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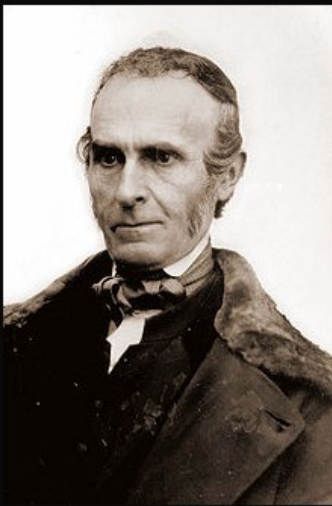
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## The Masculine Mystique

“Masculinity  
During the Age of Conformity  
as Depicted by  
the Works of Richard Yates”



How dwarfed against his manliness She sees the  
poor pretension, The wants, the aims, the follies,  
born Of fashion and convention!

(John Greenleaf Whittier)

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**Abstract:**

Richard Yates, born in 1926 and a World War II veteran, is known and critically acclaimed for his literary work on American society of the post-war era and gives an insight into how his male characters experienced difficulties trying to live up to the demands the so-called Age of Conformity (1950s in America) made on them. This will be investigated with regard to the women in the men's lives and Yates' own biography. The three areas of men's professional, private and social life will be looked into. The three works of particular interest are: *Revolutionary Road*, *Easter Parade* and his short story collection *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*.

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## Introduction

### **Masculinity during the Age of Conformity as Depicted in the Works of Richard Yates**

In 1961, the young writer Richard Yates had published his debut novel *Revolutionary Road* and even though it was not a great financial success, it immediately struck a chord with critics and was much acclaimed. From the early beginning, Yates was praised for capturing a certain malaise that prevailed the American white middle-class of the 1950s (Daly). In his works, the focus lies with mostly young, white men of the middle class and their wives. Yates himself was certainly not a feminist and viewed the women's liberation movement with much disregard as he watched his second wife Martha getting more and more involved in it (Daly). Despite these facts, he is known to be a balanced writer who not only writes sympathetically about his female characters but also treats them with the same compassion (or lack thereof) as his men (Daly). His most prominent works, debut novel *Revolutionary Road*, the autobiographical *The Easter Parade* and his short story collection *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, are all set in or play for the bigger part in the 1950s of America, a time which would later be referred to as the Age of Conformity. It was that same time that America lamented a masculinity crisis. As a writer who focusses on young men at that point in time, Richard Yates gives those men a voice and readers a chance to see their problem through the eyes of someone who has made similar experiences as them. After the publication of his first novel *Revolutionary Road* in 1961 he claimed that his work was meant as “an indictment of American life in the nineteen-fifties” and he explained his focus on conformity:

Because during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity over this country by no means only in the suburbs—a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price. [...] 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. (Bailey 231)

This thesis sheds light on the problem of American masculine identity in the 1950s the way Richard Yates reflects it through his male characters. Women and their struggles to find happiness in a lonely, suburban housewife's life have already been widely researched and discussed in a sociological context, hence my focus on the men. The primary literature that will serve as a source of information on the problem as Yates sees it, are two of his novels, *Revolutionary Road* and *The Easter Parade*, and the short story collection *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. Yates depicts his young men of the Age of Conformity to suffer from too rigidly prescribed gender roles that contradicted the demands that masculine identity made on men, which, much like women, left them feeling empty and inadequate. Close reading of these texts with regard to their presentation of gender roles and Yates' biography, is the method to uncover the identity struggles of his fictional male characters. Women cannot be excluded from the research for two reasons. Firstly, Yates describes the lives of

white, mostly middle-class men at work, in their leisure time, but also the relationships with their wives. Secondly, it is important to notice that his most autobiographical work, *The Easter Parade*, centres around two sisters, one of which resembles Yates' life the most. “[*The Easter Parade*] is my autobiography, sweetheart, Emily fucking Grimes is me, but I'm not saying I'm a cross-dressing creep or a damn homo... or well...maybe I am,” Yates once told a young reporter in an interview (Castronovo 20). Several questions will be used as a guideline through men's work, married and social lives, respectively. How were the demands of masculine identity in itself contradictory and therefore impossible to live up to for? What behaviour did they resort to to make up for the emptiness in their lives? How did those solutions fail? The answers to these questions will always be embedded into the fact that Yates gives a rather personal account of what men in their relationships and their jobs struggled with. Therefore, references to his own biography will be made throughout.

Most of Yates' characters, men and women, are caught up in Age of Conformity. It is a term first used as a reference to the 1950s in America by Irving Howe in his critique “This Age of Conformity” published in 1954 (Sorin, 123). Howe lamented, among others, the post-war trend of complacency and conformity in intellectuals and politics of liberalism. Lee Haddigan similarly explains in his article “How Anticommonism 'Cemented' The American Conservative Movement In A Liberal Age Of Conformity, 1945-1964” that during those years conservatives lamented that they found themselves in the century of the common man, in which all his values had been cut down to an easily understandable and achievable core size that made no demands on his intellect or time (6). Instead they proposed “primacy of individual freedom over the stultifying liberal desire for a harmonious and equal society” (4). On the whole, society had moved in closer together in several areas of living and where there used to be rifts of divides and differences, they narrowed down for the white middle-class population of America. The post-war economic boom and another governmental policy called The New Deal, started by then President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, helped to ensure postwar affluence and a relatively wealthy and unburdened life for white middle class people at the time. (Rosenzweig et al 581) The New Deal had covered an array of programs that was installed to improve production and stability in banking, farming and the industry (416). Higher wages were negotiated that kept workers from going on strikes; the government spent money on public works, schools, more affordable housing, Social Security and unemployment insurance (581). The results were noticeable. Blue collar workers who had been particularly disadvantaged during the war and the Depression could now afford a life that provided the amount of security that they had craved. Before the war, the suburbs had been mainly populated by the well-to-do (599-601). The more equalized distribution of wealth led to a bigger middle-class that largely

populated the suburbs and now consisted of white as well as blue collar workers.

The counter part of the suburban housewife of the 1950s, the married working father, is an underexposed subject considering its state of academic research. Still, there are sources that not only document American manhood and its development of the twentieth century, but also Richard Yates as a writer of the masculine crisis narrative. E. Anthony Rotundo's *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* and Michael S. Kimmel's *American Manhood* serve as sources on the history of American masculinity. Articles such as Jennifer Daly's "Emely Grimes is me': Anxiety, Feminism, and the Masculinity Crisis in Richard Yates's the The Easter Parade," Michael P. Moreno's "Consuming the Frontier Illusion: The Construction of Suburban Masculinity in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*," and "Like Men Betrayed: Revisiting Richard Yates's '*Revolutionary Road*'" by James Wood give insight into the problem of masculine identity in Yates' work. From these, it can be seen that men suffered from several different notions of masculinity in the 1950s that were either new or contradictory to an extent that they pulled men in different directions. Historically, Rotundo sees that "the radical form of individualism belongs to American males. Individualism-expressed in the form of the free agent, the independent citizen, the unfettered man on the make-is vital to a free society" (292). In this lies one predicament for the middle-class male of the 1950s as he further explains that "individualism breeds its own ills-for the pure concept of individualism demands personal independence not only from the demands of the state but also from the emotional bonds of intimacy, family and community" (292). These emotional bonds were hard to avoid in a society that demands also of men and women to get married and have children at an early age (Rosenzweig et al 587). Having a wife and children depending on the male leaves very little personal freedom for him as he takes responsibility as the husband and father. Kimmel also acknowledges a common expectation of men to always be in control and stand above things when he declares the "synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate and swashbuckling hero" to be "impossible [and] a fraud" (173).

In addition to that, Yates shows in his work that the suburban family lifestyle reifies rather than revolutionizes gender roles and, "in the process, re-manufactures the suburban male from the 'GI Joe' image of masculinity to an [...] anonymous, gray-flanneled consumer" (Moreno 85). Thus, the American male had to prove his masculinity not "through the prowess of combat, but by becoming a consumer of postwar domestic accessories" (86). Inevitably, reality proved different from the theory and Yates' characters are seen to struggle with the transformation from one to the other. Yates' work helps articulate an "emergent literary voice that comes not from the urban or rural parcels of the United States but the suburbs, the genesis of the modern consumer identity and the

landscape of imminent death for the American male” (85). The suburbs could not serve as an environment for men pursuing any kind of individual lifestyle and left little room for anything other than a “pre-packaged life,” which required a compliant lifestyle to work (87). Accordingly, Yates' fictional characters often resort to rehearsed conversations and gestures when socialising or dealing with their spouse. To sum up, Yates' men are often caught in a dichotomy. The demands on masculine identity themselves are contradictory and their environment at home (and at work) does not suffice in providing enough space for individualism and the former pioneer spirit that is inherent to American male identity. This often leaves them to cope with the situation by acting out certain manners which are accepted by society at large but these pretensions eventually impair harmonious living.

Another aspect that played a big role in men's identity and happiness, was marriage. Women were expected to marry and have children, thus, so were men. The war-time confidence of “Rosie the Riveter,” a strong woman who can easily step into a man's place if needed to, was gone and women were swiftly moved to the secondary labour market because they were now regarded as too incompetent and vulnerable. It was assumed, their only safe haven could be a stable and secure marriage (Rosenzweig et al 587). Eugenia Kaledin in her book *American Women in the 1950s – Mothers and More* focusses on the forgotten possibilities for women and women's resistance to their limitations and stresses that the percentage of women in the work force had increased to 27% in the 1950s, the highest rate since the 1920s. However, most of these women, some of whom were married, only held part-time jobs (63-65). In addition to that, it must be said that women held jobs rather than careers (36). Friedan in her book *Feminine Mystique* famously describes women's plight as wives and mothers within the confines of the home, which left many of them feeling unfulfilled and depressed. Even though the “suburban housewife [...] was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world,” many of them would say when asked to describe how they feel about their existence “I feel empty somehow...incomplete” (18, 20). Their lives revolved around being good mothers to their children *and* the perfect wives and support to their husbands from who they expected reward for making their home a peaceful, relaxing retreat from a hard day's work. Yet, their husbands were often no help to them either as they, too, could not grasp what the problem could be, believing she owned everything in life needed to make a married woman feel happy and fulfilled (19). In comparison to women's every day routines, men's duty as a source of income to leave the house every day and pursue a career, must have seemed like a great escape to bored housewives.

Richard Yates was a young man during the Age of Conformity and his works reflect the experiences he had made. Richard Walden Yates was born on 3 February in 1926 in Yonkers, New



York, to Vincent Matthew and Ruth (Maurer) Yates. His parents divorced when he was three years old, which left him and his elder sister to be raised by his mother. From the moment of his parents' divorce onwards, Yates lived under unstable conditions, moving house each time his family was evicted because his mother was not able to pay the rent. Additionally, his mother who aspired to be an acclaimed artist, was unreliable when it came to keeping a job and dealing with money. The family often suffered from her spending what money they had on things they could not afford such as living in neighbourhoods that were beyond their budget (Bailey 20). Yates saw his father regularly and the family depended on him as a source of income when money was short (Castronovo 22). Yates rarely discussed his early life and was always hesitant to talk about his mother but felt that all her artistic energy “could more usefully have been devoted to himself and his sister” describing her as his “poor pretentious mother” (22-23). Even though he admired her as a young child, through her he made his first encounters with people that live life as an illusion. All his mother's visions of a career in the arts and a well-to-do family-life never materialised (23). When Yates was a teenager, his mother insisted his father pay for a New England prep school even though the tuition fee was beyond their budget. When he was sixteen years old and attending Avon Old Farms School, his father died aged 52 and Richard not only felt that “the added strain of paying for his education had caused his father's early death” but also, now that the main source of income had gone, he himself should have “to serve in his father's role as family breadwinner” (23). Being drafted in 1944 eventually gave him the chance to break away from his dysfunctional family and he married his first wife in 1948. Already his childhood and adolescence were marked by feeling like he did not belong, always being the conspicuous kid at the new school in seedy clothes because his mother's lifestyle did not leave any money for clean, fitting clothes or regular haircuts (Bailey 21 50). Military service and marriage did not help to make him feel any more adequate and appropriate in what he was doing. Tall and lanky with a tendency for clumsiness, he had a hard time keeping up with other men in the army and his little talent for driving a car caused frequent arguing with his first wife Sheila Bryant (76, 172). Accordingly, Yates, like other men of his time, could not adjust to the suburban lifestyle even though he had wanted to be “a proper country husband” during the 1950s (172). In 1959 he divorced his first wife and a second marriage in 1968 also did not last very long ending in divorce in 1975. During those times he developed a destructive nature, smoking and drinking to a point where people around him feared for his physical and mental health. His difficult childhood and the fact that he himself could “never escape the middle-class life he wrote about so well” may account for his bleakness of vision and tendency for stories without a happy ending (Bailey 607).

Nevertheless, during the 1950s, he held several jobs writing for United Press on financial

affairs or for Remington Rand as a publicity or free lance public relations writer. By the early 1960s, after the publication of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* and *Revolutionary Road* had earned him appraisal and reputation as a writer, Yates started to teach creative writing at renowned places such as Columbia University. Twice divorced, he became the father to three daughters. He continued to work either teaching or writing until his death on 7 November 1992 in Birmingham, Alabama from emphysema (33).

Following this introduction, the first chapter will explore how men struggled to find fulfilment in their jobs; chapter 2 discusses their domestic lives focussing on their relationship with their wives and children respectively; and chapter 3 takes a look at the remains of their social lives with regards to male friendships and their predicaments. Along those lines, the chapters will also give more insight into the author's life and how they show in the life stories of his fictional characters before the thesis concludes its chapters' previous findings.

## Chapter 1

**Men at the Work Place**

A lot of their time, if not most of it, married working men spent at their work place, where they had to meet different expectations. First of all, employers avoided taking on employees who were in their thirties and still single because men were expected to get married, just like women. Secondly, they were required to be a “family man,” even in late adolescence, to attain maturity and respectability (Rosenzweig et al 587). Thirdly, from the experiment conducted by Richard S. Crutchfield in 1953 on “Conformity and Character” it could be seen that most young men that held jobs or even a career were acutely aware of the leading man qualities demanded by reputable companies. For example, Crutchfield juxtaposes two results of his test:

Among the control sample of men, not a single one expresses agreement with the statement: “I doubt whether I would make a good leader,” whereas 37 percent of the men subjected to group pressure toward agreement succumb to it. Here is an issue relating to appraisal of the self and hence likely to be of some importance to the person, especially in light of the fact already mentioned that one of the salient expected qualifications of men in this particular profession is that of leadership.

(193)

To balance out the notion of men's readiness to conform to any group consensus, he points out that in another question which simply asked about which line drawing each of the men preferred, only one of the 50 men tested agreed with the false group result (193). It can be seen that matters of taste and personal preferences outside the working environment can hardly be influenced by group pressure because those opinions do not matter as much to their peers at work. Nonetheless, a certain style and display of taste was a common habit of the day as well, as magazines like *Esquire* clearly document. Magazines such as *Esquire* “developed a new masculine logic that stressed personality, self-realization, sexuality, youthfulness and leisure” (Pendergast 261). Pendergast implies that, much like Rotundo, men needed to find or create something essentially unique about themselves and work on it to show it off in front of others but all that with an attitude of coolness. Yates shows in his stories how these expectations were difficult to put to reality as they contradicted each other or were simply hard to realise because of the limited space given to individuality and the responsibility men held as husbands and fathers.

Yates' character Frank Wheeler, in the novel *Revolutionary Road*, is a good example of a man struggling to find a place in his professional life that fulfils him. Bored with his job and the group of colleagues he goes to lunch with, his wife's idea to leave the U.S. for good and start a new life in Paris where she will be working to give her husband time to find himself professionally, gives their

lives and his hours at the office a lift in the first instance. Remembering that his days at the safe office job at Knox are counted had been “fun little shocks [at first] but the fun of them had worn off and soon they had become distinctly troubling” (Yates 146). A plan that seems so perfectly solid at home is hard to uphold for Frank when he tells his colleague Jack Ordway about it and soon he feels offended by Ordway's stabbing questions about the necessity of the trip. Fishing for an answer, he finds himself repeating his wife's words that people other than artists are allowed to live a life of their own and excuses the trip saying that if he could find out what kind of a job he would like to do at Knox, there would be no point in him leaving (147). Frank is also aware of the fact that whatever little thing he does for his job such as queueing for the pay check has to be done with a certain style and casualness. He describes the scene to April one day saying that he and his colleagues are “like a litter of suckling pigs waiting for a free tit [...] very well-mannered, very refined little pigs [...because] it's very important to be casual” (149). Whatever he does, there is no room to be himself because he does not have a choice. Comparing himself to a suckling implies that he is on the one hand, heavily dependent on the free tit, but also has to act like that were not the case. Frank's behaviour shows that he is caught between two poles simultaneously pulling on him by the demands they make. On the one side, Jack Ordway, himself an alcoholic, represents the general consent of society by questioning the safety of the plan by saying “I don't mean to be dense, but what exactly will you be doing? I don't see you languishing indefinitely at sidewalk cafés while your good frau commutes to the embassy or whatever” (147). With this statement he expresses several things that seem problematic to him. First of all, he cannot think of any job Europe might have to offer that would be more suitable for Frank, secondly; his clearly defined gender roles make him ridicule April's intention to work at a proper job while Frank has time to find his true vocation. Lastly, he expresses doubt whether Frank Wheeler is the kind of person that would be comfortable with the fact that his wife is earning the big money while he is strolling along the Seine. On the other side are his wife's and his own boredom with the inconspicuous lives they lead and the higher ideal to create a unique and outstanding lifestyle. Frank is somehow caught between the awareness that he needs a stable job and the underlying feeling that his life and especially work is just like anybody else's and lacks something that makes it special. Yates shows he would agree with Pendergast who says “modern masculinity represented a loss of authenticity, a capitulation to the demands of bureaucratic corporate interests. The changes associated [...] with modern masculinity appear [...] as a defeat [and] appear to deter men from achieving an authentic form of selfhood” (261). Ordway's doubts about Frank's determination are, in fact, not far from the truth. Frank certainly is bored with his job and the routine of it, but his defiance against his colleague's doubts “lacked weight” (Yates 147). As the planned trip abroad draws closer the reality of it becomes

“distinctly troubling” and Frank's uncertainty about the plan is boosted when his company offers him a higher, well-paid position (146). Naturally, he feels flattered and, despite the fact that he used to despise his superior who he had hardly known during his years at Knox, he soon considers taking the offer at hand a better idea than moving to a place where he would have to start again from being no-one at anyone's company. The fact that John Givings, an acquaintance of them from the mental hospital, seems to be the only person understanding their views and approving of their plans, only reassures April in their intentions and leaves Frank feeling depressed (161-167). To Frank, the higher position looks more and more appealing and April's unexpected third pregnancy will not only delay but will probably cancel their plans for good. This plays into Frank's cards whose doubts about the plan grow bigger with the end of summer approaching. As the story progresses, April decides to abort her child to ensure their plan of making a new life abroad. Frank is furious when he hears about her intentions because it would violate one of the main traits of post-war manhood, fatherhood. Therefore, “he slowly slides from the ideal of living in Paris to the reality of bringing up a third child in the suburbs. The career elevation and the prospect of heralding in the age of computers become far more attractive than gambling on a life beyond the protective walls of America” (Moreno 91). As we go along, it can be seen that not only Frank but other male characters of Yates fiction often are caught between being rational and striving for an individual lifestyle and tending to choose the former.

A case in point are Pookie and Walter Grimes, parents of Emely Grimes, protagonist of Yates' most autobiographical work *The Easter Parade*. They are divorced with two young daughters by the end of the 1920s and the most recognisable of Yates' own parents who got divorced when he was only a toddler. Much like his own mother “Dookie,” Pookie's life “seemed pledged to achieving and sustaining an elusive quality she called 'flair'” (298). When Pookie's eldest daughter Sarah plans to settle down with an early boyfriend, Pookie is delighted with his way of dressing and refined manners and therefore approves of the engagement and does not feel the need to get to know him any better. Walter is the more rational and responsible of the two and asks the young man the more pressing questions. The result is, the young man in question is actually much younger and his job and career prospects are less promising than he had said to be. His questioning bursts the bubble and Sarah soon calls the engagement off (307-309). Similarly to the first suitor, Pookie is delighted when Sarah's actual husband-to-be is a Laurence Olivier look-a-like with a British accent (311). Later, after Pookie's death, he will turn out to be an alcoholic who regularly beats his wife. Walter and Pookie Grimes' marriage is strained because Pookie thinks that their lives lack flair but Walter is more responsible, sticking to a low prestige job to support his ex-wife and two children. Although his decision to divorce his wife to escape her extravagant wishes and keep working at a safe job was

reasonable and from a financial point of view the best for his two daughters, Walter Grimes himself is struggling to find fulfilment and happiness from the moment of the divorce onwards. Similar to Frank Wheeler, he holds an office job, working for a newspaper to check the articles for any spelling mistakes and thinking up headlines before they go out to be printed. Knowing that he is far from being a prestigious writer, he is very modest about his profession even in front of his daughters, who would prefer he held a high ranking position with prestige and authority. They are only nine and five years old when he takes them on a tour through his office building at *Sun*, a conservative, republican newspaper, and they are already critical towards their father's professional life. From an early age on, the girls were made used to look out for things in life that are “nice” and as they get to know the work of their father the more they grow dissatisfied with it (298). When he tells them that the newspaper he works for, the *Sun*, is not the greatest daily newspaper in America, but more of a republican, conservative paper, Sarah becomes worried. Moreover, when he goes on to tell them that Pookie, but he himself is not a republican, Emily wonders why he works for a paper he does not like. His answer to that, too, is honest and rational: “Because I need a job, little rabbit. [...] Jobs are getting hard to find. Oh, I suppose if I were very talented I might move on, but I'm just – you know – I'm only a copy-desk man” (297-298). From his point of view, he is doing the best he can for his family. The sisters certainly do profit from his less extravagant but safe lifestyle, for example, when his job pays for Sarah's braces or Emily's college education. Yet, he must also live with the fact that he is surrounded by a small group of women for who his professional achievements are not enough. Strikingly, Walter Grimes also faces an early death in his mid fifties from a heart attack, just like Yates' own father who spent most of his life supporting an unappreciative ex-wife and two children he never got very close to. Especially when comparing Walter Grimes to Frank Wheeler, it becomes clear that in Yates' opinion, the two pulling factors of a safe life on the one hand and a unique lifestyle on the other, create a duality in men's lives that can haunt them for the rest of their lives whatever way they decide to deal with it. Walter is forever being judged by his family for his job and faces an early death; Frank considers making a change about his life together with his wife but then does not go through with it, which results in April's suicide. Choosing two sisters as the central characters in *The Easter Parade* is initially surprising but as Yates is known as an author who writes sympathetically about men as well as women, he gives insight not only into men's “other halves” and their perspective on life itself but also of their husbands' display of masculinity. This means on the one hand that men are not only caught between contradictory demands of their masculinity but also that they are stuck between the decisions they make and how those are perceived by the opposite sex. Thus, whatever responsible decisions Walter Grimes makes in his role as supportive ex-husband and father, his ex-wife and daughters think them

odd and incomprehensible. On the other hand, as Daly argues “creating sympathetic female characters also implies that writing female characters who share in the same dilemmas as their male characters undermines the interpretation that a crisis of masculinity is what underlies the issue at hand.” Yates himself said of *The Easter Parade* that “Emely fucking Grimes is me” implying that the experiences he has had as a man could also have happened to a woman and thereby hints at a larger, more general identity crisis in which not only men but all sorts of people of the torpid 1950s suffered from too rigidly prescribed identities and gender roles.

Another aspect of young men's work lives was their military past. Richard Yates himself was a war veteran, having been drafted when he was only 18 years old. For all those who were drafted that young (and possibly also sent abroad to fight in World War II), the army was the first real job they ever had during those formative young years. Not only did he work this into his novels (e.g. war veteran Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*) but also some of his short stories in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. A tall and skinny 18 year old with an affinity for clumsiness, Yates would later often use the term “fuckup” to describe himself during his time in the infantry. His days in the army were marked by a “vast discrepancy between his desperate *effort* as a soldier, his pure intentions, and the results achieved by his clownishly incompetent body” (Blake 77). Not only did he constantly stand out from the other enlisted men who were older and stronger, which harmed his inherently shy nature, but also did he come away from war with pneumonia complicated by pleurisy, which left his lungs permanently damaged and turned Yates into a semi-invalid for the rest of his life (76, 80-81). In his stories, Yates also discusses the negative physical effects of fighting in World War II for example in “No Pain Whatsoever,” but often he focusses on the psychological effect that war experience and routinely life in the army can have. The emotional effect that serving a long time in the infantry can have on sergeants and privates is explicitly described in “Jody Rolled the Bones.” It tells the story of a platoon sergeant and his newly arrived platoon soldiers who go from absolutely loathing their superior to admiring and liking him and even feel sorry at his departure because he is transferred to another squad. Sergeant Reece is not the tough but lovable Hollywood kind of a sergeant; he is brutal and brutally strict but also fair, a character trait the young soldiers will soon come to appreciate. Reece is a good example of a man that spent enough time in the army to have become completely indoctrinated by it. On the one hand, that is what makes lieutenants and the like admire him so much describing him as “too *damn* good” for any other squad he might be transferred to (519). Yet, he remains a mysterious figure who seems to enjoy nothing but holding his position in the army. Even when the men start to imitate him out of admiration, they “could never quite consider him a Good Joe. He just wasn't the type. Formal obedience, in working hours, was all he wanted, and [they] hardly knew him at all” (517). In him, the young men have an

example of what they could turn out to be if they decide for a career in the armed forces. Routine all day and nothing to do at weekends, it was “not surprising, then, that [their] emotional life became ingrown” (518). Weekends are spent getting drunk until sick on the bus back to camp, “grateful for the promise of an orderly new day” (518). Yates compares their free time to that of “frustrated suburban wives [who] fed on each other's discontent [and] became divided into mean little cliques and subdivided into jealously shifting pairs of buddies [who] pieced out [...] idleness with gossip” (518). At the army, neither way works to find a life of fulfilment. Again routine is comforting but decreases the self and free time is meant to be enjoyed and filled with whatever one likes to do; yet, a routine of obedience and functioning within the group takes away all creativity and the soldiers resort to filling their time with gossiping. It is worth noticing that Yates makes the comparison of boredom at the army to that of suburban housewives that are similarly stuck and bored with the routine of their daily domestic chores. Thus, he takes two of the most valued occupations for each gender type of the time, the patriotic soldier and the good housewife, and shows how detrimental they are for the state of a person's happiness, despite popular notion. Whether a man or a woman, an army camp or the confines of the home, any life structured by mindless routine and hardly any diversion will lead to inner emptiness.

Strikingly, this is not the account that Frank Wheeler gives of his time at the army. The difference maybe that he actually fought abroad and had spent some time in France with his platoon. When the Wheeler's plan to move to Paris for good; it rekindles their marriage, and Frank enthusiastically tells April how it felt to be sent to combat: “What I really felt didn't have anything to do with being scared or not scared. I just felt this terrific sense of life. I felt full of blood. [...] I kept thinking this is really true. This is the truth” (130). It might be argued that a few things come together at this point in Frank's life that make him speak that way. Firstly, he and his wife are enjoying the boost that talking about their plan gives their relationship. Secondly, Frank Wheeler is one of Yates' more pretentious characters who can often be found rehearsing things in his head before actually having a conversation. He enjoys giving sentimental speeches on life and politics which make others think him (or both Wheelers) stuck up or snobbish (144, 148). Moreover, Yates' own memories from the war are neither glorious nor exhilarating as he came away with lung problems that would not leave him until the rest of his life (Castronovo 25). It can be said that either way Yates does not think time in the army will make any one profit from it during their professional life later or make them feel like they are taking part in some glorious mission. To sum up Yates' dark vision of military endeavours James Wood explains that for Yates “war seems to have functioned a little like an impossibly stern father: no performance would ever suffice. If you fought in it, you never fought bravely enough [...] if you missed it, the rest of your life would be



perforated with inadequacies.” Kimmel comments on Yates' early findings and their development during decades to come in *Manhood in America*:

[The] world was getting smaller, closing in on men seeking military heroism as a way to demonstrate manhood. [...] And one of the most reliable refuges for beleaguered masculinity, the soldier/protector, fell into such disrepute as the news about Vietnam filtered home that even today Vietnam veterans are seen by some as having acted out an excessive and false hypermasculinity. Once a paragon of manly virtue, the soldier was now also becoming to be perceived as a failed man. (174)

The term “hypermasculinity” can easily be applied to Frank Wheeler's character, who lives by “routines, props, frantically rearranged scenery, and rehearsed dialogue” and was probably retroactively glorifying his military experience in front of his wife (Castronovo, 17). In addition to that, Yates seems to agree that the soldier cannot lead a successful life as can be seen from his characters in “Jody Rolled the Bones.”

To sum up, all work situations discussed in this chapter show men are caught between what is expected and what is possible and then having to decide which path they want to follow. In an ideal world, the man would effortlessly find a truly unique lifestyle for himself and his family; yet, he finds himself conforming to other white middle-class men that are caught in the vicious circle of having to be a married father and having a reliable income. Effectively, the pressure to be “a successful breadwinner was a source of strain and conflict, not pride and motivation” (Kimmel, 175). Additionally, military heroism proves a poor outlet for masculinity as Yates shows that an army camp, much like the suburbs, leaves no space for individualism and a soldier is more disadvantaged if he naturally stands out from the group because of unfavourable physical features or clumsiness.

## Chapter 2

**Men as Fathers and Husbands at Home**

Yates' work is radical and almost obsessive in its treatment of the question of gender and often his stories return to the weakness and hysterical anxiety of mid-century American masculinity (Wood). Nowhere else can the manifestations of gender roles better be observed than with the wife at home. Much like chapter 1, pretensions are born out of contradictory and narrowly defined demands when men try to be the right husbands to their wives and a true family man. As Judith Butler argues, “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo [therefore,] an identity is constituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519,520). In Yates' stories these acted out manners can be found when two spouses are dealing with each other within the confines of the home according to their gender roles. This is reinforced by the fact that marriage was a pre-condition to societal acceptance and job opportunities. Men find themselves trying to please their superiors at work with the decisions they make while thinking about how those decisions will also make the wife happy. Another aspect of marriage, more often than not, was fatherhood and because it was yet another mandatory rather than voluntary aspect of a respected life, it often strained the relationship between fathers and their children. All in all, it can be seen that men are pulled in different directions not just in their professional but also their domestic lives.

The double feature that marriage and approval at work go hand in hand can best be seen when Frank Wheeler is talking to Bart Pollock, the superior offering him a better position. Pollock opens the conversation by asking about his domestic situation, whether he has got a wife and children and where he lives (196). Moreover, Frank constantly thinks about how he is going to sell the afternoon's conversation to April later that evening. “You mean to say you *apologized* to him?” April might ask. ‘As if you had to ask his permission to leave, or something?’ is what he fantasizes in his head what she would say to him. His own words of defence are also already prepared “No!” he would insist. ‘Of course I didn't apologize to him. Will you give me a chance? I *told* him, that's all” (205). It is a difficult task for him to juggle both things at the same time and his planned explanatory conversations never turn out as well as he had designed them to be in his mind. Yates shows that men are aware of the fact that being married to a woman is needed for a (maybe dull) but responsible job and that that same job must also be satisfactory to the wife at home. In an attempt to persuade Frank of her plan to move to Europe, she shows that this is exactly what Frank is caught between and puts the blame on herself:

‘I think it's unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working like a dog year after year at a job he can't stand, coming home to a house he can't stand in a place he can't stand either, to a wife who's equally unable to stand the same things [...]. And it

suddenly began to dawn on me [...] that it's my fault. It's always been my fault, and I can tell you the exact moment when it began. [...] It was when I first got pregnant with Jennifer and told you I was going to - you know abort it, abort her. I mean up until that moment you didn't want a baby any more than I did – why *should* you have? - but when I went out and bought that rubber syringe I put the whole burden of the thing on you. It was like saying, All right, then, if you want this baby it's to be All Your Responsibility. You're going to have to turn yourself inside out to provide for us. You'll have to give up any idea of being anything in the world but a father.' (96).

Several things are on display in April's speech that carry Yates' opinion of marriage and fatherhood in them. For one, in the pre-pill times of the Age of Conformity fatherhood follows marriage. Not only because it is a prerequisite to maturity and society's approval but also because of a lack of birth control, children were hardly avoidable whether they were wished for or not. Furthermore, once a child was on its way into the family, there is no other option than for the man to give in and make sure he can provide for his spouse and offspring. Yates describes a vicious circle in which marriage and fatherhood are conditions to a job and a job, however unsatisfactory it may be, is the number one priority once a man has gained the maturity and respectability that comes with being a husband and father. His own life and personality become second and third priority behind his work and family. Additionally, the fact that women were expected to become mothers and men fathers means that automatically a third, innocent party gets involved whether they consent to the whole scheme of things or not. Most likely, this is one reason why Yates paints such a bleak picture for children on the whole. They are not wanted in the first place, but *needed*. Both April and Frank admit that they were not planning for a child and Frank even says that Michael was only born to prove that their first child was not a mistake (46). Therefore, children are off to a bad start and the assumption that having children adds value and happiness to one's life does not apply to Yates' stories. April had already wanted to abort her first child; she does abort her third unwanted pregnancy, which also causes her untimely death and leaves her children behind to be raised as half-orphans by relatives. Arguably, Yates' own experiences with family life are another reason why there are hardly any functional, happy families in his fiction. His own mother spend more time looking for a prosperous career than after him and his sister and a distanced father also served more as a financial than educational or emotional support. A fact he lamented all his life with a certain amount of reproach. Of his father's absence he said “I didn't give a shit about *why* he wasn't home, [...] I just wanted him to be there” (Bailey, 15). Though by all accounts a poignantly devoted father to avoid the mistakes his own parents had made, Yates ended up in an arrangement to see his two daughters from his first marriage every other weekend after he had divorced his wife, much like Walter

Grimes does in *The Easter Parade*. Yates treasured what little time he had with them, banning girlfriends from his apartment the entire weekend, which included phone calls and always went alone to Grand Central Station to wait for his daughters' train. He suffered from the loss of their constant company and usually got emotional toward the end of the girls' visit (246-248).

Consequently, children feature very little in Yates' work and if they do, they are set into scenes with their mothers, babysitters or female teachers at elementary school.

It is particularly interesting that Yates does paint the picture that way considering what Rotundo says about one of the ideals of manhood which is captured under the name of “spiritual warrior” (287). To be exact, this ideal of manliness had only emerged by the end of the twentieth century but Yates gives moments especially between fathers and their children that hint at the problems that the spiritual warriors sought to amend. Their focus lies on fatherhood because they have become dissatisfied with the “growing distance between fathers and sons in the modern world. [...] They also expressed the same anxiety about the dangers of a boy learning his vision of manhood through the eyes of mothers and other women” (287). The last point made is not as explicitly mentioned by Yates in his stories as the former, even though he has once said that it was his destiny to spend his life surrounded by women having been brought up by his mother along with his sister, and having been the father to three daughters by two marriages. But a certain distance between parents and their children can be observed in several of his stories. Not only can it be seen that parents did not want their children in the first place as demonstrated by the Wheelers, but also that they feel disconnected from them. A case in point is Shep Campbell, neighbour and acquaintance of the Wheelers, who as a father of four wonders how he ended up with the life he leads now. Very reminiscent of Yates relationship with his mother Dookie, Shep, even though he loved his own mother, did everything from early adolescent onwards to get away from her tightening grasp and led a rebellious life (Yates, 138-139). Shortly before the Wheelers arrive for an evening of drinks and conversation, Shep wonders how he came to live in the orderly, clean world of suburbia when for years “he had yearned above all to be insensitive and ill-bred” (138). He is thus shaken that when he walks past the living room and sees his four sons, who look remarkably alike, he stops and wonders whether he really knows his own flesh and blood:

'Hi gang,' he said, but none of them looked up. [...] Did other men ever feel distaste at the sight of their own children? [...] Quite often, in fact, he would happen on them suddenly and think, Who are these four guys? And it would take him a second or two to bring his mind into focus on the fact that they were his own. [...] This was different. This time he had to admit that he'd felt a distinct, mild revulsion. (146)

This section not only discusses Shep's relationship to his sons but also refers back to the

homogeneity of the time. He notices that all his sons look remarkably alike in their physical appearance and in the way they are all propped on their elbows wearing the same blue knit pyjamas (146). Moreover, they differ quite a bit in age, the youngest son being four the oldest nine, yet they are happy to dress alike and all watch the same program. It can be argued that even from an early age on, people are made to adjust to whatever is put in front of them. The fact that Shep feels estranged from his kids is one cause for concern but also that they do not notice his presence, not even when he is addressing them. If he feels distanced from them to a point where he is disgusted, his children are, to say the least, unimpressed by their father. The homogeneous way of living and pressure to spend a lot of time at a dull job that will provide for the family leaves men little time and very few things to share with their children and teach them about life. Yates' short story "Doctor Jack-O-Lantern" also conveys the idea that fathers are mainly absent figures. His only story to centre around a young boy describes New York as an "adult place that swallowed up their fathers every day" (479). It is made clear that children are used to the fact that their fathers are not present very much and mainly take care of the duty of having to go to work and earn money for the family. Frank Wheeler's children cannot be described as being very homogeneous since they are a boy and girl, but he, too, struggles to spend time with his children in a way that does not leave him bored or easily enraged (51-53; 55-56). Kimmel relates this lack of time and joy that fathers have with their children to the "male sex role [which] reduces fatherhood to a 'financial functionary' to children, forcing men to be not only absentee landlords in their homes but also absentee fathers with their children" (187). Kimmel sees the problem in the fact that men are first and foremost pressured to secure the financial support for the family, which leaves those men little time for actual parenting.

Despite all these negative images of fatherhood, Yates is careful to make clear that men are made to think they lack something in their lives and crave for what they are missing if they remain childless because of the suggestion that they are only complete as a married father. This is demonstrated by one of Emily Grimes' longer lasting boyfriends Jack Flanders. When he is at his lowest, Emily feels that the relationship is deteriorating because he has started to depend on her more and more emotionally as his career as a poet is not flourishing the way he had hoped. Moreover, he has already been married once and did not have any children from that marriage. He fears losing his girlfriend and his career at the same time and thinks the cure to it would be a happy marriage with children. So he turns to her to say "[the] way you carry on with that dog, anybody'd say you want a baby." Emily who has been very careful all her life not to chain herself to anything or anyone is startled. This is unusual considering the times she lives in and Jack is very much aware of the expectations of men *and* women of the time, so he continues "[doesn't] every woman want a baby sometime?" (385) He actively plays with the expectations life has laid out for her to fulfil his

own requirements. This is a safe way of keeping Emily close by and a way to make sure he can regain full masculinity by becoming married and a father. Moreno shows how detrimental it is for a man to lose his family by describing the remainders of Frank Wheeler's life after he has lost his family. Moreno argues that after April's death by a self-induced abortion, Frank loses all his masculinity's resilience and it now serves to mutate and weaken him rather than empower him the way it used to. So, by the end of the novel, Frank's existence is little more than an empty shell unable to fill the vacancy left by the disintegration of his family (92).

As a family man, integral to a man's identity was his home in the suburbs which functioned as a site to display his success by means of consumer goods such as a big car or a beautiful front garden (Moreno 87). Yates captures the stupidity and shallowness that this lifestyle brings about in an early scene in his debut novel *Revolutionary Road*. Frank Wheeler spends a Saturday afternoon digging a new front walk to his front door and simultaneously contemplates the life he leads. He concludes that his life “had been a succession of things he hadn't really wanted to do” and that he very much leads what Moreno calls the “pre-packaged” life of the 1950s (Yates 46; 87). Frank's claustrophobic lifestyle is cleverly captured by Yates in his prose through the use of an infinite sentence of participles: (Klinkowitz 19)

Taking a hopelessly dull job to prove he could be as responsible as any other family man, moving to an overpriced, genteel apartment to prove his mature belief in the fundamentals of orderliness and good health, having another child to prove that the first one hadn't been a mistake, buying a house in the country because that was the next logical step and he had to prove himself capable of taking it. (46)

Frank's life consists of taking one empty step after another to prove something that he doesn't even believe in. The emptiness of his acts is not only captured in Yates' prose. Digging the new front walk is meant to be a gesture of suburban house-pride; yet, it proves to be a tedious task as the soil is fouled by roots and rocks (Klinkowitz 19). Annoyed by this and the constant questioning of his children (“Are you hitting rock again, Daddy?”), he stops his work and leaves the path unfinished. (Yates 46)

The pre-requirement to become a parent, for men and women alike, inevitably means that married and family life centres a lot around the children. The assumption that men and women cannot but be happy in this constellation is proven wrong in Yates' stories not only by the fact that fathers often do not have a good relationship with their children but that they are unhappy in their marriage as well. As Klinkowitz points out, Yates' works are novels of manners and for people like Frank and April Wheeler, who are stuck in the boredom of suburban homogeneity “manners have become [...] a guide to the world” (21). Not only Frank “tries to transform the world around him

[...] by the way he looks at it,” but his wife, too, is committed to the game, which her husband notices in her “quality of play-acting, of slightly false intensity, a way of seeming to speak less to him than to some romantic abstraction” (qtd. in Klinkowitz, 19-20). Both Wheelers find it extremely hard to live a life without pretension and mannerism in the claustrophobia of suburbia; therefore, “there is no center to [their] existence, as so much of it has been composed in terms of hopelessly ideal reflections” (22). As Frank's and April's story progresses and their marriage falters because they have to cancel their plans to make a life changing trip, both Wheelers, and especially Frank, resort to play-acting their part within the marriage. When his wife declares she has decided to terminate her pregnancy, Frank tries to impress her the way he did when they were younger in order to persuade her not to attempt the abortion:

He embarks on a long effort to dissuade her, which involves 'a form of masculine flirtation that was as skillful as any girl's.' He holds his head 'unnaturally erect,' and takes care to arrange his features in 'a virile frown' whenever he lights a cigarette. On *Revolutionary Road*, life has collapsed into advertising: his attempt at dissuasion is described by Yates as 'a sales campaign.' (Wood)

Yates lets the reader into these hopelessly ideal reflections from the start of *Revolutionary Road* on by describing the failure of the amateur theatre group and its production of *The Petrified Forest*, in which April stars as the lead character. Acting in the play was her hope that “her world [would] be transformed by the play's success” (19). However, Yates makes clear by a major fight between April and Frank about the performance in which they call each other “sick” and “disgusting” that not only the play but her marriage is not working out the way it should have (Yates, 26-27). When this fight puts a complete hold on their communication for a couple of days, Frank is thus depressed with the current state of his marriage and existence that he runs into an affair with a younger girl from his office. What Yates documents here is the demand of masculinity of “remaining cool under pressure on the one hand and giving 'em hell on the other” (Kimmel, 188). Frank runs from his responsibility to work out the problems at home into an affair that confirms his manliness and does not open up to anyone about the fight he had with April since “real men [...] are emotionally reliable by being emotionally inexpressive [...] and exude an aura of manly daring and aggression” (186). And for a moment after his one-night-stand this works:

He was down the stairs and out on the street [...]; he had broken into an exultant run, and he ran all the way to Fifth Avenue. Once he had to swerve to keep from stepping into a baby carriage, and a woman shouted 'Can't you watch where you're going?' but he refused, no less than an eagle or a lion would have refused to look back. He felt like a man. (Yates, 89)

James Wood sees the discrepancy in Frank's behaviour explaining that in *Revolutionary Road* the suburban man has become so maddening because he has claimed for himself two incompatible twin rights. He can either be the rank escapist or a conservative pragmatist, which leaves him dreaming of escape while simultaneously dreaming of timid stability. Yates demonstrates that this double ideal cannot work for Frank. His high from the affair that leaves him feeling like a man and comparing himself to a lion only lasts until he arrives home and finds that April has organised a surprise birthday party for him. He is emotionally overwhelmed as she leaves him to wait in the kitchen and “the hot brown smell of roasting beef [brings] tears to his eyes” (90-91).

This chapter has shown how prescribed gender roles impair harmonious living at home with the spouse and children. The demands that are put on men, for example, to be a father and to be able to hold down a proper job, means that there would be less time to spend on one of the two. As they have to spend a lot of time at their job to at least secure financial support for the family means that the relationship with their children suffers. Men and women were equally pressured to get married and have children to gain societal approval, therefore, the decision to do so does not necessarily lead to happiness for them both. They do what they believe should make them both happy but the expectations mislead them and eventually the man and the woman struggle to live a fulfilled life. In the end, they are left with the notion of how life at home should be and eventually an unspoken agreement to perform according to one's gender takes over which is then constructed through specific corporal acts (Butler, 520,522).



## Chapter 3

**Men and Their Social Lives**

It has been established that men spend a lot of their week either at work or at home with the family because one environment feeds on the other. This, on the other hand means that there is little time left that they can devote to themselves and their own hobbies and acquaintances. Inevitably, the social life often is a combination with either work or family life. Therefore, a male friendship never stands on its own but is part of another aspect of men's lives, either work or family. Not only that, but the male friendship was not easy to establish and uphold for the times view on any too strong a friendship. A strong friendly bond between two men could easily be seen as a homosexual stigma. Men of the Age of Conformity had lost “the opportunity for the open intimacy of the romantic male friendships that were common in the nineteenth century; more broadly, the fear of homosexuality can block men's access to tender feelings and the skills that humans need in order to build connections with one another” (Rotundo, 292). Not only the homosexual associations with males bonding with other males hindered men in building strong and reliable friendships but also the way they were meant to present themselves to the world to find approval. Rotundo describes the contradiction by saying that the “part of a man's inner self that sought expression through intimacy was that part -tender, dependent, vulnerable, warm- which suited him poorly for success at his worldly tasks in a competitive marketplace” (282). Subsequently, the work place is too competitive as a ground to establish friendships on and the responsibility as a father and husband to secure financial matters leaves little opportunity to spend a lot of time anywhere else.

Due to the responsibilities, it comes to little surprise that Yates' male characters tend to socialise at the work place. For example, Frank Wheeler is only ever presented to the reader as being out with his wife or making lunch arrangements with other Knox employers. Yet, all of them, including Jack Ordway, who he considers “the best friend he had in the office,” repel him in some way (Yates, 169). Frank feels he should tell at least Jack about the secret plan but when Jack is honest enough to doubt the safety of the Wheeler's plan, Frank feels a sudden rush of enagement followed by pity for his alcoholic friend at the office and offers to buy Jack a drink as a way of of making amends (171). Yates shows on how weak a groundwork this friendship is built. It is easily shaken by some honesty on Jack's side and then rebuilt on pity on the other side, which also suggests that Frank has a feeling of superiority towards him. His main acquaintances at home that he and April occasionally meet up with are no better an example of truthful, solid friends. When April and Frank still concur in their plan, they discuss who they should tell about it. April is determined that it is hardly anybody else's business why they want to sell the house and that includes Mrs. Givings and the Campbells. Frank holds a different view and replies “Oh no, [...] we

have to tell them-' and he almost said, 'They're our *friends*' before he caught himself. 'I mean, *you* know; of course we don't have to. But why not?'" (136) On the Campbell's side, their friendship is equally pretentious. Shep and Millie Campbell both think at least Frank to be snobbish, but they approve of their intentions by saying how wonderful it all sounds and vow that they will miss them dearly if they leave. Once they are gone, Shep bursts the bubble they had to uphold while the visitors were still present and denounces their plan to be a "pretty immature deal" (151). With relief, Millie agrees and says "I really do like them both so much and they're - *you* know, they're really our best friends and everything, but it's true" (151). Once their friends are gone, they take the plan apart, each according to their ascribed gender roles. Therefore, Millie questions whether Frank and April are thinking of their children and how they are going to cope with the move. Shep on the other hand sees Frank's manhood endangered and wonders "what kind of half-assed idea is this about her supporting him? I mean what kind of a man is going to be able to take a thing like that?" (151) Yates shows here that they are not free to show their true feelings about such a drastic decision as the Wheeler's have made. In front of them, they have to be appreciative and kind and when they are gone Shep and Millie immediately fall back into their expected husband and wife roles doubting how carefully the Wheelers have thought their plan through. Yet, both lie awake at night dreading the thought that when the summer is over they will miss a couple in the neighbourhood, which they do not consider very good friends, but of who they know that they had been stuck in the same rut and apparently managed to escape.

Again, when talking about men and women coping with social situations, it is not avoidable to talk about manners and behaviours that they have come to use. Through the voice of John Givings, the mentally unwell son of the Wheelers' real estate agent Helen Givings, Yates shows his readers that he, and even people at the time, were aware of gender arrangements. It was uncommon or even unheard of that someone at a social occasion would point this out and maybe that is the reason why Yates makes the only certified insane person in the novel say these words:

'I like your girl, Wheeler,' he announced at last. 'I get the feeling she's female. You know what the difference between female and feminine is? Huh? Well, here's a hint: a feminine woman never laughs out loud and always shaves her armpits. Old Helen in there is feminine as hell. I've only met about half a dozen females in my life, and I think you got one of them here. Course, come to think of it, that figures. I get the feeling you're male. There aren't too many males around, either.' (Yates, 165)

It can be seen from this why Yates makes the Campbells take the Wheelers' plan apart according to their roles ascribed to them by society, responsible husband and caring housewife. John, who believes that the Wheelers are going to go through with their plan is the only one who truly

applauds them for it and is accordingly disappointed at his next visit when they admit the plan is cancelled due to April's pregnancy. The cancellation of their plan completes Yates' "inexorable rise and fall" rhythm of his characters, who try to change something and then fail (Klinkowitz, 19). John eventually sees the pretension that even though the "Wheelers pride themselves on being different, [...] the young couple are indeed their culture's most representative members and that whatever failings exist in their society at large can be traced directly to their own behaviour" (18).

In "The Best of Everything" Yates gives his readers an example of a true, strong friendship between two men and a man and his group of friends. It is Friday night and the eve of Grace's and Ralph's wedding day where the reader enters the story of a shy, lower middle-class girl and a working class man. On the one hand, it is made clear that both have fond and romantic memories of their early courtship. On the other hand, it is also plainly obvious that both have their insecurities about the relationship and marriage. Mostly, Grace is made unsure about her decision to marry Ralph by her room-mate Myra, who continuously makes fun of his working class background, i.e. his way of speaking, his family, friends, job and house situation (Yates, 497). Ralph, on the contrary, is also distracted by his group of friends, but not because they are not wholly embracing the fact that he is getting married. Rather, he fears for losing all those friends and the camaraderie:

Half the fun of every date – even more than half – had been telling Eddie about it afterwards, exaggerating a little here and there, asking Eddie's advice on tactics. But after today, like so many other pleasures, it would all be left behind. Gracie had promised him at least one night off a week to spend with the boys, after they were married, but even so it would never be the same. Girls never understood a thing like friendship. [...] Nearly all his life had been devoted to the friendship of boys and men, to trying to be a good guy, and now the best of it was over. (502)

Ralph's doubts over his girlfriend being able to understand the bond he shares with his mates and his foreshadowing that the life with them cannot be upheld after the wedding, shows that Yates sees a difficulty for men to have a social life of their own that completely excludes married life.

Strikingly, Rotundo discusses in his book *American Manhood* how every ideal of manhood in the twentieth century "signifies a turning away from women" and that they search "for manhood in an all-male setting" (289). In Yates' stories it might not be true that men consciously seek the company of men to fulfil any kind of ideal they might have of themselves, but as Ralph in "The Best of Everything" and John Fallon in "The B.A.R. Man" show, men tend to look for male company especially when they feel the relationship with their wife or girlfriend is lacking something. Ralph does have a very positive image of Grace. However, when he gives his best friend Eddie his reasons for taking her as his wife, it seems that those reasons are rather shallow considering that he intends

to spend the rest of his life with her and they also imply that he may not know her very well:

'Ooh, Eddie – what a paira *knockers!*' And Eddie had grinned. 'Yeah? So what's the roommate like?' 'Ah, you don't want the roommate, Eddie. The roommate's a dog. A snob too, I think. No, but this *other* one, this little *Gracie* – boy, I mean, she is *stacked.*' (502)

It fits the idea then that Ralph, a day before his wedding, expects more and is a lot more touched by the surprise stag do that Eddie and the others had organised for him, than he is surprised and happy about meeting Grace that evening, who after an abstinent courtship, had planned to surprise him in some exquisite underwear to make him the present of an early wedding night. When he enters the living room where his friends are waiting to surprise him with a party and the expensive suitcase he has been eyeing with at the shop window for months, his “eyes [gleam] in a smile of love” and when his friends demand a speech “Ralph couldn't speak and couldn't smile. He could hardly even see” (505). Therefore, he chooses to spend the rest of the night with his friends over staying with Gracie. Even when she asks him not to go and leave her he replies “Have a heart, willya? Keep the fellas waitin' tonight? After all they done fa *me?*” (508) Apparently, there is something that his friends can give him, which his fiancée cannot, and therefore, his peers get first priority.

Yates describes a similar case in the story “The B.A.R. Man.” It almost seems as if he wants to give the reader a glimpse into what Ralph and Gracie's marriage could turn out to be in ten years time. John Fallon's marriage is strained by routine and the fact that his wife cannot bear him any children and earns “more money than he [does] by typing eighty-seven words a minute without missing a beat on her chewing gum” (576). One night, when his wife decides to break his Friday night routine of going out with the boys to watch the boxing fight at a bar, and go to a movie with her instead, they get into a row over the topic of her infertility and he leaves the house to go out anyway. Because it is a little early, he does not go to the usual bar where he meets up with his friends yet, but decides to walk towards Times Square and settles for a bar near Third Avenue, in front of which two soldiers are standing outside. (582) He reminisces about his army days when he was a B.A.R. man (Browning Automatic Rifle), he seeks to spend the night with these two young soldiers, trying to impress them and the girls present at the club with his army history. Clearly, he seeks the kind of nights he had in his pre-married years that were full of drinking, dancing, chasing girls, army talk *and* the company of men that shared a similar lifestyle. Unfortunately, all his endeavours fail that night. The girl he is trying to impress shows no sign of interest towards him and when he comes back from the bar to get drinks to the booth where he was sitting with the group, he finds that they have gone and bailed on him (585-587). That evening, John Fallon has to take two if not three failures in his life. First of all, he is bothered by his wife's infertility which he mentions to

her in an accusatory tone, “So whaddaya wanna do? Walk around with a tipped utiyus the resta ya life, or what?” (581) To that, his wife Rose replies with the second thing in which he has failed: “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?” (581) Even if he were a father, he would hardly be able to provide for his wife and any offspring that they might have. Thirdly, he fails to get back to old times in which he could make an impression with other men for what he has done in the past, i.e. having been a good soldier during army times. It can be said that the “male bonding celebrated [...] is a defensive reaction to traditional masculine failure; the men turn to each other because the world (and women) have failed them” (Kimmel, 189). The failure is easier to take with people that share the same defeats and disappointments than with a wife or girlfriend that keeps making demands (whether she is aware or not) and functions as a symbol of all the things a man might have failed in. Still, Yates is careful to show that his characters do not intend to fail or be lousy husbands but that they know they are under the pressure to be a father and a reliable breadwinner for the family; otherwise, John would not mention their childlessness in such a reproachful way to his spouse. John's behaviour can be analysed according to Moreno's observation that the conflict of young men of the post-war period “is rooted in [their] deprivation of the *keys of the frontier*, the promise of roaming the idealized geography of freedom and independence, the quintessential medal for which he fought in the war and which the Cold War culture denied [them]” (93). John is painfully aware that he lacks that independence, being dependent on his wife's income who cannot or does not want to bear him any children and stuck in the rut of his half-complete post-war suburban life, goes out to seek the life he had before he got married. Similarly, Ralph in “The Best of Everything,” is shown to know of the expectation of him to get married at some point to gain maturity and because of that “Gracie herself, had become a symbol of the new and richer life he sought” (Yates, 503). Yet, he fears for losing the life he leads now that revolves around his group of peers. Even though Yates had his fair share of bad experiences with women, be it his pretentious mother or two failed marriages, he does not give his readers clear cut answers as to why someone has failed in doing something and refuses to point to the one who is to blame in the story. Castronovo also mentions this in his biography of the author in which he says that Yates had a “preference for fiction without villains” (24). Furthermore he quotes Yates as giving this statement about his fiction:

If you can blame everything on one of the characters in the story, then where's the weight of the story? . . . I much prefer the kind of story where the reader is left wondering who to blame until it begins to dawn on him (the reader) that he must bear some of the responsibility because he's human and therefore infinitely fallible. (24)

It would be a hasty assumption to think that women are to blame for their husbands' social life

failures, or indeed any failures.

More so than with other aspects of their lives, all different expectations and difficulties come together in the social lives of men. On the one hand, once they are married, the spouse has the first priority. On the other hand, men appreciate their male friendships and find it hard to keep them alive while being a family man who has to take care of financial matters and therefore, spend a lot of time at work as well. That way, a lot of the time social occasions are a mix with either married or professional life. Male bonding could have easily been associated with homosexuality during the Age of Conformity, during which people, especially men, were wary of homosexuality. On the whole, Yates does not explicitly discuss homosexuality, or any other minority for that matter, (only one story in his short story collection features a black man) but rather sees male friendship impeded by the societal pressure to be married and provide for the family. Therefore, men use male bonding to try and escape the drudgery of their lives or are hesitant to give up their lives as bachelors for fear of losing their friends.

### Conclusion

The previous three chapters have shown how Yates' male characters are caught up in a life of dualities on several levels. The demands masculinity makes on men are themselves contradictory. As Kimmel has pointed out, it is not the responsibility that men have as fathers or husbands or employees that put the stress on them but “[trying] to fulfil the role demands is the real source of stress in men's lives.” (188) On the one hand, the ideal is to be unique and show off individualism in front of other men; yet, society has been thus homogenised into breadwinners' men and dedicated wives and mothers that little room is left for individuality and responsibility for the family is given first priority. Two results could be observed from that discrepancy. First of all, Yates' characters are aware of the things that are expected of them and they are also aware of it when they do not manage to live up to them. To make up for it and keep at least an image of the suburban dream alive to the outside world, men and their women resort to acting out pretensions and manners that they have copied from others. One example for that would be Gracie in “The Best of Everything” and her behaviour on the eve of her wedding when she opens the door for her fiancé. “For this occasion she is all manners, dressed in a fancy nightgown and closing the door so she can lean against it 'with both hands holding the doorknob at the small of her back, the way heroines close doors in the movies.’” (Klinkowitz, 24) Unfortunately, this way of coping with prescribed gender roles and their expectations do not necessarily work. Her fiancé Ralph, a “patriot to group manners,” overpowers her because his “manners are more determining than hers” and she cannot make him stay the night. (24) Secondly, Yates' characters try to make up for the things that they lack in their lives by bringing about a change. The Wheelers, for example, try to escape “the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs” by remembering “who you were” and therefore make plans to move to Paris for good. (qtd. in Klinkowitz, 18) Yates makes clear that it is difficult to escape the homogeneous lifestyle of the suburbs no matter what plans and decision its residents make. The “compelling weight of reality which frustrates their hopes” is expressed in his prose (18).

Yates' stories never take a happy ending and show his rather negative view on not only manhood but also human life as a whole. The last point made by Klinkowitz that “reality frustrates [...] hopes” is a recurring theme in Yates' work and shows itself in the “[carefully] plotted rises and falls in action” and every story will end on a fall (24-25). Even the titles of the stories or the characters' names show the irony or flaws in the people's lives. The novel *Revolutionary Road* tells the story of a young couple that fails to make a revolutionary change to their lives; its main male character Frank is far from being frank but is rather pretentious and beautiful, springlike April will die in the fall (Wood). *The Easter Parade* deals with the lives of two sisters that were raised by their

mother to look out for things that bring flair to their lives and yet the opening line of the story already gives away that “[neither] of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life.” (Yates, 295)

Despite the negativity and the fact that Yates' stories can easily be read as presenting society as a whole, it is important to keep two things in mind. Firstly, his works must be seen as presenting his own view on people's lives and difficulties and subsequent failures. Secondly, it would be too rash and ill-concluded to see all American males of the Age of Conformity to be suffering from the same struggles in life. Yates' men all share the same white middle-class suburban background. They all have names that assume white Anglo-American descent, Frank Wheeler, John Fallon, Walter Grimes, Howard Givings, Shep Campbell, Jack Ordway. In addition to that, Yates never discusses any minorities including the very rich who can afford to live in the city and may have a completely different view on life. Only a small niche of male American life is given by Yates and has been discussed here.

Nowadays, Richard Yates seems to be a forgotten and much underrated writer, having once been compared to the likes of Flaubert, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, three of his own favourite writers. The 2008 adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* directed by Sam Mendes helped spark up a new discussion about the writer that was praised for his “subtle observation and presentation of the climate of his times” (Castronovo 5). Around the time of the release of the film, Wood argues in *The New Yorker* that in its then forty-seventh year, *Revolutionary Road* is more radical than ever. Moreno even goes as far as saying that Yates' work stands as a historical marker of masculine dissolution and as a reminder that American suburban masculinity still needs to be recovered and redefined (93). In his opinion, the American male is still only offered two forms of masculine identity: the resurrected GI fighting abroad or the patriotic consumer dwelling in the suburbs (93). Moreno's implies that the small niche identity of suburban husband and father, which Yates describes in his work published almost fifty years ago, is still one of the most frequently occurring masculine identities that is in need of restructuring. It might be looked into whether masculinity still suffers from the same impediments as Richard Yates describes them in his works by comparing them to more recent literature that depicts life of the white middle-class.

This thesis, much like Yates himself, laid the focus on men of the 1950s in America rather than women. The different areas of life that have been examined for their difficulties did not show that men and women were faced with exactly the same problems. The demands that were made on on men at the time cannot be compared to what women were expected to do and be in life but in both cases, the pre-scribed gender roles lead to an overall similarly unhappy state of existence. Betty Friedan in *Feminine Mystique* reported women's complains about their lives. They felt “empty somehow...incomplete” (20). It was not uncommon for men to share a sense of boredom and



alienation: “I just don't get it. I've got everything. I really have. All the same, now and then, I get the feeling I'm in a prison or something. Happens when everything's on top of me, you know?” (qtd. in Kimmel 186) Similarly, Yates' characters have been shown to ponder their existence and all factors that it incorporates such as their job or fatherhood though acutely aware that these things were meant to contribute to their happiness. For that reason, Shep Campbell is bewildered by the sight of his four sons, and Frank and April Wheeler try to flee the American suburban dream they are caught up in. Yates has made clear throughout that there is never a black and white solution to the problem in any man's life, i.e. the blame cannot be put on one person alone. The ideals that they were meant to live up to and the space that was given to do this in were inadequate to each other. Playing tennis on a football pitch is going to be a stretch. Effectively, men as well as women struggled to find balance in a life that constantly kept pulling them in different directions while providing little space for individual self-fulfilment. Friedan therefore had already concluded in 1973 that as much as women were suffering from a feminine mystique, “men were fellow victims, suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill” (qtd. in Kimmel 173).

Twice divorced, and a life riddled by alcoholism and mental illness, Richard Yates had his fair share of failing at the demands that society made on men of the Age of Conformity which left him feeling inadequate. His failures and those of other men he knew are worked into his stories and together paint a dark picture for men's happiness. The homogeneous lifestyle that prevailed in the suburbs and narrowly defined roles for men and women alike can be made responsible for his characters' unhappiness. In his most autobiographical work, *The Easter Parade*, the protagonist of the story, Emely Grimes, admits to her nephew that “[she is] almost fifty years old and [she has] never understood anything in [her] whole life” (Yates 475). This has an authorial tone to it considering that Yates said himself that Emely Grimes is a stand-in for himself and considering the fact that in 1976, when the book was published, Yates had turned fifty. As James Wood notices of Yates' stories “the teller [...] does not allow [the reader] an easy point of agreement.” Thus, Yates himself remains hesitant to judge or give a clear cut answer as to who is to blame for failure and unhappiness.

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