while women would go back to their "natural world –that of the hearth and home" (Grandstaff). In view of all this, it should come as no surprise that some American men regarded World War II as both an escape from an emasculating, effeminizing society and as a pivotal event in their lives, whose outcome would decide whether they were forever remembered as the saviors of manliness and the bringers of the 'right' gender hierarchy.

The main problem of the propagandistic romanticization of World War II was that soldiers, not long after their return, faced a reality which was radically different from the promised one. First, their status as admirable veterans did not last long and men were soon expected to resume their role as breadwinners or else be regarded as impotent patriarchs once again. Second, women did not go back to the traditional role of housewife and mother. On the contrary, against what is usually supposed, the presence of women at the workplace increased. Thus, for men the war proved to be "only a temporary respite" (Kimmel 2006: 147) from their obligations and the feminizing environment of the workplace.

Frank, like many of his comrades, experiences both the masculinizing ecstasy of war and its downhill once the conflict finished[7]. When he is 18, the American army first thrusts him "into the final spring offensive of the war in Germany" (28) and later provides him with a "confused but exhilarating tour of Europe for another year before it set him free" (28). That is, he takes part in the war in its culminating moment and therefore, at a perfect time to prove his value as man; he is then given the chance to visit Europe –and more precisely France, as he later on he reveals to April- as a hero who returns from one of the crudest wars in the history of mankind. His visit to Europe has such an impact on him that he immediately regards it as "the only part of the world worth living in" (29). For all of this, Frank considers that the time at the front was like "coming out of a Cellophane bag" because "[e]verything looked realer than real" at the battlefield (178). He even goes as far as to mention that he "never felt better (178-9). That is, it seems that as it happened to other men, taking part in the Second World War was the zenith of Frank's life and manhood and a key event in his life.

Indeed, there are multiple instances in the novel that show the impact World War II has on Frank and on his sense of masculinity. When Frank feels hopeless or needs to be admired, he wastes no time in explaining a story he lived at the front. This becomes evident when the Campbells visit Frank and April in the fourth chapter of part one. Because of the failed performance of *The Petrified Forest* Frank and April are not at the time on speaking terms, and dinner does not go as smoothly as Frank would like. In an attempt to save the evening from "degenerat[ing] into the dreariest kind of suburban time filler" (88) he tries to come up with what he expects to be an exciting topic. He suddenly recalls that the following day is his thirtieth birthday (90) and

[7] John Fallon, the protagonist of Richard Yates's short story 'The B.A.R. Man' goes through an almost identical experience as Frank. Both characters have serious difficulties in adapting to the post-World War II American society due to their time at the front, which they regard as their masculine acme.

decides to narrate what his twentieth birthday was like at the front. He does so because "the talk of the army and the war had more than once turned out to be the final salvation of evenings with the Campbells" (91). Indeed "[o]ne of the most memorable nights of the whole friendship . . . had been built on a series of well-turned army stories and had found its climax in a roar of masculine song" (91-2). By singing it, Frank and Campbell feel that they "bat[h]" in the "admiration of their wives" (92). Thus, it becomes evident that war times become a resource for Frank when he needs recognition from those around him.

Actually, whenever he faces a difficult situation, Frank always deals with it as though he was back at the front and even uses military language. The first instance in the novel occurs after Frank cheats on April with Maureen, one of the secretaries at Knox Building Machines. Frank has been interested in Maureen since, at least, the "last office Christmas party" (74) when he already kissed her. On his birthday, after the unsuccessful dinner with the Campbells and also because of the quarrel with April, Frank decides to unleash his most lecherous desires and lures Maureen into having sex with him, a victory which makes him feel "like a man" (139). Indeed, after leaving Maureen's apartment, Frank goes back home in the highest spirits and feeling and acting in an especially manly way (139-140).

However, when reaching home, Frank sees that April has prepared a special birthday party for him. He hears her confession that she has missed him "all day" (141) and that she is "terribly sorry for everything" (141) and feels "like a monster" (143). He even wishes to "make some dramatic atonement" (144) for his deplorable deed with Maureen. Instead, he keeps listening to April's praise of him. After some minutes, Frank claims he needs to have a shower. His real intention is, of course, to give himself

some time alone to decide what to do, for he is, indeed, in a desperate situation. Initially, he feels he has to tell April the truth and confess he has cheated on her with Maureen (145). However, he is not completely sure about this decision. Therefore, he imagines himself back at the front in an attempt to find some guide as to what he should do:

> He turned off all the hot water and turned up the cold, a thing he hadn't done in years. The shock of it sent him dancing and gasping but he made himself stay under it until he'd counted to thirty, the way he used to do in the army, and he came out feeling like a million dollars. Tell her? Why, of course he wasn't going to tell her. What the hell would be the point of that? (146)

Thus, as can be seen, re-enacting some of the rituals he performed as a soldier enables Frank to recover his manly resolution and his peace of mind. Indeed, he acts with the same self-confidence as after having sex with Maureen, which is when, as has been stated above, he felt especially manly. This further evidences the importance of taking part in World War II in Frank's life and, especially, in his sense of self-confidence.

After this conflict, there comes a time of happiness for Frank Wheeler, fuelled by the longing to escape the suburbs and begin a new and probably more prosperous life in Paris. As a consequence of this idyllic mood, Frank and April's relationship radically changes. They stop quarrelling and begin enjoying their nights together, spending them among talks and drinks and ending them by making love. This blissfulness comes to an abrupt end when April becomes pregnant with their third child. She shows her willingness to abort, but Frank adamantly rejects the idea and is determined to prevent April from aborting the baby (for a series of reasons that will be analyzed and explained in detail in the following chapter).

Frank faces the need to persuade April to have the baby in military terms. Indeed, he regards this task as a "campaign" in which he has to overcome a main

"tactical problem" (296), namely "making his position attractive" (296-7). To achieve his goal, he tries as hard as he can to display his self-confidence and to make sure he shows a "grim-jawed determination" (299) whenever he is with April. He also tries to be the first out of bed in the morning "so that she might never see his face lying swollen and helpless in sleep" (299). That is, he tries to act like a 'study oak'. Using this "methodology" (299) leaves him with a "certain distaste of himself" (299) but these feelings are "quickly allayed" (300) when he makes himself remember that in war all is fair (300). This remark further evidences that whenever Frank needs self-assurance, he goes back to his experience at the front.

Frank also associates his masculine identity to his experience at the front. Indeed, whenever Frank wants to remember who he is, his mind goes back "to the first few years after the war" (27), when he was "[i]n his very early twenties" (27). The reason for this is that the first months after coming back from war were a time of recognition for Frank. He was, after all, a "veteran", a rank he proudly enjoyed (27) mainly because it made him feel, for the first time in his life, "admired" by other men (28). He even believed that the "[l]oose strands of his character" that had previously kept him "dreaming and lonely among schoolboys and later among soldiers" have "coalesced into a substantial and attractive whole" thanks to his time at the front (28). As a result of all this, he soon begins to realize that "intelligent men . . . actually want[ed] to listen to him talk" (28). Indeed, whenever he performed in the "beery, all-night talks that had begun to form around him" men agreed with what Frank said and believed that he "really had it" (29) and that all he needed to be a magnificent Big Wheel was "time and freedom to find himself" (29). In fact, as it is hinted throughout the novel and as several characters, including April, argue, Frank seems to have the capacity, skill with words and talent to become a writer, although he does not produce

any text throughout the novel. Furthermore, his flirting with girls becomes even more successful than before the war. In fact, girls begin to "actually want to go to bed with him" (28). Thus, Frank feels, for the first time after his father's failure, that he is regarded as a 'real man'. He feels so admired by both his manliness and alleged talent and so full of confidence that he even has hopes of becoming a "great man" (29) in intellectual, literary and even bohemian terms. He believes he can reach his goal by rebelling against his father's lifestyle (29). Therefore, at this point, Frank seems to be determined not to become a white-collar like his father.

It is important to note that although Frank regards his time at the front as the acme of his manliness and a time worth remembering, not much is revealed about what he did at the front. Indeed, the only information he slips is what has been mentioned thus far. That is, that he celebrated his twentieth birthday at the front, that he sang songs with other soldiers and that he had a series of rituals. Yates never mentions what he did exactly nor whether he killed anybody or had any especial bond with anyone at the front. This silence seems to indicate that, in fact, his time at the war was not that extraordinary. That is, just as it happens to Tom Rath, it might perfectly be that the experience as a combatant has actually been a traumatic one. It could therefore be argued that the only reason why Frank romanticizes this part of his life is to show his manliness. He probably believes that if he talks about his time at the front as a wonderful experience, as the government propaganda made men believe it would be, he will be regarded by other men and women as a manlier man. This attitude and willingness to idealize a time he never wants to speak about, which was worryingly common between ex-combatants like Frank, shows how schizophrenic his need to prove his manliness has become. It also demonstrates that he is ready to do whatever it takes

to achieve this goal, as he actually does during the 1950s as I will discuss in the following chapter.

Unfortunately for Frank, the ecstasy of victory soon faded away and with it the admiration other men felt for ex-combatants. Furthermore, veterans were progressively required to re-enter society and resume their old lives. As a result, Frank began to "be haunted by numberless small depressions" which "tended to increase in the weeks after college was over" (29-30). He realized that having been at the front and having fought for his country was of little importance, since, apart from the benefits of the G.I. Bill[8], he was given no privilege and thus was obliged, as anybody else, to "tak[e] odd jobs to buy his food" (30) to try to survive and was no longer admired.

Frank tries to redress this situation and achieve a "sense of unalloyed triumph" (30), similar to what he (believes he) felt at the front, by dating a "first-rate girl" (30). Frank is, by no means, looking for a soul mate or someone he can give his love to. Quite the contrary, what he wants is a trophy girlfriend, so beautiful that other men would feel envy and admiration for him. That is, he wants an attractive girl just to increase his self-confidence and his sense of manliness. Initially, Frank is willing to use his intellectual charm to lure some poor innocent girl into loving him. With this in mind, he begins searching for this trophy girl. One night at a party in Morningside Heights[9], he meets April, an (upper) middle-class "exceptionally first-rate girl" with "shining hair and splendid legs" (31), one year younger than him, who, as can be deduced from one of

[8] The G.I. Bill was the popular name given to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. This law provided World War II veterans with a series of benefits such as low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans to start a business, cash payments of tuition and living expenses to attend college, high school or vocational education, as well as one year of unemployment compensation. The G.I. Bill is regarded as "one of the signal successes of twentieth century American domestic policy" (Stanley 2003: 671) but as Frank's case shows, not all ex-combatants were completely satisfied with or could completely benefit from this law.

[9] The Morningside Heights is a neighbourhood of the Borough of Manhattan in New York City. It is usually regarded as a the 'Academic Metropolis' due to the fact that it was and still one of the places where intellectuals and artists frequented. It is also the home of institutions such as Columbia University.

Frank's flashbacks, was by the time she met him on the verge of graduating from drama school (64). Feeling that destiny has presented him with a perfect occasion, Frank wastes no time in trying to win her love so that he can achieve his selfish and patriarchal goal.

The way Frank flirts with April shows his desperate need to prove his manhood. First he pretends to be a longshoreman[10] (31). As has been stated above, this type of job was linked to the ideal masculinity and manly body promoted by Roosevelt. Moreover, Frank "had been self-consciously 'shaping up' on the docks each morning" (31). That is, Frank has been trying to pump-up his body to feel properly manly. Interestingly, after lying about his job, he immediately adds that he had been given a better job and will start working as a "night cashier" (31). With this, Frank tries to show that he is not a conformist at all but rather that he aspires to having better jobs. That is, he attempts to show that he follows the 'Big Wheel' rule, which, as has been stated, is still one of the most important rules for American manhood. He also tries to keep a 'Sturdy Oak' attitude throughout his playful conversation with April, since he never loses his cool while flirting with her. He finally achieves his aim of obtaining a 'first-rate girl' and of increasing his sense of manhood when April sleeps with him after telling him that he is "the most interesting person" she has ever met (32). Sex, though, is not that successful because, as it is revealed later on (64), Frank is April's first lover. She, obviously, is still too naïve and too inexperienced to be able clearly see through Frank's lies.

Even though he obtains a "first-rate girl", Frank cannot escape his depression, his need to prove manliness and his desire to become, once again, admired by other men, as he was after the war. On the contrary, his depression increases and he becomes

[10] A person who works in a port loading and unloading ships.

even more obsessed with proving his manhood and maintaining himself within normative masculinity as will be explained in the following chapter.

This chapter has examined the events and changes regarding hegemonic masculinity that took place during the 1930s and the 1940s. In having done so, I have proved two ideas: first, that the American patriarchal society of the time and the demands on masculinity often destroyed the lives of men and their family. Indeed this is what happens to the Wheelers, which is what the novel criticizes by narrating the life of Frank Wheeler and his development since his father's fall into underemployment. Second, intrinsically related to the first point, I have shown that since 1935, that is, since he was ten years-old, Frank feels compelled to prove his manliness so that he can be accepted. He tries as hard as he can to do so, finding a perfect occasion in World War II. Effectively, he proves his manliness and actually becomes an admired man thanks to his experience at the front. Unfortunately for him, as I have shown, his time in the army harms more than benefits him, for he becomes obsessed with recovering the same status he enjoyed in his first few years after the war. This obsession and Frank's inability to regain his lost status or gain an even better one, as I will show, results in April's death.

Chapter 2: Reaping the Tragedy: Frank's Transformation into 1950s Patriarchal Man

One of the main characteristics of the 1950s in America was its "self-conscious preoccupation with masculinity" (Gilbert 2005: 2), to the point which it eventually caused a state of "panic" among men (Gilbert: 9). Not surprisingly, many scholars[11] agree that this period, sometimes labeled the 'Age of Anxiety' (Loftin 2007: 577), witnessed yet another crisis of masculinity due to the numerous changes in hegemonic masculinity (Mosse 1996) and the social pressure to conform to these. The event that triggered these changes was the Cold War, a conflict started around 1947.

As Mercè Cuenca argues in "Lectura, homosexualidad y resistencia a la homofobia: el caso de los Estados Unidos (1945-1965)" America set itself up, after the Second World War, as the "epitome de la democracia" (2010: 111). The idea of democracy that America defended, and which distinguished itself from Fascism and Communism, was based on a strongly heterosexist capitalism (Cuenca: 111). Indeed, American society at the beginning of the Cold War and especially during the 1950s defended above all the normative, heterosexual family model (Cuenca: 111), which was regarded as the key to maintain its consumerist democracy.

As a consequence of this heterosexism and the belief in the traditional heterosexual family, homosexuality became America's main enemy. Indeed, in American "Cold War culture there was room only for straight gender identity –straight and narrow" (Filene 1974: 180). The homosexual was a "national security risk" (Corber 1997: 2), linked to America's other major enemy: communism. Thus, anyone, man or woman, who showed a glimpse of a non-normative heterosexual behaviour was

[11] See Breu 2005: 3; Cuenca, 2013: 50; Gilbert, 2005: 219.

considered a double traitor to the country and was looked down on, or worse, ostracized. Hence the anxieties regarding "waning masculinity" (Loftin 2007: 577) which men experienced throughout this decade.

As a result of this fixation with consumerism and heterosexuality, a series of the characteristics attributed to normative masculinities and true manliness changed, whilst others became stricter both in the private and in the public spheres. The most important rule in the new hegemonic masculinity was that men were demanded to be "mature" and to "settle down" (Ehrenreich 1987: 11) as soon as possible. The real meaning given to these concepts at the time had nothing to do with acting more wisely or adopting a steadier style of life. On the contrary, the real meaning of being mature in the 1950s supposed that men were compelled to marry, grow a family and become successful breadwinners; women were supposed to becomes housewives and mothers. In fact, psychologists such as R.J. Havighurst established that men were required to carry out the following tasks in order to show their maturity:

> (1) selecting a mate, (2) learning to live with a marriage partner, (3) starting a family, (4) rearing children, (5) managing a home, (6) getting started in an occupation, (7) taking on civic responsibilities and (8) finding a congenial social group. (quoted in Ehrenreich: 18)

Those who deviated from these duties were automatically labelled as "less than a grown up" (Ehrenreich: 11) and consequently, "less than a man" (Ehrenreich: 12). Thus, maturity and adulthood, key aspects of the 1950s hegemonic masculinity, were linked to heterosexual, normative masculinity, whereas immaturity was identified with homosexuality (Ehrenreich: 24) and, by extension, as has been explained, with Communism. Therefore, men were expected to behave as maturely as they could in order to prevent being regarded as effeminate. They could only do so by being

breadwinners, marrying young and have children[12]. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that there was a Baby Boom in the 1950s as men attempted to eliminate the suspicion of homosexuality (Baker 2006: 5) and women embraced the housewife ideal still in their twenties.

Another major change of the 1950s regarding hegemonic masculinity is that, as Gelber (1997: 66) argues, being a husband and a father in the 1950s did not simply mean being a provider. Throughout the 1950s there was an "exaggerated emphasis on family life " (Anderson 1981: 178) by which men were supposed to be "companions" and providers for their wives (Gilbert 2005: 79) as well as "warm and nurturing" fathers (Gelber: 94). Men would show their maturity as husbands and fathers only if they were able to make their families reach 'togetherness' (Filene 1974: 186; Gilbert 79). By this notion what was meant was that families were supposed to be a "democracy" where the "decisions were to be made jointly" and disagreements were to be "resolved by consensus" (Filene: 186).

The problem of this new role men were to adopt was obvious: they were no longer supposed to be the absolute patriarchal 'head' of the family. Moreover, the focus on companionship and on spending a considerable of time at home made men feel that they were adopting, to a certain extent, the domestic role which has traditionally been played by women (Gelber 1997: 94). Thus, there was the fear that this enforced domesticity of men would eventually emasculate them (Filene 1974: 187).

A way to counteract this fear of emasculation was through the performance of 'do-it-yourself' tasks, which became especially popular in the 1950s and, more precisely, in the American middle-class suburbs. In fact, the do-it-yourself movement

[12] Interestingly, as Ehrenreich indicates, the average age for a man to marry in the 1950s was twenty-three (1987: 14). There was a popular belief during the 1950s that a man if a man waited and was not married by the time he was twenty-seven "one had to wonder" whether he was a real heterosexual man or not (Ehrenreich: 14-15).

"exploded with the new postwar suburbs" (Gilbert 2005: 152) becoming a "virtual obligation" (Gelber 1997: 89) for white-collar suburban men who wanted to prove their manliness, since these tasks were regarded as a "virtual badge of manhood" (Gelber: 100). Do-it-yourself tasks allowed men, besides, to "participate in family activities while retaining a distinct masculinely style" (Gelber: 69). That is, men could stay within their domestic environment without feeling emasculated because these tasks were quintessentially "men's jobs" (Gilbert 2005: 149) and also allowed them to have a space for them which no woman could enter: the workshop, a haven for manliness. The use of tools was also a manhood enhancer since it was believed that "to be a man one used the tools, and using the tools made one a man" (Gilbert: 154).

As for the public life, jobs became the main source of identity for men (Filene 1974: 184). A man's value and his manliness were measured by the type of job he had and by the money he earned (Filene: 184). That is, the duty to be a 'Big Wheel', mentioned in Chapter One, became more important than ever. This should come as no surprise, since due to the obsession with consumerism, the 'real man' was that the one who earned enough money to allow his family to buy all the luxuries intense marketing pushed onto them. There was, however, only one type of job that provided a source of income big enough to squander money: that of the white-collar office worker in the gray flannel suit.

The problem of this kind of job was that, ironically, it was not regarded as a manly one. At least, not in the traditional way. In fact, white-collar jobs were, to a considerable extent, feminine (Corber 1997: 35; Cuenca 2013: 52; Filene 1974: 185; Hoberek 1997: 380). Indeed, white-collar workers were expected to care for their appearance, be extremely pleasant and submissive with the clients and "use the soft arts of personnel relations" (Filene: 186). In short, white-collar employees were to adopt

typically feminine roles. Furthermore, the muscular bodies that were the epitome of masculinity became, in addition, undesirable, for they were linked to blue-collar jobs and these were to be avoided if one wished to be part of the hegemonic masculinity (Cuenca: 52). Thus, the white-collar men were not only supposed to cover (and thus hide) their bodies with the homogenous gray flannel suit, but also were supposed to have a less muscled corporality of the same kind which had been regarded as unmanly in the previous decades,. In most large companies or corporations, gray flannel suits were in low positions, making it especially difficult for them to become Big Wheels. Hence, these men felt, to a certain extent, less manly than other men who had more wealth and power than them in the same company.

Another problem white-collar employees faced was the dichotomy between "the two negative poles" (Kimmel 2006: 155) of the time: over-conformism and non-conformism. Over-conformists were seen as soulless, empty men who willingly accepted the monotony of the gray flannel suit (Kimmel: 155). Non-conformists were seen as men who could potentially "leave family and workplace responsibilities behind in a frantic restless search for some elusive moment of ecstasy" (Kimmel: 155). Thus, non-conformists were, to some extent, the previous stage to the 'Beats'.

As Ehrenreich explains in her 1987 study *The Hearts of Men*, the Beats were a "minuscule minority" (53) who refused to have a job and be a breadwinner (52). Ironically they were maintained by their wives while they lead bohemian lives as they protested against the established suburbanized life. As Savran (1998: 56) and Dunphy (2005) argue, the writer that best represented the Beat Generation's lifestyle was Jack Kerouac. Indeed, his novel *On the Road*, first published in 1957, is regarded as the work that helped most in the "popularization" (Savran: 56) of this lifestyle. The problem non-conformists and Beats had was that they were seen as subversive men in a decade when

subversiveness was closely linked to homosexuality (Kimmel 156). Thus, these type of men were often regarded as neither masculine nor mature enough.

As can be inferred from what has been explained thus far, men, and especially World War II veterans, found themselves locked into a very unsympathetic and demanding patriarchal society. No doubt, proving their masculinity and even their heterosexuality was more difficult than ever, since the tests to be passed both at the private and at the public sphere seemed to be increasingly more difficult and, in some cases, they demanded qualities that were regarded as feminine in previous decades.

The 1950s were also a harsh decade for women. As Betty Friedan explains in *The Feminine Mystique*, the patriarchal society of the time tried to make women forget about working outside the home to go back instead to their role as housewives. Indeed, the governmental propaganda flooded women with advertisements and articles which told them that the life of a wife and mother was an extraordinarily fulfilling one. These advertisements also indicated how important was for the welfare of the family that wives worked only at home and purchased the best household appliances to become ever better housewives (Meyerowitz 2002: 383). As time went by, women realized that the life of the housewife and mother was not as perfect and full of mirth as they were meant to believe, particularly in the isolated middle-class suburbs. They felt that their unhappiness was the result of some kind of problem, which Friedan labelled “the problem that has no name” (1963: 9) What happened was that they were dissatisfied with their lives. Women became depressed because the patriarchal society they had to live in tried to seclude them in their homes and labelled them as “neurotic” (May 1981: 176) if they did not enjoye their monotonous, unfree lives. To add insult to injury, married women and mothers were demanded to be passive and not authoritative at all,

since "powerful mothers, they said, would damage their children and undermine fathers' authority" (Meyerowitz 2002: 391).

Women were also coerced to become mothers (Meyerowitz: 391), as it was believed that "motherhood was the ultimate fulfillment of female sexuality and the primary source of a woman's identity" (May 1998: 149). As a result, it was extremely difficult and, in fact, almost impossible, to obtain the permission for a legal abortion. Thus, those women who wanted to abort, had to do it outside the law, using extremely unsafe domestic methods such as taking a rubber syringe filled with water and injecting it into their uterus to provoke an abortion, as April does in the novel. Activists, especially feminists, tried to make abortion legal or, at least, try to give some contraceptive education to both men and women. One of the most important birth control activists was Margaret Sanger (September 14, 1879 – September 6, 1966). She popularized the notion of "birth control" and actually created the first birth control clinic in America in 1916 and founded in 1921 the American Birth Control League, which eventually became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Her aim was to legalize abortion so that women were not forced to use unsafe, illegal methods as the one stated that kills April.

The effects of this new normative patriarchal masculinity triggered by the Cold War are soon suffered by Frank and, of course, by April, who becomes the main victim in the novel, as I have already mentioned. Significantly, April becomes pregnant with their first child (102) in 1948, only one year after the official beginning of the Cold War and its ensuing changes in hegemonic masculinity. Neither April nor Frank want the baby. April even hints at her desire to have an abortion (66) because, as she later on reveals, she rightly believes they cannot be proper parents (302) despite already having two children. Likewise, Frank admits to himself that he did not want the baby "any

more than she did" (68). Thus, the most logical decision would be to postpone becoming parents again, especially after April says that she knows of the rubber syringe method to abort which she believes to be safe provided it is done within the twelfth week of pregnancy[13]. However, they end up having the baby, because Frank forces April to carry it out to term. The reason why Frank decides to have this third child is because of his already mentioned intense obsession to prove his manliness and conform to the misogynist demands of the 1950s American patriarchal society on both men and women. This is first hinted at in his reaction to April's reluctant acceptance to have the baby: "[i]t seemed to him now that no single moment of his life had ever contained a better proof of manhood than that, if any proof were needed: holding that tamed, submissive girl and saying, "Oh, my lovely; oh, my lovely," while she promised she would bear his child." (68). As this fragment reveals, Frank clearly obtains a manly pleasure when April is subdued to him and promises to eventually give birth to his child. It would therefore seem plausible to claim that Frank feels manlier by both having April under his control and forcing her to do what he desires, and by being able to become a father, even though he does not want to. This shows how patriarchal and misogynistic Frank's actions become, actions he performs just to conform to the patriarchal hegemonic masculinity of his time and to make him feel, somehow, a manly man.

As a consequence of this absurd decision to have his first baby and thus be able to behave and act normatively, Frank becomes obsessed with proving that he can be a good provider for his family and therefore a mature, and hence manly, man. Thus, the first thing he feels compelled to do is to find a better job than the one he has. In order to

[13] It is not explicity stated in the novel whether abortion was legal or not in the suburbs of West Connecticut, where the Wheelers live. However, from what I have explained in the beginning of the chapter and what is suggested in the novel, it seems obvious that abortion was, in fact, not allowed.

do so, he talks to Sam, one of his friends. Frank, in an attempt to hide the fact that he has become just another product of his society and a replica of his father, due to his cowardice to defend his ideals, tries to convince Sam that he wants a job only to get more money for the time being:

> I need a job . . . is that any reason why the job I get has to louse me up? Look. All I want is to get enough dough coming in to keep us solvent for the next year or so, till I can figure things out; meanwhile I want to retain my own identity . . . I want something that can't possibly touch me. I want some big, swollen old corporation that's been bumbling along making money in its sleep for a hundred years, where they have to hire eight guys for every one job because none of them can be expected to care about whatever boring thing it is that they're supposed to be doing. I want to go into that kind of place and say, Look. You can have my body and my nice college-boy smile for so many hours a day, in exchange for so many dollars, and beyond that we'll leave each other strictly alone. (102-103)

Frank seems to suggest that even if he accepts a white-collar job he will not change. That is, he will still try to become a great man and will not lose his essence. He even seems to hint that he postpones his desire to go back to Paris only for a year. However, as I will show later on, these words are nothing but sham and a lie, since Frank is willing to remain a white-collar for many years and to accept a job that would forever chain him in this type of job. He has also completely forgotten about his desire to go back to Paris, since he never speaks about it again.

One of the companies Sam suggests is, ironically, the one where Earl Wheeler worked: the Knox Business Machines. Frank is taken aback when he hears that he can apply for a job in this company and believes that there must be some kind of "mistake" (103) but quickly applies for the job. When he finally gets it, Frank immediately thinks about his father: "it's pretty funny, isn't it? Old Knox Business Machines. Wait'll I tell the old man. Wait'll he hears I didn't even use his name" (104).

The fact that Frank accepts to work for Knox Business Machines and, more precisely, in the Sales Promotion Department, proves that he has sold his soul and his

self-respect to conformism. Indeed, he accepts to become for good a white-collar worker, a job that is in total opposition to his dreams of becoming a 'great man' discussed in the previous chapter of the present dissertation. In addition to this, as has been explained, since the time when his father's became underemployed, Frank loathes the salesman job and the mere idea of being a man in a gray flannel suit (49). Nevertheless, Frank's deep interest in working for the same company as his father seems to indicate that he desires to show that he can surpass his father and, therefore, prove that he has been able to become a real man, in spite of the fact that he did not have a proper role model. That is, the reason why he chooses to work in Knox Business Machines instead of in any other company that would have provided him with a similar salary is due to his need to get over his disappointment over his father in childhood. As it is revealed in the last chapter of the second part of the novel, after obtaining the job, the first thing Frank does share with his father the news about his new job, "like a little boy come home with a good report card" (275). He even spends the first year at Knox talking about his father and how he worked there to his workmates in an attempt to obtain some praise (105-6). Mostly because of his urge to be eventually able to surpass his father, Frank's first year in Knox Business Machines is relatively pleasant. Thus, Frank idiotically embraces a job he profoundly dislikes since he was a teenager in his absurd belief that by doing so he will prove he has become a manly man regardless of the role model he had.

Although Frank told Sam that he only wanted the job for a year or so, the fact is that he keeps working at Knox Business Machines for seven years afterwards. In 1955, the year the novel is mainly set, Frank has not changed at all from what he was in 1948. In fact, he has become even more paranoid regarding his manliness and he has done a series of actions he did not want to just to conform to the patriarchal society of his time

he detests. This is best portrayed in his confession in the third chapter of the first part of the novel:

> Wasn't it true, then, that everything in his life from that point on [having his first baby] had been a succession of things he hadn't really wanted to do? Taking a hopelessly dull job to prove he could be as responsible as any other family man, moving to an overpriced, genteel apartment to prove his mature belief in the fundamentals of orderliness and good health, having another child to prove that the first one hadn't been a mistake, buying a house in the country because that was the next logical step and he had to prove himself capable of taking it. Proving, proving; and for no other reason than that he was married to a woman . . . [i]t was as ludicrous and as simple as that. (68-9)

This bitter self-confession evidences the fact that he has been way too much of a coward to try to escape from the hegemonic masculinity of his time. Indeed, he has pathetically subdued his desire to become a great man and a rebel against his father's lifestyle (29; 30), his intellectualism and even his life to become the common, soulless, boring man he never wanted to be, leading a life he despises.

The one who pays for Frank's bitterness with himself is, of course, April, who becomes yet another victim of patriarchy and must therefore be completely subdued to Frank's will, lest she wants to be severely punished. Her disobedience is regarded by Frank as an attack to his patriarchal authority and to his manliness. After the fiasco of the Laurel Players and while they are driving home, Frank pretends to be genuinely worried about April, but in fact he has a patronizing and paternalistic attitude towards her, since he tries to cheer her up with condescending remarks on her performance and on the lack of ability of the rest of actors and director (26-7; 32-3). Although April firmly begs him to stop talking about the play for she wants to forget about it, Frank keeps telling her that feeling hurt is " just not worth" (32). He even stops the car in order to be able to further discuss the Laurel Player's failure without having to worry about driving. Seeing that Frank just cannot stop talking, April leaves the car and runs away in an attempt to be alone and gather her thoughts. Frank violently chases her and

starts abusing her psychologically, by shouting at her that it is not his fault that she is a failure as an actress. He also claims that when she refuses to listen to him and run away from him she is "sick" and that he does not "deserve" being treated thus (35-6). Unable to cope with this anymore, April shouts out how he has ill-treated her over the years. She reveals how she has become his "conscience . . ., guts –*and* punching bag"[14] (37, original emphasis) and that he has paradoxically caught her "safely in a trap" (37). She finishes by shouting out loud that he is by no means a real man: "Oh, you poor, self-deluded –*Look* at you! *Look* at you, and tell me how by any *stretch* . . . of the imagination you can call yourself a man!" (37, original emphasis), to which Frank responds with four punches first aimed at April but ultimately thrown at the car.

This scene and especially April's comment perfectly portrays that kind of abuser that Frank Wheeler has become. Frank believes that he behaves as a proper manly man and that despite having to live in the suburbs, he has been able to "keep from being contaminated" (27). He also believes that he is not "smug…,typical" (81) and in general terms an "idio[t] . . . who cannot ge[t] excited or believ[e] in anything except [his] own comfortable little God damn mediocrity" (81) like other suburban men. However, the truth is that he is just another prototypical gray flannel suit, for as has been argued, he has sold his life and dreams just to conform to the ideals of his patriarchal society. Furthermore, he has become an abuser perhaps because he somehow believes that by hitting, insulting and subduing his wife he becomes manlier, although, as April says, this, and his other actions just evidences he is anything but a proper man.

What makes Frank even a sadder and more pathetic character is that even though, as has been explained in the previous chapter, he hates and feels humiliated when working with tools, Frank forces himself to carry out do-it-yourself tasks in his

[14] April reveals that Frank hit her because she would not forgive him for some unspecified act (37). Thus, the reader is left to wonder what kind of barbaric act Frank did to April.

continuous, absurd attempt to prove how manly he is. The day right after the quarrel between Frank and April that has just been discussed, April starts mowing the grass (46). When Frank notices this, he decides "to get dressed and go out and take the lawnmower away from her, by force if necessary, in order to restore as much balance to the morning as possible" (53). His need to take the lawnmower from April's hands must be understood, once again, as Frank's attempt to reassure himself of his manhood for, as has been explained, do-it-yourself tasks represented masculinity (Gilbert 2005: 154). Likewise, when women used these tools, there was a symbolic "interchange of gender roles" (Gilbert: 154). Frank is so paranoid about his manhood that he believes that April is somehow stealing his manliness by carrying out a task he is supposed to do. Hence his need to snatch the lawnmower from April. Later on, in an attempt to redeem himself for the failure to monopolise the lawnmower, Frank works on a stone path from the front door to the road. He dislikes this "mindless, unrewarding work" (61) but he does it nonetheless because "[a]t least it was a man's work" (61). Once more, he undertakes a task that he loathes just to conform to the demands of his patriarchal society.

The demands of fatherhood also affect Frank. Like other men, he is supposed to spend time with his children and be a good father. He tries to do so by allowing them to watch him work in the garden and by reading them *The Funnies*[15] aloud when they ask him. Regardless of his good intention, Frank is just an indifferent father. He can only feel irritated (76) when he thinks about all he has to do in order to fit in his society and prove his manliness. Indeed, he wonders "[w]hat the hell kind of a life was this? What in God's name was the point or the meaning or the purpose of a life like this?" (77). Thus, even though he cannot stand the life he leads, Frank does nothing to change it for

[15] An American comic book famous for being "for all the family", as its subtitle indicated, although in 1942 it became more focused on children.

his fear of being regarded as not manly enough, which shows how childish and cowardly he has become in the Age of Anxiety.

In the midst of Frank's conflict between what he desires to be but dares not to try to achieve, and his loathing for the suburban ideals, to which he undoubtedly conforms despite his resistance, April comes up with a plan that could save both of them. She proposes to Frank that they move to Europe, a place Frank used to regard as "the only part of the world worth living in" (29). More precisely, April proposes moving to Paris, arguing that doing so would benefit them in a series of ways. First, it would allow both of them to break free from the prison of the suburbs before it is too late for them. Second, moving to Paris would allow her to work as a secretary and earn plenty of money, which would enable Frank to quit working and "find" himself (149), perhaps write. This plan, as April herself indicates (153) and as García-Avello very well points out, is, ultimately, based on her desire to break free from the chains of a society that condemned women to be housewives. In short, her proposal to move to Paris has as its main objective to liberate and give herself a chance to feel fulfilled, since she does not attempt to do Frank any favour (153). Therefore, Moreno's argument that April devises this plan as an attempt to save "Frank's manhood" and "their marriage as well" (2004: 90) does not seem to me very plausible. Frank is immediately afraid of this plan (148) and tries to dismiss it by arguing that it is not "very realistic" (149). This reaction is especially interesting since he used to be eager to go to Europe. The reason for his fear seems to be, as I have argued, that his obsessive preoccupation to appear manly in the eyes of other men has become more important than achieving his dreams of rebelling against his father's ways and becoming a great man.

April, aware that her only chance to go to Paris is by convincing Frank, appeals to his pride as a man. First she tells him that Bill Croft, a man Frank deeply admired

because he was a fighter pilot and was very successful with girls (156), once mentioned that if he had "half" of Frank's "brains" he would "quit worrying" about the future (155-6). As soon as he hears this, Frank is immediately persuaded to go to France. He even tries to use "the voice of a hero, a voice befitting the kind of person Bill Croft could admire" (156) when talking to April. She continues by arguing that it is his "very *essence* that's being stifled [in the suburbs] . . . it's what you *are* that's being denied and denied and denied in this kind of life" (157, original emphasis). When Frank asks her what she thinks he is, she replies that he is "the most valuable and wonderful thing in the World. You're a man." (157). April obviously does not believe what she says, but she must say it and please her husband, since this is her only chance to go to Paris.

These words are the sweetest melody for Frank. He takes them for granted and genuinely believes that April is being completely honest and that being a man is almost like a blessing from God. When he hears April's words he feels that:

> … of all the capitulations in his life, this was the one that seemed most like a victory. Never before had elation welled more powerfully inside him; never had beauty grown more purely out of truth; never in taking his wife had he triumphed more completely over time and space . . . He had taken command of the universe because he was a man. (157-8)

Because of this ecstasy and only for this, Frank willingly and even enthusiastically accepts April's plan.

Frank's sheer excitement about moving to Paris has two consequences. First, he begins spending his evenings with April in the most blissful mood. He realizes that going to Paris would allow them to escape from the hopelessness and emptiness of the suburbs (258). He is very keen on moving to Paris and considers it such a re-masculinizing act that he compares it to coming out of a "Cellophane bag" (178) and to his time at the front:

> You know what this is like, April? . . . The whole idea of taking off to Europe this way? . . . It's like coming out of a Cellophane bag. It's like having been encased in some kind of Cellophane for years without knowing it, and suddenly breaking out. It's a little like the way I felt going up to the line the first time, in the war. (178)

At this point, therefore, it seems that Frank accepts that Paris is actually the perfect escape for him, since it will allow him to depart from the asphyxiating pressure of 1950s America and its demands on masculinity. Thus, it seems that Frank has finally been able to recover his identity and his dreams to become a great man.

Unfortunately, the pressure of the suburbs and of Frank's past is way too poisonous. When Frank and April communicate to the Campbells and the Givingses their decision to move to Paris, both react as though the Wheelers are out of their mind. The reason for this skepticism and even refusal is perfectly explained by Shep Campbell. He believes that the plan to go to Europe "sounds like a pretty immature deal" (206) and wonders "what kind of half-assed idea is this about her supporting him? I mean what kind of a man is going to be able to take a thing like that?" (206). Thus, as it can be seen, the trip to Paris elicits questions and suspicions about Frank's manhood, even at his workplace, where Ordaway, one of Frank's workmates, makes fun out of this idea of Frank allowing April to maintain him (231-2). The reason for these misgivings is that Frank's continuous attacks on American society and his intention to be maintained by April make him look like a 'Beat', a type of man who, as has been explained, was regarded as immature and not manly enough. The only man who supports the idea of moving to Paris is, as has been explained, John Givings who is supposed to be mad but who, in fact, seems the sanest of the men who appear in the novel. As I will argue later on, John is probably the voice of Richard Yates in the novel. This criticism slowly begins to shake Frank's conviction about moving to Paris, since he starts to feel that this plan will somehow jeopardize his manliness.

The second paradoxical consequence of Frank's excitement with the trip to France is that he begins working especially hard at Knox Business Machines and is able to finish tasks he had left behind due to its difficulty and his diffidence. As a result of Frank's impressive hard work, Bart Pollock, one of the most important men in Knox Business Machines, offers Frank a new, very well-paid and prestigious work at a new branch in the company which Pollock himself will start. Initially, Frank refuses the offer (278), even when told that money is not a problem (279). Pollock, therefore, opts, just like April did before, for appealing to Frank's sense of manhood:

> I'd like you to give a little thought to this chat we've had today. Sleep on it a while; talk it over with your wife—and that's always the main thing, isn't it? Talking it over with your wife? Where the hell would any of us be without 'em? . . . [R]emember, this thing I'm talking about would amount to a brand-new job for you. Something that could turn into a very challenging, very satisfying career for any man . . . if you do decide for Knox I believe it'll be a thing you'll never regret. And I believe something else, too. I believe . . . it'd be a fine memorial and tribute to your dad. (280)

Pollock's comment is in fact a triple appeal to Frank's sense of masculinity. First, his recommendation to "talk it over" with April because "that's always the main thing" maliciously implies that Frank is either a follower of the ideology of 'Togetherness', which as has been mentioned Frank despises because he considers it emasculating, or that he is, at least to some extent, subdued to his wife's desires. The latter would mean that she is the head of the family and that Frank, a World War II veteran, has become completely emasculated by her.

Second, Pollock's remark that the job would be a very satisfying one "for any man" seems to suggest that any real man would accept the job he offers without hesitating for a second. Indeed, rejecting this job would be like accepting being underemployed, as Earl Wheeler was, and thus be regarded as not manly enough. Thus, Frank believes that if he refuses to work for Pollock, he should be suspected of having

an attitude uncharacteristic of a real man, for he would be refusing to become a "Big Wheel" in an age when power and money was of vital importance.

Pollock delivers the final blow with his remark about Frank's father. Pollock is actually telling Frank that accepting his offer would mean that he has surpassed his father, for Frank would have obtained a similar or even better job than the one his father aspired to get but failed to secure. Thus, by accepting to work in the new branch which Pollock will start, Frank would finally get rid of the burden of his past, for he would prove, once and for all, that in spite of having a father who was a failure as a successful breadwinner, he has become a real man.

In a matter of seconds, Frank stupidly falls for Pollock's trick and begins thinking about a way to convince April to stay in the suburbs so he can accept Pollock's job and become, according to his ever less rational perception of the world, manlier than he has ever been. The news of her third pregnancy, which come a few nights after Pollock's offer, become the perfect excuse since, as April herself states, a child would chain them to the suburbs (283). Because of this, of her accurate belief that they are not good enough parents and also of her desire to be more than a mere housewife, April suggests that they should not have their third child and she should, therefore, abort it. Frank soon convinces himself that moving to Paris, and thus freeing himself and April from the miserable and empty life they (and especially April) lead, would prevent him from accepting Pollock's job. Furthermore, just as it happened when April became pregnant with their first child, Frank believes that aborting the fetus would, somehow, diminish his manliness. This becomes evident later on when he reveals his sexual affair with Maureen and tells April the reason for having done so: "I think the main thing was simply a case of feeling that my—well, that my masculinity'd been threatened somehow by all that abortion business; wanting to prove something" (379). In an attempt to

convince April of having the child, Frank tells her that by aborting "[y]ou'd be committing a crime against your own substance. And mine" (297). In this attempt to persuade her, Frank clearly shows how he links his manliness to having children; by stating that she would be committing a crime against his nature, Frank is implying that April's abortion would somehow demasculinize and even castrate him since it is his natural obligation to have offspring.[16]

Appallingly, Frank also tries to convince April that her desire to have an abortion is a product of some psychological problem she has. Frank argues that the fact that her parents left her with her aunt and barely visited her caused April a childhood trauma (308). As a consequence of this, she has not been able to reach maturity and become a "real woman" (316), meaning a good wife and mother. The only way she can heal and become a rational woman who wants to have babies, as any sane woman should, is by accepting to see a psychiatrist (318-9). Thus, they must remain in the suburbs and the plan to move to Paris must be put off for her safety. With this argument about April's alleged psychological disturbances, Frank is actually regurgitating a patriarchal discourse used throughout the 1950s, as Betty Friedan explains in *The Female Mystique* (1963), which had as its main goal to keep women working as housewives, under the excuse that that was the role any rational woman would want to play. Likewise, with this discourse Frank is also proving his maturity, sanity and manliness for he wants to have children and be a breadwinner as a 'real man' should do.

[16] John Fallon, the protagonist of Yates' short story 'The B.A.R. Man', perfectly portrays men's need to have children in the 1950s. As has been mentioned before, John is, like Frank Wheeler, a World War II veteran and he also has problems reintegrating into society and becoming part of the normative masculinity. One of the reasons of his struggle is that he has no children, since his wife, Rose, has a "tipped uterus" (124-5). She could eventually solve her problem and become pregnant by doing a series of exercises, but she refuses to do them. John constantly asks her why she gave up the exercises and tries as hard as possible to make her taking them up again. One day Rose decides to tell him the truth: she quit the exercises because she does not want to become pregnant (125). When he hears this, John is possessed by a gust of rage, leaves home and, after meeting two ex-combatants, tries to have sex with a girl in a vain attempt to prove his worth as a man. Thus, he behaves similarly to Frank.

What makes this speech even more pathetic is the fact that he is using the discourse he has always criticized. He always defended that one of the reasons for America's decadence was that it had become too devoted to Freud and psychoanalysis (89). He claimed that the culture of the United States is "geared" (89) to Freud and that psychoanalysis had become "the new religion; . . . everybody's intellectual and spiritual sugar-tit" (89). It should come as no surprise, therefore, that he regarded men who followed Freud so blatantly as inferior and intellectually limited. Although this criticism is fierce, it shows that Frank was, at some point, a man who did not blindly follow the mass, but actually had some ideas of his own and some principles. The fact that he regurgitates this discourse shows not only that he has become a hypocrite, but also that his need to conform to the expectations of his society has lead him to lose his rebellious spirit and become a bigoted patriarchal, misogynistic man who is too afraid to achieve his dream of going to Europe and develop his talent, if he has any at all. After this confrontation April realizes that not only has any chance of going to Paris been lost (318) but also that she is forced once more to play the roles that she wanted to go beyond: those of housewife and mother. As a consequence, she remains for the rest of the novel depressed, sleeping once more alone and goes back to sleep on the sofa, since she cannot longer stand the presence of her abusive and despotic husband.

The final fight with April, which leads her to perform an abortion on herself causing her death, occurs when Frank, wanting once again to prove and reinforce his manliness, tries to make her sleep with him again. Frank decides to reveal to April his infidelity, in a vain attempt to make April jealous and win back her unconditional love and her desire to sleep with him again, as she, herself, realizes (379). As can be seen, Frank's aim is not to be true to his wife, but rather to make April see how other women madly desire him for his masculine body and charm, and that she will have to be a very

docile and attentive wife if she wants to stay with him. April replies that she could not care less about him or his affairs and that she has never loved him (380). This is, of course, a heavy blow to Frank's sense of manhood, since, logically, not being loved by one's wife is a complete failure for a man and can only suggest that he has some unmanly flaw. Thus, Frank rages and, in an absolute brutish and misogynistic manner, he begins pursuing April into the living room and savagely tries to make April tell him that she loves him: "Oh, now listen . . ., *[l]isten* to me. In the first place, you know God damn well you love me." (381, original emphasis). In the middle of their quarrel, the Givingses arrive with their son John.

Their visit, logically, does not help to improve the mood between Frank and April. Quite the contrary, for John further adds to the already poisonous situation between Frank and April. When the couple reveal that they are going to have a third child and, therefore, are not moving to Paris because they cannot afford it, John begins his attack by first stating that "Money's always a good reason . . . But it's hardly ever the real reason." (391) and initially suspects that April "isn't quite ready to quit playing house" (391). He immediately realizes that she is not the one to blame for "[s]he looks too tough. Tough and female and adequate as hell" (391). With this comment, John saves April from any suspicion of being guilty for the situation. John actually characterizes April an admirable woman, due to her extraordinary strength and willingness to leave a place that has become a prison for those who, like her, want to live beyond the boundaries of a society that has become hopeless and empty. Somehow, it could be argued that she is a real American because she is ready to make her way into the great unknown in order to achieve her own especial "American Dream", through which she might indeed be able to go from rags, i.e., a housewife, to riches, that is, a woman who can work, earn a living and live on her own.

Since April is, under no circumstances, to be blamed, John realizes that he has to direct his disappointment against Frank. He accuses him of getting “cold feet” (391) and of wanting to stay in the suburbs because he’s an over-conformist (391). These comments are already an attack on Frank’s manliness and on the ones who behave like Frank, those who opt for staying in comfortable hopelessness instead of taking risks that could lead them to achieve their true goals and eventually lead better lives. The reason why this is an attack on his manliness is that, as has been discussed in Chapter One, true American manliness has traditionally been based on taking risks so that one can eventually be a Big Wheel. Being an overconformist is directly opposed to being a Big Wheel. Moreover, Frank has willingly accepted to be a white-collar a job that, as I have argued in the first pages of this second chapter, had a series of feminine traits in the traditional sense. The rest of John’s remarks are even harsher on Frank’s manliness. John accuses Frank of impregnating April on purpose so that he could spend the rest of his existence “hiding behind that maternity dress” (392) and immediately adds that he feels sorry for him if “making babies is the only way he can prove he’s got a pair” (393). With this, John criticizes the 1950s’s obsession with having children in order to prove their manliness. He also pinpoints what has been argued throughout this chapter: how Frank links his manliness to having offspring. This remark deeply humiliates Frank for, according to John, it is only by a biological factor, i.e., the capacity to impregnate April, that he can call himself a man. It must be taken into account, as I have argued in the beginning of Chapter One, that gender is performative. Thus, Frank’s actions throughout the novel, much to his surprise and dismay, have not granted him any manliness at all. On the contrary, they have made him a pathetic character and the opposite of what a man should actually be.

With these comments, John proves that insanity is not what he allegedly suffers, but rather what American men like Frank develop in their craving to prove their manliness and conform to the demands of the patriarchal society they live in. American men were so obsessed in the 1950s to be regarded as normal, manly men that they willingly involved in activities and lifestyles that destroyed their individuality and their talent. Some, like Frank, went a step forward in their decadence and abused their wives. Therefore, John becomes, ironically, the male rational voice in the novel and he is the one that clearly states the problem of American society, and especially American men, in the 1950s. John therefore seems to be the voice of Richard Yates in the novel, since he saves April just as Richard Yates would save his mother, and criticizes Frank, as Richard would criticize his father Vincent, for depriving his wife of her dreams to go to Paris and for giving his life away and destroying his family just to conform to his society.

After John's attacks, Frank needs to somehow reinforce his masculinity and tries to convince April to tell him that she loves him, for, as I have argued, obtaining his wife's love would prove that he is in fact a manly man, otherwise a woman would not love him. He fails miserably, for April answers back that she loathes the sight of him (397) and starts screaming whenever he touches her. Feeling completely impotent and in desperate need to somehow prove his manliness, he starts a fight with April and begins to psychologically abuse April, calling her an "*emp*ty, *hol*low [sic] fucking *shell* of a woman" (398, original emphasis), since this is the only way he seems to feel he can show his "manliness", which proves that he is to the core a misogynist. He also claims that he wishes she would have got rid of the baby when she had the time (398). Because of these words and this fight, the following day April, completely desperate and jaded, gives herself an abortion using a rubber syringe in her last endeavor to gain control of

part of her life. Since more than 12 weeks have passed, the abortion is no longer safe. Effectively, April has a hemorrhage and eventually dies (437).

Frank realizes that he is the one responsible for April's terrible death. He knows that if he had allowed April to have an abortion within the first 12 weeks she would not have died (439). He probably knows too that if he had rejected Pollock's job and gone to Paris with April they would have had a chance to live happily. The three decisions that Frank makes thinking only about imposing his masculinity, namely forcing April to have children, accepting Pollock's job and refusing to move to Paris, are the ones that lead his wife to her death and Frank to the destruction of his individuality, hopes and his own soul. As Shep Cambell notes, soon after April's death, Frank leaves Revolutionary Road as a "walking, talking, smiling, lifeless man" (453). It becomes evident that the "empty, hollow shell" of a human being is him, who has given up all his essence for nothing, not April who gave everything she had in order to achieve her dreams, no matter how limited, and do what she believed was the right thing.

This chapter has analyzed the changes in hegemonic masculinity that took place in the 1950s American society and how Frank Wheeler obsessively tries to conform to them. I have argued that because of this obsession, Frank completes his transformation in this period of time. Indeed, he completely gives up all his aspirations and his potential uniqueness in order to conform to the expectations of his society and be able to be regarded as a completely normal man. Thus, he becomes a jaded, dissatisfied white-collar like his father and an abuser who cannot stand the life he leads. The patriarchal society he lives in destroys his identity and his essence and he willingly accepts it. Likewise, as I have proven, this society also abused women to the extreme by trying to cage them in their own homes, bidding them to the housework and depriving them from the freedom to choose whether they wanted to be mothers or not. April becomes the

perfect example of how women were victimized by the laws of the 1950s American patriarchal society and also by the men who longed to prove their manliness like Frank. Her tragic death shows the point of degradation and the dangerousness of this type of patriarchal society so concern with masculinity, as American society was during the 1950s.

Conclusion: What Lies beyond *Revolutionary Road*

In the present dissertation I have argued that *Revolutionary Road* presents a harsh critique of American patriarchal society from the 1930s until the 1950s, focusing and attacking especially the latter decade. My main purpose was to show that Yates' novel proves how the patriarchal societies of the mentioned decades and their demands and constraints on gender roles destroyed men and especially women, who were victimized also by the frustrated men. I have supported my argument by focusing on the life and actions of Frank Wheeler, *Revolutionary Road*'s main male character, from 1935, the year when his father failed at being a proper breadwinner and Frank became obsessed with masculinity until 1955, the year the novel is mainly set on and also the time when April's death occurs. In doing so I have shown that Frank gives in to the pressure of his patriarchal society and annihilates his uniqueness and his hopes to become a great man to conform to the society of his time and be accepted by other men. The bitterness he feels for the life he leads and his need to prove his manliness drive him to physically and psychologically abuse April. She is likewise abused by the 1950s patriarchal society, which tries to confine her in her own home and also deprives April of her right to decide whether she wants to be a mother. As a result of all this, which is what the novel denounces, April suffers a tragic death.

As I have explained in Chapter One, the Great Depression had a devastating effect on men and their sense of manliness. Unemployment and underemployment left men with a sense of emasculation and failure, which was virtually impossible to revert, since the alternatives to remasculinize themselves were extremely difficult to carry out. The sons of these men were likewise affected by the 1929 Stock Market Crash, since their fathers' failure put them under suspicion, for it was believed that the sons of unemployed and underemployed breadwinners would become homosexuals or

delinquents when they grew up. Thus, these sons were almost forced to behave in the manliest possible way to avoid being regarded as effeminate men or homosexuals lest they wanted to be ostracized and looked down on.

The two Wheeler men become a victim of this society. Becoming underemployed starts Earl Wheeler's decadence; he sickens, becomes distraught and torments his child and, presumably his wife too. Frank is also a victim of his father's failure as he is ostracized by his classmates and, therefore, has no friends. Thus he feels compelled to adopt a traditional manly attitude and behavior and prove that he can surpass his father and overcome his failure. Frank's problem is that he becomes more and more obsessed with showing how manly he is. This obsession, as I have shown, increases and becomes almost paranoia after his participation in World War II, when he becomes admired by other men due to his status as ex-combatant. Indeed, he goes as far as to romanticize his participation in World War II, even though he never talks about what he actually did there, just to show that he is a real, manly man. When the ecstasy of victory fades away and he is no longer admired, Frank, in an attempt to be looked up to again, goes as far as to look for a trophy girl who can boost his manliness. He finds the perfect victim in April, whom he does not love and whose life he has no qualms in destroying just to show how manly he can be.

In Chapter Two I have analyzed the changes in hegemonic masculinity in America during the 1950s and their effect on the life of Frank and April Wheeler. With the start of the Cold War in 1947, America crowned itself as the epitome of democracy and capitalism, regarding Communism as its sworn enemy. As a consequence, American men were demanded to be mature and to settle down, which meant that they were supposed to be make sure they were extremely good providers and also proper husbands and fathers. In order to accomplish this, middle-class men were to work as

white-collar employees to earn enough money to afford all possible luxuries their families wanted. Another problem of the changes in hegemonic masculinity was that men were required work as white-collar employees, which, as has been discussed, was not a masculine job in the traditional way. In fact, this type of job had a series of characteristics, namely its concern with external appearance and its subordination to others, which made it feminizing.

As I have tried to prove, after the start of the Cold War and throughout the 1950s Frank transforms himself into a patriarchal abuser whose only aim in life is to prove his manliness and show that he can surpass his failed father. To achieve his aim and conform to the hegemonic masculinity of the 1950s he goes as far as to renounce to his hopes and to surrender his presumed talent in order to become yet another man in a gray flannel suit, a type of job and man he detested since his father's underemployment. The result of letting his dreams fall into oblivion is that he becomes a jaded, frustrated and empty man who cannot stand the life he leads. He aims his anger at April, whom he batters, and constantly humiliates and belittles. As if this was not enough, in his attempt to conform to the patriarchal society of the 1950s, Frank forces April to have children, even though neither of them wants to become a parent. Frank especially dislikes having to play the role of the father. April is also abused by the society she lives in, which tries to bind her to the roles of housewife and mother.

April, brave and ambitious as she is, tries to break free from the miserable life her patriarchal society and her husband make her live. Thus, she develops a plan which involves going to Paris. By doing so, she will be able to work as a secretary and live in a society in which she can actually be outside home and use contraception without being regarded as mad. As I have argued, April's offer to move to Paris is also the only escape for Frank, since it will allow him to leave a society excessively concerned with

manliness and also it will allow him to be maintained by his wife while he develops his talent and becomes the great man he always wanted to be. One would therefore expect him to embrace April's idea and move to Paris. In fact, when he was still ambitious he would have wasted no time in packing his things and make his way into the great unknown. However, by the 1950s he becomes so contaminated by the misogynist and manliness-driven society that he initially refuses April's proposal and regards it as unrealistic. It is only when April states that moving to Paris would be an extremely manly thing to do that he accepts her plan. This shows to what extent Frank has been degraded due to the pressure of his society and his insane concern with manliness.

Unfortunately for Frank and especially for April, the pressure from society quickly makes Frank grow doubts about moving to Paris. The Campbells and the Givingses both regard the idea as childish and unmanly. The only one who supports it is John, an allegedly mad men. Furthermore, Bart Pollock lures Frank into believing that the job he offers him would boost his manliness and allow him to surpass his father Earl. Frank, due to his cowardice and degraded mentality, falls for Pollock's words and decides to make the impossible to remain in the suburbs and accept this new job. Since April becomes pregnant with their third child, Frank develops a plan which consists of abusing April psychologically and labeling her as mad if she refuses to have the child and remain in the suburbs. April, thus, sees how she will not be able to escape from the prison of the suburbs and from constant humiliation and abuse, which is what many women in America experienced during the 1950s.

April is finally portrayed as the innocent victim of a patriarchal society and a cowardly husband in the final showdown of the novel. When the Givinges visit the Wheelers for the last time and are informed by Frank that the plan to Paris has been cancelled, John quickly exonerates April . He confirms that she is brave and adequate

enough to move to Paris and start a new life. Thus the one to be blamed for the pathetic retreat is Frank, whom is labeled as a pitiful, coward and gutless man, whose actions show no manliness at all. As if to confirm John's words and show a further stage of his degradation, Frank starts humiliating April after the Givingses leave and claims that he wished she would have aborted.

Thus I conclude that Frank's decision, taken only to prove his manliness and get over his childhood disappointment with his father, has catastrophic consequences for April. Indeed, she is not only prevented from going to Paris, but also forced to have her third unwanted child. Unable to cope with this, she provokes herself an abortion, which causes her death. Thus, it becomes evident that April becomes a victim of both the patriarchal society of her time and of the decisions Frank takes due to the social pressure on men and due to his obsession with manliness he has experienced since he was a child. *Revolutionary Road* thus criticizes and tries to show the reader how dangerous were the American patriarchal societies of the 1930s until the 1950s.

Hopefully, this dissertation has also shown that Masculinities Studies are an excellent tool to analyze some of the American literature of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Throughout these decades there were a series of key events, namely the Great Depression, World War II and the Cold War, which brought about a series of essential changes in the conception of hegemonic masculinities. The 1930s and the 1950s, as I have explained, were regarded as the decades which witnessed the 20th Century second and the third crisis of masculinity, respectively. Furthermore the patriarchal society of these decades destroyed the life of entire families, making men sell their dreams to conform to the society's demands and also trying to deprive women of their right to work outside home and decide whether they wanted to become mothers or not. Therefore, using this academic approach for the examination of other works of literature

of these decades would help to provide a profounder understanding of both the texts and the social context of the time.

I also hope to have helped in eliciting academic interest in Richard Yates and his works. As has been stated in the introduction, research on him and his work is scarce, especially regarding his capacity to portray the problems of American society and the difficulties women and, especially, men had to cope with it. Therefore, further research on his works would help to understand the changes in American society, for, as I have hopefully shown throughout the dissertation, he perfectly portrayed the changes of masculinity during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the struggle men had to conform to them and the tragedies they caused.

As regards my own future research, this MA dissertation will hopefully be one chapter of my future doctoral thesis. I intend to write a PhD thesis on the literary representations of 1950s white, middle-class American masculinities. I have chosen this topic because the available studies on the 1950s masculinities are mostly focused on filmic or cultural representations (Cohan 1997; Gilbert 2005; Baker 2006). With this thesis I also hope to contribute to the CNM (Construyendo Nuevas Masculinidades/ Constructing New Masculinities), the research group I have been collaborating with since December 2010. The CNM is an American Masculinities research group associated to the *Center Women and Literature/UNESCO Chair Women, Development and Cultures*, and to the English and German Department of the Universitat de Barcelona. Its research lines include the investigation of the history of masculinity and the male body through the analysis of U.S. literary and filmic representations, and the study of alternative masculinities in the literature and films of the United States. Since its creation, it has developed three research projects, two funded by the Spanish

Woman's Institute (1998-2001/2003-2006) and one by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (2012-2014).

In my doctoral thesis I intend to analyze a series of American literary texts set in the 1950s, focusing on four main novels: Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. I have chosen these novels because I will argue that they all represent different types of masculinity and criticize the patriarchal society of their time. Indeed, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* portrays a male protagonist who, as I have mentioned in the Introduction, is the epitome of overconformism and who, as I argued in Chapter One, is traumatized and even ashamed of his participation in World War II. Thus, his attitude is not what the 1950s society expects from a real manly man. *On the Road*, as I have mentioned, narrates the life of the Beats, men who criticized the patriarchal society of the 1950s and presented an alternative masculinity. Finally, *The Catcher in the Rye* portrays the rebellion by male adolescents against America's 1950s patriarchal society and its hegemonic masculinity. Thus, this MA dissertation, apart from being one chapter of my future doctoral thesis, has allowed me to cover some part of the sociological and historical background I need to analyze the rest of the texts in my PhD.

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