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Abjection and Loss of Identity in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*

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Abstract

In this harrowing critique of 1950's America, Richard Yates depicts a young family who while trying to fight their way out of the inundating mediocrity of life by fleeing to Europe, fail in their effort and fall apart. The 30-year-old husband, Frank Wheeler, unable to shake off the ghost of his father, tries to hide his insecurities behind a façade of individuality and intellectuality, while his wife, April, a failed actress, is deeply unhappy in her role as the suburban housewife. Both Wheelers are without a clear sense of self, and instead seek to define themselves by differentiating themselves from those around them. By using the notion of Abjection proposed by Julia Kristeva as a means of self-definition, this article aims to show that this novel depicts how the consumerism and the material obsession of the fifties has made this family abjectify the concept of family and parenthood, and how this idea especially manifests itself in April, as she chooses to turn into the ultimate abject, a corpse, rather than deny herself the last shred of difference from the suburban life by having a third child.

Key words: Abjection; Family; Identity; Suburbia

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INTRODUCTION

Richard Yates is an adroit portrayer of postwar America, and according to Lee Siegel, "brought American fiction from the drama of free will back to the crisis of determining circumstances" (2001, p.82). As a result of his immediate placement in the Cold War America, and the prevalent pessimism of his works, the bulk of research conducted on them generally centers on three focal points, namely oppressive consumerism in suburbia, the concept of the organization man, and women's roles.

Suburban life, highly popularized during the 50s, is inalterably signified by consumerism, which desensitizes humans and relieves them of any capacity of defending themselves against oppression (Jameson, 2001), so critics are rather unanimous on recognizing its many faults and shortcomings. According to Nadel, the era is signified by an all-pervasive "national narrative of containment" (1995, p.17). Michael P. Moreno in his essay "Consuming the Frontier Illusion: The Construction of Suburban Masculinity in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*" characterizes the suburbs of the time as striving to maintain "the secured frontier illusion of communal individualism within a more contained and militarized design of high-tech domiciles and gated communities" (2003, p.85). Attacking the propagated family life of the 50s, Arlene Skolnick claims that "[t]he vision of a perfected family life in harmony with nature linked the postwar suburbs to the Victorian past as well as to the communes of the counterculture" (1991, p.51).

Set against the background of Cold War suburbia, *Revolutionary Road* succeeds in evoking the essence of the time. According to Stuart O'Nan, the novel is not particularly enamored with America and its structuring institutions (1999). Castronov and Goldleaf recognize "the grimness of Yates's suburbia," and describe the landscape of the novel as a "gruesome toyland (1996, pp.50-51), and

Richard Ford, in his introduction to *Revolutionary Road* speaks of suburbs as "monotonous, anesthetized buffer zones between the two more vital life experiences of the country and the city" (2000b, pp.xx). Siegel, elaborating on what he sees as Yates's naturalistic streak claims that "if their histories don't get Yates's characters, their environment will. Frank, like his father, dies spiritually in a soulless job; April, like her father, dies by her own hand; and all this happens in their house on Revolutionary Road, where America's revolutionary promise withers and dies in the coarse, materialistic suburbs" (2001, p.86). Yates himself has described the ambience of his work as representative of the "general lust for conformity" that many felt to be "an outright betrayal of . . . [the] best and bravest revolutionary spirit", a spirit that he contends he wanted April to embody (1972, p.6).

The general atmosphere of America in postwar years gave rise to new identities, one of which is termed by Whyte as "the organization man." This child of the times was a veteran-turned-corporate man, who devoted his blind loyalty to the corporation, and since not required to do "the basic creative work," could be described as "a practical, team-player fellow who will do a good shirt-sleeves job" (1956, p.152), and was sure to have the support of the corporation in return for his service (p.143). In general, the organization man was required to shut himself to any loyalty other than the one to his corporation (Lawrence, 1958), even the one he would have naturally harbored for his family was considered undesirable (Whyte, 1956). In addition to detecting the emasculated, caricaturized former soldiers represented in *Revolutionary Road*, Moreno discusses a predicament of these displaced men, the "white plight" that he defines as "the angst and crisis the white male envisions from his inability to reconsign himself to his position of power and recognize the privileged world he has inherited through a very controlled history of discrimination and supremacy" (2003, p.85).

Similar to the organization man, the good wife of the 50s was required to conform to certain standards, and was asked to adhere to the type of women Betty Freidan describes "kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their station wagon full of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless floor" (1963, p.14). Discussing the pro-domesticity propagandas of the 50s, Elaine Tyler May maintains that "ideological connections among early marriage, sexual containment, and traditional gender roles merged in the context of the cold war," and contributed to the mass-invitation of women "to embrace domesticity in service to the nation" (1951, p.89). Kate Charlton-Jones in her study on Yates, pays special attention to how he portrays women responding to and acting within a materialistic surrounding (2010). Although it is recognized that April, as the main female character of *Revolutionary Road* is portrayed rather favorably, and she is described as a "resourceful" woman (Ford, 2000, pp.16-17) who possesses a "sense of personal defiance," (Moreno, 2003, p.89) she is nonetheless seen more or less as a victim and a "Cold War casualty" (Ford, 2000, pp.16-17; Moreno, 2003, pp.89, 92).

As much as these readings have contributed to an understanding of *Revolutionary Road*, they still mostly focus on the setting and its effects on the characters, and fail to acknowledge the psychological processes responsible for these effects. In order to investigate these psychological processes, Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection is used as the theoretical framework of this study. Through this analysis, it is attempted to provide a view of how abjection of family life provides the characters with the means of defining an identity for themselves, and how when the borders between the self and abject become blurry, April sums up the courage to wholeheartedly embrace the abject and thus achieve her emancipation.

1. DISCUSSION

1.1 A Family of One's Own: Dream or Nightmare?

In *Revolutionary Road*, amid Cold War and changing American policies, the siren of domesticity lulls many into uneventful lives as middle-class consumers. Yet the Wheelers appear to have escaped the general slumber, and fight hard against the oppression of family life. Although living in a typical suburb, having two children, and occupying society-approved roles of organization man and his homemaker wife, they choose to stay on the "Revolutionary Road." Frank — who is more at ease with his "pre-suburban existence, in a rough walk-up in Greenwich Village," which to Ravvin is like "a chapter out of Beat America" (2009, p.29) — takes it upon himself to voice his disgust at the propaganda of domesticity, and is supported in this undertaking by his wife.

They have chosen their house in spite of its being located in a suburb and having a picture window, since they believe that it is "something out of the ordinary," (Yates, 2008) a house that could set them apart from the rampant mediocrity of the times. Despite living in such a house, having a family of four, and working for a corporation while still barely 30, Frank cannot stomach the whiffs of the family life he can detect from his wife and children. Whenever April dons on the role of a homemaker wife, Frank is sure to express his disgust, and instead longs for the spontaneous and perfect girl he had succeeded in dazzling. When seeing his wife act in the play, he is "overwhelmed by the swaying, shining vision of a girl he hadn't seen in years, a girl whose every glance and gesture could make his throat fill up with longing". However, he is equally disheartened when she morphs into "the graceless, suffering creature whose existence he

tried every day of his life to deny," "a gaunt constricted woman whose red eyes flashed reproach, whose false smile in the curtain call was as homely as his own sore feet, his own damp climbing underwear and his own sour smell" (p.13). He further describes April's reflection as "nude and shining with cold cream, looked forty years old and as haggard as if it were set to endure a physical pain" (p.16), and detests her proper wifely makeover at his birthday party (p.110). With the dawn of their escape plan, he can see her as the graceful goddess and he himself as her lucky companion, who are soon leaving behind the haunting undesirable (pp.133-4).

Frank does not express much affection towards his children, unless when they serve to propel his plans or boos his ego. Reading the funnies for his children, he takes refuge in the fact that they are kinder and more human than his wife, but otherwise feels as if he is buried under them "like a man in quicksand." A simple reading for his offspring is enough to make him struggle "to restrain himself from doing what suddenly seemed the only thing in the world he really and truly wanted to do: picking up a chair and throwing it through the picture window" (Yates, 2008, pp.58-9).

His far less than affectionate attitude towards his family is mirrored in other characters as well. Shep Campbell is disconcerted by his wife and children and daydreams about the unattainable April, while wondering if other people feel as removed from their families as he does (Yates, 2008, pp.153-5). Similarly, the Givings' household does not enjoy much warmth, as Mrs. Givings seems to be talking *at* — rather than *to* — her husband (p.166), and he usually turns off his hearing aid when she is thus rambling (pp.176, 355).

This abjection of family life is undertaken as an attempt at self-definition, so as to differentiate between oneself and the oppressive normality of the surroundings. The abject serves as a boundary between the self and the other, but as will be shown in the next section, this barrier does not seem to be impermeable in the case of the Wheelers. The furniture that they believed could "counteract the prim suburban look" of the house fails to do so, and the house stands as a dark omen of their assimilation (Yates, 2008, pp.31-3), and their gatherings with the Campbells are ironic reenactments of suburban smugness (pp.59-62),

1.2 The Ever-Elusive Self

Throughout the novel, Frank and April are seen setting definite boundaries between themselves and the middle class values of the time. Having suffered from a terrible blow to their identity by becoming parents, and forced into the roles the society has designed for them, they resort to different measures in order to define themselves. Their attempts at carving an identity fail to give them the desired result, and the illusory self continually escapes their eager grasp.

Abjection occurs when the individual casts aside a disruptive element, and thus creates a boundary between self and the abject, but the abject refuses to remain behind the wires, and continually threatens to cross the border (Kristeva, 1982). As his wife claims, Frank has always been "so wonderfully definite" about what he considers to be his right (Yates, 2008, p.28), yet has not managed to infuse the resultant space with any characteristics of his own. His space has been intruded by the abject, to the degree that he is indistinguishable from it. He is rather unaware of this process, and according to Moreno, still perceives himself to be apart from the abject, and "the disgust and anger he articulates stems from the fear of being contaminated" by the virus of suburbia (p.89). Refusing to admit being "contaminated" by the mediocrity and mundane existence of his associates, he continually defers his responsibilities and tries to adopt the persona of a carefree rebel whose sexual prowess can be seen in the string of beautiful girls he beds (p.80). But regardless of his efforts, he is shown to be no different from the consumer culture of the 50s: the office is "a part of him" (pp.83-84) and he is lured by the offer of a better corporate position into his malingering life, shunning his wife's offer of a Romantic frontier escapade.

His contamination can also be seen in the fact that despite his projected image of a man brimming with intellectual enlightenment, he is still plagued by the chauvinistic ideas that society has instilled in him: he wholeheartedly indulges in traditional notions of manhood vs. womanhood, is disrespectful towards women, and uses affaires as a proof of his virility. As Robert Corber states, organization men "were expected to define themselves through their identities as consumers — an expectation hitherto confined to women — and to take an active role in childrearing" (2000, pp.5-6). Forced to take up the position of such a man, Frank experiences anxiety with regard to his maleness, and tries to assume a dominant position with regard to females so as to maintain his power. The fragility of his sense of identity as a man can be seen in the fact that he feels dwarfed by his father's masculine hands (Yates, 2008, pp.36-8). Therefore he only feels secure in this identity on three occasions: when he is doing manual work (pp.47-8), patronizing his wife (p.52), or tumbling in bed with a woman (pp.106-7). He is threatened by April's independence from him (pp.49-50, 114-5. 140-2), and is not so much "repelled" by the idea of an abortion as by the fact that it threatens his masculinity (pp.49-51). In a moment of lucidity, he acknowledged how throughout his life, he has simply done things because "he was married to a woman who had somehow managed to put him forever on the defensive" (pp.53). This defense of his turns violent, as his manhood is directly attacked by first his wife (pp.29) and then John Givings (pp.302-2). His life can be summarized as a struggle against emasculation; whereas the allegedly insane John Givings with his "monstrous parody of a

friend-winning, people influencing smile" (pp.194) has solved the pervading problem of the age, that of the confusion between feminine and female, masculine and male (pp.201).

From the beginning of the novel, Frank Wheeler is described as a man with a face showing "lack of structural distinction," a man without a definite personality, who is nonetheless adept at constructing one (Yates, 2008, 12, 15, 22). Moreno states with regard to the novel's structure that "although Frank Wheeler feels anonymous in his world, *Revolutionary Road* empowers him by his textual visibility. In turn, April is made visible only by the shadow she casts in her husband's illuminated presence" (p.92). Her shadow is perceptible in Frank's uncomfortable feeling that she can penetrate his act, as he is nonplussed by her discerning eyes (p.16), whose look of "pitying boredom" haunts him (p.71). As will be shown in the next section, this woman, with her luminous elegance, has realized the reality of their lives, and is determined to shun it.

1.3 The Ultimate Abject

April is first introduced in the amateur play she acts in, and where she manages to distinguish herself as an extraordinary being (Yates, 2008, pp.7-8), but her moment of greatness soon flickers in the face of the terrible dullness and oppressiveness of suburban production (pp.9-10). This thespian attempt of her at individuation is not a first, and the reader soon discovers that she has battled against the pressure of suburbia many times before, most notably at the time of her first pregnancy (pp.50-1). According to her husband, she has always "held herself poised for immediate flight; she had always been ready to take off the minute she happened to feel like it" (p.50), a fact that goes to show she has never hesitated to do what she deemed to be the right action. It is in the same spirit that she devises the grand plan of escape: immigration would grant her an opportunity to define herself, providing her with the authority of a breadwinner, and the chance to prove her stamina in overcoming challenges.

Although her abjection of suburbia resembles that of her husband, she refuses to lose sight of the reality of her selfhood, a symbol of which can be seen in her father's present of a white horse (Yates, 2008, p.326). Even when she is impregnated against her will, and stuffed into the role of suburban homemaker, she has the courage to acknowledge that they have become influenced by their surroundings and claim it is "an enormous, obscene delusion— this idea that people have to resign from real life and 'settle down' when they have families. It's the great sentimental lie of the suburbs" (p.115-7). Without regard for his rage, she deflates Frank's empty talk of morals and refuses to endow them with a meaning she does not see (pp.234-6). And, therefore, she escapes the maneuver that he has used to escape the awareness of his failure (Solotaroff, 1986). Refusing his attempt at reconciliation, she further shows her strength as she expresses her exasperation at playing the charade of a wholesome family (Yates, 2008, p.57). With a steady head, she refuses Shep's post-coital declaration of love, claiming that she neither knows him, nor herself (pp.275-6), and manages to straighten her feelings with regard to Frank (pp.319-21).

Upon learning of her third pregnancy, she decides to terminate it quietly on her own, but when she realizes that her husband intends to use the unborn child as a means of fettering her to their life, she grows more desperate. John's harsh words further jostle her, and unable to disentangle herself from the abject, she decides to become its ultimate form, the corpse, and in so doing molt mediocrity. Susan Zimmerman posits that "if the body itself can be said to serve as hermeneutic matrix for the subject's construction of borders . . . As an entity that slips between categorical signifiers, the putrefying corpse represents the ultimate border problem" (2005, p.101). Kristeva also claims that "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (1982, p.4). In order to escape the abject of the mundane, April decides to embody the ultimate abject. Her endeavor at constructing meaning out of meaninglessness may appear as a sort of paradox, but may be better explained in view of Kristeva's theory. According to Kristeva, abjection pulls one "toward the [semiotic] place where meaning collapses" (p.2), and then the subject, "fluctuating between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, would find death, along with nirvana" (pp.63-64). This notion is described by Zimmerman as a paradox of "the simultaneous ecstasy/terror of obliteration" (2005, 105). She has had a similar experience of elegance in abjection: caught off guard by an unexpected period, she had run away from class, flaunting a blotch of blood, and refusing to lower her head (Yates, 2008, p.19). Many years later, she transforms herself into an ultimate abject, and leaves her husband with a neat crimson sign (p.341). Before her crowning gesture, April traced her steps along the hierarchy of abjection: engaging in the role of the glowing pregnant wife, she served her husband a nourishing breakfast, listened to his talks of work, and sent him off to his office like the angel by the hearth she should have been (pp.311-5). Then, refusing to become the mother hen, a woman whose sole capability is confined to producing heirs to the generation of consumerism, she commits her semi-suicide. In her death, she becomes the societal abject, a corpse, a rebel woman who defies societal suppression.

CONCLUSION

In the end, one might see that while both Wheelers abjectify their society, but where April succeeds in achieving individuation, her husband is sucked into the

vortex of the 50s. No longer hindered by family life, he still fails to let his potential shine through: he has unconsciously come to embody the abject.

The novel ends on a grim note, as the characters are shown in different stages of relaxation, as if April's attempt at reclaiming her life had not unraveled right before their eyes. Life is indifferent to death, and their happy suburb is not suitable for being the scene of a tragedy (Yates, 2008, pp.338-40). April becomes an anecdote for Milly with which to entertain guests (p.343), and Shep can finally appreciate his own wife's presence (p.350). Wives remain silly, and men are still superior. The elderly couples enjoy tranquility. The mad man is incarcerates, and the mad woman is dead. All is fine with suburbia.

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