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Richard Yates: Re-writing Postwar American Culture

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M.A., M. Litt.

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the fiction of American author Richard Yates to propose that his work provides an insistent questioning and alternative vision of postwar American culture. Such an approach is informed by a revisionist account of four distinct yet interconnected areas of postwar culture: the role of the non-heroic soldier stepping in and out of World War II; suburbanisation and fashioning of anti-suburban performance; demarcation of gender roles and unraveling of sexual conservatism in the 1950s; consideration of what constituted the normative within postwar discourse and representations of mental illness in Yates' work.

These four spheres of interest form the backbone to this study in its combined aim of reclaiming Yates' fiction in line with a more progressive historical framework while shaping a new critical appreciation of his fiction. Such analysis will be primed by an opening discussion that illustrates how Yates' fiction has frequently been ensconced in a limited interpretative lens: an approach, that I argue, has kept Yates on the periphery of the canon and ultimately resulted in the neglect of an author who provided a rich, progressive and historically significant dialogue of postwar American life.

This PhD arrives at a point when Yatesian scholarship is finally gaining momentum after the cumulative impact of a comprehensive biography, a faithful film adaptation of his seminal text *Revolutionary Road* (1961), plus the recent re-issue of his catalogue of work. An assessment as to why he remained on the margins of success for the duration of his career is therefore of pressing interest in light of this recent critical and commercial recognition.

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I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work.

INTRODUCTION

There's a point in Richard Yates' unfinished novel *Uncertain Times* when its protagonist William Grove—a thinly veiled incarnation of the author himself—sits with two other men in Duke Zeibert's restaurant in Washington. Grove has recently been appointed as speechwriter to the then Attorney General, Bobby Kennedy, and along with the aides, Warren Turner and Jim Bailey, decides on a celebratory lunch. Zeibert's—known for its celebrity patronage in D.C. with luminaries adorning the walls—emits the air of 1960s America at a business lunch as Grove takes in his surroundings: the heady throng of customers talking Capitol Hill; the cool aroma of oysters and gin breaking through the clouds of cigarette smoke; the first cleansing, eager sip of Martini with the promise of more. After disposing of their first drinks, the conversation switches to John F. Kennedy, and Turner suggests meeting the President will be forever memorable for Grove. The dialogue runs:

“You can feel it in hairs on the back of your neck. Gooseflesh, he explained.

“That's the kind of presence the man has.”

Grove knew he wasn't expected to make any comment but he did, and with an incautious lack of reserve. “Well, okay, Warren, but I don't know. I don't think I'd feel anything like that. The point is, you see, I still think Adlai Stevenson ought to be President.”

There was a very brief moment before Warren Turner's smile of indulgence came back. “That's a little on the anachronistic side,” he said kindly, “wouldn't you say?”

“Maybe.”¹

Up until this point, Grove is a barely concealed cut-out of Yates' career as an author: set in 1963, Grove is 37, the same age as Yates at this point, has a literary biography that encompasses one novel nominated for the National Book Award, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), a well-received collection of short stories *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962), a six-month stint in Hollywood writing a screenplay (this isn't directly referenced, but relates to the author's work on William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness*) and, just as Yates would have been in 1963, Grove is in the process of writing a novel about the final stages of World War II, *A Special Providence* (1969). On top of the literary parallels, there are the

¹ A section of Richard Yates' *Uncertain Times* was published in. *Open City: 3* ed. Thomas Buller (New York: Open City Books, 2001), p 68.

shared biographical features: Grove has been divorced for four years, struggling with alcoholism and has already suffered from a series of breakdowns. Again like Yates, Grove is rakishly thin with lank hair and a “face as haunted and sad as the tone of his best work,” a clear reference to *Revolutionary Road*.² The scene above arrives in the second chapter of *Uncertain Times* and it is unclear whether Yates intended it to be a purely confessional text or a thinly disguised roman à clef. With this in consideration, the anachronistic nature of Grove’s preference for Stevenson, picked up by Turner, is of significance due to the parallels that can be drawn with Yates’ fiction and how it presents recurring threads of criticism that have also been levied at the author: whether his work, so historically tied to the postwar years, is tethered to an era long since bypassed, out of step with political (and literary) trends, and, in the clear biographical parallels that can be drawn with Yates, whether his novels rise to the level of fiction. The last inscription on the manuscript (which was found in Yates’ freezer shortly after his death) to *Uncertain Times* is dated August 1992, some thirty years on from the point in which the scene with Grove and Turner is set: Zeibert’s restaurant, meanwhile, closed its doors in 1980.³

Author Benjamin Anastas begins his review of Blake Bailey’s *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (2003), a work that spearheaded the author’s revival, by tackling Yates’ fiction on this, and one other, key point. Anastas outlines the founding conceit of the biographical form: the contours of our lives are shaped from page to page, our progress charted from introduction to index. For the critic, what separates us from subjects within the confines of the biographical genre is, that as living beings, we depend on the possibility of being able to choose a different path, or “break from the failures of the past and the eventuality of death.”⁴ The parallel Anastas draws between Yates and Bailey’s text is clear: Yates lived a ‘singularly sad life’ with a ‘dogged persistence’ that could be mapped out by a fleeting glance at the glossary. The trajectory of Yates’ life is central to Bailey’s methodology; Bailey interweaves biographical details with how these inflect, or rather, become directly transposed, into Yates’ fiction. As a corollary, Yates’ subject is consistently governed by and enclosed within an acutely defined range. Anastas explicates this in relation to Bailey’s approach:

² Yates (2001), p 36.

³ Blake Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (New York: Picador, 2003), p 594.

⁴ Benjamin Anastas, “Richard Yates’ Gruesome Life Laudably Indexed For Posterity,” *The Observer* (28 July 2003). Accessed at: <http://observer.com/2003/07/richard-yates-gruesome-life-laudably-indexed-for-posterity/>. Last accessed [14 June 2016]

Mr. Bailey argues persuasively that there's art in Yates' reliance on lived experience—and there is, on every page—but he glosses the unavoidable fact that Yates' vision as a novelist, instead of widening and complicating with the years, grew progressively more narrow, until he could relate to nothing but his own predicament.⁵

Anastas identifies a pressing issue with Bailey's text: the biographer fails to recognise—or indeed ignores—the fact Yates' fictional range was limited to scenes-as-lived. It is unclear where Anastas stands on *A Tragic Honesty*: he primes his review by positing it as an act of apotheosis, an “unabashed example of literary hagiography,” to come to the conclusion that, “It's an odd sensation to read a biography as laudable and as necessary as Mr. Bailey's.”⁶ To cement his opening argument, Anastas cites Robert Towers, who, in his review of *Liars in Live* (1981), states: “it is as if Yates were under some enchantment that compelled him to keep circling the same half-acre of pain.”⁷ For Anastas, Bailey alludes to this, but never properly confronts his subject's predisposition in translating his macabre experiences to the page. In terms of this “half-acre of pain,” Bailey, to my mind, makes this implicit from the outset of his biography when he opens his work with quotations from George Eliot and, appropriately enough, Adlai Stevenson:

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of its frequency has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind, and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-1872)

Americans have always assumed, subconsciously, that every story will have a happy ending. Adlai Stevenson, *Call to Greatness* (1954).⁸

The epigraphs prime the reader for the biography's tone: the reference to *Middlemarch* (1871-72) intonates both the recurrence of tragedy and our resistance to being exposed to it. Stevenson's quote, which Yates had intended to use as the epigraph to *Uncertain Times*, signifies a compulsion for a resolved, content closure but as readers of Yates' fiction (and his biography for that matter) will be aware, this is rarely forthcoming.

⁵ Anastas (2003).

⁶ Anastas (2003).

⁷ Robert Towers, “Richard Yates and His Unhappy People”, *The New York Times* (1 November 1981), p 3.

⁸ Quoted in epigraph to Bailey (2003).

A further derivative can be drawn from this twinned critique, one that has broader implications for the appropriation of Yates' work and the manner in which this thesis will approach and look to reclaim his fiction. Towers' designation of a 'half-acre of pain,' and Anastas' assertion that Yates' vision contracted as his career progressed, also coalesce on the point that the author failed to diversify his thematic reach or broaden the cultural landscape for the subjects within his fiction. Certainly, there is a persistence of recurring figures throughout Yates' fiction: the mother as second-rate artist or overly dependent parent ("Regards at Home", "Oh Joseph, I'm so Tired", *A Special Providence*, *A Good School* and *Cold Spring Harbor*); the not-so heroic infantrymen ("A Compassionate Leave", *A Special Providence*, "The Canal", "The B.A.R. Man"); men suffering from depressive episodes fuelled by alcohol (*Disturbing the Peace*, *Young Hearts Crying*, *The Easter Parade*). However, this isn't, in itself, an issue: John Updike chronicled American masculinity through the singular focalisation of Rabbit Angstrom in the Rabbit tetralogy, while Nathan Zuckerman, first appearing in *My Life As a Man* (1974) is a fixture in Philip Roth's fiction. If Yates is guilty of re-writing characters within his fiction—which he is—perhaps the broader concern relates to how their persistence stands in discordance, or out of step, with the culture of the time.

Yates' fiction rarely breaks from a historic circumferential arc—to borrow Tower's terminology—that covers American withdrawal from World War II (*A Special Providence*) to the cultural and sexual revolutions of the latter part of the 1960s (signified by *The Easter Parade*), the start and end points to this study. There are a couple of qualifications to this historical framework, most clearly *A Good School* (1978), which is set on the cusp of American entry into the war. Even though Yates carried on writing into the 1990s with *Uncertain Times* and his last work to appear in print was *Cold Spring Harbor* (1986), the author retains a concentric focus on early postwar America. Rather than viewing this focus as being a reflection on Yates' anachronistic take on culture—frequently writing back to a time since passed—my thesis proposes that Yates' fiction must be viewed as representing a continuous commentary on postwar American life, even if, as is clearly the case, the country had stepped into a different era. In approaching Yates' work with such a sharply defined historical lens, specifically the point from *A Special Providence* to *The Easter Parade*, I will argue that his fiction broadens out to present a progressive cultural, social and sexual portrait of an era previously cloaked in ideology and political phraseology that bore little resemblance to the times.

This thesis will concentrate its attention on four distinct yet interconnected areas of American culture to uncover an author who insistently questioned and offered an alternative vision of postwar American life; the role of the non-heroic soldier stepping in and out of World War II; suburbanisation and fashioning of anti-suburban performance; demarcation of gender roles and unraveling of sexual conservatism in the 1950s; consideration of what constituted the normative within postwar discourse and representations of mental illness in Yates' work. These four spheres of interest form the backbone to this study in its combined aim of reclaiming Yates' fiction in line with a more progressive historical framework while shaping and arguing for a fresh critical appreciation of his fiction.

Scholars of Yates have, to varying degrees, analysed these four themes: Leif Bull connects *A Special Providence* into a broader discussion of American literary realism and themes of masculinity in his monograph *A Thing Made of Words* (2010); Steven Goldleaf and David Castronovo explore notions of performance in Yates' work, which they connect to Erving Goffman's theory of selfhood; most recently, Kate Charlton-Jones has shown how Yates remained in dialogue with the sexual politics of the decade in *Dismembering the American Dream* (2014). Aside from Charlton-Jones' work—this is an overlap I unpick in chapter four by working against Charlton-Jones' contention that Yates presents a paradoxical view of female sexuality in *The Easter Parade*—my study, in applying a socio-historical backdrop to each text under discussion, approaches Yates' fiction in a markedly new light. In the closing chapter, I offer, to my knowledge, the first extended discussion on Yates' treatment of mental illness; an analysis that shows the author to be sensitive to the evolving cultural and literary representations of the topic. The opening part of this study has combined objective of establishing how Yates' work has been approached (by reviewers) with a pre-determined theoretical lens, forming and consolidating the picture of a conservative author in both style and concentration of theme, the result of which ultimately determined the trajectory of Yates' career. This will prime the subsequent chapters to illustrate how reviewers continued to overlook Yates' progressive questioning of postwar American culture: in my final chapter, for example, I chart the manner in which his treatment of mental illness develops from *Revolutionary Road* to *Disturbing the Peace*, an engagement which sees Yates move from viewing the subject as a response to a controlling postwar environment in *Revolutionary Road*, to a concentrated account of one man's descent into psychosis in the latter text.

The significance of such a socio-historic approach to Yates' work is of added significance, and relevance, due to recent revisionist studies of the era, which have provided contrary readings of a culture previously framed within the bracketed ideological discourses of sexual conservatism, social conformity and the familial normative. Historical accounts of the era have opened up a more complex portrait of the era by unraveling its cultural ambiguities and intertwining these with the distinct social transformations of the late 1960s. Contributions from Wini Breines, Stephanie Coontz, James Burkhardt Gilbert and Kyle Cuordilene have shortened the gap between the 'tranquilized fifties' and the cultural revolutions we find in the following decade; the sizable tectonic shifts of the 1960s can be seen to emanate from the ripples of unrest in the not-so-placid postwar years.⁹ With a historiographic approach to the 1950s and early 60s, I will show that Richard Yates' work, in the four areas of postwar culture identified, should be a part of this critical rethinking. Each chapter of this study has the objective of offering a fresh reading of Yates' work in light of the new appreciation we have of the postwar years. While the weight of my argument will rest with my analysis of Yates' fiction and how this should be placed within this historical rethinking, I draw upon a number of social, cultural and political sources to supplement my textual readings. Such a multi-disciplinary focus means that the intellectual context of this thesis lies in American studies, the application of which, I believe, allows for a fuller appreciation of Yates' vision of postwar American life.

The first chapter of this study will propose a number of factors that have contributed to the lack of critical recognition Yates received throughout his career. This has the combined purpose of advancing and justifying the argument that Yates is a neglected author, while it also primes the subsequent critical analyses with a firm grounding in the pattern and trajectory of Yates' career. Relying heavily on correspondence between Yates and his agent, Monica McCall, and his publishers, Atlantic-Little, Brown, I will detail how the critical reaction to *Revolutionary Road* created critical interest in Yates' production of a topical novel on suburbia or marriage (or, in fact, suburban marriage), as the result of a somewhat misguided marketing approach. This represents an original reading of the strategic missteps that were taken in the lead up to the publication of *Revolutionary Road*, a vital stage that ultimately determined the trajectory of Yates' success. Moving through this, I will look at the notion of Yates as a conservative

⁹ The term originates from Robert's Lowell's poem, 'Memories of West Street and Lepke.' As I cover in p 28. onwards, the term was in itself paradoxical: Lowell tells us that the decade is placid only because it is sedated.

writer, a critique frequently raised and one that was consolidated shortly after the publication of both *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* and *A Special Providence*.

This label has resulted in the perception of Yates as a firmly outdated writer, both stylistically and in his continued interrogation of the same epoch. Such categorisation has enshrouded Yates' fiction within a tightly bound interpretative framework, meaning critics often approached Yates' work on a textual level (often resulting in the claim that his style failed to diversify throughout the years) or in its backward glance at 1950s and early 60s America (culminating in the assumption that his fiction concentrated on a historical era long since passed). Such an approach, however, fails to account for examples of his more progressive range (as with *Disturbing the Peace*), or its insistent questioning and the alternative vision it presents of postwar American culture. Vintage's recent re-issue of Yates' body of work, arriving shortly before Sam Mendes' faithful adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* (2008) sparked a revival and sales figures between this period have been impressive.¹⁰ As the opening chapter will illustrate, Yates was held in high-esteem — a trend that has continued to the present day with authors such as Richard Ford and Nick Hornby championing his work—while his novels often received strong reviews. An assessment as to why he remained on the periphery of success for the duration of his career, with particular focus on how his novels were received in the climate of postwar fiction, is of pressing interest in light of this recent critical and commercial recognition.

Thereafter, this thesis turns to a discussion of *A Special Providence*, in which Yates offers a vision of warfare that opposes the template of heroism and reintegration frequently evoked in post-World War II narratives. This topic, despite being one that the author frequently returned to in his early fiction, has received little critical analysis: this is in part due to the small field of scholars who have approached Yates and the fact the author openly referred to *A Special Providence* as his weakest book. The novel demonstrates a clear shortcoming, as will be covered in the forthcoming chapter, *A Special Providence's* glaring fault is its structural imbalance, which is caused by the mother-son narrative in the middle of the novel, disrupting the text's momentum and detracting from its primary focus. I will argue, however, that *A Special Providence* retains both social and historical significance when adopting a revisionist approach to postwar America. The battlefield, for Robert Prentice, becomes a source of emasculation and anxiety and a site of failed masculinity as his absence of involvement, or wounding, from warfare, inverts the process

¹⁰ Vintage sold 30,000 copies of *Revolutionary Road* between 2007 and the release of the film adaptation in 2009. Information provided by Frances MacMillan, Penguin Random House, email dated 11 April 2016.

of recovery of the returning (and valiant) veteran. Yates' protagonist also rejects, significantly, the process of demobilisation laid out for the returning soldier, troubling the expected reconfiguration of gender roles as the country made its way into the postwar era.

The third chapter of this study will concentrate on one of the defining features of early postwar American life, suburbanisation. Working from the contention that *Revolutionary Road* has been unfairly upheld as an anti-suburban text, my analysis will show that Yates conflates and parodies the characteristic tropes that were seen as symptomatic of a move from the city. Building on recent work on suburban studies and fiction, I will show how Yates divests the picture window of its status as a monochromatic symbol of suburban topography—characteristic of uniformity, homogeneity and lack of privacy—to posit a far more dynamic relationship with suburban inhabitants. As part of this discussion on privacy, this chapter will extend my reading of the postwar era to concerns that relate more directly to the Cold War. Specifically, I explore how privacy became a central concern of Cold War intellectual discussion yet there remained confusion as how this could be achieved. Suburbia, at a distance from the more populous city and boasting a larger space than urban households, was seen to be the realisation of domestic liberty and privacy. The preservation of privacy could only be ensured through observation or containment, a relationship that Deborah Nelson defined as the 'governing paradox' of the Cold War.¹¹ Working from this standpoint, I view Yates' deployment of the picture window as one that should be part of Cold War concerns over privacy and containment. My analysis shows how the picture window in *Revolutionary Road* not only heightens notions of observation and privacy, but sets up various composite points of self-reflexivity within the text. Yates utilises the window to construct a fluid interplay of observer and observant, a site of contemplation and an interstice through which the Wheelers' living room becomes a platform of display and performance; a parallel narrative to recurring features of both of Yates' central characters.

Moving on from this, I explore the shifting parameters of gender and sexuality in *Revolutionary Road* and *The Easter Parade*. My analysis will incorporate, like the previous chapter, issues that were more specific to Cold War culture. The heightened apprehension surrounding female sexuality will be linked to the ideological stress on containment within Cold War discussion. I will look at how the anxieties over anything that was perceived to be sexually deviant, whether the sexual excesses of women or

¹¹ Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America (Gender and Culture Series)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p xiii.

homosexuality, became interconnected with the threat of Communism. I aim to demonstrate, throughout this chapter, that Yates' fiction engages with the concerns and contradictions of the sexual politics in the postwar and Cold War environments. Adopting the standpoint that the 1950s constituted anything but sexual conservatism or a strict demarcation of gender roles, I argue that Yates' men seek to reaffirm various forms of control as a reaction to, and anxiety over, the looming spectre of female autonomy. In *The Easter Parade*, the author highlights the patriarchal traits of his male characters primarily to expose and critique their behaviour. When placed in a socio-historical context, the novel also outlines the increasing sexual autonomy of women in the lead-up to the second wave of feminism to show a movement that was primed by the sexual unrest of the previous decade.

The closing chapter will look to Yates' treatment of mental illness as the final area in which the author provides an incisive vision of postwar American life. In a comparative analysis of *Revolutionary Road* and *Disturbing the Peace* I argue that Yates initiates a dialogue on the theoretical grounding of mental illness and questions the pervasive power of psychoanalysis. In the latter text, Yates moves from a broader critique of the practice to concentrate more forcefully on his protagonist's descent into psychosis. My treatment of this topic extends from what constituted 'normative' within popular discourse to detail how mental illness came to be seen as symptomatic of a restrictive postwar culture, as evidenced in texts such as Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). In *Disturbing the Peace*, Yates reframes his attention to encompass a more thorough assessment of institutionalised and psychiatric care in America. This is reflected in the contrasting styles of the texts as Yates moves from a more distanced narration in *Revolutionary Road* to capture Wilder's more intimate and singular experience. Pairing the texts illustrates how Yates diversified his approach—for instance, by constructing fiction and reality as interchangeable entities in his depiction of Wilder in the throes of psychosis—yet still presents a reciprocal and complementary questioning of the fictional engagement with mental illness in the postwar era. These four strands will provide the critical backbone to this study in its aim of reclaiming Yates' fiction in line with a more progressive contextual and historical framework.

Prior to this, this introduction will interrogate the idea of Yates as a bleak writer—partly as a way of proposing this conception as being an aspect which has led to some hesitance in approaching his work (especially at the time in which Yates was writing)—but also because the tragic tone carries through all of the novels under examination. The tone

Yates strikes in his fiction will be seen as attributable to the narratorial distance he establishes throughout his work. Yates' use of the third-person omniscient narrative is distinctive, in part, due to the height from which it operates and the lack of empathetic recourse, or authorial tempering, it allows. This is a stylistic consideration that is necessary to define from the outset and a feature that will be referred to at various points during this study. I will also establish the historical context in which I will place Yates' novels: revisionist accounts of the postwar years have posited a far more dynamic and progressive conceptualisation of the 1950s, seeking primarily to expose the narratives of normativity, conservatism and placidity that were upheld previously.

Yates' Harsh Reality

It has been offered, by almost all of Yates' critics, that the author's readership has been seriously diminished by the darkness of vision threaded, almost uniformly, throughout his work. This isn't unsubstantiated: beginning with his earliest fiction, Yates has been unflinchingly consistent in charting his characters' divorces, deaths, breakdowns and spectacular delusions, all of which have been treated with an unsympathetic hand. For David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf, Yates' harsh reality, which "offers no glamour, no glimmering dreams, no sustained reveries," marked an affront to the vigour and enthusiasm of the early 1960s.¹² His overarching vision stands as "one of the bleakest in contemporary American literature."¹³ More recently, author Stephen Amidon opened his 2001 piece for *The Atlantic* by stating, "Richard Yates just might have been the saddest writer America has produced."¹⁴ Yates never shied from acceding to the tragic undertones that seem to underlie all of his fiction: when asked why his characters are invariably outsiders, frequently rejected, or striving to become someone else, Yates replied: "I guess I'm not very interested in successful people. I guess I'm more interested in failures."¹⁵ Later in his career, Yates reflected on the body of his fiction: "If my work has a theme, I suspect it is a simple one: that most human beings are inescapably alone, and therein lies

¹² David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf, *Richard Yates* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p 57 & 59.

¹³ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 59.

¹⁴ Stephen Amidon, "A Harrowing Mirror of Loneliness," *The Atlantic* (July / August 2001). Accessed online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/07/a-harrowing-mirror-of-loneliness/302256/>. [Last accessed 9 June 2016]

¹⁵ "An Interview with Richard Yates" *Ploughshares* Vol. 1, no. 3 (1972), Accessed online: <https://www.pshares.org/issues/fall-2011/archive-interview-richard-yates>. [Last accessed 9 June 2016].

their tragedy.”¹⁶ It is apparent that Yates abided by this theme, with nearly all of his work closing on a sense of isolation or loss. Indeed, the manner in which Yates ends his novels was a contentious point from the outset of his career. When Yates sent his earliest short story, “A Really Good Jazz Piano” to various publishers he received nine separate rejections. *The Paris Review*’s Peter Matthiessen provided an apt summation as to why the piece wouldn’t be commissioned:

We remain impressed with Mr. Yates's ability, and hope to agree before too long on one of his stories. But I am returning A REALLY GOOD JAZZ PIANO, with regrets. It is competent enough, but it does not seem to me persuasive—that is, the cruelty which forms its climax is incredible.¹⁷

Matthiessen’s concern centred upon how Yates arrived at such a clinical ending. The story, which follows two Americans in Cannes and their discovery of a talented pianist in a jazz bar, closes, somewhat unexpectedly, with the musician’s humiliation. Up until this point, the piece has a carefree feel of two Americans enjoying and indulging in Euro-bohemianism; Hemingway’s imprint remained evident in Yates’ work at this point. The central characters, Carson Wyler and Ken Platt, believe they have found a musician with an “incorruptible jazz talent in the backstreets of a foreign city.”¹⁸ The pianist Sid boasts an ‘*authentic integrity*’ and the pair decide to strike up a friendship with him, cemented by offering an invitation to their International Barflies Club. If Carson and Ken feel they have formed an alliance with Sid, albeit one firmly rooted in being rich in the Riviera and the novelty of unearthing an as of yet undiscovered musician, this is shattered when Sid degrades himself by playing “Stardust” for a member of the audience the following evening. For Carson, Sid’s compliance and performance of the song marks a descent into parody, with the musician playing out a “phony Uncle Remus routine.”¹⁹ Upon finishing the song, Sid approaches the two men and greet them with the IBC salutation, “*Bzz-z-z*”: cruelly, Carson lets the verbal insignia drop into a ‘heavy silence,’ leaving Sid despondent and confused as to the men’s indifference.²⁰ The story closes with a split: both men leave the bar yet the narrative voice switches to reveal Ken’s frustration and anger at his companion’s behavior, “as soon as the sobering night air hit him, as soon as he saw

¹⁶ Quoted in Stewart O’Nan’s “The Lost World of Richard Yates,” *The Boston Review* (1 October 1999). Accessed online: <http://bostonreview.net/stewart-onan-the-lost-world-of-richard-yates>. [Last accessed 9 June 2016].

¹⁷ Letter from Peter Matthiessen to Monica McCall, dated 28 January 1955, The Richard Yates Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.

¹⁸ Richard Yates, “A Really Good Jazz Piano,” *Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 2008), p 113.

¹⁹ Yates (2008), p 121.

²⁰ Yates (2008), p 123.

Carson's erect white suit...He wanted to run up and hit him."²¹ In the original version of the story—and the one Matthiessen received—both Carson and Ken laugh at Sid's embarrassment, while there is no narrative repositioning at the end, meaning it lacked the only element of the piece to give it some empathetic recourse.²² There's a glimpse of this too in *A Good School* (1976), when one of the secondary characters, Larry Gaines, leaves Dorset Academy for the military two weeks after expressing his love for Edith Stone, the schoolmaster's daughter. After detailing their last meeting in a tender, sensitive tone, we are told of how, ten miles out of New York harbor, Larry's tanker 'accidentally caught fire and exploded. There were no survivors.'²³ As ever with Yates, no authorial condolence is offered.

Perhaps the gravest example of Yates' bleak endings is April's suicide in *Revolutionary Road*. Even though the reader is primed for some form of tragedy from the outset, the conclusion shocks because it is traced with a lucidity that belies the harrowing nature of the scene. Yates had devised the ending from the novel's earliest drafts and was steadfast in his assertion that it should remain. This was despite the fact that prior to Atlantic-Little, Brown taking on the novel, several publishers had rejected it on the grounds of its gravely somber conclusion. After submitting a 130-page draft, then entitled *The Getaway*, to Random House Publishers, McCall received a very specific brief as to why they were to pass on the novel:

Although we are persuaded of his real ability and the book's real worth, we don't feel we can make an offer for it without having seen the finished work. I express my doubts about his plan for the rest and even though he and I have talked it over and he is certainly willing to tone down his tragic plan, I am sorry to say there still remains this much doubt on our part.²⁴

Prior to the rejection letter, Yates had conversed with Hiram Haydn of Random House and given—according to Haydn—the impression that he would be willing to come to a compromise over the ending. Whether Yates had conceded ground or Haydn was looking

²¹ Yates (2008), p 124.

²² "A Really Good Jazz Piano" went through several redrafts before Yates settled on the ending, which appeared in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. This revision saw a split in the two characters' reactions, with Platt angered at Wyler's response to Sid. According to Bailey, McCall had suggested altering the tone of the original ending but Yates believed it to be "honest." Bailey (2003), p 124.

²³ Richard Yates, *A Good School* (London: Vintage, 2007), p 130.

²⁴ Letter from Random House Publishers to Monica McCall, dated 8 May 1956, The Richard Yates Collection.

for McCall to act as a conduit to influence her client, Yates provided a fairly comprehensive response to Haydn's proposal. Composed just 13 days after receiving Random House's rejection letter, Yates informed McCall:

All I know for sure at this point...is that I'm going to finish the book whether anybody pays me to or not, that it's going to be as strong and un-melodramatic a tragedy as I can make it, and that any question of toning up or toning sideways is wholly arbitrary and absurd.²⁵

As Yates recognised, the point of contention rested not just in the novel's tragic impulse but its 'un-melodramatic' treatment; the detachment with which April's self-induced abortion is narrated mirrors the methodical manner with which the act is carried out, there is no authorial commentary, or narratological tempering, to soften or comfort the reader, a feature of the text that I further explore in chapter four of this study. As to Yates' determination to persist with the ending, he stated: 'I hope you understand this, in case anyone asks, and I hope you'll see it is plainly no statement of willingness to tone anything down.'²⁶ The response from publication houses across Europe followed a similar pattern to Random House's. British firm Gollancz, for one, wrote:

I am afraid we have decided to decline REVOLUTIONARY ROAD by Richard Yates. It's packed with talent, but it seems to us one of those downbeat American novels that don't go over here. Heaven knows, another publisher may have a big success with it, but we are inclined to doubt it.²⁷

There were concerns as to how the novel could be adapted for cinema, with film studios citing its dark overtones as a reason for not pursuing the avenue of adaptation. 20th Century Fox were fairly complimentary yet expressed concern as to the fact there was nothing cathartic about the tale, stating, "There is no redeeming element in the story which could make a reasonably compassionate film." As to its conclusion, they added: "While happy endings are no longer obligatory, audiences still do not want a relentless probing into the sources of pain."²⁸ Famous Artists Agency were more diplomatic in their assessment of the novel's probing of pain, yet still rejected it on similar grounds: "One of the troubles, it seems to me, is that the characters themselves are pretty dreary and I think it

²⁵ Letter from Richard Yates to Monica McCall, dated 21 May 1956, The Richard Yates Collection.

²⁶ Yates to McCall, dated 21 May 1956, The Richard Yates Collection.

²⁷ Letter from Gollancz to Monica McCall, dated 19 July 1960, The Richard Yates Collection.

²⁸ Letter from 20th Century Fox to Monica McCall, dated 31 October 1960, The Richard Yates Collection.

would be difficult to attract people into a theatre to view these unsympathetic people.”²⁹ This was, in fact, a feature of characterisation Yates constantly looked to avoid: the first draft of *Revolutionary Road*, according to the author, was “very thin, very sentimental.”³⁰ This sentimentality derived from the fact Yates had made the “Wheelers sort of nice young folks with whom any careless reader could identify.” Their dialogue conveyed everything they meant, and they “talked very earnestly together even when they were quarrelling, like people in some Sloan Wilson novel.”³¹ By revising their dialogue and interactions in the subsequent drafts, Yates believed the best approach would be for the Wheelers to “always miss each other’s points, to have them talk around and through and *at* each other.”³² Yates found fault with the fact the reader could identify—and could be lead through—his characterisation of the Wheelers: he modified the novel to ensure their dialogue would be at some sort of separation to character, that they would always just catch themselves before giving their character away. This, for Yates, would challenge us to a reading beyond surface identification to look past what the narrator has presented.

Traces of this are apparent in one of Yates’ earliest stories, “The Best of Everything,” as we meet Grace and Ralph, two days prior to their wedding. The story begins as Grace enjoys her last day of work—a gift of a corsage, a voucher for Bloomingdale’s and a gossipy lunch with the girls from the office. This easy entry into the piece recedes as Grace, upon fixing her stationery for the last time, considers: “she couldn’t marry him—she hardly even *knew* him.”³³ Grace contemplates Martha’s (her roommate) words of caution (Martha finds it difficult to understand how she could marry a man who says ‘terlet’), and the narrative switches to Grace and Ralph’s initial courtship. The doubt Grace experiences upon leaving the office pervades the flashback; she insists to Martha that “He’s perfectly nice” before leading into the scene when she decides she would be willing to marry him.³⁴ Dancing to the song “Easter Parade,” Ralph, with a whispering tenor, sings the chorus into her ear. This gentle serenading atones for the fact he is “perfectly nice,” and serves as a romantic reverie to justify Grace’s agreement to marriage. Following the analeptic break, the narrative moves to the present as Martha informs Grace she will be moving from their flat a day early, to allow the couple to spend their first night alone together.

²⁹ Letter from Famous Artists Agency, dated 8 December 1960, The Richard Yates Collection.

³⁰ *Ploughshares* (1972).

³¹ *Ploughshares* (1972).

³² *Ploughshares* (1972).

³³ Richard Yates, “The Best of Everything,” *The Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 2008), p 20.

³⁴ Yates (2008), p 20.

The third-person narrative achieves its balance, thereafter, when it focuses on Ralph's preparations for the wedding. Leaving work, he had been vaguely disappointed by the effort his colleagues had put into his farewell lunch, which consisted of a solitary drink. After, he meets his best man Eddie in the same bar he had told him about his first date with Grace, "Ohh, Eddie—what a paira *knockers*!"³⁵ Although he had agreed with Grace that he will be able to spend one night a week with his friends, Ralph is struck by the fact it would never be the same, and with this his throat swells "in a sentimental pain of loss."³⁶ Believing this is the totality of his pre-wedding celebrations, Ralph steps into Eddie's house to find a room packed with his friends, all breaking into a chorus of "Fo he's a jolly guh fella." Ralph's surprise, and joy, is compounded when his friends hand him the tawny Gladstone he had pined after for so long. If there are two contrasting notions of sentimentality—Grace's romantic reverie and Eddie's notion of friendship, which he views as presenting a conflict with his marriage—Yates brings these together as "The Best of Everything" reaches its final movement. Ralph, leaving the fellas to visit Grace, who, now alone, is wearing a matching nightgown and negligee. The dialogue at this point runs:

"Ralph, do you—do you like this?"

"What, honey?"

"My negligee. You weren't supposed to see it until—after the wedding, but I thought I'd—"

"Nice," he said, feeling the flimsy material between thumb and index finger, like a merchant. "Very nice. Wudga pay fa this, honey?"

"Oh—I don't know. But do you like it?"

He kissed her and began, at last, to stroke her with his hands. "Nice," he kept saying. "Nice. Hey, I like this." His hand hesitated at the low neckline, slipped inside and held her breast.

"I do love you, Ralph," she whispered. "You know that, don't you?"

His fingers pinched her nipple, once, and slid quickly out again. The policy of restraint, the habit of months was too strong to break.

"Sure, he said. "And I love you, baby. Now you be a good girl and get ya beauty sleep, and I'll see ya in the morning. Okay?"

"Oh, Ralph. Don't go. Stay."

"Ah, I promised the fellas, Gracie." He stood up and straightened his clothes.

"They're waitin' fa me, out home." (30)

³⁵ Yates (2008), p 24.

³⁶ Yates (2008), p 25.

The excerpt is indicative of what Yates set out to do in *Revolutionary Road*, where Frank and April would “talk around and through and *at* each other.” Heavy on dialogue, Grace anticipates that her alluring underwear will be a precursor—and sign—to Ralph of how the evening will proceed. Ralph, oblivious, misses the point as to why Grace asks him if he likes it and considers the underwear on monetary value; this misconception carries through to the fact he views it purely for the purposes of titillation. This is furthered when Grace tells her fiancé she loves him—again an indication that she is seeking a more intimate scene—only for Ralph to acknowledge this in its most factual sense as he returns the expression. If we can see in this the foundations to the way Yates wants us to think and look beyond his characters’ dialogue, the scene’s close confounds any shard of sentimentality we may have felt at the outset: as he prepares to leave and return to his friends, Ralph asks: “Gracie? Only, before I go—I’m fulla beer. Mind if I use ya terlet?”³⁷ The question, and more to the point the use of “terlet,” transposes us to the beginning of the piece, when Martha questions her decision to marry Ralph, which brings her to consider their first dance—and Ralph’s gentle voice—as her justification. Yates takes us back to the initial scene but does so without an insistent interior monologue. In *Revolutionary Road*, when April considers why her marriage to Frank has derailed so drastically and she plans her abortion, she recasts to a scene with “a boy who’d dance with you and made you laugh” and concedes that “the only real mistake, the only wrong and dishonest thing, was ever to see him as anything more than that.”³⁸

Leaving no Tears on the Page

If Yates threads a somber tone throughout his fiction—and frequently brings that to a climactic point, whether at the end of the novel as with John Wilder in *Disturbing the Peace*, or leading into it, as when Emily Grimes realises she is destined to follow the pathway to loneliness in *The Easter Parade*—this is accentuated by the narratorial distance Yates establishes and maintains for the duration of the text. During the *Ploughshares* interview Yates provided an accurate gauge as to his feelings on narrative positioning when commenting on one of his contemporaries. Asked about Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965)—one of the objectives of the interview was to engage Yates in dialogue about new journalism and postrealist fiction—the author replied: “Yeah but Capote kind of

³⁷ Yates (2008), p 30.

³⁸ Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Vintage, 2007), p 304.

screwed up I think by sort of falling in love with one of those two guys and he sort of sentimentalised that whole characterisation.”³⁹ Yates’ issue with Capote’s work shouldn’t come as too much of a surprise: the interview returned, at various points, to the rapid encroachment of personal journalism and straight autobiography, which had been “corrupting” traditional fiction.⁴⁰

Yates identified the sentimental form with which Capote treated his subject, Perry Smith, as the text’s downfall. The reference to Capote is of particular, and broader, interest: like Yates, he had started to hone his craft as a short-story writer, a practice, he told the *Paris Review* in 1957, that had taught him the skill of “maintaining a stylistic and emotional upper hand over your material.”⁴¹ During the same interview, Capote recalled reading that Dickens, during the process of composition, would often drip ‘tears all over the page when one of his characters died.’ For Capote, “the writer should have considered his wit and dried his tears long, long before.”⁴² Casting Dickens’ empathetic streak aside, the author looks to Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart* (1877), for an artist fully aware and in control of the emotive reaction of their work. Capote adds: “I believe the greatest intensity in art in all its shapes is achieved with a deliberate, hard, and cool head.”⁴³ There is an affinity between the two authors: both shared an appreciation of Flaubert (Yates’ admiration for Flaubert will be examined below) and the maxim of a controlled and detached third-person narrative. But for Yates, Capote had contravened this through his relationship with Smith: Capote’s presence, and direct influence over one of his protagonists, lessened his characterisation in *In Cold Blood*.

Looking at such a critique of Capote’s fiction, it is clear that Yates relates narrational distance to sentimentality (or lack thereof), and like his contemporary, greatly admired Flaubert. Towards the end of his career, Yates paid homage to all of the authors who had influenced his career in an essay for *The New York Times*. After citing F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and T.S. Eliot, Yates said at the age of 29 *Madame Bovary* “took command.”⁴⁴ Flaubert’s novel served as a guide, “if not a model,” for the novel that had been taking shape in his mind: above all, he aspired to achieve the kind of “balance

³⁹ Original audio of *Ploughshares* interview, occurs between 19:58-20:10. Accessed online: http://pages.emerson.edu/faculty/d/dewitt_henry/yatesinterview.mp3. [Last accessed 22 June 2016]

⁴⁰ *Ploughshares* (1972). Subsequent references will denote time of interview.

⁴¹ Truman Capote, “The Art of Fiction No. 17”, *The Paris Review*, no. 16 (Spring-Summer 1957) Accessed online: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4867/the-art-of-fiction-no-17-truman-capote>. [Last accessed 9 June 2016].

⁴² Capote (1957).

⁴³ Capote (1957).

⁴⁴ Richard Yates, “Some Very Good Masters,” *New York Times Book Review*, (19 April 1981), p 3.

and quiet resonance” found in Flaubert’s masterpiece.⁴⁵ When writing *April*, Yates wanted us to see shades of Emma Bovary, the kind of “inexorable destiny” mixed with the “heart of a lonely, romantic girl.” Similarly, and more directly relevant to the position of the author in the text, Yates cited his admiration for Flaubert’s “great line” during the *Ploughshares* interview: “The writer’s relation to his work must be like that of God to the Universe: omnipresent and invisible. Isn’t that nice?”⁴⁶ Yates believed he had executed this ideal in his construction of *Revolutionary Road*: each character was partially based on himself, people he knew, or composites of them, all going through a kind of “fictional prism, so that in the finished book, I like to think the reader can’t really find the author anywhere—or, to put the same thing another way—he can find the author everywhere.”⁴⁷ Such craftsmanship allows the author to occupy the dual role of transparency and total obscurity within the text.

The Man who Brought the Aeroplanes

That Yates clearly drew considerable inspiration from Flaubert is a connection that has been made by nearly all Yatesian scholars. Yet as much as he abided by and drew from Flaubert’s instruction, he articulated his very own maxim on authorial positioning when praising the work of a contemporary. R.V. Cassill was the first “real writer” Yates had ever spent time with (they first met in 1958 and thereafter maintained a strong professional relationship; Yates valued and respected Cassill’s honest judgement of his work).⁴⁸ Shortly after their first meeting, Cassill and his wife visited Yates at his family home. During dinner, Cassill had upset his fellow writer’s wife when he spoke of marriage being an abstract concept, unaware that Yates’ own was about to collapse. If his dinner talk left a little to be desired, Cassill made amends by bringing model aeroplanes for Yates’ daughters. Yates recounts:

They were planes he built himself: precisely fitted balsa-wood frames and struts under a taut rice-paper skin, with heavy rubber bands running the length of each fuselage. They looked a little like pursuit planes of the First World War, but no historical reference was needed: they were simply planes designed and built to fly, and they did. Sometimes it would climb and waver and fight the wind and come

⁴⁵ Yates (1981)

⁴⁶ Quoted in original *Ploughshares* interview, occurs between [28:48—28:55].

⁴⁷ *Ploughshares* (1972).

⁴⁸ After sending him a draft of *A Special Providence*, Cassill was candid in his verdict, saying that it “reads like a book written by a man on tranquilizers.” Bailey (2003), p 340.

back almost to where it had started; other times it would go gracefully out for remarkable distances, high and bright over the grass, until it finally touched down.⁴⁹

Twenty-two years later, Yates recalled a conversation he had with his daughter, in which Cassill's name cropped up, 'Verlin Cassill?' she said eagerly. "Is he the man who brought the airplanes?" Yates replied:

He is the man who brought the airplanes. He has always understood fine structure and fine surface, the coiling and release of power, and necessary illusion of weightlessness. Writers from all over the United States have sought his help in the design, the building and the launching of their own craft in a reasonable hope of flight.⁵⁰

Yates' description of the manner in which Cassill constructs the planes is couched in language that can only be taken as a technical appreciation of the author's work. The "precisely fitted balsa-wood frames" are the basis from which the story is sustained: this boasts, in turn, very clear similarities with the writerly advice Bernie Silver imparts in "Builders"—Yates' most explicitly reflective on authorship—when he advises Prentice, "Do you see where writing a story is building something too? Before you build your walls you got to build your foundation—and I mean all the way down the line."⁵¹ Bernie's metaphor verges on being trite and obtuse—and Yates' short story does flirt with parody when relaying ideas of craftsmanship—but there is subtlety and an earnest tone to Yates' description of Cassill's handiwork. The rubber bands that run the "length of each fuselage" seems to denote the narrative thread that holds the plot together as each composite chapter works together for the overall direction and momentum of the novel. In the first descriptive passage, Yates speaks of the "remarkable distances" Cassill could scale, reaching an elevated point "high and bright over the grass." If the echoes of Flaubert weren't yet fully apparent, they become clear in the rest of Yates' response, where the author is described as possessing finesse and control, the "coiling and release of power, and necessary illusion of weightlessness." These two attributes—this flexing of power and presence at any point and the ethereal position of the author—dovetail perfectly with Flaubert's "great line" that the author must be "omnipresent and invisible." The appreciation and reverence Yates felt for

⁴⁹ Letter to R.V. Cassill, dated only with 1969, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁵⁰ Letter to R.V. Cassill, dated only with 1969, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁵¹ Richard Yates, "Builders," *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (London: Vintage, 2008), p. 149.

Cassill was summed up in the close of the letter, when he states: “The best way to cover it, perhaps, is to say that he has done more for me over the years in various professional ways, than any other man I know.”⁵²

Possibilities?

Richard Yates’ meeting with DeWitt Henry and Geoffrey Clark of *Ploughshares* will be used at various points throughout this thesis; it is one of very few interviews with the author and took place at a time when his career had stalled after the publication, and poor reception, of *A Special Providence*. The content of the interview, such as Yates’ disdain at how *Revolutionary Road* had been upheld as an anti-suburban diatribe, his concerns about the marketing approach of his first novel, plus his views on the emergence of postrealist fiction, will be reviewed and analysed in the following chapter. The interview is of particular interest as it is the only point at which Yates directly addresses any questions on the process of literary composition, or provides any insight into the direction he believed his career was headed. Two versions of the interview exist: the unedited recording (made when Yates was inebriated) and the one that was eventually published, after substantial revisions, in the journal. The first has been used sparingly in studies on Yates (to my knowledge, Bailey is the only one to reference it and provides a brief analysis of its content) yet contains a number of valuable reflections, particularly on how Yates’ felt about his fiction. Early on in their discussion, DeWitt Henry asks if Yates could foresee a sense of evolution for his characters. Moving from the closed form and sense of entrapment to which the characters in *Revolutionary Road* and *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* are subject, DeWitt contends that he can detect a developing consciousness in Robert Prentice of *A Special Providence*: the novel’s conclusion sees the protagonist sever ties with home and his overbearing mother to pursue his own life when discharged from the army, a journey I discuss in further detail in the second chapter. Prentice, too, appears in “Builders” (DeWitt was envisioning a Nick Adams-esque role for Prentice) the final short story of *Eleven Kinds*, and undergoes some sort of evolution by the end of the piece. The conversation, which I quote at length, runs:

DH: Do you have a conscience sense of...

RY: You thought I was working through some affirmation right?

⁵² Letter to R.V. Cassill, dated only with 1969, The Richard Yates Collection.

DH: Not just affirmation but also that you're trying to evolve inside your vision, a consciousness, a character, as I say like Prentice, is in control of his life.

RY: And can be the conscience of the book sort of?

DH: Prentice almost does that but I think there is some ambiguity of what's going to happen to him in college.

RY: Maybe I better have a beer before we do this.

DH: I don't quite know how to express it, but how...how...how...large a range of...?

RY: (Yates interrupts)...possibilities?

DH: Possibilities you can get into a book? And it seems to me going from your earliest stories to your next two books that you are constantly working against your weaknesses in terms of expanding and...what you can get into a book.

RY: That's better than for you to say than me though but I can't see that progression.⁵³

DeWitt's initial assertion is sound; moving from *Revolutionary Road* to *A Special Providence* there does seem to be a loosening of this inexorable passage towards entrapment and disillusion. The conversation develops (with a helpful interlude) to focus on this idea of range, which DeWitt tentatively broaches. Yates anticipates the line of questioning, before the interviewer looks to connect the evolution of his character's consciousness with the broadening of authorial vision, a progression—and observation—that is shot down. (In a rather ironic twist, Yates was in the process of writing *Disturbing the Peace*, which closes with his protagonist, John Wilder, stripped of identity and permanently resident within a mental hospital.) The significance of the dialogue—even if Yates presumably knew, at this point, there wouldn't be a definitive progression of consciousness in his next text, is the concentration on range. DeWitt hazards, even at this early point in Yates' career, that this limited arc will stand as a weakness, yet Yates offers little inclination that he would be willing to modify his approach, either in its softening of sadness (as with the affirmation DeWitt perceives) or an expansion of what is contained within the text (in terms of thematic reach, diversification, or character progression).

Some years later, Anatole Broyard progressed this into a central line of attack in his review of *Young Hearts Crying*. Broyard struck a concerted blow to Yates' penultimate novel and it mutated into a defining puncture to the author's body of work. Broyard

⁵³ Original audio of Interview with Richard Yates. Occurs between 8:50-10:29.

scythed Yates down for his autocratic control of his characters, suggesting they had been “shrunk by realism, robbed of invention and reduced to bleak and repetitive rituals.”⁵⁴ This essentially expanded on a charge Broyard first articulated after *The Easter Parade*, in which he suggested Yates had been “too deft in disposing of his characters, too economical in his view of their choices.”⁵⁵ Characterisation, Broyard deemed, had become subservient to Yates’ commitment to craftsmanship. In his review of *Young Hearts Crying*, Broyard upheld Yates as a bastion for classical fiction, an author who held the line against “esthetic deterioration,” and posits the argument that Yates’ style is one that he imposes upon his subjects:

Mr. Yates's heroes are classical in the nature of their adversary relation to culture, for it's not the war in Vietnam or the Civil Rights struggle that arouses their moral indignation, but the mediocrity, emptiness and conformity—all Mr. Yates's words—of American life itself.⁵⁶

If the tone of Yates’ earliest work conflicted with the purported optimism of the initial postwar years, then his fiction thereafter was also seen to be shaped by a generation long since passed from view. This paralleling of style and content, denoted by Broyard’s reference to Yates anchoring himself to a firm yet receding form of esthetics, is connected to the sphere in which his subjects preside, and is a relationship that comes under closer analysis in the following chapter. Broyard’s critique snowballed from an un-favourable review of *Young Hearts Crying* to a macro analysis that covered all of Yates’ body of work; by positing the ideologically loaded ‘emptiness and ‘conformity’ against that of the defining cultural movements of the following decade, Broyard discarded Yates’ fiction as a throwback to a previous generation. Pushing this further, Broyard believed that the tortured men of Yates’ fiction—Frank Wheeler, Michael Davenport, Robert Prentice—embody the echoes not just of postwar American males coming to terms with conformity but share the hallmarks of the 1920s expat and the masculine figures we find in the work of Henry Miller and Ernest Hemingway. There is both substance and validity to Broyard’s claim, voiced as the author neared the end of his career. If Frank Wheeler proved to be an adversary—albeit a fairly obliging one—to the stultified placidity of the 1950s, then Broyard’s analysis suggests that Yates failed to diversify or advance his topical reach throughout the rest of his career; antagonistic, almost, to the cultural revolutions of the

⁵⁴ Anatole Broyard, “Two-Fisted Self-Pity,” *The New York Times* (28 October 1984) p 3.

⁵⁵ Anatole Broyard, “Craft Versus Character,” *The New York Times* (7 September 1976), p 31.

⁵⁶ Broyard (1984), p 3.

next thirty years. For Broyard, Yates encloses his characters within the parameters of authorial design, while the author, in turn, is shut off to the turning tides of cultural change, maintaining his focus on a rapidly receding articulation of postwar America.

If we parallel Yates' interview with Broyard's reviews the critic's line of attack starts to unravel: DeWitt's suggestion that he can detect an evolving consciousness (in terms of Prentice gaining some direction in the end of *A Special Providence*) within Yates' work is quickly refuted by the author, Broyard's criticism essentially abides by a similar rationale in that he fails to see Yates' characters demonstrating any control in the text. If Yates couldn't see this progression, a more pertinent question would relate to how he disposes of his characters (it also hints or presupposes the suggestion that characters boast some form of autonomy within the text). By way of example, the manner in which Yates disposes of Emily Grimes in *The Easter Parade* (the text Broyard was highly critical of) relates to the sense of unrealised and aborted freedom she experiences throughout her life and uncovers a continued commentary of inhibited womanhood. In *Disturbing the Peace*, published one year prior to *The Easter Parade*, Yates presents us with a protagonist who is unable to alter his descent into permanent institutionalisation, a journey that explores the levels of psychiatric care in America, conducted in a narrative that becomes increasingly fragmentary to reflect it's protagonist's psychosis. As much as Yates does seem to limit the choices available to his characters—their ultimate direction is usually revealed in the opening pages of his novels—these differ both thematically and stylistically. Yates writes, as Broyard identifies, of and about the cultural context that carried with it the ideological buzzwords of “mediocrity, emptiness and conformity.” As is apparent in the interview, Yates makes no apologies for not advancing his the date on his cultural lens: again, however, the more relevant point, and one that is pertinent to this study, is how Yates works within and advances a progressive conceptualisation of this timeframe, how he continued to unpick, contradict and expose these ideologically loaded terms through his fiction.

The Same Shade of Gray

The discordance Broyard presents in his criticism of Yates' contracted vision, that of America coming to terms with the Vietnam War while the author was still concentrating his focus on themes of moral indignation from the 1950s, functions as a useful starting point when mapping two decades that were so (seemingly) at odds with each other.

Revolutionary Road arrived at a liminal stage in terms of its thematic reach: it appeared at

the tail-end of a series of fictional diatribes against suburbia, while authors had placed their shoulder against the lust for conformity, stripping off the gray flannel suit to lay bare a restless, malaise-prone male, with depictions ranging from Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) to Rabbit Angstrom in the first of Updike's tetralogy. The rest of Yates' work, however, presents a sizable disjuncture in terms of the cultural terrain it focuses on and the point at which it was written. Yates' first text, however, held enough of a thematic thread to be associated, and held in tandem with, the cultural trends and concerns of the 1950s before the country embraced the dawn of the 1960s. Arthur Schlesinger heralded the dawn of a new era with a sense of anticipation and ardour in "The New Mood in Politics" (1960). The critic viewed the current historical rotation as being at a liminal yet expectant point, with the country pausing on the threshold of a new epoch," aware that it "must advance if it is to preserve its vitality and identity."⁵⁷ Schlesinger foresaw a grand—and welcome—departure from the 1950s, a period in which Eisenhower presided over "passivity and acquiescence," to welcome the "new forces, new energies, new values" that had been straining for expression and release.⁵⁸ Values of the 1950s had been rooted in self-indulgence—primarily careers and a preoccupation with lifestyle—all motivated by a crass materialism and a veritable "orgy of consumer goods."⁵⁹ Looking through epochs of American history, Schlesinger traces a cyclical pattern of respite and advancement: the 1930s and 40s were decades of purpose before fatigue set in, the 1950s marked quiescence and a recharging of batteries, with the pendulum set to swing forcefully into the 1960s and 70s.

At the point of writing, Schlesinger believed this transition remained both 'inchoate and elusive': the stirrings of change were being voiced amongst the young, chorused, in part, by the rise of the Beats; the reigning clichés of the decade, particularly the idealism purported at its outset, were looked upon with nothing but contempt; a new wave of political freshness, spearheaded by Kennedy's vigour, was just starting to envelop the country. Even though Schlesinger cross-checks the points of unrest and discontent that had been articulated throughout the 50s (the critic cites the popularity of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) as evidence of the country's need for spiritual affirmation and references the collective treatises of William Whyte, David Riesman and J.K. Galbraith as an intellectual backlash to the decade's culture) he gives little recognition as to how these primed the precipice, or threshold, to the new mood he identifies.

⁵⁷ Arthur Meier Schlesinger, "The New Mood in Politics", *The Politics of Hope and the Bitter Heritage: American Liberalism in the 1960s* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), p 105.

⁵⁸ Schlesinger (2007), p 105.

⁵⁹ Schlesinger (2007), p 107.

While the transition Schlesinger describes would suggest a massive elliptical leap between decades, historian Brian Ward has looked to deconstruct the metaphoric jump that counterposes the “avuncular, golf-playing President Dwight D. Eisenhower to the youthful and flamboyant Kennedy.”⁶⁰ For Ward, this over simplified metaphor has been rolled out all too frequently to delineate a bridging point between the “cultural vibrancy, bold social experimentation” associated with the 1960s and the “stolid cultural, social, and political conservatism attributed to the 1950s.”⁶¹ In *American Culture in the 1960s* (2008), Sharon Monteith adopts a similar tack in loosening the ideological ties of Presidential identity politics. Monteith suggests that placing too much emphasis on the 1950s as a “conformist foil” to the more exuberant 1960s “serves only to detach the era from all it built upon, as if Kennedy’s inauguration initiated a new cultural frontier as surely as his rhetoric.”⁶² There existed—amidst, and even prior to the point in which Kennedy evoked the Frontier spirit—a number of commentaries that questioned such a distinct demarcation of cultural epochs. Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) warned of the difficulties of male maturation, where young men were conforming to dominant society and becoming “apathetic, disappointed, cynical and wasted.”⁶³ If delinquency allowed for a departure from conformity, Goodman foresaw a pressing issue in the organised system, for if the boys could not grow, “where shall the women find men?”⁶⁴ Goodman’s work, along with the publication of Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death* (1959), “conflated a newly permissive erotic liberation with cultural and political radicalism as the fifties turned into the sixties.”⁶⁵ John Kenneth Galbraith reformulated how postwar wealth had created economic disparity in *The Affluent Society* (1956), outlining, too, how a consumerist lifestyle was increasingly becoming the barometer of social standing. Tracing this thread even further back, Irving Howe lambasted the conformity of the American intellectual community in his 1954 essay “This Age of Conformity.” Howe’s ire—primarily directed at Lionel Trilling—focused on the monolithic thinking of the New York intellectuals who were becoming increasingly acquiescent to established institutions.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Brian Ward, *The 1960s: A Documentary Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 8. The contrasting images of leadership became imbibed in discourses surrounding masculine prowess, with Kennedy seen as the epitome of virility and heteronormative masculinity.

⁶¹ Ward (2009), p 8 & 9.

⁶² Sharon Monteith, *American Culture in the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p 8.

⁶³ Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized Society* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2012), p 22.

⁶⁴ Goodman, (2012), p 21.

⁶⁵ Monteith (2008), p 8.

⁶⁶ Gerald Sorin, *Irving Howe: A Life of Passionate Dissent* (New York; London: New York University Press), p 123.

‘The Tranquilized Fifties’

These murmurs of discontent were lyricised by Robert Lowell in his collection *Life Studies* (1959), with his poem “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” coining one of the defining phrases of the era. Lowell establishes a sense of discordance early in the poem when he sets his current habitation—a house on Boston’s “hardly passionate Marlborough Street”—against his residency, one year earlier, in a West Street Jail.⁶⁷ Such dissonance rotates around the opposition of his earlier self as a conscientious objector to World War II, to one who now enjoys, with all its suburban comfort, “pajamas fresh from the washer each morning.”⁶⁸ There is a jarring restlessness beneath the tranquilized fifties: a term that is, in itself, paradoxical: Lowell tells us that the decade is placid only because it is sedated, articulated by the poet setting up this constant tension with a past self who was “manic” and “fire-breathing.”⁶⁹ This opposition comes to a close in the final stanza as the poet returns to his time in jail alongside a fellow inmate. Despite the apparent constraints, the inmate, “Flabby, bald, lobotomized,” enjoys a form of freedom and equanimity, as he “drifts in a sheepish calm / where no agonizing reappraisal / jarred his concentration on the electric chair.”⁷⁰ The reference to “agonizing reappraisal,” a direct evocation of John Foster Dulles’ assertive speech to NATO concerning American standing in Europe, is a distillation of how the country had become mired in political rhetoric.⁷¹ Yet within this narrative and evocation of Cold War containment the undercurrents of unrest hang “like an oasis in his air / of lost connections.” As Ken Kesey would formulate shortly after in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), it is the asylum that further functions as a vehicle for conformity, to straightjacket and control behaviour. Like Kesey’s McMurphy, plus Allen Ginsberg’s subjects in “Howl” (1956) and “Kaddish” (1961), Czar Lepke shows how madness stands as a necessary critique of an increasingly oppressive environment. These concerns are part of a broader evocation of normativity in postwar American and further interrogated in the final chapter of this thesis; Yates outlines a portrait of the crazed yet prophetic madman in John Givings (*Revolutionary Road*), and in John Wilder (*Disturbing the Peace*) we are offered an individualised account of one man’s descent into psychosis, replete with hallucinations and his final institutionalisation.

⁶⁷ Robert Lowell, “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” *Life Studies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p 7.

⁶⁸ Lowell (1959), p 57.

⁶⁹ Lowell (1959), p 57.

⁷⁰ Lowell (1959), p 57.

⁷¹ James McAllister, *No Exit: America and the German Problem (1943-1945)* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2001), p 237.

Revisionist studies of the era have picked apart this notion of the tranquilized fifties by unraveling the decade's ambiguities and intertwining these with the transformations of the late 1960s. In her analysis of the women's liberation movement, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (1992), Wini Breines looks for "signs of discontent and contradiction" to uncover a decade that can be characterised by "pretense and façade."⁷² Breines seeks to establish the point at which the foundations were set for the sexual revolutions of the following decade, the bridging years where "all hell, that is, the 1960s, broke loose."⁷³ As Breines makes clear, the decade is worthy of re-examination, "Critics and historians of the fifties have exposed a contrasting underside of postwar American culture consisting of fears and anxiety that mocked the barbecues and hoola hoops."⁷⁴ At the time of writing, Breines was applauded for a "methodologically adventurous" work that offered a "thoughtful, intelligent and highly ambivalent portrait of a difficult era."⁷⁵ In the same year as *Young, White and Miserable*, Stephanie Coontz further deconstructed the assumption that the 1950s was a decade of relative stability in the spheres of marriage, gender roles and family life in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trip* (1992). While the era espoused a return to the familial normative, Coontz makes the point that such an arrangement actually represented a "qualitatively new phenomenon."⁷⁶ Coontz shows how all of the trends that characterised the 20th century were subject to change as the 1940s drew to a close, with a decreasing age for marriage and motherhood, increase in fertility rates, and drop in divorces: all indexes which intimated that the nuclear family of the postwar era constituted a "new invention."⁷⁷ Such a swift recalibration of what constituted the familial normative resulted in women expressing their dissatisfaction, a reaction that perplexed cultural commentators. The impact of such restratification—or, more accurately, realignment—of gender roles would have been more keenly felt following the aftermath of World War II because women had frequently filled positions held by men during warfare. I discuss this movement in the second chapter of this thesis, proposing Yates inverts the path of the returning and heroic soldier in *A Special Providence*, thus troubling the popular narrative that was believed to follow demobilisation.

⁷² Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), p 1.

⁷³ Breines (2001), p 1.

⁷⁴ Breines (2001), p 6.

⁷⁵ Beth Bailey, review of "Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties", *American Studies*, Vol. 34, No.1 (Spring 1993), p 177 & 178.

⁷⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trip* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p 25.

⁷⁷ Coontz (1992), p 26.

Tackling the notion of suburban domesticity—and de facto, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)—Coontz suggests that behind the signs of discontent, there were, by the end of the decade, a significant number of women over the age of 16 in employment, many of whom were working not just because of financial necessity but for self-esteem and personal fulfilment.⁷⁸ As with Breines, there is recognition that the expected subordination of women in the postwar years, plus the feigned reconstruction of the nuclear family, brought about the unrest that paved the way to the liberation movement of the 1960s. Looking even more closely at *The Feminine Mystique*, Joanne Meyerowitz further challenges the depiction and retention of the 1950s suburban housewife in her collection *Not June Cleaver* (1994). Meyerowitz introduces the text by arguing that Friedan’s study somewhat flattened the history of women and reduced the “multidimensional complexity” of their lives to a mere “snapshot.”⁷⁹ Even though *The Feminine Mystique* is said to have given a name and voice to middle-class discontent, Meyerowitz believes it reinforced a very binary image of suburban postwar femininity. Such an illustration provided a caricaturist portrait of the popular ideology of the discontented suburban housewife, which subsequently formed a further layer of oppression. As will be shown in chapter three, Yates critiques and parodies models of suburban domesticity as we find Frank and April Wheeler’s actions increasingly dictated by the roles they are expected to play.

Perhaps as a consequence of the studies conducted by Breines, Coontz and Meyerowitz, scholarly attention has since articulated a more nuanced reading of masculinity in the same period. Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America* (1997), James Burkhart Gilbert’s *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (2005) and Kyle A. Cuordileone’s *Manhood and Political Culture in the Cold War* (2005) provide strong socio-historic readings on how American manhood underwent a series of revisions throughout the decade. Kimmel looks at various conceptions of manhood, spanning from the Declaration of Independence in 1776 to the modern man, and detects a persistent need for the American male to validate his masculinity. The struggles inherent in adhering to certain ideals of masculinity—particularly that of the self-made man—have been a defining feature of its history. Kimmel focuses specifically on the 1960s to deconstruct the “masculine mystique,” the male who looked to synthesise the roles of “breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero,” a construction that was

⁷⁸ Coontz (1992), p 161.

⁷⁹ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p 2.

finally “exposed as a fraud.”⁸⁰ Gilbert’s *Men in the Middle* explores the work of a broad range of cultural figures—such as Paul Goodman, David Riesman, Alfred Kinsey and Tennessee Williams—to illustrate divergent postwar models of manhood. For Gilbert, the 1950s “were unusual (although not unique) for their relentless and self-conscious preoccupation with masculinity,” a preoccupation that stems from wartime self-confidence and the accepted heroism of ordinary men.⁸¹ Part of this increased exposure can also be traced to the swelling number of sociological studies that examined social character, with masculinity emerging as the most popular subject. As with Breines and Coontz, Gilbert presents the 1950s as a decade that can be defined by its contradictions, with the conflicting versions of gender—particularly those white, middle-class men—giving shape to the diversity we find in the coming decades.⁸²

Cuordileone, meanwhile, places discourses of gender and sex in a broader narrative of political culture. If the era has retained an image of sexual conservatism, Cuordileone states, this must be seen as an ideological mirage that bore little resemblance to the realities of everyday life. The retention of such a repressive outlook minimises the “profound transformations that were occurring in the realm of sexuality and gender.”⁸³ While Cuordileone’s focus is primarily on masculinity in the postwar era, her analysis shows how this must be inclusive of, and dependent on, the evolving role of women: a balance is reached, for example, when the façade of conservative ideals are exposed, with housewifery, while “exalted in popular culture, and made to seem the natural aspiration of every normal woman,” cloaking the fact American women actually continued to enter employment. As a corollary, we are told of how men were encouraged to take up the role of breadwinners and fathers, resulting in “currents of discontent and resistance [that] crept across the cultural landscape as male writers decried a decline in masculinity,” with “marital enslavement” the cause of his downward trajectory.⁸⁴ I adopt a similar approach in chapter four of this study when looking at the sexual politics in *Revolutionary Road* and *The Easter Parade*; we see how the increasing power of the female characters within the text results in the hyper-masculinised behaviour of Yates’ men. Such a move is viewed as being part of the crisis of masculinity narrative, where men present their position as

⁸⁰ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p 190.

⁸¹ James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p 2.

⁸² Gilbert (2005), p 8.

⁸³ Kyle Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York; London: Routledge, 2005), p xxi.

⁸⁴ Cuordileone (2005), p xxi.

imperilled or threatened as a means of restoring power, a process that I believe Yates rejects in his fiction.

Studies such as *Masked Men* (1997) and *Masculinity in Fiction and Film* (2006) from Steve Cohan and Brian Baker have paired this revisionist approach with a focus on the literary and cinematic treatment of masculinity. Their contextual analyses show how these mediums were sensitive to, and willing to renegotiate, the changing ideological imperatives of the American male. As with Gilbert, Cohan looks to decentre the men in the middle, suggesting that the “gray flannel suit personified masculinity of every caste and color in U.S. society,” a profile quickly became the “standard biography common to all adult men.”⁸⁵ Cohan laments the persistence of the white, heterosexual, corporate, suburban breadwinner that “personifies” the “logo of the age.”⁸⁶ Michael Davidson echoes this theme in his work *Guys Like Us* (2004) when he situates the cultural representation of 1950s masculinity between the ‘alienated corporate drone represented in Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* or by Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*.’⁸⁷ David Castronovo (who co-authored the first full length critical analysis on Yates), proposes a number of texts—including J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952)—at the outset of *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit* (2004) that he believes to challenge the conformity and conservatism of the 1950s. With Yates, alongside Updike, Castronovo believes we have two writers who were inclined to translate the experience of American averageness. Their fiction rounded off the treatment of 1950s classics on a subject that became the “center of the mid-century American spiritual crisis,” making us aware of “how complex the very familiar subject of suburban life can become when represented by a first-rate writer.”⁸⁸ Referring to the dawn of the New Frontier, Castronovo tells us this was an idea “lodged in the heart—if not the politics—of the 1950s, not invented on a cold day in 1961.”⁸⁹

As the title of Castronovo’s study indicates, re-examination of authors such as Kerouac, Nabokov and Ellison allow us to look beyond any symbolic attachment to the

⁸⁵ Steven Cohan, *Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1997), p 35.

⁸⁶ Cohan (1997), p xi.

⁸⁷ Michael Davidson, *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p 6.

⁸⁸ David Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture* (New York; London: Continuum, 2004), p 16.

⁸⁹ Castronovo (2004), p 11.

postwar era to uncover a time that was anything but conservative or willingly sedated. *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit* stands as part of a broader revisionist movement that has advanced varying degrees of complexity to an era that was secreted beneath layers of political phraseology. Revisionist accounts are now piecing together a very different perspective of the postwar era, resulting in a discernible shift in how this time should be perceived. My methodology accords with the revisionist accounts outlined above in that I believe that Yates' fiction, and the spheres of interest advanced in this thesis, should be part of this critical rethinking. With its concentric focus on socio-historical context, this thesis offers an original reading of Yates' work.

The Yatesian Field

After existing for so long just outside the critical lens and on the periphery of American fiction, Yates' work is beginning to receive more attention. Jerome Klinkowitz deserves recognition for being the first critic to approach Yates' body of work with *The New American Novel of Manners* (1986), a year in which, even at the age of 60, Yates was still looking to consolidate his literary reputation. Klinkowitz adopts a broader historical scope than my own when analysing Yates' work, arguing that he has produced a "special angle of vision" that ranges from the 1930s to 1970s.⁹⁰ Klinkowitz's three-author study, which also includes chapters on Dan Wakefield and Thomas McGuane, aims, as a primary objective, to uncover the use of semiotics in their fiction, a feature that he views as spearheading the new novel of manners. The critic begins his discussion by quoting *Madame Bovary* (1856) and suggests that Yates aimed to adopt Flaubert's mastery of wedding incident to language. Defining his approach, Klinkowitz avers that Yates' fiction takes the "signified object from real life and makes it live within the artificial system of signs which form our spoken and written communication."⁹¹ Yates' novelistic eye is manneristic, his narrative vision 'bird's-eye sociological' with a focus that "encompasses society in its largest forms, his perspective is almost always from its smallest unit, the family."⁹² Within this, Yates sticks to a "consistent set of socially conceived characters," an approach that allows the author to do 'justice to both individual and milieu.'⁹³ Klinkowitz also recognises the static nature of Yates' subjects and again stresses the

⁹⁰ Jerome Klinkowitz, *The New American Novel of Manners: The Fiction of Richard Yates, Dan Wakefield, and Thomas McGuane* (London: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p 9.

⁹¹ Klinkowitz (1986), p 15.

⁹² Klinkowitz (1986), p 9.

⁹³ Klinkowitz (1986), p 16.

central focus of his fiction: “The people remain familiar; and even while their world develops as their ages and marital status change, a consistency of response overhangs each moment of their lives.”⁹⁴

In terms of its socio-historical context, Klinkowitz’s initial outline doesn’t quite correspond to his analysis: the 1940s, 50s and 60s are adequately defined in terms of historical backdrop via contextual readings of *A Good School*, *A Special Providence*, *Revolutionary Road* and *The Easter Parade*, yet the two remaining decades remain somewhat out of reach, subject to passing mention, with the 1930s being that of “Wilder’s suburban childhood,” while the 1970s are designated by Emily Grimes being brought into a time of “cultural trendiness” to which she couldn’t quite adapt.⁹⁵ Such a criticism is perhaps unfair in that his readings of Yates’ work show the author to uncover and expose familial structures through linguistics, and place this within a stylistic framework that shows Yates (plus Wakefield and McGuane) to negotiate a more progressive take on the novel of manners. However, by taking a more defined period than Klinkowitz, my thesis is able to offer a thorough interrogation of Yates’ fiction and the manner in which it picks apart the complexities and ambiguities of postwar culture.

Marking the territory with the first full-length critical work on Yates, David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf underpin their critical analysis by applauding the author’s stylistic grounding. For Castronovo and Goldleaf, Yates’ harsh reality, which “offers no glamour, no glimmering dreams, no sustained reveries,” marked an affront to the ardour, vigour and enthusiasm of the early 1960s.⁹⁶ Amidst this vision, Yates remained firm in his commitment to realism when literary fashions, spearheaded by writers such as Donald Barthelme and Thomas Pynchon, were siding towards postmodern experimentation. At the outset of *Richard Yates* (1996), they determine the author to be a “lifelong observer of dislocations and disorders,” whose fiction discarded the “atmosphere of official optimism” to tell stories of those psychologically and socially stifled.⁹⁷ They pinpoint the 1950s, a decade fuelled by “smoldering discontent,” “inertia,” and “frustration” as the crucial backdrop to Yates’ work. This is identified as the period in which Yates’ “talent took shape and his vision of America crystallized.”⁹⁸ If Klinkowitz believed Yates’ perspective to pivot around the family, Castronovo and Goldleaf observe his pervasive and all-

⁹⁴ Klinkowitz (1986), p 9.

⁹⁵ Klinkowitz (1986), p 37 & 43.

⁹⁶ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 59.

⁹⁷ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 1.

⁹⁸ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 11.

encompassing critique of middle-class American life, an approach that is driven by nuanced readings of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Within this context, too, we see Yates' work as exhibiting a class-consciousness that situates him alongside such contemporaries as John Cheever and Mary McCarthy. By preserving what Castronovo and Goldleaf argue to be the central precepts of the realist tradition—"raw naturalism and subtle craftsmanship"—Yates retained faith in the "broad tradition of giving a general readership accessible accounts of American social experience."⁹⁹

Richard Yates has opened several avenues of interrogation, both in terms of how Castronovo and Goldleaf pioneered a substantive recovery of the author, evidenced in their assertion that Yates stands as "one of the most accomplished writers of the post-World War II period," when almost all of his fiction was out of print, and the manner in which their approach broadened the critical lens when viewing his fiction.¹⁰⁰ In addition to integrating critical reviews of most of Yates' novels, we find, for example, particularly sharp readings of *Revolutionary Road* in relation to: suburbia as a liminal environment, supported by a pairing with James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993); Frank's manipulative appropriation of armchair psychoanalysis and the performative impulse of Yates' protagonists, formulated, as mentioned, in relation to Goffman's theory of selfhood.

My readings of *Revolutionary Road* reframe the novel in all of these contexts—suburbia, psychoanalysis and the performative traits of its protagonists—but from a different theoretical angle. I adopt a similar stance to the critics in their assessment of *A Special Providence*'s commercial failure, which they argue was rooted in its conservative form: as they eloquently state, while Yates was penciling a sensitive portrait of a boy and his mother with World War II as its backdrop, Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut were busy "painting huge Hieronymus Bosch murals" in their progressive, forward-looking novels.¹⁰¹ In *Richard Yates*, Castronovo and Goldleaf countered some of the most critical misreadings of Yates' work (particularly that of *Revolutionary Road*) at a point in which there was minimal secondary criticism on the author. I must, however, agree with Leif Bull's recognition that their monograph contains a glaring omission by failing to include masculinity when discussing social class (or, for that matter, at any extended point in their

⁹⁹ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 2 & 3.

¹⁰⁰ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 2.

¹⁰¹ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 29.

study). My thesis takes Yates' treatment of masculinity as a key theme and is an area in which he was at his most progressive; in chapter three, for example, I show Yates to critique the disaffected and malaise prone male suburbanite, a characterisation that providing a sharp counterpoint to fictional portrayals at the time.

In the opening chapter, I further interrogate their definition of Yates being a 'writer's writer,' an appellation that is somewhat misleading and obstinately situates Yates within a realist tradition. Working from this standpoint, Leif Bull destabilises and complicates this notion of Yates as a realist author in his study *A Thing Made of Words: The Reflexive Realism of Richard Yates* (2010). Bull argues that any such labeling must be qualified by the fact that his fiction exhibits a "dynamic, ongoing process of reflexive negotiation."¹⁰² If Yates operated within a mode of realism, his fiction also displays a self-conscious awareness of its own artifice and constructedness. Bull goes on the forefoot at the onset of his work to tackle Castronovo and Goldleaf's belief that Yates remained immune to the stylistic literary revolutions of the 1960s proposing a reading that his work displays an aesthetic appreciation of both modernist and postmodernist practices. If Castronovo and Goldleaf trace the genesis of Yates' style to Theodore Dreiser's succinct, naturalist hand, Bull views the author, upon consideration of the metafictional and metacommentary aspects of *Disturbing the Peace*, as an anticipatory figure to David Foster Wallace.¹⁰³ Bull offers a highly technical reading of Yates' work that is comprehensive and insistent in its deconstruction of the author as a committed practitioner of realism. His thesis questions and destabilises assumptions—particularly those outlined by Castronovo and Goldleaf—of Yates being solely committed to a realist tradition and remaining in the stylistic past.

Such a position reforms Yates' work from being backward looking to posit it within a more contemporary literary context. While not taking, or approaching Yates' fiction from an angle that seeks to prove that he was a practitioner of postmodernism, I believe that the stylistic reaction to his work has been encased in a limited framework. Throughout the following chapter, I will demonstrate that from the publication of *Eleven Kinds*, considerations of Yates follow a path that presupposes almost a reciprocal relationship between content and style: Yates was seen to work within a limited canvas, frequently defined as a form of realism, that translated to the confined space in which his

¹⁰² Leif Bull, *A Thing Made of Words: The Reflexive Realism of Richard Yates* (PhD Thesis: Goldsmiths College, 2010), p 9.

¹⁰³ Bull (2010), p 220.

characters operated. In *The Easter Parade*, for example, critics aligned Emily Grimes' inevitable path to despair as demonstrative as the autocratic control Yates displays over the text. This charge was also levied at *Disturbing the Peace* and is one which I tackle as a means of proving that reviewers have often viewed Yates' work through a pre-determined stylistic lens, an approach that has ultimately resulted in sidestepping and overlooking more nuanced readings of his fiction.

The most recent monograph, Kate Charlton-Jones' *Dismembering the American Dream: The Life and Fiction of Richard Yates* (2014) has proven to be the most illuminating critical work on the author. Accessible and highly insightful, Charlton-Jones provides attentive readings of three spheres of Yates' work: performative behavior with theoretical support from Goffman; the role of the writer and recurrence of character as author within his work; gender roles and sexual relations of the 1950s and 60s. Within the broader pursuit of reclaiming Yates' fiction, Charlton-Jones also challenges, like Bull, the notion of Yates as devout realist, exhibiting how he incorporates practices of postmodernism within his work. One of the manifest strengths of *Dismembering the American Dream* is the way each section frequently engages with what has arrived previously; a reading of Michael Davenport as character / writer also demonstrates how he is obsessed with puncturing artificiality and performance and is dismissive of other artistic movements, particularly that of abstract expressionism, which then renders a subsequent discussion on postmodernism. Like Bailey, although evidently not to the same extent, Charlton-Jones incorporates biographical details to furnish her analysis; we are informed of Yates' early fascination with cinema and it is clear this bleeds into many avenues of his fiction, ranging from his characters' interest in movies (*Disturbing the Peace*'s John Wilder, who pursues this as a career), ideas of performance, which Charlton-Jones charts from one of Yates' earliest short stories, "A Glutton for Punishment," and as a medium of representation that Yates ultimately decreed as inferior to fiction.

Charlton-Jones identifies the 1950s as the familiar environment for Yates' fiction; a factor that she suggests has precluded Yates from establishing a larger audience. Yates' readership "appears not to have seen beyond those settings and, as a consequence, failed to appreciate the universality of his fictional dramas."¹⁰⁴ In the final chapter of her analysis, Charlton-Jones identifies the cultural significance of Yates' work, claiming his perspective, with "its contradictions as well as its observations, enriches our understanding

¹⁰⁴ Kate Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream: The Life and Fiction of Richard Yates* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press 2014), p 4.

of that time.”¹⁰⁵ While Charlton-Jones’ historical approach broadly accords with that of this study, I believe that Yates’ adoption of such socio-historic specificity can be aligned with the fact this was the terrain in which he felt most comfortable, and as a consequence, set most of his fiction. In addition, while Charlton-Jones displays an awareness of the social and cultural settings of the 1950s and 60s, I argue that these should not be seen as backdrops to Yates’ fiction: rather, the author, as will be advanced, displays an acute awareness of the four distinct spheres of postwar American life outlined. Although *Dismembering the American Dream* has one distinct topical overlap with my thesis—that of Yates’ treatment of female sexuality in *The Easter Parade*—our position on that issue is markedly different. As the penultimate chapter will propose, I view Michael Crawford’s crude sexual outbursts in *The Easter Parade* as the avenue through which Yates looks to expose and critique the patriarchal behaviour of his male characters; Charlton-Jones, by contrast, views this as an expression of Yates’ own unease and anxieties surrounding sexual performance.¹⁰⁶ This is a point on which Charlton-Jones is heavily critical of Yates—she suggests that his view of women and their sexuality ‘seems distorted and askew’—and is a position that I will challenge at various stages.

Charlton-Jones’ commentary illustrates an ability to counterbalance praise with that of sharp critique, a requisite approach when dealing with a single-author thesis; this study aims for a similarly balanced approach. The following chapter, for example, proposes that the hybrid structure of *A Special Providence* proved to be not only the novel’s downfall but also resulted in a defining blow to the trajectory of Yates’ career. There is a point of contention raised in chapter four as to the closure of *The Easter Parade*; for a novel that has promised so much in its progressive treatment of women, also (rather disappointingly) concludes on a point of refrain; a conservative resolution to what could have been his most radical text. It is difficult—particularly with Yates—to clearly demarcate the personal from the fictional, especially when Bailey’s biography is to hand. Indeed, I use Yates’ experience in warfare and time in Bellevue to provide the backdrop to the second and final chapters of this study; I look to these not just for biographical context, but also as a means of providing the motivation behind *A Special Providence* and *Disturbing the Peace*. Such an admission accords with the criticism I highlighted at the outset of this chapter, and the lines between fiction and scenes-as-lived with Yates are not so much blurred as frequently indistinguishable. Yet this feature negates neither the significance of his work at the time of writing or its lasting place in postwar American literature. Perhaps Yates didn’t fully

¹⁰⁵ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 206.

¹⁰⁶ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 188.

diversify or broaden his range or the possibilities within his fiction—by his own admission, he seemed to have carefully sketched out his half-acre of pain—but he went where his interests often took him, and it is that will dictate the direction of my study.

This thesis is part of a small body of critical work that has aimed to re-examine, defend and argue for Richard Yates' status within the canon of postwar American literature. Each has sought to recover his work and it is apparent that momentum is accelerating, denoted by Vintage re-issuing all of his fiction, plus a forthcoming collection, published by McFarland & Co, that will bring together various Yatesian scholars. One of the primary objectives of this study is to build on and accelerate this momentum, to propose a further re-reading of Yates' work within the areas identified. One of the underlying premises of this thesis is to push for the proposal that Yates has been an overlooked author whose fiction has been frequently misappropriated and under-examined, a position that I look to justify in the forthcoming chapter. Such disregard does not necessarily justify, by itself, a convincing reason for an in-depth analysis of his work; I believe that the socio-historic specificity of this study brings with it a new and sharply defined approach to the work of Richard Yates. This thesis therefore argues for a richer appreciation of an author who should be regarded as an astute and progressive commentator on postwar American life. My approach brings with it a series of fresh interpretations of Yates' fiction and scope to further develop the scholarly recognition his work is beginning to receive.

CHAPTER ONE

Yates and Neglect: Tackling Marketability and Style

On 9 April 2000, author Richard Ford penned an ode to *Revolutionary Road* as the novel approached its 40th year in print. Ford, who would go on to write the introduction to Methuen's re-issue of the text the following year, said that the mere mention of *Revolutionary Road* "enacts a sort of cultural-literary secret handshake among its devotees."¹ It had reached the point of becoming a 'cultish standard' that drew 'marvel at its consummate writerliness.'² Towards the end of the article, Ford casts his attention to Anatole Broyard's scathing review of Yates' penultimate novel, *Young Hearts Crying* (1984). While Broyard had been heavily critical of the text—this wasn't, in itself, unusual as the reception of the novel was poor—the most clinical point of the review centred on Broyard's more general observations on the author's style, which had the air of a "malicious attempt to erase much of Yates's reputation with a single definitive stroke."³ After questioning the praise of Yates as a precise writer, Broyard wrote (and Ford quotes) the following:

The main question in Mr. Yates's work is whether we are being asked to see around, or beyond, the characters to some kind of symbolism - or to take them literally. Are we supposed to forgive their shortcomings and their failures as God does, or are they being offered up as intrinsically interesting without extenuation? Is his perspective metaphysical or entomological?⁴

The basis of Broyard's argument rests on whether we have to accept Yates' characters solely on the grounds of their symbolic existence within the text, or whether meaning resides in our examination from a more detached position to consider their significance as subjects. For Broyard, Yates is unsure as to where his fiction rests and, as a consequence, fails to execute either portrait with any conviction. Ford, adeptly, turns Broyard's point of contention into what he regards as one of Yates' strengths: "For my money, by allowing at least two strategies of representing reality to share time, Yates brought to life all the more remarkable a novel."⁵ Ford recognises and takes issue with the idea that we must approach

¹ Richard Ford, "American Beauty (Circa 1955)", *The New York Times* (9 April 2000), p 126.

² Ford (2000), p 126.

³ Bailey (2003), p 532.

⁴ Broyard (1984), p 151.

⁵ Ford (2000), p 126.

Yates' work and characters on the literal *or* symbolic level: the author suggests these aren't insoluble categories but composite spheres that are designed to interact and compete with each other. The context from which Ford addresses Broyard's criticism—how Yates, the consummate writer of *Revolutionary Road*, incites a sort of literary omertà amongst his followers—hints at another label tagged to the author, that of being a “writer's writer.”⁶ This, in part, flags Yates' recognition among his peers—Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates, Andre Dubus and Kurt Vonnegut were all vocal exponents—but also relates to his categorisation as an author and is referenced in David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf's *Richard Yates* (1996). In what was the first extended critical work on the author, Castronovo and Goldleaf argue that Yates “practiced realism in an age when the mode was retreating before the onslaughts of more experimental writers such as Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme.”⁷ For the critics, Yates sidestepped the postrealist work of John Barth and the new journalism of Tom Wolfe to retain a commitment to “clear supple, easy prose. His style from the start was austere...his fiction never explored the territory of the experimental, the metafictional, or the antifictional prose of the 1960s.”⁸ However, more recently, Stewart O'Nan has countered rather succinctly, “Yates doesn't fit the mold of a writer's writer.”⁹ For O'Nan, this was an era that saw the emergence and success of linguistic stylists such as Pynchon, DeLillo and Rushdie, while Yates wrote about the mundane sadness of domestic life in a language that rarely drew “attention to itself. There's nothing fussy or pretentious about his style.”¹⁰ Aside from contesting the merits of such opposing definitions of what a “writer's writer” is, the more salient point is the contrasting notions of what Yates represents as a writer—even if the critics do recognise very similar stylistic features in his fiction. Extending this further, there is a shared acceptance of Yates as a traditional author, upholding and retaining a conservative style when the literary market was becoming exposed to the experimentations of Pynchon, Roth and DeLillo.

Due to its unique status in Yates' oeuvre, this chapter will begin by looking at the critical appropriation of *Revolutionary Road*, positing the argument that reviews, almost uniformly, centred on how the author had produced a topical novel on suburbia or marriage (or, in fact, suburban marriage). Such a position assumed, in line with Broyard's approach, that Yates' characters stood as a symbolic lament on the ills of suburbanisation and

⁶ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 58.

⁷ Castronovo & Goldleaf, (1996), p 3.

⁸ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 26.

⁹ O'Nan (1999).

¹⁰ O'Nan (1999).

marriage. Extended attention will be paid, in this respect, to more practical considerations of *Revolutionary Road*'s poor commercial sales, with specific focus on the novel's somewhat misguided marketing campaign and how this shaped the book as a topical text. Moving through this, I will focus on how the "writer's writer" tag, plus that of Yates as conservative author, was consolidated through the publication of both the short story collection *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962) and *A Special Providence* (1969). Countering this will be an analysis of *Disturbing the Peace* (1975), which illustrates Yates' appreciation and application of a number of postmodern aesthetics. These features, specifically the manner in which Yates develops the author-in-text figure throughout his fiction (the genesis of which we can see in some of his earliest short stories) will be upheld as justifying a reading of Yates as a more progressive author than has been previously recognised. To conclude, this chapter will detail how the three insteps of criticism—Broyard's issue with the entomological and metaphysical in Yates' work, the slippery definition of what constituted a particular Yatesian style, plus the perception of Yates as an outdated and backward-looking writer, all coalesced in reviews for *The Easter Parade* (1976). The novel represents a collective exposition of the critiques levied at Yates at a point prior to the publication of the damaging—and arguably, fatal—review of *Young Hearts Crying*, and also signifies the four novels that will be critically analysed in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. The strength of this argument relies heavily upon the manner in which these threads of criticism were founded by, as I will regard them, a series of critical misreadings of *Revolutionary Road* that heavily impacted and shaped Yates' career thereafter. By looking at the manner in which the four novels were viewed, I aim to show that the points of criticism levied at the author not only recurred frequently, but enshrouded his work in a framework that failed to look beyond stylistic or formal considerations—whether it be the pre-determined form, conservative prose, repetition of themes—to consider the historical and cultural value of Yates' fiction, a point of neglect that I raise and seek to challenge in the following chapters.

Awards and Timing

Shortly before the release of Sam Mendes' film adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* (2008), the screenwriter Nick Fraser suggested the work's lack of recognition could be attributed, in part, to simple misfortune. For Fraser, the issue with Yates wasn't solely his bleakness of vision, "but persistently bad timing. His books appeared either passé when they dealt with the time in which he was growing up or dangerously at odds with prevailing

wisdom.”¹¹ Even if we take Fraser’s assertion at a more basic level—the perception of Yates as conservative and out-of-step writer will be covered during the course of this chapter—*Revolutionary Road* arrived at a rather unfortunate point (for Yates at least) on the literary scene. The most fitting example of this is the pedigree of novels nominated alongside *Revolutionary Road* for the 1962 National Book Awards. J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey* (1961), Bernard Malamud’s *A New Life* (1961), Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) and eventual winner *The Moviegoer* (1961) by Walker Percy, all kept Yates’ text company. Although it is somewhat futile to compare the quality of contenders from respective years, it seems 1962 stood out given that the nominated novels would become iconic reference points for the decade (such as Heller’s *Catch-22* or indeed *The Moviegoer*) or represented a much-anticipated follow up from an established author (*Franny and Zooey*).

The success of *Revolutionary Road* wasn’t solely dependent on the novel losing out to *The Moviegoer* at the NBA, even if it’s interesting to wonder how Yates’ career would have taken a wholly different path if he had been successful. Looking at the fellow nominees and the manner in which their novels were received provides a strong indicator of the literary market and tastes of the time. In *Politics of Letters* (1987), Richard Ohmann returns to postwar literature to re-analyse the formation of the canon with specific interest in the era’s socio-political and economic context and, by connection, the increasing influence of advertising on the popular press. Aside from assessing the structures that he believes started to underpin the canon—adopting a Marxist position on the encroaching power of industrial capitalism—Ohmann outlines the recurring thematic patterns of successful postwar novels throughout the 1960s. Ohmann looks to such texts as J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, Updike’s Rabbit series, Kesey’s *Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) and, latterly, Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) to provide the blueprint for a specific literary trend:

These novels told stories of people trying to live a decent life in contemporary social settings, people represented as analogous to “us,” rather than as “cases” to be examined and understood from a clinical distance... They are unhappy people, who move toward happiness, at least a bit, by the ends of their stories.¹²

¹¹ Nick Fraser, “Rebirth of a Dark Genius,” *The Observer* (17 February 2008). Accessed online: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/17/biography.fiction>. [Last accessed 6 June 2016].

¹² Richard Ohmann, *Politics of Letters* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1987), p 80.

Ohmann goes on to reference Saul Bellow's remark, "What Americans want to learn from their writers is how to live" and how they seek, in fiction, an exploration of "individual consciousness."¹³ The critic outlines a pressing feature of American literature at this time, namely the quest and "search for personal meaning, for some kind of map to the moral landscape."¹⁴ This trend had filtered through to *The New Yorker*, the long-standing bastion of the "novel of manners," which started to move in a different direction. Dickstein observes that the magazine, "long famous for its flippant and light-hearted view of life" featuring writers such as Jean Stafford, John Cheever and Shirley Jackson, had turned away "from the social text toward an interior castle of personal trauma and dysfunction."¹⁵

While this overview indicates that American readership was more receptive to a specific type of novel moving into the 1960s, it is difficult to ascertain whether this trend was initiated by demand or by the influence of advertorial strategy and the impact of a positive periodical review. With a circulation of around one and a half million readers throughout the decade—making it several times the size of any other periodical—*The New York Times Book Review* was particularly influential in this process.¹⁶ Aside from the clear benefits a positive review could generate, the *NY Times* played a central part in how a novel would be received thereafter by the market, as Ohmann suggests:

It also began...the process of distinguishing between ephemeral popular novels and those to be taken seriously over a longer period of time. There was a marked difference in impact between, say, Martin Levin's favorable but mildly condescending (and brief) review of *Love Story* and the kind of front-page review by an Alfred Kazin or an Irving Howe that asked readers to regard a new novel as literature, and that so often helped give the stamp of highbrow approval to books by Bellow, Malamud, Updike, Roth, Doctorow, and so forth.¹⁷

Tying in with Dickstein's assertion on the changing tone of the *NY Times*, there was indeed a clear split between popular fiction of the time and what was regarded as highbrow literature; a distinction often held in the hands of influential reviewers like Kazin or Howe. This gradient of serious literature against that of "trashy" fiction impacted not just on a novel's initial entry into the market but its sustainability as a classic work.

¹³ Ohmann (1987), p 70.

¹⁴ Ohmann (1987), p 70.

¹⁵ Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945—1970* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p 65.

¹⁶ Ohmann (1987), p 72.

¹⁷ Ohmann (1987), p 73 & 74.

If, as Ohmann claims, the literary audience of the 1960s were most receptive to novels that focused on a “search for personal meaning,” Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* is an almost perfect fit. Reviewers approached the text in such a manner and Robert Massie in *The New York Times* opened his critique with the following:

Every very night at dusk, when the Gulf breeze stirs the warm, heavy air over New Orleans, a 29-year- old wanderer named Binx Bolling emerges from his apartment, carrying in his hand the movie page of his newspaper, his telephone book and a map of the city.¹⁸

Massie’s review establishes the somewhat mystical nature of Percy’s protagonist; paraphernalia in hand, Bolling has all of the characteristics of an existential wanderer. Massie added: “His [Percy’s] interest in psychiatry is evident in the way he probes at the mainsprings of his characters...The reader gets fragments of meaning and occasional glimpses of deep-rooted causes.”¹⁹

After the success of his first novel, J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey* stood out as one of the favourites for the NBA. Salinger, of course, had established a reputation as an author preoccupied with crises of identity and estrangement, as evidenced in both *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and the collection *Nine Stories* (1953). While *Franny and Zooey* exhibits Salinger’s appreciation of and interest in Zen Buddhism, the focus remains on his protagonists’ existential angst. As John Updike identified in his review for *The New York Times*, the precocious Glass siblings share the “common subject” of a “spiritual crisis.”²⁰ Like Percy’s text, Salinger is concerned with finding meaning and neither novel lends itself, nor is preoccupied, by social or historical commentary. The weight of *Franny and Zooey*’s success, for Updike, resides in the fact that “Salinger’s conviction that our inner lives greatly matter peculiarly qualifies him to sing of an America where, for most of us, there seems little to do but to feel.”²¹ Updike recognised his contemporary’s incision when it came to “introversion,” “human subjectivity” and “psychological jockeying,” attributes that make him an “uniquely relevant literary artist.”²²

¹⁸ Robert Massie, “Double Features Were His Refuge,” *The New York Times* (28 May 1961), p 30.

¹⁹ Massie (1961), p 30.

²⁰ John Updike, “Anxious Days for the Glass Family,” *The New York Times* (17 September 1961), p 1.

²¹ Updike (1961), p 2.

²² Updike (1961), p 2.

Updike's appreciation would not have come as such a surprise considering that *Rabbit, Run* (1960), published one year prior to *Franny and Zooey*, also explored the inner turmoil of a central character. Indeed, *The New York Times*' David Boroff went so far as to link Rabbit Angstrom with Salinger's first troubled protagonist: "Rabbit is an older and less articulate Holden Caulfield. An urban cipher, he is trapped by wife, baby, an uncongenial job."²³ Like Caulfield, Rabbit is upheld as a misfit hero champion, one who uneasily assumes the role of picaresque hero and is subdued by a "restlessness" and an "unslaked thirst for spiritual truth."²⁴ Even though the novel is the "stuff of shabby domestic tragedy," it remained a "triumph of intelligence and compassion" due to the fact it refrained from "glib condescension that spoils so many books of this type."²⁵ In chapter four of this thesis, I hold *Rabbit, Run* in close proximity to *Revolutionary Road* in terms of Updike's treatment of heteronormative masculinity and critique of postwar patriarchy. What separates the two novels in my mind—and in relation to the thread of this opening chapter—is that Yates parodies this compulsion for masculine escape.

***Revolutionary Road* as Topical Novel**

Prior to publication, Yates voiced a number of reservations about the advertising approach Atlantic-Little, Brown were keen to adopt, with his most pressing concern being *Revolutionary Road* marketed as a topical novel. Upon receiving the first draft from the publishers, Yates expressed dissatisfaction at both the proposed jacket design and blurb. In a letter to Robert H. Fetridge Esq. of Atlantic Monthly Press, Yates suggested that the photo used for the cover, in which a couple stand back-to-back with both faces shadowed and obscured, gave the novel the feel of a "case-history kind of book...rather than a serious work of fiction."²⁶ Yates believed the cover would make readers immediately associate the novel with recent medical studies, particularly *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957) and Harry F. Tashman's *Today's Neurotic Family: A Journey into Psychoanalysis* (1958). Despite Yates' protestations, the image was used for the first run of publication. With regards to the blurb, Yates felt that the publishers had succumbed to what he "feared most about the way the book might be promoted," which was its billing as another book about suburbia.²⁷ The marketing strategy was all the more surprising considering Atlantic-Little, Brown's initial reservations about the novel's similarity to Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the*

²³ David Boroff "You Cannot Really Flee," *The New York Times* (6 November 1960) p 4.

²⁴ Boroff (1960), p 43.

²⁵ Boroff (1960), p 4.

²⁶ Richard Yates, letter to Robert H. Fetridge, dated 22 October 1960, The Richard Yates Collection.

²⁷ Yates, letter to Robert H. Fetridge, (22 October 1960), The Richard Yates Collection.

Gray Flannel Suit (1956). Yet the proposed blurb began, somewhat comically, “*Revolutionary Road* is a novel about suburbia”; an opening line that was eventually revised. While Yates stressed that he wanted the text to represent a clear departure from topical critiques of the environment, the copy contained several glaring references that implied just the opposite, as Yates highlighted:

I know enough about advertising copy to know that key words set the tone; and the key words employed in this blurb are “commuters,” “the suburbs,” “Suburban life,” “picture window,” suburban neighbors,” “attractive receptionist with an apartment in town,” etc. all of which make excellent copy for “Strangers when we Meet” by Evan Hunter, or “The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit” but are hardly appropriate to a novel like mine.²⁸

It’s apparent that Yates didn’t want *Revolutionary Road* associated with suburban texts—he had spent enough time loosening the novel’s ties with *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* for it to be an issue once more—but felt the copy did little to distinguish or disentangle such a connection. Yates’ agent, Monica McCall, stood by her client’s criticisms and relayed them to Lawrence: she believed that the blurb failed to “reflect any of the values of Dick’s book” and would “alienate any likely suburban reader.”²⁹ McCall’s letter picks up on a very salient point: if the literary market had been saturated by novels about suburbia, suburbanites themselves would surely be exhausted by the number of fictional critiques of the topic, thus lessening the book’s appeal to a rapidly-increasing consumer group. Yates’ protestations had, to an extent, the desired effect, as Atlantic-Little, Brown altered the first lines of the blurb to read: “It probes modern American marriage and suburban living to a depth heretofore unexplored. It is not, however, anything so tame as just another book about suburbia or infidelity.” The opening line seems to stand as a compromise between author and publisher: suburbia is still mentioned at the outset, but with the caveat that Yates’ novel provides a fresh approach in its exploration of the setting. There is a similar sentiment to the second line, although it does take a rather confused position as to it being a novel about suburbia and marriage. Whether this came across to readers as a somewhat contradictory disclaimer, the blurb, at best, offered a hazy, amorphous outline of the book.

²⁸ Yates, letter to Robert H. Fetridge, dated 22 October 1960, The Richard Yates Collection.

²⁹ Monica McCall, letter to Seymour Lawrence, dated 26 October 1960, The Richard Yates Collection.

If he had serious concerns about the proposed cover and packaging of the novel, Yates' most pressing reservation centred upon the publishers' failure to provide any description of authorial style or form. Reaching the closing of the letter, he states:

Finally—and this is my most sore-headed point—I fail to understand why none of the sentences in this blurb are devoted to the book as a piece of writing; why nothing is said that might include words like “talent”...or “language” or “writer.”³⁰

As much as this could be construed as Yates' defending his craft, it does seem that, along with publicising the book, Atlantic should have been earnestly trying to promote its author too, particularly when Yates would have been something of an unknown in the literary world. With their exclusion of any indication of style, Yates believed the publishers once again pushed *Revolutionary Road* towards a particular audience:

There are two kinds of novels, those written by writers and those written by hacks which are of value only in that they are "about" something timely or interesting. I know if I were to read this blurb, as a prospective book buyer, I would assume that the book belonged in the second category, and this, after five years of the hardest kind of work I know, is a troubling thought.³¹

Yates wanted more recognition of the novel's literary credentials and believed its packaging had negated any prospect of it being regarded as a classic text. Again, Yates' critique drew a response, with biographical details inserted on the inside jacket, yet in the published blurb, Atlantic-Little, Brown, provided little indication of what to expect of Yates as writer:

Rarely does a publisher introduce a first novel filled with such devastating power and compassion that it seemed destined to become an enduring comment and influence upon our very way of life. We believe that REVOLUTIONARY ROAD by Richard Yates is such a novel.

There is stylistic reference in as much as the novel is described as powerful and compassionate: there is, too, an indication of the text being a commentary on how to live, tying in with popular themes for personal meaning. Even taking these revisions into

³⁰ Yates letter to Robert H. Fetridge, (22 October 1960). The Richard Yates Collection.

³¹ Yates letter to Robert H. Fetridge (22 October 1960). The Richard Yates Collection.

consideration, there is still an absence of information about Yates' authorial identity, with the focus remaining on the novel's thematic significance. As a point of comparison, it is interesting to note the other major title published in 1961 by Atlantic-Little, Brown. Edwin O'Connor's *The Edge of Sadness* (1961) accompanied Yates' text and would win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction the following year. Their introduction to the text, and author, runs: "Not since Edwin O'Connor's phenomenal best seller, THE LAST HURRAH, has there been an opportunity to meet characters as delightful, as fascinating, as buoyant, or as deeply moving as in Mr. O'Connor's major new novel, THE EDGE OF SADNESS."³² Taking into account O'Connor's established status—he arrived at Atlantic-Little, Brown having already published *The Oracle* (1951) under Harper, and his following text, *The Last Hurrah* (1956) remained at the top of *The New York Times* best seller list for 20 weeks—the authors merited contrasting introductions.³³ Yet, even accepting their different pedigrees, the superlatives ascribed to O'Connor, "phenomenal," "delightful," and "buoyant," far outweigh those afforded to Yates. Perhaps more importantly, the blurb outlines *The Edge of Sadness*' subject-focused narrative and the emotive quality this brings, a clear departure from the topical associations referred to in Yates' novel. Even when Yates is mentioned by name, it arrives after the text and at the tail-end of the description, which again reinforces the importance of the book over that of the author. Atlantic's packaging of *Revolutionary Road* suggests they were more intent on selling the novel—the primary objective of any publisher, of course—in terms of its topical resonance, rather than seeking to introduce a text and author of significant literary merit.

Kazin's Words of Praise

However inadvertent—and indeed, counter-intuitively—a positive critique of *Revolutionary Road* ended up being as damaging as any scathing mainstream review. Alfred Kazin claimed the novel to be "a powerful commentary on the way we live now. It locates the American tragedy squarely on the field of marriage."³⁴ Atlantic-Little, Brown were eager to use Kazin's praise and placed the quotation on the novel's front cover. Even though Kazin's backing practically guaranteed an initial boost in sales, Yates felt it constituted a gross misreading of the text. (Some years later, Yates revealed that he had consented to Kazin's praise appearing on the front cover because he felt Atlantic "knew

³² Edwin O'Connor, *The Edge of Sadness* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1961).

³³ John Bear, *The #1 New York Times Bestseller: Intriguing Facts About the 484 Books That Have Been #1 New York Times Bestsellers Since the First List in 1942*, (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1992), p 65.

³⁴ Alfred Kazin, front cover of first edition of *Revolutionary Road* (Atlantic-Little, Brown: 1961).

their business” in terms of publication sales, but had “regretted it ever since.”³⁵) Again, Yates, with the benefit of hindsight, of course, believed Kazin’s summation pushed the marketing of the text towards the popular route and with a clear message at its core:

Oh, maybe it did help sell copies to people snooping around bookstores in search of an anti-marriage polemic or something, but I think it must have repelled and turned away a good many other, more intelligent readers. After all, who but a maniac or a God-damn fool would sit down and write a novel attacking marriage?³⁶

The promotion of the text as a diatribe against marriage not only diminished *Revolutionary Road*’s scope but also marginalised and lessened its appeal to a more discerning readership. There is an argument, too, that the publishers had used Kazin’s quotation out of context: Atlantic-Little, Brown sent Kazin a draft of the novel and the critic responded with a letter of praise, as Yates explains: “The publishers sent the book to him in manuscript, and he wrote back a very nice letter that said in part—*only* in part – ‘This novel locates the American tragedy squarely on the field of marriage.’”³⁷ Atlantic, naturally, believed Kazin could assist with the novel’s marketing drive and were therefore content with fronting *Revolutionary Road* with his praise even if didn’t actually originate from an official context. Despite Atlantic leading with Kazin’s quote on the front cover, Yates later absolved the publishers of any responsibility and claimed he should have been more forthright in his criticism: “It was my own damn fault, for letting them package the book that way. In any case, that was a most unfortunate, misleading blurb.”³⁸ So, too, did he refrain from apportioning any blame to Kazin (Kazin was, in the totality of the letter, very complimentary of the text, and as a first-time novelist, Yates would presumably have been flattered by the praise).

Concerns over the novel’s marketing were almost fully realised. The *Sunday New York Times* were one of the first to review the novel on 5 March 1961, and while Martin Levin resisted the temptation of looking to suburbia to explain Frank and April’s discontent—“suburbia is only the back-drop for a search that would be barren in any climate”—the piece places marriage as the focal point of discussion.³⁹ Over the course of the review, Levin mentions “marriage” on four separate occasions and towards the end of the critique, writes, “The excellence of ‘Revolutionary Road’ lies in the integrity with

³⁵ Ploughshares (1972).

³⁶ Ploughshares (1972).

³⁷ Ploughshares (1972).

³⁸ Ploughshares (1972).

³⁹ Martin Levin, “With a Fingerhold on Reality,” *The New York Times* (5 March 1961), p 135.

which its author depicts the Wheelers' disintegrating marriage."⁴⁰ This is counterbalanced, somewhat, by his assertion that in his treatment of the two central characters, Yates eschews the "pitfalls of obvious caricature or patent moralizing."⁴¹ Even if Levin does elevate the novel from the realm of polemic, its tragic impulse is sustained as Frank and April "embark on a feverish idyll which dissolves into the catastrophe that has been intimated from the beginning of the novel." Levin may, of course, have been alluding to the sense of fatalism Yates implies at the text's outset—"The final dying sound of their dress rehearsal left the Laurel Players with nothing to do but stand there" (3)—but the influence of Kazin's quote on the front cover can't be entirely disregarded. More forthcoming in his critique, *The New Republic's* Jeremy Larner perceived the text to be close to an all out cultural assault. Larner believed reading the novel was like coming to terms with "critical modern shortcomings." The reviewer believes these to be failures of 'work, education, community, family, *marriage* [italics added].'⁴² (Such a synopsis must still carry some weight; Vintage used this quotation in their recent re-issue of the text). On the same day as Levin's review, the *Chicago Tribune* printed what would be the most damning—within the mainstream periodicals at least—critique of the novel. In "Another Fictional *Exposé* of Suburban Living," author Warren E. Preece, voiced exasperation that another novel had added its name to a very tired canon:

As one in a long and rapidly lengthening line of novels concerned with the problem of marriage in suburbia, this book offers nothing unusual, contributes no new insights into the social organization it presumes to probe and, at times, barely manages to avoid the impression that it is an intentional parody of all the similarly type-cast novels that have gone before it.⁴³

Preece also seemed troubled by Atlantic-Little, Brown's and Yates' seemingly contrary positions on the novel, pondering whether it is "meant to be [as its publisher suggests], an examination of modern marriage or [as its author seems to feel] a long look at suburbia."⁴⁴ Closing with a passing reference to Cassius' line in *Julius Caesar*, Preece avers that marriage and suburbia should no longer be the automatic origins of discontent, but rather a "searching probe of the human personality."⁴⁵ Even those keen to support the novel couldn't prevent *Revolutionary Road* being labelled with the marriage tag: on February 1,

⁴⁰ Levin (1961), p 135.

⁴¹ Levin (1961), p 135.

⁴² Larner (1961), p 25.

⁴³ Warren E. Preece, "Another Fictional *Exposé* of Suburban Living", *Chicago Tribune* (5 March 1961), p 129.

⁴⁴ Preece (1961), p 129.

⁴⁵ Preece (1961), p 129.

Esquire attempted to build some momentum by publishing a lengthy section of the novel, spanning its first page to the scene in which Frank recounts a story he has already told to the Campbells (chapter 4).⁴⁶ Shortly after, a reader wrote to the magazine, “[The extract] by Richard Yates (February issue) is almost tendentious... It is sociologically significant in that it enacts the marital struggle... It would make good required reading for: courses in marriage and family-living, virgin ministers, and my Aunt Petunia”⁴⁷

An inevitable upshot of the marriage polemic thread is how this theme detracted from and influenced other narrative features, and, more generally, how attractive or accessible it made the novel to a wider audience. *The Hudson Review*’s Martin Mudrick opened his critique by quoting, at length, Frank and April’s first argument when they leave the auditorium and drive along Route Twelve. For Mudrick, the scene is symbolic of the novel’s central theme, meaning “*Revolutionary Road* resembles the earliest tragic novel about modern marriage, *The Kreutzer Sonata*.”⁴⁸ While stopping short of comparing Tolstoy’s Pozdnyshev to Frank Wheeler, he condemns the narrative’s “desperate male bias,” an imbalance that leads Mudrick to the conclusion, “What goes on in the woman’s mind, God only knows; certainly the author doesn’t.”⁴⁹ As will be argued in chapter three and four of this study, this “imbalance” has a specific function within the narrative and should not be seen as indicative of Yates’ negligence, or ignorance, when it comes to female characterisation.

The scope and influence of Kazin’s quote that the novel located “American tragedy squarely on the field of marriage” also directly impacted on *Revolutionary Road*’s prospects of being adapted to the big screen. A number of production houses expressed apprehension about its suitability, with most citing concerns about how the audience would react to the novel’s ending. In a letter to Monica McCall, dated 31 October 1960 (just over a week after Yates had relayed his condemnation of the text’s packaging to Atlantic), 20th Century Fox made direct reference to the front cover of *Revolutionary Road*:

However, it does not seem to be motion material because it is almost a horror story

⁴⁶ *Esquire* would become one of Yates’ most vocal exponents. In their November edition, Yates acted as judge for their annual Esquire-Bantam Fiction Contest to find unrecognised short story writers. More than twenty years later, the magazine published an excerpt of *Young Hearts Crying*, Yates’ penultimate novel. Their introduction called for a revival, and recognition, of his work, rounded off by a comparison to his literary hero: “Richard Yates is one of America’s least famous great writers. His work has been called masterful by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Tennessee Williams, but he has yet to win as wide an audience as some of his peers.” *Esquire* (August 1984)

⁴⁷ *Esquire* (1 April 1961), p 8.

⁴⁸ Marvin Mudrick “Something to Say” *The Hudson Review* (Summer 1961), p 293.

⁴⁹ Mudrick (1961), p 293.

of a certain kind of marriage that is as painful to see as it must be to bear.⁵⁰

Just as they concurred with Kazin's take on the novel, Fox believed there to be 'no redeeming element in the story' and were therefore unwilling to take it on. Taking a slightly different position—although one that will be familiar by now—*Famous Artists Agency* expressed reservations about whether *Revolutionary Road* would ignite viewers' interest, primarily due to its thematic focus on suburbia. Agent Ben Benjamin wrote in his rejection letter to McCall:

Maybe it was because I recently read Sloan Wilson's A SENSE OF VALUES and also A SUMMER PLACE as well as a half dozen other books that deal with sex and suburbia that I failed to be captured by Richard Yates' REVOLUTIONARY ROAD.⁵¹

Further association with Wilson—albeit not to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*—must have been vexing, as would have been the assertion that *Revolutionary Road*, despite Atlantic's disclaimer, represented another addition to the suburbia / sex genre.

Untangling Kazin

The New York Times' Orville Prescott, however, approached the text from a more cerebral position. Prescott, lead reviewer for the paper, dispensed with any formalities to strike at the novel's glaring misappropriation:

Prominently printed in large type across the front cover of the jacket of Richard Yates' brilliantly dismal first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, is one of the most sublime specimens of unintentional humor and muddled thought in the recent history of book promotion.⁵²

Prescott clearly felt Kazin's interpretation of the text constituted a blatant misreading yet apportioned blame to a rather confused promotional approach. Prescott, one of the country's most influential critics, held no punches in picking apart the text's frontispiece: "Since Mr. Yates' novel is not about the tragic state of America or about the tragedy of any

⁵⁰ Letter from the office of David Brown, 20th Century Fox, to Monica McCall, dated 31 October 1960. The Richard Yates Collection.

⁵¹ Letter from Ben Benjamin of Famous Artists Agency to Monica McCall, dated 9 December 1960, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁵² Orville Prescott, "Far Gone Into Mental Illness," *The New York Times* (10 March 1961), p. 25.

particular Americans, this is nonsense.”⁵³ For the reviewer, Kazin’s quotation had the inane look of ‘glib and pompous’ statements that “sound as if they mean something but don’t.” After deconstructing the novel’s misrepresentation, Prescott proceeded to praise Yates’ authorial credentials. In what Atlantic could have easily used for their bio on the writer, Prescott penciled his own introduction:

Richard Yates is a young journalist and teacher with a fine natural gift for fiction. He can create characters, tell a story, bring brutal wrangles to flaming life. His dialogue is expert and his prose is artfully controlled. There can be no question about the superior quality of his talents.⁵⁴

Prescott identified the very features Yates had yearned to be included in the novel’s original promotional material: his background in writing, as a “young journalist,” indicating both aspiration and prospect, while also outlining Yates’ exciting transition into the sphere of fiction. Craftsmanship is denoted through Prescott’s reference to the controlled prose and insightful, sharp dialogue, all of which is underpinned by his “natural gift for fiction.”⁵⁵ While Yates will presumably have been buoyed by such compliments, any joy might have been tempered by the fact that Prescott’s first stop was to mock the novel’s front cover. The triumph of Prescott’s review resided in the fact he not only recognised Yates’ merits as writer but attempted to reshape the text’s reception.

If Prescott had untangled *Revolutionary Road* from the restraints of being a casebook on marriage, he only succeeded in tethering the text to an even more topical subject. While the reviewer made a mockery of *Revolutionary Road*’s promotion as an anti-marriage polemic, he retained a belief that it should be categorised as a topical novel. With his prescriptive treatment of Frank and April Wheeler, Prescott suggested the text centred upon “two psychopathic characters and their miserable haste to self-destruction.”⁵⁶ Yates had, as mentioned, been apprehensive that his first novel would be received as ‘about’ something ‘timely or interesting.’” Prescott actually makes reference to such in his review when he expresses his disdain at the numbers of “fictional characters so far gone into mental illness’ who have ‘cluttered up hundreds of recent novels.” Similarly, *The Hudson Review* claimed the narrative displayed a patchy knowledge of the field with Yates cast as an ill-informed armchair analyst who “attempts kindergarten quasi-psychoanalytic

⁵³ Prescott (1961), p. 25.

⁵⁴ Prescott (1961), p 25.

⁵⁵ Prescott (1961), p 25.

⁵⁶ Prescott (1961), p 25.

explanations” for what he is “helpless to account for and can only report.”⁵⁷ Such an interpretation fails to account for the split between Frank’s poor grasp of psychoanalytic theory and Yates’ own: or rather, more pertinently, what Yates’ intended by assigning such a basic comprehension of it to one of his characters. As will be advanced in the final chapter of this thesis, Frank’s adoption of the psychoanalyst role is another way in which he attempts to affirm control in the text.

Prescott’s review cohered with one of the initial concerns Yates held about the packing and reception of *Revolutionary Road*, wherein it would be catalogued as a “case-history kind of book.” While Yates anticipated this aspect of the novel being raised, he would perhaps not have foreseen the criticism directed towards his handling of the subject. Prescott, for one, believed Yates had created two troubled characters making a bee-line towards tragedy, while *The Hudson Review* accused the author of possessing a circumspect knowledge of psychoanalysis. As the final chapter of this study will show, Yates’ fiction frequently contains characters suffering from mental illness, and, in *Disturbing the Peace*, a comprehensive outline of the therapeutic services available to John Wilder. Frank Wheeler’s hazy (or lazy?) comprehension of Freud stands to ridicule the country’s obsession with psychoanalytic theory, an argument outlined in the final chapter. As such, both reviews mistook, or overlooked, Yates’ sardonic take on the subject.

Even if, as I claim, Prescott misinterpreted Yates’ satirical position on psychoanalysis, the reviewer remained impressed by *Revolutionary Road* and, more generally, by Yates. The extent of Prescott’s admiration—and his recognition of Yates’ quality as writer—can be uncovered by comparing the review of *Revolutionary Road* with that of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. Prescott had been captivated by the novel, which appeared just seven months after *Revolutionary Road*, claiming it to be “wildly original, brilliantly comic, brutally gruesome, it is a dazzling performance.”⁵⁸ Prescott applauds “Mr. Heller’s imaginative inventions,” and suggests that *Catch-22* is a “funny book—vulgarily, bitterly, savagely funny.”⁵⁹ Yet, as much as Prescott commended the novel’s invention, creativity and non-conventional form, his outline of Heller, who, despite having some of his work published—*Player Piano* (1952) and *The Sirens of Titan* (1959)—would still have been a relative unknown to readers of *The New York Times*, didn’t live up to the introduction he afforded Yates. Prescott wrote:

⁵⁷ Mudrick (1961), p 292.

⁵⁸ Prescott (1961), p 27.

⁵⁹ Prescott (1961), p 27.

It is one of the most startling first novels of the year and it may make its author famous. Mr. Heller, who spent eight years writing "Catch-22," is a former student at three universities—New York, Columbia and Oxford—and a former teacher at Pennsylvania State College.⁶⁰

Heller and Yates shared a background in journalism, dedicated a number of years to writing their first novels, and previously spent time in service. Both were of similar age, too, at the time of publishing their first novels, Yates was 35, Heller 38. With Yates, Prescott heralded the emergence of a new, exciting author and although he is vocal in his praise for Heller, his introduction reads more as a profile rather than resounding endorsement of a major new arrival on the scene.

The Sales Pitch

As Ohmann observes, novels that were headed for substantial sales figures would generally have to establish a strong readership within the first three to four weeks of publication. Very few books—Ohmann cites *Catch-22*, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) and Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964) as bucking the trend—experienced a slow entry into the market before reaching best-sellerdom. A critical factor in this process stemmed from whether the novel could scale the lofty echelons of *The New York Times* best-seller list: if so, the domino effect would begin with store managers responding to the demand of readers, increased media exposure influencing book-club purchases, while added sales would provide increased leverage for further advertising.⁶¹ Reviews from *The NY Times* were vital to a novel's initial impact and therefore overall success in the chain of causation outlined. Considering how troubled Levin and Prescott were by features of *Revolutionary Road*, it's hardly surprising that sales remained modest. McCall recognised the importance of the novel's early visibility in the market, and with readership beneath the projected mark, knew this was unlikely to result in a spike of delayed sales. Yates' agent disclosed as much in a letter to producer Ingo Preminger, dated April 18, less than two months after *Revolutionary Road*'s release:

Very confidentially of course, the book is dropping off rather badly in sales. Total sales to date are a little under 10,000, which is solid enough for most recent novels,

⁶⁰ Prescott (1961), p 27.

⁶¹ Ohmann (1987), p 71.

but deeply disappointing in view of the critical press on this book. Thus a picture sale of some sort is becoming very urgent.⁶²

McCall's letter suggests an anticipation of the novel's trajectory in light of its indifferent sales figures, and, considering the avenue to cinematic adaptation didn't look particularly promising, her appeal to Preminger shows the limited options available in redirecting its course. Even if Yates had serious reservations about the packaging of *Revolutionary Road* and the manner in which it was released into the market, it seems Atlantic-Little, Brown remained optimistic as to its appeal and there is evidence to suggest they provided sufficient commercial backing. The publishers spent almost \$4500 on advertising and promotion, an outlay based on expected sales of 20-22,000 copies, a fairly ambitious projection, at the time, for a yet to be established novelist. Aware that figures were teetering around the 10,000 mark, Yates broached the subject with his publishers (Yates' dissatisfaction had been piqued by how much advertising space they had purchased in *The Sunday New York Times*). The author met with a fairly brusque response from Atlantic's Seymour Lawrence, who outlined the commercial support offered:

I don't think I need to review in detail the careful build-up before publication, the dramatic launching of the book in "Publisher's Weekly," the special pre-publication jackets and their rather wide distribution...I cannot recall when we last launched a first novel in such a powerful and confident way...More than 10,000 copies were sold in a few weeks, and this is outstanding for a first novel, but as often happens to new fiction, the demand dropped off sharply. It is not merely a question of our spending or your spending a few more hundred dollars (which we would have done in the course of events had we thought it would be fruitful).⁶³

Lawrence enclosed Dorothy Parker's review of the novel, due to appear in the June edition of *Esquire*, where the author would resoundingly endorse the text: "A treasure, a jewel, a whole trove is Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*."⁶⁴ With this in mind, Lawrence suggests that Yates 'ought to be very gratified by the high level of serious attention' he had received from his peers. It is difficult to ascertain how appeased Yates was by the overall content or tone of the response. According to Lawrence, Atlantic-Little, Brown had provided sufficient financial support for a new novelist, even if he does indicate their

⁶² Monica McCall, letter to Ingo Preminger, Preminger-Stuart-Feins, dated 18 April 1961, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁶³ Seymour Lawrence, letter to Richard Yates, dated 1 May 1961, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁶⁴ Dorothy Parker review of *Revolutionary Road*, *Esquire*, Vol. 5 (1 June 1961), p 38.

unwillingness to spend more for a further push in distribution. Yet in many ways Lawrence's letter reinforces the strategic mistakes made prior to the novel's commercial release, specifically the launch of *Revolutionary Road* with—in Yates' opinion—the poorly packaged pre-publication jackets. As Yates predicted, the initial sales spike could be attributed to the novel's categorisation as something timely or topical, crystallised, in many ways, by Kazin's early praise. This had, as the various reviews illustrate, shaped its initial entry and heavily influenced the text's overall reception into the literary market: a further commercial drive would, as the letter states, have proven inconsequential.

Of all the journals and periodicals to critique *Revolutionary Road*, only *The Yale Review* looked to unshackle the novel from any clear topical connection while also disregarding Kazin's commendation. The reviewer, F.J. Warnke, explains that *Revolutionary Road*'s "true subject...is neither the horrors of suburbia nor the futility of modern marriage." Warnke continues: "The novel is really about the inadequacy of human beings to fulfil their own aspirations and its target is not America but existence."⁶⁵ Warnke's interpretation, more than any other, reframed the text as subject-focused rather than topical and in the process, brings it closer to the novels—*The Moviegoer*, *Rabbit, Run* and *Franny and Zooey*—that were primarily concerned with a quest for personal meaning. Yet the impact and influence of Warnke's review, like Parker's, would have been seriously mitigated by its publication date in the summer of 1961. Just like Lawrence's assertion that a subsequent commercial drive would be somewhat irrelevant due to the status the text had already established, the impact of any review at this deferred point in the marketing cycle—although welcome—would have been inconsequential.

Moving Towards Loneliness

The publication of *Revolutionary Road* allowed Yates to look ahead to the possibility of a second novel and the following year heralded the release of his short story collection, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. The majority of the pieces were written prior to *Revolutionary Road*, with "Builders" the only story to be written and added (the eleventh and final shade of loneliness).⁶⁶ This, it seems, was the only factor in holding back the collection's publication, with Lawrence keen to keep Yates visible on the literary scene and establish his reputation. Using pieces from his catalogue also allowed Yates the opportunity to start

⁶⁵ F.J. Warnke "Some Recent Novels: A Review of Worlds," *The Yale Review* Vol.1 (1961), p 627.

⁶⁶ Bailey (2003), p 256.

progress on a second novel about the “life of an eighteen-year-old rifleman,” outlined in his Statement of Plans for a fellowship application in the summer of 1961. Promisingly, a few of the stories in the collection had been published elsewhere: “Jody Rolled the Bones” featured in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1953, for which Yates received \$250 and, more crucially, an “Atlantic Firsts” award. Shortly after, *Cosmopolitan* picked up two further short stories, “Lament for a Tenor” (although this doesn’t feature in *Eleven Kinds*) and “A Glutton for Punishment”, followed by the sale of “The Best of Everything” to *Charm Magazine*.⁶⁷

Yet the release of *Eleven Kinds* didn’t have the desired effect: even though reviews were, in general, positive, the collection failed to make a significant impact on the literary scene.⁶⁸ There seems to have been little build up pre-publication, with *The NY Times* the only periodical to include a (albeit slight) preview the collection. Appearing on 19 March—six days prior to Peter Buitenhuis’ official review for the paper—the collection is introduced under the heading “Tales of Loneliness.” Comprising very few lines of description, the preview informs readers that *Eleven Kinds* deals with ‘people whom human or external situations have somehow hurt and forced to do things that are unaccountable or self-defeating.’⁶⁹ When Buitenhuis did review the collection, he was on the whole complimentary, recognising Yates’ ability to record ‘exact and memorable’ details to make for a series of first-rate stories.⁷⁰ After Buitenhuis’ piece, *The NY Times* mentioned the collection on two further occasions: on 8 April it appeared at the bottom right hand corner under the title, “And Bear in Mind,” a section dedicated to ‘other recent books which...are of particular literary, topical or scholarly interest.’⁷¹ A further two months passed before a subsequent mention, although David Boroff was resounding in his endorsement. The critic argued the stories were “beautifully controlled” with Yates “almost surgical in his incisiveness.” Stylistically, the author never sacrifices “sympathies in the interest of artfully contrived irony or fancy dramatic fiction...the result is fiction of a high order.”⁷²

Esquire’s Dorothy Parker, who championed *Revolutionary Road*, paired *Eleven Kinds* with Updike’s collection *Pigeon Feathers* (1962) and showed no hesitancy in

⁶⁷ Bailey (2003), p 167.

⁶⁸ Bailey suggests that part of the reason for this was how slow the New York critics were in reviewing the collection. As will be covered below, Yates, or McCall for that matter, weren’t particularly happy with Atlantic’s commercial backing of *Eleven Kinds*.

⁶⁹ “Books Authors; Atomic General’s Story Tales of Loneliness Essays in Remembrance” *The New York Times* (19 March 1962), p 26.

⁷⁰ Bailey (2003), p 270.

⁷¹ A footnote to Lewis Nichols’ article, “In and Out of Books,” *The New York Times* (8 April 1962).

⁷² Boroff (1962), p 3.

favouring the former: “Mr. Yates’s eye and ear are, I believe, unsurpassed: I know of no writer whose senses are in more admirable condition.”⁷³ These features of Yates’ style make his “characters live” throughout the collection, adding to the sure perfection of his writing.”⁷⁴ To accentuate the chasm between the two, Parker added: “*Pigeon Feathers* seems to me, though disappointing is perhaps too hasty a word, not all that I had expected. I could find little to carry me along with the people.”⁷⁵ *The Hudson Review* once again placed the collection alongside *Pigeon Feathers* but remained unconvinced by *Eleven Kinds*. The reviewer suggested Updike’s work to be the “only one worth considering” and suggested that Yates can only be categorised as a serious author due to the fact “he writes about serious problems.”⁷⁶ If we look past the topical associations of the collection, Morse suggests we would find prose “about as subtle as a beer ad.”⁷⁷ Criticism centred primarily on either the somber tone that is carried throughout—the title isn’t in any way a red herring—with each of his characters either “unaccountable” or “self-defeating.”⁷⁸

As with *Revolutionary Road*, Yates expressed his disdain at the lack of advertorial space Atlantic-Little, Brown had purchased prior to and during the first few weeks of publication. McCall relayed Yates’ disappointment with Atlantic’s marketing drive and requested a full-page ad, which would have been in line with the outlay Knopf had committed to *Pigeon Feathers*. Lawrence countered with the reasoning that because Updike’s work frequently attracted front-page attention, their situations were “by no means comparable”; sales for *Eleven Kinds*, during the first cycle of publication, stalled at just 2,000 copies.⁷⁹ Yet the most damaging long-term repercussion from *Eleven Kinds*’ publication wasn’t the poor sales figures, but rather the way in which the collection was appropriated as an exemplar and consequent blueprint of Yates’ style and range. The compliments paid by Buitenhuis, Boroff and Parker all oscillate around a fairly similar theme: the precision with which he delineates his characters and careful, exacting prose, all executed with a detached, unsympathetic hand. With *Eleven Kinds*, Yates received—after expressing his dissatisfaction at the paucity of attention paid to such during the publication of *Revolutionary Road*—recognition of his merits as a writer, yet with this came a series of stylistic associations. As Bailey makes clear, *Eleven Kinds* brought about what would be a recurring line of criticism in which reviewers “ultimately and rather perversely held

⁷³ Dorothy Parker, “Six Collections Of Short Stories and A Lovely Novel,” *Esquire* (1 June 1962), p. 66.

⁷⁴ Parker (1962), p. 66.

⁷⁵ Parker (1962), p. 66 & 67.

⁷⁶ J. Mitchell Morse, “Fiction Chronicle,” *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer, 1962), p. 302.

⁷⁷ Morse (1962), p. 302.

⁷⁸ *The New York Times* (19 March 1962).

⁷⁹ Bailey (2003), p. 274.

Yates's craftsmanship against him."⁸⁰ The cumulative reviews of *Eleven Kinds* had essentially consolidated such a position and it is apparent how this definition of Yates' style filtered in to the manner in which critics approached the stories of the collection. Such self-defeatism or fatalism wasn't restricted to the characters, however, as *The New York Times* suggested: "Collectively, they [the stories] convey a depressive quality that exists independently of the often painful or depressing subject matter."⁸¹

The collective, depressive tone can also be seen to shape and support the perception that *Eleven Kinds* exhibited a rather restricted range. As Bailey observes, those critical of *Eleven Kinds* consigned the collection to the level of formula, with Yates concentrating upon and working within a limited canvas. The critical overview followed a distinct pattern:

Some took Yates to task for his "limited" range—a charge leveled at everything from the artful economy of his plots to the mediocre character types to a repetitive bleakness of theme.⁸²

Even those who championed the collection struggled to move past the darkness threaded throughout each post. In 1981, Robert Towers wrote of how scarce copies of *Eleven Kinds* had become, yet its "mere mention" was enough "to produce quick, affirmative nods from a whole generation of readers."⁸³ With its "poignant glimpses" into Manhattan life and an expansive canvas that ranges from office workers, would-be novelists and a pupil desperately trying to impress his fellow classmates by pretending to have seen a movie he can't even pronounce, Yates' characters could have been picked at random "from the fat telephone book of the Borough of Queens."⁸⁴ For Towers, these stories were (albeit without Joyce's subtlety or verbal prowess), the New York equivalent of *Dubliners*. Yet even in handing out such praise, Towers was exacting in his criticism: "I wish too that he were a more interesting stylist. Even in his best work his prose is flattened out, his dialogue strictly utilitarian or else reductively banal."⁸⁵ Moving past his critique of Yates' prose, Towers believed *Eleven Kinds* to convey a "depressive quality that exists independently of the often painful or depressing subject matter."⁸⁶ The release of *Eleven*

⁸⁰ Bailey (2003), p 271.

⁸¹ Towers (1981).

⁸² Bailey (2003), p 271.

⁸³ Towers, (1981), p 3.

⁸⁴ Towers (1981), p 3.

⁸⁵ Towers (1981), p 3.

⁸⁶ Towers (1981), p 3.

Kinds formed the genesis of Yates' stylistic personality, and, as Towers suggests, with each shade of collective and accumulative loneliness consolidating the author's reputation as a depressive, bleak writer.

A Story Within a Story

The period between the release of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962) and the publication of *A Special Providence* proved to be prolonged; if Lawrence had envisaged a smooth pathway towards the second title, he was mistaken. The difficult second novel took seven years to complete and the process took its toll on Yates. In a letter to DeWitt Henry, he wrote, "I dislike the damn book myself, and bitterly regret all the time and pain it cost me."⁸⁷ During this hiatus, Yates relocated to Hollywood and wrote the screenplay to William Styron's novel *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951)—a move that formed the basis of the short story "Saying Goodbye to Sally"—and co-authored, along with William Roberts, the script to John Guillermin's war film *The Bridge at Remagen* (1969). This interval also included a series of hospitalisations, a teaching position at the renowned University of Iowa creative writing programme and appointment as speech-writer to Bobby Kennedy, the focal point of *Uncertain Times*. While Yates remained active in the intervening period between *Revolutionary Road* and *A Special Providence*—and eventually managed to translate many of these experiences into later work—none of his occupations would have substantially heightened his exposure or presence within the literary scene. By way of contrast, Updike published three short story collections after *Rabbit, Run*—the aforementioned *Pigeon Feathers*, *Olinger Stories* (1964) plus *The Music School* (1966)—and before *Rabbit Redux* (1971). Despite compliments from fellow authors Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates, Andre Dubus, and William Styron—Didion called it a "beautiful book," while Dubus, a little more frankly, said it was a "wonderful fucking novel—*A Special Providence* turned out to be a commercial and critical failure."⁸⁸

Most critics were unconvinced by the novel's hybrid form with questions raised not just about the quality of the sections on Alice Prentice but as to whether it merited inclusion in the first place. Even in 1965, Yates knew of an inherent weakness in the text, as he revealed in a letter to McCall:

⁸⁷ Richard Yates, letter to DeWitt Henry, dated 7 May 1971. The Richard Yates Collection.

⁸⁸ Both quoted in Bailey, (2004), p 395.

The book is really and truly in bad shape—I've done nothing for the past couple of weeks but brood about it, and can promise you I'm not wrong in saying it needs a great deal more work...There's a structural flaw in it somewhere, so much so that the whole second half seems weak and unnecessary.⁸⁹

Despite identifying this defect at such an early stage, Yates persisted with the mother-son narrative and reviewers were heavily critical of the novel's structure. *The Hudson Review's* Roger Sale made no concessions when identifying this clear weakness, claiming Alice Prentice's disasters become a "little too standard, her buoyancy too pat and obvious," adding, "what's wrong is the mother and therefore the structure of the whole."⁹⁰ For Sale, Yates couldn't prevent Alice Prentice being a "hymn to the undefeated," nor did he have the "Tolstoian talent" to redeem the novel.⁹¹ Prentice's frustration and struggle in the army can perhaps be attributed to the claustrophobic presence of his mother, yet the middle section of the text, which focuses on Alice Prentice's artistic failings, is at a disconnect to *A Special Providence's* primary focus. *The New York Times's* Elizabeth Dalton suggested its inclusion at this point of the text, which in effect splits Prentice's war narratives, provides the novel with a "queer, broken-backed structure."⁹² Dalton continues, "its construction is strained, with mother and son treated in separate sections, giving the effect of two different novels under a single cover."⁹³ More recently, Naparsteck believes *A Special Providence's* obscurity must rest on Yates's decision "to frame the war story within the smaller story of the son's relationship to the mother."⁹⁴

In addition to picking apart the structural weakness of the text, *The NY Times's* Elizabeth Dalton said the strength of the war scenes was somewhat negated by its lack of cultural relevance. This antithesis resulted in a central conflict of "urgency and significance."⁹⁵ More recently, Stewart O'Nan conceded that the novel, unlike *Revolutionary Road*, was neither "searing" nor "prophetic," in the political and cultural turbulence of the late 1960s, "it spoke for no generation—or perhaps one that had long since been eclipsed."⁹⁶ In his focus on the experience of a World War II soldier, Yates

⁸⁹ Richard Yates, letter to Monica McCall, dated 3 March 1965, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁹⁰ Roger Sale, "Its Discontent:" *The Hudson Review* Vol. 22, No. 4, (Winter, 1969-1970), p. 712.

⁹¹ Sale (1969-1970), p 712 & 713.

⁹² Elizabeth Dalton, "A Special Providence; By Richard Yates" *The New York Times* (14 December 1969), p 131.

⁹³ Dalton (1969), p 131.

⁹⁴ Martin Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close: The Writer and His Works* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co Inc., 2012), p 74.

⁹⁵ Dalton (1969), p 131.

⁹⁶ O'Nan (1999).

looked to be, in effect, resurrecting an issue 20 years too late, meaning it had lost any social or cultural applicability. Considering the literary and political climate at the time, there was nothing to suggest that a war novel—especially from a novelist still held in fairly high esteem—couldn't become a commercial success. *A Special Providence* appeared just a matter of months after Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a text which Robert Scholes of *The New York Times* said spoke with the voice of a “silent generation” and is an “extraordinary success ...a book we need to read, and to reread.”⁹⁷ America's continued involvement in Vietnam ensured war literature still had a viable market, as evidenced too in the success of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. As Morris Dickstein observes, the political conflict that surrounded participation in Vietnam not only piqued interest in war literature as both topical and socially pertinent, but instigated a revisitation of previous war narratives:

The galloping disillusionment with the Vietnam War all through the 1960s made a revisionist view of World War II inevitable. As reports of atrocities like My Lai began filtering out of Vietnam, survivors of the Holocaust also began to break their near silence of two decades.⁹⁸

As Dickstein's reference to Holocaust survivors testifies, this revisionist approach had allowed for, or encouraged, the emergence of memoirs, documentaries and historical accounts of warfare. Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel / The Novel as History* (1968), which recounts the anti-Vietnam War rally in 1967, neatly brings together (and troubles) the genres of historical fact articulated through Mailer's perspective of both novelist and character in the text.

More broadly, this also denoted the displacement of more formulaic war narratives—of Allied victory or of moral crusade—to be replaced by fiction that focused on the “irrationality and insanity of war in general,” a theme central to *Slaughterhouse-Five*.⁹⁹ A quick overview of the text shows how markedly it contrasts with Yates': Vonnegut frees his text from chronological restraints, which means we are with Billy Pilgrim at varying historical points, whether it be during his capture at the Battle of the Bulge, in a flying saucer en route to the planet Tralfamadore, or in the midst of an eye examination in 1967. Yet in contemplating the atrocities of war Vonnegut never directly

⁹⁷ Robert Scholes, “Slaughterhouse-Five,” *The New York Times Book Review* (6 April 1989), p 1 & 23.

⁹⁸ Dickstein (2002), p 42.

⁹⁹ Dickstein (2002), p 42.

addresses it: there is no direct description of the bombing of Dresden, which, considering the author's revelation that this is the "famous Dresden book" he's been writing for over 23 years, seems somewhat misleading.¹⁰⁰ As too, is Vonnegut's admission, in the opening chapter—which is a blend of historiographic metafiction with autobiography—that *Slaughterhouse-Five* will be a failure as "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre."¹⁰¹ What follows, however, isn't an exercise in self-deprecating humour or pointless circumlocution: Vonnegut's text doesn't tether or restrict itself to a specific point in warfare, and, at the same time, refrains from a direct, overarching or preaching anti-war polemic.

Various critics applauded Vonnegut's decision to free Billy Pilgrim's journey from a strict chronology and linked this to the text's overall significance. *The North American Review*'s Keith McKean argued for the novel's originality, stating, "this is not an ordinary anti-war book nor an ordinary book in any sense."¹⁰² Escaping linearity in the text, for McKean, means the form of *Slaughterhouse Five* also embodies its meaning, allowing the text to become 'post McLuhan, a now novel.'¹⁰³ The effect being that we can 'encounter any phase of Billy's life that serves Vonnegut's purpose. We may weep at the horror of Dresden, Hiroshima, and Viet Nam at the same time; they are all one.'¹⁰⁴ Thus the narrative's chronological flexibility reconfigures and re-imposes the horrors of one war onto the other; a critical feature when we consider the fact many Americans were still protesting against military engagement in Southeast Asia. When Vonnegut tells us, in his authorial declaration, that 'there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre,' it is a concession that *Slaughterhouse Five* will say nothing about the fire-bombing of Dresden and an acknowledgement that the novelist is also powerless to add anything intelligent to genocide. Death, Vonnegut seeks to tell us, is arbitrary: the text's recurring quip "So it goes," which appears after each death, is an acceptance of its inevitability and capricious nature.

Published just a matter of months prior to Vonnegut's novel, there is nothing to suggest that Yates' text—on the topical level alone—would be rendered irrelevant. Vonnegut successfully managed to marry fictional form with political purpose, and Yates' novel, with its commitment to a more traditional style, linear narrative and focus on a

¹⁰⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, Or, the Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (London: Vintage, 1991), p 3.

¹⁰¹ Vonnegut (1991), p 14.

¹⁰² Keith McKean, *The North American Review* Vol. 254, No. 3, (Fall 1969), p 70.

¹⁰³ McKean (1969), p 71.

¹⁰⁴ McKean (1969), p 70.

young soldier emotionally struggling to come to terms with war, appeared outdated on a number of levels. As Castronovo and Goldleaf argue, *A Special Providence* appeared at a point in which literary tastes had become everything Yates “would not and could not be: hyperbolic, mystical, elaborate, pyrotechnical, academic, self-referential.”¹⁰⁵ The critics provide an accurate visualisation of how Yates’ novel would have seemed when paired with those of his contemporaries: “If Heller and Vonnegut were painting huge Hieronymus Bosch murals showing the horrors of war, Yates was seeking to paint a delicate miniature portrait of a boy and his mother against the backdrop of war.”¹⁰⁶ Vonnegut’s text showed how the novelist’s response to war had moved from conveying feelings of disillusionment to capturing the absurdity of military engagement, all of which were articulated in a more progressive form.

Critics also aligned *A Special Providence*’s lack of cultural and political relevance with that of its style. *The New York Times*’ Elizabeth Dalton suggested of Yates’ style: “in its fidelity to the ordinariness of the characters it is sober and controlled to the point of flatness, making one almost long for some vulgar burst of purple prose.”¹⁰⁷ The major structural flaw of the text compounded its stylistic limitations, with Yates enmeshed in writing two differing and conflicting tales. Not all reviewers were troubled by the two-part structure of *A Special Providence*: Richard Freedman of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote of how Yates had successfully welded together what were “two essentially hackneyed stories” with the “fire of integrity and conviction into a fresh and moving novel.”¹⁰⁸ For the reviewer, Yates took two clichés, that of the “flighty, selfish mother” and juxtaposed it with the “adolescent boy reaching maturity through war’s bloody rites,” a juxtaposition, of sorts, of Amanda Wingfield in Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and Henry Fleming in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895)—the connection between Crane’s novel and *A Special Providence* will be explored in further detail in the following chapter.¹⁰⁹ The reviewer views these somewhat discordant narratives coming together to construct a text that somehow adds “up to more than the sum of its parts.”¹¹⁰ As to the manner in which this is conceived, Freedman still had some reservations about Yates’ writing: “Yates does this, I suspect, mostly through a prose style which is tough and lean without being mannered and through an insight into ordinary people which is

¹⁰⁵ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 27.

¹⁰⁶ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 28 & 29.

¹⁰⁷ Dalton (1969).

¹⁰⁸ Richard Freedman, “A Whole Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts” *Chicago Tribune*, (16 November 1969), p 15.

¹⁰⁹ Freedman (1969), p 15.

¹¹⁰ Freedman (1969), p 15.

compassionate without being sentimental.”¹¹¹ To further cement *A Special Providence*’s conservative status, he adds: “The nature of his material, narrative technique and style is conventional.”¹¹²

Yates knew of these structural deficiencies—particularly the fact that he embedded the mother-son narrative within a war-story—and ultimately considered it a ‘weak book’ and not “properly formed.”¹¹³ He admitted, too, that he didn’t achieve enough fictional or emotional distance from his protagonist. Allowing for the autobiographical elements in his writing, he claimed that in Prentice he created a character “wholly” himself. Yates revealed he wanted an “autobiographical blowout”—one he believed to be merited after the manner in which this was conceived in *Revolutionary Road*—but it was the narratorial distance, so acutely measured in his first text, that he couldn’t achieve in *A Special Providence*. During the interview, Yates further reflects on this lack of detachment: “You can’t find the author in *Revolutionary Road*, but you can in *A Special Providence*—he’s Bobby Prentice, all the way through.”¹¹⁴ As apparent throughout his career, Yates had no issue in critiquing his own work. The structural flaw is clear; it is almost as though the author has shoehorned the mother-son narrative into the text, detracting, for one, from the form and content of Prentice’s section. As suggested, Yates is a writer who draws heavily on autobiography, yet is clear that the authorial imprint we find in *Revolutionary Road*—where we can detect Yates’ voice through each of the characters yet it also stands at a distance above the novel—isn’t properly realised in *A Special Providence*. While recognising the structural or authorial weakness of the text, chapter two of this thesis will put forward a reading that *A Special Providence* opposed the popular template of post-World War II narratives and its depiction of the frustrated, incompetent soldier must be recognised for its social, historical and literary relevance. There is, perhaps, some accuracy in suggesting that *A Special Providence*, like *Revolutionary Road*, was the culprit of poor timing, yet this mis-step can be attributed more directly to what was perceived to be the novel’s stylistic conservatism.

Writers who Write about Writers

As proposed, the poor reception of *A Special Providence* can be explained, in part, by its hybrid and somewhat confused structure, further cemented by the fact the novel seemed

¹¹¹ Freedman (1969), p 15.

¹¹² Freedman (1969), p 15.

¹¹³ *Ploughshares* (1972).

¹¹⁴ *Ploughshares* (1972).

out of step with more progressive and contemporary war narratives. This perception of the novel as outmoded stemmed from criticism of *A Special Providence*'s stylistic limitations—most apparent in comparison to *Slaughterhouse-Five*—and must be seen as a contributing factor in consolidating the perception of Yates as a traditional or conservative author. This wasn't the first occasion on which Yates had been subject to such a categorisation. *Revolutionary Road*, plus the clipped, stark prose of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* have been upheld as texts that forged Yates' style, with Freeman regarding his first novel as the "epitome of the realist style that is so integral to his work."¹¹⁵ In the first extended critical work on the author, Castronovo and Goldleaf argue that Yates exhibited an intentional disregard for postmodernism:

Yates the teller refuses to outstrip his characters by employing a bravura style of fantastic structure. In ignoring postmodernism and living in the stylistic past, he achieved an altogether different effect from most of his contemporaries and built a reputation that was far less glamorous than Kurt Vonnegut's or Joseph Heller's or Thomas Pynchon's.¹¹⁶

In line with their analysis, Yates had been heavily critical of what he termed as postrealist fiction during the *Ploughshares* interview. Questioned on his stance, he replied, "I just can't stomach most of what's now being called 'The postrealistic fiction. I can't read John Barth with anything but irritation. I can't read Donald Barthelme at all.'"¹¹⁷ Yates suggested, rather disdainfully, that their fiction provides 'an endless supply of witty little intellectual puzzles' but in the end it remained "emotionally empty." Yet, if Yates had been looking to draw to a clear dividing line between his work and that of postmodernism or postrealist fiction, he complicated this somewhat later on in the interview with the caveat that, "All fiction is filled with technique. It's ridiculous to suggest one technique is any more realistic than any other."¹¹⁸

The persistent labeling of Yates as a realist writer, (which is, in itself, as a loose and amorphous definition), has been challenged by contemporary critics and comprehensively in Leif Bull's recent thesis. For Bull, Yates' work should not be seen as immune to the intellectual baptism of the 1960s as it "poses a challenge to orthodox

¹¹⁵ Maddie Freeman, "Richard Yates's Reality: The Crushing Reality of Us All." Accessed online: http://departments.knox.edu/engdept/commonroom/Volume13.1/Maddie_Freeman_files/Freeman.pdf. [Last accessed 6 June 2016].

¹¹⁶ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 6.

¹¹⁷ *Ploughshares* (1972).

¹¹⁸ *Ploughshares* (1972).

understandings of the aims and strategies of literary realism in the second half of the twentieth century.”¹¹⁹ Working through Yates’ fiction, Bull begins by outlining the various points at which the author recognises and employs features of postmodernist aesthetics; his study identifies, at the outset, the manner in which Yates stages the corrosion of everyday language in post-War American middle-class life throughout *Revolutionary Road*, thereby allowing the novel to “reflexively negotiate its own fictionality.”¹²⁰ For Bull, *Revolutionary Road* uncovers how various modes of discourse, ranging from corporate diction to marital disagreements, are “presented as drained of meaning.”¹²¹ This series of representational crises strike at the heart of Yates’ self-reflexive engagement with realism and, for Bull, shows the author to test the form’s “aesthetic and thematic parameters.”¹²² Bull’s recognition of this is a persuasive one; the repeated clichés and empty dialogue of *Revolutionary Road* lead nicely into the way the novel displays its own constructedness and troubles. Further, it challenges the view of Yates as a conservative writer from the outset of his career.

Of more interest to this chapter, however, is the way Yates continued to challenge a rigid categorisation as a realist author. In 1988, Yates revisited R.V. Cassill’s *Clem Anderson* (1961) in a review in *Ploughshares*. Cassill’s novel follows the life of the self-destructive author, Clem Anderson, whose tale is narrated by Dick Hartsell, also a writer and close friend of the protagonist. At one point in the text, Hartsell comes across a manuscript of one of Anderson’s novels and reads passages that were disregarded because they were deemed too autobiographical. We are therefore presented with not just a novel within a novel, but a novelist uncovering autobiographical elements of another novelist’s discarded material, a narrative feature that clearly impressed Yates. In his review of Cassill’s novel—which, it is worth bearing in mind, Yates had returned to after an interval of twenty-six years—he wrote:

It has struck me as the best novel I know on the subject of writing, or on the condition of being a writer; and that alone seems marvelous because so many other novelists have found only embarrassment in the same material.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Bull, (2010), p 9.

¹²⁰ Bull (2010), p 50.

¹²¹ Bull (2010), p. 50.

¹²² Bull (2010), p. 50.

¹²³ Richard Yates “R.V. Cassill’s *Clem Anderson*,” *Ploughshares* Vol. 14, No. 2/3 (1988), p 189.

The significance of Yates' review centres upon his appreciation—even as a self-avowed fan of Cassill's work—of the author-in-text character and the complex manner in which this is applied in *Clem Anderson*. Indeed, Yates employs at least one writer-in-text character in most of his novels and this is a practice he started at the outset of his career. Bull makes such a connection when he explores the function of the writer-in-text in *Eleven Kinds*, a figure Yates employs as a “self-conscious encryption (and subversion) of a familiar apprentice narrative.”¹²⁴ This literary self-consciousness is furthered by the frequency with which the collection makes intertextual references—“Doctor Jack O’Lantern,” for example, derives its classroom scene from Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. We see a synthesis of these features in the final short story, “Builders” in which the narrator, who works as a journalist, informs us “I was Ernest Hemingway reporting for work at *The Kansas City Star*.” The first reference to Hemingway and the role of the author-in-text figure shows how ‘explicitly reflexive’ “Builders” is.¹²⁵ The story opens:

Writers who write about writers can easily bring on the worst kind of literary miscarriage...Start a story off with ‘Craig crushed out his cigarette and lunged for the typewriter,’ and there isn’t an editor in the United States who’ll feel like reading your next sentence.¹²⁶

This constitutes not just a metafictional trope of fiction meditating on fiction, but the “fictional treatment of the fictional treatment of the writing of fiction, moving in a spiral of reflexivity.”¹²⁷ What will follow, according to the narrator, is a “straight, no-nonsense piece of fiction about a cabdriver,” shortly followed by a direct, self-aware appeal to the reader:

You’ll have to be patient for a minute, because there’s going to be a writer in it too. I won’t call him “Craig...” but we’re going to be stuck with him right along and you’d better count on his being as awkward and obtrusive as writers nearly always are, in fiction or in life.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Bull (2010), p 88.

¹²⁵ Bull (2010), p 116.

¹²⁶ Richard Yates, “Builders,” *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates* (London: Vintage, 2008), p 141.

¹²⁷ Bull (2010), p 117.

¹²⁸ Yates (2008), p 141.

As his literary apprenticeship progresses, Prentice takes up the opportunity as ghostwriter for Bernie Silver and is paid to translate the cab driver's experiences into prose. On their first meeting, Prentice is faced with a literary-initiation test as his new employer enquires:

Let me ask you this. Supposing somebody writes you a letter and says...I didn't have time to write you a short letter today, so I had to write you a long one instead.' Would you know what they meant by that?¹²⁹

Answering the question posed, Prentice's replies leave Bernie in "no doubt...that this particular writing candidate knew something of the difficulty and value of compression in prose."¹³⁰ While Prentice is able to make this distinction, Bernie is on hand to provide literary guidance. Detailing the process of composition, Bernie adds:

Do you see where writing a story is building something too? Like building a house? I mean a house has got to have a roof, but you're going to be in trouble if you build your roof first, right? Before you build your roof you got to build your walls. Before you build your walls you got to lay your foundation...before you lay your foundation you got to bulldoze and dig yourself the right kind of hole in the ground. Am I right? ¹³¹

"Builders" represents, as Bull and a number of other Yatesian critics identify, a highly self-conscious meditation on the process of writing and stands as the first occasion in which Yates employs the author-in-text character. Moving through his fiction and up to the point of *Disturbing the Peace*, we can see how his application of this becomes increasingly self-reflexive.

In "Saying Goodbye to Sally," Yates again employs an author within the text, yet, in contrast with "Builders," the writer has evolved from budding apprentice to a novelist who has started to see himself, "not without a certain literary satisfaction, as a tragic figure."¹³² The autobiographical current running through the piece is palpable: Jack Fields' first novel, which had taken him five years to write, garnered "general praise" but "sold so poorly that only a scant, brief trickle of money came in during the whole of its first year in

¹²⁹ Yates (2008), p 148.

¹³⁰ Yates (2008), p 148.

¹³¹ Yates (2008), p 149.

¹³² Richard Yates, "Saying Goodbye to Sally," *Liars in Love* (London: Vintage, 2007), p 213.

print.”¹³³ Divorced and drinking heavily, Fields is presented with the opportunity of moving to Los Angeles to write a screenplay for a contemporary novel that he greatly admired. As mentioned, John Frankenheimer commissioned Yates to write the screenplay to Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness*, an offer he duly accepted. (While Styron’s novel is directly referenced in “Saying Goodbye to Sally,” the director’s name retains its phonetic ring but is modified to Carl Oppenheimer). Like “Builders,” there is the background presence of a literary predecessor, although this time Yates’ protagonist—who has taken up the commission for financial necessity—imagines his Hollywood move to be similar to that of F. Scott Fitzgerald. There are two direct references to the author in the opening pages: Fields, reclining on the seat during the flight to Los Angeles, considers the impending career move:

It occurred to him then, as he pressed his forehead against a small cold window and felt the fatigue and anxiety of the past few years beginning to fall away, that what lay ahead of him—good or bad—might easily turn out to be a significant adventure: F. Scott Fitzgerald in Hollywood.¹³⁴

The mirroring continues as Fields envisions his relationship with Sally alongside Fitzgerald’s affair with Sheilah Graham: “He *knew* she would never be Zelda; that was one of the ways he knew he loved her.”¹³⁵ Fields considers Fitzgerald’s life when writing the opening chapters of *The Last Tycoon* and imagines the author to have been “humbly grateful just to have her there.”¹³⁶ Just like Fitzgerald’s affair with Graham, there is a crushing inevitability to Haines and Sally’s eventual break-up, which is prolonged and, in Yatesian fashion, cruelly unsentimental. Failure, too, looms over Fields’ Hollywood sojourn as he begins to accept his alcoholism and, like Wilder in *Disturbing the Peace*, his predilection towards an inevitable decline “Maybe—and this was a phrase then in popular magazines—he was a self-destructive personality.”¹³⁷ Lying in his damp, dark, cockroach-infested room, Haines entertains the thought, once more, that he “might be a self-destructive personality after all.”

¹³³ Yates (2007), p 213.

¹³⁴ Yates (2007), p 215.

¹³⁵ Yates (2007), p 236.

¹³⁶ Yates (2007), p 236.

¹³⁷ Yates (2007), p 217.

When Fiction becomes Fictional

There are enough shared thematic elements to in “Saying Goodbye to Sally”—the male figure leaving New York to pursue a career in LA; living out a Hollywood experience that has its outcome presaged from the outset; the identification with, and almost tacit acceptance of, the tragic figure—to indicate that the short story is the younger sibling to Yates’ larger project of *Disturbing the Peace*. Yet, in *Disturbing the Peace*, each of these features becomes more reflexive as Yates complicates the fictionalisation of scenes-as-lived, initiated when the protagonist decides to translate his experiences in Bellevue into a play. On this level, Yates presents a primary issue concerning the aesthetic and interpretative issues that arise when translating biography—Wilder’s episode in Bellevue, which of course is biographical, or real, in the suspended fiction of Yates’ novel—onto another medium. When the filming of the play begins, we begin to see *Disturbing the Peace* display an “awareness and acknowledgement of the inherent artifice of the crafted fiction.”¹³⁸ As production of the film progresses, a number of incongruities arise between Wilder’s experience in Bellevue—which the reader has been privy to—and the manner in which it is shot, or modified, for camera. The film’s director, Julian, explains that even though there are only eight bunk beds on set (far fewer than in the hospital) he is able to give the “illusion of five or six times that many.”¹³⁹

After the first unsuccessful production, Wilder and Pamela resolve to take the script to Hollywood. This stage initiates the process of detachment in which Wilder becomes a passive observer in the remaking of his tale. As transformation of his Bellevue experience is under discussion, Wilder gradually begins to lose control over his narrative as two of the production team, Carl Munchin (director) and Jack Haines (screen-writer), summarise his tale and speculate on his fate:

He’s unhappily married and he’s got kids he can’t relate to and he feels trapped. He’s solidly middle class I don’t know what he does for a living, but let’s say it’s something well paid and essentially meaningless, like advertising. When he gets out of Bellevue he’s scared but he doesn’t know where to turn. Maybe he gets involved with a quack psychoanalyst, that’d give us an opportunity for some humor—black humor—and then he meets a girl. (199)

¹³⁸ Bull (2010), p 189.

¹³⁹ Bull illustrates how this act of distortion is just part of Yates’ larger project in the text of questioning the ‘inherent artifice’ of ‘artistic representation.’ Bull (2010), p 189.

Wilder therefore begins to inhabit a dual space: the character within the play—who is now subject to the interpretative and artistic impulses of the film’s production team—and the character who watches this materialise. This is representative of Wilder’s inability to distinguish between fiction and reality, a symptom of his increasing depersonalisation and denoting his descent into psychosis, an idea I discuss further in the final chapter. After a period of convalescence, Wilder attempts to resurrect the production and *Bellevue* undergoes its third retelling, this time under the direction of Munchin and new script-writer, Chester Pratt. Pratt, introduced earlier in the text as “tall, but thin to the point of frailty” whose drink-distorted face was that of a “weak, sad boy more than a man” and the author of a novel that had a “bright yellow jacket with red lettering” (155; 156). These are clear references to Yates—much like the description of Bill Grove in *Uncertain Times*—whose presence in *Disturbing the Peace* begins to complicate the writer-in-text trope. We have one direct proxy for Yates in Pratt and there are now three characters (Haines, Munchin and Pratt) who are prophesying and dictating Wilder’s fate within the play, thus secreting the position of the author of the original title (Yates) and sub-title (Wilder) beneath multiple layers of fictionalisation.

As Wilder teeters on the edge of his final breakdown, he tells Pamela: “I’m a Dark Character, all right, baby; I’m Doomed; I’ve got the fucking Seeds of Self-Destruction coming out my ears” (202). At once a reminder of Jack Fields in “Saying Goodbye to Sally,” it is also nearly an exact repetition of the fate Haines previously outlined for Wilder:

He systematically destroys everything that’s still bright and promising in his life, including the girl’s love, and he sinks into a depression so deep as to be irrevocable. And I think you’ll see, Carl, when the whole thing’s on paper there’s an inevitability to it. The seeds of self-destruction are there in the man from the start. (200)

In effect, the plot of the play begins to pre-figure that which occurs in the novel; the metanarrative supersedes that of the narrative to shape the direction of Wilder’s fate. Once written, Wilder realises he is trapped in his own fiction and is unable to do anything but hasten his own destruction as Wilder and his fictional creation’s fates are preordained: the creation of the play *Bellevue*, the fiction within the fiction, begins to control Wilder’s narrative. As Taylor notes, “in divulging the story, Wilder loses control of the experience;

and his experience takes on its own life as his fiction.”¹⁴⁰ Just as writing the play allows Wilder to translate his experience within Bellevue this is counterposed, as the fictional creation progresses, by its opposite power of disassociation. Thus, the distinction between Wilder’s fictional character within the play and that of his self becomes so slim that they eventually assimilate. By tracing out his fate within the play, and acceding to Munchin’s subsequent directions, Wilder has woven and insured his own eventual destruction. The confusion with which he treats Janice’s suggestion that he might ever leave the ward is therefore expected; Wilder has already been scripted to remain there.

The manner in which critics approached *Disturbing the Peace* suggests most already had a firmly fixed conception of Yates’ style and the themes contained in his work. William Pritchard referred to it as a “disaster-chronicle” and suggested that Yates had trouble in working out a “satisfactory resolution” to the novel.¹⁴¹ Pritchard, rather strangely, connected Wilder’s break-up with Janice to that of the Wheelers: “Anyone who has read Richard Yates’s first novel, *Revolutionary Road* (1961)...knows him to be a master of dramatizing how things go wrong in American marriages.”¹⁴² Even if *Disturbing the Peace* closes with the brutalising scene of Janice visiting her now permanently institutionalised ex-husband, the marriage narrative is secondary—as Wilder makes clear in his continued lack of consideration for his wife—to the novel’s broader thematic and stylistic concerns. Despite this, Pritchard applauded Yates for his polished prose: “One could open the book just about anywhere and find description and dialogue wholly authentic in rhythm and diction.”¹⁴³ And finally, the reviewer pinpointed, somewhat condescendingly, Yates’ position on the literary compass: “If you can’t be Pynchon why try to be second best? Richard Yates works superbly within the limits of his strength.”¹⁴⁴ Pynchon had not long published *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), which, along with *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) established his reputation as a progressive, experimental novelist central to the postmodern canon. Pritchard not only draws a clear line between the two authors’ work but implies that Yates has considered, and accepted, the constricting aspects of his prose.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Anya Taylor, “A Thrice Told Tale: Fiction and Alcoholism in Richard Yates’s *Disturbing the Peace*,” *Dionysos: the Literature and Intoxication Triquarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Winter 1990), p 5.

¹⁴¹ William Pritchard *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1976), p 152.

¹⁴² Pritchard (1976), p 152.

¹⁴³ Pritchard (1976), p 152.

¹⁴⁴ Pritchard (1976), p 152.

¹⁴⁵ Interesting to note (on the point of autobiography and relationship to the novel in general) that when *The North American Review* published ‘Bellevue,’ no reference was made to Yates’ time in the hospital. The magazine introduced the piece as ‘From the novel *Disturbing the Peace*, to be published in September by

Gene Lyons of *The NY Times* twinned the thematic concerns of *Disturbing the Peace* with those Yates had set out in his first novel to argue, “Like *Revolutionary Road*,” Yates once again explores “self-pity, pseudo-intellectual despair and early death.” The connection with Yates’ other work continued, “Like all of Yates’s previous characters, John Wilder lives by force of shallow habit alone.”¹⁴⁶ As with Pritchard, Lyons recognised the attributes for which Yates had become renowned, specifically his “exact precision of style and flawless construction.”¹⁴⁷ The similarities between the two reviews continued as Lyons offered the hypothesis that even though *Disturbing the Peace* is “eloquent,” he has the “disquieting suspicion” that Yates is “systematically denying himself major possibilities.”¹⁴⁸ Both reviewers’ appreciation of Yates’ clear prose can be seen to sideline any recognition of the novel’s more complex construction and engagement with, as the final chapter of this study asserts, the changing approach to mental illness in America in the 1960s, a concern I will revisit in the final chapter. Of those to critique *Disturbing the Peace*, only Anatole Broyard acknowledged the novel’s metafictional associations, commenting: “Wilder judges his life as if it were a movie—and now he is going to turn that movie into Art. As it happens, he does not succeed, but Mr. Yates does, to a degree.”¹⁴⁹

By overlooking the more experimental and progressive aspects of *Disturbing the Peace*, reviewers also critically misinterpreted a key aspect of the novel’s construction, its conclusion. Pritchard infers as much when he claimed Yates couldn’t find a satisfactory resolution to the text (and viewing the text purely as a “disaster chronicle” and failing to chart the manner of Wilder’s decline), while Lyons openly admitted his bemusement at the clear trajectory of Wilder’s fate: “Wilder is as doomed from the start as only a self-defeated man can be...But why? Therein lies the difficulty.”¹⁵⁰ For Lyons, Wilder lacks “both the energy and capacity to save himself from a quotidian menace that he can scarcely describe, much less hope to transcend.”¹⁵¹ Finally, the reviewer brought together the novel’s realistic form with Wilder’s lack of autonomy:

Delacorte Press / Seymour Lawrence Inc. ’ *The North American Review*, Vol. 260, No. 2 (Summer, 1975), p 18.

¹⁴⁶ Gene Lyons, “Staying Alive by Sheer Force of Habit; *Disturbing the Peace*” *The New York Times*, (5 October 1975), p 270.

¹⁴⁷ Lyons (1975), p 270.

¹⁴⁸ Lyons (1975), p 270.

¹⁴⁹ Anatole Broyard, “Books of the Times; No Label on the Bottle,” *The New York Times* (9 September 1975), p 37.

¹⁵⁰ Lyons (1975), p 270.

¹⁵¹ Lyons (1975), p 270.

Elementary as it sounds it takes a conflict to make a realistic novel go, and one more interesting than a downhill ride. The author himself need not believe that his characters can alter their fate, but it helps if they do.¹⁵²

Wilder's fate in the novel is, as Yates makes clear in the opening chapter, inevitable, but it is deliberately so; there's no pretense or mystery. *Disturbing the Peace*'s connection to or indeed assimilation with (according to Lyons) *Revolutionary Road* constitutes a superficial reading of the text on a thematic level, the novel may contain a marriage break-up but this isn't its primary focus. Such concentration on these features—the pre-determined nature of Wilder's decline and the thematic connection with *Revolutionary Road*—underscores the manner in which reviewers critically misconceived Yates' text while also failing to recognise its more progressive form.

Prior to Bull's analysis, Bailey, Charlton-Jones and, to an extent, Naparsteck, have identified *Disturbing the Peace* as the text that illustrates Yates' appreciation and application of postmodernist aesthetics. Bailey, for one, sought such recognition as a means of shaking off an appellation that was frequently attached to the author: "Those who consider Yates a "writer's writer" are particularly advised to take another look at the underrated *Disturbing the Peace*."¹⁵³ The novel contains surrealistic, metafictional effects that have been "underappreciated by those who think Yates was forever at pains to avoid comparisons to Coover, Pynchon, et al."¹⁵⁴ Charlton-Jones recognises the splitting of self that frequently occurs in Yates' work, where he occupies concurrent spheres of writer and central character, chronicler and witness. For the critic, Yates' "emphasis on the dialogic nature of experience," such as we find in *Disturbing the Peace*, aligns with the novel's epistemological questioning, a staple of postmodernist aesthetics.¹⁵⁵

Naparsteck, meanwhile, indicates how *Disturbing the Peace* represented a departure from his previous novels: "*Disturbing the Peace*, in a sense, disturbed the writer's existing patterns and marked the emergence of new ones."¹⁵⁶ As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, Yates seemed to hold a somewhat ambivalent attitude to postmodernism: during the *Ploughshares* interview, Yates had been vocal in his criticism

¹⁵² Lyons (1975), p 270.

¹⁵³ Bailey (2003), p. 447.

¹⁵⁴ Bailey (2003), p 446.

¹⁵⁵ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 8.

¹⁵⁶ Naparsteck (2012), p 88.

of postmodernism, particularly the accompanying intellectual puzzles and emotional emptiness, features he found in the work of John Barth and Donald Barthelme.¹⁵⁷ Yates, too, agreed that the emergence of “personal journalism and straight autobiography” were becoming the preferred (fashionable) literary forms over “traditional fiction,” a trend he found “reprehensible.”¹⁵⁸ This clearly defined opposition to postmodern fiction is complicated, however, by Yates’ subsequent reference to Vonnegut, whose prose, while having a “surface flippancy,” contains “real fictional meat.”¹⁵⁹ As mentioned, Yates made the very important point that each fictional style contains some form of technique; that there couldn’t be one style universally claimed to be more real than another. Such a qualification suggests that Yates didn’t necessarily view fiction in strictly defined movements or closed forms, rather, that stylistic techniques or approaches are adaptable to suit what is real for the author.

My reading of Yates as stylist will be influenced by the belief that the author exhibited a number of postmodernist features within his work, particularly in *Disturbing the Peace*. The importance of such a recognition comes to light when taking into account the critical reception of the novel, with reviewers showing an almost blanket disregard for the more progressive, self-reflexive and experimental aspects of the text. This not only impacted on the novel’s initial critical interpretation—reviewers were puzzled, for example, by Yates’ decision in outlining such a pre-determined direction for his protagonist and questioned why he would reveal this so early on in the text. This displayed, as will be illustrated, a critical misreading of Yates’ intention in laying out Wilder’s fate from the outset (Wilder’s inability to exhibit any control in the text is symptomatic of *Bellevue*, the underlying fiction of *Disturbing the Peace*, superseding the novel’s main narrative), and is representative of Wilder’s increasing depersonalisation throughout the novel. Failure to recognise the more progressive aspects of *Disturbing the Peace* further entrenched the belief that Yates was a somewhat limited, conservative stylist.

No Resurrection with *The Easter Parade*

Of all Yates’ work, *The Easter Parade* stood as the most commercially successful and generated, arguably, the strongest praise. The expediency with which it was written—

¹⁵⁷ Bailey recounts a humorous tale in which Yates scorned editor Seymour Lawrence, ‘He’s an enthusiastic supporter of Richard Brautigan, so what the hell are we going to do.’ Bailey (2003), p 423.

¹⁵⁸ Ploughshares (1972).

¹⁵⁹ Ploughshares (1972).

around eleven months—was unusual for Yates, but financial necessity, plus pressure from *Disturbing the Peace*'s poor reception, dictated a quicker turnover. The strength of the novel's reviews pointed towards a front-page feature in *The New York Times Book Review* and publication in *The New Yorker*, both of which were longstanding ambitions.¹⁶⁰ While neither of these were realised—Bailey suggests that the proposed front-page feature didn't materialise due to a newspaper strike, displacing the review to page four—*The Easter Parade* received a number of notable accolades, including nomination for the National Book Critics Circle Award and listing in *The New York Times* Editors' Choice Book of the Year.¹⁶¹ Sales were impressive too, with 12,000 copies sold through Delacorte and a further 112,000 via the Book-of-the-Month Club.¹⁶²

The New York Times' A.G. Mojtabi commended *The Easter Parade*'s "traditional undertaking of the novel," that of the journey from "innocence to renewed innocence, from illusion to fresh illusion."¹⁶³ Mojtabi applauded the manner in which Yates explored the lives of a woman and her two daughters, condensed into a compact form to produce a "spare, yet wrenching tale."¹⁶⁴ Finally, the novelist and critic saluted Yates' stylistic execution, "there are no calligraphic embellishments...no stunts, nothing flashy."¹⁶⁵ By casting these more experimental techniques aside showed Yates to be "wholly absorbed in his story."¹⁶⁶ *Ploughshares*' Hilma Wolitzer echoed this thread of *The Easter Parade* as deceptively heavy despite its size:

The prose of *The Easter Parade* is remarkably spare. Story is never sacrificed to metaphor and the characters are always seen through their actions, or *lack* of action...rather than through the linguistic manipulation of their author.¹⁶⁷

For both reviewers, Yates' unadorned prose both correlated with the pace, or activity, of the Grimes family, which reinforced and sustained the command of their story. Yates had produced, for Wolitzer, his most "powerfully affective" novel since *Revolutionary Road*.¹⁶⁸ Critic Ross Feld of *The New Republic* followed a similar tack and praised Yates for the

¹⁶⁰ Bailey (2003), p 465.

¹⁶¹ Bailey (2003), p 469.

¹⁶² Bailey (2003), p 470.

¹⁶³ A.G. Mojtabi, "Novels by Richard Yates, Lois Gold, Ishmael Reed," *The New York Times* (19 September, 1976), p 4.

¹⁶⁴ Mojtabi (1976), p 4.

¹⁶⁵ Mojtabi (1976), p 4.

¹⁶⁶ Mojtabi (1976), p. 4.

¹⁶⁷ Hilma Wolitzer, *Ploughshares*, Vol.3. No.3/4 (1977), p 285.

¹⁶⁸ Wolitzer (1977), p 285.

“unflinching care, skill, and discipline” he exhibits with his writing.¹⁶⁹ Feld also believed the novel to be a significant step in establishing Yates’ oeuvre, “In four novels now, he’s gone his way, and with each one he’s becoming more unusual and valuable.”¹⁷⁰

As much as *The Easter Parade* took a new direction for Yates in terms of its commercial success, the novel eventually became a locus upon which all of the criticisms from previous texts coalesced. On the topical level, Yates had effectively returned to a subject he examined—and was perceived to have fully polemicised—in his first novel. The twinned stories of the Grimes sisters, with their tales of a disintegrating marriage (Sarah) and a sexually and professionally discontented female (Emily) could easily have been viewed as splitting, or redeployment, of April’s character in *Revolutionary Road*. *Time* magazine were quick to pick up on the recurring thematic patterns within Yates’ work: “Marital dry rot in suburbia. A clinging mama and her growing-up boy. An alcoholic advertising salesman in search of himself. These are three of the whitest elephants in the attic of contemporary fiction.”¹⁷¹ In collating a surface synopsis for each of Yates’ previous three texts, the reviewer Paul Gray implies a limited range. If we allow for the fact that *The Easter Parade* covers, or revisits, many of the themes in *Revolutionary Road* (which of course it does), there should, presumably, have been recognition of how these are developed in the later text. Yates’ awareness of female emancipation—in light of the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s—is pertinent and relayed through Emily’s struggle with employment. Attention is paid to female sexual autonomy and domestic violence, all topics that are hinted at in *Revolutionary Road* yet never fully interrogated.

On the level of narration alone, *The Easter Parade* stood as Yates’ first attempt to employ two women—even if their tales are recounted in the third-person—a feature that was largely ignored by critics. Ploughshares’ Wolitzer was one of the few reviewers to provide any extended analysis of the author’s treatment of female identity, yet she attached little context or significance to Emily’s sexual encounters in the text. Wolitzer tells us how Emily “has a number of men in her life” yet each turns out to be “destructive in their own way.”¹⁷² After her first sexual encounter, she “suffers discomfort because she doesn’t know what’s expected of her in the way of post-coital conversation,” an observation that glosses over the exploitative nature of the scene. Analysis of Emily concludes by alluding to her unedifying experiences with men, “In truth she hardly sees anything, least of all her own

¹⁶⁹ Bailey (2003), p 466.

¹⁷⁰ Bailey (2003), p 466.

¹⁷¹ Paul Gray, “Books: The Two Sisters” *Time* (30 August 1976).

¹⁷² Wolitzer (1977), p 286.

pattern of masochistic behavior,” while the absence of real human involvement is equated with and compensated by her series of failed sexual encounters.¹⁷³ Wolitzer’s solitary reference to Sarah’s violent relationship occurs towards the end of the review, where she collates her fate with that of her mother’s: “Pookie and Sarah have followed Yates’s unhappy prophecy too, Sarah to physical abuse at the hands of her romantic Englishman, both women to alcohol, institutionalization, and death.” The passing reference makes nothing of the fact that the worst abuse Sarah suffers in marriage is the manner in which Yates relates her debilitating and abusive consignment to an institution.

In his review for *Time*, Gray touched upon another familiar criticism that had been leveled at Yates. *The Easter Parade* stood as a “tight, pellucid novel....An odd but not inconsiderable literary achievement, particularly in an age so helplessly smitten with the new.”¹⁷⁴ And, finally, the reviewer connects Yates’ style with that of his subject matter: “Yates’ work brands him as a traditionalist in the strictest sense: he is a writer who feels duty bound to tell familiar stories in conventional ways.”¹⁷⁵ Again returning to Yates’ lack of marketability, *The Hudson Review*’s Joseph Epstein disclosed, rather frankly, the reasons why Yates would provide little “handle for publicity.”¹⁷⁶ Epstein makes direct reference to *The Easter Parade*’s Book of the Month Club nomination, yet even with this, suggests the value of the novel will not be widely “appreciated, nor is it soon likely to be.”¹⁷⁷ Epstein pairs *The Easter Parade* with Paula Fox’s novel of six years earlier, *Desperate Characters* (1970), which, as the title suggests, is a downbeat tale of a disintegrating marriage. Written in the third-person, Fox’s prose shares similar features to Yates’; detached, controlled and unapologetic in its exploration of middle-class disillusionment. Epstein is assertive in his praise for both—“They are merely—some ‘merely!’—very good writers” who exhibit the “assets of craft—of prose and plot and point of view,” features that are, we must “remind ourselves” what the “novel at its best has always been about.”¹⁷⁸ Yet Epstein outlines the reasons why both authors will likely be overlooked: “They are not ethnic, nor youthful, nor scandalous, nor striking out to be major.”¹⁷⁹ As with the patterns of literary taste at the points in which *A Special Providence* and *Disturbing the Peace* were both published, Yates’ work once again looked rather staid.

¹⁷³ Wolitzer (1977), p 287.

¹⁷⁴ Gray (1976).

¹⁷⁵ Gray (1976).

¹⁷⁶ Joseph Epstein, “Is Fiction Necessary?”, *The Hudson Review* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Winter 1976-1977), p 604.

¹⁷⁷ Epstein (1976-77), p 604.

¹⁷⁸ Epstein (1976-77), p 604.

¹⁷⁹ Epstein (1976-77), p 604.

Reviewers of *The Easter Parade* were also critical of the level of fatalism Yates bestowed upon his characters and how this obstructed and nullified their autonomy within the text. A strong air of determinism hangs over *The Easter Parade*, intoned in the novel's first lines, "Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life."¹⁸⁰ Wolitzer regarded this determinism in a positive light, suggesting that the "magic of Yates's art" lies in his ability to "command our interest in such submissive characters, lost navigators who refuse to rechart the doomed course of their lives."¹⁸¹ Wolitzer also aimed to interlink this with the novel's thematic concerns, to suggest that *The Easter Parade* is about the "denial of feeling...the tragedy of failed family life and the repeatedly self-defeating choices of its member-victims."¹⁸² Most weren't inclined to be so forgiving, however: Richard Todd of *The Atlantic* suggested the Grimes sisters "seldom have a chance to enhance their lot by moral or emotional choice."¹⁸³ Broyard claimed Yates had been "too deft in disposing of his characters, too economical in his view of their choices": the critic believed Yates was guilty of an "autocratic" streak and by controlling the fates of his characters the novel had failed to "sustain much tension or carry much conviction."¹⁸⁴ Like Broyard, the *Chicago Tribune*'s Lyle Rexer detected an oppressive air of determinism in Yates' portrayal of the Grimes sisters, asserting that he had reduced his characters to "cultural cartoons, living and dreaming between the quotation marks of cliché."¹⁸⁵ The unerring darkness presents a "dangerously oblique vision" that is predisposed to a "relentless delineation of self-deception and despair."¹⁸⁶ In this, Rexer detects a conflict between Emily's capability of awareness and the level of consciousness Yates is willing to bestow. Such a denial of autonomy thus lessens the "complexity of even the events he chooses to show, he denies by implication the complexity of our experience as well."¹⁸⁷

In reality, Broyard's issue with the pre-determined form of the novel stemmed from a broader criticism of *The Easter Parade* and Yates' style, with the reviewer dissecting the authorial qualities for which the writer had become renowned:

Deft, economical, controlled, carefully shaped—it occurs to me that such a description of Richard Yates's latest novel might be double-edged. If these

¹⁸⁰ Richard Yates, *The Easter Parade* (London: Vintage, 2008), p 1.

¹⁸¹ Wolitzer (1977), p 285.

¹⁸² Wolitzer (1977), p 285.

¹⁸³ Quoted in Bailey (2003), p 466.

¹⁸⁴ Broyard (1976), p 29.

¹⁸⁵ Lyle Rexer, "Richard Yates Continues his Long Goodbye to the Fifties," *Chicago Tribune* (12 September 1976), p 3.

¹⁸⁶ Rexer (1976), p 3.

¹⁸⁷ Rexer (1976), p 3.

qualities are usually seen as virtues in a novel, why do I feel dissatisfied after reading *The Easter Parade*?¹⁸⁸

All of these features of Yates' prose—deft, economical, controlled, carefully shaped—had become superimposed on, or adopted by, his characters. As such, characterisation had become subservient to Yates' authorial dictate, as Broyard makes clear in his synopsis of the Grimes sisters: "Those people bow down to the imperatives not of life, but of the author's sense of craftsmanship." This resulted in an assimilation, or "collusion," between character and author.¹⁸⁹

Broyard's criticism of *The Easter Parade* set up an opposition with those who applauded the novel's sparse prose and those that were critical of the detached manner with which Yates treats his subjects. This essentially alludes to the same argument: each reviewer observes how Yates' style relates to or impacts upon his characters; it is the execution, or full autocratic force, which troubled Broyard. As Bailey observes, the novel became subject to a particular strain of criticism:

Those who wish Yates ill (for whatever reason) are mostly constrained to a single line of attack where *The Easter Parade* is concerned: that it's *too* perfect, *too* pat, that its merciless craftsmanship works like a kind of infernal machine to grind its characters down.¹⁹⁰

As paradoxical as such an overview appears, the critical attention attributed to *The Easter Parade* centred primarily on its careful craftsmanship. Such an approach to Yates' work, and particularly *The Easter Parade*, presupposes a symbiotic relationship between style and content, which, for Broyard, had left the Grimes sisters without any proper autonomy in the text. This, in effect, constitutes an extension of the line of criticism formed and voiced after the publication of *Eleven Kinds* and referenced in the introduction, where Yates' style was perceived to be an inhibiting force, both in terms of it being too conventional, limited and, for Broyard at least, absolute in its control of its characters.

¹⁸⁸ Broyard (1976), p 29.

¹⁸⁹ Broyard seemed to be most concerned by the novel's conclusion: 'Why does Emily say, at the end of *The Easter Parade*, I'm almost 50 years old and I've never understood anything in my whole life? She says it because it has a nice, novelistic ring. She says it because it is the last page, and this is her punch line.'

Broyard (1976), p 29.

¹⁹⁰ Bailey (2003), p 467.

The significance of Broyard's review (and for that matter, Rexer's) is how it formed the genesis of his criticism of *Young Hearts Crying*, outlined at the beginning of this chapter. What is apparent when moving through the critical treatment of Yates' work is how his characters were seen to be either figurative representations for the author's social criticism (Frank and April Wheeler) or characters subjected to the author's hand (Sarah and Emily Grimes), the progression and definition of which, from *Revolutionary Road* to *The Easter Parade*, seems to be almost linear. There is a cruel irony in the fact Yates earnestly pursued recognition for the authorial merits of *Revolutionary Road* when most critics were inclined to discuss the novel's topical associations. Moving towards the end of his career, this became inverted, with *The Easter Parade* criticised for being composed purely for the purpose of craftsmanship, with Yates' style too heavily imprinted on the novel. The definition of Yates as conservative stylist seems to have formed shortly after *Eleven Kinds* and *A Special Providence* and has shaped subsequent readings of his work, most clearly when we look at the reception of a novel such as *Disturbing the Peace*. The mistaken critical uptake of *Revolutionary Road*, in this respect, seems to have had a fateful impact on the rest of Yates' career. The almost blanket pre-disposition towards approaching Yates' work from the angle of style (or its inexorable passage towards tragedy) has negated other more formal considerations, particularly its social and historical meaning. In the following chapters, this thesis will argue for Yates' appreciation of the cultural, social and sexual forces that surround his subjects, readings that instate and argue for a progressive interpretation of his fiction and characters on both the literal and symbolic level. Recurring as his subjects may be, each provides an incisive portrait that can be seen to reshape various contours of the postwar environment.

CHAPTER TWO

A Hymn for Anti-Heroism: World War II and Failed Masculinity in *A Special Providence*

She knew perfectly well he had seen almost nothing of the war compared with a man like Brace, that he'd spent most of his service at a public-relations desk in North Carolina until they transferred him to the infantry in 1944...he would have to tell her later, when they were alone, that he wished she'd stop making him a hero whenever anybody mentioned the war.¹

I believe there were qualities about the final phases of the American infantry campaign in Europe that no novelist has as yet successfully captured—qualities of poetic, dramatic, social and historical value that can be made into something far more complex and interesting than the cliché into which nearly all other American novels on the subject seem to have descended.²

In one of his earliest short stories, “The Canal,” Richard Yates sets out the contrasting war experiences of two vets, Tom Brace and Lew Miller, while they attend a cocktail party with their wives. Brace and Miller, now working in an advertising firm, discover they were both part of the same sector that approached an unnamed canal in a battle with German military in 1945. Brace, flushed with excitement by this shared experience in combat, recounts his tale with vigour and reveals he received a silver star for his bravery. It is clear from their subsequent dialogue, and Miller's evasiveness, that Brace played a key role in pushing back the German infantry during the attack. The narrative switches to a framed, retrospective account of Miller's experience and it becomes apparent that his reticence is rooted in feelings of inferiority in light of his lack of involvement in combat. Miller's frustration is borne out of both his insecurities as a soldier and the unjustifiably elevated status with which his wife confers on him. There are elements of the “The Canal”—the suburban milieu, strong presence of alcohol, undercurrent of friction between husband and wife—that could be found anywhere within Yates' work. Yet the focus of the short story is on Miller and Brace's opposing accounts of war and how this determines their role in a postwar, domesticated setting. The dynamic between the two men, and particularly the unsettling effect it has on Miller, is a precursor to Yates' subsequent fictionalisations of

¹ Richard Yates, “The Canal,” *The Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 2008), p 368.

² Richard Yates, Statement of Plans, Fellowship Application for support in writing *A Special Providence*, The Richard Yates Collection.

warfare; the dissonant point between the valiant soldier and the crushing disappointment of unrealised heroism.

In addition to his second novel, Yates has written several short stories, “The Canal,” “The BAR Man,” “Bells in the Morning” and “A Compassionate Leave”, that deal directly with World War II. Despite this, there has been an absence of critical analysis on Yates’ attention to the subject (even within the small body of Yatesian scholars). In addition to the texts which deal with the war explicitly, *A Good School* (1978) focuses on the experience of several young men at a New England school as the country prepares to enter the war, while “A Clinical Romance” and “Out with the Old” are both set in a VA hospital. The lack of critical attention is more surprising still given the fact Yates co-authored the script to *The Bridge at Remagen* (dir. John Guillermin) a World War II film released in 1969, the same year as the publication of his second novel. One of the reasons for this absence is surely the cool reception of his sole war novel, *A Special Providence*: as charted in chapter one, Yates’ second work looked stylistically out of step with more contemporary portrayals of warfare. The author remained all too aware of the text’s faults, referring to it as a “weak book” for its lack of authorial distance and objectivity, and looked for it to be deleted from his bibliography in future publications. Of those few who have furthered the discussion on Yates’ engagement with the subject, Leif Bull has done so most forcefully: he connects Yates’ war fiction to a broader discussion of the author’s style, arguing that his literature should be placed in relation to American literary realism and its association with masculinity, with his fiction uncovers a “crisis of realist representation” that also occurs in his treatment of male identity.³ Specifically, he looks at how discourses of masculinity are problematised in relation to the “professionalization of the writer,” a contestation that can be seen in the work of Hemingway. While his study is short on critical examination, Martin Naparsteck believes *A Special Providence* to be an “excellent war story, as fine a war novel, in fact, as has come out of World War II,” and goes on to claim the novel should be held in the same regard as Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), James Jones’ *From Here to Eternity* (1951) and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961).⁴ Naparsteck suggests that if part two of the novel—the section which focuses on Prentice’s mother—were to be removed, we would be left with a novel that depicts the “closest thing there is to a universal emotion among soldiers, a sense not of

³ Bull (2010), p 123.

⁴ Naparsteck (2011), p 63.

cowardice or bravery but of inadequacy. Nothing more unites all soldiers and nothing is less discussed by them.”⁵

This interpretation recognises one of the greatest strengths of Yates’ second text and opens up fresh ground for discussion, both of the author’s oeuvre and of how his fiction opposes and contradicts the template of reintegration frequently evoked in post-World War II narratives. Rather than the battlefield providing a platform for male validation through violence, it becomes a site of emasculation, anxiety and of failed masculinity. Carried throughout his fiction, and most apparent in Robert Prentice in *A Special Providence*, is the depiction of a frustrated soldier, unable to reflect proudly on his time in warfare, either because of his lack of direct engagement or through basic incompetence. The path of demobilisation is frustrated through Prentice’s absence of a wound from warfare, thus inverting the process of recovery of the returning (and valiant) vet. As such, Yates rejects an easy pathway to the domestic in his war fiction, troubling the expected restoration, or reconfiguration, of gender roles in the postwar setting. Like Henry Fleming in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Prentice seeks proof of combat via injury, a validation that is cruelly undercut in *A Special Providence* with Yates’ protagonist admitted to hospital with pneumonia. The absence of scarring—a symbol of sacrifice and heroism—becomes the source of his anxiety and a further reason for his failed masculinity. In this, Prentice fails to realise the imagined and projected model of soldierhood the war was believed to offer. This uncovers the lasting significance of Yates’ text in terms of its position within narratives of World War II fiction and accounts for the author’s intention as outlined in the 1961 Fellowship Application: Yates gives voice to the failed soldier in combat to show its social and historical value. With *A Special Providence*, Yates takes us to the source of Prentice’s insecurities about war, the figurative wound of his undistinguished time in service. The intent of this chapter is not to deconstruct established portrayals of demobilisation by pointing to their historical inaccuracy: it is clear that these accorded with the experience of many. Rather, it is to demonstrate how Yates’ fiction, particularly *A Special Providence*, represents a departure from the narratives of reconciliation and heroism. More broadly, this chapter will serve to demarcate the grounds upon which Yates envisions a different pathway into the postwar years, with soldierhood proving to be the first contour in which he reshapes its environment.

⁵ Naparsteck (2011), p 63 & 64.

Ernie Pyle's War

This chapter will examine how the identity of the regular foot soldier was formed in American culture and how the formation of such had broader significance to a country, and male figure, that was in need of a type of remasculinisation. The identity of which contrasts with the soldier Yates envisions in *A Special Providence*, but is one that is held up in national discourse. We can see how this identity was outlined in the work of journalist Ernie Pyle, the country's leading military commentator on World War II. With such a close relationship to those on the ground, Pyle was able to offer an intimate portrait of the experiences of American warfare and, with such a vast readership, shape how the soldier would be defined and perceived in popular culture. Pyle, a reporter for the Scripps Howard newspaper chain, established a reputation for his refusal to glorify the "Hollywood-esque" figures in the army and his insistence on documenting the experiences of the regular soldier, the unsung hero.⁶ The journalist provided Americans with frontline access to the 12.1 million American soldiers who were involved at the war's peak in 1945, with his columns retaining a focus on specific people or events in warfare. This approach accorded with that of the Government, with Dwight Eisenhower, then serving as the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, committed to hailing the GI Joes of the war. As Susan Faludi notes, this combined approach provided the model for American soldierhood, "By Eisenhower's voice and Pyle's typewriter, the foot soldier was elevated into a masculine emblem."⁷ Pyle's columns served a dual purpose; they gave the American public an intimate account of what was happening on the ground, while the focus on the regular soldier, modestly but bravely supporting his fellow men in the trenches, documented the experience of heroism of thousands of men. More generally, in fighting a clear and justifiable enemy in Nazism, American soldiers were embarking on a legitimate war and a moral rhapsody to the "virtuous tenor of military manhood."⁸

The impact of Ernie Pyle's columns had political and cultural significance that stretched beyond uncovering the harsh realities of war to his readership. Scarred from his father's inability to fulfill the traditional role of financial provider during the Depression, the battlefield represented an environment where soldiers could valorise and reaffirm their masculinity: the Second World War, and Pyle's reporting, provided the medium through

⁶ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), p 17.

⁷ Faludi (1999), p 17.

⁸ Kimmel (2011), p 223.

which this could be documented.⁹ With its primary focus on the unsung heroes of warfare, the figure of the regular foot soldier became an identifiable figure throughout Pyle's columns. This concentration uncovered the actions of the modest yet valiant soldier, a man who could prove his virility not through "individual feats of heroism but by being quietly useful in conducting a war and supporting the welfare of his unit."¹⁰ From his earliest columns, Pyle regularly refers to the soldiers as 'boys' and the imagery is frequently of young men who inhabit a foreign land and shed any of the luxuries they could expect at home. In his entry "Killing is all that Matters," dated December 1, 1942, Pyle writes, "From now on...life is completely changed for thousands of American boys on this side of the earth." The transition from civilian life to the Army centred purely around "existence," there were no more hot-water taps, movies, and the boys threw out "personal gear from their musette bags and filled them with ammunition."¹¹ Pyle's language often showed—and sent a direct message to those at home—that warfare takes little consideration of the fact the soldiers were still boys. This focus on youth also extended to highlight the vigour of the army's newest recruits to reify and consolidate national strength. In accordance with this push, tabloids and magazines frequently projected images of "powerful, youthful male bodies' during their wartime coverage, many of which were cast with comic book physiques.¹² This hyper-physical exaggeration can be aligned with a broader focus of postwar narratives that were interested in "man-making."¹³ A large part of this process stemmed from Pyle's focus on the intergenerational relationship between the officers, where masculine transformation could be fashioned from 'paternalistic officers who could mould their adopted soldiers into men.¹⁴ Senior officers doubled as "surrogate fathers" and tempered the younger soldiers "into men in the heat of a heroic struggle against malevolent enemies."¹⁵ This transition of moving into adulthood and the father / son dynamic is apparent in one of his most famous articles, "The Death of Captain Waskow." Written while at the front lines of Italy at the beginning of 1944, Waskow, as commander of the 36th division, carried a "sincerity and gentleness that made people want to be guided by him." According to Pyle, no officer had been as beloved as Waskow, who had looked after

⁹ Christina Jarvis, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity During World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), p 102.

¹⁰ Faludi (1999), p 17.

¹¹ Ernie Pyle, "Killing is All That Matters" (1 Dec 1942). Accessed online: <http://journalism.indiana.edu/resources/erniepile/wartime-columns/killing-is-all-that-matters/>. [Last accessed 6 June 2016].

¹² Jarvis (2004), p 186.

¹³ Faludi (1999), p 18.

¹⁴ Faludi (1999), p 18.

¹⁵ Fauludi (1999), p 18.

each of his soldiers and would ‘go to bat’ for them every time. Following Waskow’s death, a fellow officer sullenly told Pyle, “After my own father, he came next.”¹⁶

Pyle’s work clearly carried some weight: in 1944, the journalist’s columns appeared in more than 400 daily and 300 weekly newspapers.¹⁷ As the war drew to its close, Pyle adopted a cautionary position to advise his readership that the transition from the front line to home would be difficult for the soldiers. He did so through the medium of a memorable scene when recounting the infantry’s reaction to a thunderstorm while camped in France:

Last night we had a violent electrical storm around our countryside. The storm was half over before we realized that the flashes and the crashings around us were not artillery, but plain old thunder and lightning.... You must remember that such little things as that are in our souls and it will take time.¹⁸

Readjusting to civilian life—hearing a roll of thunder for what it is—would need to be aided by the sensitivity and patience of those at home. The tale hinted at visceral considerations, and repercussions, of warfare: while not gaining medical recognition until 1980, it is clear that many vets were suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Referred to at the time as “combat fatigue” or “operational fatigue,” psychiatrists detected symptoms of “emotional numbing” caused by the trauma of warfare.¹⁹ Even though psychiatric screening for military personnel during World War II resulted in a far higher rejection ratio than in World War I (11% of all inductees compared to 2%), there was a substantially larger breakdown rate too (12% and 2%).²⁰ While provision was made for the returning vet, the breakdown rates turned out to be far higher than anticipated.²¹ We see the consequences of this in Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), where Tom Rath struggles to reconcile the distress of warfare with his role as corporate worker, husband and father. Tom is haunted by both his experience as a paratrooper and his affair with Maria, shown in the text through a series of flashback sequences. Wilson’s

¹⁶ Ernie Pyle, “The Death of Captain Kaskow,” (10 Jan 1944). Accessed online: <http://journalism.indiana.edu/resources/erniepyle/wartime-columns/the-death-of-captain-waskow/>. [Last accessed 6 June 2016].

¹⁷ Martin J. Manning, Clarence R. Wyatt. ed. *Encyclopedia of Media and Propaganda in Wartime America* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), p 538.

¹⁸ Ernie Pyle, *Brave Men* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p 493.

¹⁹ Mark Van Ells, *To Hear Only Thunder Again: America’s World War II Veterans Come Home* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001), p 109.

²⁰ Roy W. Menninger & John C. Nemiah ed. *American Psychiatry After World War II* (1944-1994), (Washington; London: American Psychiatric Press, 2000), p 7.

²¹ Kimmel (2011), p 225.

novel shows how Tom attempts to disentangle himself from the psychological effects of warfare, “between peace and war a clear line must be drawn. The past is something best forgotten; only in theory is it the father of the present.” Stressing that the past world is “disconnected” from the present, Tom considers, “the past is gone...and I will not brood about it. I’ve got to be tough. I am not the type to have a nervous breakdown.”²² Yet Tom struggles to separate or compartmentalise his experience and is constantly brought to a scene of death as the man in the leather jacket haunts him for the duration of the text; it is only through the gradual teasing out of his experience, and with Betsy’s assistance, Tom is able to come to terms with his time in service.

There remained considerable awareness as to the levels of readjustment vets would undergo; in his comprehensive study covering the readjustment of World War II soldiers, Mark Van Ells refers to Willard Waller’s *The Veteran Comes Back* (1944) as a key text that warned of potential issues regarding the returning vet. Waller, a social worker, claimed vets would begin to resent the sacrifices—watching their children grow up, developing a career, enjoying their youth—the war had enforced upon them. Waller believed that the war could turn civilian into soldier, but as yet hadn’t found the “art of rehabilitation...the art that we must perfect if we are to ever solve the problem of the veteran in our society.”²³ In the opening chapter, ‘Veterans-Our Gravest Social Problem,’ the author said veterans had been maimed, crippled, demented and left destitute by the war. Waller went on to warn his readership that the veteran must be “renaturalised” or he could become a “threat to society.”²⁴ This transition is explored in Fred Zinnemann’s *The Men* (1950), where infantry officer Ken “Bud” Wilochek suffers from permanent paralysis after being shot in the spine. While recovering in hospital, Ken struggles with depression, breaks his engagement with Ellen and refuses to interact with his fellow patients. Ken is eventually brought from his inertia by the persistence and counselling of Dr. Brock and is able to rescue his relationship with his wife. The film closes as Ellen aids her husband with both assurance and comfort, helping him up the stairs, as he accepts his physical limitations.

²² Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), p 97.

²³ Van Ells (2001), p 23.

²⁴ Andrew J. Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p 34.

Richard Yates' War

If Pyle's journalism provided an accurate template of the regular foot soldier and the accompanying transition—maturation, affirmation of masculinity, acclimatisation from the battlefield to the domestic—Richard Yates' own experience in World War II offers a very different blueprint. Even though he performed poorly at the General Classification Test, Yates enlisted for the army at the age of 18 on June 17, 1944.²⁵ After training as an infantry rifleman for six months, Yates joined the 75th Division, later renamed the Diaper Division due to the lateness of their arrival, and travelled, somewhat in vain, to Southampton, just as the war in Europe came to a close. Upon departing England, the division was deployed in the Alsace region for duty at the Colmar Pocket Battle. Despite suffering from what later turned out to be pneumonia, brought on from marching across the Vosges Mountains, Yates volunteered for the position of runner and is said to have taken great "pride in delivering his small messages, even though the effort of speaking made him twist and rise on tiptoe before any sound came out."²⁶ Incapacitated due to respiratory problems, Yates spent five weeks in hospital, ashamed that he had been removed from the front-line even though he hadn't been harmed in battle. According to Bailey, the author woke up in an aid station with a "dawning sense of embarrassment: he wasn't even wounded."²⁷ Upon returning to duty in March, Yates would encounter his closest encounter with actual warfare: the 75th Division's deployment along the Rhine resulted in the group coming under mortar attack and brought them into direct combat with German soldiers Yates had never been so "shit-scared" in all his life and spent a lot of time shooting at trees.²⁸ This represents a snapshot of Yates' time in the army but it uncovers the sense of conflict he experienced when eventually demobilised on January 15, 1946. His eagerness and courage—illustrated in assuming the dangerous role of runner—were undercut by the feelings of inadequacy he had as a soldier, which were compounded when he was removed from the front-line. Enlisted as an awkward, gangly 18-year-old amongst far stronger, worldly men, Yates never quite shook off concerns about his physical inferiority: the author remained beset by a 'discrepancy between his effort as a soldier, his pure intentions, and the results achieved by his clownishly incompetent body.'²⁹

²⁵ Yates scored 109 on the army entrance test, one short of the qualifying entry mark for the Office Candidate School. Naparstek (2011), p 74.

²⁶ Bailey (2003), p 80.

²⁷ Bailey (2003), p 81.

²⁸ Bailey (2003), p 81.

²⁹ Bailey (2003), p 77.

A Special Providence

Yates' tale is significant as it speaks of the discrepancy between the hardened war vet and the soldier who returned home without encountering any direct combat, all features we find in *A Special Providence*. Considering the frequency with which the topic appears in his earliest work, it is surprising it took until 1969—18 years after “The Canal”—for the author to write his first full-length war novel (although a significant part of this time was the eight years it took Yates to write *A Special Providence*). Several of his novels, including *Revolutionary Road*, *Disturbing the Peace* and *Young Hearts Crying*, contain protagonists who served in the army, yet Yates doesn't concentrate his focus on their experience of warfare. *A Special Providence* opens with Prentice, on leave before mobilisation, having dinner with his mother. We are informed that, prior to enlisting in the army, Prentice had financially supported her by working as a mechanic. While being embraced by his mother as they prepare to leave for dinner, Prentice is seen “staggering in the clutch of his mother's hug” (3). The scene establishes the sense of dependency from which Prentice will struggle to break until the closing lines of the text, while also dictating the infantile role he assumes when he begins his rifleman training. Despite hopes that his fellow soldiers would call him “Slim” or “Stretch,” they merely refer to him as “Kid” or “junior” (25) when he first enlists, echoing the way the men in Crane's *The Badge of Courage* refer to Henry Fleming as “fresh fish.”³⁰ As he marches through France towards the Belgian border, Prentice takes up the hospitality of a French family in Normandy, misses the morning wake-up call and is reported AWOL. When he eventually catches up with the division, Prentice realises he has missed the rations for both breakfast and lunch and faces the reprimand of John Quint, the only soldier with whom he has bonded. Quint, who has been protective of Prentice, absolves himself of responsibility: “I'm through. I've had it. I'm through being your goddam—your God damn father” (69). Quint's outburst illustrates a rupture in the father / son dynamic the war was said to facilitate and functions as a precursor to Prentice's continually-arrested development in the text.

This break in the assumed role of a paternalistic officer is one Yates interrogates throughout his war fiction: in “Jody Rolled the Bones,” part of the collection *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, the author presents a training platoon under the direction of Sergeant Reece. The narrator concedes that the group were “shameless little wise guys about everything”

³⁰ Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p 9.

and that Reece is charged with the responsibility of turning them into “soldiers.”³¹ Strict and unaffectionate towards his men, Reece doesn’t adhere to the idea of the ‘burly, roaring, but lovable’ figure in the mould of Victor McLaglen: rather, he leads by example, impressing with everything he does, from “cleaning a rifle to rolling a pair of socks” and the platoon follow by trying to “emulate” him (32; 39). The tempering of his insults, according to the narrator, was acknowledgement of the platoon’s “growth as soldiers” (39). Yet the story ends with Reece being replaced by the more jovial Ruby, a “slack drill-master” who was every inch a “Good Joe,” stalling the platoon’s transition and progress into soldier-hood (44). We see a glimpse of this too in “Bells of the Morning,” as Murphy, the elder soldier, chastises the younger recruit, Cramer, for sleeping too much and never cleaning his rifle. Over thirty years later, Yates once again explored this dynamic in his unpublished novel, *Uncertain Times*. The author revisits Quint’s character, this time through the eyes of his protagonist Bill Grove, who, in tune with the novel’s metafictional engagement, is in the process of writing *A Special Providence*. The scene begins with Quint scolding the younger soldier:

“And don't give me that wounded-child look of yours, hanging there like some adolescent Jesus on the cross. Christ, I'm fed up with that look.”

“So why the fuck don't you leave me alone?”

“Because if I let you alone you'd be helpless, that's why. You'd go on fucking up and fucking up until you drop, and you'd be costing the army a whole lot more than you're worth.”³²

The episode is revised and re-written in *Uncertain Times*, yet the source of Quint’s frustration is still born out of Grove’s child-like incompetence, just as it was with Prentice in *A Special Providence*. Like Yates’, Prentice’s body causes him both anxiety and ineptitude, as we are told he joins the division as a “spindly” and “ill-coordinated” 18-year-old, who is unable to perform the manual of arms without dipping his head (26). Prentice immediately feels physically inferior to his older colleagues, “men whose uniforms looked somehow more authoritative than his own” (1). He retains, too, all of the clumsiness Yates suffered from as a young soldier; during his first morning of training, fumbling with his unfamiliar infantry leggings, he places them on backwards, which results in a “spectacular locklegged fall that left his audience weak with laughter for the rest of the day” (26). Once

³¹ Richard Yates, “Jody Rolled the Bones,” *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates* (London: Vintage, 2011), p 33.

³² Manuscript of *Uncertain Times*, The Richard Yates Collection.

mobilised and promised the opportunity to be a part of some of the “bitterest fighting yet known in the Second World War,” Prentice’s involvement is underscored by disappointment and failure (59). After a reorganisation of the Company, Prentice volunteers for the role of runner—a relatively dangerous assignment—and assumes the position with eagerness and vigour as he anticipates his first engagement in warfare. Despite performing with relative bravery, he is once again beset by fear and incompetence. Charged to relay a message to the First Platoon, Prentice becomes disorientated, loses his position and is reprimanded by the communications sergeant:

“Christ,” he whispered. “Are you gonna start fucking up already? Can’t you stay on the ball? You’re the Second Platoon runner—can’t you get that straight in your head? Now you’re holding up the whole fucking works.”

“I know; I—I just didn’t think.”

“Well you better start thinking, kiddo. This is important.”

He knew it was important, and he stumbled along as fast as he could beside Logan, weak with embarrassment. (85/86)

When he loses the location of his division between relaying messages, Prentice frantically asks the nearest soldier if he’s seen his platoon. The narration reveals that his voice broke into a ‘womanish wail on the “toon”’ that sounded as if he were “crying” (87).

As the text closes, Prentice’s lasting engagement in combat results in two failed episodes, which further cement *A Special Providence*’s departure from patriotic and heroic narratives of warfare. In a scene that is almost identical to Miller’s tale of incompetence in “The Canal,” Prentice, charged with the responsibility of transporting the communications wire, becomes disorientated and again loses his division. This time, Finn scolds him: “I got no use for fuckups Prentice. And you done a pretty good job of fuckin’ up right along, ain’tcha?” (273). The Company’s final attack, a “special patrol,” is co-ordinated despite the fact German surrender is expected and Prentice, aware that this might be his final opportunity of direct combat, volunteers (282).

Yet it becomes clear the mission is a desperate attempt to reclaim the last vestiges of warfare and the men selected for the mission decide to hide in the woods and submit a fraudulent report to their commanding officer. As before, combat is promised yet unrealised, their final mission is “an abortion...robbing Prentice...of any chance for heroism” (283). Informed of the German surrender shortly after, Prentice’s fellow soldiers

delight in the smiles, handshakes and fraternising in the city of Kierspe-Bahnhof. This sense of release and closure doesn't chime with the feelings of Yates' protagonist, however:

Everyone seemed happy except Prentice, who felt a nagging sense of unfulfillment. The war had ended too soon. Whatever chance he might have had to atone for Quint's death had been denied him, and there would be no more chances. The purpose had gone out of his life. (288)

It is this sense of denial, of frustrated promises and expectations that defines Yates' exploration of warfare. These feelings are encapsulated by the ineptitude of Yates' soldier-protagonist: as Leif Bull correctly identifies, Prentice's body is consistently cast as a "site of uncertainty and anxiety," which underlines his incompetence and his inability to fulfil the valorised "spectacle of masculinity."³³ Bull furthers this to suggest that Yates' disavowal of the established discourses of warfare, which are defined as "patriotism, heroism and camaraderie," allows the novel to achieve its "verisimilitude."³⁴ The references to Prentice's infantile character denote a negation of the process of man-making the war was believed to offer, while his hysteria frames the constant worry he experiences over his performance.

'The Natural Role of the Twentieth-century Man is Anxiety'

Martin Naparstek's analysis of *A Special Providence* places the novel in the same bracket as *The Naked and the Dead*, and in many ways Mailer's text projects a similar vision of the incompetent, unfulfilled combat as we find in Yates' work. Like Yates, Mailer experienced a fairly undecorated experience of warfare, reflecting on his time: "I was the third lousiest guy in a platoon of 12—it got so I thought there wasn't anything I could do as well as anyone else."³⁵ When drafted, Mailer felt the move would substantially benefit his work as he planned to write "THE War Novel" and conceived *The Naked and the Dead* to be a tale of the "heroic adventures" of warfare: instead, he produced a text about the "anxious, tender uncertain men ground down by the Army's 'humbling process.'"³⁶ Like *A Special*

³³ Bull (2010), p 150.

³⁴ Bull (2010), p 153.

³⁵ J. Michael Lennon, *Conversations with Norman Mailer* (Jackson; London: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), p 3.

³⁶ Lennon (1988), p. 3.

Providence, Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* begins with a young recruit who struggles with the early onset of combat. In the opening chapter, we see Hennessey seek cover from an aerial bombardment during a beach landing. Sobbing and trembling in his foxhole as the mortars drop, Hennessey screams like a child and realises with both "revulsion and mirth that he had emptied his bowels."³⁷ Despite the continued bombing, Hennessey attempts to escape the foxhole, explaining to Togliolo that he got his "pants dirty," only to feel another stool fall out as he pulls free. Hennessey, disorientated, pirouetting in a circle, is met with the echo of machine gun fire and the loud empty sound of grenades flying past him. The scene closes abruptly: "Perhaps he felt the explosion before a piece of shrapnel tore his brain in half" (46). This sets the blunt and merciless tone with which Mailer treats warfare; the explicit detail of the scene is an uneasy introduction to the author's style of documentary realism, a technique that channels the depravity of the soldier's situation.

Yet Hennessey's death also acts as a precursor to the physical and emotional frustration endemic in Mailer's fictional regiment as they attempt to traverse the Japanese-held island of Anopopei. As in *A Special Providence*, there are no heroic battles; the soldiers' experience is defined by the anticipation of action, a tension that is carried throughout the narrative yet fails to reach a satisfactory climax. For critic Andrew Gordon, this tension is comparable to a man "gingerly maneuvering through a mine field which, we later discover, was planted with duds all the time."³⁸ Following Hennessey's death, the narrative centres on the platoon's invasion of the island. The advancement is slow, with minor battles halting the infantry's progress and Mailer dedicating substantial passages to General Cummings' tactical approach. Rather than direct combat, much of the second part of the novel focuses on the soldiers building and maintaining their bivouac as it moves up the peninsula. Aside from a minor attack by the Japanese army in chapter five—which is very quickly followed by a retreat—Part Two closes with the soldiers sleeping, eating, writing letters and standing guard in their foxholes (192). Mailer captures this inertia in two consecutive scenes:

They would sit in their holes for almost an hour searching the field beneath them in the silver uncertain moonlight. Occasionally, they would hear the crackling of some rifles on an autumn day, and often a shell or two would arch lazily overhead, sighing and murmuring. (192)

³⁷ Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p 44.

³⁸ Andrew Gordon, *An American Dreamer: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Fiction of Norman Mailer* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickson University Press, 1981), p 65.

The front had been given its first chance to solidify, and like a weary animal it had done even more; it had fallen asleep, it had hibernated. A deep and unshakeable lethargy settled over the front-line troops. (305)

The pathetic fallacy of ‘uncertain moonlight’ conveys the sustained tension of the soldiers’ experience, while the crackling of rifles and the sighing shells are akin to unwelcome interruptions to an autumn day. Mailer expands on this passage of time in the following quotation as the camp’s languid atmosphere, the inactivity, has moved the soldiers to a primitive and immured existence. The futility of their mission is encapsulated in the failed reconnaissance mission—a mission that we later find out is pointless as the battle has already been won. Traversing the mountain, one of the soldiers disturbs a hornets’ nest and the platoon is forced to abandon their weapons and run to safety. The final action of the novel captures the aimlessness of the platoon’s mission; a frustrated sense of purpose that has ended in the absurd notion that the soldiers have been stripped of their weapons and power by a nest of hornets. Even though the war is all but won, Captain Agate proposes the men embark upon a “special patrol” to find and shoot any remaining Japanese soldiers (282). After spending several “meaningless days” in foxholes in the rain, the “A” Company is finally presented with the opportunity of direct engagement with the Japanese military (287).

The extent to which Naparstek’s comparison between *A Special Providence* and *The Naked and the Dead* holds is the manner in which the youthful soldier in both Yates’ and Mailer’s texts is fraught with anxiety and stifled by the false expectation of warfare. This strain of anti-heroism is apparent in Prentice’s lack of direct combat—a single wasted round of ammunition his only contribution—and more generally, for the platoon’s inactivity in *The Naked and the Dead*, underlined by their futile reconnaissance mission. Mailer’s text is, in contrast to Yates’, ideologically driven: Mailer explores the political justification of war through General Cummings, a purveyor and defender of fascism, who is frequently positioned against the liberal-leaning Lieutenant Hearn. This conflict allows Mailer to uncover the deadening autonomy of the individual and the effects of determinism, with Hearn’s resistance set against Cummings’ totalitarian nature; a pairing that raises broader questions about the function and control of the army. On a more basic level, both authors portray a version of soldierhood which does not adhere to the pattern of masculine transformation the war was believed to offer. This contrasts with the projection of heroism we find in other World War II narratives and conveys an alternate

rendering of American involvement in the war. Even with their late participation, the American military totalled over 12.1 million by 1945, yet of the total number to have enlisted, only a small proportion—around one million soldiers—were involved in direct or extended combat.³⁹ Historian Michael Kimmel furthers this to claim that around 75% of the country's infantrymen reported, after the war, that they had never used their rifles at all.⁴⁰ Part of this can also be seen to uncover a key feature of the effects of warfare: “After the war, psychiatrists probed the military veneer to reveal a trembling terror underneath the soldier's bravado.”⁴¹ This terror culminated in many of the soldiers being unable to return enemy fire and reports of incontinence during battle, while some made claims of ‘emotional disorders’ to ensure they be withdrawn from the front line.⁴² Yates and Mailer uncover both the physical and psychological anxiety of their soldier-protagonists, an anxiety that is brought on, rather significantly, not by their direct involvement in combat but by their failure to engage.

Wounds, National Power and Women

If Yates, like Mailer, offers an account that contrasts with heroic adventures of warfare, this lack of action on the battlefield strikes at another feeling of loss that we find in *A Special Providence*. Prentice's failure to engage in combat means he leaves the war without any wound, a symbolic marker not just of individual heroism or sacrifice, but one that had broader implications for America's cultural involvement in the war. Despite America's relatively late arrival in World War II, figures from a 1973 congressional estimate that 670,846 soldiers suffered from non-fatal wounds during combat.⁴³ On the individual level, wounds were signs of valour and sacrifice, with medals such as the Purple Heart given to those “honourably wounded” in battle, with the award intoning a sense of significance and purpose.⁴⁴ Emblematic of self-sacrifice, injuries were also markers of gender, due to the fact that deployment didn't become available to women until the Gulf War.⁴⁵ Tabloids and magazines projected images of muscled soldiers to accentuate the physicality of warfare and the maturation into adulthood. The construction and centrality

³⁹ Van Ellis (2001), p 5.

⁴⁰ Kimmel (2011), p 225.

⁴¹ Kimmel (2011), p 225.

⁴² Kimmel (2011), p 225.

⁴³ This is an addition to over 405,000 deaths caused by the war. Hugh Rockoff & Gary M. Walton, *History of the American Economy 11th Edition* (Mason: South-Western, 2012), p 466.

⁴⁴ Jarvis (2004), p 93.

⁴⁵ Michel (1992), p 110.

of servicemen's bodies provided a strong visual image that reaffirmed the "performative nature of masculinity."⁴⁶ In a similar way, the wounded vet also became a marker of both individual and national power: in the aftermath of war, injury could be construed as national weakness. With disability representative of the vulnerable state of the body politic, the successful restoration of the male body would stand as reaffirmation of national power. In *The Male Body at War* (2004), Christina Jarvis details how disabled serviceman could be transformed into a figure of political strength through which the U.S. could exhibit its advanced technology.⁴⁷ War injuries, rather than signifying weakness or degeneration, were often reframed both to symbolise national strength and to valorise the spectacle of masculinity. The restoration of the wounded body had, therefore, political implications that extended far beyond the sole rehabilitation of the injured vet, as Jarvis explains:

Thus the fate of the wounded veteran in cultural narratives took on special significance as America attempted to sustain its new hypermasculinized construction of itself. Precisely because the wounded body exposed the limits of phallic impenetrability, its restoration to wholeness or its remasculinisation became a key component in many postwar cultural narratives.⁴⁸

Successful rehabilitation was bound to an affirmation of power on both the individual and political level; the spectacle of the wounded body related not only to a narrative of national strength but to one that re-inscribed masculine valour. Historian Sonya Michel adopts an approach similar to that of Jarvis, suggesting that the normalisation of postwar culture required a "restoration of the veteran's masculinity" to ensure national victory didn't "constitute an affront to hegemonic political values."⁴⁹ Women were to play a central role in the process of rehabilitation by combining the roles of available partner and care giver considerate of the emotional distresses of their husbands: in effect, they would play both wife and mother. Afforded increased employment opportunities during wartime—ostensibly by filling jobs traditionally reserved for men—women were required to withdraw from the workforce to reclaim their roles as housewives: a move which was believed to represent a reconstitution of pre-war domestic ideology and signify a

⁴⁶ Jarvis notes how censorship policies dictated, to a large extent, the images of war the media could use. It wasn't until 1945, for example, that the American public were exposed to a picture of a dying soldier lying in his own blood. Jarvis (2004), p. 88 & 93.

⁴⁷ Jarvis (2004), p 88.

⁴⁸ Jarvis (2004), p 102.

⁴⁹ Sonya Michel, "Danger on the Home Front: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Disabled Veterans in American Postwar Films," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* Vol. 3, No. 1, (July 1992), p 110.

restabilisation of gender roles.⁵⁰ As Michel notes, a large body of experts, including journalists, counselors and psychologists, advised women “to be tolerant and understanding in order to make their men feel secure.”⁵¹ The popular magazine *House Beautiful* framed this as the dutiful action for a wife, whose interests were now subservient to those of her husband: “he’s head man again... Your part in the remaking of this man is to fit his home to him, understanding why he wants it this way, forgetting your own preferences.”⁵² Women were to play a dual role in this process by being sexually available (but not too forceful) wives and caring, almost maternal partners. Michel writes, “women were instructed to temper expressions of their own sexual needs and behave submissively, at least during the early stages of postwar reunions.”⁵³ Females were to adhere to this advice so as to embody the qualities of both ‘sexual partner and mother’; a combination, of course, charged with psychological taboos.⁵⁴

Wounds, then, also related to the domestic and specifically the restorative influence of the female figure. For Jarvis, the nurturing female became key to narratives of rehabilitation, where men could experience “self-generating remasculinization,” a process that was frequently “performed on female bodies.”⁵⁵ This transition is explored in William Wylder’s *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), where we see the readjustment of three servicemen upon their return to civilian life. Wylder’s film reflects many of the issues relating to postwar reintegration: Al Stephenson returns to his previous job at a bank yet finds himself in trouble with his boss after approving a loan for a returning vet; Fred Derry comes home to an unappealing job market and must settle for a position as a soda clerk; having had both of his hands blown off, Homer Parrish struggles to come to terms with his disability and is unsure whether his wife is still in love with him. Homer’s struggles with his physical impairment—there is a scene where his friends and family watch him attempt to clasp a glass of lemonade with his hook—are the most arresting in the film. The visual impact of Homer’s disability is further heightened by the casting of the actor, Harold Russell, a real-life veteran who had lost his hands in an accidental explosion at an army training camp.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Michel (1992), p 110.

⁵¹ Michel (1992), p 112.

⁵² Quoted in Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II (The American Moment)* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p 151.

⁵³ Michel (1992), p 112.

⁵⁴ Michel (1992), p 112.

⁵⁵ Jarvis (2004), p 103.

⁵⁶ Nancy Young and William H. Young, *World War II and the Postwar Years in America: A Historical and Cultural Encyclopedia, Volume I*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), p 104.

The film received plaudits for its theatrical composition, with Wylder using a life-sized set and clothing identical to what would have worn at the time.⁵⁷ With the support of his fiancée, Wilma, Homer is able to overcome his injury with determination. The stress on Homer's impairment is conveyed through the frequency with which the camera focuses on the surprising range of tasks he can perform with his hooks.⁵⁸ Wylder felt that the casting of an actual amputee would involve the audience more fully than usual in all 'visual transactions within which it figures.'⁵⁹ As critic David A. Gerber notes, Homer's character personifies the "anxious projections about veterans," namely the audience's anxieties about the physically disabled as "freakish and menacing."⁶⁰ Yet this is tempered through the conventionalised representation of the disabled vet in mass culture, where courageous effort can overcome debilitating circumstance, particularly if women followed the advice literature of the day and "played their prescribed role in the demobilization drama." In her sensitivity, deference and discreet sensuality, Wilma also successfully achieves the potentially awkward fusing of maternal and sexual roles we find in advice literature.⁶¹ The film received almost universal praise for its sensitive treatment of the returning vet, with *The New York Times* stating: "[*The Best Years of Our Lives*] fully reflects the delicate tensions, the deep anxiety and the gnawing despair that surely have been experienced by most such fellows who have been through the same routine." It also became the biggest commercial success of the decade, taking in \$10 million shortly after its release.

Scarring in *A Special Providence*

Wounds therefore did not just signify valour but were intertwined with narratives of national power, remasculinisation and the restorative influence of the domestic scene. As illustrated, Prentice's involvement in combat is undermined by failure and physical incompetence, thus contesting the process of masculine transformation the battlefield was

⁵⁷ Kaja Silverman "Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity," *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* Ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Routledge 1990), p 122.

⁵⁸ It is worth noting that the producer of *Best Years*, Samuel Goldwyn, had originally commissioned MacKinlay Kantor to write the screenplay. Kantor, who had worked as a news correspondent during the war, published *Glory for Me* (1945), a book-length narrative poem that told of the issues faced by three returning vets. MacKinlay's portrayal of the seriously disabled Homer Wermels was deemed too raw for Hollywood, with Goldwyn claiming MacKinlay had created a character so 'repellent that no actor would play him.' The film, of course, was released under an entirely new name and almost wholly adapted by screenwriter Robert Sherwood. David A. Gerber, "Heroes and Misfits: The Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in *The Best Years of Our Lives*" in *Disabled Veterans in History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012), p 77.

⁵⁹ Silverman (1990), p 121.

⁶⁰ Gerber (2012), p. 76.

⁶¹ Paul Monaco, *A History of American Movies: A Film-by-Film Look at the Art, Craft, and Business of Cinema* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010), p 103.

thought to offer. This disappointment is further compounded when Yates' soldier-protagonist is withdrawn from the front line and sent to a VA hospital to recover: significantly, Prentice's withdrawal isn't due to being hit; his admission comes, as it did with Yates' own experience, after he is diagnosed with pneumonia. The first chapter of section three opens with a description of his convalescence, an "exquisitely peaceful time for Prentice," where he could enjoy warm sponge baths, clean sheets, regular meals and "sipping hot chocolate" (223). Located even further back from the evacuation hospital for the wounded, the building—that had once been, significantly, a Catholic school for girls—overlooks a vista of "gently rolling hills" (223). As much as the description is laced with a touch of satire, the removal from the front-line is stressed by the harmonious environment of the hospital, further accentuated by the particularly feminine comforts Prentice enjoys. His hospital stay amounts to reading paperbacks, striking up listless conversations with other patients and writing letters to his mother to explain that he has been "hospitalized but not wounded" (224). Prentice hears of the allied advance on the radio and the prospect of peace being called, and muses, "What if it ended before he got back to the line? Would he then be able to say he'd been in the war, or not?" (225). Significantly, Prentice, while hospitalized, also hears about the Marine Corps landing on Iwo Jima: a battle in which U.S. soldiers were roundly praised for their bravery which, of course, calls to mind the 1949 film *Sands of Iwo Jima* (dir. by Allan Dwan) where Sergeant. John Stryker, played by John Wayne, leads his platoon to a heroic, but brutal, victory.

The absence of a visible wound gradually becomes a source of guilt for Prentice and can be traced to Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*: after fleeing from battle, Henry Fleming returns to camp and casts 'envious' glances at the wounded men who surround him. Observing the bleeding soldiers, he surmises that those with "torn bodies" must be "peculiarly happy." Fleming also considers how he must look to the other men; "He was continually casting sidelong glances to see if the men were contemplating the letters of guilt he felt burned into his brow."⁶² This sense of shame filters through *A Special Providence* as upon Prentice's return to the field, the commanding officers fail to recognise him and he is forced to explain that he has been recovering from pneumonia in hospital. This results in persistent questions about his absence, usually as to whether he had been "hit" (228). Replying to Lieutenant Coverly that he hadn't actually been physically injured, or been hospitalised with the more common dysentery, Prentice muses: "what was so shameful about having pneumonia? Was he afraid that Loomis, like Wilson, might mistake

⁶² Crane (2008), p 48.

him for the kid that took sick in the factory?” (232) His return causes confusion from other officers, with the first asking if he had contracted dysentery, the next laryngitis. Here, Leif Bull draws a valid comparison between the Hemingway war figure and Yates’: Jake Barnes and Frederic Henry have both been wounded during combat, a feature that guarantees their masculinity.⁶³ Prentice, however, is simply sick, which must be seen as “further evidence of his failure as a soldier and as a man.”⁶⁴ In this, Yates divests the signification of Prentice’s illness, marking his injury as a rather pathetic departure from those honourably wounded in battle.

Blaming himself for Quint’s death—Prentice persuaded him, prior to being admitted to hospital, that he would be able to carry on despite clearly suffering from pneumonia too—Prentice vows to atone by proving his valour for the remainder of the war. This pursuit has all the hallmarks of heroic redemption: an attempt to salvage meaning through the death of a fellow soldier. As he contemplates composing a letter to Quint’s parents to express his sorrow about their son’s death, Prentice resolves:

The only way he could ever make amends was with action, not words—with whatever action might still be possible on the dangerous land beyond this river—and he put himself to sleep with daydreams of heroic combat and rescue and self-sacrifice. (239)

The language—action, not words—once again echoes Hemingway, yet Prentice is unable to make any physical contribution prior to the war’s end. This is compounded in the closing section as he instigates a fight with a fellow soldier in a crude and desperate attempt to validate his bravery. Prentice faces the ultimate humiliation of having the fight stopped when Walker, the stronger man, concedes just to ensure he doesn’t inflict any more harm on him. Bull correctly identifies the idealised Hollywood imagery that radiates throughout the scene: the fight begins with Walker shouting, “This is it” (300), a phrase used by the “phony bastards” in the “movies” (300). The fight, as Castronovo and Goldleaf identify, is similar to that found in Fred Zinnemann’s *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and a satirical punch at clichéd war tropes.⁶⁵ Yet, as Bull argues, as much as Yates is deliberately subverting this clichéd representation, he draws attention to the fact this is in itself a rather clichéd move; the awareness of this empties the scene of any sentimentality,

⁶³ Respective protagonists of *Fiesta: The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929).

⁶⁴ Bull (2010), p 151.

⁶⁵ Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 123.

which leaves the focus entirely on Prentice's attempt to salvage some final vestige of valour from the war.⁶⁶ Just as he is unable to perform heroically in battle, the fight turns out to be like "everything else since Quint's death, like the ending of the war itself: no settling of accounts, no resolution, no proof" (302).

Prentice's lack of war wounds is, of course, a product of his lack of involvement in combat, yet his absence is exacerbated by the fact he is withdrawn—to apparent comfort—due to illness rather than being "hit." Henry Fleming experiences a similar sense of shame in *The Red Badge of Courage* after he is accidentally injured rather than fatally wounded. Crane's soldier considers, "Without salve, he could not, he thought, wear the sore badge of his dishonor through life."⁶⁷ Prentice—unlike Henry Fleming, who seems to salvage some semblance of honour by the close of *The Red Badge of Courage*—is unable to break free from the shackles of infirmity and vulnerability which plague him for the duration of the text. His quest to honour Quint's death is unsuccessful, as is Prentice's last attempt at physical validation when he initiates a needless fight; unrealised pursuits that divest his army career of any lasting significance. This irresolution has a dual purpose within the text: Yates seeks to display Prentice's compulsion for proof of his army experience, while also exhibiting the clichéd features of heroism of World War II narratives. As much as Prentice is unable to adhere to the lauded soldier-protagonist ideal due to his physical incapacity and general ineptitude, there is also a sense that his desperation in modelling himself as such has proven debilitating; This guilt is driven most intently through the absence of scarring and Yates' examination of such can be seen to account for those who are never quite able to achieve the status of honourably wounded in warfare. This apparent need for injury is evident in the epilogue to *A Good School*, when Bill Grove recounts the army experiences of the students who attended Dorset Academy. When meeting Bucky Ward, Grove's closest friend at Dorset, Ward explains that he had been wounded in the knee, an injury that had left him with a constant limp. Ward speaks of how, during the Bulge and Siegfried line, he had repeatedly volunteered to be scout on the most dangerous of patrols, when his fellow soldiers would try to persuade him otherwise. He had also refused, for no apparent reason, the offer of a Purple Heart. Meeting his friend in '46, Grove is struck that Ward could walk the streets of New York for miles with no sign of a limp.

⁶⁶ Bull (2010), p 156.

⁶⁷ Crane (2008), p. 59.

Wounding: An Alternative Vision

Validation through physical action, heroism or scarring is absent in Yates' war fiction and is as an aspect of his work that can be seen to offer an alternative account of the infantrymen involved in World War II. The prevalence of World War II narratives that focus most intently on physical injury has been a subject of inquiry for few studies, yet James Deutsch's *Coming Home from the Good War* (1991) provides a nuanced analysis of the frequency with which these appeared in fiction and film of the time. According to Deutsch, of the 994,241 army disability discharges issued between 1942 and 1945, 86% resulted from disease, 3% from non-battle injuries, and 11% from wounds.⁶⁸ Spanning the time from 1 January 1942 to 31 March 1946, only 57 cases of double arm amputations were recorded, accounting for roughly 0.16% of all non-fatal casualties in World War II.⁶⁹ As such, there is a disparity between the ubiquity of postwar narratives that highlighted physical and psychological impairment and to the actual number of those injured. The prevalence of these representations can perhaps be attributed to the popularity of postwar narratives that dealt with psychological or physical impairment. As Thomas Doherty notes, the war had transformed Hollywood's "sense of itself and the public's sense of the movies" and "ignited a revolution in film content and filmmaker consciousness."⁷⁰ We can see a similar trend in the rise of Pulp Magazine fiction, where men's adventure magazines such as *Argosy* and *Blue Book* detail the vet's return to home to eventually restore a semblance of social order after his valiant efforts on the battlefield.⁷¹ It would be reductive, however, to suggest that the prevalence of narratives that focused on injured vets shot to popularity entirely due to the exploitation of a viable market. The pattern of trajectory within fictional representations relates, perhaps, to the fact they were confronting a more general social issue or cultural problem than directly addressing that of physical injury and the subsequent acclimatisation. Looking at the physical injuries in *Best Years*, *The Men*, *Pride of the Marines* (1945) and *Bright Victory* (1951), Martin Halliwell proposes that the focus on the physical impairment of the soldier should also be seen as a figurative translation of psychological turmoil and suggests: "although the dramatic spectacle of these films focused primarily on physical injury, psychological maladjustment is central to

⁶⁸ James Deutsch, *Coming Home from the Good War: World War II Veterans as Depicted in American Film and Fiction* (PhD Thesis: George Washington University, 1991), p 52.

⁶⁹ Deutsch (1991), p 52.

⁷⁰ Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p 269.

⁷¹ Timothy Shuker-Haines, *Home is the Hunter: Representations of Returning World War II Veterans and the Reconstruction of Masculinity, 1944-1951* (PhD Thesis, University of Michigan, 1994) p 64.

their narrative trajectory.”⁷² Halliwell is correct in his estimation that psychological acclimatisation frequently supersedes that of physical injury in the trajectory of these narratives: an interdependence that speaks of “realistic and figurative war wounds.”⁷³ I would argue, too, that this is still reliant on an a priori acceptance of the soldier’s experience of warfare requiring some form of adjustment. We can see how this trajectory is disturbed through the absence of the injured vet in *A Special Providence*: Yates’ soldier-protagonist does not suffer from either a physical or psychological war wound. This, for Prentice, is the source of his guilt; the absence of scarring denoting the fact he has no proof of combat.

Disavowing the Domestic

In *A Special Providence*, Yates’ protagonist rejects the opportunity to return home; a symbolic disavowal of his support framework, represented through his mother and the exclusion of a sexual partner, as illustrated in his failed sexual encounter at the beginning of the text. Yates seeks to invert this dualism at the novel’s outset: while on a weekend pass from the army towards the end of his training, Prentice decides to spend time with his mother rather than visit a prostitute with the rest of his training squad. Accepting his mother’s invitation to dinner—a scene which unveils the fact Prentice has been supporting her failing sculpting career prior to enlisting—Prentice contemplates his choice: “The truth is, I wish I’d taken my pass to Lynchburg today and gone to a whorehouse. *That’s* the truth” (17). This is qualified shortly after when he reveals his own self-deception, “And as for the whorehouse in Lynchburg, he knew deep down that he couldn’t blame his mother for his own lack of guts” (18). When Prentice is finally discharged, he decides against a return home and informs his mother, through letter (and without a return address) that he has moved to England. This rejection is, in part, a disavowal of the heroic image she has continually bestowed upon him: implied, at the beginning of the text when she refers to him as her “big, wonderful soldier” who visits her on “*leave*”, when he is, in fact, just out of training and on a pass (3). In the epilogue, Prentice’s mother makes one further reference to her son as she awaits his return, when he will come home as, “A man. A beautiful, sensitive, resolute young man” (320). Yet as much as Prentice has been unable to pull free from the domestic throughout the text—embodied through the structure of the

⁷² Martin Halliwell, *Therapeutic Revolutions: Medicine, Psychiatry, and American Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), p 31.

⁷³ Halliwell (2013), p 30.

novel too, with his war experience intertwined with the domestic and his mother's narrative—he resists the opportunity to return home: again, Prentice is unable to live up to her expectation, this time that in he has not been transformed into a man. As such, Prentice's decision to reject the passage homeward is a break from the oppressive nature of the domestic and a concession of his failure in war, as Bull identifies: "He can only escape her by hiding...the freedom gained is gained precisely through the kind of failure of masculinity Yates' work repeatedly stages, his newfound autonomy subverted by his ultimate inability to resist his mother's influence."⁷⁴ His mother's constraining influence has denied him the freedom the war's end is expected to bring with it the realisation that is unable to return home having undergone the process of maturation. The novel's closing lines, "He said he was out of the Army now, and feeling well, and that he would write again soon. He wished her luck," denotes the bittersweet nature of coming away from war without any sense of pride (321).

Yates further inverts the paradigm of female support to show how Prentice's sexual performance, like his effort in the battlefield, is undermined by anxiety and failure. When the opportunity is presented to him—this time with a girl he meets at a bar while on a day pass—he is hesitant and unsure over his performance. Reaching her apartment, Prentice imagines the night drawing to a close in a jovial kitchen scene, talking to her father about the Great War and receiving thanks for getting their daughter home safely. The sex scene is awkward, as Prentice looks for an escape route but is foiled by Arlene's eagerness:

Only then did he remember the pack of Army condoms that had ridden in his wallet for weeks; he struggled to get one of them out but wasn't at all sure if he knew how to put the damned thing on until Arlene helped him. She helped him, in fact, to do everything else that was required: she positioned their two bodies on the sofa and gravely, carefully guided him with both hands. He knew it was supposed to take a long time, but it was frantically over in almost no time at all. (50; 51)

The scene draws heavily on one of Yates' earliest short stories, "A Compassionate Leave," where we find Paul Colby and George Mueller roaming the Left Bank for women. Colby is haunted by a series of failed attempts at losing his virginity; he muses over his failure with a Russian girl in Germany, when his "inevitable shyness and the terrible

⁷⁴ Bull (2010), p 159.

awkwardness” had once again set in.⁷⁵ Unlike the sexual lack we find in Wylder’s characterisation of Homer Parrish, Yates doesn’t afford Prentice or Colby the opportunity of sexual doubt or inadequacy through war. Rather, this is presented at the start of the text as a salient prefiguration of his inability to perform in the battlefield. In this, Yates’ text envisages a splitting and inversion of the roles frequently assigned to women in postwar narratives: the supportive figure (Prentice’s mother) is cast as co-dependent, reliant on her son’s financial assistance, while Prentice’s only sexual encounter is defined by an assertive female character, Arlene. This stands as a significant rejection of the narratives of reconciliation we find in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, *Best Years* and *The Men*, with Prentice’s ineffectuality as a soldier meaning he is unable to fulfil the part of the heroic vet.

Dissonant Images of Warfare and Hemingway’s Legacy

In his 1999 article, entitled “The Lost World of Richard Yates,” Stewart O’Nan argues for *A Special Providence*’s importance within postwar fiction. For O’Nan, Yates’ work bears the hallmarks of one of the author’s literary heroes, “The prose is clear—much of the war writing flinty and reminiscent of Hemingway’s best work in *A Farewell to Arms*.”⁷⁶ In terms of style, both Yates and Hemingway’s prose is, on the surface, uncomplicated and the scenes of warfare are narrated in a detached and unadorned manner. Frederic Henry, like Prentice, is presented with an unattainable ideal of manhood. The comparison is extended in terms of the novel’s pace: as in Hemingway’s work, little time is dedicated to scene-setting, while summary narration is—as with all of Yates’ work—minimal. Yet O’Nan observes, quite succinctly, that the “split between expectations and reality fuels the drama of *A Special Providence*.” The pattern to which *A Special Providence* adheres shows how Prentice fails to live up to the assumed role of the heroic soldier. This dissonance—between the idealised journey of soldierhood and Prentice’s experience—is one Yates places at the forefront of *A Special Providence* that is also distilled in some of Hemingway’s earliest work. In “Soldier’s Home,” part of the 1925 collection *In Our Time*, the narrative focuses on Harold Krebs, who has returned to his hometown of Oklahoma after two years service in the Marines. Within the opening paragraphs, Hemingway describes two different photographs of his soldier-protagonist. In the first, Krebs is among his fraternity brothers, all of whom are wearing “exactly the same height and style of

⁷⁵ Richard Yates, “A Compassionate Leave,” *Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 2008), p 281.

⁷⁶ O’Nan (1999).

collar.”⁷⁷ The second photograph is taken at the Rhine, where two German girls and another corporal accompany Krebs. We are told that the soldiers both look “too big for their uniforms,” that the girls are not “beautiful” and the Rhine isn’t even in the picture (87). The juxtaposition of the two photographs sets up a preliminary visual disjuncture in the piece, denoting the experiential split of Krebs’ time in the army.

As Krebs’ recollection of warfare is uncovered, we see Hemingway’s soldier-protagonist attempt to reconcile these images of youthful vigour and anticipation with the reality of warfare. Krebs encounters, firstly, a temporal conflict on his return home: arriving two years after the war was over, causing people to believe it to be “ridiculous for Krebs to be getting back so late” (87). He is ready to share his stories of warfare, yet the people in the town had “heard too many atrocity stories” and were prepared to listen no more (87). To be heard, Krebs finds that he must lie, to attribute to himself things “other men had seen, done or heard of, and stating as facts certain apocryphal incidents familiar to all soldiers” (87). This relaying of stories—and its accompanying disappointment—is evident in Crane’s text too, as Henry believes he will only be able to tell insignificant tales of warfare. He imagines the “consternation and the ejaculations of his mother and the young lady at the seminary as they drank his recitals.” Yet their enjoyment and pride will be punctured when they hear what he recites, “their vague feminine formula for beloved ones doing brave deeds on the field of battle without risk of life would be destroyed” (96).

Such consideration in “Soldier’s Home” forces Hemingway’s protagonist to admit that he becomes nauseous when reflecting on his own experience, and is forced to strike a “pose” when he meets other soldiers. In all, he resolves that he “had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time” (88). As Hemingway shifts the piece to the present tense, we are presented with Krebs sitting on his porch, reading a book about war that details all of the engagements in which he had been involved. Like Prentice’s desperate pursuit of proof of his time in combat, Krebs seeks comfort in the factual accounts of his involvement and is buoyed by the fact that even more “histories...would come out with good detail maps” (90). The sense of disconnect becomes apparent once more as Krebs now feels, reading the details of his involvement, that he was “learning about the war” and tries to assuage his anxiety by reassuring himself that he “had been a good soldier” (90).

⁷⁷ Ernest Hemingway, “Soldier’s Home,” *The Collected Stories* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1995), p 87.

We see, too, how Hemingway evokes Krebs' feelings of a frustrated, or foiled, passage into adulthood. Prior to leaving for the Marines, Krebs had never been granted permission to drive the family car: his father wanted it to be in his command. A month after he returns home, his mother approaches Krebs to inform him he can take the car out on weekends. Despite her claims to the contrary, it is clear—and apparent to Krebs—that this had been at his mother's insistence and not a decision taken solely by his father. Yet this fairly limp appraisal, or recognition, of maturity is undercut shortly after when Krebs picks up *The Kansas City Star* at breakfast and his mother warns, "Harold, please don't muss up the paper. Your father can't read his *Star* if it's been mussed" (90). The passageway to maturity, or transition into manhood, isn't afforded to Krebs as he is reminded of his father's authority and scolded by his mother. This strain of infantilisation is emphasised as the piece draws to a close when Krebs' mother asks him, "Don't you love your mother, dear boy?" Comparable to the claustrophobic manner in which Alice Prentice treats her son, Krebs, at first, replies that he doesn't, before he backtracks to explain that he does love her and kisses her hair. The scene ends with a further reinforcement of co-dependence: "I'm your mother...I held you next to my heart when you were a tiny baby" (93). Hemingway shows how the obstruction of his path into manhood extends to Krebs' relationship with women. Krebs observes how nothing in the town had changed "except that the young girls had grown up" (88). While there is a sense this relates to the temporal discord of the returning soldier who looks to reconcile his absence with the inevitable changes at home, the passage thereafter retains focus on Krebs' admiration of the attractive qualities of the grown women. Krebs expresses a reticence in approaching them due to the fact they "lived in a such a complicated world of already defined alliances" (88). Yet this concession is qualified by the fact he did not have the "courage to break into it" (88). This lack of sexual experience is intimated, as Krebs considers how the men in the army "boasted" about the fact they couldn't live without women. Reflecting on his own lack of involvement, he considers, "sooner or later you always got one. You did not have to think about it. Sooner or later it would come" (89). Hemingway's use of free indirect discourse reveals Krebs' reassuring thoughts in which he convinces himself that a sexual encounter will happen.

Hemingway's piece is in many ways a crystallisation of the themes of soldier-hood we find throughout *A Special Providence*, themes which Hemingway presages at the outset through the visual disjuncture he creates in the opening two photographs. Yates presents a similar split between expectation and reality to deconstruct any romantic considerations, or sentimentalisation, of warfare. In the novel's prologue, Prentice, on break from infantry

training, observes the Marines at Penn Station. Watching the more experienced men, whose uniforms all looked “more authoritative than his own,” his attention is drawn to a corporal enjoying the firm embrace of a delighted woman:

Prentice didn't want to stare, but he couldn't take his eyes off their greeting: their long kiss, the girl nestling to weep in the Marine's shoulder as her hands gripped his back, the Marine lifting her off her feet to swing her around in an exultant whirl...He was weak with envy as he turned toward the subway, and he tried to make up for it by squaring his wrinkled overseas cap down into one eyebrow and hoping that the tension in his face and the hurry in his walk might suggest, to other observers, that he was bound for a welcome as romantic as the Marine's. (2)

The scene has all of the romantic associations of the returning, heroic vet: Prentice's thoughts turn to how he looks in his uniform, if he is able to project the same image as the marine. We see an inversion of this towards the close of the text, when Prentice prepares to re-join the army after recovering from pneumonia. Standing at the army replacement depot, he spots two new recruits and imagines how he must look:

How easy it was to play the hero in a setting like this! Here in this room, so many miles from danger, any fool and any coward could saunter across the floor in a golden aura of celebrity as long as his clothes were dirty enough to suggest that he'd been "in combat." It wasn't fair, and the unfairness of it made him tighten his face under the scrutiny of these other, newer replacements—yet he was aware too that the very tightening of his face, like the dust and toothpaste stains, had the effect of enhancing his false image. (226)

As I explore in the forthcoming chapter, Yates' characters adopt roles and personages to suit their suburban context. Here, Prentice's primary concern is that of feigned heroism; his uniform denotes a status that he doesn't deserve. Removed from the battlefield, it could be easy to indulge in the 'aura of celebrity' afforded to vets. The quotation marks that engulf “in combat,” denotes how the term can be loosely defined, and in Prentice's case, shares very little resemblance to his experience of warfare. This issue with feigned projection reappears in *Young Hearts Crying* when Michael Davenport first meets Tom Nelson, with the artist sporting an Army Tanker's jacket. When he asks Nelson if he had served in the armoured division, he explains that he merely bought it “off a guy” and that his only

contribution to the service amounts to playing drums at retreat and homecoming parades.⁷⁸ Aside from his affectation of wearing military attire that he hasn't "earned," Nelson boasts a vast collection of toy soldiers and re-enacts battles—complete with cigarettes for gun smoke—on his living room floor (33). Davenport, by the end of the novel, becomes exhausted with Nelson's attachment to playing war, commenting, "think you'd better take off that flight jacket now, you hear me? Because if you don't take off that flight jacket I'm gonna tear it off your fucking back" (407). The visual split we find in the respective images represents the disjuncture between the expectations of warfare and the reality, and, just as with Krebs in "Soldier's Home," this is Prentice's abiding experience of warfare.

Faults in the Line

In focusing on the accounts of a World War II soldier, Yates was, in effect, attempting to resurrect an issue twenty years too late, meaning it had lost, to an extent, its cultural relevance. While Yates identified 1961's *Revolutionary Road* as an indictment of American life in the 1950s, *A Special Providence* seemed even more distanced from the period on which it was commenting, rendering it somewhat obsolete. This tension centred upon the version of war Yates wanted to articulate—that of it as an emasculating, frustrating experience—and the relevance of a World War II novel published in 1969. In this respect, Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* deserves its place precisely because it articulated this tension some twenty years prior to Yates. Mailer's text also retains the quality of a documented account, his journalistic style allowing for an unabridged sensory exploration of the physicality, sounds and smells of war, as *The New York Herald Tribune* identified when signalling Mailer's entry into the rank of major American novelists, "Do you want to know how American combat soldiers of the second World War ate, slept, swore? Read *The Naked and the Dead*."⁷⁹ Published in 1948, Mailer's novel also arrived at the point America was stepping out of one war and preparing to enter another, meaning that it was both pressing and of its time. Stewart O'Nan posits a similar interpretation as to *A Special Providence*'s neglect:

Predictably, the critics were not as kind to *A Special Providence* as they had been to the earlier books, and it hardly sold at all, partly, perhaps, because in the political

⁷⁸ Richard Yates, *Young Hearts Crying* (London: Vintage, 2005), p 32.

⁷⁹ Qtd in Mary V. Dearborn, *Mailer: A Biography* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), p 63.

climate of 1969 readers didn't know what to make of Bob Prentice, whose values as a young soldier seemed old-fashioned, completely out of step with the times.⁸⁰

In the political and cultural turbulence of the late 1960s, "it spoke for no generation—or perhaps one that had long since been eclipsed."⁸¹ Stylistically out of tune with more fashionable texts such as Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *A Special Providence* seemed to belong to a fictional era that had been surpassed. Yet as pointed out in the previous chapter, this can't be seen as the primary determinant of the novel's poor reception because the literary climate did remain receptive to some fictional portrayals of war.

The inclusion of the mother-son section, which, at a push, can be considered to aid our comprehension of Prentice remaining shackled within a parallel narrative of a failure to attain manhood, becomes, in reality, a distraction from the text's primary theme. Comprising around a third of the text, it serves as something of a narratorial side-step, an extended condemnation of Alice Prentice's constraining maternal qualities—a theme Yates returns to frequently in his fiction—with various passages committed to her failed career and the smothering nature way in which she treats her son. Castronovo and Goldleaf present another telling critique to find fault with the author's professional judgement, particularly the protracted manner in which Yates details Prentice's insecurities within the text. They suggest there is a "raw unmediated quality" to the story with a "great deal of explicit (and fairly dull) material about his own vulnerability." Scenes of warfare, and the battlefield, become "stylized backdrops for an endless series of frustrations," specifically that of "manhood and integrity, the puerile macho rejection of feeling, the predictable scene (complete with what Jerome Klinkowitz aptly terms 'cinema heroics') in which Bob Prentice rejects his own achievements."⁸²

While Yates may have wanted to give voice to his protagonist's vulnerability, there is scope to suggest that this is exhausted within the text. There's a certain insularity to the novel that can't be justified solely by the fact it has a limited cast or predominant focus on Prentice. *A Special Providence* has a claustrophobic feel that seems to be symptomatic of a narrow lens—perhaps due to the protagonist's immaturity—and unerring determination in outlining his insecurities. Recognising the biographical parallels that can be drawn with Yates' time in service, Castronovo and Goldleaf suggest Prentice is basically a conduit

⁸⁰ O'Nan (1999).

⁸¹ O'Nan (1999).

⁸² Castronovo & Goldleaf (1996), p 123.

through which Yates can voice a type of literary apologia. As Yates conceded, his second novel stands as an autobiographical blowout; Prentice's voice in *A Special Providence* is unashamedly his own. It seems, too, that Yates struggled to shake off these feelings of incompetence: in *Uncertain Times*, there's a scene in which Grove, shortly after taking on the role of Bob Kennedy's speech-writer, is investigated by the FBI about his time in World War II. Under questioning, Grove's friend, Frank Marr, explains that he was "fine" under fire. When Marr relays the story to Grove, Yates' protagonist replies, "You said I was 'fine?' Christ almighty, Frank, I wasn't fine. I was scared shitless the whole time."⁸³ Like much of the unfinished novel, the scene seems to have been lifted directly from Yates' life.⁸⁴

Taking into account its structural imbalance, conservative style and the fact it is a thinly veiled biography, what remains to corroborate my claim that Yates realised his ambition to compose a war novel of social, historical and poetic value? Well, in terms of its topical engagement alone, *A Special Providence* articulates a universal theme common to all generations, as the *Antioch Review* identified in one of the novel's first critiques: "An apparent anachronism, a war novel 25 years late, *A Special Providence* competently detects in particular strife ageless maps of human behavior. War, as someone has said, is a permanent condition."⁸⁵ For all that it was mistimed, accounts of warfare tend to retain a timeless quality, even if, from the *Antioch Review's* perspective at least, *A Special Providence* only managed a competent job of framing these. If Yates failed to adequately demarcate the boundaries between character and author, such positioning didn't lead to a narrative driven by sentimentality. Elizabeth Dalton, for one, found the distance Yates established—in this respect—as one of the novel's clear strengths, "The sections dealing with Robert Prentice's time in the war...contain excellent descriptions of combat, done with a clarity and precision of detail." For Dalton, Yates broke down words such as "attack" or "artillery barrage" into "their exact components of lived experience." Most tellingly, Yates executed this "without any of the straining for emotion or extreme effects that often makes war seem hysterical and unconvincing." The intimacy of author and protagonist, then, didn't translate to a highly emotive account of warfare: Yates managed to retain the narratorial distance he admired in Flaubert; no tears can be found on the page. While in this context, Yates' novel doesn't break any fictional ground: *The Naked and the Dead*, for one, offers a highly detailed rendering of warfare. Yet in terms of its social

⁸³ Richard Yates, manuscript of *Uncertain Times*, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁸⁴ Bailey (2003), p 82.

⁸⁵ "Reservations," *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Autumn 1969), p 443.

value, *A Special Providence* can still be seen to hold its own for an individualised and personalised account of World War II, and one that echoes, at various stages, the voice of Hemingway and Crane.

A revisionist approach to the novel—necessary, on one level, in that the text is partitioned from its primary topic due to its anachronistic approach—offers an alternative view to the heroic narratives of warfare. It is perhaps an understatement to suggest that American involvement in World War II had a significant impact on the stratification and renegotiation of gender roles leading into the 1950s. Apparent, too, is the fact that the war arrived at a specific point at which the American male seemed primed for some type of hyper-masculine revival. Prior to enlisting, where the military would allow young American boys the passage to manhood and allow for the older generation to reaffirm some semblance of power after the debilitating impact of the Depression. During the war, the battlefield was seen to provide the platform through which he could exhibit his valour. Finally, at home, where the wounded soldier could re-assume his position in the domestic setting with the aid of a compliant and understanding partner. *A Special Providence* troubles and challenges this narrative at almost every step. Part of the purpose of this recovery of *A Special Providence* is also to breath life into a novel that impacted heavily on the trajectory of Yates' critical and commercial success: as proposed in the previous chapter, the composition of the text proved to be exhausting and stalled any momentum or traction gained after the publication of *Revolutionary Road*. Looking beyond its lasting impact on his career, *A Special Providence* can also be seen to be a realisation of the objectives he outlined in his 1961 Fellowship Application to offer an account of the American infantry campaign that retains social, historic and dramatic value as the country stepped into the postwar years.

CHAPTER THREE

Playing Suburbia in *Revolutionary Road*

At the turn of the 21st century, the *New York Times* ran an article entitled “Suburbia Outgrows it’s Image in the Arts.”¹ The author, Samuel Freedman, laments the persistence of the cheerful utopia that is portrayed in the television series *Ozzie and Harriet* (1952 – 1966), and the materialistic anomie that is evident in the literature of Sloan Wilson and Rick Moody. While condensed into a compact format, the article neatly maps out the polarities of domestic contentment and dystopian ennui that have become synonymous with cultural interpretations of the topic. Just as distressing for the author is the endurance of these themes, with mainstream films such as Gary Ross’ portrait of 1950s domesticity in *Pleasantville* (1998), or Truman Burbank’s existential nightmare in Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show* (1998), pedalling fairly predictable attacks on suburbia. In a wider context, Freedman’s recognition of this dialectic is concurrent with the discernible advancement in the re-assessment of fictional portrayals of suburbia. Critical studies, such as Catherine Jurca’s *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (2001), Robert Beuka’s *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth Century American Film and Fiction* (2004) and Jo Gill’s *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (2013) have shortened the gap between the polarities Freedman identifies to more nuanced readings of suburban fiction and the projected effects on its inhabitants. Beuka’s and Gill’s work, particularly, has re-analysed the persistence of symbolic and metaphoric tropes—such as the picture window and the grey flannel suit—that have often been used to consolidate static and collective readings of the environment. More broadly, their work has attempted to recover established suburban texts by challenging a critical consensus that has frequently viewed all fictional engagement with the setting in terms of indictment. These approaches have provided a counterpoint to regressive interpretations of the era by divesting the setting of its stereotyped associations to engage in a more dynamic relationship with the suburban landscape.

Since the publication of *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Richard Yates has, somewhat unfairly, been viewed as a critic of postwar suburbanisation. Indeed, in the blurb to Vintage’s recent re-issue, the novel is described as an “evocative portrayal of the opulent

¹ Samuel Freedman, “Suburbia Outgrows Its Image in the Arts,” *The New York Times* (28 February 1999), p 1.

desolation of the American suburbs.”² Aside from the fact this reads as a review of *The Great Gatsby* (1925)—a comparison that Yates, as a known admirer of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s work, would perhaps have embraced—it suggests that the novel should be approached as a broad-sighted diatribe against suburbia. Yet this has been echoed by some of the author’s most insightful critics, including American novelist Richard Price, who opens his introduction to a trio of Yates’ books with the claim that he is the “poet laureate of the Age of Anxiety, a master purveyor of the crushed suburban life.”³ A similar theme is echoed in Christopher Hitchens’ 2008 review for the *Atlantic Monthly*, which states that the novel’s longstanding achievement has been its ability to “anatomize the ills and woes of suburbia.”⁴ This lingering categorisation may have its genesis in the ideological context of *Revolutionary Road*’s release, in which a number of works, including Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, were upheld as fictional indictments against the setting. Indeed, upon Yates’ submission of *Revolutionary Road* to Atlantic-Little Brown, the publishers rejected the novel on the grounds that it was “one of the many imitators of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.”⁵ Thematically, Yates’ text is a neat fit with that of Wilson’s: in both, we are presented with a protagonist who is at odds with a sterile suburban setting, which causes the male figure to struggle with feelings of conformity, disempowerment and malaise. The similarities weren’t lost on Yates, who, reflecting on the first draft of the novel, admitted the Wheelers were very earnest, “thin...sentimental” and reminiscent of characters from a “Sloan Wilson novel.”⁶ Even though the texts end in very different ways—Yates offers little cathartic outlet after April’s abortion, while there is an optimistic outlook to domestic life in the conclusion of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*—they are often paired when tracing the lineage of suburban narratives. Without exhausting the comparative merits of the novels, this coupling is important as it emphasises the saturation of fictional portrayals dedicated to the subject.

In keeping with recent revisionist approaches to suburban narratives, this chapter will suggest that a reading of Yates’ texts from a perspective of suburban indictment severely limits and restricts our understanding of his work. A reappraisal of his seminal work shows the author to satirise the connection between suburbanisation and the affective

² Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Vintage Publishing, 2007).

³ Richard Price’s introduction to *Revolutionary Road, The Easter Parade, Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2009), p ix.

⁴ Christopher Hitchens, “Suburbs of Our Discontent” *Atlantic Monthly*, (9 December 2008). Accessed online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/12/suburbs-of-our-discontent/307131/>. [Last accessed 6 June 2016].

⁵ Bailey (2003), p 178.

⁶ Bailey (2003), p 178.

response from the masculine figure. Through Frank Wheeler, Yates conflates and parodies the characteristic tropes that were seen as symptomatic of a move from the city: Yates shows how Frank's actions are motivated by, and founded upon, his stylised conception of an intellectual anti-suburbanite. Notions of what constitutes the prototypical anti-suburbanite dominates his actions and Yates shows how his criticisms are misplaced, hollow, and pieced together from sociological commentaries of the time. This chapter will take a similar approach to Robert Beuka in as much as the 'troubled nature of suburban place identification...fuels the contentious social dynamics'⁷ of suburban fiction: in *Revolutionary Road*, Yates upholds the proposition of suburbia as a troubling point of identification rather than as a metonymic location loaded with ideological associations. Yates' novel advances a cautionary appraisal of suburbia in which beliefs about its supposed effects on its inhabitants are, in fact, more destructive than the move itself. Moving from this, I will focus on Yates' treatment of one of the most prominent symbols of suburbia, the picture window. Recent analyses, spearheaded by Gill's *Poetics of the American Suburbs*, have aimed to divest the picture window of its status as a monochromic symbol of suburban topography—characteristic of uniformity, homogeneity and lack of privacy—to posit a far more dynamic relationship with suburban inhabitants. Referring to work by Deborah Nelson and Lynn Spigel, Gill suggests that the picture window should be read more broadly within the context of the Cold War and its relationship to a "concomitant rethinking of boundaries between intimate, private spaces and shared, public domains."⁸ This rethinking, for Gill, opens up a more complex interpretation of these boundaries in which suburbia is viewed as a "highly charged site for the testing and transgression of these binaries."⁹ Such reconsideration uncovers an environment that embraces a "marginal, liminal, in-between space."¹⁰ The extent to which the picture window plays a prominent role in *Revolutionary Road* has been somewhat overlooked by Yatesian scholars, with Antonia Alexander Mackay providing the only extended analysis of its presence in the novel. For Mackay, it represents a "highly complex architectural device," which, in turn, "creates a barrier between inside and outside, and a transparency between interior and exterior."¹¹ Just as the picture window heightens notions of observation and privacy, it sets up various composite points of self-reflexivity within the text: my analysis builds on this notion to suggest Yates' deployment of the trope should

⁷ Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p 16.

⁸ Jo Gill, *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p 134.

⁹ Gill (2013), p 134.

¹⁰ Gill (2013), p 156.

¹¹ Antonia Alexander Mackay, *City, Suburban and Pastoral Spaces and the Formation of Identity in Cold War America, 1945–1965* (PhD Thesis: Oxford Brookes University, 2013), p 131.

also be viewed in connection to and as an extension of the theme of performativity in the novel.¹² The heightened valorisation of the suburban household results in the increased theatricality of the living room, caused by the frequent exposure of the Wheelers' picture window. Yates' treatment of such will be shown to complicate the connection between suburban inhabitants and one of its most recognisable symbols: it transcends a separation of private and public spaces and sets up a far more dynamic relationship with the suburban environment.

History of the American Suburbs

Prior to moving onto a discussion on the effects of suburbanisation as the country moved into the postwar years, it is worth noting how America experienced a similar demographic repositioning after World War I. Suburban postwar expansion was unprecedented in terms of volume and its signification of broader cultural and political change, specifically the ideological push towards the domestic and restratification of gender roles; legislation that prioritised GI housing; plus the accompanying narrative of Cold War containment and concerns over privacy. Many of the themes that arise from cultural commentaries of this time, and which we find in Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (the novel's engagement with issues of privacy, the perceived loss of character, concerns about uniformity) can be detected in the social criticism, and fiction, that accompanied the move to suburbia in the first part of the century. The period between 1922 and 1929 saw residential development at 883,000 new houses per year, more than double that of any previous seven-year period.¹³ Part of this can be attributed to the 1920 census that showed a steady decline in home ownership, a trajectory that resulted in Herbert Hoover's championing the 'Own-Your-Own-Home' campaign when he became secretary of commerce in 1921.¹⁴ In addition to substantially increasing the number of homeowners, the campaign looked to tie ownership with individuality and independence. As a further draw from urban areas, suburbia was

¹² Performativity, of course, relates to a broad range of disciplines and is a loaded concept that must be unpicked for the forthcoming discussion. In my analysis, I extend my reading of suburban privacy to show that both the picture window and television denoted points of intrusion into the suburban home, resulting in the living room becoming a platform for domestic theatricality. This interpretation draws upon Lynn Spigel's contention that this increased exposure was similar to watching the "family in the theatre next door." In my reading, I view Yates' protagonists as exhibiting a heightened awareness of their roles in the suburban setting, with the living room displacing the theatre as the platform for their performance. Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 136.

¹³ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-century American Novel* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p 45.

¹⁴ William M. Rohe & Harry L. Watson. ed. *Chasing the American Dream: New Perspectives on Affordable Homeownership* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p 21.

believed to offer a residential retreat from the industrialised city and a move closer to nature. This can be traced back to the early 19th century and to Thomas Jefferson's idea of the agrarian dream in which the "middle state"—defined as the harmonious and transcendental relationship between Americans and the pastoral environment—replaced that of the wild frontier.¹⁵ Suburbia constituted the midpoint of wilderness (the frontier) and civilisation (the city), giving licence to a new democratic society, where "individual property ownership and self-governance were firmly rooted in Enlightenment ideals of individualism, self-sufficiency, freedom and equality."¹⁶

Property developers were quick to pick up on this as a potential selling point: an advertisement from Sears, Roebuck & Co from 1921 outlines the benefits of suburban living, promoting "happiness and containment, for it is the most pleasant and natural way to live. It has the correct environment made up of the natural instead of the artificial."¹⁷ Texts such as Caroline Bartlett Crane's *Everyman's House* (1925) supported the movement for widespread ownership, arguing that the purchase of residential property shouldn't be solely the preserve of the middle class. Crane's publication provided a blueprint for the ideal home, where a standardised form would marry the desired comfort of a household and contain adequate space to allow for female independence.¹⁸ Housing programmes such as the 'Home Modernizing Bureau' and 'Better Homes in America Movement' created an idealised portrait of American suburbia while supporting the mass construction of new houses outwith the urban locale.¹⁹ Further developments such as the expansion of interstate highways, commencing with the Federal Highway Act of 1916, plus the affordability of the automobile, resulted in increased accessibility to the city from more peripheral locations.²⁰ In *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985), Kenneth T. Jackson explains how the expansion of the highway in Detroit in 1920 culminated in the emergence of several "commuter

¹⁵ Conrad E. Oswalt, *After Eden: The Secularization of American Space in the Fiction of Willa Cather and Theodore Dreiser* (London; Toronto: Bucknell University Press, 1990), p 27.

¹⁶ Judith K De Jong, *New SubUrbanisms* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p 22.

¹⁷ Advertisement taken from Sear, Roebuck & Co image from *The Suburb Reader*, ed. by Becky M. Nicolaidis & Andrew Wiese (New York: Routledge, 2006), p 175.

¹⁸ Jeffrey M. Hornstein, *A Nation of Realtors: A Cultural History of the Twentieth-Century American Middle Class* (New York: Duke University Press, 2005), p 129.

¹⁹ Janet Hutchison, "Shaping Housing and Enhancing Consumption: Hoover's Interwar Housing Policy", *Tenements to the Taylor homes: in search of an urban housing policy* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000) edited by John F. Baufman, Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylvian, p 82.

²⁰ The price of a Model T Ford dropped from \$910 in 1910 to \$250 in 1924 – Kenneth T. Jackson *Crabgrass Frontier* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p 161. In 1920, over nine million cars were registered, by 1925 however, this figure rose to over twenty million. Rosalyn Baxandall & Elizabeth Ewen *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p 15.

suburbs,” whereby the city became accessible to neighbouring towns of Pontiac, Toledo, Lansing, Windsor, Ann Arbor, and Port Huron.²¹

As would be the case of postwar America, this shift in demographics occurred at a point when the country also enjoyed a period of economic prosperity. As Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen note in *Picture Windows* (2000), the 1920s saw the democratisation of the “good life” in America, with the country converting from a production-based economy to one orientated towards consumption.²² This resulted in the development of a more material culture in which modern electrical appliances, as well as new forms of entertainment, made “abundance attainable to a growing number of people.”²³ Yet the increased availability and mass production of commodities brought claims of homogenisation, particularly in relation to the household. Marina Moskowitz suggests that this ‘nationalization of material culture’ brought about the ‘standardization of everyday environments.’²⁴ As such, suburbia quickly became a victim of this standardisation of environment. In “Suburban Nightmare” (1925), Frederick Allen touches upon this feeling of uniformity when he castigates the ‘innocuous community with neat oblong gardens before the doors... a standardized community which has lost the life of the country.’²⁵

The publication of Sinclair Lewis’ *Babbitt* (1922) occurred while suburbanisation was in the throes of expansion. For this reason, the text, and Lewis’ protagonist, are entrenched in suburban iconography and often cast as the most immediate reference point when analysing suburban fiction. For Jurca, Babbitt, as the “dissatisfied suburbanite,” arrived at a point when “stereotypes of the suburb had not yet hardened and its meaning was up for grabs.”²⁶ Beuka takes a similar approach to the text, arguing that the struggles of Lewis’s protagonist, ‘between conformism and rebellion, domesticity and adventure, civic pride and a sense of adventure—sets the blueprint for subsequent representations of male suburbanites,’ and are features that we find in Yates’ portrait of Frank Wheeler.²⁷ From the outset of *Babbitt*, Lewis outlines many of the features—both in terms of topography and characterisation—that would thereafter form the basis of suburban

²¹ Jackson (1985), p 165.

²² Baxandall & Ewen (c2000), p 14.

²³ Baxandall & Ewen (c2000), p 14.

²⁴ Marina Moskowitz *Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America* (Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), p 2.

²⁵ Frederick Lewis Allen, ‘Suburban Nightmare’ quoted in Nicolaides & Weise (2006), p 228.

²⁶ Jurca (2001), p 18.

²⁷ Beuka (2004), p 25.

criticism. We are told that there are but three or four old houses in Floral Heights, the rest of which were built after 1880. The opening description of Zenith's business centre focuses on its ubiquitous form, where you could find yourself in "Oregon or Georgia, Ohio or Maine, Oklahoma or Manitoba."²⁸ Just twenty years previously, the hill on which the suburb was spread had been "a wilderness of rank second-growth elms and oaks and maples"; now, along the "precise streets" there are but few vacant lots.²⁹ The Babbitts bedroom is described as displaying a "modest and pleasant colour scheme...one of the best standard designs of the decorator who did the interiors."³⁰ The bedroom itself is satirised as a "masterpiece...right out of Cheerful Houses for Medium Incomes," while the living area, one of the best by 'Floral Heights standards,' contains all but new furniture; a davenport, found in two out of three houses in Floral Heights, a Victoria cabinet, that eight out of every nine own, and finally a "hand-coloured" photograph of a Colonial room, of which nineteen out of every twenty houses hang on their wall.³¹ Finally, the bedroom is described as having the "air of being a very good room in a very good hotel."³² While the ubiquity of the furnishings in Floral Heights indicates a certain anonymity and impersonality, it serves to underline the fracture between notions of house and home in the text. Babbitt's ability to feel at home in two separate hotels suggests that his house does not possess the type of individuality to differentiate between the two environments, a dialectic that we find again in postwar suburban fiction and poetry. This tension of house, as a site of familiarity and standardised space, and home, as intimate, individualised and private, is never entirely resolved: the impersonality of the house is such that he is unable to properly call it a home. Perhaps the most telling scene is Babbitt's hesitancy in using the guest-towel in his bathroom, an act that nobody "had ever dared," further emphasises this sense of estrangement.³³

The Suburban Critique

If Babbitt arrived at a time when America was still experiencing the tremors of suburbanisation in the 1920s, the publication of Yates' first novel came at the endpoint of suburbia's most rapid expansion in the postwar period. Between 1934 and 1954, the

²⁸ Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p 190.

²⁹ Lewis (1996), p 24.

³⁰ Lewis (1996), p 12.

³¹ Lewis (1996), p 12.

³² Lewis (1996), p. 12.

³³ Lewis (1996), p 6.

suburban population increased by 75%, while the country's overall rose by only 25%.³⁴ If the baby-boom following the end of World War II necessitated an upsurge in new houses across the country, suburban plots, with the promise of extra space, became the perfect location: of the 13 million homes constructed from 1950 to 1960, 11 million were built in the suburbs, a scale that placed suburban growth at six times that of cities.³⁵ In *Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth T. Jackson identifies the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944)—commonly known as the G.I. Bill—which created the Veterans Administration mortgage program, as perhaps the most important step in the development of housing.³⁶ The Federal Housing Association further supported the G.I. Bill to insure both the mortgages of the purchasers and the banks that purchased them, which allowed more potentially high-risk clients, such as young homebuyers without guaranteed long-term financial security, to purchase. In effect, a cross-section of society began to affiliate themselves with the expanding middle-class, with blue-collar workers achieving a higher-class status through union-earned wage and benefit increases. In 1960, the total number of suburbanites reached approximately 50 million; five years later it soared above 60 million.³⁷

Such a vast demographic repositioning didn't come without a barrage of cultural criticism and, notably, a recurrence of the critiques levied at suburbia in the 1920s. Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* (1961), appearing in the same year as *Revolutionary Road*, claimed postwar suburbanisation had produced a "low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible."³⁸ Mumford believed the uniformity of postwar suburban expansion resulted in the 'grim antithesis' of the earliest suburbs, which had been praised for their individuality, flexibility and connection with nature. This critique condemned suburban estates for their unvarying developments in which little regional differentiation could be made. Claims of spatial claustrophobia extended to the particular structural make-up of suburban homes, in which there was a lack of distinction between public and private spaces in new housing estates. A large part of this criticism drew from sheer numbers: in *The Suburban Myth* (1969), Scott Donaldson cites the example of Irving, Texas, which saw its population rise from 2,621 in 1950 to 45,489 in 1960, underlining the scale of acceleration of suburbanites finding residence in self-contained pockets of land.³⁹

³⁴ Scott Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth* (New York; London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p 4.

³⁵ Anna G. Creadick *The Pursuit of Normality in Postwar America (Culture, Politics, and the Cold War)* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press 2010), p 123.

³⁶ Jackson (1985), p 204.

³⁷ Donaldson (1969) p 4.

³⁸ Lewis Mumford *The City in History*, qtd in Becky Nicolaides & Andrew M. Wiese, ed. *The Suburb Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p 175.

³⁹ Donaldson (1969), p 70.

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, admitted to this much later in his life when he said the construction of suburban houses were like “cardboard....glued together in boxlike forms.”⁴⁰ On top of the uniform profile of the developments, there was said to be little space between houses, giving rise to the close proximity of inhabitants. In *The Organization Man* (1956), Whyte warns that the “more accustomed one becomes to the homogeneity, the more sensitized is he to the small differences.”⁴¹ In Levittown, Pennsylvania, Whyte believed residents were becoming increasingly cognisant of any modification to the standard ranch-house design: as part of his study, Whyte reports that one owner mounted a small gargoyle on top of his house, an act which resulted in residents driving out of their way to show visitors.⁴²

As with suburbanisation in the 1920s, architectural uniformity infiltrated the domestic sphere. For Mumford, this resulted in postwar suburbanites “witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods” and producing communities that conformed in “every respect to a common mould.”⁴³ For real-estate developer William Levitt, the standardised form of housing developments was a natural by-product of the mass production of commodities during the postwar era. Levitt, widely acknowledged to be the most powerful figure in American suburbanisation, claimed the uniform nature of housing was a natural, although not necessarily damaging, consequence of standardisation:

It seems to be incredibly myopic to focus on the thread of uniformity in housing and fail to see the broad fabric of which it is a part – the mass production culture of America today... The reason we have it so good in this country is that we can produce lots of things at low prices through mass production.⁴⁴

While Levitt quite happily connected the commodification of American culture with that of uniform housing, he opposed the notion that this could result in the homogenisation of the individual. (As president of Levitt and Sons, the most influential suburban development company, Levitt, of course, had a vested interest). In his 1958 report, which

⁴⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright Qtd in Donaldson (1969), p 70.

⁴¹ William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p 312.

⁴² Whyte (2002), p 312.

⁴³ Lewis Mumford, “Suburbia: The End of A Dream” (1961) in Charles Haar *The End of Innocence: A Suburban Reader* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Co, 1972), p 6.

⁴⁴ William Levitt qtd in Baxandall & Ewen (c2000), p 163.

appeared in the July issue of *Good Housekeeping*, Levitt rejected the claim that “living in these new suburbs [will] rob people of their individuality and bounce.”⁴⁵

Despite Levitt’s protestations, there remained a strong current of thought that married the effects of suburban standardisation with that of conformity. David Riesman outlined this shift in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and defined a split between the “inner-directed” self, which signified an autonomous citizen and had its genesis in the utilitarian individualism of the 19th century, to the “other-directed” type of postwar America, where emotion, temper and all idiosyncratic qualities would be eliminated or repressed.⁴⁶ This “deadness of feeling” came about as a result of individual compliance with corporate bureaucracy and a culture dictated by consumerism.⁴⁷ As critic Barbara Ehrenreich notes, this culture of submission was also a by-product of the formation of a new professional class: “[the] white-collar work world crushed initiative, reward[ed] conformity rather than creativity, and forced the individual to submit to the collective.”⁴⁸ While economic stratification following the war allowed for an expansion of the middle class and occupational prioritisation for vets the financial benefits were offset by the somewhat insipid positions in large corporations. William H. Whyte also investigated this idea of dissipating individuality as a consequence of a commitment to the corporate collective in *The Organization Man* (1956). Whyte’s critique connected feelings of anonymity in the workforce to the enveloping nature of mass consumerism, and, on a visceral level, the text also provided a distinct symbolic attachment for the male corporate worker.

The prevalence of sociological studies heavily impacted on the fictional engagement with suburbia, with one of the most vicious anti-suburban attacks, John Keats’ *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1957), bridging the two formats.⁴⁹ Keats’ suburban vision is given fictional license through the aptly caricatured John and Mary Drone, who, as their name suggests, become little more than prototypes for the author’s dystopian projection. Mainstream tabloid representations were also quick to capitalise on a subject that practically guaranteed a sizable readership. As Kathryn Louise Riley notes, this

⁴⁵ William Levitt qtd in Benjamin Stroud, *Perilous Landscapes: The Postwar Suburb in Twentieth-Century American Fiction* (PhD Thesis: University of Michigan, 2009), p 30.

⁴⁶ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2001), p 72.

⁴⁷ Riesman (2001) p 126. onwards

⁴⁸ Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), p 35.

⁴⁹ The book’s notoriety derived from its ‘skilful combination of the fantastic and the factual, presented, complete with cartoons, in a journalistic style accessible to both critics and residents of the suburbs.’ Kathryn Louise Riley, *The Use of Suburbia as a Setting in the Fiction of John O’Hara, John Cheever, and John Updike* (PhD Thesis, University of Maryland, 1981), p 16.

spillover resulted in a number of non-technical, mass-circulation magazines devoting a number of issues to the subject.⁵⁰ In 1955, the *Saturday Evening Post* ran a highly popular three-part series entitled simply “Trouble in the Suburbs.” *Look* magazine picked up on this feeling of apprehension about increasing anonymity, particularly in relation to male identity, and published (again as a three-part series), “The Decline of the American Male.” In “Why Is He Afraid to Be Different?” author George Leonard caricatured the anonymity of the American male through Gary Gray, who awoke one day and “realized he had forgotten to say the word I.”⁵¹ Even though there is a distinct anti-communist undercurrent to Leonard’s article, Gary Gray’s existence, one without a “private inner self”—echoing Riesman’s terminology—was symptomatic of a disintegrating individuality.⁵²

Just as mass-circulation publications were keen to critique suburbanisation and caricature the psychological effects on its inhabitants, there remained a current of argument that viewed the movement as a realisation of the postwar ideal. Long-running and highly popular programmes such as *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960) and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–1966) perpetuated the image of a romanticised domestic lifestyle, strikingly content nuclear family and convivial community, all of which were set against an idealised landscape. These portrayals set up a disparity between the sentimental idea of suburbia, with its connotations of a pastoral ideal, and the reigning sociological argument that it had become a homogenous, conformist environment. As Beuka explains, this discourse set up a diametric opposition in the cultural interpretation of suburbia, whereby sections of the popular media envisioned it as an “inclusive model of old fashioned community,” a place of contentment, while sociological representations depicted it as an alienating “noplac.”⁵³ Sociological commentaries, as a relatively new methodological approach, held precedence, with fictional portrayals then following suit.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding the publication of Bennett M. Berger’s *The Myth of Suburbia* (1961), William M. Dobriner’s *Class in Suburbia* (1963) or Herbert Gans’ *The Levittowners* (1967), which all represented suburbia as a heterogeneous, economically and socially diverse environment, sociological interpretations pertained to a fairly formulaic narrative of indictment that could be seen to shape the cultural perception of the setting.

⁵⁰ Riley (1981), p 17.

⁵¹ “Why Is He Afraid To Be Different?” *Look Magazine* Qtd in Cuordileone (2005), p 124.

⁵² Cuordileone (2005), p 124.

⁵³ Beuka, (2004), p 4.

⁵⁴ Bennett M. Berger makes reference to this in his 1971 work “The Myth of Suburbia.” Berger said there was an “apparent need for sociological commentators” and that the “myth of suburbia conceptualizes” for sociologists a “microcosm in which some of the apparently major social and cultural events of our time (other-direction, mobility, neo-conservatism, status anxiety, etc.) flow together, and may be conveniently studied” qtd in Haar (1971), p 42.

Performance and Fashioning of the Anti-Suburbanite

It is clear then, that even though *Revolutionary Road* arrived at a point when the literary market had been saturated by portrayals of suburbia, America was still coming to terms with the cultural, social and political consequences of such a significant geographic change. Cultural commentaries of the time were quick to highlight how the move impacted on the construction of male identity in postwar America. Feelings of male anonymity, believed to be a consequence of the uniform and conformist nature of suburbia, contributed to the many narratives of masculine disempowerment prevalent in postwar culture. Apparent, too, is how suburbia became the noticeable site from which female discontent could be voiced, as evidenced in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. If anything, suburbia would become the platform upon which female grievances could be aired; sexual dissatisfaction, unrealised potential in the job market, negation of reproductive rights (in that suburbia was the bastion of the nuclear family). The cultural and political impact of suburbia then, stretched being merely a pocketed (yet fairly substantial) land that harboured and fostered feelings of dissatisfaction. Discussion of the sexual politics of the time come under close scrutiny in the forthcoming chapter, but it is useful to see how these cultural reformations were, if not as a direct result of suburbanisation, often regarded the suburban environment as the backdrop to these tangible signs of discontent.

As suggested, Yates remained steadfast in his position that the novel shouldn't be promoted as an anti-suburban critique. The thematic associations with the environment are apparent, yet Yates remained apprehensive, as the first chapter of this thesis proposed, of *Revolutionary Road* being marketed as a topical novel on suburbia. Such disassociation can be seen first in the manner in which he severs the link between the supposed effects of suburbanisation and his protagonist. Various critics have noted the theatrical current that runs throughout *Revolutionary Road*: Castronovo and Goldleaf, for one, connect this to Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). For the critics, both Yates and Goffman analyse the idea of social performance, public behaviour and projection of self.⁵⁵ Charlton-Jones, similarly, believes Yates' fiction displays a "more complex view of selfhood that is perhaps subconsciously informed by the likes of Mead and Erving Goffman."⁵⁶ The critic suggests that Yates seeks to "disrupt false

⁵⁵ Castronovo and Goldleaf (1996), p 16.

⁵⁶ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 77.

performances and expose inauthenticity” through the enactment of “dialogic exchange.”⁵⁷ Ola Jönsson, meanwhile, posits that the opening performance ‘becomes an extended metaphor in the novel for the strictly regulated “script” or code of affects and behavior in Revolutionary Hill, where characters play designated roles of husbands, wives, parents.’⁵⁸ English playwright David Hare also recognizes to Yates’ awareness when it comes to his characters’ performance, writing: “The highest compliment I can pay him is to say that he writes like a screenwriter, not like a novelist. He wants you to see everything he describes.”⁵⁹

Revolutionary Road abounds with theatrical overtones: the novel opens with the final dress rehearsal of *The Petrified Forest*, a performance that leaves the cast standing “silent and helpless, blinking out over the footlights of an empty auditorium” (3). In what is a resoundingly mediocre production, the audience’s attention is attracted to the cast’s “only hope” April, who, we are informed, attended one of the most respected drama schools in New York (8). Amidst the “virus of calamity” that seeps through the production, culminating in an actor throwing up backstage, April’s performance descends to be “as bad as the others, if not worse” (9; 10). Approaching his wife after the play, Frank watches April, who is clearly aware of her sub-par performance: as she looks at her reflection, “her eyes were still red and blinking, but she gave him a small replica of her curtain-call smile before turning back to the mirror” (15). While Frank intends to comfort his wife, he offers the rather hollow, “I guess it wasn’t exactly a triumph or anything, was it?” (15) Yet the scene uncovers more than the sustained tension that will define their relationship as backstage (this is where the adoption of Goffman’s theory of selfhood is most persuasive) Frank and April exchange glances through varying points of observation:

He looked at himself in the mirror, tightening his jaw and turning his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look, the face he had given himself in mirrors since boyhood and which no photographer had ever quite achieved, until with a start he found that she was watching him. Her own eyes were there in the mirror, trained on his for an uncomfortable moment. (15)

The switch occurs, first, as Frank now seeks his reflection in the mirror as he adjusts his face to acquire the visage he had cultivated from a young age. Yet this point of self-

⁵⁷ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 90.

⁵⁸ Ola Jönsson, *Suburbia Rewritten: Masculinity and Affect in Contemporary American Literature* (PhD Thesis, Uppsala University, 2014), p 59 & 60.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Fraser (2008).

reflexivity is noticed by April, whose gaze is fixed upon her husband's through the mirror, interrupting Frank's reverie and locking the pair in a shared yet uncomfortable reflective circle. This enclosed point between husband and wife is the first example of Yates' attention to the heightened sensitivity of performance and observation within the text.

Yates outlines this loosening of Frank's personage during the first extended description of his character:

He was neat and solid, a few days less than thirty years old, with closely cut black hair and the kind of unemphatic good looks that an advertising photographer might use to portray the discerning consumer of well-made but inexpensive merchandise...But for all its lack of structural distinction, his face did have an unusual mobility: it was able to suggest wholly different personalities with each flicking change of expression. (12)

This malleability, which Yates relates to advertising and consumerism, uncovers Frank's heightened self-awareness, a feature that becomes most apparent as he aims to cultivate a personality that is at odds with suburbia. The construction of this is established when Frank and April argue at the outset of the text, where Frank outlines the character he will endeavour to define himself against: "I don't happen to fit the role of dumb, insensitive suburban husband" (25). Therein we see Frank fashion himself as an anti-suburbanite who suffers from the affective tropes of displacement, ennui and stifled intellectualism in an oppressive and conformist habitat. His separation and denouncement of his environment is predicated, initially, on an idealised version of pseudo-bohemianism that he believes to be incompatible with the suburbanite's more conservative existence: he regards himself as an urban "intellectual" with a leaning towards the "humanities" and, rather than shaping up as a grey-flannel suited corporate worker, his alter-ego is an "intense, nicotine-stained, Jean-Paul Sartre sort of man" (20; 23). During his first meeting with Maureen Grube, Frank portrays himself as a cultured, "disillusioned young family man" who is "sadly and bravely at war with his environment" (97). He asks Maureen her thoughts on the death of Dylan Thomas and if she agreed that their generation was the "least vital and most terrified in modern times" (96). This projected bohemianism has a convincing effect on Shep Campbell, the mechanical engineer, who regards himself as Frank's antithesis: "Frank was a product of all the things that had once made him writhe in envy—the Eastern university, the liberal arts, the years of casual knocking around in Greenwich Village" (141). In *Young Hearts Crying*, Yates returns to this diametric relationship between the bohemianism of the

city set against the conformist suburbs. Michael and Lucy Davenport, with their four-year-old, decide upon a move to Larchmont. Like the Revolutionary Hills Estate, there is a suggestion that their chosen locale is different to other suburban developments; it is more “civilised than the others they visited,” a “good place to rest; and it had a good, grassy backyard for Laura to play in.”⁶⁰ Yet their move is met with scorn, particularly by Amherst graduate Bill Brock, who almost as if the Davenports were referring to the “shore of a new continent,” responds, “Suburbia!”⁶¹

If Frank’s initial reaction to suburbia is rejection, April’s is one of mild acquiescence. When shown around their new house, she states hesitantly: “Yes, I think its sort of – nice, don’t you, darling?” (29) This unconvincing air of contentment carries on through the opening sequence of the novel, “Everything about her seemed determined to prove, with a new, flat-footed emphasis, that a sensible, middle-class housewife was all she had ever wanted to be” (43). This, in part, allows Frank to further fashion his anti-suburban role, which channels through to a perceived incompatibility with suburbia as Frank articulates a number of sociological diatribes against its inhabitants. Holding their neighbours, Shep and Milly Campbell, as a captive audience, Frank mocks the “damn little suburban types” who are unable to see past their commuter train or barbecue pit; he rails against the neighbour who is obsessed with his power mower and ridicules him for his “extreme suburban smugness” (16; 65). All three of the above—the commuter train, barbecue pit, lawn mower—are highly recognisable and charged symbols associated with suburban topography. Of its potential effects on its residents, Frank warns: “Economic circumstance might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were” (20). Suburbia is aligned with a corruption of self; Frank’s advice is to resist any such yielding of individuality. In a further, more broad-sighted critique, Frank explains how suburbanites live in a “state of total self-deception” (66) and completely detached from reality. Well-versed, he adds:

Let’s have a whole bunch of cute little winding roads and cute little houses painted white and pink and baby blue; let’s all be good consumers and have a lot of Togetherness and bring our children up in a bath of sentimentality. (66)

⁶⁰ Yates (2005), p 28.

⁶¹ Yates (2005), p 28.

Again, Frank correlates suburban landscape with its effects on character; here, the pastel colours is connected to the artificiality of feeling, resulting in the contrived emotions of ‘Togetherness’ and ‘sentimentality.’ While the postwar male figure struggled with feelings of anonymity in a conformist environment, Yates’ protagonist is narcissistic and appears confident of his own self-worth, as he imagines his life alongside the biographies of great men (22). In contrast, we see Tom Rath struggle to write an interesting autobiography when requested to do so as part of a job interview in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Asked to conclude the task with the closing line, “the most significant fact about me is...” Wilson’s protagonist resists the opportunity to paraphrase his life and concludes his autobiography with a very succinct synopsis.⁶² (The irony, of course, is as the novel progresses, is that there is an unravelling of Rath’s biography as a paratrooper and the revelation of an illegitimate child: all of this is gradually teased out to denote the protagonist’s innate, but partially obscured, complexity). Yates clearly wanted to convey Frank’s sense of self-importance: in one of the early manuscript versions of the novel, the author pencilled a scene where Frank falls asleep and day-dreams of his own cover story and life achievements in *Time* magazine, Yates intended for this motif to reappear later in the text, where Frank imagines himself in a new edition of the magazine.⁶³ We see a similar form of self-defined aggrandisement from Ned Merrell in John Cheever’s “The Swimmer.” Originally conceived as a novel-length piece that re-told the story of Narcissus, Merrell believes he was “determinedly original and had a *vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure.*”⁶⁴

Part of Frank’s projected individualism stems from his employment at the non-descript Knox Business Company, which he treats with an ironic, supercilious detachment: he pursues a job that “can’t possibly touch him” (74). During the early part of his employment, which he describes to others as a “kind of joke,” Frank would leave the “buttoned-up” Knox men and visit April in Greenwich Village to make love on the floor (76). He ponders the ‘absurd discrepancy between his own ideals and those of “Knox Business Machines,” which he defines as the “dullest job you could possible imagine” (78). Like the other-directed citizen Riesman characterised in *The Lonely Crowd*, Frank watches as each employee walks into the Knox building like an ‘automaton’ (78). As Brian Rajske has recently identified, Frank seeks to further distinguish himself from the

⁶² Wilson (2005), p 13.

⁶³ Outline to *Revolutionary Road*, then entitled *The Gateway*, dated 11 August 1956, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁶⁴ Al Alvarez, *Pondlife: A Swimmer’s Journal* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. 113.

mechanisation of the mid-century corporate environment by parodying its tech-jargon.⁶⁵ Frank procures Maureen for the day on the basis that she is required to assist him to research “Visual Aids,” an imaginary department constructed as a ruse to take the afternoon off work (94). Somewhat unwittingly, Frank produces a series of brochures under the umbrella title “Speaking-of” (123). Transcribed into a Dictaphone, the pamphlets, which feature rather inert titles such as “Speaking of Product Control” contain advice on streamlining work and increasing productivity through the launch of the Knox ‘500’ Electronic Computer (123). Frank is told by his boss, Bart Pollock, “I’m interested in one thing, and one thing only: selling the electronic computer to the American businessman” (196). Amidst this consumer-driven environment, Yates’ protagonist seeks to distinguish himself from his job: as Rajski notes, “Frank’s self isn’t touched by his work largely because that work has been systematized so that it can be carried out impersonally.”⁶⁶ Thus, when he receives praise—and an eventual promotion—for producing the brochures, Frank further subordinates his work at Knox to claim, “a thing like this just proves what a bunch of idiots they are” (175).

Despite his pronouncement of misplaced or wasted talent, we are informed that Frank, who holds on to the fact he was once told he had a “first-rate mind,” has never specialised in anything related to the arts (113). In the earliest drafts of the text, Yates had envisioned Frank to be a talented painter but altered this to illustrate a sense of misplaced entitlement. Yates noted:

Change all the parts about Frank’s attitude to the Kline job and to “Real” work—show that he is not a real artist suffering from commercial work...but a commercial artist with delusions of grandeur.⁶⁷

Closer to publication, Yates further revised this position: “Show clearly that is not a real artist...make Frank Garvey a fool.”⁶⁸ As such, Yates gradually unravels the loose strands that hold together Frank’s projected anti-suburban performance. The dynamic in the novel

⁶⁵ Due to his work with the Remington Road Corporation, a firm that released the first commercial electronic computer, Yates was able to draw on first-hand experience of the technological advances in the 1950s (he worked for the company between 1953 and 1960). Written in 1961 although set in 1955, *Revolutionary Road* takes place at the “threshold between tabulators and computers, the old business technology and the new one.” Yates freely incorporates business and computing terminology into the novel, with words such as the file, memo, interface, and mark-up all appearing. Brian Rajski, “Writing Systems: Richard Yates, Remington Rand, and the Univac,” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Fall 2013), p 553.

⁶⁶ Rajski (2013), p 558.

⁶⁷ Outline to *Revolutionary Road*, then entitled *The Gateway*, dated 11 August 1956, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁶⁸ Outline to *Revolutionary Road*, dated 11 August 1956, The Richard Yates Collection.

is signified after April proposes the family leave for Paris, a move that is premised on allowing Frank more time to find himself and commit to the intellectual lifestyle he has projected. Frank is momentarily exhilarated with the move but, as critic Morris Dickstein notes, he becomes “unconsciously appalled” at the prospect of swapping his comfortable and stultified life.⁶⁹ His job at the corporate Knox Company, at first treated with a kind of ironic detachment, becomes far more attractive after a wage rise. Considering the benefits of putting off their Parisian adventure, Frank muses “If there was indeed a two-or-three year span of waiting to be done, wouldn’t it be made more endurable by the money?” (208). There’s also more than a suggestion, however, that Frank has stayed within the company through some kind of sentimental attachment, or simply to carry on his father’s legacy. During the meeting with Pollock, he feels compelled, at one point, to “bring up the topic nearest his heart” and asks, “Do you happen to remember a man here in the Home Office named Otis Fields?” (198). Settling in to a gray-flannelled routine, Frank begins to enjoy the daily commute and late dinners in the city. His relationship with Maureen Grube, at first a platform through which Frank could exhibit his pseudo-bohemianism, is reduced to nothing more than a clichéd extramarital affair. As Stroud notes, “At his most mercenary, taking on the role of suburb-hating nonconformist becomes a way for Frank to pick up women.”⁷⁰ In *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, by contrast, Tom is able to achieve a sense of principled vindication after his affair with Maria, Betsy is glad her husband is finally able to share his experiences in war, and the Rathes are in such a privileged position that they can make the moral decision to financially assist Maria and Tom’s child at the end of the novel.

The creaking of Frank’s anti-suburban visage becomes all the more prominent as the Parisian move diminishes and the sense of derision with which he treats suburbia slips into acceptance. Rejski notes, “As the Wheelers’ quest for distinction devolves into bitter fighting and betrayal, however, Frank begins to lose his reflexive detachment.”⁷¹ This loosening of personage is given an ironic undertone as April adopts Frank’s anti-suburban rhetoric to turn his arguments against him:

“My God, Frank, I don’t have to tell you what’s wrong with this environment—I’m practically quoting you. Just last night when the Campbells were here, remember what you said about the whole idea of suburbia being to keep reality at bay? You

⁶⁹ Dickstein (2002), p 136.

⁷⁰ Stroud (2009), p 57.

⁷¹ Rejski (2013), p 552.

said everybody wanted to bring up their children in a bath of sentimentality. You said-.” (110)

April’s mimicry serves to emphasise the vacuity of Frank’s postulations and proves the catalyst for his increasingly sympathetic outlook to the setting. This also uncovers a further departure from the dynamic we find in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*: in Wilson’s text, Betsy, like April, rails against the Rath’s suburban existence, “You took an easy job, and we both bellyached all the time because you didn’t get more money. And what’s more, you’re a coward. You’re afraid to risk a god-damn thing!”⁷² Betsy’s criticisms are conducted, however, as a way of entreating Tom to improve their suburban lifestyle—she exhibits, in contrast to her husband, an entrepreneurial impulse—and seeks to fully embrace the class privileges that are just beyond their reach at the beginning of the novel. Rather than suburbia being an intolerable presence, Frank begins to alter his position and concedes that, “unquestionably worthwhile men and women had somehow managed to transcend their environment” (217). This contradicts the shaky pretence of Frank’s initial postulations as he moves towards accepting his suburban existence.

The Suburban Malaise

One of the prevailing features of literary portrayals of suburbia is the discontent and malaise that accompanies the suburbanite’s predicament. In *White Diaspora* (2001), Catherine Jurca bemoans the continued presence of this victimised suburban figure and questions how novelists can defend its persistence. Such is the suburbanite’s spiritual and cultural disassociation from their material wealth, they are said to suffer from feelings of “sentimental dispossession.”⁷³ Jurca feels that the suburban protagonist can be characterised by their twinned feelings of material wealth and spiritual emptiness, a response first articulated in Lewis’ *Babbitt*. This poses a fundamental paradox of suburban literature, whereby the twentieth century model of white middle-classness is based “counter-intuitively, and, indeed, incredibly on the experience of victimisation.”⁷⁴ Babbitt’s material estrangement contributes to the principal movement of the text, as Lewis’ protagonist becomes disillusioned with the stultified, suburban middle-class life and seeks to escape. As a real estate agent, he initially immerses himself in his expansion of wealth and material possessions: during his speech to the Zenith Real Estate Board,

⁷² Wilson (2002), p 64.

⁷³ Jurca (2001), p 5.

⁷⁴ Jurca (2001), p 6.

Babbitt speaks of the “ideal type,” the “Solid American Citizen,” fellows with “adding-machines” in their offices, a modern business man who knows how to make money, disdainful of “liberals and radicals,” in all, a “hustling, successful, two-fisted Regular Guy.”⁷⁵ Babbitt represents the suburban figure who is saturated in the machinations of his environment and its material pleasures. Yet Babbitt’s transformation in the text is his revolt from the persona of “Standardized Citizen,” promulgator of everything Zenith, to considering the fact he received little “pleasure out of making money’ to finally pursuing a life like ‘one of those bohemians you read about.’”⁷⁶ A similar trajectory can be traced in Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, when Betsy attempts to make sense of how little financial and familial security has done little to abate their feelings of unhappiness: “I don’t know what’s the matter with us. Your job is plenty enough. We’ve got three nice kids, and lots of people would be glad to have a house like this. We shouldn’t be so discontented.”⁷⁷ This persistence of middle-class pathos can be traced through to more contemporary portrayals; one need only think of Kevin Spacey’s artful portrayal of ennui in *American Beauty* (1999) or Don Draper’s quest for meaning beneath the spiritual emptiness of working as an ad man in Matthew Weiner’s hit TV series *Mad Men* (2007–2015).

Just as Frank Wheeler appears to be the suburban husband bravely fighting his environment, while suffering from this middle-class pathos and ennui, Yates shows how this persona is constructed and fragile. His actions, at first, revolve around cultivating the figure of an urbane intellectual, misunderstood and underappreciated in the conformist arena of suburbia. His initial pursuit, of distinguishing his existence from the mediocrity of his suburban neighbours, ends in nothing but empty and misplaced prevaricating. Frank’s determination to prevent the Parisian move shows that his hostility towards suburbia was at best an expression of insecurity but more likely a pretence cobbled together from the sociological criticism of suburbia at the time. His observations of suburbia come across as shallow laments and rehearsed for the benefit of the Campbells. As Benjamin Stroud notes, Frank’s criticisms “aren’t honest explorations, but recitals of preconceived positions based on their adoptions of social critics’ accounts of mass-middle-class culture.”⁷⁸ Leif Bull picks up on a similar theme when he claims, “Laced with irony, the novel negotiates the popular vocabularies of the time, holding up the discourses of the everyday as entirely

⁷⁵ Lewis (1996), p 168.

⁷⁶ Lewis (1996), p 243 & 246.

⁷⁷ Wilson (2002) p 3.

⁷⁸ Stroud (2009), p 51 & 52.

hollow.”⁷⁹ While Bull feels the use of clichés contributes to the epistemological uncertainty of the characters, it also illustrates how Frank’s perceived separateness from suburbia is devoid of any ideological reasoning. Frank’s progress in the text is essentially his recognition that the suburban life is one in which he can find contentment, and although he is at pains to present himself as a victim of his environment, his exaggerated protestations take the form of sociological critiques of the time. In *Revolutionary Road*, the affective tropes identified by Jurca—material dispossession, victimisation—are consciously undercut and parodied by Yates, with Frank’s expression of discontent founded on an a priori notion that he should be experiencing this malaise.

Accompanying this feeling of suburban malaise is the recurring impulse for a quest; a search through which the suburban protagonist can find some form of resolution. In Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* (1961), Binx Bolling, a New York stockbroker who derives little satisfaction from the world of commerce, fills his time with meaningless dalliances with his secretaries. Towards the end of the novel, Binx reflects, “what is the nature of the search? The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life.”⁸⁰ Binx’s journey is characterised by a need for exploration, for escape from the restraints of his commercial lifestyle. This idea of a quest is characteristic of postwar suburban fiction, with a feeling of revolt underpinning many narratives. In his essay on John Updike, “Restlessness in the 1950s: What Made Rabbit Run?” Stanford Pinkser positions Rabbit’s revolt in the novel within the context of “The Tranquilized Fifties.”⁸¹ Signs of incipient rebellion, we are told, could be seen beneath the folds of the gray flannel suit, with a “dark underside” inverting the public face of “tidy suburban lawns and Madison Avenue ads.”⁸² Dickstein tells us that ‘*Rabbit, Run* is built on the images of blockage, frustration, baffled vitality.’⁸³ If Rabbit’s movements can be characterised by his kineticism, as the closing lines in the text, ‘he runs. Ah: runs. Runs’ testify, Frank’s are defined by a need for stasis. For Frank, the move to Paris, which is predicated on his need to find himself, fails to materialise as he decides to pursue the serene, suburban life.⁸⁴ In a wider context, countercultural works such as Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” and “America” lyricised a renunciation of conformity and materialism with unmediated fervour. Kerouac’s seminal text *On the Road* (1957) explores the sense of

⁷⁹ Bull (2010), p 65.

⁸⁰ Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (London: Methuen Publishing, 2002), p 18.

⁸¹ Stanford Pinkser “Restlessness in the 1950s: What Made Rabbit Run?” *New Essays on Rabbit, Run*. ed. Stanley Trachtenberg (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p 53.

⁸² Pinkser (1993), p 54.

⁸³ Dickstein (2002), p 107.

⁸⁴ Updike (2006), p 264.

limitless freedom motivated by an underlying feeling of escape. Critic Morris Dickstein feels Frank's "diminished horizons" in the text are such that *Revolutionary Road* can be read as a counterpoint to Kerouac's novel, "He has no real desire to live out his old fantasy, or take up the freedom to be poor and creative (rather than comfortable and stultified)." ⁸⁵ Frank's mutiny is revealed to be nothing more than an inane sound bite, the portrayal of which is conveyed in a meek if not acerbic manner by Yates. Jönsson adds: "While Frank does attempt to fashion an image of non-conformist masculinity beyond that of nostalgic dreams of escapism, this image becomes ironically stylized and staged." ⁸⁶ In this, we can see how Yates parodies Frank's apparent impulse for rebellion, which is predicated on the misplaced perception that he must escape his suburban habitat, rather than a true impulse or intention.

Privacy and Suburbia

Privacy became a central tenet and concern of postwar American culture and one that became even more pressing during the Cold War. There remained, however, confusion as to how it could be achieved. Deborah Nelson suggests that its cultural deployment always carried with it a concomitant association in Cold War studies, where the ambivalence surrounding privacy arrived hand-in-hand with the "ubiquitous" metaphor of containment. ⁸⁷ Nelson traces the term to the 1947 foreign policy directive outlined by George Kennan, in which the diplomat detailed the threat of prospective Soviet expansion set against the libertarian domestic ideology of the US. ⁸⁸ This set up a diametric opposition between the countries' respective domestic ideologies:

The sanctity of the private sphere was generally perceived to be the most significant point of contrast between the two regimes. The potency of American democracy in cold war rhetoric was, therefore, not its cultivation of a vibrant and free public discourse but its vigilant protection of private autonomy. ⁸⁹

This distinction came to the public fore in the infamous 'Kitchen Debate' between Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev and American Vice President Richard Nixon in 1959. Fashioned as an impromptu meet displaying the kitchen of a split-level suburban home (the

⁸⁵ Dickstein (2002), p 136.

⁸⁶ Jönsson (2014), p 52.

⁸⁷ Nelson (2002), p xii.

⁸⁸ Nelson (2002), p xii.

⁸⁹ Nelson (2002), p xiii.

location and exchange was, however, carefully staged by Nixon's camp), political debate was discarded as Nixon extolled the virtues of the American household.⁹⁰ Discussing the respective merits of household commodities, Nixon upheld the argument that the American lifestyle remained true to ideals of freedom, in which the suburban home, with its designated areas for husband and wife, plus the technological appliances available to each household, stood as a realisation of domestic liberty. Nixon proclaimed:

To us, diversity, the right to choose...is the most important thing. We don't have one decision made at the top by one government official... We have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the housewives have a choice.⁹¹

Nixon's carefully worded speech steered attention from the perceived vulnerability of the American military to the security, freedom and enfranchisement of those living in a model suburban household.⁹² As May observes, this focus on American material culture, articulated through the medium of the suburban home, also upheld the innate "superiority of free enterprise over communism."⁹³ The distillation of the Cold War conflict was thus brought squarely to the domestic realm, with *The Washington Post* running the headline, 'U.S. Typical Home Enters Cold War' the following day.⁹⁴ The perceived freedom (and at the same time, privacy) afforded to American suburban residents provided a political message antipodal to the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union. In a very practical sense, suburbanisation also countered some of the prospective Soviet threats: depopulation from the more densely packed urban areas provided a strategic to any large-scale, concentrated nuclear attacks; while urban dispersal acted as a necessary measure against potential unrest from disgruntled workers, with class conflict an inevitable precursor to communism.⁹⁵ As with the demographic movement of the 1920s, suburban dispersal, set against the city, offered something of a quest towards a pastoral ideal to offer residents space and retreat.

⁹⁰ Historian Greg Castillo refers to the scene as a 'premeditated ambush' in *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) p x.

⁹¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), p 17.

⁹² May (1998), p 18.

⁹³ May (1998), p 18.

⁹⁴ Castillo (2010), p xi.

⁹⁵ May (1998) p 169.

This preoccupation with privacy also became one of the central concerns of suburban criticism, with the lack of space afforded framed within a Cold War narrative of containment. Nelson comments:

The suburban home was supposed to offer the opportunity to live out the democratic dream of privacy in postwar America. And yet, at the same time, true to the paradox of postwar privacy, suburban homes in the earliest and most influential accounts of suburban life were associated with a profound deprivation of privacy as well.⁹⁶

Suburbia, then, occupied a somewhat liminal position as a place of retreat—in that it represented dispersal from more heavily populated urban areas—and one that also brought with it a foreclosing of privacy. Mackay suggests that the enclosed form of suburban houses, with areas designated to instil a sense of togetherness, also heightened feelings of insularity:

Indeed, the very lay-out of suburban spaces meant family space and family “togetherness” functioned as a form of containment, where private spaces (the home) served only one purpose—to protect from the outside (the public space) and therefore segregate any outside influence, in effect containing the inhabitants.⁹⁷

As such, readings of the claustrophobic nature of suburbia condensed and centred upon some of some of its most salient aesthetic features that were seen to contribute to issues of containment, perhaps none more so than the picture window.⁹⁸ Structurally, suburban homes were designed with picture windows holding a prominent, street level position, contrasting with that of the vertical form of urban apartments. As Kreadick notes, the picture window became a central part of this narrative of containment due to its dual aspects of “proximity and exposure,” ocular features John Keats explored and used as the title metaphor in *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956).⁹⁹

The significance and persistence of the metaphoric attachment to the picture window has been recognised by a cohort of postwar suburban critics. Bennett Berger’s *The Myth of Suburbia* (1961) suggested images of suburbia had been evoked primarily to

⁹⁶ Nelson (2002), p. 85.

⁹⁷ Mackay (2013), p 131.

⁹⁸ Beuka (2004), p 258

⁹⁹ Creadick (2010), p 124.

denote a consumable “way of life for the non-suburban public.”¹⁰⁰ Berger adds, “one source of the peculiar susceptibility of suburbia to the manufacture of myth is the fact a large supply of visible symbols are ready at hand,” and identifies patios, barbecues, lawnmowers and picture windows as the most malleable and frequently referenced images.¹⁰¹ Benjamin Stroud advocates a similar position in terms of the residual significance of such symbols and argues that the image of the suburb has subsumed a more complex reading of the environment, where interpretations begin from “afar as a collective while fixing on only a few details, like barbecues and picture windows, to underscore a similarity of manner.”¹⁰² Drawing on humanistic geography, Beuka believes a more dynamic reading of suburbia would exist if we could separate the idea of the environment from its reality, arguing that a “reductive, two-dimensional vision” has persisted because of an investment in “symbolic meanings.”¹⁰³ With reference to Nicholas Entrikin’s conception of the duality of place, Beuka argues that a contemporary approach to suburbia should be one that can separate that of a tangible, objective reality and as a symbolically invested chora, or “landscape of the mind.”¹⁰⁴

Just as the picture window remains a representative trope of suburban imagery—and one which has been consistently latched on to in suburban commentaries and critiques—it has been re-defined in a more fluid context of observation and as a device, or aperture, for the suburbanite to reflect on their identity. For Jo Gill, one of the first articulations of this can be found in the work of Phyllis McGinley. Referring to her poem “View from a Suburban Window,” taken from the collection *Times Three: Selected Verse from Three Decades with Seventy New Poems* (1960), McGinley situates the suburban window as a reciprocal point of interior and external vision. There is a panoptical element to the vantage point of the suburban viewer when positioned at the window, while it also functions as a point of contemplation, a “lens or mirror through which the suburbanite studies herself and the abstract conditions of her own existence.”¹⁰⁵ This reading of the picture window in suburbia instates a more spatially conscious analysis of its function within the suburban home and understands it to hold a far more active relationship with the viewer. Updike delineates the lack of privacy in his poetry collection *Telephone Poles and Other Poems*, published in 1963. In “Suburban Madrigal,” which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1959, each observation occurs from the vantage point of a window. The intense

¹⁰⁰ Berger qtd in Nicolaides & Weise (2006), p 315.

¹⁰¹ Berger qtd in Nicolaides & Weise (2006), p 315.

¹⁰² Stroud (2009), p 18.

¹⁰³ Beuka (2004), p 5.

¹⁰⁴ Beuka (2004), p 5.

¹⁰⁵ Gill (2013), p 104.

intimacy of this becomes apparent when the narrator speaks of placing his car in front of his neighbour's house, an act that would "violate his windows."¹⁰⁶

Frank and April Wheeler's introduction to the Revolutionary Hills Estate does little to suggest their environment will be distinguishable from the standardised suburban milieu as Yates quickly outlines many of the established aesthetic features, with sustained focus on the picture window. While the estate agent, Mrs Givings, stresses that their house is disconnected from the great hulking split-levels in the estate, the Wheelers' habitat is constructed as prototypically suburban. The couple are shown around a "sweet little house" with a "sweet little setting," the development is "simple" with "clean lines," "good lawns" that are "marvellous for children" (29). We are told that their house has a "prim suburban look" with an "all too-symmetrical living room," and as a final allegorical signpost to the reader, an "outsized picture window" (30). Inside, the description moves on to the neatly aligned floorboards, perfectly balanced doors and flawless bathroom. The window increasingly governs Yates' description: as April states, "Of course it does have the picture window; I guess there's no escaping that," to which Frank replies: "I guess not. Still, I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities" (30). Here, the affective power of the picture window is implied, along with its encaging presence. The narration suggests its reflective potential too, as the "outsized central window" stares "like a big black mirror" (29). Such a description intimates its reflectivity yet it is complicated by the fact the window is darkened, which relates, in part, to its foreboding aesthetic appearance, which relates, in part, to its foreboding aesthetic appearance, but almost seems to suggest the gaze will be transmitted from outside the house (almost like a one-way police mirror).

The initial description of the picture window in *Revolutionary Road* establishes its reflective power, and in turn, outlines how it will hold an active presence in the Wheelers' household. This is apparent in its subsequent mention in the text, when Frank reads the newspaper cartoons to his children:

When the funnies were finished at last he struggled to his feet, quietly gasping, and stood for several minutes in the middle of the carpet, making tight fists in his pocket to restrain himself from doing what suddenly seemed the only thing in the

¹⁰⁶ John Updike, "Suburban Madrigal" *The New Yorker* (25 April 1959), p 100.

world he really and truly wanted to do: picking up a chair and throwing it at the picture window. (56/57)

Here, Frank's realisation that he is playing the role of prototypical suburban husband compels him to shatter the image by breaking the picture window. This current of reflection is complicated shortly after when Frank returns from his affair with Maureen. Approaching the house, Frank is met with a romanticised suburban scene as April hurries from the kitchen to wait for her husband in the carport, clothed in a cocktail dress, a crisp white gauze he'd never seen before and a new kind of perfume (103). Entering the house, Frank is greeted by a cake and the chorus of happy birthday from his wife and children. The image has been framed with the knowledge that when Frank nears the house he notices the "curtains were drawn in the picture window" thus obscuring the vision of domestic harmony that awaits him (102). As Mackay observes, the drawn curtains have a dual effect on Frank; they cut him off from "surveying the family unit within the home and distancing himself from family togetherness" but at the same time also offer "him a reflection of his own subjectivity (a blankness)—a constant site of tension for his character."¹⁰⁷ This tension uncovers Frank's inability to reconcile the reflection of his suburban self (as suburban father reading to his children) with that of his subsequent dislocation from the role.

This dislocation and fluidity of reflection continues throughout the novel as Frank uses the picture window to visualise a series of different images:

Catching sight of his walking reflection in the picture window, he had to admit that his appearance was not yet as accomplished as hers (127)

Sometimes...he could glare at the window and see the brace beginnings of a personage (127)

When April mentions Frank is fluent in French, he ponders:

If he'd looked at the window at that moment he would have seen the picture of a frightened liar (131)

¹⁰⁷ Mackay (2013), p. 131.

And finally, after their meeting with John Givings:

He took a deep drink, standing at the picture window and watching the last of the sunset. "I guess that means we're as crazy as he is" (192).

These four points of reflection each operate on separate levels; in the first, Frank considers it in relation to his wife, in the second, he traces the vague contours of a self; followed by a reflection of insincerity in the third; and, finally, in comparison to John Givings.

Living Room as Theatre

If the Laurel Players performance at the outset sets the novel for the theatrical undertones of its central characters, notions of performance are heightened when the Wheelers' suburban home displaces the theatre as the arena in which they begin to exhibit and negotiate their roles. As with the picture window, the television became a malleable symbol of the postwar suburban environment and one that came to signify an intrusion into personal space. Lewis Mumford warned of such an intrusion in his work *The City in History* (1961), suggesting that "within the cabin of darkness before a television set...every part of this life...will come under supervision."¹⁰⁸ Updike adopts a similar critique in *Rabbit, Run*, and uses similar imagery to Mumford's. Moving through Wilbur Street at the beginning of the novel, Rabbit looks through the "broad living-room windows," which uncover "silver patch of a television set the warm bulbs burning in kitchens, like fires at the backs of caves."¹⁰⁹ Rabbit's vision assimilates the picture window with that of the television, co-ordinating the two as viable points of observation and supervision. Lynn Spigel outlines this connection from a slightly different angle when looking at the metaphors of postwar domesticity to argue that the suburban home increasingly became characterised by the "theatrical quality of everyday life."¹¹⁰ Referring to Nelson Foote's (1955) article "Family Living as Play," Spigel suggests that theatricality stood as the key metaphor for defining suburban family relations; "the husband may be an audience to the wife, or the wife to the husband, or the older child to both."¹¹¹ This theatricality is, in part, attributable to the very artifice on which suburban life is founded,

¹⁰⁸ Lewis Mumford "*The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*" quoted in Nicolaides & Weise (2006), p 299.

¹⁰⁹ Updike (2006), p 15.

¹¹⁰ Lynn Spigel "From Theatre to Space Ship, Metaphors of Suburban Domesticity in Postwar America" in Roger Silverstone. ed. *Visions of Suburbia* (London: Routledge, 1997), p 220.

¹¹¹ Spigel qtd in Silverstone (1997), p 220 & 221.

where would-be suburbanites left multi-ethnic or mixed-class urban areas to pursue a lifestyle in a “prefabricated social setting.”¹¹² Spigel broadens this connection to argue that home magazines often featured suburban households with “glamorous backgrounds” that were appropriate for enacting “spectacular scenes.”¹¹³ This was often visualised by adopting features of the homes of Hollywood celebrities to further “enrich its theatrical status.”¹¹⁴ Creadick, meanwhile, designates an even stronger connection, suggesting, “television effectively extended the eye of the ‘picture window’ across the nation.” The picture window had allowed for a gaze “knowing, yet passive...critical, but also covetous,” a practice that had extended to and allowed the normalisation of television viewing, of “watching and being watched.”¹¹⁵ This was in part due to the remarkable rise of televisions within American family life: in 1946, 0.02 percent of American households owned a television, by 1960, this figure had reached almost 90 percent.¹¹⁶

We see, on two levels, how Yates constructs the living room as the platform on which these scenes will be played out. Firstly, the passage to the Wheelers’ front door has been rendered inaccessible by the poor condition of the stone path (45). As such, visitors must enter via the kitchen, meaning the front of the house holds no practical purpose other than spectacle. As Charlton-Jones notes, the path provides a “literal means by which the Wheelers’ friends will cross their threshold, a literal means by which the Wheelers’ suburban performances can be enacted.”¹¹⁷ Remaining incomplete for the entirety of the text, the path is both a narrative indicator of the “fractured nature” of the household and one that denotes a defective point of observation: with the Wheelers unable to view their visitors as they approach the house, they must enter through the kitchen door.¹¹⁸ Rendered inaccessible by the broken passageway, the living room’s interiority is valorised—for both spectator and inhabitants—with its furnishings, on first description, fashioned as props. On their first viewing of the house, April switches on the light and the “living room exploded into clarity. In the first shock of light it seemed to be floating, all its contents adrift” (30). The room has a “tentative look,” as the wall of books obediently competes with the picture

¹¹² Spigel qtd in Silverstone (1997), p 220.

¹¹³ Spigel qtd in Silverstone (1997), p 221.

¹¹⁴ Spigel qtd in Silverstone (1997), p 221.

¹¹⁵ Creadick (2010), p 125.

¹¹⁶ Creadick (2010), p 125.

¹¹⁷ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 26.

¹¹⁸ As the Givings approach for their second visit, the Wheelers are not alerted of their arrival: “The house had a strangely unwelcoming look, as if they weren’t expecting visitors. She knocked again, and this time she made a visor of one hand and pressed it to the pane, to see inside. The kitchen was empty...but just then Frank Wheeler came lunging in from the living room, looking awful...She saw at once that he hadn’t heard her knock and didn’t know she was there: he hadn’t come to answer the door but in desperate escape from the living room, possibly from the house itself.” (284)

window, yet “might as well have been a lending library” (31). The furnishings, ‘chairs, coffee table, floor lamp and desk, stood together like “items arbitrarily grouped for auction” (31). Their arbitrariness and tentative form yields similarities with props compiled for a stage production, comparable to a *mise-en-scène*, while the glaring light illuminates the room for external observation. Nelson identifies this notion of the suburban home’s plasticity in Anne Sexton’s poem “Self in 1958,” where the speaker opens with the lines, “I live in a doll’s house with four chairs, a counterfeit table, a flat roof and a big front door.”¹¹⁹ The depersonalised furniture results, for Nelson, in an unavoidable paradox where, although the house is ‘divorced from the public’ it is “neither private nor individual.”¹²⁰ The arbitrary arrangement of the Wheelers’ living room also picks up on the difference between a lived-in home and occupied house, a theme of suburban literature that stretches back to Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *Babbitt*. This discordance is outlined at the very beginning of Lewis’ text, when we are told that “there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home,” and latterly, when Lewis’ protagonist is confronted by the discrepancy between “material and spiritual shelter, structure and sentiment, suburban house and home.”¹²¹

The living room as theatrical arena thus serves as the backdrop to the Wheelers’ playing out a number of highly stylised performances. Immediately prior to proposing the Parisian move, April apologises for her behaviour (the reader is aware that this is done solely as a pretence for what is to come). The scene runs:

“Forgive you for what, April?” They were standing alone on the living room carpet, and she took a tentative step toward him.

“Oh, for everything,” she said. “For everything. The way I was all weekend. The way I’ve been ever since I got mixed up in that awful play. Oh, I’ve got so much to tell you, and I’ve got the most wonderful *plan*, Frank. Listen.” (105)

April’s movement, the tentative step, is framed as a succinct stage direction, while her apology isn’t articulated in the text: the scene cuts directly to Frank’s question. The

¹¹⁹ Nelson (2002), p 88.

¹²⁰ Interesting to note that in *Revolutionary Road* the only other detailed description of a suburban household (aside from the Wheelers’), which takes place at the Campbells’, strays very close to the plastic, doll-like enclosure Sexton delineates. “Shep Campbell had to admit that this particular room, this bedroom, was not a very sophisticated place. Its narrow walls, papered in a big floral design of pink and lavender, held careful bracket shelves that in turn held rows of little winking frail things made of glass; its windows served less as windows than as settings for puffed effusions of dimity curtains...It was a room that might have been dreamed by a little girl alone with her dolls and obsessed with the notion of making things nice.” (142; 143)

¹²¹ Jurca (2001), p 4.

interconnection between the *The Petrified Forest* and the living room is denoted by the direct reference to her role in the play, and April's lilting, excited lines are delivered in a performative manner. While Frank identifies the picture window as a means of reflection and subjectivity, April utilises the living room as a stage, and it is an environment in which she gradually becomes the more dominant of the two. During the heated argument concerning the prospect of abortion, the passage runs:

She began to move stiffly around the living room in a way that always meant trouble. He had learned early in the courtship, or the campaign, that this room was the worst possible place for getting his points across. All the objects revealed in the merciless stare of its hundred-watt light bulbs seemed to support her argument; and more than once, on hot nights like this, their cumulative effect had threatened to topple the whole intricate structure of his advantage: the furniture that had never settled down and never would, the shelves on shelves of unread or half-read or read-and-forgotten books that had always been supposed to make such a difference and never had; the loathsome, gloating maw of the television set. (221)

There is an acknowledgement firstly, that April has retained the living room as a site of control. The illuminated room recalls the imagery associated with the final rehearsal of *The Petrified Forrest*, where the 'blinking' (3) floodlights engulf the empty auditorium. Yates recalls the objects he outlines in the initial mise-en-scène; items that remain disconnected from the rest of the room. The theatrical, framed tone of the description is rounded off with reference to the television, which is given an anthropomorphic profile in its mocking presence: a concession, in part, to the commodification of the Wheelers' household and its assimilation with every other suburban home. On a figurative level, the gloating maw also suggests a form of mimicry; it is almost as if the Wheelers are playing out their own suburban sitcom. Mackay has argued persuasively that the picture window "creates a troubling fluidity and mobility of surveillance" within the text and it is apparent that this feature amplifies notions of performance from the main characters.¹²² Yet Mackay also suggests that the picture window serves no "gender designed function" in the novel, but it is noticeable that Frank looks to gravitate from the living room—an exposed site due to the picture window—and towards the kitchen, at various points, in an attempt to regain some semblance of power. As Nelson notes, the kitchen (despite Nixon's assertion that autonomy resides in the housewives' freedom to choose their electrical appliance) became

¹²² Mackay (2013), p 131.

an intense site of surveillance and containment for women.¹²³ Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) connected the enclosing space of the kitchen to the stifling of female identity. Friedan outlined the vacuity of the suburban housewife's role in the 1950s and the subsequent resentment and dissatisfaction this fostered. Friedan feels "each suburban wife," who, with a daily routine of making beds, shopping for groceries, matching slipcover material, is afraid to ask herself, "Is this all?"¹²⁴

In *Revolutionary Road*, when April first informs Frank she is pregnant, the scene is played out in the kitchen; the description is focalised from Frank's gaze and runs:

He found her in the same tense, high-shouldered way she had paced the stage in the second act of *The Petrified Forest*. From the living room came the muffled strains of horn and xylophone, interspersed with the shrieks of midget voices; the children were watching an animated cartoon on television. (206)

Again, the performative intonation is conveyed through the television sounds emanating from the living room and there is further recall of the theatre production. Displaced from the living room—or the site from which Frank must gaze, somewhat uneasily, at his subjectivity—April's image is recast in much the same light as her shaky performance during *The Petrified Forrest*. This breakage of front is furthered in the subsequent image and directly connected to that of her responsibilities as a housewife: "the perfection of her curtain-call smile began to blur and moisten into a wrinkled grimace of despair and her breathing became as loud as the boiling vegetables on the stove" (206). There is a direct assimilation, too, with the image we are presented when Frank visits April backstage, at which point he observes the "small replica of her curtain-call smile." Backstage and in the kitchen, April's performance is hesitant: her curtain-call smile unconvincing. Shortly after, when Frank finds the syringe that April intends to use for the abortion, he carries the package, "through the living room, swiftly past the place where the children watched their cartoon...and into the kitchen" (209). Once more, note the prominence of the living room and television, yet the action is displaced from here—and thus obscured from observation—as Frank marches purposefully to the kitchen with the syringe.¹²⁵ Prop in

¹²³ Nelson (2002), p 87.

¹²⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p 5.

¹²⁵ Elizabeth Cox, an author who first met Yates at a writers' conference, said Yates' entreated her to think precisely about each character's actions. When helping to edit her first novel, he asked "Why did the character enter the room at this particular moment? What was he doing just before he entered?" The precision with which he treats his fiction demands that he holds each character 'accountable for every action.'

hand, the scene, played out at a distance from the picture window, marks the point in which Frank re-establishes some semblance of authority in the text. The kitchen, existing as both a contradictory realisation of housewifery freedom and an enclosing space of femininity, is centred, swiftly, to the latter with Frank's possession of the syringe, a symbolic move that marks a clear domestication of April's sexuality.

The close of the novel contains two further allusions to the living room and its connection to the picture window, both of which are worthy of consideration. The first occurs when Jennifer views her parents from the garden:

She walked up close to the picture window and was peeking inside. They were still sitting on the sofa, leaning a little toward each other, and her mother was nodding and her father was talking. It was funny to see his hands making little gestures in the air and his mouth moving and moving, with no sound coming out. (236)

This scene has strong echoes of *The Great Gatsby* when Nick observes Tom and Daisy after Myrtle's death in chapter seven of Fitzgerald's novel:

He was talking intently across the table at her and in his earnestness his hand had fallen upon and covered her own. Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in an agreement... There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together.¹²⁶

Nick views the pair from the pantry window as they sit opposite each other at the kitchen table and, like the scene in *Revolutionary Road*, the husband actively outlines instructions. We can detect, too, the contrasting awareness of both narrators: Jennifer only has the capacity to view their interaction as "funny" due to the fact her parents are muted, while Nick Carraway—so infamously within and without—is able to pick up on the closeness of Tom and Daisy at this point, and, cognisant as to what has come before, the conspiratorial nature of the scene. Flaubert's presence lives on too in the control exhibited of the third person narrative as it repositions itself yet maintains the requisite distance from both characters. This is the only time the point of observation is transferred as we view Frank and April arguing from outside of the house—prior to this, the reader is a silent and

Elizabeth Cox, "Meet Richard Yates", *pif Magazine* (1 October 2000), Accessed online: <http://www.pifmagazine.com/2000/10/meet-richard-yates/>. [Last accessed 6 June 2016].

¹²⁶ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p 113.

invisible presence within the living room. Significantly, it is Jennifer, (recall Spigel's definition of the theatricality of the suburban household, "the husband may be an audience to the wife, or the wife to the husband, or the older child to both") who observes her parents. While before the television denoted a metonymic and theatrical backdrop to their arguments, Frank and April have now essentially become characters in their own sitcom yet seem without any script to follow. The reader (or their daughter) isn't privileged with any form of dialogue, all we are afforded is the vision of two gesturing silhouettes. Yates uses a similar approach in his short story "Liars in Love" to describe Warren and Carol Matthews' marriage breakdown. When Carol prepares to break the news that their marriage is to end, the subject is couched in theatrical metaphors: she "tried to rehearse her lines just under her breath; but when the time came it proved to be a much less difficult scene than she had feared."¹²⁷

During their final argument, Frank struggles to deal with April's hysteria, and as with the previous scene, there is a further disintegration in the code of performance:

He wondered what to do. In the movies, when women got hysterical like this, men slapped them until they stopped; but the men in the movies were always calm enough themselves to make it clear what the slapping was for. He wasn't. He wasn't, in fact, able to do anything at all but stand there and watch, foolishly opening and shutting his mouth. (290)

Without a designated role to follow—how does the suburban sitcom Dad comfort a hysterical wife?—Frank searches for a cinematic reference points to guide his actions.¹²⁸ The final break from performance is realised as Frank voices what is, up until this point, his only sincere line in the novel, as indicated in Yates' use of omniscient narrative: "The great pressure that began to be eased inside him now, as he slowly and quietly intoned his next words, made it seem that this was a cleaner breakthrough into truth than any he had ever made before" (291). Note how "seem" acts as a crucial qualifier to the scene too; at this point he believes a point of resolution has been reached, which is undercut by the strength—and knowledge—of the narrative voice. Frank then reveals his true feelings about April's wish to have an abortion: "I wish to God you'd done it" and with this he

¹²⁷ Richard Yates. "Liars in Love," *Liars in Love* (London: Vintage, 2010), p 97.

¹²⁸ Charlton-Jones provides an astute analysis of this scene, arguing: "The movies, Frank finds, are not always able to supply him with a version that mirrors his experience...His experience does not imitate the movie version of reality, and he is, therefore, at sea, knowing no other version and being unaccustomed to recognizing an authentic performance when it confronts him." Charlton-Jones (2014), p 27.

departs the scene on the “perfect exit line” (291; 292). Following this, April runs to the woods, resisting his calls to return home. Frank observes April from the kitchen window:

Once he was in the kitchen he gave all his attention to the grim business of keeping watch on her through the window, standing—or crouching, and finally sitting on a chair—far enough back in the shadows so that she wouldn't be able to see him.
(293)

As suggested, the kitchen is a domain in which Frank possesses most power; this vantage point, of watching yet remaining unseen, strengthens his position. Where April has previously met Frank's gaze in a fluid interplay of observer / observee—when she catches him in a moment of self-reflexivity backstage—there is a critical breakdown at this point. April is now purely the subject of her husband's surveillance and aims to obscure his point of observation by hiding in the woods. This is played out, critically, in the encaging arena of the kitchen, a room he has utilised as a means of domesticating her role; only now there is no need to enter when she is cooking dinner, or arrive with a prop (the syringe) to do so. When April returns, we are presented with their final interaction in the living room:

Then she came into the living room and turned on the lights and the exploding glare caused them both to blink and squint. What he felt, above all, was embarrassment. She looked embarrassed too, until she walked across the room and lay down on the sofa with her face out of sight. (294)

As before, April has entered the room and switched on the lights, almost as if illuminating the auditorium. While this has, previously, signalled her looming authority, here she crosses the room to lie prostrate on the sofa. Again, there is no dialogue, yet this time the living room as theatre has lost one of its characters with April's face now obscured from vision. The living room scene has suggested a close to the role April has played—all that seems to be missing is the direction, ‘April departs’—yet April's withdrawal is signified in two further movements. The morning after their final argument, Yates presents us with a breakfast scene that could have been lifted from a suburban sitcom:

The table was carefully set with two places for breakfast. The kitchen was filled with sunlight and with the aromas of coffee and bacon. April was at the stove, wearing a fresh maternity dress, and she looked up at him with a shy smile. (296)

April looks to have adopted, or fulfilled, the role of suburban housewife that has been so previously ill fitting. After a momentary pause, Frank accepts the scene as it is presented as April feigns interest in the meeting her husband will hold with Pollock that afternoon.¹²⁹ As he prepares to leave for work, Frank, under the impression that a truce has been struck after the night before, states, “I mean it was a swell breakfast...Really; I don’t know when I’ve ever had a—a nicer breakfast” (298). Following his departure, the focalisation of the narrative switches, for the first time in the novel, entirely to April: “April Johnson Wheeler watched her husband’s face withdraw, she felt the light squeeze of his hand on her arm and heard his words, and smiled at him” (300). The narrative therein concentrates on April as she makes all the necessary preparations for the home abortion. If we bridge the two scenes together, the novel has reached a point of closure in its exposition of performances: the breakfast episode functions almost as an encore to the couple’s interaction in the living room, with April constructing a scene of idealised domesticity during their final scene together in the kitchen. We see one last glimpse of April’s curtain call smile, bringing us back to her casting in *The Petrified Forest*; completing the circularity of the novel’s engagement with performance.

‘The Toyland of Pastel Houses’

In her study of confessional poetry in mid-century America, Jo Gill identifies a number of recurring tropes used to signify a suggestive context or point of realisation in the suburban environment. For Gill, metaphors such as “lamps and stars (and occasionally of street and moonlight) help to situate the action in a liminal dawn or dusk timeframe, poised between night and day.” This period of uncertainty allows for an “exploration of polarities, between the micro- and the macrocosm, the personal and the public, the immediate and the historical, the margin and the center.”¹³⁰ After April’s self-induced abortion and subsequent death, we are taken to a point where Frank approaches his house, and, in a scene that can be seen to align with Gill’s conception of a liminal point, Yates’ protagonist reconsiders his suburban setting. Moving through the Revolutionary Hill Estates, where “proud floodlights” illuminate front lawns, Frank scrabbles through the woods to view his home, and the narration runs: “Then he saw the house – really saw it – long and milk-white in the moonlight” (323; 324). This revised perception of his home, as if he is viewing it for the first time, is set against the “toyland of...pastel houses” of the estate (323). At first depicted as a constructed and artificial setting, with the living room akin to a show home,

¹²⁹ As covered in more detail in the following chapter, Yates maintains this to be the strongest scene he had ever written.

¹³⁰ Gill (2013), p 157.

there is a sense that it is now something animate in the shadow of April's death. As critic Tim Foster argues, this inversion is furthered as Frank attempts to clean the crimson carpet, coloured by his wife's blood.¹³¹ Moving through the rooms, he is able to hear his wife's voice—"How could she be dead when the house was alive with the sound of her and the sense of her?"—as she narrates and explains the abortion method:

"I thought that would be the simplest way to handle it."

"I thought you could just wrap the towels up in newspaper and put them in the garbage, and then give the tub a good rinsing out. Okay?" (324)

This anthropomorphic description again counteracts the sterile environment Yates initially outlined, as April's voice—which remains muted in the closing two scenes in the living room—now percolates through the house. As her voice begins to disperse and fade, when he has cleaned the last of the blood, Frank is left with "nothing to do but walk around and turn on lights and turn them off again," recognising that her figure would immediately—as it has before—become visible upon the room's illumination (324). The passage closes with Frank, who has hidden in the closet to avoid Shep, carrying April's suicide note to sit "in the darkness by the picture window" (325). Foster sums up the position of Yates' protagonist well to claim, "In the narrative's climax, it is only through a literal separation from his domestic arrangements that Frank is released from the ideological hostility he feels towards the suburban environment."¹³² The pretence with which he has constructed his anti-suburban persona has collapsed to uncover Frank's complete reconsideration of his environment; a contemplative point which takes place beside the picture window at the close of dusk.

At the close of her analysis on *Revolutionary Road*, Jurca argues that the text "brilliantly defines the postwar suburbanite as the antisuburbanite, whose existence is a protest against everyone else's putative conformity."¹³³ Such identification situates Yates' novel alongside Wilson's and Lewis' as a suburban critique with the Wheelers an exemplar of the American couple at odds with their conformist habitat. *Revolutionary Road* has been continuously viewed as charting the desolation of the suburbs in postwar America and, as such, Jurca's analysis isn't unprecedented. This approach equates the downfall of the Wheelers' relationship with the potentially destructive effects of suburbia: a correlation

¹³¹ Tim Foster, *Escaping the Split-level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in Recent American Fiction* (Phd Thesis: University of Nottingham, 2012), p 66.

¹³² Foster (2012), p 64.

¹³³ Jurca (2001), p 148.

that critically misconceives Yates' intention in the text. Presaged in the novel, and hinted at through Yates' use of omniscient narration, is the fact the Wheelers' fate has been sealed even before their move to the Revolutionary Road Estate (as outlined in the opening chapter of this study, Yates tends to delineate the fateful trajectory of his characters at the beginning of most of his novels). The novel opens with the already doomed production of *The Petrified Forest*, as the Laurel Players, omitting the "final dying sounds of their dress rehearsal" are left with "nothing to do but stand there, silent and helpless, blinking out over the footlights of an empty auditorium" (3). If we are to accept the play will serve as the catalyst and backdrop to the Wheelers' performative roles, then the Laurel Players' final sounds must be seen as the echo of April's voice at the end of the text, when Frank hears his wife detail, or narrate even, her closing actions.

Yates displays how this fatalism is connected to—yet not dependant on—their new environment: we are told, at the outset, that the Wheelers hoped, "the gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made to fit these rooms" (30). The strength of the determinism that holds the pair, however, is such that even though we are informed that "The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy," they are unable to realign their direction in the novel (323). As suggested in chapter one, of those to review the novel, only Martin Levin of *The New York Times*, picked up on the inevitability of the Wheelers' decline: "The Wheelers' Revolutionary Road is in Connecticut, but suburbia is only the back-drop for a search for emotional sustenance that would be barren in any climate."¹³⁴ Such identification denies the suburban environment being the sole determinant of the Wheelers' downfall, and, by extension allows Yates' novel to enter into a different discourse with its setting. In the same year as the publication of *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories* (1958), John Cheever made a very clear statement as to the folly of such a clear connection:

There's been too much criticism of the middle-class way of life. Life can be good and rich there as anyplace else. I am not out to be a social critic, however, nor a defender of suburbia. It goes without saying that the people in my stories and the things that happen to them could take place anywhere.¹³⁵

Some years later, Yates provided his own response to the fact *Revolutionary Road* has been frequently referenced as an anti-suburban polemic:

¹³⁴ Levin (1961), p 135.

¹³⁵ John Cheever quoted in "Literary Horizons," *Saturday Review* 41 (13 September 1958)

The book was widely read as an anti-suburban novel, and that disappointed me. The Wheelers may have thought the suburbs were to blame for all their problems, but I meant it to be implicit in the text that that was their delusion, their problem, not mine.¹³⁶

Voiced in 1972, these remarks suggest that the reception of the novel didn't assimilate with Yates' intention. His statement makes a clear separation between the Wheelers' belief that suburbia was the reason for their marital collapse and his own analysis. By initially viewing it as a constructed, symbolically loaded topography, Frank's relationship with suburbia has been predicated on an aversion to the perceived effects it has on his personality. The anti-suburban role he projects is, as suggested, fashioned and plucked from sociological critiques of the time rather than sincere articulations of discontent and is in line with the performative undercurrent Yates establishes at the outset of the novel. His misplaced adoption of which becomes, more pertinently, the source of the Wheelers' marital collapse: a prefabricated disavowal of suburbia is what motivates their protests against the putative conformist of the Revolutionary Hills Estate. Rather than an anti-suburban exposition, *Revolutionary Road* should be regarded as a text that cautions against an implicit acceptance of the perceived effects on its inhabitants. This affective impulse is distilled through to the controlling and troubling impact of one of suburbia's most prominent symbols, the picture window. Yates' use of the window sets up a fluid interplay of observer and observant, a site of contemplation and an interstice through which the Wheelers' living room becomes a platform of display and performance.

It is apparent that Yates' employment of the picture window, as Mackay asserts, creates a complex interplay of spatialities within the text that can be placed, more broadly, in relation to cultural discussions of surveillance. Such an assessment recognises its recurring presence and is in line with more progressive conceptualisations of our relationship with the longstanding images associated with the suburban landscape. My reading also suggests that, in light of the kitchen scenes in the text, Yates does hint at the prescriptive categories of suburban gender and the ways these are spatially dependent, yet doesn't necessarily relate these to the picture window. This analysis has extended the signification of the picture window to show that it not only functions as a site of surveillance but also heavily influences the stylised performances of Frank and April

¹³⁶ Bailey (2003), p 231.

throughout the novel. The circularity and recurrence of this is denoted through the persistent references to *The Petrified Forrest*, with the picture window the aperture through which Frank and April play out the disintegration of their suburban marriage. This approach argues for a more spatially conscious reading of the picture window in Yates' novel and is informed by the recent re-conceptualisation of its symbolism in suburban literature, identified by critics such as Jo Gill and Robert Beuka. Not only does this loosen the somewhat binary or staid ties to its presence within *Revolutionary Road*, it can also be seen to outline a more progressive appreciation of its function within postwar suburban fiction.

CHAPTER FOUR

Postwar Masculinity: Reframing Sexual Politics in *Revolutionary Road* and *The Easter Parade*

Mike Wallace: What do you mean by that -- men who were essentially women? Who among our leaders is so unmasculine that you regard him in that light?

Norman Mailer: Well, I think President Eisenhower is a bit of a woman. (New York, 1957).¹

“Look at you! *Look* at you, and tell me how by any stretch...by any stretch of the imagination you can call yourself a man!” April Wheeler, *Revolutionary Road* (1961).

In an article published a few weeks prior to his interview with Mike Wallace, Norman Mailer suggested, with his customary tongue-in-cheek machismo, that Ernest Hemingway should run for President because far too often the country had let itself be guided by women. The author places Eisenhower within this category of “unmasculine,” indicating that Hemingway would have been his preferred presidential candidate. Mike Wallace, hosting the New York City television programme, *Night-Beat*, returned to the topic during the interview, which provoked the above response from Mailer. Whether Mailer’s ruminations are merely posturing or not is irrelevant: this snippet of loaded dialogue provides a contextual basis for the apprehension that accompanied masculinity throughout the late 1950s and early 60s. Mailer’s emphasis on Eisenhower’s feminine character in contrast to Hemingway’s hyper-masculine image indicates a longing for a lost ideal of American manhood (although the iconography of Hemingway as a resolutely masculine figure has been frequently challenged by critics over the last few decades). Aired during a prime-time slot, Wallace’s focus on the subject suggests this anxiety concerning manhood was both pertinent and topical within contemporary discussion. Just months after the interview, *Look* magazine published a series of articles under the definitive heading, “The Decline of the American Male.” The magazine identified the ever-encroaching influence of women in the workforce, plus the retreat of the male into a feminised domestic sphere, as key factors that signalled the downward arc of the contemporary American man. Part of the series included Arthur Schlesinger’s essay, “The Crisis of American Masculinity,”

¹ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1992), p 402.

which has become somewhat of a point of definition for the male's decline during the decade.

April Wheeler's goading in the second epigraph, which occurs at the beginning of *Revolutionary Road*, can be seen as the initial provocation from which Frank looks to reaffirm his masculinity throughout the entirety of the text. April's accusation suggests the looming spectre of an increasingly destabilised masculine identity in light of the shifting sexual politics of the decade, wherein the increased autonomy of the female figure—both professionally and sexually—constituted a threat to the postwar American male. Frank's reassessment of his masculinity becomes increasingly pronounced when placed in relation to the threat posed by April's proposed independence. In her recent publication *Dismembering the American Dream: The Life and Fiction of Richard Yates* (2014), Kate Charlton-Jones shows how the author's work is in dialogue with the evolving sexual debate of the 1950s and early 60s, arguing that Yates' writing "displays a prescient awareness of gender politics."² Charlton-Jones believes Yates clearly outlines the shifting gender roles in his fiction, and, at points, prefigures many of the concerns of second wave feminism.³ For the critic, Yates draws attention to many of the themes raised in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963): specifically, how women inhabited a "proscribed space in life and how men struggle to understand their changing roles" and points to the author's treatment of sex, which is often fraught with masculine insecurity and competition.⁴ Yates' recognition of female emancipation extends to the attention paid to abortion rights and domestic violence—topics further explored in *The Easter Parade* (1976). Such appreciation constitutes the first analysis of gender in Yates' work and is in keeping with contemporary readings of the era that identify the 1950s as the point when the second wave of feminism gained its initial momentum.

Yet *Dismembering the American Dream* identifies a subsequent issue with the manner in which Yates outlines the sexual relationships in *The Easter Parade*. For Charlton-Jones, Yates struggles to come to terms with the sexual appetite of his character Emily Grimes, whose demands for sexual fulfilment are met with "barely concealed aggression and dislike" and is critical of the graphic outbursts and physical attacks the sisters are subjected to in the novel.⁵ This, for Charlton-Jones, tempers and counterbalances the author's more progressive approach to women's rights and represents

² Charlton-Jones (2014), p 152.

³ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 152.

⁴ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 153.

⁵ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 184.

a troubling paradox within his fiction. In its scenes of sexual exploitation and domestic violence, *The Easter Parade* is a far more unsettling text than *Revolutionary Road*, and Yates seems, at times, to undermine the more progressive position he outlines in his earlier work. Yet I will assert that the author exhibits a consistent approach in both which highlights the patriarchal traits of his male characters primarily to expose and critique their behaviour. In *Revolutionary Road*, Yates uncovers the manner in which Frank attempts to reaffirm his masculinity according to a strictly hetero-normative code, pursuing the sexual and psychological submission of his partners as a means of control. This becomes far more pronounced in *The Easter Parade* as Yates outlines the increasing sexual autonomy of women in the lead-up to the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and the accompanying reaction from his male characters. As such, the novel should be seen as a continuation of the sexual politics initially explored in *Revolutionary Road* as Yates centres his text on the point at which the country approached the sexual revolution, towards the end of the decade. There are points in which Yates does fail fully to explore—even within *The Easter Parade*’s female-focused narrative—namely, the cultural and political obstacles that women faced. There is, for example, very little recognition given to the reproductive rights of women in the novel; there are fleeting references to contraception and Emily’s abortions, yet these are never fully interrogated and, for a novel that focuses upon sexuality leading into the second wave of feminism, Yates ultimately settles on a relatively cushioned, conservative position for a text primed to be his most radical. In such a context, Charlton-Jones is correct in her estimation that Yates could not be viewed as a “protofeminist.”⁶ I will contend that the author makes no pretence to be so: the strength of his depiction lies in identifying the shifting parameters of gender roles in the 50s, specifically the changing terrain of manhood in reaction to the perceived threat of emasculation, and he does this in order to question the longstanding assumption that American masculinity suffered from a crisis.

Postwar (Male) Domesticity

As suggested in chapter two, demobilisation was thought to bring about the restoration of the nuclear family, with both sexes expected to return to pre-war roles. This transition is complicated, however, when we consider the conflicting experiences of those involved in warfare: either the soldier’s experience didn’t accord with that of the circulated version of heroism (as the case of Prentice attests), or, as is more commonly thought, the retreat from the frontline would require a period of acclimatisation. As such, the majority of popular

⁶ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 184.

literature of the time expressed concern about how men would react to this realignment. The fact this almost invariably involved a move to the suburbs—the seeming bastion of conformity and anonymity—raised further doubts as to the effects of domestication on the male figure. Louis Lyndon’s article “The Paradox of the American Male,” which appeared in the *Woman’s Home Companion* in 1956, suggested that this movement into the domestic setting represents the ‘repression of certain deep and perfectly normal masculine drives.’⁷ The reality, Lyndon claims, is that married men carry the constant threat of emasculation. This concern developed to the extent that such a retreat to the domestic result in feminisation, with *Playboy* magazine igniting a debate in 1958 about the ‘womanization of America.’⁸ In his work *Family Socialization and Interaction Process* (1956), sociologist Talcott Parsons pointed to the absent father as a key factor in this breakdown. Parsons identified a fissure in male ‘subcollectivity,’ the category of shared maleness, causing the disintegration of father-son relationships and ultimately allowing the mother to take the primary position as role model.⁹

This absence of a strong paternal figure is apparent in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), where the pinafore-clothed Frank Stark is depicted as an effeminate and submissive husband. The commandeering mother, as portrayed by Ann Doran in Nicholas Ray’s film, could be seen to drive her son to delinquent hell-raising in order to reassert and prove his masculinity, a reaction Paul Goodman outlined in *Growing Up Absurd* (1960). Goodman believed that a conformist culture hindered the process of maturation, for it had become “desperately hard...for an average child to grow to be a man, for our present organized system of society does not want men.”¹⁰ Taking a slightly different approach, Arthur Schlesinger suggested that the growing confusion over male identity—with particular stress on sexual preoccupation—had resulted in disempowerment and fragmentation. In “The Crisis of American Masculinity” (1958), Schlesinger asserted that the male figure had lost a “rugged clarity of outline” by the mid-century: frontiersmen, like James Fenimore Cooper, or Dreiser, Fitzgerald, or Hemingway, “never had any concern about masculinity.”¹¹ The comparison to a more traditional form of masculinity—and for Schlesinger, the forefathers of American literature—became a popular reference point when outlining the decay of the contemporary male. If a father-son rupture had caused a disintegration of subcollective masculinity the newly domesticated male was now seen as a

⁷ Louis Lyndon, “The Paradox of the American Male” qtd in Cohan (1997), p 35.

⁸ Miriam G. Reumann, *American Sexual Character: Sex, Gender, and National Identity* (California: University of California Press, 2005), p 63.

⁹ Talcott Parsons, *Family Socialization and Interaction Process*, (London; Routledge, 1956), p 92.

¹⁰ Goodman (2012), p 22.

¹¹ Schlesinger (2007), p 292.

counterpoint to the more physically robust man of the early 20th century. Not since the pioneer days, when men were responsible for their own log cabins, *Life Magazine* suggested, had men been so involved in the construction of their home.¹² Yet the 1950s male, physically softened from working in a mechanised and sedentary environment, represented a very different form of masculinity.

Yates and Imperiled Masculinity

As proposed in the opening chapter, the critical reception of *Revolutionary Road* was heavily determined by Kazin's misterming the novel as one about American marriage. Kazin's misapprehension is similar to the belief that *Revolutionary Road* is as an anti-suburban text, an interpretation that Yates rejected when he made it clear that the Wheelers' environment couldn't be blamed for the disintegration of their relationship. In a similar manner, *Revolutionary Road* can't be read as an attack on the institution of marriage, as Yates entreats us to look at the Wheelers' relationship via their interactions and dialogue to source their tragedy. The opening two chapters demarcate the issues which will plague their marriage: the Laurel Players' production is the background against which Yates establishes the performative traits of his principal characters and the self-deception that we can detect until their final scene together. Following the production, Frank and April confront and outline, as a type of foreshadowing, the issues that will eventually cause their break-up; their perceived superiority to their suburban neighbours; Frank's deluded moralising and the assertion that his wife is "sick" (27). April, tellingly, retorts with "Look at you! *Look* at you, and tell me how by any stretch...by any stretch of the imagination you can call yourself a man!" (27; 28) The provocation results in Frank attacking their car. The significance of the scene, specifically April's accusation, is apparent in one of the final manuscripts related to the text; in a note dated 20 May 1959, Yates wrote, "In chaps 2 +3, the development must be this: Fight introduces the 'you're not a man' idea, which carries over into the opening of chapt2, and up to the scene on the lawn: then he begins arguing she's not a woman, which he supports with the abortion memory."¹³ A final revision resulted in the fight scene occurring towards the end of chapter two, yet it is clear that Yates wanted the "you're not a man" to be a provocation from which Frank will attempt to prove his masculinity. We can also see how Yates wanted this

¹² Cohan (1997), p 55.

¹³ Note to text dated 20 May 1959, The Richard Yates Collection.

to be threaded throughout the text, culminating in Frank's accusation that April's wish to have an abortion is a negation of her womanhood.

We are provided with an early insight into this pervading sense of disempowerment when Frank is struck by a memory of his father, "On Earl Wheeler's deathbed his hands had been as positive as ever and when they lay loose and still on the hospital sheet at last they still looked stronger and better than his son's" (37). Frank's hands are leaner, more refined, with the implicit comparison that his are physically undeveloped and feminised in comparison to his father's. This provides a polarity between the two forms of masculinity, with the implication that the more traditional mode is inherently stronger. We see, too, how Frank identifies their move to suburbia and its affects on his manhood. He questions the ideals of "security" and "togetherness" that are brandished in relation to postwar domesticity, the sycophancy of family life that is bathed in "sentimentality" (129). This, for Frank, is most apparent in the "television crap where every joke is built on the premise that daddy's an idiot and mother's always on at him," (129) a clear cultural critique of programmes such as *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966). His tirade is then directed towards the 'loathsome' family on the hill who have changed their name to the plural—"The Donaldsons"—and constructs his own sanctimonious image: "You picture the whole cozy little bunch of them sitting around all snug as bunnies in their pajamas, for God's sake, toasting marshmallows" (129). He finishes by asking, rather rhetorically, "And I mean is it any wonder all the men end up emasculated?" (129). The irony, of course, lies in Frank's eventual acquiescence to the very traits he laments, accomplished when he decides to accept a promotion and recede further into the security of Revolutionary Road rather than move to Paris.

Frank's anxiety surrounding his masculinity, however, becomes more pronounced when placed in relation to April. This is depicted in a very visual manner as Frank, suffering from the ill-effects of a hangover, wakes to hear April mowing grass in their garden. Frank views his wife "stolidly pushing and hauling" the lawnmower while "wearing a man's shirt" (35). April's commanding presence, symbolised both in his control over the "old machine" and choice of attire, results in Frank's attempt to regain a "certain muscular control" over his features (35). This provokes a very physical reaction, as Frank decides to begin work on the path that leads to their house. In a scene that seems

to undermine, or out-masculinise April, Frank is described as wearing an old pair of army trousers and a torn shirt while working.¹⁴ The passage continues:

He began to like the muscular pull and the sweat of it, and the smell of the earth. At least it was a man's work. At least, squatting to rest on the wooded slope, he could look down and see his house...safe on its carpet of green, the frail white sanctuary of a man's love, a man's wife and children. (45)

In this, Yates constructs an air of masculine primacy as Frank, in contrast to the earlier scene in which April is portrayed as the dominant figure, revels in the muscular tilling of the land, the smell of the earth, heartily convinced that his house provides sanctuary and security for the family. The image recalls, too, a more traditional, yet quickly diminishing form of masculinity, where a man is involved in the construction of his home. This is strengthened at the end of the scene as Frank takes pleasure in viewing his "heavily veined forearm" and "dirty hand," which, whilst not standing in comparison with his father's, is a "serviceable, good-enough hand all the same" (45). There is, of course, a touch of irony to the scene—in terms of Frank's excessive and stylised reaction, plus the faux-sentimentality, intonated in the reference to "the frail white sanctuary"—yet it locates the reactionary impulse that motivates Frank's actions throughout the novel.

Female Employment and Domesticity

As much as fears over masculine disempowerment were motivated by the perceived domestication of the American male, such concerns must also be viewed as a reaction to the increasing professional and sexual autonomy of the female figure. While women were forced to cede their economic independence for the agenda of demobilisation, which resulted in the emphasis on the familial normative, their increased autonomy in the workforce can be seen as influencing the feminist movement of the 1960s. Recognising this increase in powers during their absence, soldiers felt their position had become destabilised in the home. The reconstitution of pre-war roles aligned with the narrative of domestic ideology and postwar containment, key components that symbolised a return to normalcy and the nation's return to power, movements which were outlined in chapter two. Yet this also dictated the successful restoration of the male figure, primarily through

¹⁴ There are a couple of references to Frank's involvement in the war although this is never stressed in the novel. The most extended passage on the subject occurs when Frank recounts a story to the Campbells about a birthday he had in the army in Chapter 4, a tale that he had already told them.

legislation such as the G.I. Bill, which assisted veterans in housing, university education, starting businesses and the job market.¹⁵ Such prioritisation can also be seen in a series of governmental reforms that essentially diminished women's power in the aftermath of war: in 1948, the senate refused to sign a United Nations mandate advocating the equal rights of women, while veterans were frequently given preference over female candidates when applying for jobs, even if they were less qualified.¹⁶ In terms of its significance to gender relations at the time, this somewhat eased male anxiety surrounding their role when returning home; in their absence, the increased economic and social autonomy of women was framed as a necessary but temporary measure rather than a permanent rendering of designated roles.

The process of demobilisation and its effects on employment can not explained simply by the fact men immediately re-assumed positions in the job market, leaving women to focus solely on housewifery. Historian Stephanie Coontz argues that the war's end didn't simply bring about the expulsion of women from the workforce (Coontz reports that female employment in 1949 was double that of 1940), rather, they were often downgraded to more suitable, "female" jobs.¹⁷ Coontz states that in 1952 there were two million more wives in employment than during the peak of wartime production, and by the decade's end, 40% of all women over 16 were in employment.¹⁸ Despite this ascendancy, these roles were said to lack both the financial and psychological benefits of the more challenging wartime work. In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1969), Elaine Tyler May further dispels the accepted narrative of female participation in the workforce, arguing that the longstanding assumption requires further clarification: "Employed women, whose numbers continued to increase, held jobs that were even more menial and subordinate than those of men."¹⁹ For many, the temporary exposure to the job market during the war left a yearning for economic and social freedom that didn't quite accord with the retreat to "naturalized domesticity" enforced by the war's end. All of this must be viewed against a cultural backdrop that prioritised the employment of returning soldiers and the series of political moves—the 1948 United Nations mandate, plus the elimination of many day care provisions implemented during the war, which diminished

¹⁵ Paul Levine & Harry Papasotiriou. ed. *America Since 1945: The American Moment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p 24.

¹⁶ This, plus the elimination of many day care provisions implemented during the war, further receded the opportunities for employment. In reflection, the increased employment during the war was cast as an act of sacrifice rather than a step towards sexual or economic equality. Shuker-Haines (1994), p. 5.

¹⁷ Coontz (1992), p 31.

¹⁸ Coontz (1992), p 31 & 60.

¹⁹ May (1988), p 22.

job prospects for women. The continued prominence, or at the very least, presence, of women in the workforce had wider implications beyond the gendered make-up of a workforce, as May explains:

Anxiety continued to surround this issue, since an essential ingredient in winning the cold war was presumably the rearing of strong and able offspring. The influx of women into jobs revived not only fears of sexual promiscuity and neglected children, but also the old eugenic cry of race suicide.²⁰

During World War II, the necessity of substantial defence production far outweighed any hesitance in recruiting women for industrial positions; a revision that was cast as an act of sacrifice rather than a step towards economic equality. The postwar years upheld a very different dictate, however, with women expected to be mindful of the next generation and to abate any fears over a declining population, not to mention unsupervised homes. (This is complicated somewhat by the argument that women, during wartime, took the role of economic provider and homemaker). Those who decided against a life dedicated to rearing children, or who voiced dissatisfaction with motherhood, were subjected to accusations of neurosis or schizophrenia. Coontz refers to a 1950 study of “schizophrenic” women in San Francisco Bay, who were given shock treatments as they were unable to accept their husbands’ demands and role within the domestic setting.²¹ The career woman thus remained an identifiable threat to male autonomy and dominance in the workforce. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan demonstrates how this figure infiltrated the mainstream media, and refers to the 1956 Christmas edition of *Life* magazine, which ran a feature on the “masculinization” of the career woman.²² Defined in the article as the “fatal error feminism propagated,” the career woman is said to have been so masculinised by her occupation that her “castrated, impotent, and passive” husband will become sexually “indifferent” to her.²³ Just as the article maps out fears over female ascendancy in the workforce, it is clear that this is also bound up with and connected to sexual anxiety.

²⁰ May (1988), p 99 & 100.

²¹ Coontz (1992), p 32.

²² Friedan, (2010), p 28.

²³ Friedan (2010), p 41.

Buzzards and Ball-cutters

The perceived threat of the masculinized career woman, the matriarchal figure who threatens to (symbolically) castrate men, is visualised Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). Just as *Life* magazine claimed the career woman would be sexually unappealing, Nurse Ratched becomes the reason for the inmates' emasculation. Her dominance is stressed in sexualised terms, with McMurphy immediately locating the source of her authority, "she's a bitch and a buzzard and a ball-cutter."²⁴ McMurphy's virility, frequently referenced in the text, stands as a counterpoint to the masculinised and sexually repressive presence of Nurse Ratched. His libidinal impulses are overtly stressed to accentuate the impotence of the accompanying male characters; a manifestation that has occurred through Ratched's sustained psychological castration of the inmates. The battle between the two results in McMurphy's attempt to become something of a sexual saviour, organising for Billy Bibbit—most frequently subjected to Ratched's ridicule—to lose his virginity with a prostitute. This act of sexual liberation proves to be fatal as Ratched discovers the pair and threatens to tell Bibbit's mother about the scene, which results in his suicide. *Cuckoo's Nest*, while clearly foregrounding the effects of emasculation in a female-dominated setting, can be seen to justify a highly-virile male sexual performance through the reverence and idolisation of McMurphy; a somewhat problematic response, particularly when we consider McMurphy's sexually violent reaction to Ratched after Bibbit's death. Critics such as Michael Meloy have read McMurphy's virility-focused image of masculinity as a subtle reaction to the "political climate of the McCarthy era," where Kesey's protagonist counters the senator's claim that Americans were "becoming pink."²⁵

This fed into a broader apprehension concerning male sexuality, ignited, perhaps, by Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948). In the first of his two groundbreaking studies, Kinsey published statistics concerning the prevalence of homosexual encounters in American males.²⁶ Figures from Kinsey's report suggest that 37% of all males had been involved in a homosexual act at some point in their life, while 1 in 10 defined themselves as exclusively homosexual.²⁷ Two years later, The Lavender Scare, which resulted in the dismissal of several Governmental officials for suspected

²⁴ Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), p 54.

²⁵ Michael Meloy, "Fixing Men: Castration, Impotence, and Masculinity in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" *The Journal of Men's Studies* Vol. 17, No. 1 (Winter 2009), p 5.

²⁶ For more information refer to Michael Bronski's *A Queer History of the United States* (Beacon Press: New York, 2011).

²⁷ Alfred Charles Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 1998), p 84.

homosexuality, intensified the feeling that normativity—as defined through Cold War culture—stood as an impractical and unrealised ideological ideal. Just as the oppression of Nurse Ratched’s ward connected with the intense surveillance of the McCarthyist era, suspicions about homosexuality were often related to the threat of Communism. Brian Baker believes that the connection between the two, paired together as the “enemy within,” was established as Americans were scrutinised for any form of political or sexual deviation that could raise questions about their national loyalty.²⁸ Robert Corber extends this to offer a reading to suggest that the two were considered “immature forms of heterosexuality in which the Communist or the homosexual remained fixated on the mother.” While the Communist was perceived to have betrayed national security through collusion with the Soviet Union, the homosexual figure was unable to ‘resolve the Oedipus complex and suffered from an arrested sexual development.’²⁹ What’s more, the story of Christine Jorgensen sparked media frenzy in 1951, as she became the first world-renowned transsexual. The *New York Daily News*’ headline, “Ex-G.I. Becomes Blonde Beauty,” charted a cultural leap from figurehead of national (masculine) strength to a model of femininity, posing serious questions about gendered identity and did little to allay fears of masculine instability.³⁰

More than just a Baby Boom

As much as the sexual politics of the decade are intertwined and difficult to separate, a series of reforms that related specifically to female sexuality came to define the trajectory of women in the 1950s. The period, even preceding the 50s, is frequently referred to as the baby boom years, with the country experiencing a massive upsurge in birth rates: in 1957, it is believed American women gave birth to 4.3 million babies, the highest annual rate in recorded history.³¹ Yet the increased fertility rate masks a more complex reproductive history. As R. Sauer points out, there were very few studies that recorded the rate of abortions at this time, despite it being an issue frequently written about in the popular press.³² Sauer suggests the only data of any merit is contained in Kinsey’s *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female*, which revealed that there was one abortion for every 2-5

²⁸ Brian Baker, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres, 1945-2000* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), p 8.

²⁹ Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1977), p 166.

³⁰ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p 51.

³¹ John C. Super, *The Fifties in America* (Ipswich: Salem Press, 2005), p. 87.

³² R. Sauer “Attitudes to Abortion in America, 1800—1973” *Population Studies: A Journal of Demography* Vol. 28, Issue 1 (1974), p 62.

births.³³ However, it should be noted that Kinsey's estimation was based on an interview pool that consisted primarily of women with fairly high socio-economic status, a group believed to be more likely to have abortions.³⁴ Like women who were subjected to institutionalisation if they refused to accept their role as dutiful wife or caring mother, shock treatments were not uncommon for those seeking abortion, primarily on the 'assumption that failure to want a baby signified dangerous emotional disturbance.'³⁵ Public opinion on the issue sided towards agreement with abortion on medical grounds or in the case of rape: a 1962 Gallup Poll, conducted in light of Sherri Finkbine's abortion request on the basis that her use of thalidomide may have deformed her unborn child, resulted in a 52% agreement.³⁶ There remained a strong resistance towards abortions for most other justifications, however, with economic concern regarded as the poorest excuse.³⁷ The prerogative and responsibility ultimately resided with the women who went through with the procedure, as May notes, "Although[...] articles condemned the illegal abortionists, they also condemned the women who died at their hands."³⁸ Not until 1973, after the *Roe v. Wade* case, did the practice of abortion become formally legalised.³⁹ Abortion did feature in fiction (although not that regularly), appearing in Grace Metalious' *Peyton Place* (1956), Rona Jaffe's *The Best of Everything* (1958) and John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958). Barth's text presents, perhaps, the most controversial depiction of abortion of the three: after committing adultery with her husband's co-worker Jake, Rennie soon realises she is pregnant but unsure of the father's identity. So against the idea of giving birth to the child is she that Rennie insists that the only alternative to abortion is suicide, echoing April's predicament in *Revolutionary Road*. Having found a physician willing to operate, Jo, Rennie's husband, asks, "Is [the doctor] safe?" to which his wife replies, "That doesn't matter."⁴⁰ The Doctor, who remains nameless in the text, botches the procedure, which results in Rennie's death.

After the initial hype of the baby-boom years, heightened concerns surrounding over-population meant the introduction of birth control became something of an economic necessity, with the FDA granting approval of the pill in 1960 (although it wasn't until 1965

³³ Sauer (1974), p 62.

³⁴ Sauer (1974), p 62.

³⁵ Coontz (1992), p 32.

³⁶ Raymond Tatalovich, *The Politics of Abortion in the United States and Canada: A Comparative Study* (New York: Routledge 2015), p 36.

³⁷ Tatalovich (2015), p 36.

³⁸ Tyler May (1988), p 153 & 154.

³⁹ For more information on the case, refer to Joseph M. Hawes, *The Family in America: An Encyclopedia, Volume 2* (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2002), p 7.

⁴⁰ John Barth, *The End of the Road* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1997), p 430.

that all states overturned their laws on its use).⁴¹ Prior to this, birth control consisted of condoms, intrauterine devices and male withdrawal, methods that—aside from the use of intrauterine devices—gave men agency in deciding on contraception. Following these new approvals, marriage became an appropriate relationship through which the wife could express her newly recognised sexual desire. The increased availability of birth control led not to further developments in female sexual emancipation (with the caveat that it did help to enable the counterculture’s sexual revolution in the 1960s), rather, it allowed couples to become more strategic with their family planning. Advances in contraception reified Cold War ideology with its stress on family values and procreation, as May explains, “Contraception thus reinforced the imperative to contain sex within marriage, and underscored the ideology of modern domesticity that included reproductive responsibilities and traditional roles for women.”⁴² Various figures support May’s contention: by 1960, 68% of the adult population was married, with a further 8% widowed (the highest number ever recorded).⁴³ Despite the increased availability of contraception, couples conceived far more quickly after wedding than they had previously, while there was also a smaller age gap between children.⁴⁴ Even taking into consideration liberating advances in employment (with the caveat that these were often downgraded roles), the progress of women in the 1950s was frequently undercut and suppressed, often as a means of resurrecting postwar ideology. As such, it is clear how most recent revisionist studies feel the era is characterised through its contradictions. In *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties* (1992), Wini Breines provides a concise summary of the decade when she states: “For young, white, middle-class women, the 1950s were a time when liberating possibilities were masked by restrictive norms; they grew up and came of age in a time when new lives beckoned while prohibitions against exploring them multiplied.”⁴⁵ As such, we can see how these movements could be placed, and were often manipulated in such a way, to support the postwar cultural agenda.

⁴¹ Rodney P. Carlisle, J. Geoffrey Goldson, ed. *America in Revolt During the 1960s and 1970s* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), p 161.

⁴² May (1988), p 152.

⁴³ May’s figures are taken from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970.

⁴⁴ May (1988), p 20.

⁴⁵ Breines (2001), p 11.

Sexual Politics In *Revolutionary Road*

Taking into consideration the developments in female sexuality, employment and reproduction at this time, it is clear that the position and profile of women inside marriage seemed at flux throughout the postwar years. If Kazin's definition of *Revolutionary Road* as a novel *about* the tragedy of American marriage is misleading, it is perhaps more accurate to view the text as one that interrogates the interplay of sexual politics, or the increasing politicisation of American sexuality and gender, *within* marriage. The dynamics of these begin to unravel and complicate when the move to Paris is proposed. April suggests that she becomes the sole earner in the household to allow Frank space to 'find' himself; yet this proposition leads Frank to imagine what April would look like when she returned from a day of work:

When she came home to the Paris apartment her spike-heeled pumps would click decisively on the tile floor and her hair would be pulled back into a neat bun; her face would be drawn with fatigue so that the little vertical line between her eyes would show, even when she smiled. (113)

This image of April, with piercing spike-heeled shoes, hair drawn back, and a frowned expression on her face, ties in neatly with the perceived "masculinization" of the career woman identified by Friedan.⁴⁶ April's unappealing aesthetic dominates the passage, thus implying Frank's (imagined) sexual indifference towards his wife. In the same scene, we see how April—sensing, perhaps, her husband's hesitance—attempts to restore Frank's displaced masculinity. Changing approach, April offers:

"It's got nothing to do with definite, measurable talents—it's your *essence* that's being stifled here. It's what you *are* that's being denied and denied and denied in this kind of life."

"And what's that?" For the first time he allowed himself to look at her—not only to look but to put down his glass and take hold of her leg, and she covered and pressed his hand with both of her own.

"Oh, don't you know?" She brought his hand gently up her hip and around to the flat of her abdomen, where she pressed it close again. "Don't you know? You're the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You're a man." (115)

⁴⁶ Friedan (2010), p. 28.

April skillfully redirects the conversation so as to promote Frank's hegemony and valorise his sense of manhood. This rhetoric allows her to deflect attention from what is actually happening in the scene—her persuading Frank that she should be the wage-earner in Paris—under the pretense that his masculinity is currently being stifled. The scene also encapsulates the strength of Yates' dialogue: there is little meaning in April's appeals; rather, it is the significance of what lies beneath her manipulative language, the performance she strives to maintain. We see, too, how the dynamics of the scene are embodied through April's movements, the submissiveness of holding his hand with both of her own; followed by the more sensual act of pressing his hand against her hip and then, symbolically, her abdomen.

While the men in *The Easter Parade* and *Uncertain Times* are at various points crippled by impotence, there is little evidence of this in *Revolutionary Road*. As will be illustrated, this, in Yates' fiction, is often a physical reaction to a sexually confident or emancipated woman, most evident in the figure of Emily Grimes. In the lead up to his affair with Maureen, Frank indulges in the secretary's enthrallment before leaving for her apartment. During lunch, she is described as having to look away for a "kind of emotional catching of breath" and she "seemed to melt" when he helped her with her coat (97). This narcissism is compounded when the pair have sex and the narrative switches to Frank, who finds, with an overwhelming sense, "*this* is what I needed; his self-absorption was so complete that he was only dimly aware of her whispering, "Oh, yes; yes; yes" (98). Maureen's sexual agency is given little to no recognition and it is apparent the act has served a specific purpose, as suggested by the fact Frank feels he has never been "more grateful to anyone" (101). The power dynamic is underscored when Frank deliberates the merits of apologising as he prepares to leave Maureen's flat: "Did the swan apologize to Leda? Did an eagle apologize? Did a lion apologize? Hell, no" (101). The mythological reference raises the issue of exploitation—and perhaps rape—with the subsequent images clearly mapping out the indexes of sexual power between the pair. Waiting on the train home, Frank muses: "The way for a man to ride was erect and out in the open, out in the loud iron passageway where the wind whipped his necktie, standing with his feet set wide apart."⁴⁷ His compulsion for sexual domination and control is exhibited during their final meeting: Frank, having decided to break off the affair, visits Maureen to find her preparing dinner. She appears naked, wearing "even more eye-make up than usual," with lashes "thick and ragged" (271). When informed of the split, Maureen is described as having the

⁴⁷ Yates (2007), p 103.

“desperation of a drowning man in his upward struggle,” with her “breasts wagging like little startled faces” (271).

Frank’s very physical and self-serving approach to sex is also discernible in his behaviour with April. After the scene in which we see April deftly redirect the conversation from their Parisian move, Frank is described as “taking his wife” more triumphantly than ever before (115). As with Maureen, the dynamic isn’t one of sexual parity, as Frank relies on a type of reverence before making love. The narrative focuses on Frank’s virility-centered and hyper-masculinised reaction as, post-coitus, he feels he took “command of the universe because he was a man” (115). There is, like the previous sexual scene, strong primal imagery connected to the act, as Frank takes “pleasure in the slow rise and fall of his own chest, which felt broad and deep and muscled enough to fill the modelling of a medieval breastplate” (116). Frank’s dependency on both the physical and emotional submission of both Maureen and April eliminates the prospect of female sexual agency, with the caveat, however, that April uses her sexuality as a form of control and manipulation by letting him feel physically dominant. This is complicated somewhat by the performative language Yates continuously employs, which denotes how Frank uses sex as a way to outwardly project his masculinity.

In his notes for *Revolutionary Road*, the author provided an early indication of Frank’s character: “His basic trouble in marriage is that he wants both her enslavement and his own irresponsibility.”⁴⁸ The note, dated August 1956, shows Yates to have identified, at an early stage, that Frank would attempt to exert a dominating influence over his wife, exhibited through his failure to take responsibility for his affair, then, by concluding that April’s wish for an abortion is symptomatic of a sort of confused womanhood. This absconsion of responsibility is first apparent when Frank informs April of Maureen, proposing that something “neurotic and irrational” happened to him (277). Frank explains:

I think the main thing was simply a case of feeling that my—well, that my masculinity’d been threatened somehow by all that abortion business; wanting to prove something; I don’t know. Anyway, I broke it off last week; the whole stupid business. (277)

⁴⁸ Draft of *Revolutionary Road*, then entitled *The Getaway*, dated 11 August 1956, The Richard Yates Collection.

The justification for his affair is sanctimonious and serves to reappropriate responsibility towards his wife. Yates makes it clear that Frank's reasoning is shallow and self-serving, as leading up to the speech, Frank hoped to combine the "power of confession with the narrative grace of romantic storytelling," while also highlighting the performative traits identified in the previous chapter. Even more, it underscores Frank's narcissism within the text, and April's apathetic reaction—"I don't feel anything"—shows the confession to be misplaced and, ultimately, futile (278). Constructing the passage in such a manner conveys the absurdity of Frank's justification; the threatened masculinity a vacuous sound-bite to which April now gives no recognition. The scene acts as a clear marker of Frank's trouble within marriage, the pursuit of April's enslavement, doubled with his own irresponsibility, as Yates outlined. This compulsion to control is pushed even further as Frank muses, rather absurdly, that April's abortion would result in his own castration: "How much, he would ask her, would his prime of manhood be worth if it had to be made conditional on allowing her to commit a criminal mutilation of herself?" (217; 218). Viewing his masculinity as dependent on the birth of a child is a confused conflation, while the language employed evokes—in Frank's mind, at least—the illegality and derangement of such an act. We can see a similar apportion of blame in one of Yates' earliest short stories, "The B.A.R. Man," where John Fallon asks his wife, "So whaddya wanna do? Walk around with a tipped utiyus the resta ya life, or what."⁴⁹ Just as Fallon looks to assign his wife's medical condition as the reason for their childless marriage, he also questions her sexuality, such as when, shortly after the above accusation, he picks up a padded bra and asks, "Why d'ya wear these goddam things?"⁵⁰

Sensing his attempt to control failing, Frank takes a slightly different approach and theorises that April's wish for an abortion is essentially an expression of her desire to become a man; he offers a very vague outline of Freud's "penis-envy" (231). Frank's poorly formulated synopsis of Freud attempts, firstly, to privilege male sexuality. Such a phallogentric reading is a misapprehension of April's wish to have an abortion and functions, unsuccessfully, as Frank's way of reaffirming some sort of patriarchal power. Kate Millet interprets the pervasive linguistic power Freudian's theory possesses in *Sexual Politics* (1970), arguing, "Beginning with the theory of penis envy, the definition of the female is negative—what she is is the result of the fact she is not a male and "lacks" a penis."⁵¹ Millett's work, which seeks to uncover how patriarchy is exercised and codified

⁴⁹ Richard Yates "The B.A.R. Man," *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (London: Vintage, 2008), p 99.

⁵⁰ Yates (2008), p 99.

⁵¹ Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p 179.

through politics, literature and psychology, shows how this functions to negate female identity, “In formulating the theory of penis envy, Freud not only neglected the possibility of a social explanation for feminine dissatisfaction but precluded it by postulating a literal jealousy of the organ.”⁵² Looking at the dynamic in this context, Frank’s approach essentially becomes an extension of the argument that April’s abortion wish is in line with her denial of womanhood, although this time Frank seeks to interpret it as a psychological disorder. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Frank’s reference to Freudian theory and frequent suggestions that his wife should see a therapist is recognition of the power yielded by psychoanalysis at the time and a point of manipulation; he constantly alludes to the fact April is mentally unwell. These twinned strategies are formed with the purpose of domesticating April’s sexuality, reframing the abortion as an aberration that is at odds with her femininity. The scene stresses Frank’s continued attempts at subduing and harnessing female autonomy, illustrated in the power dynamic he establishes with Maureen and the controlling influence he seeks to exert over April.

Updike and Patriarchy

In both subject and style, it is John Updike who can perhaps be aligned most closely with Richard Yates, and, in his Rabbit tetralogy, the author provides one of the most insistent and comprehensive studies of American masculinity in the postwar years. In *Picked-up Pieces* (1975), Updike’s collection of non-fiction prose, the author admits that his novels tend to centre upon one key theme: “The question is usually, ‘What is a good man? What is goodness?’ and in all my books [this] act is inspected.”⁵³ The first instalment of the tetralogy, *Rabbit, Run* (1960) was published shortly after *Revolutionary Road*, and like Yates, Updike explores, through Rabbit Angstrom, the changing parameters of masculinity in response to the evolving sexual politics of the decade. Like Frank, Rabbit pursues sex as a means to escape what he perceives to as the oppressive enclosure of domesticity and, in a similar manner to Yates’ protagonist, seeks to do so as a way to reaffirm his masculinity. This compulsion is even more pronounced in *Rabbit, Run* as there is a suggestion, initially at least, of some form of sexual parity, before Rabbit seeks his partner’s physical and psychological submission. We see this intimated at the outset of the text, when Rabbit reflects upon an experience with a prostitute in Texas: “he was hurt to learn...that she had

⁵² Millet (2016), p 183.

⁵³ John Updike quoted in *Conversations with John Updike*, ed. James Plath & John Updike (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) p 50.

faked her half.”⁵⁴ This obligation to sexually satisfy his partner is carried through to his first meeting with Ruth, the prostitute with whom he conducts an affair. When Rabbit tells her he has been, “loving [her] so much all night,” Ruth retorts with, “You all think you’re such lovers,” he replies, “I am a lover” to assure her he is a competent sexual partner.⁵⁵

This emphasis on female sexual pleasure as a measure of male virility is highlighted as Rabbit seeks to distinguish himself as a good lover amongst Ruth’s clients.⁵⁶ Two distinct features, however, complicate their first sexual encounter. As he undresses Ruth he tells her, “I just love you too much. Where’s a washrag?”⁵⁷ The assertion that he loves her is undercut by Rabbit’s wish to wipe off Ruth’s make-up. Sexual parity reverts to a type of vulnerability, which is reinforced when Rabbit prevents Ruth from using her diaphragm. Rabbit imagines himself on their wedding night, with Ruth as the virginal bride, when he will provide her with comfort and security. This is further complicated when the scene is desexualised, with Rabbit reflecting, “it is not her body he wants, not the machine, but her, her” (77). We see how Rabbit attempts to exact control as he asks Ruth, or rather commands her, to get him a glass of water. This is followed by Rabbit’s post-coital reaction, “She...goes off into the bathroom to do her duty. There’s that in women repels him: handle themselves like an old envelope, wash away men’s dirt – insulting, really. Faucets cry.”⁵⁸ In contrast to the idealised image created earlier, Ruth is now described in a purely mechanical and abstract manner. The scene thus revolves around a shifting and contradictory power dynamic, with Updike’s protagonist acceding parity to Ruth whilst also looking to negate her identity.

In *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma* (1996), critic Mary O’Connell comments on the scene, “His striving for control rather than surrender makes him inaccessible to Ruth, while his depersonalization of Ruth renders her inaccessible to him.”⁵⁹ The negotiation or re-definition Updike articulates shows Rabbit to be both cognisant and appreciative of Ruth’s sexuality, but also threatened in such a manner that he needs to imagine her in an abstract and idealised form. Yates set up a similar type of male fantasy-identification in his short story “Liars in Love,” where Warren Matthews, after he splits from his wife, visits and begins to date a prostitute. Warren considers, “Nobody had to tell

⁵⁴ Updike (2003), p 42.

⁵⁵ Updike (2003), p 66 & 67.

⁵⁶ Mary O’Connell, *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma: Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), p 25.

⁵⁷ Updike (2003), p 72.

⁵⁸ Updike (2003), p 72.

⁵⁹ O’Connell (1996), p 24.

him what a triumph of masculinity it was to have a young whore offer herself to you free of charge.”⁶⁰ When Rabbit finds out she has slept with his ex-team mate Ronnie Harrison, Ruth’s sexual experience threatens once more. He tells her, “Listen. Tonight you turned against me. I need to see you on your knees.”⁶¹ The previous passage, however, indicates that Ruth hasn’t turned against Rabbit; he purely feels his masculinity has been threatened by the appearance of an ex-lover. When Ruth asks why and Rabbit replies, “It’d prove you’re mine,” he is merely imposing his reality on her.⁶² Akin to the first encounter between the pair when Ruth’s make-up is washed off, Rabbit seeks her complete vulnerability and acquiescence.⁶³

In her assessment of the Rabbit novels, O’Connell raises a vital point when looking to define Updike’s treatment of masculinity to claim:

There is...an important distinction to be made between authors who create misogynistic male characters as heroes and authors, like Updike, who creates misogynistic characters and expose and question and even satirize their behaviour.⁶⁴

Updike’s exploration of the sexual dynamics between Ruth and Rabbit, rather than validating forms of exploitation, may be seen to question how power is manipulated and executed. The dynamic Updike constructs for his protagonist is, as identified, often contradictory, creating a tension between conflicting forms of masculinity. Through Frank Wheeler, Yates adopts a similar approach: the interstice he creates—the competing forms of masculinity, the reliance upon female submission—provides the requisite space for the author to critique, satirise, and expose the negotiations or manipulations of the power of his protagonist. Yates’ insistence that “you’re not a man” threads throughout the narrative illuminates such a reading, an accusation from which Frank seeks to affirm his masculinity; an approach that allows us to uncover his insistent exploitation and pursuit of control in the text. The background of which is the shifting and contested parameters of sexual politics, most clearly the evolving role of women and the affective response from the accompanying male characters.

⁶⁰ Yates (2010), p 109.

⁶¹ Updike (2003), p 161.

⁶² Updike (2003), p 161.

⁶³ Mary Allen, *The Necessary Blackness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p 111.

⁶⁴ O’Connell (1996), p 38.

While Frank's disapproval of April's abortion has been aligned with his pursuit of control and desire to domesticate her sexuality, the conflict has far broader significance in relation to political and cultural discussions of the practice at the time. Martin Halliwell suggests that April's use of a syringe to induce the abortion and the awareness of how late on she is in her pregnancy, echoes many of the cases admitted to hospital in the 1950s and 60s.⁶⁵ Halliwell praises Yates' exploration of such a taboo subject, particularly when the literary engagement remained sparse. So, too, does he credit the author's graphic treatment of the scene at a time when there were "profound silences" on family planning and the relationship between physiology and female sexuality.⁶⁶ Yet Halliwell takes issue with how "Yates resists giving April Wheeler her own narrative voice in *Revolutionary Road* until the final part of the story, when April's fate seems already sealed."⁶⁷ The shift in narrative voice signifies, in part, the text's movement away from Frank's self-obsession, closed off by his continued mishandling of the abortion. In the scene immediately preceding this shift, April and Frank enjoy, on the surface, a perfectly harmonious breakfast. The switch in narrative position occurs after this, as we follow April who meticulously prepares and carries out the abortion, thus invalidating the congenial sentiment of the breakfast episode.

The transference is jarring, revealing, on one level, the extent to which April has convinced Frank that the issue of the abortion, and their marriage, has been resolved. The shift in narrative focalisation allows Yates to establish the contrasting tones of the previous scenes while maintaining the authorial height she looked for throughout the text. April's fate has already been assigned is correct yet not in a way that presupposes or disrupts narrative causality; the tragedy, as ever with Yates, is implied throughout the text.⁶⁸ The fact Yates doesn't provide April with a narrative voice until this point thus forces the reader to return to the previous scene, aware, at this point, that her response to the computer diagram Frank sketches—"It's really sort of interesting, isn't it?"—was feigned. The absence of authorial commentary or retrospective account to detail her thoughts leading up to the abortion concentrates the reader's attention on what preceded the event. Taken in isolation, Yates' treatment of April's abortion represents, as Halliwell identifies,

⁶⁵ Halliwell (2013), p 164.

⁶⁶ Halliwell (2013), p 165.

⁶⁷ Halliwell (2013), p 165.

⁶⁸ In his manuscript for the novel, Yates makes it clear that April's death will be foreshadowed throughout, writing in a note dated 2 April 1959: "Prepare for April's death in chapt.2 by having Frank actively think of it when he sees the "milky shape" of the house after taking Mrs. Lurdguist home. He has already thought of it earlier, when she jumps out of the car: now he could think of it again and it could be said that he'd always worried about it—that she'd often looked and talked like someone destined for it, etc. This will plant the idea in the readers' mind." The Richard Yates Collection.

one of the few instances of literature at the time tackling a troubling subject. Before the novel's release, the scene troubled potential publishers, which, as covered in the introduction, brought about the request that Yates should 'tone down his tragic plan' before they would consider accepting the manuscript. Significantly, Yates felt this was the best scene he had ever written and revealed his satisfaction with it in his interview with Geoffrey Clark and DeWitt Henry: "I think maybe the breakfast between Frank and April, just before he takes off for work, on the day she dies. I've always thought that came off nicely."⁶⁹

The Threat of the Femme Fatale

As suggested, Cold War ideology pertained to and insisted upon the sanctity of the nuclear family, fixed gender roles, and sexual restraint. If anything, the normativity upheld could be viewed as an anxious move to disguise the numerous sexual transgressions and domestic tensions that were simmering beneath the ideological front and, as is apparent, this impression of conservatism obscures evidence of increased sexual activity throughout the decade. Female sexual activity became the focus of Kinsey's second work, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), which shifted the emphasis on male agency to include details of the sexual activities and appetites of women. Kinsey found that men were at their most virile during their late teens; a point at which they peak sexually before the need for sexual activity gradually drops. This contrasted with the female's sexual appetite, which, according to Kinsey, remained high throughout adulthood.⁷⁰ *Newsweek*, which reported the findings, stated: "Females are most sexually responsive in their late 20s and early 30s, and their capacity remains more or less constant into their 50s and 60s."⁷¹ The suggestion that women outpaced men sexually brought with it combined recognition of female sexual appetite. Within ten days of its publication, Kinsey's report sold 185,000 copies, highlighting the widespread interest in the sexual behaviour of women.⁷²

The recognition of female sexual desire also became drawn into a Cold War narrative. Just as homosexuality was linked to a threat of national disloyalty (and therefore open to Communist infiltration) concerns about female sexuality converged upon political discourse. As Courdileone identifies, conservative anti-Communism, with its "language of

⁶⁹ Ploughshares (1972).

⁷⁰ Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* Part II, particularly chapters 8, 9 & 10 (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁷¹ Qtd in Cohan (1997), p 58.

⁷² Donna J. Drucker, *The Classification of Sex: Alfred Kinsey and the Organization of Knowledge* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), p 142.

sexual deviance and perversion,” was characterised by a particular strain of “masculine bravado” and “scorn for feminine attributes.” Such rhetoric, that which also vilified “pinks,” “lavenders” and “reds,” also generated real anxieties about Communism and sexual disorder in America.⁷³ May furthers this connection to suggest that the projection of national strength depended on the “ability of manly men to stand up against Communist threats.” This depended not just on a strong social policy but managing to contain any sign of sexual depravity, as “sexual excesses or degeneracy would make individuals easy prey for Communist tactics.”⁷⁴ If the threat of female sexual excess could be contained, this would also help to negate the possibility of Communist infiltration. The relationship between an unwieldy female libido and a type of atomic Armageddon remained in sensationalist and political discourse, a connection that Benjamin Shapiro nicely summarises when documenting America’s military actions: “The bomb dropped on Bikini Island, for example, was itself nicknamed for *femme fatale* ‘Gilda’ and adorned with a picture of Rita Hayworth.”⁷⁵

Returning to Kinsey’s findings on the sexual appetite of women, Helen Mayer Hacker, in her 1957 article for *Marriage and Family Living*, identified the contemporary male’s status as lover as his principal issue. Hacker writes, “Virility used to be conceived as a unilateral expression of male sexuality, but is regarded today in terms of the ability to evoke a full sexual response on the part of the female.”⁷⁶ The changing indexes of power are represented by the “sexual emancipation of women,” which now required men to seek from women the “assurance that they are satisfied.”⁷⁷ In *The American Male* (1966), Myron Brenton traces a similar trajectory, arguing that contemporary man must recognise the changing parameters of sexual satisfaction. Its opening chapter, “The Male in Crisis,” states that sexual inadequacy is a constant worry for men: “The contemporary male faces sexual responsibilities far exceeding those of men in earlier times. He must gratify himself and his sexual partner.”⁷⁸ Brenton views the masculine crisis as the American male’s commitment to antiquated versions of patriarchy—the “age-old image of the male as provider, protector, and possessor”—which encloses them in a cultural “straitjacket” (a term he uses on several occasions in the text).⁷⁹ The author suggests that this traditional

⁷³ Cuordiolene (2005), p 39.

⁷⁴ May (1998), p 94.

⁷⁵ Qtd in John E. Connor and Peter Rollins. Ed. *Why We Fought: America’s War in Films and History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), p 352.

⁷⁶ Helen Mayer Hacker, “The New Burdens of Masculinity” *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (August 1957), p 231.

⁷⁷ Hacker (1957), p 231.

⁷⁸ Myron Brenton, *The American Male* (Fawcett Publications: Incorporated, 1970), p 28.

⁷⁹ Brenton (1970), p 18.

image must be reconciled with the “democratic present,” where men must learn to cope with sexually liberated women. While this certainly contributed to the heightened awareness around women’s sexual desire, it also placed a stronger emphasis on sexual satisfaction—for both husband and wife—within marriage. This is complicated somewhat by the fact there remained a stigma attached to those who engaged in pre-marital sex and a cultural obsession with female virginity, as May explains: “In spite of the increasing emphasis on sexual gratification, the double standard of sexual morality was still alive and well in the postwar era.”⁸⁰

The sexual ambiguities uncovered can explain, in part, why there was a continued reconstitution and awareness surrounding gender politics of the postwar era. It also primes the discussion as to how the focus on and attention to female sexual desire progressed into the 1960s. As outlined, historians such as Stephanie Coontz, Morris Dickstein and Wini Breines have all identified the 1950s as priming the cultural revolutions of the following decade, the contradictions and complexities of which formed the catalyst to the sexual freedom of the 1960s. The significance of a gendered analysis of 1950s culture stretches beyond the decade in question, with many critical studies identifying its sexual politics as giving the initial momentum to the second wave of feminism. For Breines, we must look at the point before “all hell, that is, the 1960s, broke loose.”⁸¹ It is clear, too, how this was contingent upon and intertwined with concerns over male sexuality, particularly the suggestion that the contemporary male may not be as voracious as once believed. We can see how the elevated recognition of female desire was framed within a broader postwar narrative, again with a constraining impulse. Just as female domestication and the stress on reproduction were codified in terms of reifying the familial normative throughout the 1950s, so connections were drawn between an unwieldy female libido and the threat of atomic destruction.

Female Sexuality in *The Easter Parade*

Leading into the 1960s, the patterns of sexual behavior, and specifically the anxiety that surrounded female sexuality, run throughout *The Easter Parade*, the only novel in Yates’ oeuvre in which the narrative focuses solely on two female protagonists, Sarah and Emily

⁸⁰ May (1988), p 122.

⁸¹ Breines (2001), p 1.

Grimes.⁸² Even though *The Easter Parade* touches upon broader issues of female employment, abortion, and domestic violence, Yates concentrates more forcefully on Emily's sexual relationships. The narrative is framed through Emily's perspective yet scenes focus more heavily on the agency of the male characters, with the first two sexual episodes in the text undermined by exploitation and unfulfillment. During the first, Emily loses her virginity to a soldier on leave, an encounter that is barely consensual, frenzied and results in her vomiting. Emily later meets Andrew Crawford, a relationship that is underscored by male impotence and verbal abuse. Prior to their first attempt at having intercourse, Yates provides a preliminary indication of Crawford's lack of sexual virility by characterising his actions in highly affectionate and feminised terms: "he seemed to enjoy just hugging and kissing, which he accompanied with soft little moans" (58). Following this, it becomes apparent that he is unable to maintain an erection: deflated, Crawford heaves himself from the bed, and "looked so dejected that she put her arms around him from behind" (59). After he seeks counselling, Crawford eventually returns to Emily, yet his sexual problems persist. Despite a summer in which his performance had been "adequate," Crawford suffers the humiliation of prematurely ejaculating on Emily's leg, before falling into her arms in tears (71). This precedes the most sexually graphic scene in the text as Crawford attempts to shift the emphasis from his own impotence to that of Emily's (supposed) licentiousness. He accuses her, firstly, of entertaining sexual fantasies about her brother-in-law, Tony: "I'll bet you masturbated over him. Didn't you? Oh, I'll bet you tickled your little nipples until they came up hard, and then..." (75). This is followed by an even more explicit attack:

Oh, I suppose I love it too, at least God knows I try to, but at the same time I hate it. I hate what it put me through last year—what it's putting me through now. I hate your sensitive little tits. I hate your ass and your hips, the way they move and turn; I hate your thighs, the way they open up. I hate your waist and your belly and your great hairy mound and your clitoris and your whole slippery cunt. (76)

The outbursts appear in quick succession and it is apparent they are Crawford's violent articulations of his own sexual failures; the first accusation questions—wholly irrationally—Emily's sexual fidelity, while the verbal attack on her body is abusive and

⁸² Yates does, however, have a female narrator in a couple of his short stories, and an "Evening on the Côte d'Azur" springs to mind. One of Yates' earliest pieces, the narrative is focalised at first through Betty, a navy wife who is stationed in Cannes with her children while her husband is away. The piece sees Betty, bored and unloved, have a one night stand with a charming sailor. We find out in the closing stages that the man retains all of the addresses of the woman he has slept with in a black book and always gives them a false name).

crudely graphic. This is one of the scenes of which Charlton-Jones is most critical, claiming that Yates' references to female genitalia presented through the prism of "male anger and peep-show distaste" are what "affords the opportunity for some gratuitous, semi pornographic images."⁸³ Further, the critic suggests this is used as a 'cheap device to shock,' and creates an undeniable example of "voyeurism in his narrative position" that is difficult to ignore.⁸⁴ Nick Fraser takes a similar position, suggesting that *The Easter Parade* underlines the author's stance as an "anti-feminist, grandly patronising women in the old style."⁸⁵

I would argue, however, that these readings misapprehend Yates' intention. The scene arrives immediately following Crawford's final sexual humiliation and the outbursts should be read as irrational and violent reactions that seek to justify his own sexual insecurities, not an attack on female sexuality or feminism. Even considering Crawford's persistent sexual problems, such a response is at odds with his character (particularly when taking into account the scene of affection between the pair and the fact Crawford undergoes counseling), and jars the narrative due to how misplaced the comments are. As suggested in the opening chapter, Yates wants us to look beyond a surface reading of his dialogue, and this must serve as a prime example in which Crawford's outburst serves to obscure or mask what is really occurring in the scene. This counter-interpretation shouldn't be read as an apologia or justification for an outburst that could be read as gratuitous or misplaced, but to offer an analysis that suggests it should be read in line with Yates' more acute take on the dynamics between his characters and how he wants their dialogue to function within his work.

We see a similar type of linguistic transference in *Revolutionary Road* when Frank attempts (far more dexterously than Crawford) to rationalise his infidelity by blaming April's proposal of abortion, something he believed threatened his masculinity. In this, Yates critiques Frank's misogynistic behaviour by both satirising his narcissism and showing how it is so misplaced. The approach in *The Easter Parade* is slightly more cutting, yet it is precisely through this exposure of attempted male dominance that Yates invites us to condemn Crawford's actions. When taken in isolation, the scene could be viewed as voyeuristic or, with the imagery employed, semi-pornographic. Yet it is apparent that in the other sex scenes in the text, Yates avoids the use of graphic or

⁸³ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 185.

⁸⁴ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 186.

⁸⁵ Fraser (2008).

titillating imagery. The most sustained descriptive passage occurs when Emily meets Lars Ericson, her most rewarding sexual partners, in the aftermath of her first break-up with Crawford. This is the first time she encounters any form of sexual satisfaction or parity with a man: “It drove her slowly and steadily into a long-sustained delirium for which the only possible expression was a scream; it left her weak and panting and feeling like a woman, waiting for more” (64). Indeed, in the most passionate sexual scene in the text, Yates refrains from crude or semi-pornographic language, while the imagery is neither for the purpose of titillation or unnecessarily graphic.

As such, the manner in which Crawford reproaches and attacks Emily is so obtuse and jarring that it should not be read in sexualised terms; the language employed serves as a form of humiliation and assault rather than gratuitous erotica. In her assessment of the text, Charlton-Jones stresses the voyeuristic tendencies Yates exhibits towards women, a feature which she links to Jerome Klinkowitz’s claim that the boys in Yates’ fiction “peep up their skirts.”⁸⁶ Charlton-Jones concedes that Yates is perhaps looking to highlight these sexualised attacks in order to hold the individuals up for criticism, yet argues that he can only ever be seen to be partially successful as the outbursts “are so poorly integrated into the sequence of events” that they create a palpable imbalance in what is, normally, a rigidly controlled narrative.⁸⁷ Certainly Crawford’s outbursts are explosive and seem rather jarring in the context of what is a tightly woven narrative but in this way they take the form of an intrusion, both to the reader and Emily. Yates employs this technique to elicit a particular response. To align Crawford’s outburst with Yates’, or indeed detect anything instructive in his verbal attacks is to conflate the character’s voice with the author’s. The lack of authorial commentary in this passage should not be construed as an implicit approval of gratuitous behaviour; rather, it is through this void Yates invites his readers to critique Crawford’s outbursts.

Yates’ Impotent Men

Anxiety surrounding sexual failure recurs in Yates’ fiction, particularly his later work. In *Young Hearts Crying*, Michael Davenport suffers a series of unfulfilling evenings with Mary Fontana, the first of which is likened to “a couple of laborers engaged in a subtle, self-defeating job.”⁸⁸ Moving through a number of tender scenes—drying each other after

⁸⁶ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 192.

⁸⁷ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 187.

⁸⁸ Yates (2005), p 279.

showering, long, slouching walks—Davenport resolves that even if ‘revulsion and disdain’ were appropriate feelings for a man who “couldn’t get it up” then at least he could infuse their relationship with love.⁸⁹ When she pretends to climax, Davenport recognises Mary’s performance is inspired by pity:

The trouble was that he could tell she was faking it; she'd said it only because of all the times he'd told her he loved her. She felt sorry for him; she wanted to give him something to keep on his last night - and in the very few seconds it took him to understand all that he shrivelled and fell out of her. (287)

Davenport’s co-dependence brings with it an emotional investment that has influenced his physical performance. Mary’s concession that she wanted to give Davenport something to keep, a sexual souvenir, is an attempted act of clemency that stresses the scene’s desperation. Yates returns to the theme in *Uncertain Times* as Bill Grove, again an older man, fails to make love to his secretary, Holly Parsons. Before their first night together, Grove looks to comfort Holly, who is a virgin and worried the whole night will require a performance. Grove, stroking her back, reassures her, “You won't have to be any kind of actress at all. We'll just go upstairs and be tender and nice with each other.”⁹⁰ The evening, however, turns out to be “long, tense, unsatisfactory,” with Grove failing to climax on two occasions. Despite his disappointing performance, Holly tells him: “You were awfully tired and I was all virginal and strange, and I thought the way you made love to me was marvellous. Really.”⁹¹ The sexual dynamic is thus inverted as Holly assumes the more senior, reassuring role. Relieved by such kinds words, Grove had “never been more grateful for anyone’s generosity.” Yet, as Grove’s problems persist, the significance of his impotence becomes apparent: during another sex scene, Grove feels he is about to reach climax, “Oh, yes, there. There. Now you're my girl...Or no, wait. Oh, Jesus.” Holly questions Grove on this the morning after, seeking qualification on the ‘my girl’ utterance, “why do you think I have to have some giant orgasm before I can be your girl.”⁹² For Grove, sexual validation, as Holly recognises, aligns with a form of ownership.

There are a number of features that overlap in both novels that require attention. Firstly, Davenport and Grove are unable to sexually satisfy their partners and become dependent on reassurance about their impotence. Both men attempt to obscure their lack of

⁸⁹ Yates (2005), p 283.

⁹⁰ Manuscript of *Uncertain Times*, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁹¹ Manuscript of *Uncertain Times*, page number noted as 128, The Richard Yates Collection.

⁹² Manuscript of *Uncertain Times*, page number noted as 131. The Richard Yates Collection.

virility through performance: Davenport cultivates a flat, jaded voice like Humphrey Bogart's, "If he couldn't be a man for her, at least he could be a character."⁹³ Grove, who resolves that he "might still have a way with words," evokes JFK's rhetoric when he tells Holly she is "a whole new frontier of a girl." Recognising its iteration, she replies, "That's awfully funny and sweet, only I bet you rehearsed it."⁹⁴ It is clear that Yates' men look to obscure their failed masculinity through the guise of different roles. This idea of performance is further complicated by the fact women are compelled to adopt a part too; Mary unsuccessfully feigns an orgasm, while Holly—who had been told by her friend that she was going to "feel like an actress" when she loses her virginity—is forced to become the more sexually mature member of the two, a part she didn't anticipate. Consummation is equated with control yet in both scenes this isn't realised; Davenport is unable to perform, while Holly questions the grounds on which Grove terms her "his girl." Finally, both men connect their impotence with mental instability: Davenport ponders whether he will have to "spend years in psychoanalysis" to locate the source of his problem (283). Grove, meanwhile, visits a doctor in an attempt to treat his sexual dysfunction—what he terms as "hormone imbalance"—only to be told that his problems are psychological and he must seek a different referral. The shifting dynamics that underpin both scenes exhibit Yates' recognition of the sexual insecurities of his male characters and are in many ways an extension of the theme—male figure who seeks reassurance, attempts to domesticate female sexuality, equating impotence with psychological problems—found in *The Easter Parade*. The extremity with which these surface in *The Easter Parade* represents a distinct departure from the sensitivity with which Yates treated the subject in his other texts. Unlike *Young Hearts Crying* and *Uncertain Times*, Yates gives very little narrative space to justify Crawford's behaviour, an absence that further stresses how it is both misplaced and abusive.

Moving through the 1960s

Revisionist accounts of the second wave of feminism have identified the 1950s as the point at which the United States' sexual politics witnessed their most profound transformations. While a metaphoric leap has been traced between the two, namely the "cultural vibrancy, bold social experimentation" of the 1960s and the "stolid cultural, social, and political conservatism" attributed to the 1950s, it is clear that the decades can not be demarcated so

⁹³ Yates (2005), p. 281.

⁹⁴ Manuscript of *Uncertain Times*, both references from page number noted as 127, The Richard Yates Collection.

distinctly.⁹⁵ Towards the end of *The Easter Parade*, Yates outlines the cultural shift, showing how Emily's feminist ideology precedes that of the late 60s. Attending a dinner party in the hope of finding a new partner, the evening brings a surprise visit to a masturbation studio, owned by the host's neighbour. Entering the room, Emily is taken aback by the "life-sized renderings of open vaginas" all of which are intricately detailed (216). Her discomfort is apparent, evidenced in her rash exit and concern that if she didn't do so, she would be asked to enrol in classes. This experience is nicely bookended in one of the final exchanges in the text. Peter, Emily's nephew, tells her:

"You know something, Aunt Emmy? I've thought of you often since this Women's Lib movement began. You've always struck me as the original liberated woman."

"Liberated from what?"

"Well, you know—from the old, outmoded sociological concepts of what a woman's role should be." (221)

Peter's reference to Women's Lib, followed by that of the "outmoded sociological concepts," verbally distinguishes the two separate yet connected movements. Emily's discomfort, or incompatibility even, with the new wave of feminism is apparent during the masturbation scene, and is further demarcated by Peter's claim that she is the "original liberated woman"; a flattering way to suggest she belongs to a different generation. Charlton-Jones feels Yates' focus on onanism should be seen, again, as an expression of his revulsion towards female sexuality. She argues, "it is impossible to ignore the suggestion that the narrative voice resents the fact that women's fingers can perform a function that the flaccid penises of Yates's frequently impotent men cannot."⁹⁶ Such a suggestion fails to recognise how the masturbation scene acts as a bridging point between the two movements in female sexual politics and separates Emily from its more progressive faction. It also reflects Emily's sexual disillusionment in the text; after a series of failed relationships, she is presented with a new opportunity of sexual gratification, but this is an articulation from which she feels she is isolated.

In its exploration of female sexuality, with two female protagonists, *The Easter Parade* has all of the thenatic and topical features that suggest the novel could stand out as the most politically, or sexually, radical in the author's oeuvre. It presents, however, a number of distinct problems that forestall any claims of it being entirely progressive, and it

⁹⁵ Ward (2009), p 8 & 9

⁹⁶ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 186.

seems Yates clearly knew that the novel wouldn't be categorised as such. Shortly after the publication of *The Easter Parade*, author Geoffrey Clark invited Yates to do a reading of the novel to his creative writing class. Yates, hesitant as to how the female members of the room would react to the text, politely declined: "Thanks for the invitation, but I'll shy away. Every time I meet one of your classes I make a horse's ass of myself, and that tendency would be rampantly worse if I were given a chance to 'explain' *The Easter Parade* to a roomful of girls."⁹⁷ The conclusion of the novel is, in relation to what it initially promises at least, somewhat conservative. We have, at one end of the spectrum, Andrew Crawford, Emily's impotent husband prone to graphic sexual outbursts. On the other, the more brutish Tony, who exacts dominance over Sarah through domestic violence. Upon hearing of the sustained abuse her sister has been subjected to, Emily confronts Tony, "you bullying, wife-beating bastard," followed by, "You're a pig. And I swear—are you listening to me? I swear to God if you ever touch my sister again I'll—kill you" (150; 151). For all that Emily's vocal and vociferous defence silences Tony, the scene closes on a rather mute note. Having been presented by her sister with the opportunity of leaving Tony and the offer of a place to stay, Sarah declines on the basis that she is too afraid to leave her husband.

Perhaps more cutting to a scene that is, initially, a fairly impassioned defence against domestic violence, the narration concedes the fact Emily is "relieved" by Sarah's decision to stay with her husband, simply so she can have her "days and nights" free for Michael Hogan (156). When Sarah does finally make the decision to leave her husband—after another fierce beating—Emily urges her to stay, suggesting that she will be unable to find employment in New York. This feeling of desertion is compounded during their last meeting, when Emily makes an unscheduled detour to visit her sister. Emily, when visiting her Sarah shortly after her return from hospital, is shocked to find her sister housebound, with cropped hair, a half-collapsed face, pestering her son to play a song on the guitar he learnt as a child. We are told, shortly after, of Sarah's death, caused by a longstanding liver ailment and "complicated by a fall" (185).

Sarah's sad, alcohol-ridden face has its fiercest impact on the reader in light of Emily's gradual acceptance of the domestic violence to which her sister was subjected. Emily's initial condemnation subsides, not simply due to a lack of affection for her sister, but to ensure that she can fully commit time to her partner. At the funeral, and after being

⁹⁷ Letter to Geoffrey Clark, dated 7 November 1977. The Richard Yates Collection.

informed of the police investigation into her sister's death, Emily decides against confronting Tony. Emily's pacification is, when we consider her early protestations, a troubling feature of *The Easter Parade*. On one level, perhaps, the very physical assaults Sarah suffers can be seen as a counterpoint to the verbal abuse Emily is forced to confront from Andrew Crawford, and then the psychological bruising and debasement she endures from Howard Dunninger. Charlton-Jones is, then, correct in her estimation that Sarah's relationship with Tony Wilson exhibits Yates' sensitivity to and understanding of the "vulnerability of women *within* marriage."⁹⁸ The text only explores the dynamics of domestic violence from a distance—namely through Emily's perspective—and fails adequately to convey Sarah's desperation or isolation within the relationship. Unlike Crawford's graphic outburst, which is narrated in the present and invites, as I've suggested, a critical stance from the reader, we are never transported to the scene of Sarah's abuse as it occurs. As such, the reaction is somewhat diluted, lacking both urgency (in terms of its retrospective telling) and agency (due to the narrative distance we have from Sarah).

It could be argued, perhaps, that her situation is more widely symbolic of the marginalised position of women at the time; Sarah is only able to turn to her sister, who, as independent as she is, struggles to live a life that is not dependent upon men: the alternatives open to both are therefore severely limited. Jerome Klinkowitz feels Yates' strategy of employing a female protagonist ultimately illustrates Emily's passivity in the text and exposes her lack of agency in a male-dominated society; throughout the novel, her actions are, for Klinkowitz, "rarely self-directed." For all that her life displays the characteristics of independence, this is purely in appearance as her objectives are always "tied to the initiatives of a man."⁹⁹ Her excluded position becomes ever more visible as Yates' novel makes its inexorable passage towards loneliness: as a middle-aged woman, Emily accepts "there would be no more parties; the prospect of happiness is always equated with finding a partner" (216). The first line of the text, "Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life," looms over the novel and outlines the direction in which the sisters' lives will move (1). Yet, prefiguring the conclusion—or final tone of the novel—is, as outlined in the introduction, a familiar trope of Yates' work and the theme of entrapment is stressed throughout *The Easter Parade*. This is at its most apparent when Emily visits her sister at the state hospital and they discuss the prospect of Sarah leaving her husband to find work in New York. The conversation then makes an elliptical jump to

⁹⁸ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 154.

⁹⁹ Klinkowitz (1998), p 46.

the fact their mother is staying in the same hospital, and Emily asks if she knows where she is being treated, only to realise the foolishness of the question: “How could Sarah know the location of any other building when she was locked into this one?” (175). As the metaphor dawns on Emily, Yates makes it clear that Sarah will be subjected to the same confinement as her mother.

It is not inconceivable to suggest that the conservative outcome of *The Easter Parade* is a frank way of articulating the struggles women would have encountered throughout the decade: both of the sisters are, ultimately, trapped, unable to break free from either an abusive husband or unsuccessful as an independent woman. Without a definitive didacticism at its core, the abiding message of the novel is difficult to decipher. This approach aligns with how Yates consistently refrains from conveying a definitive ideological message within his novels, yet, as apparent in *Young Hearts Crying*, the author allows his characters a lasting word through their own writing. In Yates’ penultimate novel, Michael Davenport, the once successful writer, returns to the process of literary composition to firstly keep him from returning to Bellevue, then to present his wife Sarah with an ultimatum. As will be further explored in the following chapter, Davenport returns to writing to articulate his thoughts, to bookend his experience within Bellevue; a therapeutic measure to help him come to terms with his mental illness. In *The Easter Parade*, we see Emily compose and draft two articles, both of which remain unfinished. Working through the first piece—in a manner that shares many similarities with Yates’ writing process; pencilled paragraphs, countless cigarettes, scribbles in the margin—Emily settles on the title, ‘ABORTION: A WOMAN’S VIEW’ (81). Not quite satisfied, she stores the article in a cardboard box and the typewriter hidden away. Towards the end of the novel, Emily returns to writing again, this time to the subject of female unemployment. The article details her previous professional fields—librarian, journalist, and copywriter—yet she is currently unable to find work. As an older woman who has now come to the end of unemployment compensation and about to receive welfare benefits, Emily feels she is approaching “all too fashionable self-pity” (211). Like the previous piece, the article isn’t completed and she leaves the paper in the typewriter “curled and sun-bleached and gathering dust” (211). There is a sense that, like the two unfinished articles, *The Easter Parade* has, in effect, aborted a more radical position on feminism.

In her assessment of the author’s treatment of gender in the postwar era, Charlton-Jones asserts that Yates’ “considerations are never primarily driven by ideological matters

but are the result of the way patterns of change impinged on his own life.”¹⁰⁰ Biographical parallels, with Yates, are never difficult to locate: a reading of *A Tragic Honesty* makes connecting Yates’ life to that of his fiction an easy task. It is clear, for example, that Sarah Grimes is based on Yates’ sister Ruth, who suffered years of domestic abuse but never left her husband.¹⁰¹ Yates’ impotent men are, by all accounts, reflections of the sexual problems the author encountered at end of the 1970s.¹⁰² It is not hard, either, to find examples of misogyny in his fiction that have been taken directly from his life. In *Uncertain Times*, for example, Holly Parsons asks Bill Grove if he’s “one of those men with a thing about driving?”¹⁰³ Grove claims he isn’t and allows Holly to drive, watching her steer and shift gears with ease. Upon leaving the restaurant, Grove demands the keys and when his companion asks why, he replies: “Just because. I am one of those men with a thing about driving.”¹⁰⁴ Bailey tells of how, behind the wheel, Yates became a “cartoonish stereotype of masculinity.” Yates was at best a shaky driver and this became a point of contention between him and his first wife Sheila, who recognised her husband’s insecurity. Bailey recounts a scene in which the pair argued about how to turn on the car heater: when Sheila proved to be correct, Yates fumed: “Well, cut my penis off!”¹⁰⁵ Bailey also posits that Yates possessed a lifelong fear of being thought of as homosexual, a belief that is upheld when we consider his reaction to lunching with Tennessee Williams. Yates, convinced that the effeminate photo of him in *Revolutionary Road* was the sole reason behind the invitation, was apprehensive of the playwright’s motives. After what was a fairly uneventful and platonic lunch, Yates insisted that the jacket of upcoming publication *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* showed him to be “ballsy.”¹⁰⁶ This is strengthened by other instances of homophobic behaviour—Yates was appalled when his daughter suggested she might enlist, as “Everyone in the army is lesbians.”¹⁰⁷

At the same time, however, lifting a definitive ideological dictate from an author’s biography confuses and conflates the two environments, a fact of which Yates seemed very much aware. In his interview with *Ploughshares*, the author was asked if he was against abortion, to which he replied: “Oh, no. I am very distinctly for legalized abortion...But one’s political considerations don’t have much to do with one’s fiction, really.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 152.

¹⁰¹ Bailey (2003), p 291.

¹⁰² Bailey (2003), p 485.

¹⁰³ Manuscript of *Uncertain Times*, page number noted as 111, The Richard Yates Collection.

¹⁰⁴ Manuscript of *Uncertain Times*, page number noted as 116, The Richard Yates Collection.

¹⁰⁵ Bailey (2003), p 172.

¹⁰⁶ Bailey (2003), p 255.

¹⁰⁷ Charlton-Jones (2014), p 155.

¹⁰⁸ *Ploughshares* (1972).

Admittedly, Yates may have been guilty of misogyny in his life but this does not suggest he wanted to use fiction as the platform to justify his misogynistic actions. As the two driving anecdotes illustrate, Yates and Grove are, behind the wheel, aware of how ridiculously stereotyped they become, but more so, we can also detect how this hyper-male personas mask and or born out of their respective insecurities. To push further the ambiguous space of political considerations and fictional work, there are scenes from Yates' life that contradict any reading of the author as homophobic. As Bailey and Naparsteck identify, Yates greatly respected his agent Monica McCall, who was a lesbian, and named his daughter after her. There are also some instances of latent homosocial behaviour in his work¹⁰⁹, most clearly *A Good School*, the novel opens with a detailed description of the muscular Terry Flynn, who, is presented to us—from the perspective, at this point, of an unnamed narrator—as entering the show, where “every bulge and cord and ripple of him was outlined as if by the bite of a classical sculptor’s chisel.”¹¹⁰ Throughout the novel, there are scenes of homosexuality too, as the students take turns at stripping and masturbating, at first, Grove, and then one of the other pupils. While it is unclear whether these are examples of homosexual behavior or sexual awakening, or if they are symptomatic of the repressive boarding school environment in which the novel is set, if Yates did possess this strident fear of being labelled homosexual, it is strange that he would include scenes of that nature within his work. Yates may have held fairly conservative views on gender, marriage and sexuality, yet there are points in his fiction when he can be seen to adopt a progressive position on each topic.

Masculinity in Crisis

Yates' depiction of his male characters sexual insecurities, infidelities and anxieties surrounding the increasing sexual freedom of their partners has broader significance when placed in relation to the decline American men were perceived to have suffered in the postwar era. The chorus of Arthur Schlesinger's proclamation that American masculinity had reached a point of crisis has become delineative of historical accounts concerning the descent of 1950's American manhood. Yet such an approach suggests American masculinity had never before confronted a conflicted impasse. E. Anthony Rotundo's *American Manhood* (1994) stands as one of the first studies to explore this assumption by

¹⁰⁹ Although homosocial bonding is never really a recurring relationship for Yates' male characters, there are exceptions when we look at the interactions of the platoon in “Jody Rolled the Bones” and the men in the VA hospital in “A Clinical Romance.”

¹¹⁰ Yates (2007), p 9.

challenging an essentialist reading of American masculinity. Rotundo shows how the construction of masculinity can be traced through several stages in American history, beginning with a “communal manhood” in colonial America, the Revolutionary Era brought about a “self-made” conception, through to a “passionate manhood” in the 20th century.¹¹¹ Historian Bryce Traister traces a similar trajectory and details how this transformation is often accompanied by American masculinity representing itself in crisis.¹¹² From the late 1880s through to post World War I, middle-class male identity was seen to be undergoing a “nervous search” in response to the re-structuring of public life and the disintegration of traditional values.¹¹³ This language of crisis implies, too, that there was a point at which American manhood enjoyed a period of blissful serenity. Judith Kegan Gardiner argues that this is a recurring feature in masculine studies: “Masculinity crisis falsifies history by implying there was once a golden time of unproblematic, stable gender.”¹¹⁴ Popular talk of crisis, Gardiner contends, looks to gather attention around the subject while remaining vague about the alleged problem. Sally Robinson picks up on a similar point to Rotundo and argues that the language of crisis is often employed as a “ruse of white patriarchy,” whereby the male victim exploits the disempowered and victimised voice to reappropriate forms of control.¹¹⁵ The significance of this rhetoric is such that American manhood is always perceived as being in an exigent state of disintegration; Schlesinger’s definition of the era, in this light, can be seen as an echo of every other (male) generational crisis.

In “Locating Masculinity: Some Recent Work on Men” (2005), Robert Nye develops this conceptualisation of perpetual crisis, arguing that masculinity is in a constant state of “reconsolidation,” with an “endless capacity for reinventing and reaffirming gender difference.”¹¹⁶ In this respect, there can be no resolution to the quest or crisis because masculinity is in a constant state of reimagining itself in opposition to or in relation to an other. A contemporary revisionist approach to the postwar era shows that American manhood is, like the generations that preceded it, involved in a similar pattern of negotiation. Yates displays very little recognition of or indulgence in discussion of

¹¹¹ E. Anthony Rotundo *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p 7.

¹¹² Bryce Traister, “Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Volume 52, Number 2 (June 2000), p 274-304.

¹¹³ Gaylyn Studar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p 25.

¹¹⁴ Gardiner (2002), p 14.

¹¹⁵ Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p 8.

¹¹⁶ Robert A. Nye, “Locating Masculinity: Some Recent Work on Men,” *Signs*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Spring 2005), p 1939.

masculine crisis; he is more inclined to critique his male characters' narcissism than display any compassion for their supposed plight. His literature doesn't necessarily debunk the narrative of a masculine crisis but poses insistent questions about the grounds on which men attempt to reaffirm or reassert power, a process that he seeks to uncover and expose. Studies such as Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Culture History* (1996) and more recently Gilbert's *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1960s* (2005) have reignited an interest in the gendered relations of the postwar era, with both reclaiming a more progressive legacy and outlook on American masculinity at this time. My assessment adopts a reading that is in accordance with recent accounts of postwar American culture that have revisited and reformulated the conflicted sexual relations of the 1950s and 1960s. Yates' concentration, throughout, remains on men but to suggest that this is a binary approach negates the affective response his literature demands. This approach provides the vehicle through which he can explore the conflicting and often contradictory gender dynamics of the era. Moving through *Revolutionary Road* and *The Easter Parade*, Yates provides a progressive outline of the sexual politics that underpinned American culture leading up to the sexual revolution of the late 1960s. As such, his work can be seen to reframe our comprehension of American masculinity to show how it was contingent upon the evolving role of women in the postwar era.

CHAPTER FIVE

Defining Mental Illness in *Revolutionary Road* and *Disturbing the Peace*

“It's the second anniversary of that day in your office, and still no more Eve White and no more Eve Black.”¹

“Sigmund Fucking Freud!”²

In Nunnally Johnson's *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), Joanne Woodward plays a character who suffers from multiple personality disorder. The film, based on a 1954 study by psychiatrists Corbett H. Thigpen and Hervey M. Cleckley, sees Woodward alternate between three different roles.³ Initially focused on the unassuming housewife Eve White, the narrative unfolds to reveal Eve Black, who is eventually admitted to an asylum, before finally uncovering a third personality, Jane. With help from her psychiatrist, Curtis Luther, the woman is able to separate herself from the two other characters to return to her original identity as Jane. Aside from the praise Woodward received—she would go on to win an Academy Award for Best Actress—the film was released at a time when there was considerable attention paid to the therapeutic treatment of mental illness. The film's conclusion, which sees Dr. Curtis Luther successfully restore Eve to one unified identity, is representative of the elevated status psychiatry, and particularly the practice of psychoanalysis, enjoyed during the 1950s.⁴ Throughout this time, psychoanalysis emerged as a reputable and progressive diagnostic approach to mental illness. Just as the practice looked to consolidate its position in the medical field, it established a strong and favourable sociocultural image with particularly positive on-screen portrayals.

In his study tracing the trajectory of psychoanalytic influence in America during the 20th century, Nathan Hale suggests there was a “golden age of Hollywood films about psychiatry and psychoanalysis” following the Freud centennial.⁵ From the mid-to-late 1950s, psychoanalytic influence peaked, with psychiatrists frequently portrayed as

¹ *The Three Faces of Eve*. Dir. by Nunnally Johnson. Perf Joanne Woodward, Lee J. Cobb, David Wayne. 1957.

² Bailey (2003), p 286.

³ Hervey M. Cleckley and Corbett H. Thigpen “A Case of Multiple Personality.” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* Vol. 49 (Jan 1954), p 135-151.

⁴ Nathan G. Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p 246.

⁵ Hale (1995), p 289.

“humane and effective.”⁶ This favourable image, however, proved to be temporary as advancements in drug therapy, plus attacks on the legitimacy and efficacy of psychoanalysis, resulted in the profession coming under serious scrutiny during the early 1960s. As Gerald Grob notes in *Mad Among Us: A History of America’s Mentally Ill* (1994), just as psychoanalytic psychiatry was establishing a form of hegemony, a series of developments—particularly criticism from more biologically orientated specialists—began to erode the foundations of the discipline.⁷ Established works such as Thomas Szasz’s *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1960) and Erving Goffman’s *Asylums* (1960) questioned the theoretical grounding of psychiatry to argue that its very practice functioned as a form of coercion, both a method of social control and a way of validating and developing the profession. Szasz, a renowned psychiatrist who would later receive tenure at the State University of New York, believed mental illness to be a “convenient myth” that is self-serving: the construction of the term serves to create a problem that doesn’t exist.⁸ Mental illness, for Szasz, was a way for psychiatrists to attach a medical explanation to “man’s struggle with the problem of how he should live.”⁹ In *Asylums*, the result of his work as a therapist’s assistant in the 1950s, Goffman investigated the function and behavioural impact of institutionalisation. Goffman argues that the patient’s relationship with the asylum was one that required almost complete submission to the institution and its matrix of power. In this respect, the system, as well as the diagnosis, is again self-serving: by repressing patients’ individuality, the institutions, particularly the professionals operating in them, are upheld and strengthened. The latter stages of the decade brought fresh impetus in the confrontation of institutional oppression, spearheaded by John F. Kennedy’s “bold new approach,” outlined in his special message to congress on mental illness. One of the cornerstones to this would be the reformulation of the patient’s needs, where the “sick could retain their agency and an active place within the community.”¹⁰

Yates’ expletive, “Sigmund Fucking Freud!”, voiced in 1962, neatly captures this obsession with psychoanalysis from the late 1950s and indicates, too, the subsequent disillusionment with psychoanalysis that occurred during the 1960s. Equally, it reveals Yates’ own disdain for and distrust of the profession—a position that is frequently articulated in his fiction. Yates voiced disillusionment two years after his first breakdown, which resulted in his first stay at Bellevue, the psychiatric hospital, and signals the

⁶ Hale (1995), p 289.

⁷ Gerald N. Grob, *Mad Among Us: A History of the Care of America’s Mentally Ill* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p 269.

⁸ Thomas Szasz, “The Myth of Mental Illness,” *American Psychologist*, 15 (1960), p 113.

⁹ Szasz (1960), p 114.

¹⁰ Halliwell (2013), p 199.

beginning of his longstanding issues with mental illness, specifically manic depression. The paired quotations also provide a useful starting point for mapping the changing diagnostic approaches to mental health in postwar America and how Yates' fiction fits within this narrative. Starting with *Revolutionary Road* (1961), mental illness, in the figure of John Givings, is appropriated as a problematic and challenging term. Givings stands in accordance with a literary position that fashioned the crazed madman as a prophetic figure, possessing what Norman Mailer refers to as "psychopathic brilliance."¹¹ As a counter-narrative, we can see how the threat and power of psychoanalysis in the text functions as an undercurrent to Frank and April's relationship. This threat serves as a point of manipulation, as April's mental condition is a product of Frank's projection rather than an admission of her instability. In this, Yates' first novel initiates a dialogue that both addresses the theoretical grounding of mental illness and questions the pervasive power of psychoanalysis. By contrast, in *Disturbing the Peace* (1975), Yates concentrates more forcefully on his protagonist's descent into psychosis: the author repositions his attention to focus on a more specific reading of the material conditions experienced by John Wilder in the healthcare system. The text encompasses a more thorough assessment of institutionalised and psychiatric care in America and recognises the move from mental illness being perceived a condition symptomatic of a restrictive postwar culture. Throughout the novel, Yates paints an extremely bleak picture of custodial care during the 1960s, which is conveyed from a more individualised perspective as Wilder's descent into psychosis is uncovered. This is reflected in the contrasting styles of the texts as Yates moves from the more distanced narration of *Revolutionary Road* to capture Wilder's more intimate and singular experience: beginning with a stay in Bellevue, Wilder moves through the full continuum of therapeutic services, which range from psychoanalysis and drug therapy, to a course of ECT that precedes his final admission to a psychiatric ward. We see this coalesce upon a closing sequence in which Wilder suffers from various degrees of paranoia and hallucinations as he descends into psychosis as Yates constructs an intricate interplay between fiction and reality within the text. This is denoted, in part, by the manner in which Wilder's play, *Bellevue*, begins to supersede and dictate his actions within the primary narrative of *Disturbing the Peace*: a feature that, I will argue, is a synthesis of Yates' attempt to detail Wilder's increasing depersonalisation and evidence of the stylistic modification made by the author to suit his character's condition. As much as *Disturbing the Peace* represents a departure from his opening novel, the text will be viewed as a continuation of Yates' assessment of mental illness moving through the 1960s.

¹¹ Norman Mailer "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster" (1957), Accessed online at <http://www.dhs.fjanosco.net/Documents/TheWhiteNegro.pdf>. [last accessed 6 June 2016].

Revolutionary Road and *Disturbing the Peace* might diverge in their depiction, but they will be viewed as reciprocal in their insistent questioning of mental illness in the postwar era.

Yates and Mental Illness

With reference to Yates' biography, it is clear the author has re-worked and translated his experiences with mental illness into his novels. Yates' first breakdown occurred in 1960, aged 34, when Seymour Epstein forcibly admitted him to Bellevue. Like Paul Borg's appearance in *Disturbing the Peace*, Epstein staged an intervention after Yates' wife, Sheila, entreated him. Following his release from Bellevue, Yates remained adamant that his admission was due to Epstein's closed-mindedness rather than his own manic behaviour. According to Bailey, "Yates blamed his friend for the whole horrific episode—for Epstein's failure in imagination, that is, in being unable to distinguish between 'crazy' and 'crazy.'" ¹² This provides a snapshot of Yates' first visit to Bellevue—the author would suffer several breakdowns during his lifetime—but is also a useful paradigm for interpreting his approach to mental illness prior to the publication of *Revolutionary Road*. From the early-to-mid 1960s, Yates began to place much emphasis on the remedial benefits of drug therapy and, as the opening quote in this chapter indicates, retained this disdain and mistrust of psychoanalysis. The quotation also marks the beginning of what would be a long-standing relationship with Dr. Nathan S. Kline. A firm proponent of drug therapy, Kline became a leading figure in psychopharmacology and spearheaded the use of antipsychotic drugs throughout the decade. ¹³ Just as importantly, in his commitment to psychotropic treatment, Kline contributed to the reshaping of mental illness as a biological rather than psychological condition. As Bailey notes, Yates took great solace in the fact he could be treated for a "chemical imbalance," with Kline's medically orientated approach alleviating some of the stigma attached to the condition. ¹⁴

Since he was unable to quell his excessive drinking, the psychotropic drugs didn't always work to their full effect, meaning Yates continued to suffer from episodes of ill health, including a month long hospitalisation in 1967. By the time of *Young Hearts Crying*'s release, the frequency of Yates' breakdowns had become such a fixture that his

¹² Bailey (2003), p 214.

¹³ Bailey (2003), p 286.

¹⁴ Bailey (2003), p 286.

frantic behaviour was frequent and (relatively) manageable. The extent of this autobiographical connection is furthered as Yates reworks many of the specific details of his psychotic episodes into his later work, particularly *Disturbing the Peace*. It is apparent that, for example, The Second Coming Scene in the text is analogous to a breakdown Yates suffered in 1962 when at a writers' conference: heavily inebriated, the author began to hallucinate that he was the Messiah and believed the students were his disciples. (Yates also used this as the basis for Michael Davenport's drunken hallucinations in *Young Hearts Crying*). This autobiographical context provides two complementary factors that can enhance an assessment of the author's treatment of the subject: Yates' admissions to mental hospitals provided him with first-hand experience of the custodial care on offer to patients at this time, and, like Wilder, situated him directly within the movement from office-based therapy towards psychotropic treatment.

The Development of Psychoanalysis

After costing the treatments of vets from World War I at just over \$1 billion dollars, the government made additional provisions for America's next entry into the battlefield and the psychological effects this would have on soldiers.¹⁵ As a preventative measure, psychiatrists provided training for military personnel and conducted research on the suitability of new recruits. Further, looking ahead, it was recognised that a framework of psychological support would be required for returning veterans. Even though Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) wasn't officially diagnosed until 1980, medics in the 1950s accepted psychoanalysis as an essential measure in countering the traumatic effects of war.¹⁶ This also proved to be a measure to lessen the potential cost of postwar care, with psychiatrists encouraged to advise on the early detection of neuropsychiatric patients.¹⁷ Hospital psychiatrists were somewhat ill-equipped to deal with the illnesses suffered by servicemen (specifically neuroses and psychosomatic disorders), while psychoanalysts, with a more comprehensive grounding in theory and therapy, were seen to

¹⁵ Robert Genter, "We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes": Alfred Hitchcock, American Psychoanalysis, and the Construction of the Cold War Psychopath" *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2010), p 136.

¹⁶ PTSD only appeared as a diagnosis in 1980 when The American Psychiatric Association published the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-III). For more information refer to Wilbur J. Scott "PTSD in DSM-III: A Case in the Politics of Diagnosis and Disease" in *Social Problems* Vol. 37, No. 3 (1990), p 294-310.

¹⁷ It is estimated that the cost of therapeutic treatment from World War I totalled close to \$1 billion. Genter (2010), p 136.

offer a more progressive treatment.¹⁸ This underlined the necessity of the profession in the postwar years and confirmed that issues concerning mental illness were far more prevalent than once believed. As a consequence, the practice of psychotherapy mobilised to have practical and effective application during warfare and, as Gerald N. Grob argues, allowed the profession to fashion itself as a “self-conscious and confident speciality” in the following years.¹⁹ Hale takes a similar position and suggests the rise of psychoanalysis in the immediate postwar era took the profession to a point where it enjoyed “precarious prominence in American psychiatry.”²⁰ Taken as a whole, this attracted an influx of people to psychoanalysis as an occupation and enhanced the status and responsibilities of those already in the profession. The credibility and popularity of psychoanalysis as a certified therapeutic technique is neatly illustrated in a 1947 feature-length article in *Life* magazine. The authors provide a detailed introduction to the profession and chart its unprecedented boom, with accredited psychiatrists, in particular, seen to be the ‘most sought-after members of the entire medical profession.’²¹ This is attributed to two key factors: the rising numbers of mental and emotional disorders, and the increasing knowledge of the subject in popular culture. While admitting that not all analyses would result in “clear-cut success,” the article asserts that the emergence of psychoanalysis unearthed “unique discoveries and observations about the nature of man,” and concludes, “there is some hope that the madness of the world will begin to decline.”²² If providing postwar care for service personnel precipitated the professionalisation of psychoanalysis, *Life* magazine’s reporting could be seen to influence its reception in popular culture.

Mental Illness and Normativity

For Philip R. Yannella, media attention to mental illness became widespread in the postwar period and was matched only by that of juvenile delinquency, a concern raised by Goodman’s *Growing Absurd*.²³ Coverage of mental illness primarily focused on three central themes: the ill-equipped and poorly funded health care system; the prevalence, including documented evidence of how many people were suffering from various conditions; and finally the numerous crimes committed by mentally ill individuals.²⁴

¹⁸ Hale (1995), p 187.

¹⁹ Grob (1994), p 238.

²⁰ Hale (1995), p. 187

²¹ Francis Sill Wickware, “Psychoanalysis,” *Life Magazine*, (3 February 1947), p 98.

²² *Life Magazine* (1947), p 112.

²³ Philip R. Yannella, *American Literature in Context After 1929* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p 63.

²⁴ Yannella (2010), p 63.

Intensified media coverage, plus the movement towards office-based therapy, gave rise to the suggestion and fear that those who suffered from psychopathic tendencies could be allowed to roam freely in society. With consistent warnings of subterfuge by McCarthyist propaganda in the backdrop, there was evident concern about what could be lurking just beneath the surface. The idea that the psychopath was in some way sexually deviant with no control over their urges further intensified this apprehension. Even though arrest rates for sexual offences fell in the postwar years, stories of sex crimes appeared frequently in the media, with *Collier's* magazine claiming in 1950—with no empirical evidence—that rape had increased 200 percent over the past twenty years.²⁵ With Alfred Kinsey's study calling into question the sexual practice of many ordinary Americans, anxiety surrounded anything that could be regarded as sexually abnormal. The crazed, shadowy psychopath quickly became the most befitting culprit, as Estelle Freedman explains: "At a time when the standards of sexual behavior for both women and men were changing rapidly, the psychopath became a malleable symbol for popular fears about the consequences of new sexual value."²⁶ The culmination of intense media coverage, plus the country's hypersensitivity to anything that contravened normativity, resulted in the approval of a number of laws—heavily related to sexual deviancy and its increasing association with those perceived to be mentally unwell—to quell the danger posed to the body politic. By 1955, almost half of the Federal States signed legislature to revise the punishment of those convicted of sexual offences, with even minor offenders, such as exhibitionists, seen to pose a very serious threat.²⁷

The heightened apprehension and discussion concerning mental illness can be seen to relate intimately to the rhetoric surrounding, and the cultural obsession with normativity. It is difficult to locate one specific reason for the fascination but it can be viewed as an accumulative response to: the restratification of gender roles following World War II; dispersal to suburbia and the subsequent stress on the familial norm; postwar posterity and collective affiliation with broadening middle class; Cold War paranoia and an anti-communist obsession; the standardisation and mass-production of material goods. Yet, as Anna G. Creadick notes in *Perfectly Average: The Pursuit of Normality in Postwar America* (2010), normality was very much a vague term, with the frequency of its use

²⁵ Estelle B. Freedman "Uncontrolled Desires": The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960' in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Jun., 1987), p. 96. Historian Philip Jenkins argues the media's fascination with fiendish 'sex psychopaths' was a throwback to the obsession surrounding moral insanity in the 19th century. Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p 58.

²⁶ Freedman (1987), p 100.

²⁷ Freedman (1987), p 97.

revealing more about the period—Creadick identifies 1943 until 1963 as the high point of its linguistic redeployment (normality had originally been used in the mid-nineteenth century)—than what it describes. Just as normativity was pursued and espoused as an attainable ideal, it also proved to be a somewhat abstract notion. As identified in the preceding chapters, the normative standard outlined for the suburban family and sexual behaviour were prescriptive categories that bore very little resemblance to the reality of postwar life. However, the continued employment of the term—particularly by the mainstream media—ensured normativity became entrenched in national nomenclature and culture. Creadick suggests that the stress on normality heavily influenced a particular branch of American life and became, “disseminated through the increasingly porous domains of science, medicine, and psychiatry.”²⁸ Broadly speaking, in terms of its reception within medicine, the pursuit of normativity caused a debate as to whether it could be analysed by a quantitative or qualitative approach. This characterised a tension between medical and biological factors against psychological and sociological methodology that remained throughout the postwar years.²⁹ As the second chapter in this thesis explores, fictional engagement with normativity frequently ignited feelings of alienation and disassociation, as articulated through the roaming and rootless protagonists, Frank Wheeler, Rabbit Angstrom and Binx Bolling. Even though their search for meaning remains unresolved, their predicaments voice the concerns of a malaise that couldn't be medically treated or biologically explained. While Yates, Updike and Percy provide platforms to express this ennui and malaise, they are just as keen to deconstruct and critique this vacuous quest for normativity—with Yates perhaps the most forceful in parodying his protagonist's self-involved search for meaning.

‘We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes’

The hyper-vigilant culture surrounding normativity formed the cultural backdrop for a series of Hollywood films that took madness as their central theme. Three of the most prominent and commercially successful were Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* (1960).³⁰ Adapted from Robert Bloch's 1959 novel of the same name, *Psycho* interlaces the concerns associated with the stereotyped psychopath: just below the facade of normalcy lurks a crazed, fiendish and sexually threatening male.

²⁸ Creadick (2010), p 2.

²⁹ Creadick (2010), p 3.

³⁰ From 1957 to 1963, Hollywood produced more than twenty films that showed psychiatrists in a positive light and often in ‘glowing and idealized terms.’ Grob (1994), p 269.

Hitchcock's lead, Norman Bates, delivers a chilling exposition of a psychopath that ties in with these wider cultural concerns. As Robert Genter notes, the key to Bates' impact is how unassuming he is initially: "Hitchcock references popular characterizations of the psychopath as a predatory yet innocuous figure."³¹ Paralleling the slow unravelling of Eve's alternate personalities, Bates is at first meek and withdrawn before his darker, sinister side is gradually teased out. Like Woodward's character, Bates' split personality is confirmed after being interviewed by a psychiatrist. At the end of the film, Dr Fred Richman (Simon Oakland) provides an extended epilogue to explain his actions. Staying true to Bloch's novel, Dr. Richman refutes any suggestions that Bates, who is seen wearing his mother's clothes, is a transvestite or homosexual. In effect, the scene alleviates the threat posed by the lead character's sexual ambiguity to provide a detailed (and medical) explanation of Bates' actions. While the epilogue has been criticised for being out of place—reviewer Pauline Kael claimed it was "arguably Hitchcock's worst scene"—the psychiatrist is given centre-stage through his diagnosis, and like Dr. Curtis Luther in *The Three Faces of Eve*, is framed in an assured and positive manner.³² Aside from the way Hitchcock portrays the "abnormal normality" of the psychopathic figure, *Psycho* makes a series of references to the cultural issues surrounding mental health.³³ There is, for example, direct reference to the conditions of mental hospitals, as Bates asks: "You mean an institution? A madhouse? Have you ever seen the inside of one of those places?" In the same scene, he attempts to downplay his mother's insanity by claiming, "It's not as if she were a maniac, a raving thing. She just goes a little mad sometimes. We all go a little mad sometimes." His relationship with his mother echoes—albeit in the extreme—the destructive effects of domineering maternalism. Voiced most vociferously in 1940s, momism remained a concern throughout the following decade, as evidenced by Jim Stark's controlling mother in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). Despite receiving some negative reviews shortly after its release, *Psycho* went on to be one of Hitchcock's most commercially successful films, with only William Wyler's epic, *Ben-Hur* (1960) grossing more in revenue that year.³⁴ In all, the positive reception for both *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Psycho* can be seen to illustrate how mental illness remained not just a pressing cultural issue but one that could be successfully adapted for popular entertainment.

³¹ Genter (2010), p 149.

³² Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 205.

³³ Genter (2010), p 149.

³⁴ The film also received four Academy Award nominations, with Janet Leigh shortlisted for Best Supporting Actress and Hitchcock for Best Director Tino Balio, *United Artists, Volume 2, 1951-1978: The Company that Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p 127.

If the cinematic treatment of mental health aimed to thrill audiences by uncovering a dark, psychologically unbalanced and threatening character, as evidenced in *Psycho*, literary representations throughout the decade took a very different approach. In 1956, Allen Ginsberg produced one of the most stripped-down depictions of institutionalisation and mental illness in “Howl.” Ginsberg’s work is, in part, a lyrical and verbal protest against capitalism and imposed censorship. Published as part of a collection entitled *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), it also signalled Ginsberg’s own commitment to an artistic expression that was open and free from the restraints of literary form.³⁵ Dedicated to Carl Solomon, a friend and fellow writer he met at the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute, Ginsberg’s tour-de-force begins with the arresting line: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked.”³⁶ Moving through the profusion of images and illuminations in the first section, the poem returns to Solomon, who becomes the embodiment of the poet’s own self-expression. Solomon is presented as possessing transcendental thought, the flash of alchemy and dreaming through the “incarnate gaps in Time & Space.”³⁷ The poet also makes a personal plea in defence of his creativity: “ah Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe.”³⁸ The final section of the poem refocuses on Solomon to show how this creativity, perceived as insanity, has destroyed his character: “I’m with you in Rockland, / where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its / body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void.”³⁹ In this, Ginsberg laments the aggressive electro-shock therapy Solomon has received, which has reduced his friend to a barren and lifeless existence. The poem’s impact, however, is rooted not just in its political intensity but its openness: it is, in many ways, a celebration of madness. On one level, Ginsberg claims a reciprocal relationship between artistic creativity and madness, a theme carried through his poetry. In “On Burroughs’ Work,” the interrelationship between the two is described thus: “A naked lunch is natural to us, / we eat reality sandwiches. / But allegories are so much lettuce / Don’t hide the madness.”⁴⁰ Madness, here, nourishes the appetite of the writer. This theme recurs in Beat literature of the time, with drug-fuelled images underpinning some of the visions and a strong connection between the two. There is also a certain reverence for the psychopathic figure,

³⁵ Jack Kerouac told Ginsberg, prior to the poem’s publication, that he wanted his ‘lingual spontaneity or nothing.’ Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p 168.

³⁶ Allen Ginsberg, “Howl”, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2006), p 9.

³⁷ Ginsberg (2006), p 20.

³⁸ Ginsberg (1956), p 19.

³⁹ Ginsberg (1956), p 25.

⁴⁰ Allen Ginsberg, “On Burroughs’ Work”, *Reality Sandwiches* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1963), p 40.

portrayed as a kind of soothsayer and symbol of cultural rebellion. In his 1957 essay “The White Negro,” Norman Mailer identifies the rebel as the “American existentialist—the hipster,” who “quivers with the knowledge that new kinds of victories increase one’s power for new kinds of perception.”⁴¹ Moreover, Mailer implores, “encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom.”⁴² “Howl” is a rousing defence of self-expression, both artistically and politically, that stands as a broader countercultural attack on institutional thought in America. At the same time, it can be seen to shift the ideological association from the crazed, sexually driven psychopath to viewing madness as a creative response to the hegemonic culture of the 1950s, and, further, embracing the new forms of perception this elicits.

In the following decade, Ken Kesey challenged and redefined psychopathy in his seminal text *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962). Set in an Oregon psychiatric hospital, Kesey’s novel is loosely based on his own experiences as a nurse’s aide at a vets’ hospital in Menlo Park. The asylum, strictly regimented under the domineering presence of Nurse Ratched, has its established order overthrown by Randle P. McMurphy. McMurphy, we are told, has been certified psychopathic by the courts because he “fights too much and fucks too much.”⁴³ Delivered from the perspective of Chief Bromden, McMurphy’s introduction results in his fellow inmates protesting against Ratched’s omnipotence in the ward. Like Ginsberg’s early memory of Solomon or Mailer’s American existentialist, McMurphy’s strength lies in his capability to transcend his environment and in the “psychopathic brilliance” to which Mailer refers. By questioning Ratched’s authority and instilling a sense of individuality within his fellow inmates, Kesey’s protagonist succeeds in challenging the mechanised environment of the ward. His presence initiates a counter-current to the established order of the asylum, which, as Lupack notes, underlines the inversion the novel seeks to quantify: “antiorder is sanity, that true madness...is not their alleged irrationality but the deadly order, system and rationality of the institution.”⁴⁴ The inmates’ treatment—beatings, rationing of cigarettes, the low-hum of a song on repeat—speaks of a wider concern about the conditions in mental institutions. Kesey’s novel is an attack on institutionalised thought—the asylum is a microcosm of a far broader cultural pandemic that is referred to in the text as the Combine—and a parable for a controlling postwar society. Aside from McMurphy, there is certainly a question as to whether any of

⁴¹ Mailer (1957).

⁴² Mailer (1957).

⁴³ Kesey (2002), p 13.

⁴⁴ Barbara Tapa Lupack, *Insanity as Redemption in Contemporary American Fiction Inmates Running the Asylum* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), p 84.

the other inmates are certifiably insane, and, just as importantly, if their institutionalisation has any therapeutic benefits.

‘A Real Nut’

Revolutionary Road arrived two years prior to *Cuckoo’s Nest* and, in contrast to Kesey’s text, the novel’s opening contains little to suggest that mental illness will be a significant issue. Indeed, the topic remains muted until John Givings’ introduction midway through the novel. His presence is felt in the background however, and is at first a conspiratorial whisper between the Campbells and Wheelers, “You know where he is? You know where he’s been for the past two months? He’s over here in Greenacres. You know, The State hospital. The insane asylum.”⁴⁵ The extent of his condition remains something of a mystery until the first meeting with Frank and April. We are told that his parents were allowed to take him on an hour’s drive outside the hospital grounds but that he wasn’t quite ready for a home visit. A former maths professor at an unnamed western university, he is also presented as highly educated: “goodness only knew that John, whatever else he might or might not be, was an intellectual” (159). The reason for his confinement is loosely explained, as Milly Campbell passes on a second-hand account about him holding his parents captive. Even though the Wheelers keenly anticipate his visit—April ponders excitedly, “I wonder what he’ll be like? I don’t think I’ve ever met an insane person before, have you?”—they make the proviso of sending their children away, just in case he “turns out to be a real nut” (181). Givings’ introduction breaks the humdrum of social niceties between his parents and the Wheelers with a series of cutting yet perceptive observations. Like McMurphy’s ability to acutely size up a social situation, Givings quickly grasps Frank’s frustration with his job and the Wheelers’ decision to leave for Paris. Establishing an immediate congruence with the pair, Givings latches onto Frank’s comment about the vacuous nature of the postwar society.

Wow. Now you’ve said it. The hopeless emptiness. Hell, plenty of people are on to the emptiness part; out where I used to work, on the Coast, that’s all we ever talked about. We’d sit around talking about emptiness all night. Nobody ever said ‘hopeless,’ though; that’s where we’d chicken out. Because maybe it does take a certain amount of guts to see the emptiness, but it takes a whole hell of a lot more to see the hopelessness. (189)

⁴⁵ Yates (2007), p 62.

This functions as their collective refutation of the suburban environment, to stand against the “ninety-eight-point-nine” (187) percent of society, a binding expression of their discontent. Givings’ ability to accurately gauge the Wheelers is underscored by the manner in which he conceptualises them. He explains to Frank, firstly, his thoughts on April:

I like your girl, Wheeler, I get the feeling she’s female. You know what the difference between female and feminine is? Huh? Well, here’s a hint: a feminine woman never laughs out loud and always shaves her armpits. Old Helen there is feminine as hell. I’ve only met about half a dozen females in my life, and I think you got one of them here. Course, come to think of it, that figures. I get the feeling you’re male. There aren’t too many males around, either. (190)

The language, so heavily codified in gendered terms, directly relates to the dynamic that has dominated, as advanced in the previous chapter, Frank and April’s actions. Givings’ distinction between “female” and “feminine” looks to separate the idealised image of a suburban housewife (Mrs. Givings) with that of the reality, the female identity that exists beneath the surface. What’s more, Givings’ reference to Frank’s manliness—although not as clearly defined as April’s gender—reaffirms his masculinity, a pursuit, that, as I suggested in chapter three, is a priority after his wife’s goading earlier in the text. By the end of their first encounter, April, enthralled by his directness and clarity, comments: “he’s sort of nice, isn’t he? And intelligent. I thought some of the things he said were brilliant” (192).

As advanced in this thesis, *Revolutionary Road* abounds with performance, as characters assume different roles, rehearsing and rehashing lines at will. Yates’ dialogue elsewhere enacts this; as we find in “The Best of Everything,” Yates wants his characters to miss each other’s points, to talk around, through and at each other. Givings’ second appearance disrupts this, stripping away the benign and empty language with candid and unaffected remarks. Initially impressed with their planned rejection of the suburban life, Givings’ relationship with the couple gradually disintegrates when they cast doubt on their departure from Revolutionary Road. During their last encounter, when Frank informs him that the trip to Paris is off, Givings becomes increasingly distressed and agitated by their decision. The balance struck during their first encounter, neatly condensed in the shared appreciation of the “hopeless emptiness” of society, has been placed out of sync by the Wheelers’ decision to settle for their suburban existence. Givings rejects Frank’s assertion

that this is based on financial considerations and, as with the previous scene, begins to refer to Frank and April in very pointed terms. When his mother implores him to stop puzzling Frank, he response, “Ma, will you keep out of this? I’m asking the man a question” (286). This is followed, shortly after, when he decides on a distinctive line of reasoning,

What’s the real reason? Wife talk you out of it, or what?....Little woman decide she isn’t quite ready to quit playing house? Nah, nah, that’s not it. I can tell she looks too tough. Tough and female and adequate as hell. (286).

Givings’ explanation oscillates around a gendered subtext, referring, first, to Frank as a man, and then the subsequent allusions to April as “wife” and “little woman,” as if to tease out an answer. Realising this isn’t the case, he settles on his previous definition of April as female, and thereafter strikes at the heart of the real reason for their stay:

What happened? You get cold feet, or what? You decide you like it here after all? You figure it’s more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness after all, or—Wow, that did it! Look at his face! What’s the matter, Wheeler? Am I getting warm? ...Boy! You know something? I wouldn’t be surprised if you knocked her up on purpose, just so you could spend the rest of your life hiding behind that maternity dress. (287)

Givings’ words ring true and act as a cruel yet perceptive observation that shatters the illusion Frank attempts to uphold. As off hand as the statement seems, Givings’ assertion is an astute summary of the scene and of the Wheelers’ relationship in general, evidenced by Frank’s reaction, which sees him clench fist and trembling from head to foot. Givings mocks Frank’s wish to affirm his masculinity through his wife’s pregnancy, a need that he further ridicules by suggesting that “making babies is the only way he can prove he’s got a pair of balls” (287). The reference to Frank cloaked in a maternity dress is Givings’ insinuation that such an act represents an invalidation of manhood rather than the affirmation Frank mistakenly believes. Furthermore, we see a complete reprisal and inversion of Givings’ initial references to Frank as a ‘man,’ a contentious point, as raised in the previous chapter.

Almost a decade after the publication of *Revolutionary Road*, Yates revealed that John Givings’ was a late addition to the novel. The author explained that he wanted a

character who could “point up or spell out the story at crucial moments” and had an “uncannily keen and very articulate insight into other people’s weaknesses.”⁴⁶ In this context, Givings’ function within the narrative is to expose the hollowness of language in the text and strip the air of delusion that surrounds Frank and April’s relationship. For Morris Dickstein, Givings’ verbal rectitude counterbalances the unspoken words between Frank and April Wheeler: his presence acts as the “distorting mirror that reflects back the compromises and denials that enabled the Wheelers to construct their little world.”⁴⁷ More recently, critic James Wood identifies the dramatic significance Givings possesses, defining him as a “seer-like authority” in the text.⁴⁸ In much the same way that McMurphy represents the sane inmate who stands in opposition to institutionalised thought in *Cuckoo’s Nest*, Givings is imbued with an insight that both challenges the restrictive suburban environment in which *Revolutionary Road* is set, and by the same token, poses a threat to the façade of normalcy its central characters seek to uphold.

‘Emotional Things’ in *Revolutionary Road*

Yates’ portrayal of the “crazed” Givings takes an ironic turn when we consider the psychological insecurity of his principal characters. Mental illness, and particularly the threat of psychoanalysis, becomes a subtle yet controlling force beneath the surface of Frank and April’s relationship. As suggested in the opening chapter, Yates voiced reservations about *Revolutionary Road* being perceived as a ‘case-history kind of book,’ and seemed apprehensive that it would be associated alongside studies such as *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957) or Harry F. Tashman’s *Today’s Neurotic Family: A Journey into Psychoanalysis* (1958). *The New York Times*’ Orville Prescott centred his review on this feature of the novel, arguing that it was about “two psychopathic characters and their miserable haste to self-destruction.”⁴⁹ *The Hudson Review* sensed Yates had been guilty of woolly armchair psychology, arguing that the novel displays, “kindergarten quasi-psychoanalytic explanations for what the author is obviously helpless to account for and can only report.”⁵⁰ Approaching the text in much the same way, *The Chicago Tribune* suggested Yates, in painting the picture of two very “immature young people,” had

⁴⁶ Ploughshares (1972)

⁴⁷ Dickstein (2002), p 139.

⁴⁸ James Wood, “Like Men Betrayed: Revisiting Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*,” *The New Yorker* (15 December 2008) Accessed online: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/12/15/like-men-betrayed>. [Last accessed 8 June 2016].

⁴⁹ Prescott (1961), p 25.

⁵⁰ Mudrick (1961), p 293.

explained their actions through an “overly simplified psychological motivation.”⁵¹ To understand Yates’ treatment of psychoanalysis on the level of justifying the actions of his central characters is, however, a misinterpretation of its application. Yates included it as a convincing thread in the novel, but purely for the reason that Frank is under the delusion that he has grounding in psychoanalysis and is therefore able to theorise his wife’s discontent. In one of the earliest drafts of the novel, Yates clearly noted how he wanted this feature to play out:

Make Frank’s urging of psychoanalysis a more active, more reasoned thing, bring it in earlier so that it colors the whole chapter. Have him very soberly play arm-chair analyst, “let’s explore this” etc about her “true motives.” Not broadly satirical: sensible enough to disturb and convince her—and him too. He believes what he’s saying.⁵²

It is apparent Yates wanted Frank to adopt this role, with the author noting that he wanted Frank to “play” armchair analyst. Key, too, is the detail “not broadly satirical,” serious enough to pose as a theorised position but with enough of an ironic tone for the reader to identify. *The Hudson Review*’s mistake was assuming Frank’s voice, when playing armchair analyst, to be that of Yates,’ and not recognise the split, or indeed Frank’s motivation. In chapter three, during the first extended passage devoted to Frank, Yates provides a brief flicker of his protagonist’s psychological musings:

Boy, I guess the headshrinkers could really have a ball with me...I mean the whole deal of my relationship with my father alone’d be enough to fill a textbook, not to mention my mother. Jesus, what a little nest of neuroses we must’ve been. (37)

In keeping with Yates’ use of omniscient narration, this isn’t spoken at the time, but comes as Frank reflects on something he said “wryly” to his friends. The utterance is framed as a throwaway comment, underlined by the fact it doesn’t occur in the present, yet serves as the first reference to the topic. Significantly, the same passage ends with Frank assessing his wife’s psychological well-being: “If the headshrinkers could have a ball with him, God only knew what kind of a time they would have with April” (38). Here, Frank seems to take solace and draw strength from the fact April is, in his opinion at least, more psychologically unbalanced than him. This dynamic gradually underpins the Wheelers’

⁵¹ Preece (1961), p 129.

⁵² Richard Yates, draft of *Revolutionary Road*, dated 31 July 1955, The Richard Yates Collection.

interactions as their relationship begins to deteriorate and Frank looks to exercise his authority by implying that he is the more stable of the two. When April insists she will follow through with an abortion, Frank makes an amateurish, and particularly excruciating, attempt to explain her actions: “I mean things within yourself, things that have their origin in your own childhood—your own upbringing and so on. Emotional things” (224). This comes as Frank begins to lose ground in the argument and realises he must resort to a “last-ditch maneuver” (224) to stave off defeat. He persists with the assessment and questions how April could have survived her troubled childhood, “let alone come out of it without any damage to your—you know, your ego and everything” (225). Part linguistic manipulation, Frank’s psychological analyses teeter around the Freudian with their focus on ego and childhood, yet remain speculative and poorly developed.

Even though April gives a fairly strong argument as to why his assessment is unfounded—having already given birth to two children—Frank suggests her wish for an abortion is based on a denial of womanhood. Again echoing Freudian thought, he concludes:

I do remember reading something about a woman with a sort of infantile penis-envy thing that carried over into her adult life; I guess this is supposed to be fairly common among women; I don’t know. Anyway, she kept trying to get rid of her pregnancies, and what this particular guy figured out was that she was really trying to sort of open herself up so that the –you know—so that the penis could come out and hang down where it belonged. I’m not sure I have that right; I read it a long time ago, but that was the general idea. (231)

Baseless conjecture it may be, but Frank’s theorising serves to relate April’s discontent to her sexual identity. Such a position suggests an issue with April’s psychosexual development, undermining both her sexuality and gendered identity. Even if it is poorly formulated, it ultimately destabilises April’s condition, which leads to her agreeing to meet a therapist. Prior to her breakdown, Frank plays out a series of hypothetical situations between his wife and an analyst, and again draws strength from his wife’s emotional vulnerability. Confident in his own assessment, he imagines the therapist disclosing: “I think your own evaluation of the difficulty is essentially correct, Mr. Wheeler” (265). Just as distressingly, he begins to revel in the role he has constructed, “He smiled at her like a patient psychiatrist” (276). This dynamic is disrupted, however, when April shows an awareness of her husband’s linguistic and emotional manipulation. After he offers another

psychoanalytic explanation, April counters her husband's suggestion: "Put it whichever way makes you the most comfortable" (276). Just as the Wheelers were apprehensive about inviting Givings, a 'true nut', to their house, Frank's threat of psychoanalysis illustrates the stigma attached to mental illness at the time; similarly, by adopting psychoanalytic theory, Frank takes advantage of the prestige and power the profession possessed.

A number of years after Szasz suggested that mental illness was a self-serving condition that created a problem that didn't exist, Thomas Scheff developed an argument to provide the basis for his labelling theory. Cited in his work *Being Mentally Ill* (1966), Scheff proposes that the continual affirmation of mental deviancy results in the individual accepting the proffered role as the traditional "stereotype of insanity."⁵³ Scheff echoed Szasz's insistence that mental illness was a convenient way of dismissing any break from the behavioural or cultural norm. As Gerald Grob notes, labelling theory again functions as a way to "reify and legitimate the existing social order."⁵⁴ In Yates' text, Frank's insistence that April visit a therapist is a vocalised way of labelling his wife and serves to accentuate his power in the novel. April's final act, methodical and planned as it may be, essentially conforms to Frank's theoretical suppositions: she can either fully submit to her role as a dutiful housewife or express her discontent, but either way she ends up reinforcing and strengthening the system. At the end of the novel, Frank has entered therapy, with his favourite topic of conversation, somewhat ironically, being "my analyst this"; "my analyst that." The narration concludes with the line: "he had turned into one of these people that want to tell you about their God damned analyst all the time" (331). Sombre as the disclosure is, it is also laced with irony and dark humour too, perhaps, as Frank fulfils the prophecy he had set out for April.

Yates' text is in many ways a dual commentary on the subject of mental illness; John Givings, as a deranged but gifted inmate, can be seen as an incarnation of the figures we find in Kesey or Ginsberg's work. Yates' portrayal of such does not have the same political undertones as either author: Kesey, for one, is far more direct in his criticism of the conditions in asylums and homogenised culture, while Ginsberg's work is a polemic against artistic censorship and an exploration of the connection between madness and creativity. Yet, even without this clear didactic core, Givings' character can be seen as the product of an increasingly stifled suburban environment, as evidenced with the mutual

⁵³ Thomas Scheff, *Being Mentally Ill: A Sociological Study* (New York: Aldine Transaction 1999), p 80.

⁵⁴ Grob (1994), p 273.

agreement of discontent he establishes with the Wheelers. Givings, too, as a secondary character and late addition, nonetheless, has a specific function in relation to both narrative and plot; he ruptures the facade of normalcy and superficiality that is upheld from the outset. Responsible for such a central part within the novel—Yates said he required someone to direct the story at crucial moments—Givings, as the intuitive outsider who exposes the muddled and problematic distinction between “crazy” and ‘crazy.’ His introduction, too, leads to an extended engagement on the subject that takes a tripartite form when his presence forces Frank and April to gaze, somewhat uneasily, at their psychological well being. A parallel can, firstly, be drawn with the ambiguity that surrounds Givings’ perceived insanity in the text and April’s condition; Givings believes his admission is unjustified and at the mercy of someone else’s interpretation of ‘crazy.’ April’s instability is, in effect, a projection of her husband’s and perhaps even more so, an admission of his own psychological instability. Frank’s willingness to adopt a psychiatrist’s role ties in with the readiness to impose a theoretical and psychoanalytic reading on any expression of discontent; his ungrounded and ill-informed hypotheses correlate with the argument that mental illness is dependent on interpretation. By weaving both of these strands within the narrative, Yates opens up a preliminary dialogue about the cultural construction of mental illness and the pervasive power of psychoanalysis. In a text that questions the perceived insanity of two characters, Yates interconnects both the literary appropriation of the crazed-yet-prophetic madman (Givings) with the encroaching influence of psychoanalysis in the postwar era.

Kennedy’s Bold New Approach

Just as there was a current of thought that looked to connect mental illness as being a response to an increasingly restrictive postwar society, there remained evident concern about the country’s therapeutic services, particularly within asylums. A series of press exposés throughout the 1950s and 60s provided a behind-the-scenes portrayal of an institution that remained hidden from the public eye to reveal the dire conditions experienced by patients in state mental hospitals. Medically, this raised questions about the merits and sustainability of long-term hospitalisation. In quoting Norman Bates, her aptly named “Have You Ever Seen the Inside of One of Those Places?” Cynthia Erb charts a number of exposés, ranging from photo-essays in *Life* magazine to a 1956 CBS documentary, which showed mental hospitals to hold many similarities with concentration

camps. *Life*'s photo-essay provided graphic illustrations of the abuses—beatings, starvation, isolation and overcrowding—that characterised hospital conditions in the mid-to-late 1950s.⁵⁵ The strength of these exposés, for Erb, resides in their visual impact, with photographs, such as those contained in *Life*'s photo-essay, given provocative labels such as 'Nakedness' and 'Forced Labor' to further stress the comparison with concentration camps.⁵⁶ These portrayals raised wider concerns about the treatment of institutionalised patients and the cultural significance of enforced confinement.⁵⁷ Such coverage put pressure on implementing reforms and improving conditions for patients, further stressing the fact mental illness couldn't be overlooked or disregarded through long-term hospitalisation.

From the beginning of his presidency, John F. Kennedy, whose sister was mentally disabled, showed a determination in implementing institutional reform with particular focus on reintegration rather than permanent hospital stays.⁵⁸ This culminated in a speech to Congress on 5 February 1963, in which he heavily criticised the "shamefully understaffed, overcrowded, unpleasant institutions" from which "death too often provided the only firm hope of release."⁵⁹ Kennedy outlined a "bold new approach" that favoured therapeutic treatment, which could allow the patient the possibility of reintegrating within their community. With rehabilitation key to what was, at the time, a fairly progressive approach, Kennedy also championed the introduction of community mental health centres. If prevention wasn't an option, regionalised community centres could offer a full continuum of services, "from diagnosis, to cure, to rehabilitation—without need to transfer to different institutions."⁶⁰ Tellingly, Kennedy suggested that a psychiatric clinic could form the nucleus of the centre, and recommended a sharp increase in funding for auxiliary personnel, particularly psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, social workers, and psychiatric nurses. By 1970, he hoped to have 85,000 auxiliary workers—compared with approximately 45,000 in 1960—and promised to facilitate this by allocating \$66 million for training of personnel, constituting an increase of \$17 million over the current fiscal

⁵⁵ Erb (2006), p 48.

⁵⁶ Erb (2006), p 49.

⁵⁷ Erb argues that these exposés would form the basis of how the visual media represented mental hospitals for the forthcoming decades. Erb (2006), p 49.

⁵⁸ While Kennedy seemed to take a personal interest in institutional reform, the wheels had been set in motion as early as 1955 with the establishment of the Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health. The findings, published two years later in a paper entitled 'Americans View Their Mental Health,' showed a 'high prevalence of persons with psychiatric or psychological maladjustments.' Genter (2010), p 135.

⁵⁹ John F. Kennedy, "Special Message to the Congress on Mental Illness and Mental Retardation," (5 February 1963) Accessed online: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9546>. [Last accessed 6 June 2016].

⁶⁰ Kennedy (1963).

year.⁶¹ The impact of Kennedy's memorandum on mental illness is somewhat difficult to assess, with contrasting statistics as to its legacy. Cynthia Erb, for one, argues that the period between 1955 and 1970 saw a significant decrease in the number of patients in state and county hospitals: during this time, residents in both fell from a peak of 500,000 to fewer than 340,000 by 1970, a trend that continued throughout the 20th century.⁶² Yet, as historian Howard Zinn notes, despite this downward trajectory approaching the 1970s, in 1965 there were 488,000 living in mental institutions, a further 435,000 outpatients in psychiatric clinics and 9 million defined as "mentally ill."⁶³

While these statistics provide somewhat contrasting outlooks on the effect of Kennedy's reforms, his change signified an ideological revision to the previous model of therapy. In his study *Therapeutic Revolutions*, Martin Halliwell believes the shift from Eisenhower to Kennedy should not be underestimated when tracing the direction of American healthcare. For Halliwell, the 1950s upheld "political and medical authority," "regulated forms of social organization," and a "centripetal pull toward the cultural center."⁶⁴ Kennedy's reforms, with their emphasis on the full continuum of psychosocial services, leaned towards a more holistic outlook and community-driven therapeutic treatment. Delivered in 1963, this community-centred approach also signalled a distinct shift away from psychoanalysis as the preferred method of therapy. Just as institutional reforms heralded the benefits of community practice, the development and re-emergence of somatic therapy precipitated its downfall. Even when psychiatry reached its peak as the favoured and popular method of practice, there still remained a keen academic interest in the merits of a biologically-orientated approach. As with the emergence of psychoanalytic theory in the 1950s, the renewed faith in psychotropic drugs represented a new strain of optimism in the treatment of mental health. Hale provides a succinct overview of these developments:

This stylistic shift within psychiatry renewed a militantly hopeful emphasis on somatic treatment and genetic causes. Interest shifted away from the traditional case history to an insistence on experiment, quantification, and replication...and by the increasing use of an ever-broadening pharmacopeia of psychotropic drugs.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Kennedy (1963).

⁶² Erb (2006), p 49.

⁶³ Howard Zinn, *Postwar America 1945-1971 (Radical 60s)*, (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002), p 101.

⁶⁴ Halliwell (2013), p 199.

⁶⁵ Hale (1995), p 289.

The unquantifiable results of psychoanalysis meant drug therapy, rooted in biological considerations, started to regain precedence. Clinical trials on the benefits of pharmacological treatments were conducted throughout the 1950s, with chlorpromazine, later marketed as Thorazine, showing positive results on those suffering psychoses, neuroses and anxiety.⁶⁶

As a corollary, the advancement of drug therapy placed even more strain on the medical credibility of psychoanalysis. Rather than attributing responsibility to environmental or cultural issues, emphasis was placed on genetics as the main cause of mental illness. Grob characterises the shift as signalling disillusionment with the “liberal, psychological and environmental explanations of human behaviour.”⁶⁷ This movement from office-based therapy further diminished the stigma associated with mental illness; the renewed faith in psychotropic drugs brought about the pervasive feeling that the condition could be medically treated or even cured. In contrast to the previous decade, in which psychoanalysis emerged as a respected and revered profession, the mid 1960s resulted in a series of attacks against the practice. Questions arose over the authority psychoanalysts possessed and whether it could produce any tangible evidence in support of its medical efficacy. Underpinned by theory, the profession was regarded as purely subjective and therefore unable to produce scientific results to prove its validity. Initially championed as the self-confident speciality that could explain psychological conditioning, there was a feeling that it had failed to live up to its hype. Recalling Szasz’s supposition that mental illness was merely an expression of man’s struggle with the world, psychiatry increasingly became viewed as an expression of middle-class ennui and an “unproven luxury, limited to the minor distresses of the well-to-do.”⁶⁸ This raised concerns about the medical integrity and legitimacy of a profession that was orientated towards solving what were perceived to be middle-class issues. Woody Allen frequently ridicules this sense of intellectual malaise, with his films often critiquing the shaky theoretical grounding of psychoanalysis and its association with the middle-classes. In his directorial debut, *Take the Money and Run* (1969), the film’s protagonist, Virgil, tells his analyst about his longstanding love for the cello. In-keeping with Allen’s style of parodying Freudian thought, Virgil is offered this explanation: “The utilization of the bow is the sublimation of stroking the feminine, motherly torso.”⁶⁹ The interpretation, in which the instrument is said to symbolise Virgil’s Oedipus complex, encapsulates Allen’s satirical take on psychoanalysis. If psychiatrists

⁶⁶ Yannella (2011), p 63.

⁶⁷ Grob (1994), p 276.

⁶⁸ Hale (1995), p 303.

⁶⁹ *Take the Money and Run*, Dir. Woody Allen, Perf. Allen, Janet Margolin, Marcel Hillaire. 1969.

were cast in well-respected and revered roles during the mid 50s and early 60s, particularly in Hollywood—as evidenced in *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Psycho*—its favourable image was frequently tarnished in the subsequent years.

This is the House for the Mentally Ill

Just as the conditions of asylums proved to be a pressing concern, as exposed by the media and through Kennedy's reforms, it remained a topic, and an environment, under the artistic lens. In its confessional stance, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), which focuses on the poet's depressive psychosis and institutionalisation, bridges the gap between the two forms. The collection, which won the National Book Award in 1960, comprises four sections, the last of which, "Waking in the Blue," reflects on a stay at McLean's Mental Hospital in Boston. The opening stanza encapsulates the poet's isolation in the ward, as the freedom of the outside is juxtaposed with an anthropomorphic description of his window: "Azure day / makes my agonized blue window bleaker."⁷⁰ This also embodies Lowell's attempts to relate his own, increasingly distressing experience to that of the outside world. The stanza ends with a frank disclosure, "(This is the house for the 'mentally ill')" which signifies the poem's confessional form, while the quotation gives it a whispered, almost hushed intonation.⁷¹ His fellow inmates are unable to relate to the present, as Stanley, a former Harvard all-American full-back, "is still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties," even though he is now "sunk" to his sixties.⁷² While the poet is initially detached from his inmates, the concluding stanza sees him standing in front of the metal shaving mirror, where he is now unable to distinguish himself from the "indigenous faces."⁷³ This identification is further underlined in the penultimate line, "We are all old-timers."⁷⁴

Throughout the collection, Lowell embarks on a process of realisation by recollecting moments from his past and then locating himself within the scene. Beginning as a descriptive piece on his inmates, "Waking in the Blue" ends with recognition that Lowell is a fellow patient in the ward and to a direct consideration of the psychological condition of the inmates. The poet develops the vision of Stanley, who still holds on to his

⁷⁰ Robert Lowell, 'Waking in the Blue' *Life Studies* (1959) lines 5-6.

⁷¹ Lowell (1959), line 10.

⁷² Lowell (1959), lines 15 & 11.

⁷³ Lowell (1959), line 46.

⁷⁴ Lowell (1959), line 49.

former self, as having a “granite profile.”⁷⁵ In advancing this image of Stanley in his prime at Harvard, Lowell shatters any romantic or sentimental associations, as his granite profile gives the impression of something durable, or non-evolving. This is furthered as the poet switches his attention to Bobbie, who, like Stanley, casts an image of a time past, as he “swashbuckles about in his birthday suit.”⁷⁶ The poet concludes by bringing both of them together as “These victorious figures of bravado ossified young.”⁷⁷ Sitting as a single line in between the third and fourth stanzas, the final image reveals how both patients have failed to move forward mentally and are frozen in time. Stanley and Bobby exist, like Ginsberg’s portrayal of Solomon, within a void from which they are unable to break free. The poem’s concluding line, “each of us holds a locked razor,” connects to the previous image of the poet staring at himself at the shaving mirror, and rounds off the personal and revelatory form of the composition.⁷⁸ Yet the locked razor and mirror—which we are told is metal, rather than glass—also relates to the physical void Lowell and the inmates inhabit: even if they were looking for an escape, they are powerless in their means. *Life Studies* signified Lowell’s transition from a poetic form that was grounded on the foundations of modernism to a highly individualised, singular voice that has its genesis in Ginsberg’s “Howl.” This allowed the poet to adopt a more confessional style that was suited to exploring personal concerns, as is evident in his recollection of his time in McLean’s Hospital. In its direct engagement with the asylum and issues concerning mental health, *Life Studies* is said to have formed the grounding for a number of subsequent works, with Sylvia Plath citing it as a key influence when writing *Ariel* (1965).⁷⁹

Disturbing the Peace

Just as *Life Studies* expressed concern about the material conditions of institutionalisation and did so with Lowell adopting a style to suit the collection’s confessional form, *Disturbing the Peace* represents an individualised account of mental illness, captured in what represented a stylistic break for its author. Considering its publication in 1975, *Disturbing the Peace* is in effect a retrospective novel on mental illness in America during the 1960s, and as outlined in the first chapter of this study, this must be seen as one of the contributing factors to its lukewarm reception. The novel’s protagonist, John Wilder, is a

⁷⁵ Lowell (1959), line 20.

⁷⁶ Lowell (1959), line 31.

⁷⁷ Lowell (1959), line 33.

⁷⁸ Lowell (1959), line 50.

⁷⁹ Susan R. Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath’s Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill; London: University of Carolina Press, 2004), p 52.

lithograph of Yates' male characters; like *A Special Providence*'s Prentice, he has an undecorated war record, arriving at the last stages of duty, and, as with Bill Grove of "Regards at Home," has an IQ of 109. The war lingers in the backdrop as a source of dissatisfaction, as Wilder informs us how his father would refer to him as an infantry veteran who received a star for his involvement in the Battle of the Bulge. It is disclosed, however, that he was nowhere near the Ardennes and hadn't been involved in any direct combat (89). Akin to Frank Wheeler, Wilder works in a non-descript job in advertising, drinks too much and expresses unhappiness with his domestic life. Before moving to *The American Scientist*, Wilder was employed at *Chain Store Age*, the company magazine Michael Davenport works for in *Young Hearts Crying*. Unlike *Revolutionary Road*, which gradually introduces the theme, Wilder's admission to Bellevue occurs in the opening pages of Yates' third novel, and, like the confessional form Lowell adopts in *Life Studies*, it is apparent that *Disturbing the Peace* will offer a highly individualised account of institutionalisation. (Its title, too, gives the impression of something conflicted and disordered).

Upon first entering the ward, Borg, who has taken the decision to commit Wilder, notices a chair with the word "PSYCHO" crudely pencilled on the back (12). Wilder's stay in Bellevue is unpleasant, with the conditions similar to those contained in *Life Magazine*'s photo-essays of the previous decade. The asylum's environment is harsh and unhygienic, with windowless walls, over-crowded latrines and floors covered in phlegm. The men, who aren't allowed their own razor, stand "four and five deep waiting to shave at a steamed-up mirror under watchful, official eyes" (17). Showers are only allocated to new patients and are without soap or hot water. Moving through the corridor, Wilder notices the padded cells, floored with canvas mats of the kind used by "wrestlers and gymnasts" (17). In the accompanying room, he observes an unattended patient, a straitjacketed man lying face down, as still as death "with a dark stain of piss around his thighs" (17). There's a strong sense of homoeroticism and repressed sexual urges as Wilder notices two men masturbating beside him during his first evening and is propositioned by an inmate, who asks: "Do you want to kiss me?" (18) Entering the mess hall the next morning, Wilder sits between a toothless, ancient man and a "fat boy whose wet mouth hung open," both of whom receive a plastic bowl of glutenous oatmeal and canned milk (19). Neither, however, is able to eat their breakfast, as the old man is unable to lift the shaking spoon to his gums, while the other plunges his face into the bowl, "slobbering like a dog as the porridge slid down his chest" (20). Aside from the depraved conditions, Wilder is hospitalised without proper psychological examination, and with his admission falling on the Friday evening of

a Labor Day weekend, he doesn't come into contact with a psychiatrist until the following week.

Two days into his admission, Wilder, becoming increasingly agitated by his situation, is struck out by an orderly and placed into solitary confinement. Wilder is pictured scrabbling around the padded cell with his pants falling towards his knees. Inside the cell, Wilder contemplates: "the last thing he knew as he turned and floundered and sank was that nothing in his life had ever been as bad as this" (34). The detachment with which Wilder is able to treat his stay is underlined during the first visit he receives: Borg, who has accompanied Janice to see her husband, surveys the patients to "assess the degree of insanity in each case; then he turned the same cool scrutiny on Wilder for an instant before they both lowered their eyes" (36). After their visit, Wilder moves directly to the bathroom for a moment of reflection:

He had to admit, studying himself from several angles in the dim, white-and red-flecked mirror, that this was a sound, manly, reliable face. Troubled, maybe, but not openly neurotic and certainly not mentally ill. It was nothing less than absurd for him to be here, in the Men's Violence Ward, and the absurdity made him toss his head with a wry, amused little smile. (39)

The consecutive scenes—the shared glance with Borg, the rational moment of introspection in front of the bathroom and the condition with which he has been labelled—serve to distance Wilder from the position in which he finds himself within the asylum. This reaches a point of resolution when he is finally interviewed on the Thursday after his committal, where a dozen white-coated men assess the merits of his discharge. Explaining his position, Wilder admits to his irrational behaviour, heavily influenced by alcohol, and states: "I know if I say 'I'm not crazy' it'll probably just convince you I am; but even so, that's my—that's my position" (47).

Following his psychological examination, Wilder is released from Bellevue on the condition he visit a psychotherapist, a meeting orchestrated by his friend, Paul Borg. Yet, just as his discharge signifies a definite break from the asylum, the initial experience becomes a coercive force from which is unable to break free. Anya Taylor, one of the few critics to analyse *Disturbing the Peace*, writes: "When Wilder is finally released from the ward, he is a changed man, vulnerable to forces within the mind which he never before

suspected, and uncertain about the boundaries between madness and sanity.”⁸⁰ This is partly attributable to the insufficient care Wilder receives, beginning with the counsellor, Dr. Jules Blomberg. During their first meeting, Blomberg’s office is described as luxuriant, with “rich-looking paintings,” “rich-looking abstract culture” and deep leather armchairs (70). Chubby, balding and wearing pink-tinted glasses that magnify his eyes, Blomberg is characterised as both a comic and effeminate figure. On entering his office, Wilder refuses to lie on the “psychiatric couch,” preferring to speak to him in an armchair “man to man” (81). By declining to lie on the couch—an item of furniture so synonymous with therapy—Wilder illustrates his initial resistance to analysis. The first session is noteworthy for how stunted their interaction is, as Blomberg offers very little insight into his patient’s condition – Wilder is annoyed by how often the doctor replies with a simple “Mm” after any revelation. Referring to his readily apparent drinking problem, Wilder is struck by Blomberg’s “enlightened” endorsement of Alcoholics Anonymous, a piece of advice for which he is charged \$25 dollars (71). Bill Costello, Wilder’s AA sponsor, does little to assuage suspicions about the practice by warning: “This town’s loaded with psychiatrists and I know I don’t have to tell you most of ’em are quacks” (73). Wilder, frustrated by the psychiatrist’s passivity during their final meeting, asks: “When’s all this famous ‘work’ and ‘help’ and ‘therapy’ supposed to begin?” (92) This antagonism culminates in Wilder breaking off his relationship with Dr. Blomberg.

After suffering from a manic episode and severe hallucination, Wilder has a further breakdown and is admitted to a hospital in Vermont. In contrast to his treatment after Bellevue, he rules out psychoanalysis, “‘I’ve tried it and...It just doesn’t take with me. The point is it simply doesn’t *work*’” (145). Wilder’s refusal of analysis takes him down a different path of treatment and under the direction of Dr. Epstein, who convinces him of the recent developments in drug therapy:

Our common tranquilizers were only the beginning, back in the fifties. Now we have a wide range of medications – antidepressants, psychic energizers, antipsychotics – drugs to take you up or bring you down in any number of subtle, medically controlled ways; and the field is getting more sophisticated every day. (145)

⁸⁰ Taylor (1990), p 5.

Epstein's remarks tie in with the shift from psychotherapy and outline the benefits medication was thought to offer. Following his recommendation, Wilder is taken under the care of "the drug therapy man" Myron T. Brink to begin a new course of treatment. Brink, muscular and well tailored, casts a very different impression to Blomberg's soft and feminised image (145). Their styles contrast markedly, too, as Brink takes a diagnostic and medically orientated approach to his patient's condition. During their first session, the doctor is orderly to the point of curt, explaining to Wilder; "Just let me ask a few routine questions first; then I'll prescribe some medication and send you on your way. Fair enough?" (148) Wilder leaves with four pill vials, comfortable in the knowledge that a reputable doctor is now addressing his condition rather than the "quacks" of which Costello had warned him.

Wilder's transfer to Brink and his faith in the curative effects of drug therapy, however, proves to be a false-dawn. After a controlled and lucid phase in which he attends AA meetings and plays the role of a committed father and husband, he decides to leave with his mistress, Pamela, for Los Angeles to follow a dream of becoming a producer. When Wilder informs Brink of his decision and imminent departure, the doctor expresses concern but provides him with three emergency medications as a means of security—just in case he feels he is about to "go over the edge" (184). (Hence the doctor's appropriate name). Following bouts of excessive drinking and the realisation that his play *Bellevue* will never be produced, Wilder's mental health rapidly deteriorates. His third and final breakdown in the novel is drawn out in graphic detail as Yates traces his protagonist's loss of control as he spirals from symptoms of paranoia to severe hallucinations. Aware he is on the edge of another breakdown, Wilder resorts to the emergency kit supplied by Brink. Pamela, recognising the dependency that has been fostered, questions: "Do you honestly think pills are the answer to everything? You can't change your whole personality with pills" (215). Brink's emergency kit, somewhat ironically, fails to have any calming effect, as Wilder suffers his most paranoid episode in the text. Manic and confused, Wilder is forcibly restrained and put under sedation before being committed to a psychiatric ward for the final time. *Disturbing the Peace* opens with Paul Borg hospitalising Wilder and closes with his wife, now married to Borg, visiting him in a psychiatric ward in New York. His admission has been preceded by a course of ECT—a hum of "voltage coursing through him"—that caused no pain or feeling (239). Unrecognisable to Janice, Wilder now casts a grey shadow, devoid of energy or emotion. Detached and observant in Bellevue, he is indistinguishable from the other patients and is mystified by Janice's suggestion that he might ever consider leaving the ward.

No Tears on the Page

Any sense of redemption at the end of *Disturbing the Peace* is, as in much of Yates' fiction, absent. The climactic point conforms to the narratorial height the author always sought to maintain: when Janice asks him about his departure, the scene runs: 'He looked puzzled, as if she had asked him a riddle. "Leave here?" he said. That was when an orderly came out and announced that visiting hour was over' (253). Detached and stark, there is little sentiment given to Wilder's condition: we are offered no insight into Janice's reaction to her ex-husband's plight, nor is there any indication that Wilder will enjoy a life outside the asylum. While Yates does have a predilection for apathetic endings, this is also in keeping with one of the novel's primary aims, as Castronovo and Goldleaf note, "Cool and analytic, never preachy or polemical, he studied the specifications of his character's downfall without thundering at the sane society."⁸¹ If there is an absence of feeling in *Disturbing the Peace*, it can be seen to be Yates abiding by his belief that he wanted to "have the man go crazy without letting the book go crazy," voiced some two years prior to publication.⁸² Yates looked to detail Wilder's journey with a steady hand, which he executes by establishing a distance between character and author, plus that of character and reader. In all earnestness, Wilder isn't particularly likeable, nor has he any redeeming features. This is, in a rather humorous and self-reflexive manner, articulated within the novel: when Wilder's play is in the hands of Carl Munchin, he finds it has a central weakness, "Your protagonist—the man all this Bellevue business *happens* to—is never really characterized" (194). Wilder, in turn, responds, "We planned it that way.... We wanted him to be a sort of nameless observer, you see, a kind of Everyman" (194). By allowing Wilder to be a figurative representation devoid of agency—as the italicisation of Munchin's quotation intimates—Yates retained a focus on his character's passage into psychosis. The empathetic distance Yates established can be seen in his reaction to a friend who, after reading the novel, said she had cried because of Wilder's downfall: "I hoped people might wince a little...or shudder, but really didn't expect anyone to cry."⁸³

⁸¹ Castronovo and Goldleaf (1996), p 76.

⁸² *Ploughshares* (1972).

⁸³ Bailey (2003), p 444.

Fiction vs. Reality in *Disturbing the Peace*

As identified in the first chapter, *Disturbing the Peace* contains various metafictional features: there is the presence of Chester Pratt, a thinly veiled incarnation of Richard Yates himself; the transposition of the *Bellevue* play which undergoes several degrees of fictionalisation from the original script; and finally, Wilder's fate in the novel, which becomes controlled by the direction of the new script-writers. This last point is of particular relevance as Wilder increasingly begins to perceive himself to be a character, or hero, within his own script, initiating a process of depersonalisation that leads to his eventual decline; a salient feature of which is how this passage is articulated through Wilder's engagement with and questioning of reality. This can be seen as part of the novel's ontological awareness, a staple of postmodernist work, as Raymond Olderman identifies, "The blurring of fact and fiction with its resulting confusion over the nature of reality is so intense that there is nothing very firm for a character to retreat from or to."⁸⁴ This process of depersonalisation occurs during *Bellevue*'s first inception at Marlowe, as Wilder, watching the play under the direction of Julian Feld and being discussed by the actors, begins to consider his importance to the production. Wilder believes, "he had been born for this, for finding order in chaos" (133). The production of the play rotates around his character, a realisation that leads him to think, "John Wilder was coming into his own at last—this was reality" (133). Wilder, here, starts to consider himself in the third person, which leads to the first stage of depersonalised identity. As Taylor observes, this accelerates Wilder's passage towards schizophrenia:

Being at once fictional, the Wilder of the story, and "real," a man who watches his story being acted by others, he is free to imagine himself as any other fictional character, and to roam at whim among the possibilities offered to him by competing stories available in the Bible, in films, and in newspapers.⁸⁵

After the suggestion of inserting a Christ motif into the play—or rather, have Wilder believe he is being crucified in *Bellevue* as an objective correlative for his whole situation—Wilder, of the novel, subsequently suffers from a breakdown and attempts to live out the scene. When being admitted to hospital, he paraphrases a line from Blanche du Bois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), "I have never depended on the kindness of strangers" (144). This first instance of foreshadowing shows how interchangeable fiction

⁸⁴ Raymond Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven; London: 1972), p 16.

⁸⁵ Taylor (1990), p 6.

and reality start to become for Wilder and the blurring is further emphasised by his adoption of a character within Tennessee Williams' play.

When in Hollywood, the play, now under the direction of Haines and Munchin, has an even more intense hold over Wilder. Haines is, at first, able to give an apt summation of Wilder's character in the novel:

He's solidly middle class. I don't know what he does for a living, but let's say it's something well paid and essentially meaningless, like advertising. When he gets out of Bellevue he's scared and lost but he doesn't know where to turn. Maybe he gets involved with a quack psychoanalyst, that'd give us an opportunity for some humor—black humor—and then he meets a girl. (199)

Haines description is an outline of Wilder's character in the play (and indeed of *Disturbing the Peace*), which adds a further layer of fictionalisation on top of Yates' novel. This takes another reflexive turn when the director, Carl Munchin, subsequently suggests a revision of the play:

I can't help feeling there's a quality of cliché about everything you've said so far. Unhappy advertising man, gray flannel suit and all that. We can't have a character who meets his downfall out of some cockamamie. This is a dark story. We need a man who's *doomed*. (199)

This is, in part, a parody of the Yatesian figure and the author upholds it to subsequently satirise his fiction. After this suggestion, both men agree on the direction in which Wilder must head: after his second breakdown, offer him a glimpse of hope (as Wilder experiences following Marlowe) before everything falls to pieces in the third act, where he will systematically destroy everything in his path and sink into a "depression so deep as to be irrevocable" (200). This presages, of course, Wilder's final actions within the text. The revisions, both men decide, should be handed over to the new scriptwriter, Chester Pratt, or the thinly disguised Richard Yates. Wilder is, thereafter, under the hand of Yates and Pratt—and prior to this, that of Julian Feld, during the play's first inception—which further consolidates his fictionalised identity within the text.

We see, thereafter, Wilder assume various roles or incarnations—Lee Harvey Oswald, Mickey Rooney, Alan Ladd, the recurring Christ motif—as he heads towards his

final breakdown. This is precipitated by an enveloping paranoia, as Wilder imagines himself at the centre of JFK's assassination and the accompanying media search. As Charley Barker notes, themes of paranoia, induced by institutional power and "thought insertion through the media and advertising" were all prevalent features of postmodernist fiction throughout the 1960s and 70s.⁸⁶ Believing that the world's communications must be broken down, he moves through his kitchen with a carving knife and cuts his telephone wire before running, barefoot, through Santa Monica Boulevard and tracing his hands through dogshit as a means of recapturing reality, to prove "he was mortal and earthbound. No second coming of Christ would have dogshit on his thumb" (228). Wilder's paranoia reaches the point that he begins to hear Walter Cronkite's voice narrating his pursuit, "There is still no word from Los Angeles....The man is still at large" (229). Wilder's media exposure extends to print as he envisions the headline, 'Saviour or Fraud?', while CBS camera crews congregate outside his apartment. Seeking to decipher what constitutes reality—and whether he is at the centre of this media hunt—Wilder looks around his apartment:

Walking, he insisted to himself that it wasn't true. If it was true the tumbled apartment wouldn't look this way: these ashtrays wouldn't be overflowing with butts and there wouldn't be this tan stain of whiskey on the wall. The clothes in this closet were John C. Wilder's clothes—anyone could see that—and the dirty feet that padded this carpet were John C. Wilder's feet. John C. Wilder was short. He was thirty-nine years old and he came from New York, where he sold space for *The American Scientist*, and he had a faint scent of dogshit on his thumb. (231)

The frequent references to Wilder's full name is reflective of his increasing disassociation, as too is his consideration of himself in the most basic, biographical terms. Again, there is a further allusion to the dogshit, a desperate, primal attempt to locate something real as his mind succumbs to hallucinations. With the delusion becoming increasingly more pronounced, Wilder begins to believe he is reliving Christ's crucifixion, signifying the final stages of his manic episode, "he raised two fingers in benediction, and then to leave no shadow of a doubt he raised both naked arms as if he were hung from a cross and let his head fall to one side" (232). The Christ motif, initiated after it is suggested during the *Bellevue* production in Marlowe, seems to be a part of Wilder's increasing conviction—or perhaps hope—that he is about to experience the Second Coming. As Olderman points out,

⁸⁶ Charley Baker, *Madness in Post-1945 British and American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p 165.

the second of these is a recurring theme for the crazed figure in fiction of the 1960s and 70s, “the hero, whether he is active or passive, is trapped cold in a waste land where he can work for re-birth but hope only for a way to cope with the waste land that life is better than death.”⁸⁷ Yet for Wilder there is no prospect of resurrection and he fulfils the fictional path that has been laid out by Haines and Munchin. This denotes the controlling force of the metanarrative over the primary fictional narrative of *Disturbing the Peace* and veils Yates’ novel under a further layer of fictionalisation. Looking at the novel from this angle, then, it is apparent that *Bellevue* disturbs the central narrative of *Disturbing the Peace*, with the play’s dictate overriding that of the novel’s. Wilder’s immersion in the play opens the text up into a broader ontological discussion, in which he is unable to decipher whether he is a character within *Disturbing the Peace* or *Bellevue*. This point of contestation between reality—within the suspended fiction of Yates’ text—and that of the meta-reality (*Bellevue*) is the platform through which Yates details Wilder’s psychosis, with the resonant themes of paranoia and fragmentation symptoms of his condition.

Scenes-as-Lived in *Disturbing the Peace*

There’s a point in *Disturbing the Peace* in which Wilder and Pamela discuss the contrasting merits of fiction and film, and specifically the poor cinematic adaptations of classic novels. Wilder concedes that he hasn’t read most of the books under discussion—*Madame Bovary* and *The Great Gatsby* are mentioned—but advances an argument as to why certain movies wouldn’t have enjoyed the same impact if they were translated to the page. When asked the best American movie he’s seen, Wilder replies:

Citizen Kane. And can you imagine what kind of a novel that would’ve been? A piece of schlock. A half-assed, sensational book by some all-thumbs Harold Robbins about the life of William Randolph Hearst. See what I mean? (108)

The content of Wilder’s response is of interest as it relates to the oppositional merits of the fictional forms—*Disturbing the Peace* is essentially one man’s beleaguered journey in getting his script translated on to screen—yet his reply also has a familiar ring. During the original *Ploughshares* interview, conversation turned, early on, to the power fiction possesses over cinema, with Yates claiming, “when you get a verbal image on the page, its given to you to make of it what you can and the picture is all yours. When you watch a

⁸⁷ Olderman (1972), p 18.

movie it's someone else's. It's just an easy way of absorbing art." Following this, however, Yates qualifies his position somewhat with the use of an example:

The best movie I ever saw was *Citizen Kane*. But picture *Citizen Kane* as a novel: it would be a cheap journalistic novel about William Randolph Hearst, which would sell five million copies and be instantly forgotten. Right?⁸⁸

The similarities between the two are palpable. At the time of the *Ploughshares* interview, Yates was still in the process of writing *Disturbing the Peace*, and clearly thought this dialogue to be worthy of inclusion. In the printed edition, reference is made to the contrasting merits of film and fiction—Yates argues that reading allows you to make the “narrative pictures create themselves in your mind as you go along, rather than having them arbitrarily flashed at you”—there is no direct allusion to *Citizen Kane*. The scene in *Disturbing the Peace* therefore posits a subtle questioning of fiction against reality: fictional in that it appears in Yates' novel, real due to the fact it occurred in a recorded interview, yet not fully realised as it didn't appear in the official, or printed edition of the interview. If *Disturbing the Peace* blurs the boundary between fiction and reality on a textual level, the novel's incorporation of scenes that seem to be lifted directly from Yates' life further complicates this relationship. According to Bailey, Yates wrote much of the final version of *Disturbing the Peace* in mid-1972, a point at which he entered one of the “most alcoholic, disturbed phases of his life.”⁸⁹ Like his central character, Yates is said to have attempted to quell the onset of another manic episode through excessive alcohol consumption. Frantically wandering around Sunset Boulevard, Yates was subsequently arrested, informing police officers he was Lee Harvey Oswald (and at the same time Jesus Christ), before being taken to the County Psychiatric Unit and then the Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital.⁹⁰ The novel, according to Monica Yates, was “as true as [her father] could write about how [his breakdown in Los Angeles] went.”⁹¹ The depiction of his protagonist's psychosis, replete with hallucinations and fragmentary images, are the most factually concise in the novel. Blake Bailey furthers this by adding: “Ironically the most ‘unrealistic’” scenes are perhaps the most mimetically exact – namely Wilder's psychotic delusions, which evoke the actual process of going mad with compelling accuracy.”⁹²

⁸⁸ Original audio of *Ploughshares* interview. Occurs between 35:58-36:18. Accessed online: http://pages.emerson.edu/faculty/d/dewitt_henry/yatesinterview.mp3. [Last accessed 6 June 2016].

⁸⁹ Bailey (2003), p 438.

⁹⁰ Bailey (2003), p 350

⁹¹ Bailey (2003), p 349.

⁹² Bailey (2003), p 446.

Writing as Therapy

For Yates, then, *Disturbing the Peace* served as a form of biographical disclosure, a precise rendering of his own breakdown and hallucinations. Looking at the novel in this context—and to a similar extent, *Revolutionary Road*—it is apparent Yates sought to translate his own experiences through fiction, often at the point in which he had either recovered, or was in the process of recovering from an episode. In *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis*, Jeffrey Berman investigates this relationship between the creative and therapeutic process. Focusing primarily on American authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sylvia Plath and Philip Roth, Berman argues that this process is often symbiotic: authors can translate their sufferings into literature. In his chapter on Plath, Berman references the author's journals and connects her increased productivity to her positive response to psychoanalysis during the late 1950s. Contrary to Yates, Plath's relationship with her analyst, Dr. Beuscher, brought major intellectual and emotional breakthroughs that freed her from writer's block.⁹³ Some of Plath's most renowned works, such as "Electra on Azalea Path," "The Colossus" and "Poem for a Birthday," centre on the anguished familial themes she had been confronting in her work with Beuscher.⁹⁴ For Berman, Plath's relationship with her analyst allowed her to make the "imaginative leaps that were to secure her artistic fame."⁹⁵ While Plath was clearly responsive to psychoanalysis—she is referred to as the 'perfect' patient in *The Talking Cure*—her journals reveal how the act of writing holds a certain therapeutic benefit. A 1958 journal entry from Plath reads: "Fury jams the gullet and spreads poison, but, as soon as I start to write, dissipates, flows out into the figure of the letters: writing as therapy?" One year later, this is framed as a rhetorical question: "I would not despair. If writing is not an outlet, what is?"⁹⁶ The anger detectable in the first entry suggests that writing has a soothing, almost purgative effect. The latter entry, with its use of "would" rather than the more natural will, seems like it is dialogue with the first; a reassuring nod to her former self that the fury will translate into a creative outlet.

By directing his attention to Plath's journals, Berman uncovers direct access to the way the writer translated her issues with mental health into art. Not only did it have a purgative effect, but also allowed her to rely on the creative process as a form of therapy. If

⁹³ Berman (1985), p 134.

⁹⁴ Berman (1985), p 134.

⁹⁵ Berman (1985), p 134.

⁹⁶ Plath qtd in Berman (1985), p 137.

we look at Yates' penultimate novel (and his last to give extended attention to mental illness) *Young Hearts Crying*, there is evidence, via Michael Crawford, of literature being used as an outlet, or form of recovery, after being hospitalised. The novel has more of a reflective feel than the two discussed above, however, as Yates firms up and resolves many of the issues with psychoanalysis and mental illness that were established in the earlier novels. The text sees both of its central characters, Michael and Lucy Davenport, turn to therapy after the break-up of their marriage. The second section of the novel, which focuses solely on Lucy, opens with a scene that is comparable to Wilder's interaction with Blomberg: "Well, you've got an answer for everything, haven't you. You guys run a pretty slick racket, don't you?"⁹⁷ As with *Disturbing the Peace*, there is a suggestion that psychoanalysis is symptomatic of middle-class malaise, as the narration confides, "Even a small-town psychiatrist would have more interesting things on his mind than assessing the emotional balance of a rich, rich girl who didn't know where to go and didn't know what to do."⁹⁸ Michael, who appears in the section immediately after Lucy, is committed to Bellevue after several sleepless nights and manic behaviour. The model is much the same as Yates' earlier text as his character is forcibly committed by his friend, Bill Brock, and is sent on a course of therapy upon release. Like Wilder, Davenport shuns psychoanalysis for somatic therapy—"they're wonderful things, these pills: they keep your brains working even after your mind is dead"—yet his excessive drinking dulls their effect, resulting in his second breakdown in the text; following a period of relative lucidity, Michael suffers a second psychotic episode, this time at a writers' conference in New Hampshire.⁹⁹

Michael's section in the novel opens with the lines: 'For Michael Davenport, looking back, the time after his divorce would always fall into two historical periods: pre-Bellevue and post-Bellevue.'¹⁰⁰ This retrospective tone is carried throughout the narration, as Michael attempts to compartmentalise his life in relation to his first admission to Bellevue. Unlike *Disturbing the Peace*, which follows Wilder's experience in Bellevue in the present tense, Davenport's stay is related through Lucy, meaning there isn't the same focus attributed to his admission. As his second breakdown approaches, Michael explains to a student that he is preparing for what is about to come:

Listen, Irene. Don't get scared, but I think I might be going crazy...Listen, though: it's no big deal, if you'll let me explain a couple of things. I went crazy once before

⁹⁷ Yates (2005), p 137.

⁹⁸ Yates (2005), p 139.

⁹⁹ Yates (2005), p 166.

¹⁰⁰ Yates (2005), p 265.

and came out the other side of it, so I know it's not the end of the world. And I think I've caught it in time, if you see what I mean. I'm still mostly in control.¹⁰¹

While Wilder's mental decline is frenzied, filled with hallucinations and abstract images, there is a far more composed feel to Michael's second episode. During his convalescence in the psychiatric hospital in New Hampshire, he is able to reflect on the latest episode, "And when he was alone again he lay slowly trying to sort things out in his mind. Could he still divide the years into pre and post-Bellevue periods, or not?"¹⁰² In this, Davenport exhibits a kind of introspection and cognisance of his situation; characteristics Yates doesn't attribute to Wilder. While in the psychiatric hospital in New Hampshire, Michael Davenport sets about composing a letter of apology to Charles Tobin, the programme director who had invited him to the writers' conference (the scene of his last, excruciating breakdown). Piecing the words together, Michael considers how it must strike the right tone and "convey humility and apology and gratitude" (308). Upon his release, we are told that Davenport continued to rework and sound out certain phrases of its content before posting. In the following paragraph, the narration runs:

Work might not be all there was in the world, but it had come to be the only thing Michael Davenport could trust. If he eased up on it now, if he ever let his mind slide away from it, there might be a third episode—and the third one, here in New York, might easily take him to Bellevue again. (308)

Writing, for Davenport, is a reliable, stable outlet that provides him with an element of control over his psychosis. His letter to Tobin, who is directly associated with the scene of his last breakdown, has the purgative effect to which Plath refers; by composing an accurate, well-formed apology, he is closing off, or book ending, the experience. Davenport's recognition of the connection between literature and self-discovery is emphasised at the end of the text as he presents his estranged wife, Sarah, with an ultimatum through a letter. Sitting at his desk, he composes the piece with a pen and notepaper, the "fundamental tools of his trade" (412) and manages to strike the correct tone and achieve the precision he intended. With a touch of levity, and perhaps irony, too, he reflects: "Sometimes, if you wrote out your thoughts, it could help you put them in order" (412). Berman's study on mental illness shows how authors have, over time, turned to literature as a therapeutic recourse. The sense of maturity evident in *Young Hearts Crying*

¹⁰¹ Yates (2005), p. 303.

¹⁰² Yates (2005), p. 307.

gives the impression of some kind of concession, almost as if Yates is willing to allow the identification but bring with it a sense of detachment, too.

Considering the biographical parallels that can be drawn with his fiction, the two texts under consideration contain elements of self-disclosure that indicate Yates used literature as part of this therapeutic process. Aside from the way this directly aided his work—it's clear, for example, that Yates was able to draw on a first-hand knowledge of Bellevue—the novels were written to signify a point of departure; by closing it off in his fiction he seems to be signifying a point of separation. The apathetic close to *Disturbing the Peace* aligns with the authorial distance Yates aspired to throughout his fiction: derived, and admired, from afar, through Flaubert's work, and found, more closely, as identified in the introduction, in the fiction of his contemporary, Verlin Cassill. Yet such separation has a different resonance in the context of his fictional treatment of mental illness. Yates was, it seems, aware that he needed some distance from his work: in a letter to Barbara Singleton Beury, the author shows a cognisance of the dangers in becoming too close to his characters, "Because it was identification such as this that hustled me into Bellevue."¹⁰³ The letter is dated February 1961, shortly after he had finishing writing *Revolutionary Road*. In this, the author associates insanity with the failure to provide the requisite distance from his work. There's a cautionary tone to the letter, as Yates continues: "I just plain can't afford to be as doomed as the people I wrote about."¹⁰⁴ With John Wilder, and to a lesser extent John Givings, there is an element of emotional discord; the lack of pathos we feel at the conclusion of *Disturbing the Peace* can also be perceived to be Yates' insurance that his own fate isn't as tragic as his protagonists.

America's literary engagement with mental illness isn't confined, of course, to the postwar era: Berman, for one, traces it back to the late 19th century and to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), and the relationship could easily extend to include much of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction. Poe's narrator in his 1838 short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" struggles to overcome a 'malady' that blurs his perception of fiction and reality and displays many of the symptoms we would now associate with those who suffer from split personality. Considering the vast developments in the field—the psychological provisions made for vets after World War II, plus the emergence of psychiatry and renewed faith in psychotropic therapy—the postwar decades are perhaps

¹⁰³ Richard Yates, "Excerpts from the Correspondence of Richard Yates and Barbara Singleton Beury, September 1960-November 196," *Harvard Review* No. 25, (Fall 2003), p 72.

¹⁰⁴ Yates (2003), p 72.

unique in their association with mental health. A separate, although certainly related, movement saw the condition become an ideological response to a repressive postwar environment. It's hardly surprising, then, that so many authors—Kesey, Ginsberg, Plath, Lowell and Mailer—can be placed readily within this narrative. One of the reasons for Yates' omission from this canon is the absence of critical attention paid to his work.

There's also an argument to be made that of the novels under consideration, neither fall directly within the categories outlined above. In the prophetic, crazed but brilliant John Givings, Yates created an on-trend and culturally significant figure in the mould of Ginsberg's Solomon and Kesey's McMurphy. Yet Givings is a secondary character and while he holds a kind of soothsayer role within the text, he doesn't contain the same rebellious impulse as Kesey or Ginsberg's characters, nor does he symbolise the by-product or direct reaction to an increasingly restrictive postwar culture. Equally, the psychoanalytic tête-à-tête between Frank and April is subservient to the novel's overall directive, which is, even according to the author, a broader indictment of American life in the 1950s. As identified in the opening chapter, the novel's initial reception—specifically the claims of armchair psychology and the text's reception as a 'case-history kind of book'—must have impacted on how a readership approached, or perhaps even appropriated, Yates' treatment of mental illness from the outset of his career. *Disturbing the Peace* contains an implicit critique of institutionalisation but the Bellevue scenes are wholly polemic or extremely critical; even though Wilder's passage is one that encompasses the paradigmatic shift from psychoanalysis to drug therapy in the 1960s, there is a sense that the novel's publication in 1975 would have rendered its analysis obsolete.

Yates' sustained concentration suggests his commentary on the era wasn't quite complete. While this certainly lessened the political impact of *Disturbing the Peace*, this shouldn't necessarily detract from its cultural applicability or significance, especially when placed in a historiographic context. The novel generated criticism for the inevitability of its central character's decline, yet, to look at this from a position of narrative causality, or plot progression, is a misappropriation of the manner in which Yates charted Wilder's downfall. Denied pathos or an affective attachment, Wilder's descent into psychosis is detailed with a detached authorial hand. The questioning of reality and submersion within hallucinations are exhibited in the novel by Yates extending his stylistic boundaries, as evidenced too in *Disturbing the Peace*'s fascination with fictionalisation; features of the text that were, at the time of publication, almost fully ignored. This chapter has allowed

for a biographical reading of Yates' on-going issues with mental illness as a contextual backdrop to the evolving medical and cultural engagement with the subject in the postwar era; considering his own experience, Yates can be seen to boast a somewhat privileged position within this narrative as both commentator and patient. This is an aspect of his literature that has not been studied to any great degree, yet a re-analysis of the two novels identified unveils a continuous engagement with the subject. It is clear that the channels of postwar culture were receptive to any advance or change in the medical profile of mental illness and this underscores how closely bound representations of mental health were with that of national identity. My analysis shows that Yates was sensitive to the evolving cultural and literary approaches to the subject, and represents the concluding area in which Yates' fiction further engages with, and re-writes postwar American life.

Conclusion

Aside from the justifications outlined in this thesis or by fellow critics on the neglect of Yates' work, it is important to consider the (somewhat limited) reflections Yates offered on the topic. This thesis has used the 1972 interview with DeWitt Henry and Geoffrey Clark to expand the author's reflections on narratorial position, the ill-conceived critical appreciation of *Revolutionary Road* and considerations of postmodernism and new journalism. As illustrated, two versions of the interview exist, and, as evident in previous examples, Yates revised his answers and did so when questioned on the topic of neglect. When asked, in the printed edition, if he believed his work had been neglected, he responded: "Oh, sometimes, in my more arrogant or petulant moments, I still think *Revolutionary Road* ought to be famous."¹⁰⁵ Yates goes on to provide a very measured reply but also qualifies any claims of neglect by citing *Revolutionary Road*'s reviews, NBA nomination and Podhoretz's belief that it was an "unfairly neglected novel." The answer is closed with a further qualification:

I can't honestly claim my stuff has been neglected; it's probably received just about the degree of attention it deserves. I simply haven't published enough to expect more—not yet, anyway.¹⁰⁶

Again, there is a modest tone to Yates' response and sense of optimism too with the prospect of future publications—the interview occurred in 1972, so such optimism wouldn't have been misplaced. Both of these responses occur a number of months after the first interview and it is clear Henry knew of the subject's importance. In a letter dated 15 July, Henry wrote to Yates:

The questions that matters most, I think, is the one about "neglect"—I've been presumptuous enough to try to imagine your answer, and all I've come up with is travesty, even of my own credo, let alone yours. The problem isn't that I don't know what to say—I do—only it matters, and it's got to be said with sincerity and conviction, and if you can't say it greatly, it's just plain embarrassing.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ *Ploughshares* (1972).

¹⁰⁶ *Ploughshares* (1972).

¹⁰⁷ Letter from DeWitt Henry to Richard Yates, dated 11 May 1972, The Richard Yates Collection.

Henry's language is tentative, suggesting that he perhaps knew Yates would not have been fully content with his first reply being published. During the original interview, Yates had not been particularly forthcoming when discussing the subject but eventually gave a response, the content of which shows why Henry returned to the topic. Yates drew a distinction between the "popular writer": the one who established a "sustained contemporary audience," and the author who made the "bestseller lists." Yates continued:

Much more common, and I think the case is mine, is when the good work is its own reward and you share it with as many readers as you can and it stays alive, and has some hard-won clarity and richness, some distillation of human investment, that continues to claim some kind of permanent interest no matter what angles fashion may dispose new readers afterwards...My first book made a big, popular splash and that kind of success was intoxicating, and I was in the racket, in the race, but the down that followed it was miserable, and the real success has been a quieter, more solid kind of thing. I know the book's good. It's there. It wins new readers. That level is there to be reached, and I don't need a cheering crowd to tell me that it's worth it.¹⁰⁸

These are markedly different responses to the same question. It's telling how Yates regards *Revolutionary Road* to be a novel of "clarity" and "richness," which stands as a measure of the amount of time he invested in its composition. The distinction Yates provides prior to this—that of the serious and popular writer—shows the author believed he had written something enduring rather than topical, a separation outlined in my introduction. Of interest too is Yates' reference to what "angles fashion," an acknowledgement that his two published novels at this point were either additions to an exhausted topic (*Revolutionary Road*) or simply backward looking (*A Special Providence*). This is furthered by his subsequent comment, "it would be nice to be the fashion, to be recognised for what I'm trying to do." While in the printed interview Yates seemed to take some solace from the NBA nomination, he also knew how first place could have drastically impacted on the trajectory of his career. When the subject was broached some years later by a student, Yates, responded, "Want it? Want it? Of *course* I wanted it, I wanted it so fucking bad I could taste it!"¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Original audio of *Ploughshares* (1972) interview.

¹⁰⁹ Bailey (2003), p 268.

Bailey has been the only critic to recognise such a split at this point in the interviews and believes the cuts had been due to the fact Yates didn't want to be seen as a "crybaby who felt he'd been treated unfairly by the literary establishment"; that his original response looked too "pontifical" and "protesting."¹¹⁰ It was only after, when Henry revised the original transcript and followed up points that required clarification, that the author substantially changed the tone and content of his response. If Yates did believe he had been somewhat overlooked—as the original interview seems to suggest—openly admitting to this would essentially have been professional suicide, and the revisions were a necessary step to stymie any impact on the impending publication of *Disturbing the Peace*. What can be taken from the sentiments expressed in the piece, however, is a belief that his work would win new readers. Yates wasn't necessarily chasing literary stardom; he once joked that all he wanted was a "story in the goddamned *New Yorker*!", an ambition posthumously realised in 2001 upon publication of "The Canal."¹¹¹ What is clear is that Yates perhaps knew how close he was to reaching the upper echelons of literary success—he could taste it!—but this remained out of his grasp.

Yet, in what would have been Richard Yates' 90th year, the tide of revival and critical recognition paid to the author is beginning to rise. Stewart O'Nan, at a point when all of Yates' novels were out of print, before Bailey's biography and Sam Mendes' adaptation of *Revolutionary Road*, prophesied such a movement in *The Boston Review*, "Eventually the books will make it back in print... the work is there, waiting for its readers." Anticipating the impact a strong biography could have, O'Nan surmised that Yates' life would offer an avenue ripe for exploration, the unraveling of a tragic literary figure is one that has proven to be a "vital selling point for American literary lions."¹¹² Some 17 years on and these estimations have proven accurate: when I asked O'Nan why the recovery is now building momentum, he responded on 27 August 2015: "The revival took place for two main reasons: the enormous respect other U.S. writers have for his work, and how perfectly he fits the cliché of the neglected, drunken writer." Just as Charles Bukowski championed the work of John Fante, Yates has retained, throughout his career, a backbone of peers fighting his corner—Joyce Carol Oates, Andre Dubus, Kurt Vonnegut and latterly, Richard Ford.

¹¹⁰ Bailey (2003), p. 414.

¹¹¹ Bailey (2003), p. 507.

¹¹² O'Nan (1999).

If Yates did fit the mould of the neglected and drunken writer, it is also fair to say the author acceded to or at least consciously contributed such an image. With the stylised incarnation of Fitzgerald—Goldleaf has further uncovered this relationship in a recent piece—Yates sensed, perhaps, that the trajectory of his career would follow that of his tragic hero. The comparison with Fitzgerald holds only to a point, however: Fitzgerald received far more notoriety during his career than Yates ever did, while Fitzgerald, even if he did specialise in charting his characters' grand delusions and self-deceptions, granted and even applauded these traits; a separation O'Nan makes clear: "Yates's vision isn't redeemed by an angry idealism...his characters' dreams turn out to be empty, and their striving therefore pathetic—unlike, say, *Gatsby's*, whose love is somehow innocent." Where Fitzgerald allowed *Gatsby* to see a verdant path filled with promise and potentiality, Yates showed this to be a hollow pursuit even before the journey started. What's apparent, too, is that, in terms of Yates' lasting legacy, such a cliché is worth very little without substance to the claim of neglect. Yates' worth and quality, as O'Nan knew when prophesying the author's eventual (re)-discovery, would not be realised on the sole basis that he seemed the very incarnation of the neglected drunken writer. As Yates realised when reflecting on the quality of *Revolutionary Road*, the work must be there: it must offer some hard-won clarity and richness to win new readers.

In an interview with the *Paris Review*, author Tobias Wolff spoke of being at a launch party with Yates in Boston in 1983 and recounts an anecdote that offers a further qualification to the imagery of Yates as this drunken, neglected writer. Wolff had compiled an anthology and included "Oh, Joseph, I'm so Tired!" and invited Yates, along with two other authors, to read their work. Yates, due to present third, appeared drunk at the launch while Wolff, who was meeting Yates for the first time, recalls that Yates was in no "state to have a conversation," and kept nodding off during the two readings before him. Wolff, reconciled to the fact he had no control over Yates' actions and aware that "Oh, Joseph, I'm so Tired!" was a tough read, braced himself for Yates' introduction. At this point, Wolff recounts:

He made his way to the podium and read that story without dropping a comma. He read it in a beautiful, smoke-cured, gravelly voice. It was a wonderful reading. A

perfect reading. Professional doesn't even begin to describe it. And then he came off the podium and I went up to congratulate him and he was drunk again.¹¹³

Wolff compares Yates' performance to that of the surgeon in Oliver Sacks' *An Anthropologist in Mars* who suffers from Tourette's. When he is due to operate, however, he becomes entirely efficient and precise: "there was something of that in Yates." Wolff's anecdote underscores the sort of image Yates had cultivated but at the same time it Wolff's tale is one of admiration; he seemed enthralled by Yates' professionalism when it came to his work, the control he exhibited on the podium where he never missed the stress on one syllable. The tale, too, is demonstrative of how close Yates was with his fiction. As his letter to Barbara Singleton Beury shows, Yates looked to distance himself from identifying too closely with his characters; to establish a space that would ensure he wouldn't be as "doomed" as the people he wrote about. By the same token, it seems, Yates knew of the inseparability between the two—of living out his fictional persona, of living out the journey he spells of his characters. When commenting on how his life reflected that of *Revolutionary Road*, for example, he revealed, "I'm the best living example I know of a man who invested much too much into that essentially romantic idea, to the point where it very nearly destroyed both my wife and myself."¹¹⁴ Yates, both in pursuing the Fitzgeraldesque persona and charting a life inseparable to that of his characters, lived through and for his fiction. Grace Schulman, a long-term friend and once a student of the author's, remarked on such commitment at Yates' memorial service: "Dick believed that Flaubert's hard, detached observations were the gestures of love. 'When Emma dies, I die,' Dick said of Madame Bovary."¹¹⁵

This proximity with his characters—or indeed assimilation, when we look at Prentice in *A Special Providence*—has been proposed as one of the reasons for Yates' neglect. Benjamin Lytal offered a synopsis in a recent piece and relates this to Yates' relationship with those in his fiction:

Have the 1950s become so distant from the present that they seem potentially classical, a forum for mayhem and tribulation? A comparison of Yates with all his contemporary rivals — Cheever, Percy, John Updike — suggests that authorial

¹¹³ Tobias Wolff, "The Art of Fiction No. 183," *The Paris Review*, No. 171 (Fall 2004). Accessed online at: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5391/the-art-of-fiction-no-183-tobias-wolff>. [Last accessed 17 June 2016]

¹¹⁴ "Excerpts from the Correspondence of Richard Yates and Barbara Singleton Beury, September 1960–November 1961. *Harvard Review*, No. 25 (Fall, 2003). p 68 & 69.

¹¹⁵ Richard Yates, *An American Writer: Tributes in Memoriam* (Seymour Lawrence, 1993), p 47.

distance sets Yates apart. Even Fitzgerald, with Flaubert the writer Yates most consciously modeled himself upon, always expressed tenderness toward his troubled characters.¹¹⁶

Has Yates' fiction, doused by tragedy with little taste of redemption, proven to be more palatable since the turn of the century? Such an analysis demarcates the separation between Yates and his peers, which, as Lytal identifies, rests on the authorial space Yates establishes in his work. As outlined in my introduction, the harsh reality Yates presented in his work, as evidenced from the outset of his career (recall the reaction to the clinical ending of "A Really Good Jazz Piano"), must be seen as contributing to his lack of recognition. When we view Lytal's observation with that of Grace Schulman's remarks at Yates' funeral service we are presented with an author who had essentially constructed a self-defeating formula: Yates' detachment, from Schulman's perspective, were gestures of affection, a bond of sincerity between author and character. For Lytal, and many of those who have read Yates but been resistant to the world he presents, disconcerted by his cold and distant authorial vision, there is no reprieve, such as we find in Fitzgerald. For Yates, however, these cold, distances observations were examples of his tenderness.

If the lack of apathy Yates offered in his work prevented him from building a larger audience at the time, it has been my intention to approach Yates' work precisely from and within the harsh reality he presents, whether this be the unrealised heroism of an incompetent soldier, the fateful and disintegration of a young marriage, the inhibited space prescribed to women in the postwar environment, or the spiralling mental health of a man in the throes of alcoholism. Constricting and as unappealing as these themes may have been to an American readership, these portrayed the environment Yates sought to represent, his "half-acre of pain," etched with an unforgiving and unrelenting hand. As Lytal offers, there is substance to the claim that the more detached position we now regard the era has perhaps allowed for a readership less hesitant in approaching his work. The distance we now have means that any restoration of the time may temper any rawness for those who had lived through and as part of the postwar life Yates envisioned. Equally, and as advanced in each of the chapters in this thesis, the 1950s and early 1960s have seen its profile and identity substantially revised over the past two decades. The rearticulation of this has brought about fresh impetus in revisiting a time that has been enshrouded in

¹¹⁶ Benjamin Lytal, "Reconsiderations: Richard Yates's Revolutionary Road," *New York Sun* (2 July 2008). Accessed online: <http://www.nysun.com/arts/reconsiderations-richard-yates-revolutionary-road/81093/>. [Last accessed 28 June 2016]

narratives of cultural, social and political ideology that now seem so ill-fitting and inaccurate. The revival has reached the point at which the 1950s are very much in vogue, as evidenced in the success of Matthew Weiner's multi-award winning series *Mad Men*. As proposed from the outset of this study, Yates maintained an obstinate concentration on a specific historiographic arc, and while this attachment looked passé as the country moved through the liberation movements of the following decades, the critical appreciation of his work must now be revised in light of the more nuanced readings that have been offered of this time.

The launch of Sam Mendes' film brought grand proclamations of Yates' status and unearthing: *The Independent* published an article under the banner, "America's Great Secret"; Nick Fraser, in his byline for *The Observer*, referred to Yates as "America's Great Lost Writer"; while Stephen Amidon of *The Sunday Times* loftily hailed Yates as the "Hidden Giant of American fiction." Such platitudes stretch only so far, and just as Yates was admired amongst his peers throughout his career, this didn't translate the widespread recognition his work deserved. Just as Yates was in many ways the embodiment of the clichéd drunken and neglected writer, there must be substance to disentangle any mythology from the content and quality of his writing, as Wolff's anecdote demonstrates. One of the abiding premises of this study has been to propose the reasons for Yates' position on the periphery of the American literary canon, to account for this continued exclusion, a situation that I outlined in the first chapter of this thesis. The justification offered portrays an author whose work was habitually mistimed; whether in terms of when it was released (*Revolutionary Road* and the NBA being the prime example), or out-of-step with the literary fashions of the time (*A Special Providence* seemed to set this trend but any novel from Yates' catalogue would work). In mapping out the arc of Yates' career—without stepping into the territory of literary hagiography—the opening part of this study had the objective of establishing how Yates' work had been approached (by reviewers) with a pre-determined theoretical lens, forming and consolidating the picture of a conservative author in both style and concentration of theme. More than anything, I wanted to show, with the subsequent analytical chapters, how Yates was a subversive writer *within* the framework his critics applied: Yates may have been guilty of retuning to the same themes but if we combine, for example, his treatment of mental illness in *Revolutionary Road* and *Disturbing the Peace* on the same theoretical level we completely disregard the way Yates diversifies and develops his vision in the two novels. In applying a methodology drawn from a range of cultural sources, I have aimed to show why the postwar era, a time that is now defined by how it repudiated against the previously

accepted narrative of normativity, placidity and conformity, merits such reconsideration. With such an approach, I have identified four distinct areas in which Richard Yates develops this critical re-thinking. His fiction and the chapters under analysis, uncover an author whose fiction is in dialogue with a progressive and alternative version of American in the 1950s and 60s.

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