Suburban Superheroes: Sitcom Suburbia Reimagined in WandaVision

Elisa Cavanaugh
Bridgewater State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/grad_rev

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/grad_rev/vol8/iss1/4

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Copyright © 2023 Elisa Cavanaugh
Suburban Superheroes: Sitcom Suburbia Reimagined in WandaVision

Elisa Cavanaugh, Master of Arts in Teaching (English), Department of English, Bridgewater State University, e2cavanaugh@student.bridgew.edu

Abstract: The superhero genre traditionally dictates that a hero’s traumatic past drives them to save people, and cities—often perceived as highly populated places that are full of crime—make for places where there are plenty of people in need of saving. This trope is notably disrupted, however, in an MCU sitcom-style television show released in 2021: WandaVision. This article contends that WandaVision’s suburban setting serves to mediate and reflect Wanda’s trauma and subsequent sense of powerlessness, as she constructs a small world that is (on the surface) stable and safe from the pain, loss, and violence of the outside world, yet (beneath the surface) furthers the entrapment and instability that characterizes her past. Wanda reconfigures the stereotypical role of a suburban housewife from something that is constrictive to something that is freeing, as it offers her an escape from her identity as a hero and a reprieve into a new life that is structured and stable. However, this quaint suburban life is not sustainable for a superhero, and ultimately the pitfalls of suburbia crumble Wanda’s contrived reality, serving as an ominous reminder regarding the power of the suburbs: though they may be places of order and stability, the control inherent in this dynamic is reciprocal; just as residents of the suburbs shape their community, the suburbs shape their residents right back.

Keywords: Suburbs; suburban studies; dramatic arts; television and video; superhero; trauma; WandaVision.

When Bruce Wayne utters the words, “This city needs me,” in The Dark Knight Rises (2012), he is not merely stepping up to his heroic duty as Batman; rather, in these words, Batman makes explicit an assumption that is implied by most superhero settings preceding and following this moment—a city needs a hero to protect it. This premise is present in nearly all classic superhero tales: Superman has Metropolis, Batman has Gotham City, and innumerable heroes spanning a myriad of franchises (e.g., Spider-Man, Captain America, Doctor Strange, Green Lantern, Ghostbusters, and even the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles) share New York City. Implicit in this pattern is the notion that cities are places in need of saving; as urban spaces are historically regarded as crowded, polluted, corrupted, and crime-ridden environments, it is no surprise that such a backdrop has become home to characters dedicated to protecting the public and fighting crime (Jackson 1985, 32). Concisely put, to many viewers, superheroes “are urban dweller[s] because that’s where the criminals are” (Bakutman 2013, 171).
The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)—most famously the creators of the Avengers comics and films—generally abides by this guideline of the genre; despite jaunts across the globe and even into outer space, New York City most frequently prevails as home base for this team of superheroes. This trope is notably disrupted, however, in an MCU sitcom-style television show released in 2021: WandaVision. Wanda Maximoff, previously a supporting Avenger and now protagonist of WandaVision, possesses many of the classic traits of a superhero—a dramatic backstory, a collection of supernatural powers, a secret identity concealed from her surrounding community, and, of course, a history of saving the world. However, the setting of this show, at least on the surface, lacks the grandeur, exoticism, and adventure that typically characterizes a story of its genre; instead, WandaVision is set in the fictional suburb of Westview, New Jersey. This deviation in locale does more than simply offer some new scenery for a franchise that has already traversed all seven continents and many fictional planets. WandaVision’s positioning inside a quaint American suburb—and the complexities and contradictions that accompany this environment—is an essential component of the show’s exploration of Wanda’s grief and trauma following the conclusion of Avengers: Infinity War (2018). Furthermore, Marvel’s cinematic shift to suburbia takes place during a time in which more Americans than ever before (a 69% majority) reside in the suburbs, enabling WandaVision to leverage its audience’s familiarity with these spaces and tap into the increasingly relevant aspirations and anxieties of this growing demographic (Anderson 2020, 6).

Five years after the events of Infinity War, Wanda Maximoff and her husband Vision (a synthezoid who was killed in the previous film) live an idyllic suburban life in the town of Westview, without a clear recollection of how they arrived there. The episodes progress through the sitcom styles of different decades (beginning with the 1950s in a style reminiscent of Leave it to Beaver and concluding with the 2010s in a nod to the mockumentary style of shows like The Office) as the couple begins to uncover the mystery of how they got there and what they are doing. As Wanda, Vision, the Westview residents, and those outside of Westview investigating the strange occurrences in the town all eventually discover, Wanda has used her powers to manifest an altered reality in which she is able to live happily-ever-after in a peaceful suburb with Vision. As summarized by one of the investigating agents, Wanda “has the world’s only vibranium synthezoid playing Father-Knows-Best-In-Suburbia” (Schaeffer 2021b). To outsiders in the show and audiences alike, this choice to settle down in suburbia may seem particularly strange for a superhero, but it is important to note that the suburban locale is not meant in jest; rather, it is chosen by Wanda as a reprieve from the sorrow wrought by the outside world (until, that is, it is shown not to be a reprieve at all). Ultimately, the suburban setting of Westview, New Jersey, serves to mediate and reflect Wanda’s trauma and subsequent sense of powerlessness, as she constructs a small world that is (on the surface) stable and safe from the pain, loss, and violence of the outside world, yet (beneath the surface) furthers the entrapment and instability that characterizes her past.
WandaVision joins a broad collection of suburban literature and film that have offered reflections—both critical and celebratory—of the social and geopolitical impacts of a widespread migration to the suburbs in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American society. These literary and cinematic interpretations reveal the hopes and anxieties Americans experienced as suburban development gave way to a new culture of dualities: community accompanied by conformity, ambition accompanied by entrapment, and affordability accompanied by standardization. Robert Beuka offers a foundational investigation of suburban literature and film of the 1950s in his book SuburbiaNation, distinguishing between “two-dimensional” depictions of suburbia, which he views as reductive, and more nuanced, realistic depictions of suburbia (2004, 4). As a way of “overcoming” the limiting framework set by two-dimensional representations, Beuka applies Michel Foucault’s notion of a “heterotopia” to suburban spaces. He asserts that the suburb reflects both the idyllic and the foreboding aspects of American middle-class culture and applying the idea of a heterotopia to suburban spaces reveals that “utopian and dystopian views of suburban life [are] really two sides of the same coin,” where the “fantasies” and the “phobias” of a broader culture are reflected (2004, 7-8). Ultimately, Beuka suggests that the spatial context of the suburbs has become a mirror for both the promises and shortcomings of American life and culture. WandaVision accomplishes a unique feat when viewed through the framework of Beuka’s arguments: the series intentionally mirrors the styles of those “two-dimensional” sitcom depictions of suburbia that Beuka dismisses, and at first glance, it appears to adhere to the reductive tropes and stereotypes that seem to define the sitcom genre. However, upon closer examination, WandaVision increasingly subverts those very same tropes, adding nuance as the same traits that make suburbia attractive to Wanda simultaneously make it more difficult for her to live in the community of Westview.

Bernice Murphy further investigates the implications of suburbia, and its unique position between urban and rural, on American culture and psyche by tying popular suburban narratives to the American gothic tradition in her book The Suburban Gothic. Murphy posits a dichotomy between two categories that she dubs the “suburban dream” and the “suburban nightmare,” echoing the dualism present in Beuka’s notion of heterotopic suburban spaces. She examines how the suburban dream (a paradisiacal place in which families thrive, where beautiful homes and kind neighbors make for a safe community, and the threats of the outside world are kept at bay) clashes against the suburban nightmare (a tormented place in which untrustworthy neighbors have something to hide, dangers lurk throughout the community, and the “threats come from within, not from without”) (2009, 3). The tension between these two states of being paves the way for the Suburban Gothic, which, as Murphy contends, “has always had much more to do with how people chose to perceive suburbia than the reality of such neighborhoods” (2009, 5). Much like Beuka, Murphy considers the significance of the American suburbs as more than just a place, but also a mindset.

WandaVision, while not strictly Gothic, contains many elements of Murphy’s suburban nightmare. There are, in Murphy’s words, “neighbors
with something terrible to hide” (namely, Wanda herself given her usurpation of the town of Westview, as well as her neighbor Agnes, later revealed to be an ancient witch); there is a “place of mindless conformity and materialism” (the residents of Westview are literally mind-controlled to behave in ways that fit with Wanda’s quaint suburban family storyline, and the story is periodically interrupted by strange commercials advertising fake products within the Marvel Universe, such as the all-new ToastMate 2000 by Stark Industries or Yo-Magic, “the snack for survivors”); there is a “place in which the most dangerous threats come from within” (as there is a literal force field protecting the community from outside threats, but Wanda herself remains a force that is arguably terrorizing the Westview residents) (Murphy 2009, 3). However, perhaps the most noteworthy link here is Westview’s role as a “place of entrapment and unhappiness” (Murphy 2009, 3). Since Wanda’s takeover, Westview is literally entrapped by a bubble-like force field, dubbed the “Hex” on the show. Essentially every person within the Hex is trapped: Wanda and Vision cannot leave without causing their altered reality to crumble, while the Westview residents are victims of Wanda’s mind control and do not have the autonomy to act on their own—they cannot even leave their homes unless as pawns in Wanda’s story. Despite Wanda’s initial conception of her family’s life in Westview as a peaceful existence in line with the “suburban dream,” their life in suburbia is quickly exposed to be more complicated, more contested, and more perilous than the surface reveals.

Furthering Beuka and Murphy’s explications of the contradictory nature of American suburbia, David Coon focuses on how the suburban façade of white picket fences and picturesque lives falsely conceals “desires, secrets, and problems that threaten to disrupt the tranquil suburban existence” in his book Look Closer (2014, 18). Orienting his argument amongst the many suburban works that suggest a “darkness” lurks “beneath the charming surface of suburban life,” Coon claims that these works “interrogate and subvert conventional images of American suburbia” in order to complicate the values promoted by the suburban myth (2014, 2). He agrees with Beuka’s rebuke of the two-dimensional suburban image and focuses his attention on works in which the suburban landscape is not a mere backdrop, but a defining force of the narratives contained within it (2014, 17). Coon ultimately concludes that the motif of the suburban façade has the potential to “challeng[e] conservative ideologies” by suggesting that ideas such as tradition, family, community, gender roles, and the American Dream “are not as simple and clear-cut as they might appear,” and instead, they are inherently accompanied by darker underbellies such as discrimination, misconduct, and exclusion (2014, 29). This discrimination that Coon sees as characterizing of suburban spaces can exist in explicit ways, such as overt racism or the exclusion of LGBTQ+ folks, but it can also come into play in a less obvious manner, quietly rejecting those who do not conform to the values and expectations of the culture that governs suburbia.

Catherine Jurca offers a lone dissenting opinion in her book White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel, in which she rejects a focus on the pitfalls of suburbia and aims to expose the ludicrousness what she dubs the “fantasy
of victimization” of the white suburbanite (2001, 8-9). Jurca observes the way in which suburban literature of this time centers the trials and tribulations of this population, sympathizing with their feelings of entrapment and tedium in the suburbs, which she views as unreasonable. She highlights the tendency of this literature to “convert the rights and privileges of living [in a suburb] into spiritual, cultural, and political problems of displacement” and resists the notion that the suburbs could be disempowering to the white, middle class in any substantial way (2001, 4). Instead, she ironically invokes the term “white diaspora” to suggest that white suburbanites have taken on a narrative of victimization that distorts the reality of “white flight” into the suburbs as a byproduct of their persecution, rather than their privilege (2001, 9). Jurca’s commentary on representations of race in WandaVision calls attention to the absence of such issues in WandaVision. The suburb of Westview is relatively racially diverse (reflecting its modern-day population), and it remains so even when Wanda magically imposes a 1950s atmosphere on the town, but issues of race are not made explicit in the show. Ultimately, though Jurca would resist scholarly interpretations that lend validity to the victimization concerns of suburbanites, the tendency of recent scholarship to highlight the pitfalls of suburbia suggests the value of further exploring the paradoxical nature of suburbia, which serve to shape the culture of seemingly all of the works that find themselves set in such a contested, complex space.

The suburban façade critiqued by Coon is, in fact, the very reason that Wanda’s story is situated in a suburb. American sitcoms, and, by extension, suburban spaces, are established early in Wanda’s story as a childhood refuge from her war-torn home of Sokovia, a fictional country in Eastern Europe. In a flashback, the audience is transported with Wanda back to the night of her parents’ deaths; it is young Wanda’s turn to choose what the family would watch on television that night, and she makes her usual choice of a contraband copy of The Dick Van Dyke show. It is implied that this choice is typical for Wanda, as her brother complains, “Dick Van Dyke again? Always ‘sitcom, sitcom, sitcom’, but Wanda’s eagerness to rewatch the same sitcom over and over again suggests that she finds comfort in the predictability of the sitcom structure—a predictability that is absent in her war-torn space (Schaeffer 2021c). Shortly after her family settles down to watch the show, their apartment is bombed, killing her parents and causing Wanda and her brother to lose consciousness. When she awakens, the sitcom is still playing amidst the wreckage of her home, providing an eerie laugh track to the traumatic scene. Despite the trauma born of this night, sitcoms—and the polished suburban lifestyle depicted within them—remain associated with a sense of safety and comfort for Wanda. Thus, when she is grief-ridden following the death of her husband and in desperate need of consolation, it is understandable that she would seek solace in the place that offered her such a reliable source of reassurance as a child. In the genre of early sitcoms, regardless of the conflicts that arise during the episode, conclusions are reliably happy and confrontation is resolved peacefully; it is here that Wanda has the ability to construct her own peace. As she says herself as a child regarding the low-stakes conflicts of the sitcom genre: “At the end of the episode, you realize it was all a bad dream. None of it
was real” (Schaeffer 2021c). She does not know, at this time, that the source of her comfort is merely a scripted façade of joy, ultimately unattainable in any tangible sense to her in the real world.

This desire to manifest the simple bliss she imagined of the suburbs depicted in The Dick Van Dyke Show is what spurs Wanda to create her altered reality within the suburb of Westview. The actual construction of this altered reality is somewhat unintentional—overcome by grief, Wanda finds the deed to a plot of land that Vision had purchased with the aim of beginning a family with Wanda before his death. She drives to that location, passing through a sad, worn-down looking town that has seen better days. Then, in a scream of despair, her powers pour out of her and construct both an alive version of her husband and a quaint, enclosed, seemingly protected world in which they can live. The construction of this suburban world is the ultimate act of escapism for Wanda. The audience is first introduced to this setting without any of this context though; we merely thrust into the black-and-white world of episode one, watching as newlywed Wanda and Vision pull into the driveway of their new house, ready to begin their happy suburban life together.

The old-fashioned sitcom aesthetics of the first episode—complete with a sepia film color, an exaggerated laugh track, and a mise-en-scène that nearly-exactly mirrors kitchen scenes from The Dick Van Dyke Show—clash with the audience’s expectations of a story from the typically vibrant, action-packed superhero genre, but this action-free life is precisely what Wanda desires. As a theme song (emulating the jazzy musical style of the 1950s) announces at the start of episode one:

Oh, a newlywed couple just moved to town / A regular husband and wife / Who left the big city to find a quiet life / WandaVision! / She’s a magical gal in a small town locale / he’s a hubby who’s part machine / How will this duo fit in and fulfill all? / By sharing a love like you’ve never seen / WandaVision! (Schaeffer 2021a)

After a lifetime of fighting and trauma, a “quiet life” in the predictability of a “small town locale” is appealing to Wanda, and the order implicit in a suburban existence offers this consistency. As sociologist Herbert Gans observes in his exploration of life in Levittown, a quintessential example of 1950s American suburbia, “Because the suburb makes [it] possible, morale goes up, boredom and loneliness are reduced, family life becomes temporarily more cohesive, social and organizational activities multiply, and spare-time pursuits now focus on the house and the yard” (2016, 327). This low-risk, family-centered life is precisely what Wanda is seeking. In entering the suburbs, Wanda and Vision enter a structured world governed by routines, social expectations, and problems of little consequence (for example, forgetting the date that they were supposed to be hosting Vision’s boss for dinner, or an inelegant talent show performance for the neighbors). Even when things do go awry in a more substantial way—for instance, when Wanda receives a radio correspondence from outside of the Hex while socializing with the other neighborhood ladies at a garden gathering—Wanda is able to reclaim control over the scene, using her powers to “rewind” it and rescripting it to fit her desired narrative. From the outset, it seems that Wanda is exerting influence
not only over herself and her family, but also her environment and those around her. The suburban locale first seems to facilitate this ability of Wanda’s to manipulate her environment with such precision, as its natural tendency toward conformity and order paired with its geographic separation from the world beyond it makes Westview particularly vulnerable to Wanda’s attempts to control it.

Just as the show’s suburban sitcom aesthetics clash with expectations of a show in the superhero genre, Wanda’s role in the story disrupts audience expectations of the superhero herself. In a move seemingly contradictory to the modern empowered woman—especially a woman with an extensive history of single handedly fighting off evil forces and saving the world—she intentionally steps into the ordinary role of a suburban housewife and embraces the domestic duties of this position. Betty Friedan, in her salient second-wave feminist text *The Feminine Mystique*, contends in a chapter about the “Happy Housewife Heroine” that the “fulfillment of femininity,” which seems to be the “the highest value and the only commitment for women” during the mid twentieth century is, in actuality, not fulfilling at all, and is contributing to a widely-felt dissatisfaction amongst American housewives during this time (1963, 50). Wanda, however, has a vastly different experience with suburban housewifery and motherhood, for two reasons: it is a role she has created for herself, rather than a role she has been subjected into, and it offers her a reprieve from the responsibility of superhero. In early episodes, she is often pictured in the kitchen, grappling with silly dilemmas such as how to cook an appropriate supper for dinner guests, but these dilemmas are a welcome alternative to the prospect of a life outside of her suburban bubble. During one such conundrum, Wanda’s neighbor, Agnes, saves the day by popping into her kitchen carrying piles of food and announcing “What kind of housewife would I be if I didn’t have a gourmet meal for four just lying about the place?” (Schaeffer 2021a). To be rescued in such a way contrasts starkly with the role Wanda played in the “real” problems she faced in her life outside the Hex, before she attempted to shed her superheroism by entering into this simplified existence. By the third episode, Wanda is pregnant and (rapidly) progressing toward motherhood, quickly fulfilling the third and final role of a standard suburban woman: wife, homemaker, and mother. Wanda’s performance of a suburban housewife is both a result of and a reprieve from her trauma; she is driven toward a desire for normalcy and order in the wake of her devastating past, and she welcomes the mundanity of life as a suburban housewife because it offers her an escape from the reality of her post-war life without Vision.

The force of the suburban environment becomes ever more coercive upon Wanda’s story; whereas at first it may seem that Wanda is shaping the suburbs in which the narrative of her dream family plays out, it soon becomes apparent that suburbia is simultaneously shaping her and the story she is attempting to write for her family. There are several key suburban qualities that play such a pivotal role in molding Wanda’s story from her ideal scenario into something less dreamlike. Firstly, Wanda soon learns that suburban living comes with nosy neighbors and an acute lack of privacy. Despite the privacy that would seem to accompany having one’s own home, their house is quickly subject
to frequent drop-ins, mostly by next-door neighbor Agnes, who is prone to throwing open the front door and announcing “Hiya!” or “Knock knock!” For Wanda and Vision, this invasion of privacy is not merely an imposition; rather, it threatens the secrecy of their identities, as their neighbors are not supposed to know that Wanda is a witch and Vision is a synthezoid (who must conceal his android features—a red face and body with metallic accents—and switch into his human form when in the presence of those outside his home).

These recurrent moments of privacy breaches begin to wear on Wanda and Vision’s relationship, as Wanda takes on a laxer attitude toward hiding their identities (perhaps because she can always rewrite the script of their life if something goes awry). In one such moment, Agnes pops over from next door when she overhears that Wanda’s sons have brought home a puppy, and while Agnes is still in the kitchen with them, Wanda conjures a collar and tag for the newest addition to their family, Sparky. Appalled, Vision remarks, “Agnes was right there!” but Wanda brushes him off, saying, “She didn’t notice. She didn’t even notice when the boys went from babies to five-year-olds.” Vision is unconvinced, replying, “That’s not what we agreed upon. You made no effort to conceal your abilities,” but Wanda counters, “Well, I’m tired of hiding, Vis. And maybe you don’t have to either” (Schaeffer 2021b). After some time in the suburbs, Wanda seems to think that she can have it all: a quaint family life with her husband and sons, and an opportunity to live authentically as themselves. She will soon learn, though, that just as Coon highlights in Look Closer, suburbia is not built for the authenticity of outsiders.

The entrapment of suburban life—symbolized by a literal force field supposedly keeping outside threats out but also keeping Wanda’s family in—continues to drive a wedge between Vision and Wanda, as Wanda can only keep up the reality if she does not share the truth with Vision (who still lacks all memories prior to arriving in Westview, and does not know that his wife is the puppeteer behind their entire community). This leads to conflict in their relationship and pushes Vision to investigate the truth. On Halloween night, Vision ventures to the outskirts of the town of Westview and discovers that the further from the town center he goes, the more ghostlike the town becomes. In the outer streets immediately before the force field, he finds the residents there frozen in time; they have tears in their eyes, but they are unable to move. It appears that in maintaining control of the town, Wanda has focused her energy on the spaces and people closest to her family, and she has kept control of those further from her family by merely freezing them in place, without giving them a role to play in her story. These individuals are stuck in one place, confined to roles barely more than mannequins, offering a rather grim picture of suburban existence as they remain trapped in half-finished loops of tasks such as hanging laundry on a clothesline or perpetually waiting for a traffic light to turn green. In a direct contradiction to Herbert Gans’s aforementioned assessment of suburbia, Wanda’s creation of a suburb offers far from a reduction in boredom and loneliness—in fact, Wanda inflicts acute idleness and isolation upon these residents who are paused in time, nearly boring them to death.

Beginning to connect the dots, Vision confronts
his wife, informing Wanda that he “unearthed the man’s suppressed personality and...spoke to him free of your oversight. He was in pain, Wanda... He has a family, and he can’t reach them because you won’t let him reach them” (Schaeffer 2021b). Wanda denies playing the omnipotent role of which Vision accuses her, but the seeds of doubt have been planted, and the sustainability of Wanda’s creation has now been called into question. The reprieve from the pain of the outside world that Wanda initially sought out in suburbia seems less simple now, as guilt and pain seep into the bubble that Wanda intended to keep the rest of the world at bay.

The inevitable infiltration of the outside world into Wanda’s quickly devolving suburban bubble continues with the surprise arrival of Wanda’s beloved brother, Pietro, at her doorstep on the same evening as her above-mentioned conversation with Vision. Pietro’s arrival comes as an uncanny shock, given that he was killed eight years prior in the Avengers movie Age of Ultron (2015). Orphaned together as children, Wanda and Pietro shared a close bond, and his loss was comparably traumatic to her loss of Vision. She seems to have rectified this latter loss through her takeover of Westview, and when Pietro reappears at Wanda’s door, he too is alive and entirely healed, seemingly a further extension of Wanda’s wish fulfillment manifestation of her new life in this suburb. However, in a jarring moment in the next episode, Pietro takes Wanda’s hand and as she glances up at him, she sees his body as it appeared immediately after his death—bloody and riddled with bullet holes. This moment mirrors a scene from a previous episode, in which Wanda turned to look at her husband on the couch and was instead met with the macabre image of Vision’s dead body, pale with a caved-in forehead from his death in Infinity Stone. These gruesome sights are both reversed in her next glances, but the unease of the moments remain, showcasing the impossibility of locking out the reality of Wanda’s traumatic past permanently, even in the quaint, quiet streets of the suburbs.

The danger present in suburbia ultimately comes to its most explicit fruition in the final episodes, when the friendly neighbor Agnes is revealed to be an ancient witch who intends to steal Wanda’s powers. Masquerading as a well-intentioned (if a bit meddlesome and gossipy) friend to Wanda, she offers to babysit Wanda’s sons so Wanda can have some time to herself. When Wanda goes next door to retrieve her children, she learns that Agnes is actually the centuries-old witch Agatha Harkness, and—in an allusion to the reality that suburbanites are not immune to the lurking threats of child predators—Wanda’s children have been kidnapped as a means of drawing her in so that Agatha can steal her powers. True to Murphy’s notion that, despite suburban spaces being seemingly “insulated from the dangers of the outside world,” in reality, “the most dangerous threats come from within” these spaces (2009, 3). Murphy’s explication of the “suburban nightmare” highlights how the threats families seek to escape by moving to the suburbs (such as the possibility of kidnapping, along with other dangers such as pedophilia, violence) can exist within suburban spaces just as they can exist in urban spaces: the suburbs, in reality, offer no real protection from the evils of humanity. Thus, Wanda discovers that despite her attempts to escape the pain of the outside world and protect her family in the bubble of suburbia, the
real threat was inside Westview all along.

While the reveal that Agnes is really Agatha produces a major plot twist that sparks a suspenseful battle scene in the final episode of the series (returning *WandaVision* to its superhero genre roots in an exciting finale), it is not Agatha but Wanda herself who brings about the end of their brief period of suburban bliss. She is able to defeat Agatha, but she cannot overcome her realization of the fact that her idyllic suburban existence has been built upon the suffering and captivity of the Westview residents. When Wanda’s mind control on the town residents is temporarily paused, she is approached by one character who begs Wanda, “My name is Sarah. I have a daughter. She’s eight. Maybe she could be friends with your boys. If you like that storyline. Or, uh, the school bully, even. Really, anything. If you could just let her out of her room. If I could just hold her, please.” If this moment were not heart-wrenching enough, an elderly neighbor follows up this request with, “If you won’t let us go, at least let us die” (Schaeffer 2021d). At this, Wanda is forced to confront the full reality of the injustice she has created: in order to live out her life with her family, she has been preventing an entire town of people from doing the same. The order of the suburbs was temporarily comforting to her, but ultimately, she cannot justify the cost of maintaining this suburban life, and she must recognize that the safety she created within the bubble of Westview was never real in the first place. Following her defeat of Agatha, Wanda performs one final role as a mother by tucking her boys into bed, then collapses the Hex, ending her reign over this suburban town and erasing her family along with it.

Jac Schaeffer, head writer of *WandaVision*, comments in a *New York Times* coverage of the series that the show intends to “shatter that safety [of a sitcom] in a calculated way” (Itzkoff 2021). Drawing on the rich tradition of suburban portrayals in sitcoms, *WandaVision* exposes the false nature of the safety felt within suburbia and challenges the achievability of the suburban dream. By situating Wanda’s story in a suburban setting, the show not only offers a fresh take on the superhero genre but also provides a nuanced examination of a universally human experience: the search for solace and control in the face of trauma. While Wanda’s eventual failure to protect her magic-produced family and their quiet suburban existence is complex for the above-explored reasons, the ultimate infeasibility of her experiment raises the question: if the suburbs operate upon a base level of sameness, conformity, and order, is the term “suburban superhero” itself an oxymoron? Is it possible for the supernatural to be contained and accepted by the suburbs, or will the social governance of suburbia inevitably reject the Otherness that inherently sets heroes apart? Ultimately, the elusive solace Wanda seeks is not to be found in suburbia, and her failure serves as an ominous reminder regarding the power of the suburbs: though they may be places of order and stability, the control inherent in this dynamic is reciprocal; just as residents of the suburbs shape their community, it seems that the suburbs shape their residents right back.

**Note on Author:** Elise Cavanaugh is currently pursuing her Master of Arts in Teaching in English at Bridgewater State University. This paper was completed in spring 2023 under the mentorship of Dr. Heidi Bean for the course ENGL 570: The Suburbs

32 • The Graduate Review • 2023

Bridgewater State University
in American Literature and Film. Elise works as an English teacher at King Philip Regional High School in Wrentham, Massachusetts and will complete her master’s degree in summer 2023.

References


