“Being an Instance of the Norm”: Women, Surveillance and Guilt in Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*

Vavotici Francesca

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15847>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.15847

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Vavotici Francesca, ““Being an Instance of the Norm”: Women, Surveillance and Guilt in Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*”, *European journal of American studies* [Online], 15-2 | 2020, Online since 06 July 2020, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15847> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.15847>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

"Being an Instance of the Norm": Women, Surveillance and Guilt in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*

Vavotici Francesca

- 1 In the early 1960s, as Betty Friedan was conducting her preliminary interviews for *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she encountered the testimony of "a twenty-three-year-old mother in blue jeans" (11) who explained:

I often ask myself why I'm so dissatisfied. I've got my health, fine children, a lovely new home, enough money. My husband has a real future as an electronics engineer.... It's as if since you were a little girl, there's always been somebody or something that will take care of you life.... Then you wake up one morning and there's nothing to look forward to. (Friedan 11)

- 2 As a young mother, the woman seems to possess everything that she is supposed to desire. She is privileged with the comforts of a stable and decorous income, and she is secure in her position as the member of a respectable family unit. She is the prototype of the successful white middle-class American, and, yet, she is "so dissatisfied." She has "nothing to look forward to," no stimulus that will propel her toward further personal development and growth. She has no desires outside the ones she has been conditioned to accept as her own, and she is not alone in this. On the contrary, as *The Feminine Mystique* demonstrates, she is a representative of a specific cross-section of America in response to which she seems to voice a series of concerns—concerns with regards to social status, consumerist instincts, and self-actualization—that permeated the social structures and shaped the cultural landscape of the time. The mother of Friedan's recollection is, essentially, a spokesperson for a generalized feeling of social paralysis and anxiety that seems to characterize early-1960s' middle-class America as a social milieu occupying a liminal space between utopia and dystopia.
- 3 Exploring the contradictions, limitations and struggles of this particular social milieu has been a primary aim for the fiction of Richard Yates. As Jennifer Daly argues, "as a writer, Yates was primarily concerned with what he saw as the flawed American Dream" (1). Burdened by the "stifling conformity and artificiality" (1) that the dream

engenders, Daly continues, American "citizens" become in Yates's fictions centres of tension where the dream is both "atrophied" and, simultaneously, "still holds power over almost every aspect of life" (1). That the "flawed" dream—which Daly identifies as the "struggle to... be content to conform to the social and cultural mores of the time... without compromising" a certain "sense of individuality" (1)—is inextricably linked to environmental circumstances is evidenced by the attention placed by most scholarly readings of the novel on the idea of the suburb as the setting that "deftly reveals the mechanisms of social control that drive these conformist environments, and thereby exposes the illusory nature of freedom and autonomy existing therein" (Wilson 14). Indeed, the vast majority of criticism concerned with Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961) places the novel steadily within the sub-genre of suburban fiction, and addresses, to varying degrees, the effects of suburban development on its characters and storylines. Jessica Mayhew speaks of "the frightening aspect of this environment" as one that "is difficult to articulate because it is concealed in blandness" (618), while Andrew Slade suggests that "April and Frank live in a constricted space where the possibilities for action appear progressively limited" (671). Wilson, Mayhew and Slade all point at the physical design of suburban developments as directly impacting the psychological and social development of Yates's characters, rendering the Revolutionary Hill Estates an active agent in the process of identity formation. In this context, then, suburbia is seen as functioning as a locus that both offers a physical representation of the "stifling conformity" imposed on the characters, and, at the same time, engenders a reinforcement of the social structures from which such concept of social conformity stems. Indeed, if, as Beuka suggests, "the development and subsequent expansion of suburbia entailed the construction of... new psychic and emotional landscapes" (4), these seem to work in Yates's fiction in a symbiotic relationship with the strategic planning of the suburban town and its houses, so as to establish suburbia "as a place that reflects both an idealized image of middle-class life and specific cultural anxieties about the very elements of society that threaten this image" (7).

- 4 Yet, if the impact and symbolic value of suburbia in *Revolutionary Road* has been widely analyzed and debated, there still appears to remain a certain degree of ambiguity over the highly gendered connotations that the suburban town and house bear for the characters in the novel, and for the wider social landscape. On the one hand, there is no doubt about the structural normalization of gendered roles that is embedded within the suburban landscape. As Kim England underlines,

Post-war residential suburbanization was hinged on the notion of dichotomous spheres. The 'private' sphere of consumption/reproduction, home, family, and domesticity being the domain of women, and the 'public' sphere of production, waged work and political activity being associated with men. (25)

- 5 In this light, female characters in the novel are regularly depicted in critical assessments as representations of "the myriad unfulfilled housewives of the post-war years, confined to their homes and gendered roles" (Wilson 20), or "the suburban housewives and mothers" that were "of central importance as the symbol[s] of the new domesticity even as [they] found [themselves] increasingly estranged from society at large" (Beuka 152). On the other hand, however, this reading of the gendered prescriptions embodied by suburban developments is employed to portray an uncomplicated image of womanhood in the novel by essentially generating an ulterior gendered code wherein all suburban housewives are encompassed by one archetypal character-type subjected to limiting standards of gender identity, and, as such, devoid

of personality and individuality as an emblem alternatively of female repression or masculine dissatisfaction. As Wilson suggests, Frank Wheeler is "Yates's protagonist in *Revolutionary Road*" (15), while "the Wheelers exemplify falsehood, duplicity and inauthenticity" (19). There is either no distinction between April and her husband, or, if a distinction is identified, it is only so that April might serve as a counterpart to Frank's "protagonist" struggles. Moreover, in the same article, John Givings as the madman of Foucauldian heritage is described as "forc[ing] his family and neighbors to confront the ruptures in the dominant ideology of the time" (Wilson 28), while April Wheeler is portrayed as a mere victim of social circumstances beyond her control, a slave to the "traditional gendered behaviors demanded of her by the postwar context" (Wilson 27). Similarly, McGinley argues that, within the realm of the suburban home, only Frank is able to realize "that he is playing the role of the prototypical suburban husband," becoming thus compelled "to shatter the image by breaking the picture window" (36) while April remains unaware of her condition, a meek player in a suburban social performance solely orchestrated by patriarchal authority.

- 6 Where many have recognized the gendered nature of suburban structures and social mores, the significance of singularly female struggles and expressions within *Revolutionary Road* has often been either overlooked or wildly misread as a the exclusive result of patriarchal operations of power. What this paper proposes to address in the first instance, then, is an analysis of the ways in which the pre-existing gendered codes embedded within the structural design of suburban towns and houses serve to enforce a mechanism of social control exercised by women over women. This mechanism, it will be argued, leads to a seemingly unbreakable cycle of surveillance and guilt over the performance of certain prescribed gender roles aimed at the preservation of the social status quo. The question of whether and how the novel seems to present avenues for the examination, manipulation and subversion of such roles will then be raised in an attempt to demonstrate what agency remains available to the female characters offered by the narrative. The first section of the paper will focus primarily on the language employed in Yates's description of the suburban landscape so as to highlight the gendered dynamics at work in the connection between the physical structure of the suburban town and its social hierarchies. The following section will highlight the impact of said characteristics onto the suburban community by examining the ways in which the instances of social performance encouraged by the suburban design deprive female characters of a viable audience for the expression of personal desire. The paper will conclude with a suggestion that an alternative form of extra-linguistic semiotics may be available to the female characters in *Revolutionary Road* as exemplified by April's death at the conclusion of the novel.

1. Dream Houses and Suburban Consumerism

- 7 As the main site of narrative action, the Revolutionary Hill Estates are first presented in the novel in a carefully planned introduction orchestrated by the town's estate agent, Mrs.. Givings. In describing Frank's and April's soon-to-be family home, the woman praises its neat and tidy appearance, placing emphasis on its rigorously structured spaces with the "prim suburban look" of a "symmetrical living room" (Yates 30) "corners" that "made right angles," and "floorboards" that "lay straight and true" (Yates 30). The language employed to describe the house gradually shifts in

conversation with the Wheelers from a strictly architectural register to one concerned with rather more moral and symbolic issues, prompting the idea of the suburban home as the focal centre of social status and emblem of honesty and respectability. What Mrs. Givings implies in her presentation is the idea that the choice of dwelling for the Wheeler bears far wider ramifications than the practical aspects of family living. The scriptural language employed to describe the physical space denotes an almost religious belief that the regulated and hierarchical order of the suburban landscape can give meaning to an otherwise confused and hazy concept of personal and social identity, a characteristic that even the Wheelers cannot help but find "undeniably appealing" (Yates 30). The choice of a proper and "prim" suburban home grants a feeling of social affiliation that signifies the willing adoption the suburban social code, thus rendering the values associated with the social norm a commodity that can be acquired for the improvement of one's personal circumstances. Mrs. Givings as an estate agent in this context, then, is significant beyond the contents of her discourse for it is representative of the notion that suburban ideals possess a certain consumeristic quality, and idea that is reinforced by Frank Wheeler's own latent attitudes toward suburban living. Indeed, in his attempt to align himself with a social structure that sees him as the intellectual guide of his familial life, Frank goes so far as to rewrite entire conversations and scenes of his life to create, in his mind, a TV spot of what his future is supposed to look like:

All afternoon in the city, stultified at what he liked to call 'the dulllest job you can possibly imagine,' he had drawn strength from a mental projection of scenes to unfold tonight. Himself rushing home to swing his children laughing in the air, to gulp a cocktail and chatter through an early dinner with his wife; himself driving her to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand...; himself glowing and disheveled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss...; and then the two of them stopping for a drink in the admiring company of Step and Milly Campbell. (Yates 13)

- 8 Frank's constructed image of the idyllic family life—the "children laughing," the "cocktail and chatter," April's "tearful kiss," and "the admiring company of Shep and Milly Campbell"—speaks of an individual whose sense of personal achievement is deeply connected to his compliance with normalized standards of suburban "happiness:" the "mental projection" that gets Frank through his day is a pre-packaged dream, a spectacularly presented interlude that he actively pursues in an attempt to "sell" the utopic suburban vision to both himself and his wife, and whose crystallized existence, however, is at odds with the complexities of a reality that is far from the imagined.
- 9 In a social environment which equates housing circumstances to happiness and morality, being able to provide a suburban house for his family becomes for the male characters a rite of passage, a way of showing he belongs to the status of manhood. As John Cheever suggests in his novel *Bullet Park* (1969): "The stranger has left his wife in the Hotel Plaza, watching television. The search for shelter seems to him to go on at a nearly primordial level. Prices are high this days and nothing is exactly what one wants" (4). The satisfaction of a primary need such as the "search for shelter" is equated in the suburban context to the acquisition of commodities that bear little connection to survival and are, instead, to be considered as emotional tokens of personal success. As Berger explains, "the suburbs were rich with ready made visible symbols: patios and barbecues, lawnmowers and tricycles, shopping centers, station

wagons, and so on" (82) and "such symbols were readily organizable into an image of a way of life that could be marketed" (82) not only by businesses seeking financial gain, but also by single individuals in promotion of their supposed self-actualization. The reference to the hunter-gatherer spirit that is embedded in Hammer's "search for shelter" demonstrates how identity has become a transaction closely linked to consumeristic drives, in which the prosperity of the family unit is granted by the fulfillment of prescribed roles: a husband who is willing to embrace the "primordial" struggle to provide for his family, and a wife who "gathers"—by "watching television"—the social codes and is capable of enacting them. This "commercial quality" (Cheever 100) is exactly what distinguishes the suburban effort: the symbolic possession of commodities for the man is not constrained to objects of everyday use, nor to his dwelling and his wealth. Rather, it extends to encompass, as the ultimate signpost of his achievements, his family, for it is the family that becomes representative of the values to which the suburban community attributes importance. Ownership of the physical landmarks of respectability—the "patios and barbecues, lawnmowers and tricycles"—in itself is not enough to grant male satisfaction, for the symbolic power of said articles needs to be reflected in the behavioral patterns of those who wield the objects. In this light, the acquisition of the familial home becomes more than a commercial investment, and is charged with allegorical meaning: "The house or the flat that he looks for, he knows, will have to have appeared at least twice in his dreams" (Cheever 4). There is a spiritual quality to the "search for shelter" insofar as its completion seems to mark, for the man, a development from boyhood into manhood.

- 10 The issue is, of course, markedly different for female characters, for whom two contrasting forces are seen at play in the geographical plan of *Revolutionary Road*. On the one hand, the design of the home as the normative female space seems to reflect a need for the projection of an outward appearance whose accomplishment defines the woman's—and, as a reflection, the family's—success within the suburban community. On the other hand, the physical isolation of the Revolutionary Road houses from the wider landscape of productive activity—agricultural, industrial, or tertiary—also imparts limitations on ideas of femininity by precluding female characters from partaking in occupations of financial and political interest. It is, thus, no surprise that the objection that April Wheeler finds to the property presented by Mrs. Givings is that, "Of course it does have the picture window" (Yates 29). With its similarity to a permanently open stage curtain or an always-on TV screen, the picture window represents the social scrutiny to which the woman as the centre of the house is subject, and emphasizes the need for a sort of theatrical "(re)production" of motions and tasks as a way of expressing allegiance to the predetermined role and satisfying the prying viewers. April's understanding that "I guess there's no escaping that" (Yates 29), and Frank's assured response that "I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities" (Yates 29) foreshadow an essential thematic concern for the entire novel: the fact that the notion of female "entrapment" is mystified by its being embedded in a project of architectural reconstruction that symbolizes a social discourse whose primary manufacturer is patriarchal authority. Frank's dismissal of April's objection to the "picture window" that characterizes suburban life is symptomatic of a wider attitude that seeks to establish female desires and anxieties as secondary, irrational, and unimportant in the broad scheme of things. Particularly if examined in contrast to a female-authored novel such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), *Revolutionary Road* is shown to make a conscious effort to depict the totalitarian

nature of the male discourse within the suburban community. Indeed, Plath's heroine's response to the intrusiveness that windows represent demonstrates a sharp contrast in perspective:

Ours was a small, white clapboard house set in the middle of a small green lawn on the corner of two peaceful suburban streets, but in spite of the little maple trees planted at regular intervals around our property, anybody passing along the sidewalk could glance up at the second storey windows and see just what was going on. (Plath 111)

- 11 Where April Wheeler's complaint with regards to the picture window is presented as being only a minor glitch that can easily be conquered by Frank's self-assured stance, Esther Greenwood's insistence on the contrast between the "two peaceful suburban streets" and the "glance" that, at any moment, can "see just what was going on" underlines the constant violation of female personhood that the suburban standard of living imposes upon women.

[Mrs. Ockenden] had called my mother up twice about me—once to report that I had been sitting in front of the house for an hour under the streetlight and kissing somebody in a blue Plymouth, and once to say that I had better pull the blinds down in my room, because she had seen me half naked getting ready for bed one night when she happened to be out walking her Scotch terrier. (Plath 111)

- 12 The two instances of intrusion that Esther Greenwood chooses to recall describe the lack of privacy that the suburbs offer to women, and are thus significant insofar as they speak of an entrapment that is not merely psychological, but bodily. The acts of kissing and undressing are denounced by the community as unbecoming for they do not conform to the wholesome ideals of femininity as pure—before marriage—and motherly—after marriage. The female body is controlled by the community insofar as its uses are prescribed by the same social codes that affirm men as providers and women as carers, and the only role open to the female character as a participant in the suburban social performance becomes that of the "suburban housewife."

- 13 It can be argued, then, that the male patriarchal authority is able to find its own self-actualization through the provision of a satisfactorily "suburban" familial home. His female counterpart, however, is either infantilized or subdued by the physical space she is forced to occupy. This is particularly evident in Yates's treatment of Milly Campbell and Mrs. Givings, where both characters seem to live in an almost symbiotic relationship with their home, so much so that their identities become fused with the social significance of the buildings they inhabit. Milly Campbell's bedroom, for example,

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 for them... and whose quick, frightened eyes, as she worked, would look very much like the eyes that now searched this mirror for signs of encroaching middle age. (Yates 143)

- 14 The aspirations of "little girl" Milly are reflected in the design of the bedroom, whose mirror, in turn, reflects an image of adult Milly, fighting "encroaching middle age" and yet somehow still stuck in an immature fantasy of what her life should be. The house is an extension of Milly's desires—or lack thereof. The childlike obsession with "making things nice" for her "dolls" develops in the adult representation of a woman that "could live in an ugly, efficient suburban house like this and know why and how it had to be apologized for in terms of the job and the kids" (Yates 142), and all through this, nothing of Milly is ever explored outside her relation to the house and the family that inhabits it. The home becomes the place where female identity is realized not as a personal choice, but, rather, as a conventional association. The segregate nature of

suburban life grants no space for female expression outside the home, and yet, the "regulations" that familial life abides to limit the scope of independent agency for women even within the narrow confines of their assigned habitat. The desires of the female caretaker are equated to those of the community insofar as they seek to uphold externally dictated standards of respectability.

- 15 If Mrs. Givings, the real estate agent, could be read as a character in defiance of this oppressive strategies—she is the only married female character in the novel who occupies a productive role as a member of the suburban workforce—yet it has to be noted that her efforts are limited by the fact that her pattern of financial production demonstrates a repetitiveness that seems to point at the futility and vanity of her project as devoid of all economic and political significance. "Helen had a way with houses," Yates writes, "She could buy one in a rundown condition, move in, vigorously improve its value and sell it at a profit, to be invested in the next house" (152). Rather than utilizing her profits—and her business acumen—to accomplish professional goals and establish her independence from male-dominated work environments, Mrs. Givings's talent seems to be reduced to a recreational interest in manual labor that provides a superficial satisfaction "against the pressures of marriage and parenthood" (Yates 155). Moreover, even Mrs. Givings's feeling of self-actualization outside the prescribed roles of mother and wife is eventually understood as delusional, for the only looming prospect that the working woman can aspire to is that of eventually settling into her family life. This is what her latest house represents for Mrs. Giving, and "her ability to love this house, she truly believed, was only one of many changes in her nature these past few years —deep, positive changes that had brought her to a new perspective on the past" (Yates 154). As with Milly, the house gradually becomes a reflection of Mrs. Givings's state of mind, and the woman's deep bond with her physical surroundings talks of a "change" that encourages a "dwindling of her fixation on work" (Yates 156) and a "long-delayed emergence into womanliness" (Yates 156), where "womanliness" is equated to domestic contentment and maternal care. In both Milly Campbell's and Mrs. Givings's narratives, the female character whose actions are dictated by the suburban milieu almost assumes the shape of her environment, generating the cult of womanhood as domesticity, nurture and maternal instinct; or, as Friedan would later call it, the cult of a "feminine mystique."

2. Gender Performance, Motherhood and Surveillance

- 16 With its detailed and insightful depiction of the physical space of suburbia, therefore, *Revolutionary Road* offers a glimpse into the private and public workings of the "regulations" to which gender identity is "subjected" (Butler 41): as Judith Butler asks her readers, "Is there a gender that pre-exists its regulation or is it the case that, in being subject to regulation, the gendered subject emerges, produced in and through that particular form of subjection?" (41). In the context of Yates's novel personal identity is indissolubly tied to social norms of decorum and decency that dictate highly gendered behavioral patterns and whose existence is validated by the subject's willing adherence. The desire to participate in and be accepted by the suburban community leads to the birth of a gendered "norm" that "has no independent ontological status" and "is itself (re)produced through its embodiment, through the acts that strive to approximate it, through the idealizations reproduced in and by those acts" (Butler 48).

As Richard Ford notes in his introduction to *Revolutionary Road*, "None of the characters glimpsed in *Revolutionary Road* has much of a clue about who it is they are. ... All are walking paths laid out by forces and authorities other than their own personal sense of right and wrong: Convention. Habit. Disengagement" (xviii). Ford's emphasis on the idea of "being" is interesting, for it delineates a distinction between the characters' existence and their actions, where the former becomes undefinable because its only means of expression—action—is determined "by forces and authorities" that are "other" and, therefore, unrecognizable. "It's as if," Frank himself admits, "everybody'd made a tacit agreement to live in a state of total self-deception. The hell with reality!" (Yates 65): the suburban existence is not "real" insofar as its dynamics are shaped by "convention" and "disengagement," and bear no relation to the "beings" that inhabit them.

- 17 Thus, when April asks Frank to be let out of a commitment with the Campbells, Frank is forced to lie to the couple: "It was the first lie of its kind in the two years of their friendship, and it caused them all three to look at the floor as they labored through a halting ritual of smiles and goodnights; but it couldn't be helped" (Yates 17). Both the Campbells and the Wheelers realize what the lie is hiding, and yet, the lie "couldn't be helped" for with its delivery the "ritual of smiles and goodnights" that accompanies the traditional ending to an evening can be taken to its rightful completion. The integrity of the suburban interaction is restored beyond April's distress for her acting failures, and the momentary awkwardness of the lie is a small price to pay for the fulfillment of the social norm. Yet, as Butler suggests, "The norm is a measurement and a means of producing a common standard. To become an instance of the norm is not fully to exhaust the norm, but, rather, to become subjected to an abstraction of commonality" (50). If adherence to the social "ritual" allows the characters to perform in compliance with suburban standards of decorum, the reproduction of the ritual is what generates and reinforces the norm itself. Moreover, the superficial satisfaction of the "common standard" reduces and impedes personhood in favor of "an abstraction of commonality." Despite their loud complaints against the constraints of suburban life, the Wheelers's actions denote an ever-fading sense of selfhood and a voluntary subscription to suburban regulations. By senselessly abiding to the social code that requires him to lie to the Campbells, Frank annihilates all instincts of personal expression in favor of an obedient replication of conventional gestures, thus adopting upon himself a pre-made model of personhood that comes to absorb his entire existence.
- 18 Throughout his novel, Yates demonstrates over and over how, circumscribed within the confines of their suburban interactions, his characters willingly renounce the idea of an autonomous and individual identity. Even as protagonists, they become satirical stock figures in a scripted sequence of appropriate behaviors—"Mrs. Givings, the ungiving real estate agent; Shep, the bird-dogging neighbor; ... the implicitly grubby Ms Grube; even the reeling Wheelers themselves, spinning out of kilter and down the road to disaster" (Ford xix). The use of evocative names that express ethical judgments recalls Medieval morality plays and thus generates a claim to suburbanity as a faith whose dogmas establish personal identity as a form of controlled agency that denies free will. There is a sense of pre-destination that pervades the community of characters populating *Revolutionary Road*, as if, from the very beginning, their paths to success or failure have been established in their relation not to the idea of selfhood, but to that of

the authoritarian "norm" of suburbia. April Wheeler with her "patrician kind of beauty," her perpetual claim to "the shyly sensual grace of maidenhood" (Yates 7), and a name that recalls ideas of Spring and rebirth, is bound to become pregnant and thus repeat the "natural" cycle of social entrapment. The paradoxical nature of the suburban existence is thus brought to light in satirical tones as an appraisal of the fact that a recognition of forms of subjection to social norms does not lead to a break with conventional standards, but, rather, to a reaffirmation of the same social patterns that the characters claim to be struggling against. There is no personal identity that precedes the social codes of suburban interplay, for the characters' very existence depends upon their interaction with the norm: as Yates suggests, "[Frank] couldn't even tell whether he was angry or contrite, whether it was forgiveness he wanted or the power to forgive" (Yates 31). Deviation from the norm—as in the case of a husband and wife falling into a violent fight—cannot lead to liberation, for it leaves characters in a state of numb confusion in which, unable to fulfill the role they have been assigned by suburban regulations, they cannot achieve a state of resolution. Frank's line of thought constantly leads him back to what is expected of him, and no interiority or personal drive is found in his efforts to deal with his circumstances. In Cheever's *Bullet Park*, the character of Nellie clearly and consciously delineates the way this mechanism works in terms of gendered understandings of personal identity: "[Nellie] was going home and she would, in the space of an hour, be able to close the door on that disconcerting and rainy afternoon. She would be herself again, Nellie Nailles, Mrs. Eliot Nailles, honest, conscientious, intelligent, chaste, etc." (Cheever 32). The act of "closing the door" represents the symbolic separation between independent will and traditional gender performance, with the former pertaining to an outside world that is afforded no place in the home and in the female construction of selfhood. The woman, whose name dangerously reads like an abbreviation of her husband's name, sees the familial residence as a refuge from forces that would lead her to stray from the established role that she performs within her household and her community. Cheever's ironic use of "etc." underlines both the impersonality and the omnipresence of the qualities that Nellie lists as her own. There is nothing in this depiction of womanhood that can be attributed to an autonomous "essence" the way Ford describes it, because any instance of female selfhood can only recur within the boundaries set by the suburban code of conduct.

- 19 Moreover, it has to be noted that the architectural structure of the familial residence regulates gender dynamics not only by demanding that women occupy certain prescribed spaces but also that specific tasks are associated with such spatial constraints, and that the degree of proficiency with which said tasks are completed will be carefully judged by an audience of peers:

Large windows, open-plan settings, fireplaces, and gallery kitchens added to the visibility of housework, enforcing high standards of cleanliness and neatness. Essentially the design of suburban communities and houses reinforced the notion that women's place was in the home doing 'housework' and raising children. (England 26)

- 20 If the home is private in the sense that it is excluded from the political and social discourse, its privacy is threatened by the endlessly scrutinizing eye of the community, and the woman is therefore never able to shed the role of perfect "housewife" without permanently compromising her social status and that of her family. The voluntary performance of gender-appropriate roles for the benefit of an outside audience creates

a type for womanhood that is so well cemented in its own environment—the home—as to become a model for the continuous replication of the norm. As the character of Mrs. Givings demonstrates, the gendered code becomes in *Revolutionary Road* a consciously female concern to be passed on from woman to woman. Indeed, not only is Mrs. Givings, in her own private understanding of self, giving in to the pressures of suburban gender regulations, but, through her work, she is able to implicitly encourage other women to follow in her footsteps by replicating the “change” that she herself has experienced, and thus becoming a vehicle for the “(re)production” of established gendered norms. Because Mrs. Givings’s role as a respectable suburban woman is juxtaposed with her role as an estate agent, she becomes a spokesperson for the gendered suburban ideal she is programmed to “sell.” Mrs. Givings is aware of the “charm” (Yates 28) that the suburban house, built “right after the war” by “little local builders” (Yates 29) exercises over “so many city people” (Yates 28), and she is willing to overemphasize this charm to reach her aim. Mrs. Givings’s description of the Wheelers’ property is telling in this regard: “It’s really rather a sweet little house and a sweet little setting,” she states, “Simple, clean lines, good lawns, marvelous for children” (Yates 29). The assumption is that a married couple of Frank and April’s age and social status would want to have children, and that the house—the neat, “clean,” dignified house—would serve the purpose of shielding the mother as the head of familial care-taking from the “cinder-blocky, pickup-trucky places” of “plumbers” and “carpenters” (Yates 29). The overly-emphatic, repetitive, child-like language employed by the real estate broker—“a sweet little house and a sweet little setting”—recalls the rhythmic cadence and alliterations typical of nursery rhymes, and points to a certain conventionally “motherly” behavior on the part of Mrs. Givings. The Wheelers are, at this point, extraneous to the suburban community and landscape, social “newborns” that Mrs. Givings seeks to educate by employing certain speech-patterns that project a biased image of suburban life, simultaneously establishing the implicit “regulations” governing it and normalizing the notion of “dichotomous spheres” expressed by England.

- 21 The presentation of the Revolutionary Hill Estates through the eyes of a woman who not only willingly adheres to, but also actively seeks to impart the gender hierarchy that the design of the suburb recommends is a crucial mark of how ingrained within personal identity the notion of a gendered separation of roles might be, and negates the existence of a personal identity that is distinguished from the social performance that the suburban community collectively agrees to fulfill. Mrs. Givings’s discourse, influenced by suburban ideas of happiness and self-satisfaction, is persuasive insofar as it is capable of exploiting the romantic notion of suburbia to affect her clients’ decisions. She is, at heart, a business woman, and, as such, her efforts are focused on some form of personal gain. As she herself complains, she cannot “waste” (Yates 28) her time, for she has a goal to achieve. However, where the aim of Cheever’s male real estate agent, Hazzard, is that of pursuing financial profits, Mrs. Givings’s efforts seem to be driven by different motives. In describing the “great hulking split levels, all in the most nauseous pastel” (Yates 29), her only mention of commercial value—“and dreadfully expensive too” (Yates 29)—comes as an afterthought, an appendix to the real, moral issue that is at stake in her personal line of business. With her donations of sedum (Yates 40), her insistence that the Wheelers “call her Helen” (Yates, 41), her taking “a little trouble, even in the low price bracket” (Yates 28), Mrs. Givings seems to assume upon herself the part of maternal caretaker of the suburban social order, in

which all houses present beautifully arranged flower beds, and neighbors share in each other's lives both through affected courtesy and unreserved judgment. "For Mrs. Givings the time after April's death followed a pattern of shock, pain, and slow recovery" (Yates 333): like the community she inhabits and represents, Mrs. Givings cannot come to terms with the disruption to social structures that April's decision has brought upon her suburban reality. "At first, she could think of it only in terms of overwhelming personal guilt, and so was unable to discuss it at all.... This, then, was what came of good intentions" (Yates 333): not only does Mrs. Givings fear the subversion of the stereotypical roles that she has willingly chosen to adopt and endorse; she also feels guilty at not having been able to pass down to April as a daughter-figure the idea of "change" as a settlement into pre-disposed duties.

- 22 The only way that the shock and pain caused by April's death can be overcome is by restoring the theatrically idyllic and static nature of the suburban community. "I simply cannot tell you how pleased I am about the little Revolutionary Road place" (Yates 335), Mrs. Givings tells her husband once a new couple of her selection has taken possession of the property. The restoration of the house—"I drive past it and it gives me such a lift to see it all perked up and spanking clean again" (Yates 336)—represents the symbolic recreation of the family unit as the basis of suburban society, and of feminine care-taking as the core of familial survival. Mrs. Givings's ultimate aim is that of "improving" her little suburban community by keeping it clear of the "impossibly rude people whose children ran tricycles against her shins" (Yates 153), a sort of social crusade that Yates veils with ironic hyperbole. "The demands of the working day might take her deep into the ever-encroaching swarm of the enemy swamp" (Yates 152), the narrator explains, drawing a satirical comparison with the heroic endeavors of some ancient Greek demi-god descending into hell. The alliterations, the assonances, the rhythmic cadence of the sentence, all point to some sort of epic narrative and add to the humor of Yates's portrayal: Mrs. Givings's fight for "the clean scent of cedar and floorwax" (Yates 153) is what drives her business efforts, but the contrast between the woman's first impression of the Wheelers—"it is so refreshing to deal with people of that sort" (Yates 28)—and the denouement of the Wheelers' storyline points at the futility of the woman's strive for social decorum. As depositaries of "the home," suburban women are ironically depicted by Yates as the "moral" centers of social interaction, and yet their efforts to diverge from the norm are always shown as destined to fail. Encapsulated in Mrs. Givings and April Wheeler is, essentially, the idea that adherence or deviation from the standardized roles of loving mothers and wives both loosen the fabric of the community, the former by vesting it in ridiculous effacements, and the latter by leading it to tragedy.

3. Guilt, Confession and the Potential for Female Self-Determination

- 23 Where Yates takes a satirical approach toward the performative demands placed upon his female characters, however, there still seems to remain throughout the novel a conception of femininity as embedded within archetypal images of womanhood. As Charlton-Jones argues,

Yates's fictional representations of females appear to fall into two categories: young women struggling to communicate with the men in their lives, with whom we

generally sympathize, and older women, mothers, who restrict their sons and daughters, unequivocally damaging them in the process. (Charlton-Jones 501)

- 24 This separation between "younger" and "older" women—the latter, by necessity, "mothers"—bears some critical insight insofar as it addresses the archetypal ideals of motherhood and wifehood not as mere private practices, but as social acts with ramifications for the entire community. Yet, at the same time, Charlton Jones's analysis fails to address the possibility of alternative readings of Yates's femininity, where the responsibility of failed "communication" and enforced "restrictions" lies beyond female culpability for it depends on the systemic misinterpretation and misrepresentation of female-dominated discourses. Indeed, it could be argued that *Revolutionary Road* presents, through the character of Maureen Grube, quite a clear depiction of how an alternative reading of urban femininity can shed light on the pitfalls associated with conventional understandings of female suburbanity. As an unmarried, satisfactorily employed, young woman who shares a city flat not with a family of her own, but with a peer and a "mentor" (Yates 95), Maureen could not be further removed from the suburban life in which April feels trapped. In fact, with her administrative job, her freedom of movement, and, even, her not-so-secret affairs, Maureen quite plainly represents the life that April imagines for herself in Europe. Maureen Grube's "all girl orthodoxy of fun" (Yates 95) allows the female character to shed the suburban roles of wife and mother and explore a more varied and liberal narrative. If April's life is characterized by its resemblance to the constraints of a stage play, Maureen's set recalls a "confectionery Hollywood romance of bachelor-girls in Manhattan" (Yates 96): despite the still recognizable signs of action as performance—"her overuse of 'fabulous' and 'appalling,' her wide-eyed recitals of facts concerning apartment maintenance, and her endless supply of anecdotes" (Yates 95)—Maureen's life is afforded the freedom of expression and extension that April's lacks. Nowhere in her suburban setting is April able to encounter the "sweet little Italian grocers and sweet little Chinese laundrymen and gruff but lovable cops on the beat" (Yates 95-6) that enrich Maureen's stories and give depth and variety to her background. The "stock of supporting actors" (Yates 96) that populates Maureen's tales may account for nothing more than romanticized fantasies and exaggerated caricatures of real people, and yet it serves to put the woman at the centre of her own story, making her a protagonist in a self-produced narrative that defies external definition.
- 25 Of course, the problem remains that, just like April with her European dream, Maureen is only partially able to accomplish her imagined narrative. In fact, as Frank notes, "much of [Maureen's] talk rang false" and "so many of its possibilities for charm were blocked and buried under the stylized ceremony of its cuteness" (Yates 95). The focus on the woman's "stylized" discourse and the "quality of play-acting" (Yates 103) carried by her voice points to a re-writing of personal history that is purely fictionalized, and cannot concretely come to fruition within the social realities in which these women find themselves. If Manhattan, with its endless potential for discovery and development, offers a more imaginative and freeing environment for a re-writing of personal history, this rewriting "seems to speak... to some romantic abstraction" (Yates 103). The fault in Maureen's fictionalization of her character is not in the narrative itself, but in the impossibility of matching her ideal audience with her current interlocutor, and the "stylized ceremony" of "cuteness" that Frank despises masks a clumsy attempt to adapt the female performance of independent personhood to what is, essentially, a hostile system of—male—listeners. As Butler proposes,

deviance from normalization results in a form of social guilt that manifests itself through confession (162-3), a confession that in the case of both April and Maureen is not based on a past deed, but, rather on an intended form of agency with no potential for actual realization. If the confession as a performative act is employed by women in an attempt to overcome the structural impasse in the process of female identity-making, yet its existence within an ideology reliant on imbalanced gender regulations signifies its impending failure. In fact, the unwillingness on Frank's part to meaningfully hear both April's and Maureen's confessions attests to the existence of a semiotic system whose process of assigning meaning lies beyond the female field of agency and whose effect is that of nullifying the female communicative effort.

- 26 The forms of oral storytelling that both April and Maureen adopt as avenues of self-expression are thwarted by the patriarchal lens through which these performative acts are read and analyzed, and speech and audience become fundamental in the representation and actualization of gender stereotypes both within a suburban and an urban environment. Quite significantly, where male speech is characterized by a structure closely resembling free indirect discourse—"[Frank] went that far without any idea how the matter was going to be taken in hand, if at all; but... soon he was intoning one smooth sentence after another" (Yates 122)—women are often pictured "stalking" the scene, and speaking "in an odd, stifled voice," as if they have "rehearsed [their] speech several times without allowing for the fact that [they]'d have to breathe while delivering it" (Yates 49). Even within their own project of storytelling, women are limited in their freedoms and conditioned by the "regulations" that apply to all gender dynamics. In the realm of performance, male characters can draw on experience to successfully deliver improvised monologues, while female characters, whose only source material is imagination, are limited to rehearsed conversations whose effectiveness is undermined by their own nature as fiction. The semiotic patterns underscoring male and female discourses speak of a highly gendered hierarchy that sees performative and narrative acts as successfully persuasive only where they demonstrate to be embedded within the current cultural rhetoric, and thus favour the patriarchal authority as the social entity that is charged with dictating the rules of said rhetoric. The expression of a female desire that exceeds the boundaries of domestic contentment cannot be contemplated as a "logical" and "sensible" (Yates 226) form of agency, for its realization would contradict the very speech norms that allow for its existence.
- 27 The idea of female self-actualization is undermined by semiotic regulations that mirror the gendered codes of social interaction and preclude hypothetical statements of alternative agency from being realized. Where "her speech is supposed to underscore her own sovereignty," Butler states, "something else is revealed. Although she uses language to claim her deed, to assert a 'manly' and defiant autonomy, she can perform the act only through embodying the norms of the power she opposes" (167): because the language sign-system is the domain of patriarchal signification, the female confessor is by default precluded from finding liberation in her speech. Rather, following her confession April Wheeler is presented as "damaged" insofar as her behavior deviates from the standards of what "intelligent" and "thinking" (Yates 20) people would assume as normal. "Wasn't it likely, after all, that a girl who'd known nothing but parental rejection from the time of her birth might develop an abiding reluctance to bear children?" (Yates 225) Frank asks rhetorically. Against her will, April becomes the subject of a personality study that seeks to disengage her from her

personal desire for freedom and self-actualization by attributing its roots to some traumatic experience that disconnected the woman from her own "femininity." "I guess your aunt always really seemed like your mother, though, didn't she?... She must have given you a certain feeling of—you know, love, and security and everything" (Yates 38-9), Frank tries to suggest. His interest in the "motherly" as the source of "love" and "security" is crucial in this context, for it shifts responsibility of parenting from a shared duty to a form of deranged motherhood, and makes April's "problems" a result of an exclusively female lineage of "emotional difficulty" (Yates 226). The pseudo-psychiatric jargon employed by Frank in this context seems to resemble more closely that of a court of justice than that of a helpful, open, and constructive, session of dialogue and interaction, and the woman finds herself in need of creating a line of defense—"But I've had two children.... Doesn't that count in my defense?" (Yates 225)—not to assert her will—for no space is left for that—but to ensure her social survival.

- 28 In addition, in April's discourse the feeling of ostracization that is elicited by the fracture between the woman's expected behavior and her personal desires becomes an internalized state that creates a fragmentation of the female consciousness. "Don't 'moral' and 'conventional' mean the same thing?" (Yates 222), April asks Frank: subjected to the pressure of sacrificing her own aspirations in order to achieve the image of "happiness" that her husband and children have grown accustomed to, April becomes incapable of distinguishing between what society requires of her and what is right for her personal development. The "regulations" to which April must obey are seen as the realization of a social hierarchy that is the epitome of "morality," and by failing to accept the normative behaviors codified by the suburban landscape, April automatically poses herself as an exception, an error that needs to be rectified. "Maybe it means there's something awful the matter with me" (Yates 223), she says. The incapability on April's part of denying "what I feel" and "what I've got to do" (Yates 224) is coupled with a sense of guilt at the understanding that this marks her, not only to her audience of judgmental peers and to her husband, but also to herself, as an anomaly. Frank doesn't need to voice his anger at April's "way of denigrating" what he considers "every half decent human value with some cute, brittle snobbish little thing to say" (Yates 222), because it is exactly in the inconsistency of April's expression of discontent and her intense conviction that "how am I supposed to get over it?" (Yates 225-6) that her interior struggle lies.
- 29 April is thus subjected to an encroaching feeling of abstraction and guilt that determines her existence as woman, in a process that is clearly exemplified in the novel by the only chapter narrated from April's perspective. The chapter opens with a vision of familial life as observed from a distant and objective position. April is depicted from the outside as the perfect housewife, watching "her husband's face withdraw," "hugging her arms against the morning chill, while he started up the station car and brought it rumbling out into the sunshine" (Yates 300). This short portrait of idyllic domesticity is described with clinical impartiality, and yet its presence at the beginning of the section point to a displacement of the woman's sense of identity in which April cannot reconcile her notion of self with the scene that occurs before her eyes. Although she casually participates in the scene, then, April is also left to watch its unfolding as if she were extraneous to the role that her body plays. Even in her most intimate manifestations of emotion—"her gums were sore from too many cigarettes, her hands were inclined to shake and she was more aware of her heartbeat than usual; otherwise she felt fine" (Yates 301)—April finds herself incapable of untangling her physical

symptoms from a social psychology that seeks to impinge on her personal perceptions, and she is therefore left to enact a process of analytical rejection of the self that leads her to a detachment from independent personhood. The female consciousness cannot exist for itself within the context of this social background, and, yet, all attempts at diverting from the background are thwarted by the mechanical reproduction of gender "regulations" that are ingrained within the female mind. As Esther Greenwood tries to externalize, "if Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat... I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (Plath 178). The suburbs are not just a physical environment, nor a social group that shapes the norms of that environment. Instead, they symbolize within the woman a state of mind hinged on a series of limitations that pervade all avenues for self-expression and shape the female characters' personal identities.

- 30 Yet, on closer analysis, certain details of April's life and, even more importantly, her death, seem to suggest that reducing the female character to the role of the victim might overlook the narrative signs that help portray a more nuanced picture of femininity. It does not appear correct to simply state, as Butler does, that "although [the confession] reads as an act of defiance, it seems in fact to be a suicidal act propelled by an obscure sense of guilt," nor does it automatically follow that "the confession produces a set of consequences that in retrospect illuminate a desire for punishment" (Butler 170). As an unsuccessful "act of defiance" the confession certainly comes to shape April's ultimate decision to abort her unborn child, but the claim that this abortion might be fuelled by "a desire for punishment" much like the claim that April's death might merely be read as the tragically unfortunate result of "a late-term home abortion attempt" (Wilson 27) subtract intentionality from April's act and fail to appreciate her understanding of and rebellion against the social persona she is forced to impersonate. Indeed, in the context of her strictly controlled suburban environment, April Wheeler demonstrates insight and clarity beyond all other characters in *Revolutionary Road*. April is painfully aware to the fact that her attempted abortion is likely to result in her early demise, so much so that her preparations involve devising what can be essentially read as a suicide note, and it is with this awareness that April transforms her death from the tragic denouement of an anti-heroic epic to an act of defiance in the face of constriction and ostracization. As a suicidal act, April's abortion bears invaluable political ramifications: by choosing to die, essentially, of motherhood, April commits an act that is fundamentally representative of a reluctance to relinquish a sense of independent selfhood and succumb to gender regulations. The impossibility of achieving a successful confession, thus, does not result in a defeatist abandonment to the gendered discourse laid out before the character, but, rather, it propels April towards the search for an alternative semiotic system outside the control of patriarchal authoritative codes. Thus, the "suicidal act" can be read not as an attempt to assuage a form of social guilt derived from deviance, but, rather, as an expression of self-determining personhood in the face of male-centered processes of signification. The intentional nature of April's gesture is denoted by her final message to Frank:

Dear Frank,
Whatever happens please don't
blame yourself.

From old, insidious habit, she almost added the words I love you, but she caught herself in time and made the signature plain: April. (Yates 310)

- 31 April's insistence that Frank should not "blame" himself is not an act of kindness and wifely affection toward her husband, but a reclaiming of personal agency. April's note is a declaration of intent whose function is primarily that of asserting responsibility and control over the rhetoric surrounding her decision to end her pregnancy and her life. The fact that April is consciously "catching" herself before adding "the words I love you," and thus before falling into the codified behaviors conventionally associated with the roles of wife and mother, is indicative of a desire to break with normalized ideas of femininity and disrupt the semiotics that characterize these. By ending the note on her "plain" signature, April is erasing the social pressures that would see her perform a role she perceives as foreign and alienating, effectively fabricating a liberating language void—represented on the page by Yates's use of punctuation—around her presence and existence. If April's speech acts throughout the novel designate her as a woman trying to unsuccessfully negotiate a semiotics that is too entrenched into traditional discourses of gender dynamics and, therefore, both restrictive and inaccessible, her final, free choice seem to suggest the possibility, however minimal, of a new kind of semiotics beyond language.
- 32 Indeed, in what could be read as a further attempt at distancing herself from stereotyped suburban codes, April also actively involves herself in an intentional break from the singularly female line of inherited limitations that distinguishes the suburban rhetoric of *Revolutionary Road*. "Have you thought it through, April?" Aunt Claire used to say, holding up one stout, arthritic forefinger. 'Never undertake to do a thing until you've thought it through; then do the best you can'" (Yates 302). April's recollection of her aunt's words at the beginning of the chapter mimics the conventional pattern of female interaction that the suburban communities represented by Yates adhere to: the older, wiser motherly figure imparts advice upon the younger, less experienced woman, drawing from a catalogue of preconceived ideas whose purpose is that of maintaining the status quo. Through this pattern, the concept of female identity is codified within the social fabric as a form of care-taking that simultaneously reinforces the gendered standards and suggests its benignity. Yet, rather than unquestioningly identifying with Aunt Claire's words, April seems to challenge their validity. In reporting her aunt's advice in the form of direct speech, April creates a distance between her self and the behavioral patterns that she is socially required to follow, and her subsequent return to the idea of advice as an impulse that shapes the cultural landscape of the community is telling of a new maturity of judgment:
- But she needed no more advice and no more instruction. She was calm and quiet now with knowing what she had always known, what neither her parents nor Aunt Claire nor Frank nor anyone else had ever had to teach her: that if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone. (Yates 311)
- 33 The equivalence that April draws between "advice" and "instruction" marks a system that April recognizes as constricting and in which the notions of functional personhood encouraged by the community have been transformed into social obligations beyond which no space is left for individual thought. April's rejection of her pregnancy within this framework is not merely a rejection of the ways in which giving birth might change her life and personal identity, but, rather more significantly, it becomes a rejection of motherhood as a social institution whose reach extends far beyond the familial nucleus and whose existence serves as the basis for the suburban social aggregation. The idea that "if you wanted to do something absolutely honest,

something true," as April tells at the end of her chapter—and her life—"it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone" (Yates 311) points to a form of self-actualization in which the only way personal desire can be accomplished is through the realization of a cultural and social vacuum that excludes external intervention.

- 34 Because the scrutinizing action of the suburban community, facilitated by the structural design of the home and fervently endorsed by the social group, serves as a regulating body that both promotes adherence to the norm and continuously reaffirms its legitimacy, the suburban realities explored by Yates delineate a social and political background to 1960s American life that is based upon mutual surveillance. The environmental circumstances of the suburban landscape, with its focus on the home as the centre of superimposed moral codes and behaviors, creates a fertile soil over which the gendered code that sees men as providers and women as carers can flourish, and each and every character in this setting acts both as a player in the contractual obligations dictated by social convention and as an enforcer of said obligations, thus generating a chain of behavioral patterns that becomes impossible to break without risking social and personal alienation. This imposes vast limitations and unbearable pressures upon female characters, whose only options in this landscape are either compliance with the rule or expulsion from the social group. However, an a-critical depiction of female characters as victims only serves to reinforce certain cultural stereotypes that limit female agency to functional viability. If it is indeed true that social pressures result in a fracture that sees women both as alienated from the social discourse—for they do not possess the language to influence it positively to their own advantage—and from their own ideas of selfhood—for they cannot imagine themselves as anything other than their functional roles without experiencing feelings of guilt and estrangement, it is also important to notice how forms of awareness and attempts to reclaim autonomous selfhood beyond the superimposed social codes are still present in Yates's narrative—primarily in the form of April Wheeler—and serve to complicate the notion of an archetypal understanding of womanhood.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berger, Bennet. "Suburbia and the American Dream," *The Public Interest*, vol. 2, 1966, pp. 80-91.
- Beuka, Robert. *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth Century American Fiction and Film*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2015.
- Charlton-Jones, Kate. "Richard Yates's Fictional Treatment of Women." *Literature Compass*, vol. 7, no. 7, 2010, pp. 496-507.
- Cheever, John. *Bullet Park*. Vintage, 2010.
- Daly, Jennifer. "Introduction." *Richard Yates and the Flawed American Dream: Critical Essays*, edited by J. Daly, McFarland, 2017, pp. 1-10.

- England, Kim. "Changing Suburbs, Changing Women: Geographic Perspectives on Suburban Women and Suburbanization." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1993, pp. 24-43.
- Ford, Richard. "Introduction." *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates, Methuen, 2001.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Penguin Classics, 2010.
- Mayhew, Jessica. "Pantomimes of Death within Suburbia: Abject Boredom in Yates's *Revolutionary Road*, Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, and Bowen's 'Attractive Modern Homes.'" *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2015, pp. 617-34.
- McGinley, Rory. "Playing Suburbia in *Revolutionary Road*." *Richard Yates and the Flawed American Dream: Critical Essays*, edited by J. Daly, McFarland, 2017, pp. 30-49.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Faber and Faber, 2013.
- Slade, Andrew. "'You Are the Most Beautiful Creature': The Ethics of Masculinity in *Revolutionary Road*." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 34, no. 7, 2017, pp. 664-677.
- Wilson, Joanna. "*Revolutionary Road*: Mental Illness and Socio-Political Control." *Richard Yates and the Flawed American Dream: Critical Essays*, edited by J. Daly, McFarland, 2017, pp. 11-29.
- Yates, Richard. *Revolutionary Road*. Methuen, 2001.

ABSTRACTS

This paper will analyze how space as both a physical environment and a social construct affects what Judith Butler calls 'gender regulations': how does the intersection of the private and the public influence the development of personal identity? How can these stereotypes be challenged within the confines of structured social and gendered hierarchies? The notion of suburbia as a physical representation of social anxieties and codified behaviours will firstly be introduced. In particular, the paper will look at how a male authoritarian rhetoric that sees happiness as a commodity rejects the idea of individual identity and serves to generate the conventional role of the all-American housewife as the only aspiration for female characters. Through an investigation into the development of different female characters, the paper will then highlight the ways in which adherence to the suburban social norm that regulates gender relationships leads to a renunciation of personhood in favour of conformity and designates the ostracisation of April Wheeler as an outcast. The semiotics of female identity that surrounds the character of April will be examined to show how this ostracisation is not only an external process of separation from society, but becomes an internalised action that leads to a fracture in the female consciousness that can only be overcome through the adoption of an alternative, extra-linguistic semiotics.

INDEX

Keywords: 1960s, American novel, Judith Butler, feminine mystique, femininity, feminist theory, gender studies, second-wave feminism, suburban life, Betty Friedan, Sylvia Plath, John Cheever, Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road*

AUTHOR

VAVOTICI FRANCESCA

Francesca Vavotici is a teaching assistant and final-year doctoral candidate in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. She is involved in gender and equality projects within the Centre for Research Collections at the University of Edinburgh and has served on the reading panel for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Her scholarly interests lie in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American literature, with a particular focus on gender studies and feminist theory. She is currently working on a project examining the relationship between space, language and female identity in the American novel of the 1960s.