

“Model” and the “Empty Shell”: A Study of White Male Identity in the American Suburban Novel Model Home

Ke Lu, Dengheng Zheng*

Guangzhou Railway Polytechnic, Guangzhou, China

Email: *zhengdengheng@gtxy.edu.cn

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Abstract

This article examines the instability of white middle-class masculine identity in Eric Puchner’s *Model Home* through close textual analysis. Focusing on Warren Ziller’s financial decline, marital conflict, parenting failures, racialized perceptions, work, and housing, it analyzes identity at three connected levels: familial identity, community identity, and social identity. Familial identity concerns Warren’s performance of the roles of husband, father, and breadwinner; community identity concerns his perceived belonging and status within suburban social relations; and social identity concerns his relation to class aspiration, institutional power, and consumer culture. The article argues that the novel stages Warren’s inability to sustain patriarchal authority, material security, and racialized middle-class distinction. His eventual residence in an abandoned model home reveals the gap between the suburban ideal he pursues and the precarious social position he actually occupies. Rather than treating Warren as representative of all white middle-class men, this article reads his predicament as the novel’s critical representation of the contradictions within white middle-class suburban aspiration.

Keywords

American Suburban Fiction, White Middle-Class Men, Identity, Model Home

1. Introduction

Following World War II, the United States experienced rapid economic growth, while population expansion intensified social problems such as the housing shortage. At the same time, the construction of a nationwide highway network, the widespread adoption of automobiles, and policy interventions by federal and local

governments collectively accelerated the process of American suburbanization. White middle-class Americans were among the principal participants in this process. With rising productivity, increasing numbers of white workers moved from manual labor into non-manual occupations, contributing to the rapid expansion of the white-collar workforce (Sun, 2004, p. 149). Although this group enjoyed relatively high incomes and a certain degree of social prestige, its members neither controlled the means of production nor possessed secure accumulations of capital. They therefore remained, in essence, members of the middle class.

In this article, “white middle class” refers not to a homogeneous or permanently secure social group, but to a historically situated formation associated with relative educational attainment, professional or white-collar employment, income, property aspiration, and cultural claims to respectability. These criteria are unevenly possessed and function as sources of aspiration as well as status. The suburbs appeared to offer a space in which such aspirations could be displayed through homeownership, consumption, and distance from the city. Warren belongs to this category in an aspirational and precarious sense: he has attended college, worked in real estate, seeks homeownership in an affluent suburb, and relies on consumer goods to display respectability. His financial instability does not place him outside the category; instead, it enables the novel to expose the fragility of a middle-class identity founded on credit, property, and social recognition.

The rapid development of suburbanization had far-reaching consequences for American society. Although representations of suburbia had long been present in American literature, “suburban fiction” did not become established as a distinct category of literary study until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Gan & Lu, 2023). By depicting suburban landscapes and the everyday lives of suburban residents, such fiction reconstructs the apparent prosperity of American suburbia at the height of suburbanization. Scholars have argued that, because middle-class white Americans constitute a major segment of the U.S. population, the values with which they identify are often treated as broadly representative of American society and have played an important role in determining the trajectory of suburbanization (Wang, 2007).

Cultural transformation, however, often lags behind spatial migration. Although white middle-class Americans had physically relocated to the suburbs, their attitudes remained deeply influenced by traditional patriarchy, consumerism, and other dominant social ideologies. They were thus compelled to sustain their desired identification with an “upper-class” lifestyle through continuous material accumulation and consumption. Spatially, the segregation and social differentiation characteristic of suburbia created further difficulties for white men seeking to construct a stable identity. The coexistence of homogeneous communities and divergent individual destinies intensified their anxiety over belonging, making identity crisis one of the central themes of suburban fiction.

Eric Puchner’s 2010 debut novel *Model Home* is a representative example of fiction set in American suburbia. The novel was named one of the best overlooked

books of 2010 and became a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Set in the 1980s, *Model Home* follows Warren Ziller, who moves with his wife and children from Wisconsin to a suburban community in Southern California in the hope of realizing an “American Dream” of upward mobility through real-estate investment. His investment fails, however, and a devastating accident eventually forces the family to move into one of the model homes left behind by his unsuccessful development project. American writer and screenwriter Daniel Handler describes *Model Home* as embodying the California of the 1980s: bright yet insane, glamorous yet dilapidated, desperate yet resilient, and consistently moving (Puchner, 2010).

Like much suburban fiction, *Model Home* places white middle-class masculinity at the center of its narrative. Warren’s failed investment, unstable marriage, troubled relationship with his children, and eventual isolation allow the novel to question the economic and cultural foundations of the identity he seeks to maintain. The article therefore examines Warren not as a sociological representative of all white middle-class men, but as a fictional figure through whom Puchner dramatizes the pressures surrounding suburban masculinity, respectability, and belonging.

Drawing on Tao’s account of identity as shaped by the relation between individual consciousness and social determination, this article uses familial, community, and social identity as three connected analytical levels. Familial identity concerns Warren’s performance of the roles of husband, father, and breadwinner within the nuclear family. Community identity concerns his perceived belonging, distinction, and recognition within suburban social relations, where race, class, and respectability shape everyday interactions. Social identity concerns his relation to wider structures of class mobility, work, property, consumer culture, and institutional power.

Methodologically, the article employs close reading. The selected episodes are organized according to these three levels: marriage, parenting, and financial provision illuminate familial identity; encounters involving Hector, racialized perception, and neighborhood status illuminate community identity; and real-estate investment, employment decline, debt, and changing homes illuminate social identity. These episodes are read as a textual pattern within *Model Home*, rather than as empirical proof of the condition of all white middle-class men in the United States.

2. A Sense of Powerlessness in Familial Identity

Twentieth-century American society underwent profound transformations that reshaped mainstream values and conceptions of family life and contributed to the emergence of the nuclear family as the dominant family form. Suburbanization not only helped alleviate the postwar urban housing shortage but also responded, both spatially and culturally, to the psychological needs of the white middle class. Detached houses ensured a degree of domestic privacy, while well-developed

community facilities satisfied residents' expectations for a higher quality of life. The suburb consequently emerged as an ideal residential environment for white middle-class American families.

Postwar Americans attached considerable importance to family life. Familism came to be regarded as one of the fundamental values motivating middle-class migration to the suburbs and structuring everyday suburban life (Sun, 2005). White middle-class men, in particular, often constructed their identities through the fulfillment of three interrelated domestic roles: husband, father, and breadwinner. Yet social change and economic instability increasingly challenged conventional gender roles and destabilized established forms of familial identity. Warren Ziller, the protagonist of *Model Home*, represents precisely this predicament.

When a man establishes a new family, one of the first identity transitions he confronts is the movement from the role of son to that of husband. Warren and his wife Camille meet, fall in love, and marry in Wisconsin. During the early years of their relationship, they support each other through considerable hardship. At their poorest, "they were living in a run-down studio in Rogers Park" and were even forced to subsist on a moose that Camille's brother had shot in Michigan (Puchner, 2010: p. 7). Both are willing to make sacrifices for the relationship: Camille deliberately misses the train that would take her back to school in order to remain with Warren, while Warren eventually drops out of school himself. When their eldest son Dustin is born, Warren feels that he could not possibly be happier (Puchner, 2010: p. 31). After the family moves to suburban California, however, the equilibrium of the marriage gradually collapses. Repeated crises destabilize their relationship until it ultimately breaks down.

By the 1980s, the second wave of American feminism was drawing to a close. Expanded access to higher education had given increasing numbers of women greater autonomy in their occupational choices, and women's economic contributions to the household were becoming an increasingly significant factor in determining family status. Camille embodies many of the characteristics associated with the new white suburban woman. On the one hand, she preserves the traditional emphasis on emotional commitment and familial responsibility; on the other, she demonstrates a distinctly modern consciousness that challenges conventional gender constraints.

Camille produces educational films for public schools and approaches her work with seriousness, even though Lyle regards the videos as ridiculous (Puchner, 2010: p. 133). She gathers the family together to watch her films, assuming responsibility for maintaining emotional connections among family members. Even when she develops an ambiguous emotional attachment to a colleague, a telephone call from her family immediately draws her back into domestic reality. After Warren's financial collapse, she remains reluctant to abandon the family's traditional camping trip, and even when contemplating divorce she takes the family's aging dog into consideration.

Warren's masculine identity crisis forms a striking contrast to Camille's behavior. After his career deteriorates in the suburbs, Warren proves unable to withstand the psychological consequences of failure and seeks temporary reassurance from his client Melody. In his lover's trailer, he is neither husband nor father and can therefore briefly escape the responsibilities associated with family life. His behavior reveals his inability to establish a new identity once the traditional masculine role on which he has depended ceases to function. More importantly, he loses the confidence and courage required to reconstruct that identity. Warren's marital crisis thus reflects a broader identity challenge confronting traditional white men as suburbanization brings them into increasingly modernized family relationships.

Warren's second familial identity is that of father. All three of Warren and Camille's children are approaching or passing through adolescence, a critical period during which parental guidance is especially important. Middle-class families tended to embrace a child-centered approach that emphasized both moral education and academic development, and the perceived advantages such an environment offered to children were among the reasons middle-class families chose suburban life. A new generation of American parents increasingly recognized that children should be regarded as independent individuals rather than parental possessions, that their personalities should be respected, and that parents should endeavor to meet their legitimate needs (Sun, 2004: p. 151).

On the surface, the Zillers appear to follow such modern educational principles. Warren respects the individual autonomy of his children. When he sees his younger son Jonas dressed entirely in orange in support of a campaign concerning a missing girl, for example, he asks about the reason rather than attempting to stop him. Likewise, Warren wants to participate in Dustin's band activities but consciously maintains a certain distance, sitting beside the garage and listening rather than directly interfering.

Three years of suburban life, however, subject the family to increasing economic and interpersonal pressures. In this context, parental respect for children gradually turns into emotional estrangement. Warren's behavior as a father becomes deeply contradictory. Although he sincerely wishes to fulfill his paternal responsibilities, he attempts to express his love through irrational and even unlawful actions, including theft, the misuse of educational funds, and the displacement of his anger onto others. By seeking the identity of a "good father" through fundamentally misguided means, Warren ultimately contributes to the collapse of the family's educational and emotional structure. Burdened by guilt, Jonas eventually runs away from home, while those who once had every reason to remain close become "as distant as satellites" (Puchner, 2010: p. 233).

More than once, Warren thinks that he wishes Jonas, rather than Dustin, had been injured and that he would exchange Jonas's life for Dustin's recovery (Puchner, 2010: p. 212). Such favoritism and irrational indulgence toward his eldest son are immature and irresponsible, particularly for a middle-aged father in

his forties. The roots of Warren's paternal failure lie in the collapse of his identity as a middle-class father. He is unable either to preserve the stability traditionally associated with paternal authority or genuinely to practice the equality and respect demanded by modern educational ideals. Once the family's material foundations become unstable, crises in marriage, education, and everyday life within the suburban white middle-class household reinforce one another and accelerate familial fragmentation.

Within patriarchal American society, men have traditionally been cast as the family's "breadwinners" and heads of household. They are expected not only to assume primary economic responsibility but also to occupy the central position in family decision-making. The one major decision Warren makes independently is to move the family to California and purchase a house larger than they need, seduced by the promise that they deserve more (Puchner, 2010: p. 32). This decision reveals the contradiction between the cultural aspirations of the white middle class and Warren's actual economic capacity.

As early as the Hoover administration and the New Deal era, the U.S. federal government encouraged public-private partnerships that enabled large numbers of white Americans to purchase homes through long-term, low-interest mortgages (Ferguson, 2009). By the time Warren buys his suburban house, however, he has already invested all of the family's savings in a real-estate project known as Auburn Estates. He therefore lacks the financial resources either to purchase a suburban home outright or to sustain the high cost of suburban life. Through credit and mortgage financing, however, he appears to "own" everything. His house, furniture, and automobile are all expensive commodities acquired through debt. In effect, he is merely renting the furniture until he has enough money to purchase it outright (Puchner, 2010: p. 32).

This decision to live far beyond the family's actual means eventually drives Warren toward financial disaster. He can do little more than watch as his car and furniture are successively repossessed. At the same time, every member of the family becomes trapped within an emotional world of his or her own. Warren, nominally the "head of the household," can neither provide economic security nor preserve emotional cohesion. The relationships within this suburban middle-class family consequently become increasingly alienated. Once Warren can no longer fulfill the traditional responsibility of the breadwinner, the resulting crisis of identity proves even more devastating than financial bankruptcy itself.

Warren's tragedy exposes the fragility of the particular model of white middle-class masculinity constructed in Model Home. Once its economic foundations are undermined, the roles of husband, father, and breadwinner through which Warren understands himself become unstable. His powerlessness may therefore be read as the novel's representation of an anxiety surrounding patriarchal authority and middle-class belonging in late-twentieth-century suburbia. The abandoned model home materializes this anxiety: it promises domestic security and social recognition, yet finally leaves Warren isolated at the suburban margin.

3. A Sense of Frustration in Community Identity

From the postwar period through the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. government promoted homeownership by transforming the detached suburban house into a powerful symbol of the American way of life. The suburb gradually shifted from a space inhabited by a minority to one occupied by the majority and, symbolically at least, from a predominantly white community into an American community (Lawler, 2025). In the process, the homogeneous structure of suburbia began to erode.

Economically, although suburban spatial planning continued to sustain forms of racial segregation, it could not prevent members of other social groups from entering suburban spaces. Culturally, racism remained deeply embedded in white attitudes and everyday practices. Socially, meanwhile, the discourse of equality that followed the Civil Rights Movement weakened the ideological foundations of white superiority. Such changes and conflicts within suburban communities generated an increasingly acute identity crisis for the white middle-class population that had been among the earliest groups to suburbanize.

The postwar expansion of American suburbia was closely connected to white migration and metropolitan inequality, both of which were fundamentally shaped by racism. The high cost of suburban living created an economic barrier that separated middle- and upper-class white residents from low-income racial and ethnic minorities. During periods of housing shortage, inexpensive and poorly constructed low-rise communities built by governments and developers to minimize costs frequently became residential areas for economically disadvantaged populations and minority groups. Such communities were usually located either in deteriorating inner-city districts or along the peripheral margins of white middle-class suburbs (Wu & Lin, 2020).

The Mexican neighborhood inhabited by Hector, the security guard, provides one example. Like the white suburb, it lies far from the prosperous urban center and is connected to other areas by freeways. When Lyle first visits, Hector tells her that, in a sense, they are neighbors and that she can almost see her own home from his neighborhood (Puchner, 2010: p. 57). Although the Mexican neighborhood is geographically close to the white suburb, clothing and religious decorations hang throughout its streets, creating a sharp contrast with the spacious and orderly streets of the Zillers' community. Through gated residential spaces and extensive highway systems, suburban whites establish a physical distinction between themselves and ethnic minorities that resembles a form of racial segregation.

At the same time, racial prejudice is deeply embedded within the white subconscious. Although Camille insists that she is "not a racist" (Puchner, 2010: p. 118), her behavior frequently suggests otherwise. When Lyle reveals that she is dating Hector, for example, Camille immediately recalls the Spanish labels on his radio and questions his immigration status. On another occasion, Camille deliberately greets Hector in Spanish because she subconsciously assumes that he does not speak English.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 nevertheless provided greater legal protection for African Americans, ethnic minorities, women, and other historically disadvantaged groups. People of different racial backgrounds, religions, and national origins entered American society in growing numbers, while suburban life, as a symbol of Americanization, became an aspiration shared by a wider range of social groups. Warren's suburban community includes families with the surname Wong as well as Asian female workers. Such details simultaneously demonstrate the increasing openness and inclusiveness of suburban communities and expose the persistence of deeply rooted racial problems.

Racism within community culture is often expressed through subtle interactions among perceptions of skin color, identity construction, and social class. Traditional white American racial ideology positioned white skin at the top of a racial hierarchy and Black skin at the bottom while also displaying particular sensitivity toward the complexion and ancestry of Latin Americans (Niu, 2021). Before moving to the suburbs, the young Warren did not fully conform to conventional ideals of American whiteness. He was once "proud of his Mediterranean complexion" (Puchner, 2010: p. 36) and frequently walked along the beach with his shirt open, exposing his chest. One day, however, he notices that girls laugh at working-class boys laying asphalt who dress in much the same way. From then on, Warren changes how he dresses.

This transformation from pride to shame demonstrates the young Warren's growing concern with maintaining a white identity while also revealing the fundamentally class-based nature of that identity. Decades later and on the other side of the continent, Californians have begun to celebrate healthy suntanned skin, and sunbathing on the beach has become part of mainstream culture. Lyle, by contrast, has extremely pale and delicate skin. When she attempts to sunbathe like a Californian, she suffers severe sunburn and subsequently feels embarrassed by her appearance. Skin that once functioned as a marker of racial superiority is transformed into a sign of incompatibility with the culture of suburban California. As white North Americans, the Zillers can no longer rely on whiteness itself to reinforce class distinctions or confer an unquestioned sense of superiority. Changing cultural perceptions of skin color therefore destabilize one of the symbolic foundations of traditional white identity.

The erosion of white superiority is not restricted to race. Because suburban communities are highly homogeneous and because post-civil-rights discourses increasingly emphasize universal equality, the social privileges associated with white middle-class identity become progressively less tangible. When Warren's furniture is repossessed, he angrily confronts the removal workers, but the blue-collar laborers pay no attention to his insults and threats and simply continue doing their jobs. Americans from different classes pursue the American Dream through their own labor and effort; Warren's identity as a white middle-class man does not, by itself, grant him greater authority or material advantage.

The pursuit of material wealth is another defining characteristic of the Ameri-

can middle class. The Shackney family, among the wealthiest residents of Herradura Estates, owns an enormous Spanish Revival-style villa complete with a swimming pool and lawn—the largest house in the neighborhood (Puchner, 2010: p. 34). The Zillers should, like their neighbors, represent the supposedly high standard of living and respectable social character associated with suburbia. Yet the moment Warren commits burglary, he effectively abandons the identity of the educated and respectable middle-class white suburbanite. He casually steals wine and, after being released on bail, becomes increasingly indifferent to the consequences of his actions. Telling himself that he already has a criminal record (Puchner, 2010: p. 170), he proceeds to steal someone else's beer.

Warren's behavior in adversity constitutes more than a violation of the law; it signifies a fundamental dislocation of identity. He is transformed from a supposedly respectable, educated white suburban middle-class man into a criminal suspect whose behavior is rejected by both legal and moral norms.

Eventually, the Ziller family moves to Auburn Estates in the Mojave Desert, where "they had no neighbors" (Puchner, 2010: p. 188) and must drive for many miles before even reaching the freeway. By the following winter, Camille has moved with Lyle and Jonas into an apartment near the freeway, while Dustin gradually resumes a social life and appears likely to leave the family home as well. The thought of living alone in an empty house while waiting for the bank to evict him fills Warren with fear (Puchner, 2010: p. 358). The identity he has so desperately pursued not only remains unattainable but recedes ever further from him. In terms of residential location, material possessions, and social status alike, Warren moves progressively farther away from the white middle-class identity he desires.

For earlier generations of white suburban migrants, suburbia could be imagined as a promised land in which the American Dream might be realized. In *Model Home*, however, that promise is troubled by racial prejudice, shifting cultural symbols, and the pressures of a more diverse social environment. The Zillers' anxiety and eventual marginalization should therefore be read as the novel's concentrated representation of these contradictions, rather than as evidence that all white suburban residents undergo the same process. Warren's declining authority reveals how the assumptions supporting his desired identity become difficult to sustain within the world the novel depicts.

4. A Sense of Loss of Control in Social Identity

Social identity emphasizes the determining influence of society on individual existence and consciousness (Tao, 2004). Warren's identification with the middle class is not an automatic consequence of being native-born and white. It is an aspiration shaped by his partial educational background, his work in real estate, his pursuit of homeownership, and his investment in the consumer symbols of suburban respectability. The suburban middle class is conventionally associated with education, professional employment, economic security, property ownership, and cultural status, yet Warren possesses these markers unevenly and precariously.

As Kathy Knapp observes, suburban fiction frequently assigns white male protagonists the task of defending neoliberal values such as individualism, private property, and upward mobility (Knapp, 2014). In *Model Home*, Warren's occupation, income, debt, and limited access to institutional power repeatedly frustrate his attempt to secure recognition through those values.

Within a broader culture of upward mobility, the suburban middle class seeks greater economic wealth and higher social prestige through personal effort, with the aim of securing a better quality of life for the family. Warren and Camille both attend college in the North. After the two begin a relationship, Warren leaves school and enters the real-estate industry under the influence of Camille's father. On a friend's recommendation, he invests in Auburn Estates, a development in California's Mojave Desert.

An optimistic Warren believes that the favorable economic climate makes real-estate investment particularly promising and that the project will meet market demand. When opportunities arise for him to withdraw from the investment, however, he fails to take them and is eventually left unable to sell a single house. His friend successfully avoids the same danger and, like his automobile, ends up "parked in the only patch of shade" (Puchner, 2010: p. 37), while Warren leaves his own car exposed to the scorching sun and must accept the consequences of his choices. Warren's essentially straightforward nature creates further obstacles to selling the development: he cannot bring himself to deceive potential buyers and therefore cannot induce others to assume the burden of his failed investment. In the end, he must bear the consequences alone.

Following the family's catastrophe, the forty-five-year-old Warren endures a difficult three-month search for employment. At an employment agency, he is told that if he were younger—even ten years younger—they might be able to find him a position as a legal assistant (Puchner, 2010: p. 206). The quintessential white middle-class American man thus enters a quintessential midlife crisis. Within the family, authority is shifting from parents toward children approaching adulthood; in the workplace, older employees increasingly feel displaced by a younger generation. Anxiety, tension, and a sense of inferiority therefore become powerful threats to the psychological stability of middle-aged men.

By the time the family moves for a second time, Warren has fallen from his former position in real estate to the status of a door-to-door salesman. He works alongside colleagues and supervisors considerably younger than himself and performs poorly, eventually learning to exploit his son's injuries in order to win customers' sympathy. His descent from respectable real-estate work to door-to-door kitchenware sales signifies not merely a loss of income but the collapse of the professional dignity on which he has relied. Through Warren's deteriorating occupational status and insecure income, the novel portrays the vulnerability of a masculine identity tied to professional success, economic provision, and upward mobility. Warren's American Dream gradually disappears, like the abandoned Auburn Estates fading into the distant desert.

After the economic stagflation of the 1970s, Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States in 1981. The Reagan administration attracted large amounts of foreign capital, relied on capital-account surpluses to offset current-account deficits, and introduced extensive tax reductions intended to stimulate economic growth. David Stockman, director of the Office of Management and Budget under Reagan and often associated with the formulation of “Reaganomics,” tells the country that if supply is created, demand will follow (Puchner, 2010: p. 39).

Ordinary people such as Warren, however, are unable to understand the political-economic logic underlying such theories. Warren naively interprets the success of Japanese investors operating under strong governmental support as evidence of the triumph of the free market. More ironically, when he attempts to imitate the investment strategies of economic elites, he discovers that he has entered an impossible situation. To prevent the government from constructing a landfill near Auburn Estates, he must first sell enough houses to organize homeowners in collective protest; yet the proposed landfill itself makes the houses virtually impossible to sell.

This institutional trap reveals Warren’s limited capacity to influence decisions that shape his life. He possesses neither effective access to public decision-making nor sufficient economic resources to bargain with those who hold power. The destruction of Auburn Estates thus turns his American Dream into a narrative of frustrated aspiration, in which property ownership offers neither security nor political agency.

In the United States of the 1980s, the combined effects of credit deregulation and tax reductions contributed to the expansion of consumerism. Individual value became increasingly associated with material possession, while wealth was displayed and measured through consumption. Within consumer culture, consumption does not simply satisfy practical needs; rather, it fulfills desires that are socially produced and continually stimulated (Zhong, 2024). Commodities therefore exceed their practical functions and become symbolic instruments through which individuals compensate for emotional emptiness and confirm social status.

The Shackney family represents the affluent suburban class. Their Spanish Revival villa, equipped with a swimming pool and extensive lawn, is the largest house in the neighborhood (Puchner, 2010: p. 34). They own several luxury automobiles, including BMWs, and even the family’s children mock Warren’s Renault. Such details demonstrate that material symbols have become common criteria through which success is measured across the social spectrum.

Deeply shaped by consumerism, Warren insists on acquiring a house in Herradura Estates that far exceeds the family’s practical needs. Through credit, he obtains luxurious furniture and a new 1985 Chrysler LeBaron, only to see these possessions repossessed once he can no longer make the payments. Even after the family loses virtually everything in the aftermath of disaster, Warren still purchases a used automobile. On the one hand, this reflects the enormous practical

importance of, and dependence on, cars in American life. On the other, it reveals a consciousness profoundly alienated by consumerism: at every stage of his decline, Warren continues to believe that material possessions can signify identity and personal worth.

The most obvious embodiment of material desire is the “home” named in the novel’s title. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, shelter belongs to the most fundamental level of physiological necessity, whereas identity and the realization of self-worth belong to the highest level of human needs. Within suburban society, however, housing comes to function as far more than shelter; it becomes a visible symbol of identity and social position.

When the Zillers are forced to stay in a motel after the fire, what they have lost is not merely a physical structure that protects them from the elements. They have also lost one of the final material guarantees of their middle-class identity. At this point, the suburban house has ceased to be merely a vehicle through which the American Dream might be realized and has instead become an embodiment of the American Dream itself.

In the end, the model home in the desert provides Warren and Dustin with the most basic form of physical shelter, but Warren’s pursuit of identity has already moved profoundly off course. Alone in the empty model home, Warren attempts to persuade himself that he is fortunate to have found a safe and comfortable house, only to recognize that the world itself seems ultimately to have expelled him and withdrawn its welcome (Puchner, 2010: p. 360). The moment exposes the profound separation between material security and a genuine sense of identity.

The “home” in the novel’s title thus functions as a central metaphor for Warren’s social identity. The attractive suburban house is destroyed, while the neglected model home stands isolated in the desert. This downward movement of domestic space mirrors Warren’s loss of status and recognition. The degradation of the home can therefore be read as the novel’s critique of an identity dependent on property, consumer display, and the promise of suburban belonging.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined Warren Ziller’s identity predicament through the interconnected dimensions of family, community, and society. In *Model Home*, Warren’s desired white middle-class identity is progressively destabilized as he loses economic security, familial authority, community recognition, and confidence in upward mobility. His residence in the abandoned model home condenses this process: the house is intended to display an idealized suburban future, yet it becomes the setting in which the gap between aspiration and reality is most visible.

The word “model” suggests both an exemplary form and a representative type. A model home is designed to make a particular way of life appear desirable, attainable, and secure. Puchner reverses this promise. In the novel, the model home is not a stable symbol of success but an “empty shell” whose apparent comfort conceals financial collapse, domestic fragmentation, and social isolation. War-

ren's movement toward this space does not prove a universal decline among American white men or the American middle class. Rather, it dramatizes the contradictions within a historically specific ideal of white middle-class suburban masculinity.

The novel links Warren's crisis to familism, racialized distinction, class aspiration, consumer culture, and faith in property ownership (Isenstadt, 2020). These values promise belonging, but they also produce pressures that Warren cannot resolve. His collapse therefore reveals the limits of defining masculine worth through provision, respectability, and material possession. At the same time, the ending does not impose complete closure. Warren's improving sales performance and Dustin's growing identification with other burn survivors suggest that identity remains contingent and revisable. Model Home ultimately presents identity not as a fixed social achievement but as an unfinished process shaped by loss, recognition, and the possibility of reconstruction.

Author Contributions

K.L. conceived and designed the study, conducted the close textual analysis, and drafted the manuscript. H.D.Z. supervised the research, contributed to the theoretical framing and interpretation, and critically revised the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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