

Reading American Suburbs Through the Fiction of Richard Yates

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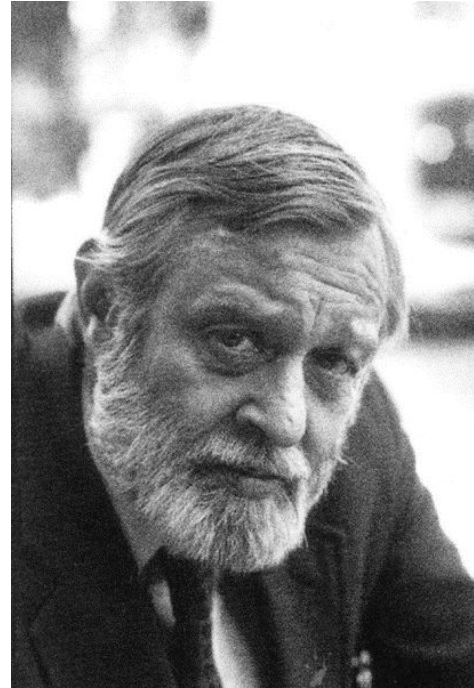
(Palacký University)



Urbanism and Suburbanisation in the EU countries and Abroad:
Reflection in the Humanities, Social Sciences and the Arts

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Richard Yates (1926-1992)



The American Suburbs in US society

- rise of the American suburbs since the mid-19th century
- related to worsening of city living conditions and advances in transportation technology—from the horse carriage to the automobile
- 1930s government legislation to increase accessibility of suburban home ownership (New Deal...)
- postwar proliferation (1950s and after) of highways and suburbia (Levittown and other communities)
- since 1950s—racialization and ethnicization of (some) US suburban communities

The suburban novels of Richard Yates

1/ *Revolutionary Road* (1961)—mid 1950s

2/ *A Special Providence* (1969)—1930s

3/ *The Easter Parade* (1976)—1930s-1970s

4/ *Young Hearts Crying* (1984)—1940s-1970s

5/ *Cold Spring Harbor* (1986)—1935-1942

Literary Influences on Yates

Hemingway (minimalist, lucid realism, description, expatriation as theme)

Fitzgerald (brilliant style, preoccupation with class, materialist destruction of the American idealism)

Anderson (characters doing strange, “grotesque” things they cannot seem to control)

D. H. Lawrence (characters doing inexplicable things that go beyond their rational control, obsession of characters with “being alive” and authentic)

Faulkner (fill-in-the-gaps realism, characters true to their subconscious drives, violence, naturalism, drama)

Novels of Direct Influence on Yates's fiction (esp. on *Revolutionary Road*)

Gustave Flaubert: *Madame Bovary*

F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*

Sloan Wilson: *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*

Richard Yates, on *Revolutionary Road*

- I think I meant it more as an indictment of American life in the 1950s. Because during the fifties there was a 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, as exemplified politically in the Eisenhower administration and the Joe McCarthy witch-hunts. Anyway, a great many Americans were deeply disturbed by all that—felt it to be an outright betrayal of our best and bravest revolutionary spirit—and that was the spirit I tried to embody in the character of April Wheeler. I meant the title to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the fifties.

--DeWitt Henry: An Interview with Richard Yates (*Ploughshares* 3, 1972)

April Wheeler, “in a trap”, *Revolutionary Road*
(film version 2008, dir. Sam Mendes)



Vintage ads, 1959



"Snug within it she basks in the warmth of a good mans love...glories in the laughter of healthy children... glows with pride in every new acquisition that adds color or comfort pleasure or leisure to her family's life."

"And, she's *a*lways there! She's an up to date modern American homemaker."

Breathing in deeply of the beauty parlor air heavy with the cloying sweetness of perfume diluted by the acrid smell of singed hair, Mom sighed contently.

The Wheeler Home, *Revolutionary Road* (2008)



Frank Wheeler, an Organization Man



Suburban Characters in Yates's Fiction

April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler, their children, Shep Campbell, Milly Campbell, Mrs. Givings (*Revolutionary Road*)

Emily and Sarah Grimes (*The Easter Parade*)

Bobby and Alice Prentice (*A Special Providence*)

Michael Davenport, Lucy Davenport, Tom Nelson, Paul Maitland, Jack Halloran (*Young Hearts Crying*)

Gloria Drake, Rachel Drake, Phil Drake, Evan Shepard, Charles Shepard, Mrs. Talmage (*Cold Spring Harbor*)

Class in Yatesian suburbs

-*A Special Providence* (Boxwood stay of Alice Prentice)

-*Cold Spring Harbor* (friendship of Gloria Drake/Charles Shepard and Mrs. Talmage)

The Suburban Family in Yates's Fiction

- always fractured, broken, dysfunctional (father absent/divorced/dead)
- is not the haven that family members retreat to for rejuvenation and quality shared time

Children in Yates's Suburban Novels

-marginalized, victims of their parents' selfish actions and parental neglect, reflectors of family dysfunction

-try to maintain a sense of normalcy by inventing games, identities (The Wheeler children in *Revolutionary Road*, Laura Davenport's imaginary sister in *Young Hearts Crying*)

-grow up shy, self-conscious, and rebellious in relation to their parents' upbringing

Gender-Related Conflicts and Issues in Yates's Suburban Novels

- pregnancy, contraception, abortion issues (April Wheeler, Emily Grimes, Rachel Shepard--*Revolutionary Road*, *The Easter Parade*, *Cold Spring Harbor*)
- the feminine mystique—women in suburbia unhappy and depressed (*April Wheeler*, *Sarah Wilson*, *Lucy Davenport*)
- masculinity crisis (Frank Wheeler, Michael Davenport, Bobby Prentice, Phil Drake)

Yates's Fiction Related to Social Criticism of Suburbs

Lewis Mumford: *The City in History*

John Keats: *The Crack in the Picture Window*

Phyllis McGinley: "Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing"

Herbert J. Gans: *The Levittowners*

John Archer: "Everyday Suburbia: Lives and Practices"

Phyllis McGinley, “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing”, pp. 113 (*Province of the Heart*)

“for the best fifteen years of my life I have lived in Suburbia, and I like it.”

“there is nothing really typical [or Jones-like] about any of our friends and neighbors here” and “the true suburbanite needs to conform [in suburbia] less than anyone else” and is able to pursue an amazing diversity of exciting hobbies and leisure-time activities in their suburban home, garden, or community. (my own text, pp. 32)

Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, p. 486

a new kind of community was produced [in the new postwar suburbs], which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.¹²⁵

Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners* (179-180), a rebuttal of suburban conformity criticism

the suburbs.

What, then, accounts for the critics' preoccupation with suburban conformity, and their tendency to see status competition as a dominant theme in suburban life? For one thing, many of these critics live in city apartments, where the concern for block status preservation is minimal. Also, they are largely upper middle class professionals, dedicated to cosmopolitan values and urban life and disdainful of the local and antiurban values of lower middle class and working class people. Believing in the universality of these values, the critics refuse to acknowledge the existence of lower middle class or working class ways of living. Instead, they describe people as mindless conformers who would be cosmopolitans if they were not weak and allowed themselves to be swayed by builders, the mass media, and their neighbors.

The ascription of competitive behavior to the suburbs stems from another source. The upper middle class world, stressing as it does individuality, is a highly competitive one. In typically upper middle class occupations such as advertising, publishing, university teaching, law, and the arts, individual achievement is the

Gans (cont.)

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THE LEVITTOWNERS

main key to success, status, and security. The upper middle class is for this reason more competitive and more status-conscious than the other classes. Popular writers studying upper middle class suburbs have observed this competition and some have mistakenly ascribed it to suburbia, rather than to the criteria for success in the professions held by these particular suburbanites.⁴⁴ Those writing about lower-status suburbs have either drawn their information from upper middle class friends who have moved to lower middle class suburbs for financial reasons and found themselves a dissatisfied minority, or they have, like upper middle class people generally, viewed the lower-status people about whom they were writing as trying to compete with their betters.

John Archer rebutting the suburban conformity criticism: (from "Everyday Suburbia: Lives and Practices", pp. 26-7)

To understand suburbia in this fashion is to acknowledge that suburbia (in this respect, like everywhere else) is a *nexus of everyday life*. Suburbia is a physical, social, and cultural fabric (landscape as well as ethnoscape) that people both employ and produce as part of their *practices of everyday living*. This fabric, and these practices, are the essential means by which people fashion their lives in multiple dimensions—as individuals, families, neighbours, friends, citizens; as entrepreneurs, workers, believers, team mates, playmates, gardeners, cooks, readers, acquaint-

Archer, cont.

tances, buddies, networkers, performers, audiences, tastemakers, enemies, activists, and leaders; as Asian- (or other-) Americans, as adherents of particular religious and political perspectives, and as connected to history and heritage. To engage in all these dimensions of everyday living necessarily requires that on a daily basis people engage in a nearly unlimited array of *signifying* and *materially productive* practices: from making home improvements, choosing décor, and arranging family photographs, to cooking a meal, working in the garage, gardening, telecommuting, visiting with neighbours, attending a potluck, using the playground or basketball court, walking the dog, driving, or just sitting in a favourite chair. In all these respects, the suburban physical and social fabric is instrumental in the practice—indeed the very definition—of everyday life.

Conformity in Yates's Suburban Novels

- criticism by suburban insiders (The Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road*)
- search for acceptance by outsiders who want social recognition in suburbia (*A Special Providence*, *The Easter Parade*, *Cold Spring Harbor*)

The American Suburbs in Yates's Fiction

- realization of the American Dream (materialism, conformity, consumerism)
- locus of problems placed within the nuclear family (infidelity, domestic violence...)
- environment that challenges gender roles (feminine mystique, crisis of masculinity)
- misplaced criticism of suburbia as conformist hell (neurosis of protagonists and their incompatibility with suburban living rather than the suburban setting itself is to blame)
- inability of his characters to see the neurotic origin of their suburban problems
- suburbia as an environment wherein class differences matter
- a setting that is witness to (but primarily does not produce) the social (and private) problems of the characters in suburbia