
THE ANGEL OF THE HOUSE REVISITED IN RICHARD YATES' *REVOLUTIONARY ROAD*¹

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I. Introduction

After the Second World War, American society underwent a revival of patriarchal ideology, which aimed at establishing a strict segregation of the sexes. Within this framework, the organisation of space played a crucial role in the development of an "American way of life" in which the public arena was reserved for men, whereas the private realm of the house was closely connected with women. Women's association with the private sphere in the character of the family implied that the features used to describe this domain were transferred to female identity. According to this logic, women were supposed to be sympathetic, altruistic, caring, nurturing, etc. From 1949 to 1963, advertising, magazines and domestic consumer goods promoted the image of feminine fulfilment in the form of domesticity. Thus, the media was central to the propagation of a message that urged middle-class women to remain in their proper, traditional place within the domestic area. This arrangement, however, had detrimental effects, which were articulately exposed by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. This pioneering work denounced the anxiety suffered by a large number of middle-class housewives, characterised as a "quiet desperation", for no words were available to communicate the frustration common to those women who did not wish to comply with the ideological

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stranglehold. As Friedan categorically stated: “for over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women”².

In spite of Friedan’s conviction, literary re-presentations can function as effectual instruments to render visible women’s concerns inasmuch as they constitute the channels to communicate their particular experiences. This article focuses on the period right before the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in order to support the thesis that literature can serve as the medium to articulate what is still unrecognised within the social dominant discourse. Following this assumption, this work aims to demonstrate how literature was ahead of its time by dealing with a novel that exposed the flip side of the conservative promotion of domesticity glorified by postwar mass culture. Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* (1961) deals with the deep discontent suffered by suburban women in an era in which domestic ideals were momentous. Within this frame of reference, the novel gives an invaluable insight into the discrimination underlying the division of spaces, while offering a magnificent example of the frustrated attempts to challenge subordination carried out by April, the female protagonist. This leads us to consider April’s efforts to liberate from the oppressive gender roles that tie her to the domestic sphere. During an age in which there seemed to be no channel available for women to express their unease, literature filled this void, while preparing the ground for approaching the transformations that would take place during the “second wave” of the Women’s Movement.

The analysis of the novel must be preceded by a brief overview of the development of the public/private dichotomy followed by an examination of the features that made up the context in which *Revolutionary Road* unfolds. The decade of the 50s in America should be taken into account in order to identify its singularity. At that time male citizens were educated to be participants in the market of the capitalist world economy, while their female counterparts acted as the “Angels of the House” and key components of consumerism. The course of action projected through this paper starts with the “genealogy” of the organisation of space that leads to a second and related survey concerning the years of the “feminine mystique”. On the other hand, it is vital to point out that this investigation is circumscribed to a particular sector of society: white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class women. Likewise, both the public/private dichotomy and the dominant discourse of the feminine mystique are crucial factors to comprehend the female protagonist. Thus, these two aspects

² B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co, 1963, p. 16.

provide us with the theoretical framework to approach a novel in which freedom is related to location. This correlation explains why April aims at three targets connected to space: to be released from the imprisonment represented by her home, to leave her country and finally to take possession of her own body. In order to attain these goals, she devises a number of strategies to conquer new lands, which include taking part of a play, the project to move to Paris and a struggle to gain control over her own body by means of deciding on matters of reproduction and motherhood. This work aims to emphasise the social dimension of the literary work, which compels us to devote an important section to the contextualisation of *Revolutionary Road*.

II. Public citizens / Private housewives

Throughout the past four decades, feminist political theory has been informed by research on the significance of the private/public dichotomy for gender. In so doing, the private sphere has been exposed as a major site of oppression and inequality for women. Spanish scholar Cristina Molina conforms to this stream when she defines patriarchy as the “power to assign spaces”³. These “spaces” can be arranged under two categories termed as public and private. The first one refers to polity, the market and civil society in general, whereas the private realm designates the family. A number of feminist scholars have focused on the association of men and women with public and private spheres, respectively, but in spite of the countless investigations concerned with this dualism, the topic has not been exhausted yet. Quite the contrary, there are still grey areas on which academic research is expected to shed some light.

The public/private divide has been a chief constituent of the development of Western political thought. Within this framework, Jean Bethke Elshtain's *Public Man, Private Woman* (1981) centres on the concepts of public and private, along with the distribution of the roles and traits stereotypically allocated to each sex: “Public and private are imbedded within a dense web of associational meanings and intimations and linked to other basic notions: nature and culture, male and female, and each society's `understanding of the meaning and role of work; its views of nature’”⁴. Elshtain's work explores the ideological purpose served by the conventional creation of an asymmetric division between public and private grounds, which she identifies

³ C. Molina, *Dialéctica feminista de la Ilustración*, Barcelona, Antropos, 1997, p. 32.

⁴ J. B. Elshtain, *Public Man. Private Woman*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 5.

as a political mechanism to safeguard patriarchal power. Echoing other feminist critiques, she states that male dominion in the public arena has perpetuated their social power, allowing them at the same time to exert power within the private realm. On the other hand, the domestic sphere, skilfully referred to as “private”, has been the locus of exploitation for women throughout history. A brief survey on the genealogy of this organisation unveils the distortion concealed by these terms, giving an insight into the asymmetry they entail.

In the XVIth century there was a transition illustrated by Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. According to this influential work, the private realm was separated and at odds with the public arena. While the public space was characterised for its brutality, corruption and competition, as well as for being predominantly masculine, the private sanctuary where women belonged provided men with a haven of security from that outer world. In other words, by assuming that women’s participation in the public sphere would destroy their gentleness and good-heartedness, Machiavelli endeavoured to secure the *status quo*. “Women are not of politics per se, but provide, in their capacities in the private sphere, a refuge from public life for men when they share in the private sphere”⁵. Therefore, both areas of life were not only opposed, but also irreconcilable, which also implied that the only way women’s virtue could be kept intact was by means of preserving their enshrinement within the domestic world, erroneously but cunningly denominated “private” domain.

The Prince was the first step towards Liberal ideology as represented by social contract theorists. Locke’s thesis conceived civil society as founded on a social contract between naturally free and equal individuals capable of creating their social relationships and institutions for themselves. Nevertheless, not all human associations were judged as conventional in character. Unlike Hobbes, Locke and later on, Rousseau and Hegel defended the hypothesis that the family was the most natural association. Locke approached this issue by appealing to nature in order to legitimise a series of binary oppositions, such as mind and body, reason and passion, public and private sphere or civil society and the family. The abyss between the poles defined by each term in the dichotomies served him to describe public and private domains as perfectly distinct and separate: the former was conventional in character and the latter was natural, one the work of men and the other belonged to women. More specifically, Locke regarded the private region in the character of

⁵ M. Charlton, <<Women in Development>>, in M. Charlton, Jana Matson et al (ed.), *Women, The State and Development*, Albany, New York Press, 1989, p. 24.

family as part of the natural order that allowed men to rule over their wives. Therefore, Liberal thought established what Carol Pateman has called "fraternal patriarchy": "Modern patriarchy is fraternal, contractual and structures capitalist civil society"⁶. Furthermore, Locke's dichotomies reappeared in the following centuries as part of liberal theory. Rousseau, Hegel, the work of Bentham and Stuart Mill, etc., also drew a dividing line between the family and the public world, treating them as two unrelated fields.

In a similar vein, Rousseau based on the separation of the political and private spheres in order to define the roles allocated respectively to men and women in civil society. His famous prescription of the mission undertaken by the ideal (male) citizen and the "Angel of the house" was exhaustively elucidated in his *Emile*. This tract depicted women as the guardians of morality and the necessary nurturers for civil society to function properly. Paradoxically, the myth of women's moral superiority was used both by Rousseau in order to confine women to the domestic realm and by Suffragists to vindicate their inclusion in the public space. "First wave" feminists appropriated the traits associated with women in patriarchal discourse arguing that the public arena would profit from female values, such as peacefulness, morality, virtue, nurture, etc. In order to uphold their rights to citizenships and equality on a par with men, they made use of the same arguments that had been put in action to exclude women from civil society, relegating them to the household. The resulting consequence was that citizenship was granted in the liberal democracies, but core structures remained unchanged.

This analysis evinces that despite the numberless alterations undergone by the public/private split, the organisation of space according to gender has been crucial for the asymmetrical distribution of power between men and women. Despite the numerous transformations in Western society, the structure of gender inequality remained intact insofar as the separation of domestic from civil life, which was also a sexual separation, survived as the ideology of the liberal capitalist state. This seems to support Lampedusa's sagacious remark "Everything must change in order to remain the same"⁷. Furthermore, the retention and reification of the public/private dichotomy was particularly conspicuous after the Second World War. Postwar America reinforced the legitimisation of separate spheres for men and women, along with the attribution of different functions and a set of dichotomous values, which

⁶ C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 32.

⁷ G. Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, New York, Random House, 1988, p. 45.

became correspondingly sex-typed. An overview of the United States during the 1950s brings about an exceptional panorama to approach the polarised spheres through a feminist lens, along with the social roles assigned to men and women that mirrored them.

III. “The Angel of the House” during the *Feminine Mystique*

The patriarchal ideology underlying the discourse on strict segregation of the sexes was at its height at this period labelled by Betty Friedan as “the feminine mystique” years. Therefore, the particular circumstances that led to the demarcation between public and private and the dichotomies thriving at this time need to be considered. In order to approach this issue, the Second World War must be contemplated. In the United States, as in most European countries, universal suffrage had been granted after the First World War, permitting women to enjoy civil rights and access to education on a par with men. This, however, did not prevent most women from remaining within traditional female areas in the role of family caretakers, while men were in charge of public work. Not surprisingly, an interesting reversal took place during the Second World War. One of the collateral effects of the war was the need for women in male occupations; hence, women were recruited by the government to enter the labour force. Maureen Honey’s investigation on the new roles for women during the 40s reports that

for professional women, the war provided opportunities to become newspaper editors, personnel managers, pilots, engineers and to enter other occupational roles offering creativity, power and status. For working-class women, it lowered barriers against employment in high wage durable goods industries⁸.

To this end, the mass media campaign to recruit women into war production was aimed at a female audience stratified by class. “Rosie the Riveter” and her famous slogan “We can do it” has survived as the most popular expression of how women were encouraged to join the factory in order to sustain the country while men were at the battlefield. Even though working-class women had been employed in the past on account of economic reasons, it was the first massive entry of middle-class women into the labour force.

Nevertheless, once the war was over and the American soldiers were back at

⁸ M. Honey, “New roles for women and the feminine mystique: popular fiction of the 1940s”, *American Studies*, Vol. 24, n° 1, 1983, p. 37-51.

home, middle-class women voluntarily left their jobs for homemaking. The prevailing image of femininity corresponded to the archetype of the "angel of the house" whose life was devoted to maternal tasks. But far from being spontaneous, this massive exodus to the domestic household was part of an orchestrated plan. Since they were no longer needed in the postwar market, female aspirations were redirected towards the private realm. The belief that domestic life was the proper sphere for women was supported by a number of reports, such as the following one from the War Production Board's Labor Division: "There is little doubt that women will be required to leave their jobs at the end of the war to permit the return of the men to their jobs as they are released from the armed forces"⁹. But contrary to what is usually assumed, economic reasons were not the only motivating forces behind this stream. According to Michael Kimmel, the new territories conquered by women during the war triggered a "crisis of masculinity" at the end of the decade, which elicited the following reactions: "antifeminist backlash [...] promale backlash [which] sought vigorously to reassert traditional masculinity, especially as a cultural and political ethos"¹⁰. The "American Dream" promoted during the 50s can be regarded as a manifestation of this prevailing anti-feminist backlash.

Consequently, the outcome was the exacerbation of the polarised spheres, along with the sharp division of the roles attributed to men and women. The assignation of women to the private and men to the public spheres became the bedrock on which dualisms were raised. As it was already mentioned, the peculiar features of the 1950s differentiated this period from other contexts. More specifically, the coalescence of patriarchy and capitalism shaped the ideological grip of the postwar era. The "Emile" of postwar mass culture was entrusted with the duty of maximising the profits, earning more and more money while being promoted in a competitive labour market. Regarding Sophie, she became the necessary pawn of consumerism. Advertising, magazines and the proliferation of consumer goods were central to the propagation of the "feminine mystique". The image of femininity perpetrated by the media dictated female enslavement within the domestic realm, encouraging women to seek fulfilment in the roles of mother and wife. Betty Friedan's pioneering essay put an emphasis on the role of advertising and consumption in the social control of American housewives. In so doing, she exposed the ideological apparatus hiding behind the association of women with the domestic functions related to motherhood

⁹ Th. McKelvey, *Women in War Production*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1942, p. 39.

¹⁰ M. Kimmel, "The Contemporary Crisis of Masculinity in Historical Perspective" in Harry Brod (ed.), *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men Studies*, Boston, Allen and Wind, 1987, p. 121-54, p. 152.

and the household. Thus, Friedan succeeded in making visible the ideology that legitimised gender inequality by means of imposing an archetype of femininity based on female subordination and fulfilment in the form of reproduction and domesticity. Therefore, it is no surprise that this path breaking research was followed by the “second wave” of feminism.

Furthermore, this work also gave an insight into the situation of middle-class women after 1949, unveiling the dissatisfaction shared by a large percentage of housewives:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries [...] lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: “Is this all?”¹¹

By referring to this exasperation as “the problem that has no name”, Friedan intended to point out the silence or void surrounding female concerns within the linguistic repertoire. This lack acted as a barrier preventing women from verbalising their discontent. Nonetheless, this paper is anchored in the American 1950s in order to demonstrate that at a time in which there seemed to be no discourse available for women to expose their oppression, literature functioned as the medium through which female uneasiness could be denounced and subverted.

IV. *Revolutionary Road* and its “politics of location”

Certain literary works can be said to have been ahead of its time, anticipating the discourses that would later on be verbalised. Due to spatial constraints, this article is circumscribed to one particular novel: Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*. This novel is set in 1955 in a suburban neighbourhood called Revolutionary Road, where Frank and April Wheeler live with their two children. Published in 1961, it was well received by critics, whose reviews praised Yates’s deeply perceptive depiction of the materialistic self-interest and shallowness engendered by American ideals. Nonetheless, engrossment with this issue led them to neglect the significance of the female protagonist, along with her embodiment of the deep discontent suffered by suburban women in the postwar era.

The novel depicts the lives of Frank, who works in an office job in the city and

¹¹ B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, *op. cit.*, p. 16

April, a housewife. In spite of having a big house and two beautiful children, their unhappiness leads them to think about moving to Paris. April suggests that in Paris she can get a lucrative secretarial job, while Frank develops his real passion. Unfortunately, as the novel unfolds Frank starts to change his mind and once he finds out that April is pregnant he decides to stay. Having seen her plan frustrated, April ultimately kills herself in a tragic end that bears some resemblance to canonical masterpieces like *The Awakening*. One of the achievements of the novel is precisely the two-fold dimension of Yates' characters, whose psychological depth combines with the role they play as symbols, that is, as allegories. Through April, the author offers a discerning depiction of domesticity. This causes April to personify the malcontent of the feminine mystique, exposing the negative consequences of women's circumscription to the traditional female areas of the house and their roles as family caretakers with no room for satisfying public work. As a suburban housewife confined to the family and relegated to her proper, traditional place, April represents the dissatisfaction of suburbia centre, conforming to Friedan's formulations. Therefore, not only is April a round and well-developed character, but she also mirrors the oppressive "positioning" of women in American society.

The narrative technique correlates with the symbolic meaning of Yates' work. The third person narrator usually adopts Frank's point of view, while April is not entitled to convey her perspective until one of the final chapters. The silencing of female experience at the time is symbolised by April's lack of a narrative voice until the chapter dealing with her suicide. Wittingly, in spite of April's muteness, the novel succeeds in revealing her feelings of dissatisfaction stemming from the situation of confinement to the home, as well as her continuous attempts to be released from the socially induced femininity. Since April's oppression is closely associated with space, it is only logical that her efforts to liberate are intended to expand the territory that she is allowed to occupy. Therefore, April aims at three targets connected to location: to be released from the imprisonment represented by her home, to leave behind American way of life and finally to take possession of her own body. In order to move beyond the home she pursues a career as an actress, later on, she intends to abandon American oppressive culture by establishing in Paris and finally, she struggles to gain control over her own body by means of having an abortion. Thus, this analysis delves into the correspondence between freedom and location by considering April's situation, along with the strategies she carries out in her struggle to be free to choose. In fact, the concept of free choice is questioned by

April, who queries to what extent choice is limited to what is offered.

To start with, the novel exhibits a threshold division between public and private grounds, replicated within the social roles assigned to men and women. Frank is associated with the public world, which includes the market and civil society. Private, on the other hand, purports to relate to an individual's interior life but as it is applied to April, this sphere in the character of the family encompasses domestic life, which has been considered by feminists as the primary site of inequality for women. The following fragment serves as an example of how the polarised spheres are highlighted in Yates' work, along with the inequality they entail: "It was still necessary for him to kill most of each day at the office [...] and for her to spend it imprisoned in the reality of their home"¹². The quotation hints at the nature of the relation between Frank and April. Whereas the public sphere is exclusively male, the house is shared by both genders, but their experiences and the "positioning" they occupy inside the residence are at odds. Frank's patriarchal power in the private realm is legitimised due to the fact that he retains his position of influence in the public sphere. Furthermore, he is released from the quotidian demands of housework and childcare, which are commissioned to April. The house means domesticity for April, while for Frank it represents a haven from hectic daily life. In Frank's words: "he could see his house the way a house ought to look [...] safe on its carpet of green, the frail white sanctuary of a man's love, a man's wife and children"¹³.

The family is not only the place where certain basic human needs are satisfied, but in consonance with April's experience, feminists have long exposed the domestic sphere as a primary site of oppression for women. In *Revolutionary Road*, Frank is described in a number of places, such as the city, his office, restaurants with friends, his lover's flat, but he also has "a house of his own". Meanwhile, April is usually at home and even inside the household she is associated with a particular room: the kitchen. In the previous passage, the term used to define April's rapport to her house is revealing: she is there "imprisoned". The endorsement of domestic roles contributes to the conceptualization of home as a place for incarceration, relegated to secondariness in relation to the public world of achievement. Moreover, April's captivity takes place within the limited space represented by the kitchen. The copious references to space throughout the novel demonstrate that the protagonist's

¹² R. Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, Boston, Little Brown & Co, 1961, p. 232.

¹³ R. Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

oppression is mainly physical, but at the same time location is used as a pretext for the establishment and distribution of sex-typed roles.

According to Frank's outlook, his wife is expected to conform to the archetype of the "feminine mystique" version of the "angel of the house". This ideal revolves around a family and fulfilment in the form of a husband, children and suburbia. The novel exemplifies how the feminine mystique has brainwashed Frank when, inspired by the image of femininity perpetrated by magazines, he describes April as the perfect housewife, whose life is devoted to her children and husband: "Everything about her seemed determined to prove, with a new, flatfooted emphasis, that a sensible middle-class housewife was all she had ever wanted to be and that all she had ever wanted of love was a husband who would get out and cut the grass once in a while"¹⁴. The quotation features Frank's misconception of his wife, while pointing out that the roots of his biased perception are found in the dominant ideology of the 50s. That is, by the conservative promotion of domesticity which dictated that women did not have to earn a living, for their role was in their home. According to this logic, all "sensible" middle-class women should long for a family as the source of meaning in life.

Nevertheless, the novel hints at April's discontent, uncovering a depiction of the female character that differs from Frank's distorted opinions. Since April does not have a narrative voice, this information is transmitted through more subtle channels, such as her behaviours, reactions and the dialogues in which her voice and opinions are heard. Additionally, the chapter dealing with her suicide can also be interpreted as her final attempt to denounce her malcontent. To sum up, April's refusal to assimilate to the ideal of domestic femininity is conveyed from the beginning of the novel. One of the most explicit instances occurs during an argument with her husband that prompts her to recriminate: "I've always known I had to be your conscience and your guts – and your punching bag. Just because you've got me safely in a trap"¹⁵. This declaration is important because it raises two main issues. On the one hand, April "knows", that is, she is aware of public conceptions about women's place in American life. On the other hand, she blames her husband for dragging her into the "suburban dream" she defines as a "trap". The coalition of these recognitions causes her to acknowledge that in order to gain some independence she cannot overtly defy the social order. Instead of that, she must

¹⁴ R. Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁵ R. Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

operate within the establishment, endeavouring to subvert it from within.

April's non-conformity to the social roles ascribed to women impels her to devise certain plan of actions aimed at liberating from the oppressive confinement she is forced to endure. The tension between the domestic ideals prevailing at the time and April's individual aspirations is the source of the feelings of emptiness and unfulfilment that instigate her to seek social emancipation. Thus, she strives to escape from domestic enslavement by attempting to rise to public achievement, which drives her to pursue a career as an actress. When her expectations are frustrated, she struggles to leave behind the "American Dream" and move to Paris, but she finds out that in order to achieve social emancipation, she firstly needs to take control of her own body. When considering the strategies employed by April, it is useful to remember Lucien Bianco's remark on peasant resistances in China: "the weapons of the weak are always weak weapons"¹⁶. This statement can be applied to April's weapons as well because in spite of her efforts, her plans are doomed on the grounds that she lacks the means by which to hold the reins of her own life. As a consequence, this circumstance compels her to remain tied down to a system that oppresses her.

Revolutionary Road opens with the performance of *The Petrified Forest* in which April plays the part of the main character Gabriela. As the analogies between April and her character reveal, the play foreshadows the development of the novel. Gabriela is a waitress in the midst of the desert who hopes that a man will rescue her and take her to France. Apart from the remarkable similarities between both women, the significance of the play for the protagonist's daily life cannot be underestimated. April identifies acting as the means to break with the vacuity of her domestic reality, allowing her to escape from her tedious duties as a housewife. April resorts to performance in order to play an act under the illusion that she is living a different reality; hence, for a short lapse of time, the rehearsals give her the opportunity to leave aside the role of family caretaker. Paradoxically, Gabriela is also imprisoned, which suggests that even at an imaginary level, women were deprived of any dreams or aspiration differing from those dictated by American society. On the other hand, acting is not a mere entertainment. Since the eventuality of becoming an actress constitutes April's ultimate objective, acting means the possibility of pursuing a career. Unfortunately, all hopes of transcending the domestic world are annihilated when the debut turns out to be a failure and she is constrained to return to an empty

¹⁶ P. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001, p. 32.

life.

The sense of grievance generated by this situation causes April to identify her husband as the representative of patriarchy. Thus, she expresses her resentment by spending some days without talking to Frank. In the absence of a medium through which to convey her dissatisfaction, she opts for silence. However, Frank's inability to read those silences compels her to devise a new scheme. Aware of the lack of choices offered by American society, she tries to persuade Frank to move to Paris, where she expects to apply for a job as a secretary. According to her plans, she will work to support the family while Frank embarks on an inner search to find his vocation. If her will is to prevail, April needs to make use of subtle tactics that conceal the subversive implications of this reversal of roles. Firstly, she moulds her proposal so that it conforms to her husband's ideology, which corresponds to the discourse of the "feminine mystique". At a more personal level, she also takes advantage of Frank's egotism by convincing him that he is a gifted man whose potential is being wasted with the kind of life they lead. On the other hand, Paris is depicted as the ideal scenario to develop his talent. Skilfully, April manages to leave intact the association between masculinity and achievement in the public sphere to such an extent that Frank approaches the plan as a perfect opportunity to thrive as an artist. Instead of threatened, his masculinity is reaffirmed on account of his expectations to explore different facets of his male identity: "The past could dissolve at his will and so could the future [...] He had taken command of the universe because he was a man, and because the marvellous creature who opened and moved for him, tender and strong, was a woman"¹⁷. At this point, April seems to have succeeded in making Frank believe that Paris is the ideal place for him to cultivate his artistic talent, while concealing her hidden motif: the attainment of emancipation.

Nevertheless, it must be noticed that April aims to subvert the social order by making use to the same ideology that oppresses her. This is highly problematic because as long as her strategy leaves gender dichotomies unaltered, her future depends on Frank's whimsical desires. In addition, the subjugation to her husband confirms the weakness of the weapons of the weak previously mentioned. When friends and colleagues urge Frank to regard his glorious expectations as quite quixotic, he begins to grasp the full implications of the plan. Insomuch as there is no guarantee that he will become an artist or nothing of the sort, the only certainty of the project is that April will emerge as the breadwinner. Finally, when April finds

¹⁷ R. Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

out that she is pregnant she unintentionally provides him with an alleged reason to stay in the United States. Even though she is not willing to have another child, Frank forces her to forget about having an abortion or moving to Paris. Thus, April remains confined to her reproductive role, subjugated by the archetypal figure of femininity: motherhood. On the other hand, Frank's categorical objection to allow April to decide is related to a complex issue he defines as "this bleakest and most unnatural of conjugal problems, a wife unwilling to bear his child"¹⁸. Not surprisingly, the crux of the matter concerns the female body. Frank does not reject abortion on the grounds of religious or moral principles. What seems to be at stake is his male authority, which rests on his capacity for exerting control over his wife's body. This exhibits how the web connecting masculinity and the physical subjection of women is woven by a definition of manhood that encompasses the right to dominate the female body. This observation does not differ from Carol Pateman's thesis in *The Sexual Contract*, which attributes the following basis to patriarchal society: "The original pact is a sexual as well as a social contract: it is sexual in the sense of patriarchal –that is, the contract establishes men's political right over women- and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women's bodies"¹⁹. In relation to this, there is a flashback in the novel in which Frank remembers the first time April got pregnant. Neither of them wanted children, but when April decided to have an abortion, Frank saw his authority faltering, which prompted him to oppose action for his personal choice to prevail. Finally, April was physically and psychologically coerced by Frank, whose feelings of triumph are eloquently described in the following quotation:

the next day he had won. The next day, weeping in his arms, she had allowed herself to be dissuaded [...] And it seemed to him now that no single moment of his life had ever contained a better proof of manhood than that [...] holding that tamed, submissive girl [...] while she promised she would bear his child²⁰.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that condemnation of abortion has served as a useful mechanism for keeping women confined to their reproductive role throughout history. A suggestive example is that in Ancient Rome access to abortion was legal, but this resolution needed to be reached only by the patriarch.

¹⁸ R. Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

¹⁹ C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, *opt. cit.*, p. 32.

²⁰ R. Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, *opt. cit.*, p. 52.

Consequently, if a wife had an abortion without his permission, she was sentenced to death. This exponent supports the assumption that the female body has traditionally been regarded as the domain over which men could exert their power. Likewise, the body has been used to enslave them in behalf of conceptions of females as destined for reproduction and domestic functions. At this point, it is possible to establish an evocative analogy between the oppression represented by the female body and the house. Forasmuch as April's subordination is closely associated to the "politics of location", her attempts to liberate from the social constriction are mainly represented by her failed challenges against the physical boundaries that imprison her at different levels: the female body, domesticity and national boundaries. She struggles to surpass barriers by means of operating within the social order, but her plans are frustrated once and again. Her discernment leads her to realise that patriarchal society constitutes a trap inducing an archetype of femininity that annihilates social emancipation.

Conclusion

To conclude, April's scarce power to choose raises a series of queries about the options available to her. In spite of her many efforts to be free to choose, the question that remains is: what choice is she offered? The lack of alternatives offered by society urges April to ascertain the farcical existence she is forced to endure, she even draws the conclusion that only her own death will allow her to put an end to her entrapment. The paradox is that by choosing suicide, she regains the power she lacked over her life. Furthermore, the fact that she dies trying to abort is also symptomatic of her final attempt to exert control over her own body. Forasmuch as choice is limited by what is offered and the postwar era denied middle-class women any commitment outside the home, April is only free to choose her own death. In relation to this, one of the distortions that the novel discloses is related to the fact that both protagonists approach April's discontent as if it was a personal issue, overlooking by so doing the social bases lying at the heart of the housewife's syndrome. Frank's words bring to light this delusion when he wonders: "Was his wife unhappy? That was unfortunate, but it was, after all, her problem"²¹. As long as both of them ignore that April's dissatisfaction stems from a social structure, the essence of the problem is bound to remain unseen, contributing to the myopia that intercepted the eventual realisation that this same feeling was shared by millions of

²¹ R. Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

middle-class housewives in America.

It was already mentioned how the characters could be considered from two angles. On the one hand, they are round characters endowed with a penetrating psychological depth, and simultaneously, they can be interpreted as allegories. Seen in this light, April's final decision is loaded with symbolism. More specifically, the determination to commit suicide can be read as a vindication on the part of the author to denounce the lack of opportunities available for women in the America's 50s. In her famous essay "Can the subaltern speak?"²², Gayatri Spivak defends the thesis that for suicide to be used as an effective weapon of resistance against power, oppressed groups must be provided with networks and channels to communicate their outlooks. Therefore, for April's suicide to be read as a political vindication, women required an area of political expression that was not available in the 50s. The fact that *Revolutionary Road* was ahead of its time implies that its subversive potential was for the most part ignored. The political reading of the suicide is feasible to the contemporary reader because nowadays there are a number of channels granting female voices the possibility to be heard. At this point the issue of the author's gender must be invoked, for the question that remains is whether Richard Yates as a male writer in the 1960s intended to denounce the oppression suffered by middle-class housewives in America. Although the answer stays open, it is undeniable that his magnificent portrait of the American society at the time led him to illustrate the problems of the "feminine mystique" before Friedan's work was written.

To conclude, the analysis of the public/private dichotomy from a feminist perspective, Friedan's work and other development in the field of women's studies provide us with the tools to give the novel a deeper significance. This contributes to explain why the reception of the novel in 1961 was not the same as its reception nowadays, while allowing us to recover a masterpiece that can be regarded from an angle that had previously been overlooked. Furthermore, this investigation also demonstrates the undeniable, albeit less visible roles played by literature: its capacity for transcending the private realm, transforming private concerns into public ones.

²² G. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988. p. 271-313.