

Karl Wood

**At Home
in Loneliness,
Loneliness
at Home:
*Domesticity
and the Early Short
Stories of Richard
Yatese Asylum***

Richard Yates is best known for his first and most would say best novel, *Revolutionary Road*, published in 1961. Typically viewed as a harsh, yet insightful critique of American suburban life in the mid-twentieth century, the novel speaks clearly and powerfully to questions of home, escape and ultimate entrapment in the suburban idyll of Eisenhower-era middle-class white America, a bleak examination of an ideal that promised safety, community, and belonging (to those allowed to belong). As fine a novel as *Revolutionary Road* is, Yates' short fiction is in ways more compelling and poignant. In stories that focus on unremarkable, ordinary individuals, Yates addresses a considerably broader range of experiences of home, isolation and loneliness in the 1950s in dialogue with the postwar hegemonic ideal of white suburban middle-class domesticity and masculinity. The intent of this paper is to critically examine themes of home and alienation in three stories from Yates' short story collection *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962), "The Best of Everything," "The B.A.R. Man," and "Out with the Old"¹ in order to explore the complexity of 1950s American discourse surrounding home and domesticity, perhaps surprisingly from the pen of a mainstream white male author.

This was the decade of the ascendancy of the suburban ideal, which, while far from uncontested, provided the "template" for an ideal or an ideology of middle-class life that was propagated by television and the outlets of mass consumer culture. The "myth of suburbia," as sociologist Bennett Berger wrote in 1961, was useful for both critics and boosters of suburbia alike. For critics, the "row upon monotonous row of mass produced cheerfulness masquerading as homes" (Berger 316) produced a dangerous hyperconformity: row upon row of William Whyte's colorless Organization Men with their housekeeping wives sequestered behind their identical picture windows gazing over their baby-boom children as images of the idea of a vapid, lonesome suburban existence behind pretty facades of superficial pleasantness and codes of "nice" behavior that resonate into the present day.²

For developers like the iconic William Levitt, marketers of consumer goods like *Redbook* magazine,³ as well as countless thousands of (white, middle-class) suburbanites, this similarity, even this homogeneity was perceived as a clear advantage, as it helped to build the bonds of community and a sense of belonging. More importantly, however, the suburbs and their very homogeneity, or what Peter Bacon Hales argues residents adapted into "reiterations and reinventions of the American dream" (42) provided a sense of security and homeliness. This provided solace in an era which had a constant undertone of fear of nuclear annihilation and the perceived threat of Communism to name the most salient causes, but also the hopes and anxieties related to the growing Civil Rights Movement and the underlying social and cultural tensions simmering beneath the surface, waiting to come out (as indeed they would) in the 1960s.

1 Each of the stories discussed in this article, according to Bailey, were written in 1954 for magazine publication. Only "The Best of Everything" sold, to *Charm* together with one other story, "Fun with a Stranger" were published at the time (168). The others, Bailey believes, were rejected as they offered readers little in the way of moral uplift, as was expected by magazine publishers at the time, but rather an unflinching view of "frustration and failure" (273).

2 The popular culture references to this kind of interpretation are too numerous to list, but an obvious reference could be made to the film *Pleasantville* (1998).

3 Well worth a look for insight into the marketing of suburbia is a 1957 *Redbook* promotional film "In the Suburbs", widely available online, most easily and reliably at archive.org

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It was feared however, that comforts of this sense of security came at a cost. In a dichotomy that continues to shape thought about suburbia to this day, the new suburban landscape which some saw as a kind of new utopia, one of community and a society based on home ownership, others saw as a stifling, dangerous, and oppressive conformism rising in the suburbs. Extending far beyond homogeneous tract-housing with picture windows and all the latest conveniences of the kind that then Vice President Nixon would boast of as an embodiment of American freedom of choice in the 1959 so-called Kitchen Debate, critics saw (and often continue to see) how over-organized and highly regulated lifestyles promoted a conformity of thought and action. Betty Friedan's critique of the suburban lifestyle in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as oppressively crushing women's human potential, is of course well known. Friedan's work was an essential corrective as well as a complement to works such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), or Arthur Schlesinger's essay "The Crisis of American Masculinity" (1958), to name only a few of the most salient contemporary critiques of the new suburban 'utopia.' In such works, much attention was devoted to the supposed dangers posed to American men by the suburbs and the femininization of their lives through the suburban environment. This was seen as colluding with the corporate 'hive' mindset to erode American manhood by destroying male autonomy of thought and action and bringing about a "shift from individualism to the socialized personality" (Gilbert 56).

Yet the dreamlike (or denial-based) security of this domestic environment, built with the promise not simply of security, but of economic advancement in this era of cultural and political anxiety was highly appealing to millions of mostly white Americans who were included in this vision – racial exclusivity was, as it were, a founding principle of the suburbs. In their self-perception, many who lived there did not put much stock in such criticisms, seeing themselves rather as part of a new, even pioneering community, that was a mix of private and public life, both a "huddling place and open community" (Hales 109).

Yates himself fell more in line with the critics, later decrying in an interview in *Ploughshares* what he saw as the "general lust for conformity all over this country, by no means only in the suburbs—a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price" (Henry and Clark, 208). In this trend, the home, and in particular the suburban domestic ideal, took on an iconic status of a bastion of that security – at least for those allowed to belong, namely white middle-class people, the characters of Yates' work.

Yates' fiction engages and questions this milieu most notably in *Revolutionary Road*, in which the themes of the suburban home and security are most tragically evident. April and Frank Wheeler, echoing much of the critiques of the time, believe that their hollow feelings of an empty and meaningless life were a direct result of their exile to the suburban wasteland. They feel little but scorn, even contempt for their neighbors in this suburban 'paradise' where "[n]obody thinks or feels or cares anymore; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity" (60). Fancying themselves something better, April a "first-rate girl" and Frank "a first-rate mind," see how Frank's value as a man, his "very essence [was] being stifled" (115) and soon hatch an unconventional plan in which they would escape with their two children to Paris – a symbol of promise, hope, freedom and a new start – April would work as a secretary for the embassy, perhaps, and support the family. There is not space in this paper for a full summary of the plot but suffice to say that the story ends tragically. April

dies of a self-performed abortion,⁴ Frank is left a shattered shell of a man, the family is scattered, and all the Wheelers' hopes and ambitions are in ashes.

The novel quickly earned a reputation as a harsh indictment of suburban life, which subsequently was only reinforced by the film adaptation. Yet Yates himself was not pleased with that characterization. When it was suggested in an interview that he had "really lambasted the suburbs," his response was clear:

I didn't mean to. The book was widely read as an antisuburban 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 (Henry and Clark, 208).

As Kate Charlton-Jones points out, the problem for Yates was not necessarily with suburbia *per se*, but rather with the generally exaggerated tenor of optimism and progress present in American life, which he found "not only misplaced, but damaging" (192). Rory McGinley argues that to read *Revolutionary Road* primarily as a "suburban indictment severely limits and restricts our understanding of the topic" (31). In Yates' vision, the suburbs were not the cause of the obsessive conformism then prevalent in mainstream American culture. To blame the suburbs, like the Wheelers did, was simple solution, and explains their ill-fated attempts to escape; in the end, such blame and escapism costs them their dreams and April her life. This view is somewhat at odds with the highly influential critics of the 1950s, and yet is in greater concordance with some more recent scholarship on suburbia. As Robert Beuka argued, while the suburban space itself certainly helped to shape and promote strong tendencies in American culture, for example materialism and cultural homogenization, or the reassertion of what were thought to be traditional gender roles, this "suburban landscape . . . both reflected and facilitated these tendencies, emerging as a symbolic manifestation of these values and contradictions" (7). The problem, then, was not so much a suburban one as a mainstream American one that the suburbs both symbolically embodied and strongly propagated.

A central theme in Yates' work are the tensions of this sort of a dual *Zeitgeist*, a Janus-faced fusion of optimism, faith in progress and a loneliness-producing anxiety of not being able to "make it" in the dominant spirit of the age. As sociologist Joseph A. Kahl observed in the early 1950s, this norm of "living well" in a well-ordered nuclear family home well-stocked with consumer goods set the tone, as "[a]ccording to the mythology, almost every American lives this way, and the few who do not expect to as soon as they 'get on their feet'" (110). Yates' characters with their anxieties are not the 'winners' of the age, those who claimed and owned their chunk of the happy promise of the era (and perhaps worried about losing it, or how it was gained and at what cost), nor are they those who were fully excluded. Instead, Yates' characters, are those in the grey zone, people who think and feel that the promise of the American Dream should be theirs (the unspoken assumed entitlement of their white privilege), and who yet remain on the margins, their inflated dreams of grandeur, adventure, or at very least of a satisfactorily happy life

⁴ Yates includes enough ambiguity in his narrative to leave open the possible reading that April's failed abortion was in fact suicide, evocative of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*.

“in an atmosphere of official optimism” (Castronovo and Goldleaf, qtd. in Charlton-Jones, 205) go unfulfilled at best. For Yates’ characters, loneliness lies in the discrepancy between the Dream and the reality of their lives, or perhaps of themselves. Neither outcasts nor outright failures, Yates’ characters are trapped not simply by the confines of their environment, but rather in their inability to succeed in terms of the ideal of a “normal” life, but equally by their inability, or unwillingness, to transgress the prescribed norms.

And this kind of loneliness, while quite apparent in the Connecticut suburb of *Revolutionary Road*, was hardly limited to “the suburban wasteland.” This is clearly apparent in the stories collected in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. Here, we see a range of characters in diverse settings, from ordinary New York neighborhoods (“The Best of Everything,” “The BAR Man”), a US Army basic training camp in Texas (“Jody Rolled the Bones”), a VA hospital (“No Pain Whatsoever” and “Out with the Old”), or even abroad (“A Really Good Jazz Piano”). Set and written in the 1950s, the stories illuminate the domestic lives of people who we might say lived in the shadow of the ideal of the era. The characters in these stories are themselves not suburban dwellers, although they could be and were certainly of the kind who over the course of the 1950s, might well be found there. While not living suburban ideal, their lives exist within those dominant cultural streams.

The three stories selected for analysis here are those which most directly address questions of home and safety, and all diverge substantially from the ideal while working simultaneously within it. All three involve the domestic ideals of marriage, family and home – ostensibly the basis for home and security in the suburban ideal. We can begin our investigation of Yates’ treatment of domesticity at its very beginnings: a couple just before their wedding, eagerly awaiting the promised happiness waiting just at the other side of the threshold. In “The Best of Everything,” Yates introduces us to a young couple, Grace, and Ralph, about to be married. Both are quite ordinary people, she innocent and a bit naïve, he a young man full of New York bravado who still could be tender and sweet. The narrative opens with Grace at her office job, receiving congratulations and gifts on her last working day before her wedding, a long and tiring day ending in a ‘bedlam of farewell’ and wishes (26), as they send her off, exhausted from their good intentions, into married life. Ralph, too, was given a sort of shower at work. Taken to a lunchtime drink by his office colleagues, they offer him formulaic jovial consolations “(Aw, don’t feel too bad Ralph – worse things could happen!)” (29), and before leaving work, he is unceremoniously given a fifty-dollar bonus from his boss, a sum which he brags about to Grace, oblivious to her tiredness, while masking his disappointment that it had not been more. Disappointing, too, was that he had hoped for a proper party, most of all from his best friend, Eddie, for whom he waited, alone, in a bar, morosely sipping his beer. He does not yet know that his buddies were planning to make his dream come true.

The couple had arranged to meet in the evening at the Queens apartment that Grace shared with her roommate. The roommate, who had never believed that Ralph was much of a catch, makes a rather contrived excuse of needing to visit her brother, thus missing the wedding. But as a sort of wedding present, she decided to leave a day early, leaving the place to Ralph and Grace to be alone together. At first unsure, and then quite taken by the idea, Grace nervously makes preparations to welcome her husband-to-be as seductively as she can, dressing for the first time in the negligee “treasures of her trousseau” (28), waiting for him in an awkward and aroused anticipation.

When Ralph arrives, two hours late, he brushes past her at the door with a dismissive “Hi, baby. [...] Guess I’m late, huh? You in bed?” Still trying to maintain some semblance of seductiveness, she strikes a movie-star like pose against the door and stumbles her response: “I was just – waiting for you.” (34). Yet Ralph’s excitement is for quite something else. The reader knows, but Gracie – a somewhat childish diminutive used in the narrative only when she is together with Ralph⁵ – is surprised to learn that Ralph’s friends had prepared a surprise party for him. What is more (for Ralph, at least), in a manner reminiscent of Mr. Gower and George Bailey in Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life*, his best friend Eddie had bought him a fine tawny Gladstone suitcase of the kind he had dreamed of for his honeymoon. Yet where George Bailey ultimately settles into the loving arms of his wife, Mary, rendering the suitcase unnecessary, for Gracie and Ralph another vision of the future is unfolding.

Gracie continues her attempts to be seductive, reminding her fiancé that they have the apartment to themselves, all weekend, drawing attention to her negligee, yet Ralph cannot contain himself as he tells the story of how he nearly burst into tears at how thoughtful “the guys” were. In fact, he could only stay a few minutes. He had promised to return to the party. When Gracie protests, now speaking “with the whine of a wife” Ralph is appalled, clearly concerned with needing to set appropriate boundaries now, before the wedding. Gracie yields, and Ralph prepares to leave, asking first “mind if I use ya terlet?” In the final moment, Yates leaves no doubt where the future is headed:

When he came out of the bathroom, she was waiting to say goodnight, standing with her arms folded across her chest, as if for warmth. Lovingly, he hefted the new suitcase and joined her at the door. “Okay, then, baby,” he said, and kissed her. “Nine o’clock. Don’t forget, now.” She smiled tiredly and opened the door for him. “Don’t worry, Ralph,” she said. “I’ll be there.” (37)

Here we see a couple at the outset of their married life, and already Grace is dismissed, with her husband more devoted to his circle of friends and, ominously, feeling a need to keep her in her place, as it were. While not yet in the suburbs, it is easy to imagine Grace and Ralph settled in a Levittown house a few years hence, leading a life far removed from the ideal. While one could give a simple reading of “the honeymoon is over before it even begins,” the subtle phrasing of how Grace folds her arms seems important here. They are not crossed in anger, or in scolding disapproval, but rather she seems to be huddling for warmth, for comfort in the face of the coldness from her husband. Ralph will certainly still have his circle of friends, and we can easily see Grace asking herself “is that all?” But the story makes it clear that at least in this case, that the suburbs were hardly the cause, but rather Ralph and his need to assert his perceived male prerogative and authority.

While “The Best of Everything” seems sadly ironic and leaves the reader pensively contemplating Grace’s lonely future, in the second story, “The B.A.R. Man” Yates offers another, much darker vision of the domestic life of a married couple, John and Rose Fallon. Twenty-nine years old and ten years into their married life, the Fallons have some of the superficial trappings of a settled,

⁵ This use of “Gracie” could have been chosen as a simple diminutive, or might have been chosen to evoke Gracie Allen, of the popular comedy team Burns & Allen.

middle-class life: they have a home together, spending evenings playing cards or watching television, spending Saturdays together at the movies or some other entertainment, and Sundays at home. John works conscientiously in a dull office job, it would seem, at first, one of Whyte's Organization Men. Yet Fallon's suit is not the gray flannel uniform, but he prefers a cheap gas-blue suit, suggesting a man of modest means and common, hardly aspirational tastes.⁶ This is hardly the only divergence from the 1950s ideal. We soon learn that the Fallons are the 1950s – to use an anachronism – DINK's, living in the city, no children, both employed. Rose, who apparently cannot have children due to her "tipped uterus," earns more as a highly-skilled typist than her husband, a low-paid office drone.

What becomes rapidly apparent, beginning with a minor disagreement over what to do on a Friday evening, is the level of dissatisfaction and resentment present in the relationship. Instead of the usual Friday routine when John has his night with the guys watching a prizefight on television, Rose suggests a movie instead, a Gregory Peck film on its last night.⁷ That evening, the tension seethes beneath the surface. The couple spars in rounds of petty bickering over shopping, over an unfinished glass of milk John left on the table before the anger spirals out of control. Soon the unfinished milk is retorted with a resentment-filled accusatory question about why Rose stopped the exercises that were supposed to correct her posture and her tipped uterus. Her retort is clear: "Well," she said, "I certainly don't wanna get pregnant, if that's what you mean. May I ask where we'd be if I had to quit my job?" His sense of breadwinner-masculinity directly challenged, he snaps, verbally assaulting her body with an angry "Why d'ya *wear* these goddamn things?" as he waves her padded bra in her face. He then leaves, slamming his way out of the apartment (125) to have himself a night on the town.

At first, it seems the themes of a lack of fulfillment of the 1950s ideal of a man as the sole breadwinner for a family with children seem the clear source of John Fallon's aggression. To be sure, from his suit on up, he does not meet the measure that was set as the standard of hegemonic masculinity of the period. But the anxiety about his masculinity, as read through the lens of Whyte and others (Cuordelione 97) was not just about his failure to be a 'proper' head of a family, but also in the very nature of his work. Office work, especially in lower positions such as Fallon's, was feared to have a potential 'softening' effect on American men, who faced the impossible task as drones of living up to the mythic ideal of man as creator of his own destiny, the self-made-man ideal. Unsuccessful both in his performance as a man in control of his own fate, but also as a successful Organization Man, Fallon lashes out.

Yates, however, is not content to leave us with such simple explanations. As the title of the story suggests, Fallon roots his sense of masculinity, his sense of self not in his work, nor in his identity as a husband, but in his war service. A World War II veteran, he takes pride in the fact that he was "a damn-good B.A.R. man" (122): a soldier who carried and operated the Browning Automatic Rifle, a physically demanding and particularly dangerous role in an infantry squad. Yet we also learn early in the story – and this is quite characteristic for

6 In his 1976 novel *The Easter Parade*, Yates re-uses the gas-blue suit to indicate a lack of sophistication: "he showed up in a cheap gas-blue suit with padded shoulders – no Columbia boy would be caught dead in a suit like that" (65)

7 It would be too perfect to believe that the film suggested here is *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, but Yates wrote "The B.A.R. Man" in 1954, and the film was released in 1956. The film suggested here would more likely be *Roman Holiday* (1953).

Yates as an author – that this is Fallon’s own self-deception. While he presents and vehemently defends this image of himself to other veterans from work or to two young soldiers he tries to befriend that evening at a nightclub, the reader knows something that Fallon appears to hide behind a wall of denial. He did, in fact, carry the weapon during his service in Europe, yet he only fired it twice, never at any visible enemy soldiers, and the second time was reprimanded for “wasting ammunition” (122).

Lacking the foundations on which to build a sense of ‘acceptable’ masculinity, Fallon compensates with escalating violence. After storming out of his home, he seeks a night on the town. He foists himself on two young soldiers in strained camaraderie and tries to join them in picking up three young women. While the young soldiers are flirting and laughing with their new companions, Fallon’s advances are clearly rejected. As he tries all the more to be awkwardly, then creepily charming, his fantasies turn from seduction and passion at the woman’s apartment to an overtly violent rape fantasy in which “[h]e’d loosen her up!” (131). Clearly uncomfortable, the woman takes advantage of Fallon going for more beer during a raucous musical number and convinces her friends, and the two soldiers, to ditch him. Yet Fallon’s evening does not end there. Wandering through the streets, he comes across an auditorium where a meeting on Civil Rights has just ended with the participants, black and white, exiting the building, including a notable activist. Joining some picketers outside, Fallon is swept away by his rage. He charges the activist with a yell of “Kill the bastard! Kill ‘im!), only to be taken down “with an absolute sense of fulfillment and relief” by a blow to his head from a policeman’s billy club (134).

If Fallon’s violence is the result of his failed aspiration to assert his masculinity in some way that fits to the criteria of the 1950s construct of hegemonic masculinity, his ironic fulfillment at being defeated by a billy club is a kind of last ditch effort that if all else fails, a “man” can still be violent toward those seen as weaker than himself, i.e., toward women or toward minorities. While some may find this story particularly cruel (Bailey 274), even repugnant, it offers an unflinching look at the dark potential of what a thwarted kind of American Dream can produce in an angry white man with a sense of “aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel 21) that resonates into the present day.

Fallon is by far the ugliest character in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. In the third story to be discussed here, “Out with the Old”, we meet more likeable and yet also flawed men: the patients on the tuberculosis ward of a Veterans’ Administration hospital on Long Island. The first and obvious cause of these men’s loneliness is their separation from their homes. As might be expected, they have weekly visitors to ameliorate this feeling of isolation, but this is of little help to these men. What is most important to them is a kind of bond they share because of their shared lot, much as if they were still in the service. Similarly, they pass the time with cigarettes which are allowed and whiskey which is not, with talks of operations and treatments, or in the case of Tiny, a bear of a man, with pranks and practical jokes, one of which turns out to be central to the plot. As entertainment, Tiny hopes to inaugurate the New Year (1951) with a bit of juvenile theater in violation of the rules.

Here we find little that is surprising – the men act and seem to feel much like soldiers in their barracks with nothing to do, the difference being that rather than facing a future of combat, their lives are threatened by disease. All the while, as one would expect, the men long for the Christmas holiday and the short furlough home. Much as soldiers taking off their uniforms and

returning to their “civvies” to go on a five-day pass, the patients undergo a transformation from their hospital personae into ‘themselves’ as they put on their own clothes again. This affected them all: Tiny went from being a childish prankster to a serious, calm, controlled adult, another losing his “common” touch and becoming visible as Yale man in his J Press flannels, and even “several of the Negroes had suddenly become Negroes again, instead of ordinary men” (164). Of course, on their return after the holiday they all sadly, reluctantly don their VA pajamas and their hospital personae and lonely camaraderie.

All, that is, except for McIntyre, the older man on the ward. Ordinarily sarcastic and independent, he returns quiet and sullen, working intently on a letter. He remarks that he had wished he had not been allowed to go home, masking his true feelings behind a dismissive remark about how it was simply difficult to return to the hospital. This was the case for Tiny, who now again as Harold was in the embrace of his family and shows himself warm, sensitive and gentle. McIntyre’s home visit in contrast was a very difficult one. After some time of his wife (none of the characters at his home are given names) awkwardly trying to make things as “normal” as possible, the theme of the inadequate provider emerges. McIntyre mentions something about the VA raising pensions, and his (for 1951) long-haired, adolescent son makes a smart (but accurate) remark about how McIntyre’s brother-in-law is really supporting the family financially. While irritating and frustrating, this does not cause the accounting clerk McIntyre the kind of distress it does Fallon – here we have a man who, despite his illness, seems to feel more secure in himself.

The real issue is related to his daughter, who is nervous and agitated the whole time. McIntyre’s wife tries to explain it away to McIntyre that the girl is simply stressed about her new job and adjusting to an eight-hour day. But he persists and tries to communicate with his daughter, asking her what the trouble is, trying gently to have her confide in him. But his daughter refuses, pleads for him to leave her alone, and storms to her room. Only when pressed does his wife blurt out with the warning of “it’s your funeral” that the girl is in fact four months pregnant. He sits down, short of breath, he asks who the father is, but she has told no one. It is then that the sarcastic teen son remarks with a smirk “Maybe she don’t *know* they guy’s name.” This causes McIntyre to rise and he slaps his son once, then twice, bloodying his nose in a violent outburst. Shortly thereafter, he is back at the hospital, the holiday presumably cut short.

Disappointment and anger at home is not all of McIntyre’s story, however. Back in the hospital he still wishes to connect with his daughter and is trying to compose a sensitive and caring letter to her. Here we learn her name, Jean, and how he wishes they could have the kind of heartfelt talk they would have on walks together a few years earlier, before he was hospitalized. As he comes to his point, one can almost imagine a scene from *Ozzie and Harriet* or *Father Knows Best* in which the caring, loving father offers paternal wisdom to his troubled child.⁸ He writes:

Your old dad might not be good for much any more, but
he does know a thing or two about life and especially
one important thing, and that is
That was as far as the letter went. (171)

8 Of course, such as scene involving unwed teen pregnancy would have been impossible in such suburban sit-coms. As it was, Yates’ agent felt the story was unsaleable for publication in 1954 due to the theme (Bailey 167).

Looking out the window, he sees how it had grown dark, the window that should let in light only reflecting the bright yellow colors of the hospital ward. He looked back into the room with “an oddly shy look of rejuvenation and relief” (174). Resigned to the impossibility of communication with his family, he accepts the reality of the hospital as a place he may never leave. The story ends with McIntyre taking part in Tiny’s little theater to the sounds of the lonely men of Ward C singing – the predictable order back in place – *Should auld acquaintance be forgot....*

This, for Yates, is what passes for a happy ending. In each of the stories in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, as well as in most of his work, there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Instead, we see ordinary people confronted with the lonely reality of their lives quite at odds with the “official optimism” of the era, and more in keeping with the anxiety that that optimism tried to keep at bay. Then, as now, it would be easy to say that the suburbs with their facades of perfect order and the repressed, conformist Organization Men and lonely, isolated housewives who dwelled within those walls were the hallmark of mainstream white America of the period. Yates offers in his stories a richer version of this. The characters are, in many ways, the same people who we would meet in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* or on the repetitive clichéd sitcoms of the era, in other words white, middle-class (or aspiring middle-class) families, who, by all rights, “should” be happy, at least in the mythology of the era. *Revolutionary Road* can be (mis) read in terms of an indictment of suburban life as the root of the Wheelers’ (and countless others’) misery. The stories in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* clearly suggest that the suburbs themselves did not cause this malaise, but rather disappointed dreams, misguided optimism, or self-delusion did.

While the Wheelers of *Revolutionary Road* at least fit the model of suburbia, and they themselves believe that the suburbs are the root of their problems, the characters of the stories discussed here show that in Yates view, the problem lay in an unrealistic optimism. The suburbs may have been the most crass (and exaggerated) expression of this as iconic refuges from fear, perhaps, but for Yates this was a larger phenomenon. Illusions, false hopes or misguided optimism, universal human traits, alas, are to blame, and this is what gives Yates’ work power beyond that of a ‘mere’ critique of suburbia. As Stuart O’Nan wrote in his now well-known 1999 *Boston Review* celebration of Yates and his work:

It’s this merciless limning of his people that makes Yates unique and the process of reading his work so affecting (some would say terrifying). We recognize the disappointments and miscalculations his characters suffer from our own less-than-heroic lives. And Yates refuses to spoon-feed us the usual redeeming, life-affirming plot twist that makes everything better. No comedy dilutes the humiliation. When it’s time to face the worst, there’s no evasion whatsoever, no softening of the blows. The reader recoils even before these scenes begin, like horror movie viewers realizing the victim is going to open the wrong door. In fact, part of the drama—as in Dostoevsky—is anticipating just how terrible the humiliation will be, and how (or if) the characters will survive it.

Grace of “The Best of Everything” is a young woman in love, who still believes, it would seem, in stories with in happily-ever-after fairytale endings. Of course, her environment has encouraged her to believe this, especially in 1950s America with its well-known cult of domesticity pushing women out of the workplace and back into the home, probably in a suburban development. Yet so humanly, she allows herself to be swept off her feet by an at least somewhat handsome, somewhat charming young man, and ignores her friends’ warnings. In clear contrast to a happy-ever-after story, Yates seems to leave little doubt as to the long, tiring future that lies ahead of Grace, and that clearly the cause is Ralph, his priorities, and his desire to establish “who is boss”, i.e. his male authority and autonomy at the outset, that no sexual seductiveness can apparently undermine. If Grace is to blame, it is only for believing naively in a dream, at least with Ralph. The only ‘hope’ that the ending leaves for the future is that perhaps, someday, the immature Ralph may grow up into a man able to enter a mature relationship, but Yates does not seem to leave much room for this interpretation.

The most troubling character is John Fallon, “The B.A.R. Man”. Where Ralph from “The Best of Everything” might be (perhaps) excused as immature and wedded to his homosocial network (homosexual themes, even subtle ones, are difficult to find in Yates’s work), Fallon cannot be so easily written off. We do know that John and Rose’s marriage is a troubled one, but while there are suggestions that Rose’s infertility *could* be to blame, or even the fact that she earns more than her husband, none of these is a complete explanation. In an era when one might argue the hegemonic norms of masculinity in America were at their most pronounced, Yates shows us a character failing at successive levels on which to build his masculine self-esteem. To be sure, the ‘suburban’ ideal is one he does not live up to in the least (aside from holding a white-collar job), which then in turn causes him to fall back on the last reliable bastions of ‘manliness’ – military service, sexual conquest, and ultimately physical violence. Yates’ formulation of Fallon finding an “absolute sense of fulfillment and relief” seems to suggest that failing in all other ways, that at least getting bloodied in a violent conflict was a “manly” thing for Fallon.

The tuberculosis patient McIntyre in “Out with the Old”, also a veteran, presents a different case. At first, he is set apart from the other, sophomoric men; he is the mature family man, evidently the embodiment of masculine fulfillment but for his unfortunate physical ailment. His resultant inability to provide for his family financially does not seem to be a threat to his sense of self in the way that it is to Fallon, the B.A.R. Man. Yates leaves us guessing as to why – evidently McIntyre has other foundations for his self-esteem. Like a fine model of the 1950s paterfamilias, he seems to place great value on imparting his paternal wisdom to his daughter in crisis – explaining, illuminating, not listening. Yet unlike the suburban sitcom father, perhaps no better embodied by the fictional Ozzie Nelson, who James Gilbert argues “was allowed to think that his patriarchal values had meaning, even as each episode demonstrated their futility” (163), McIntyre sees his efforts could lead nowhere. He is unable to communicate in person, and unable to do so in writing. This acceptance of this failure leads him to a strange sort of resolution. His “oddly shy look of rejuvenation and relief” at letting go the burdens and responsibilities of family life expresses a kind of paradoxical sort of happiness to grow out of misery, out of acceptance of one’s failures and lost dreams.

This vision is quite at odds with the prevalent notions of happiness and fulfillment of the 1950s. That era promised – for some, at least – the idea that

a new kind of American Dream, encapsulated in the suburban ideal, would bring happiness and fulfillment to those who took part in it. For some, that promise seemed (and may seem) to be a bold-faced lie. For Richard Yates, it would seem the larger problem was the lies and self-deceptions we tell ourselves.

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