

American Suburbs and American Suburban Poetry



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Definitions: What is a suburb?

1/ A residential community of primarily single-family detached houses located between the city and the country, offering the best of both worlds.

2/ “Suburbia is the site of promises, dreams, and fantasies. It is a landscape of the imagination where Americans situate ambitions for upward mobility and economic security, ideals about freedom and private property, and longings for social harmony and spiritual uplift.” = fulfilment of the triple dream of owning a suburban house is set in an unspoiled natural environment and promises a friendly neighborhood community ---Dolores Hayden, from *Building Suburbia*

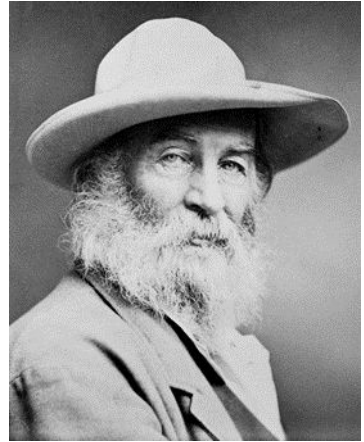
On the cultural value of suburban housing

“a man is not a whole and complete man unless he *owns* a house and the ground it stands on.”

--Walt Whitman, from “Wicked Architecture”

Through the 19th century, “the single-family dwelling became the paragon of middle-class housing, the most visible symbol **of having arrived at a fixed place in society, the goal to which every decent family aspired.** [...] The purchase of one’s [suburban] home [...] became more than a proxy **for success; it also conferred moral rectitude.**”

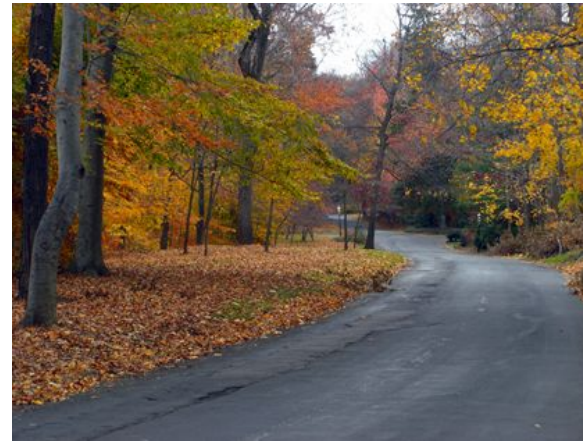
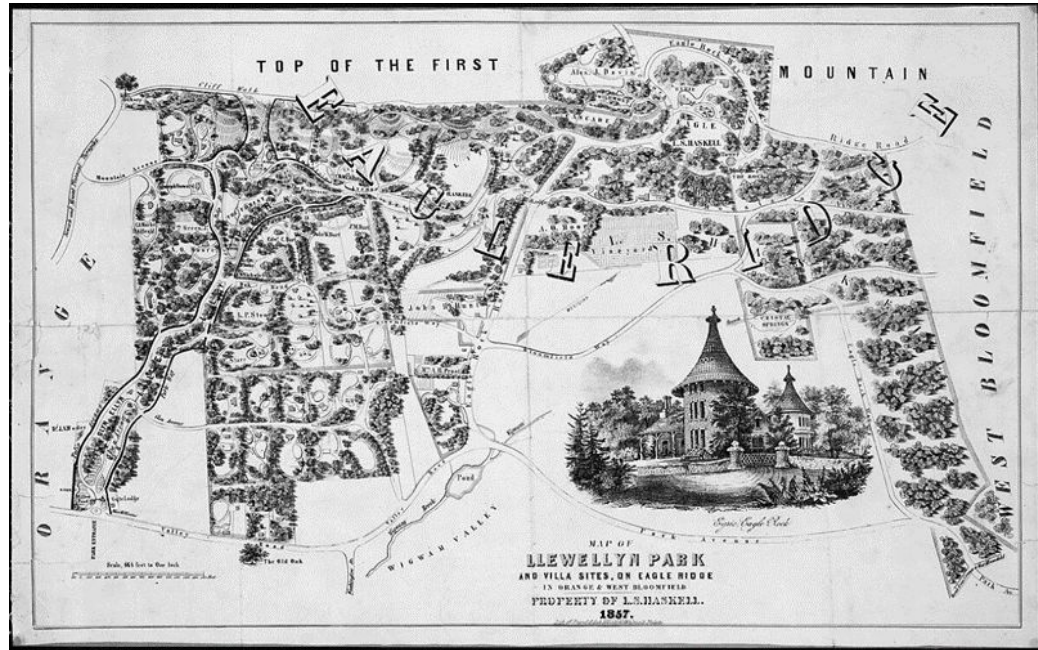
--Kenneth T. Jackson, from *Crabgrass Frontier*



Other reasons for migration to the suburbs

- **preference for a detached house**, with a large, weed-free lawn
- **escape from the unsanitary conditions in the cities** (cleaner environment, bigger garden, larger house)
- **idealization of the suburban home** as „a kind of Edenic retreat, a place of repose where a family could focus inward upon itself“
- development of **suburban domesticity** (ie women at home, men away at work)

Early Picturesque Suburb: Lewellyn Park, NJ (1850s)



A Railroad Suburb:
Germantown, PA



A Streetcar suburb:
Spruce St, Philadelphia



On life in a 19th century railroad suburb of Boston

“**Charlesbridge appeared to us a kind of Paradise.** The wind blew all day from the southwest, and all day in the grove across the way the orioles sang to their nestlings. The butcher's wagon rattled merrily up to our gate every morning; and if we had kept no other reckoning, we should have known it was Thursday by the grocer. **We were living in the country with the conveniences and luxuries of the city about us.**”

W. D. Howells, *Suburban Sketches* (1871), p. 12



Westlake, CA suburb, 1920s



Tract housing, Lakewood, CA, late 1940s



Park Forest, IL, 1955



Typical postwar suburban house designs in “sitcom” suburbs



The Emergence of American Suburban Poetry

-1910s—William Carlos Williams and modernist poets (Wallace Stevens) start exploring suburbs in their work

-three full-length volumes of suburban poetry, *The Suburb by the Sea* by Robert Hillyer (1952), *Four Good Things* by James McMichael (1980) and *Blue Suburbia* by Laurie Lico Albanese (2004)

-four 20th century American poets extensively wrote suburban poems throughout their careers: Phyllis McGinley, Mona Van Duyn, Louis Simpson, John Updike

-hundreds American poets have written one or several suburban poems

The American Dream

Jack Myers (1941-2009): from “Something Solid,” 1980s

First thing in the morning,
I open my eyes, look into the mirror
of my old armoire,
a bald man in stolen hospital pyjamas
expecting to see
a distinguished man of letters.

[...]

[...] about this time
Mr. Pernell, retired oilman and rancher,
marches by the house on his morning exercise
[...]
and he’s thinking to himself,
“This is Professor Myers’ house,”
and he’s feeling good about the neighborhood
whose citizens, like me, he thinks,
have achieved something solid.



Phyllis McGinley: "The 5:32," 1940s

She said, If tomorrow my world were torn in two,
Blacked out, dissolved, I think I would remember
(As if transfixed in unsundering amber)

This hour best of all the hours I knew:

When cars came backing into the shabby station,
Children scuffling the seats, and the women driving
With ribbons around their hair, and the trains arriving,
And the men getting off with tired but practiced motion.

Yes, I would remember my life like this, she said:

Autumn, the platform red with Virginia creeper,
And a man coming toward me, smiling, the evening paper
Under his arm, and his hat pushed back on his head,
And wood smoke lying like haze on the quiet town,
And dinner waiting, and the sun not yet gone down.



Suburban Pastoral

is a work of literature which portrays suburbs as the idealized residential landscape and space that offers material and spiritual retreat from the challenges of urban and rural, enabling the construction of a unique American identity of the suburbanite

Josephine Miles, “\$7,500” (1939)

I cannot tell you what a bargain this is,
Built at a cost of seven thousand, selling
For seven five, and all utilities
In, and trees.

Landscaped front and back, strings up for lawn,
Tiled, wrought-iron fixture, entrance hall
With an echo, echo, echo, beamed ceiling,
And a Southern feeling.

Marvelous in this spring month, in this empty field,
Out of already forgotten hammers, hands compressed,
So like a snowdrop sprung, white, delicate, and new
With mountain view.



Dave Lucas: from “Suburban Pastoral,” 2004

Twilight folds over houses on our street;
its hazy gold is gilding our front lawns,
delineating asphalt and concrete
driveways with shadows. Evening is coming on,
quietly, like a second drink, the beers
men hold while rising from their plastic chairs
to stand above their sprinklers, and approve.
Soon the fireflies will rise in lucent droves—

for now, however, everything seems content
to settle into archetypal grooves:
the toddler's portraits chalked out on cement,
mothers in windows, finishing the dishes.
Chuck Connelly's cigarette has burned to ashes;
he talks politics to Roger in the drive.



Conformity

Against:

“ [...] a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers.... Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.”

--Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, (1961)

An opposing view on conformity as a good thing

“The only haven for having a sense of identity is conformity. Being acceptable really means not being different from anybody else. Feeling inferior stems from feeling different, and no question is asked whether the difference is for the better or the worse.”

--Erich Fromm, from *The Sane Society*

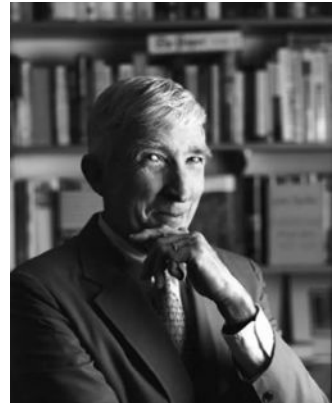


John Updike: “Suburban Madrigal” (1950s)

Sitting here in my house,
looking through my windows
diagonally at my neighbor’s house,
I see his sun-porch windows;
they are filled with blue-green,
the blue-green of my car,
which I parked in front of my house,
more or less, up the street,
where I can’t directly see it.



How promiscuous is
the world of appearances!
How frail are property laws!
To him his window is filled with his
things: his lamps, his plants, his radio.
How annoyed he would be to know
that my car, legally parked,
yet violates his windows,
paints them full
(to me) of myself, my car,
My well-insured '55 Fordor Ford
a gorgeous green sunset streaking his panes.



Louis Simpson: “In the Suburbs”

There’s no way out.

You were born to waste your life.

You were born to this middleclass life

As others before you

Were born to walk in procession

To the temple, singing.



Richard Wilbur: "To an American Poet Just Dead"

(1940s)

In the Boston Sunday Herald just three lines
Of no-point type for you who used to sing
The praises of imaginary wines,
And died, or so I'm told, of the real thing.



Also gone, but a lot less forgotten
Are an eminent cut-rate druggist, a lover of Giving,
A lender, and various brokers: gone from this rotten
Taxable world to a higher standard of living.

It is out in the comfy suburbs I read you are dead,
And the soupy summer is settling, full of the yawns
Of Sunday fathers loitering late in bed,
And the sshhh of sprays on all the little lawns.
[...]



Race and Ethnicity

Claudia Rankine (b. 1963): from *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.



At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. **When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?**

It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry.

Suburban Racial Profiling, arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates, followed by the Beer Summit at the White House, July 2009



it" at the White House, July 30, 2009; from
d Obama

David Lehman: from “A Little History”

Some people find out they are Jews.

[...]

They are in a state of panic—at first.

Then they realize that it is the answer to their prayers.

They hasten to the synagogue or build new ones.

[...]

They are free to marry other Jews, and divorce them, and intermarry with Gentiles, God forbid.

[...]

They are resented for being clever and thrifty.

They buy houses in the suburbs and agree not to talk so loud.

They look like everyone else, drive the same cars as everyone else, yet in their hearts they know they're different.



Gender roles and Domesticity: Two opposing views

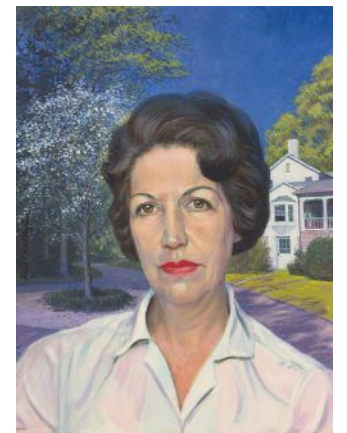
The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction [...] Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all?”

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 11 (1963)



“I have lived in the country. I have lived in the city. I have lived in an average Middle Western small town. But for the best fifteen years of my life I have lived in Suburbia, and I like it.”

Phyllis McGinley, from “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing” (1949)



Phyllis McGinley, "Occupation: Housewife," (1940s)

Her health is good. She owns to forty-one,
Keeps her hair bright by vegetable rinses,
Has two well-nourished children—daughter and son—
Just now away at school. Her house, with chintzes
Expensively curtained, animates the caller.
And she is fond of Early American glass
Stacked in an English breakfront somewhat taller
Than her best friend's Last year she took a class
In modern drama at the County Center.
Twice, on Good Friday, she's heard Parsifal sung.
She often says she might have been a painter,
Or maybe writer; but she married young.
She diets. And with Contract she delays
The encroaching desolation of her days.



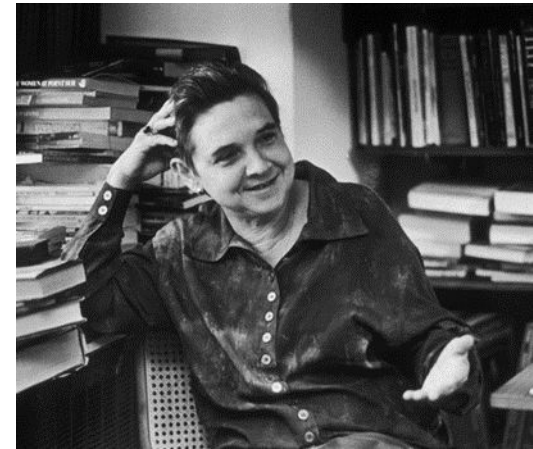
Adrienne Rich: from "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law" (1963)

1.

You, once a belle in Shreveport,
with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud,
still have your dresses copied from that time,
and play a Chopin prelude
called by Cortot: "*Delicious recollections
float like perfume through the memory.*"

Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake,
heavy with useless experience, rich
with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

Nervy, glowering, your daughter
wipes the teaspoons, grows another way.



Laurie Lico Albanese: from *Blue Suburbia* (2004)

It seems

I am a housewife

now

[...]

I don't expect pity

I am only

a lonely woman

spending too much time

At her kitchen sink—

[...]

I put dinner on the table,
summon my family to the kitchen,

and call it ordinary

when two or more

of the people I love

gather in the same room

we call it ordinary

even as stars

spin inside us.



Humor

John Ciardi, “Suburban” (1960s)

Yesterday Mrs. Friar phoned. “Mr. Ciardi, how do you do?” she said. “I am sorry to say this isn’t exactly a social call. The fact is your dog has just deposited—forgive me—a large repulsive object in my petunias.”

I thought to ask, “Have you checked the rectal grooving for a positive I.D.?” My dog, as it happened, was in Vermont with my son, who had gone fishing— if that’s what one does with a girl, two cases of beer, and a borrowed camper. I guessed I’d get no trout.

But why lose out on organic gold for a wise crack?

“Yes, Mrs. Friar,” I said, “I understand.”

“Most kind of you,” she said. “Not at all,” I said.

I went with a spade. She pointed, looking away.

“I always have loved dogs,” she said, “but really!”

I scooped it up and bowed. “The animal of it.

I hope this hasn’t upset you, Mrs. Friar.”

“Not really,” she said, “but really!” I bore the turd across the line to my own petunias and buried it till the glorious resurrection

when even these suburbs shall give up their dead.



Allan Sherman: "Here's to the Crabgrass," 1963

Here's to the crabgrass,
Here's to the mortgage,
In fact here's to Suburbia.

Lay down your briefcase,
Far from the rat race,
Where nothing can disturb ya.

Uncomplicated,
It's what we waited
For so long in this city.

Come let us go there,
Live like Thoreau there,
A life of sweet simplicity.

Did you set the thermostat?
No, I don't know where it's at.
Tuesday the Cub Scouts meet again.

Walk the dog and cut the grass,
Take the kids to dancing class,
Jim's Little League got beat again.

Can't keep a maid here,
No matter what they're paid here,
This place has bad publicity.

Why did we move here?
Don't you remember?
To live in sweet simplicity.

Here's to mosquitos,
Clam dip and Fritos,
To golf and bridge and scuba there.

Men wearing knee pants,
Women in Capri pants,
Discussing what's with Cuba there.

Each big appliance
Treats you with defiance,
Until it finally falls apart.

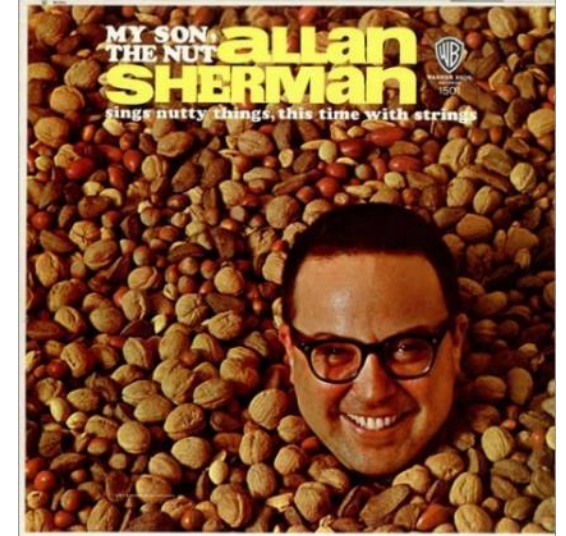
Call the repairman,
In a week he's there man,
To knock your kitchen walls apart.

Tommy's got a bloody nose,
Gotta fix the garden hose.
Book Of The Month Club came today.

Didn't read the last one yet.
Yes you did, but you forget.
Oh well, they're all the same today.

Here's Mrs. Ritter,
She's the baby sitter.
Tonight we're going joyously

Back to the city,
Where life is gay and witty,
Back to the noise there,
That everyone enjoys there.
Back to the crush there,
Hurry let us rush there,
Back to the rat race,
Don't forget your briefcase,
Back to the groove there,
Say why don't we move there.
Away from all of this
Sweet simplicity.



Billy Collins: "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep A Gun In The House (1990s)

The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.
He is barking the same high, rhythmic bark
that he barks every time they leave the house.
They must switch him on on their way out.

The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking,

and now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dog.

When the record finally ends he is still barking,
sitting there in the oboe section barking,
his eyes fixed on the conductor who is
entreating him with his baton

while the other musicians listen in respectful
silence to the famous barking dog solo,
that endless coda that first established
Beethoven as an innovative genius.



Community

Mona Van Duyn: "The Block," 1990

Childless, we bought the big brick house on the block, just in case. We walked the dog. Mornings the women looked up from their clipping and pruning and weeding to greet us, at dusk the men stopped their mowing to chat. The children were newly married or off to college, and dogs they had left behind them barked from backyards at our dog, first in warning, later in greeting. On other blocks we walked in the zany blare of adolescent records and stepped around skates and tricycles left on the sidewalk, but our middle-aged block, busy and quiet, settled us into its solace.



Van Duyn, from “Addendum to the Block,” 1993

“Three new babies are due all at once on the block,”
our soft-hearted widow tells us, waking her fat,
puffing poodle with a new pink bow on her ear.

“Two on the other side of the street, one here.”

[...]

Before we know it, dangling by his wrist
from the hand of a leaning mother, one infant lurches
as far as our drive, legs testing this strange notion,
toes touching or missing the ground, eyes wild with promotion.

[...]

This morning, tough, the sun sends a wordless, warm
hug to us all—children, parents, barren
couples, frail graybeards, gays—“hello? Goodbye?”
reaching out of the newborn blue of the sky.

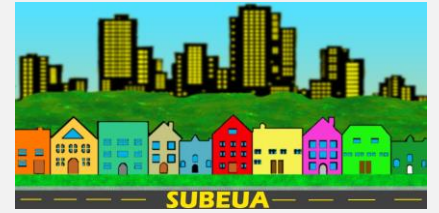


Conclusion: Why American Suburban Poetry Matters

- it is a full-fledged literary tradition that is equal to the rich American suburban fiction tradition**
- deserves more critical (and readers') recognition than it has received**
- reflects all the major sociocultural trends in the history of suburbanization in the US of the last century or more**
- provides a useful literary tool towards the construction and understanding of uniquely American identity that includes considerations of the American Dream, Suburban Pastoral, Conformity, Race and Ethnicity, Gender Roles and Domesticity, Humor, and Community**
- is a very American literary response to the diversity of the suburban experience**
- is interesting to read alongside the range suburban critique by social critics and historians**
- offers fruitful inter-genre comparisons with suburban fiction, drama, nonfiction, and film**



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