
From the Instructor

Sabrina Patrizio's essay, "Wouldn't You Like to be Loved by April Wheeler: Suburban and Feminine Containment in *Revolutionary Road*," was written as the final paper for EN 220: Postwar American Literature. As in WR 150, in EN 220 students read a variety of texts that revolve around a particular theme and write research-driven final essays. In order to complete this final assignment, Sabrina proposed her argument in a prospectus, explored relevant research by constructing and revising an annotated bibliography, and crafted and revised the final essay in response to peer and instructor comments.

Sabrina came to me early in the research process because she found that very little had been written about *Revolutionary Road*—a fact that she saw initially as an obstacle to writing about the novel. However, once she began to consider new approaches to the problem and different strategies for performing research, she was able to capitalize on the limited scholarship on Richard Yates and begin to fill in that gap. The final version you see here represents a series of revisions to Sabrina's line of argument with particular attention paid to positioning the claim within a body of scholarship and considering alternative perspectives and counterarguments. This essay is a joy to read because of Sabrina's sensitive literary analysis and beautifully wrought prose. Sabrina is an incredibly gifted writer, and her persistence in developing her approach to research has paid off in this exemplary essay.

— Gwen Kordonowy

EN 220: Postwar American Literature

From the Writer

“Wouldn’t You Like to be Loved by April Wheeler: Suburban and Feminine Containment in *Revolutionary Road*” is the culminating essay from my semester in EN 220: Postwar American Literature. This final assignment gave me free reign to examine any prominent postwar themes in any of the pieces I read in the course.

From the moment I read Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*, I knew I wanted to write about it. I was drawn in by Yates’ writing style, his social commentary, and of course his flawed characters. *Revolutionary Road* quickly became one of my favorite novels, and I was eager to explore what literary criticism surrounded it. To my surprise, I found that almost none existed. For a long time, scholars paid this novel no critical attention. One of the most difficult experiences I had in writing this paper was locating relevant research.

After taking a step back and thinking about what really intrigued me in this novel, I realized that I wanted to understand better the entrapment April Wheeler, Yates’ protagonist, experiences, and why breaking out of such a state proves almost impossible for her. I broadened my research to find discussions of these themes in the postwar era, and I found compelling theories in Alan Nadel’s and Betty Friedan’s work—the former discussing suburbia, the latter feminism.

Once I discovered sources with which I could engage, I genuinely enjoyed writing this essay. The lack of scholarship on Yates actually granted me a lot of freedom with which to express my own analysis of this novel. I also enjoyed being able to write about feminism in the 1950s through a critical lens. Most of all, however, I am ecstatic that Yates and *Revolutionary Road* are finally receiving some well-deserved critical attention.

— Sabrina Patrizio

SABRINA PATRIZIO

WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO BE LOVED BY
APRIL WHEELER: SUBURBAN AND FEMININE
CONTAINMENT IN *REVOLUTIONARY ROAD*

In his 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road*, Richard Yates explores just what it means to attempt to lead a revolutionary life in 1950s American suburbia. He describes the cultural landscape of conformity and the struggle for sameness that pervade this era: “a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price” (qtd. in Henry and Clark 208). His description conjures for the modern reader the familiar image of the perfect smiling suburban family standing behind their white picket fence, the father heading off to work in the city in his gray flannel suit, the mother waving in her apron and pearls while ushering the children off to school. In fact, Yates’ description of the Wheeler house in *Revolutionary Road* mirrors this illusion—“small and wooden, riding high on its naked concrete foundation, its outsized central window staring like a big black mirror” (40). As Yates points out, however, “a great many Americans were deeply disturbed by all that—felt it to be an outright betrayal of our best and bravest revolutionary spirit—and that was the spirit I tried to embody in the character of April Wheeler,” arguably the novel’s protagonist (Henry and Clark 208).

Despite its relevance to the era, both culturally and literarily, Yates’ work has received little scholarly attention, remaining almost entirely ignored until recent years. Scholars have, however, developed a range of theoretical work relevant to certain prominent themes in *Revolutionary Road*. Notably, Alan Nadel expands upon the term “containment”; originally coined as a term for American philosophy in anti-Communist Cold War rhetoric, Nadel’s “containment” functions as a model for explaining the restrictive conformity of postwar American culture. While this gen-

eral idea of containment applies to most Americans living in suburbia in the 1950s, women in particular faced an even more oppressive culture, as explicated by Betty Friedan in her discussion of the *Feminine Mystique*. The double pressure that results from the combination of these two cultural phenomena created a repressive social and mental environment for the suburban American housewife, a theme Yates explores in his novel.

Although criticism of the postwar era so often excludes Yates' work, reading *Revolutionary Road* as merely a well-written novel overlooks its value as a work of literature and limits our understanding of his characters. Specifically, the previously unstudied April Wheeler requires application of Nadel and Friedan's theoretical work in order to decipher the enigma that is her character. All her counterintuitive actions are attempts to assert what little independence and control she can in the face of the containment she experiences both as a member of American suburbia and as a 1950s housewife. She is continually foiled in her attempts at independence and grows increasingly more frustrated; these frustrations build up to her eventual suicide. The crushing of her revolutionary spirit reflects the plight faced by millions of women of this era who struggled with balancing their true personalities with societal expectations. By tracing her attempts to reconcile her various roles throughout the novel, we can illuminate the elusive minds of not only April but the silenced class of women she represents, one fighting to defy social and gender rules. We can also understand her suicide as a desperate grasp at freedom in the context of a hypocritical American society obsessed with containing its members under the guise of freedom.

The cultural idea of "containment" effected a cultural constriction on Cold War America, enforcing adherence and conformity to traditional values. The term was first introduced as "the philosophical underpinnings of American foreign policy" following the war, mapping out a plan for Americans to combat Soviet influence (Nadel 99). As Nadel explains, "if America projects an image of potency through decisiveness, power, and spiritual vitality . . . containment will be effective by making the Soviets appear, by contrast, less potent and attractive" (99). Writers of the postwar period, Nadel argues, rebelled against that policy if they wrote "a narrative that neither generates events nor results from their sum" and therefore is

free to expand upon revolutionary ideas, thus rejecting American ideals of conformity.

Although containment affected most Americans of the era, Betty Friedan first discusses the sense of containment pertaining specifically to women of this era. “The problem that has no name,” as Friedan puts it, is the “sense of dissatisfaction” women found with their unfulfilling lives (15). In particular, she addresses the plight of the suburban housewife suffocated by social expectations and trapped by her white picket fence. Although the problem was largely ignored or disregarded for a long time, “it is no longer possible to ignore that voice, to dismiss the desperation of so many American women” (26). The dual constrictions of social and gender containment pressed upon postwar American women and presented themselves as an opponent to the freedom of these women in society. This containment can only be circumvented by undertaking diverse roles in hopes of finding one that both rejects social convention and reflects the inner personality of the individual American woman.

When we first meet April Wheeler, she has already quite literally assumed a different role from that of her everyday life, as she enters stage right as the lead actress in the Laurel Players’ production of *The Petrified Forest* (Yates 9). The audience is in awe of her apparent grandeur; “she caused the whispered word ‘lovely’ to roll out over the auditorium” and “seemed ideally cast in the role” (9). In this description, Yates immediately establishes April as a distinguished actress, one who “had attended one of the leading dramatic schools of New York less than ten years before” (9). It would seem to the reader that April has already transcended “the housewife’s syndrome,” as one doctor of the time referred to that inherent problem (Friedan 20). She has found a calling beyond the drudgery of cooking and cleaning and caring for children, and her suburban community has noticed her for it. Yet Yates soon dissipates this illusion; as the play begins to fall apart, so does April’s façade. “She had begun to alternate between false theatrical gestures and a white-knuckled immobility” in a desperate attempt to retain this other role, uninhibited by the social conventions that strangle the actress (Yates 11). But Yates illustrates the inevitability of containment as April unwillingly slips back into her suburban reality. Her husband, Frank, reluctantly acknowledges this reality, her “change 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” (17, my emphasis). Like the husbands Friedan mentions, “he [wouldn’t] understand what she was talking about” if April expressed her feelings, but even he on some level senses her entrapment (19).

This suffocating containment propels April toward her next attempt to break out of her role as well as her surroundings, as she suggests that the Wheeler family relocate to Paris so she can work and Frank can find himself (Yates 147–149). She explains to Frank the “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” (152–153). April’s sentiments echo what Catherine Jurca describes as “the path through which white middle-class identity founded itself on ‘a disavowal of the things that would seem to make it middle-class’” (Edmunds 413). Jurca diagnoses “white suburban homeowners” of the era as hypochondriacally “plagued by the problem of ‘homelessness,’” a condition from which the Wheelers certainly seem to suffer (412). But while Jurca argues that “the experience of white middle-class alienation has had more to do with self-pity than profound or even trite resistance to capitalist culture,” Susan Edmunds counters her by suggesting that “suburban social codes can end up severely compromising the possibilities of human community and human intimacy” (413, 415). It is this compromise that is helping sever the relationship between April and her husband, causing her to have “contempt for [Frank], because [he] couldn’t see the terrific fallacy” of their lives (Yates 151). Europe, April believes, is the only salvation from the constraints that are transforming them into the suburban stereotype they hate—“Look at us! We’re just like the people you’re talking about! We *are* the people you’re talking about!” (150–151).

Yet amidst her explanations of her grand plan to move to Europe and escape dull suburbia, April “had to keep interrupting herself, with mounting impatience, to tell [Frank] not to laugh” (148). Frank cannot take her plan seriously, not due to the notion of uprooting the family and settling in a foreign country, but because she proposes a role reversal—“The point is you won’t be getting any kind of a job, because I will” (147–148). His reaction to the idea of April working reflects the widespread cultural belief written “in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers . . .

that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity” (Friedan 15). Such social upheaval appears ridiculous and frightening to Frank, who tries to identify so strongly with the middle-class man. But April, like so many other internally suffering women, cannot be satisfied with “what every other American girl wanted—to get married, have four children and live in a nice house in a nice suburb” (18). “In order to agree with that,” April asserts, “I’d have to have a very strange and very low opinion of reality” (Yates 149–150).

Such a lack of satisfaction in April’s life extends to her relationship with her unwanted children. Earlier in the novel, the reader discovers that “according to their plan, which called for an eventual family of four, her first pregnancy came seven years too soon” (65). April planned to stage an abortion, but after a lengthy fight she submitted to Frank’s insistence that they keep the accidental child, thus entering her life of containment (66–68). Because she subconsciously perceives them as one of the forces trapping her, April exhibits mainly feelings of resentment, impatience, and frustration towards her children. When her daughter Jennifer misunderstands her instructions regarding the disposal of certain toys before going to Europe, April snaps: “Didn’t you understand me? I just finished explaining all that. Why can’t you listen?” (143). As Jonathan Tran explains, “children ruin the Wheelers’ every plan, ending a ‘first-rate affair’ between two first-rate people, forcing marriage and work, reducing their lives to the daily grind of caring for others, finally ending their hopes of escape” (202). This last foiling of their European plan comes in the realization that April is once again accidentally pregnant. Bad enough that “the disdain cosmopolitans feel toward provinciality cannot help but resent or idealize the dogged realness of children, their arbitrary ‘thereness’”—now her children become a quite physical barrier to April’s happiness (192).

Once again, April responds to encroaching threats upon her potential independence with a radical proposition, resurfacing her abortion plan. At the end of part two of the novel, Frank finds a box containing a rubber syringe and storms into the kitchen to confront April, who stands in “defiant readiness,” daring him to stop her (286–287). From the reader’s perspective, she appears prepared to finally defy the “mystique of feminine fulfillment [that] became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture” and with which she so starkly contrasts

(Friedan 18). Theoretically, the American housewife “was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world...free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything women ever dreamed of” (18). But if this image Friedan paints of social thought was actually true, why then does Frank immediately disregard April’s opinion? Friedan’s idea suggests equality, or at least an ability to logically discuss major decisions. Friedan tells us housewives “had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home,” leaving those decisions to their husbands, but the question of abortion could not be more involved in the home itself. And yet all of April’s points in her argument for abortion, including those that would benefit her husband, are shot down by Frank’s brilliant remedy for her problems: “We ought to have you see a psychoanalyst” (Yates 309). He clearly subscribes to the popular ideas of the time of sending emotionally disturbed women to “the analyst’s couch, working out their ‘adjustment to the feminine role,’ their blocks to ‘fulfillment as a wife and mother’” (Friedan 21). And by doing so, Frank maintains control over his wife and her actions, thereby further containing her.

April’s stifling frustration in all aspects of her life results in her first successful defiance of both society and Frank: her brief affair with Shep Campbell. Towards the end of a double date, the Campbells find their car hedged in by others in the parking lot, and April devises the solution of sending Frank and Milly Campbell home in the Wheelers’ car to relieve their respective babysitters while she and Shep wait for the other cars to move (344–345). She is therefore able to manipulate the situation, as well as Shep’s emotions, to finally get what she wants. Even Friedan notes that a desperate housewife often thought, “what she really needed was to redecorate her house, or move to a better neighborhood, or have an affair” (20). April embraces this idea, as both relief and rebellion, when she tells Shep: “Here. Now. In the back seat” (357). But even this liberal dose of independence and rebellion cannot satisfy April, because, as the reader learns, her dissatisfaction with life runs far deeper than previously imagined. She refuses to listen to Shep’s declarations of love for her, telling him, “It’s just that I don’t know who you are” (358). More than that, however, is her startling claim that “even if I did . . . I’m afraid it wouldn’t help, because you see I don’t know who I am, either” (358). In these few lines, April reveals the truest problem in her life—the question of her ill-defined

identity. Her insecurity directly reflects the “problem that has no name,” that causes women like her to say “I feel empty somehow...incomplete” and “I feel as if I don’t exist” (Friedan 20). The reader remains left with the pressing question: who *is* April Wheeler?

April’s obscurity as a character is only augmented by the containment of her inner thoughts. Even her voice is contained until the very last moments of her life, as Yates writes from every point of view but hers until the one of the last chapters of the novel (410). By finally allowing her voice to emerge in the novel’s narration, Yates gives April her opportunity to break through the restrictive containment that has trapped her for the duration of her entire life. Now, finally, the reader gains insight into the enigmatic April’s mind. She is alone in the house, as Frank has just left and the children are with the Campbells. We see the seemingly impenetrable April break down—“her smile didn’t fade: it simply spread and trembled and locked itself into a stiff grimace while the spasms worked at her aching throat, again and again, and the tears broke and ran down her cheeks as fast as she could wipe them away” (411). Here she reflects Friedan’s “housewife [who] often is reduced to screams and tears” (23). She has been so utterly defeated by her containment that all she can do is cry.

In the midst of her tears, April is able to reflect on her past and acknowledge her mistakes. And “the only real mistake, the only wrong and dishonest thing, was ever to have seen [Frank] as anything more than that”—than a nice boy to go on one date with and then leave alone (416). In the same breath, however, she admits that she “couldn’t possibly hate him. How could anyone hate him? He was—well, he was *Frank*” (415). Despite Frank’s evident influence on the path her life has taken, April cannot entirely blame him for her suffering. She claims that her life was her own fault, that it is “a subtle, treacherous thing to let yourself go that way” (416). Therefore, she subscribes to the common thought at the time that “if a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself,” and attributes the former problem to the latter (Friedan 19). However, April fails to realize that it is, in fact, the society in which she lives that contains her, both as a suburbanite and, more importantly, as a woman. These social conventions so stifle her independence that she sees only one way out of a life of miserable containment: suicide.

Yates implies in his novel the fundamental dilemma underlying that last statement. America has, from its very conception as an independent nation, touted ideals of freedom for all. Yet just a glance at our nation's history reveals its proclivity toward containing and even oppressing various minority groups within our society. At the time in which *Revolutionary Road* was written, women had retained the right to vote for several decades. It was even socially acceptable for women to wear pants instead of skirts. But this was, and still is, a far cry from freedom. Women of this era were expected to fall neatly inside the lines of a family-oriented, submissive housewife's role and to happily accept the supposed "freedoms" this status afforded them. From her peers to her children to her husband and other men, the postwar housewife received constant reminders of what she *should be*, stifling any expression of what she *was*.

This suffocating impact of feminine containment so strangles April Wheeler that she sees one drastic remaining escape route: to kill herself. By committing suicide, she finally breaks free of her own unhappiness with her society's rules. And it is through this action that she realizes herself and her situation in the meaning of her own last words—"that if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone" (Yates 426). With this revelation, Yates presents his readers with the essential question: what kind of "freedom" is this, in which an individual feels so entrapped that desperation pushes her over the edge? The answer seems simple: that is not freedom. And yet American society continues to contain its members with the restrictive noose of this "freedom."

Suicide is by no means a viable escape route from the pressures of living, social or otherwise. But in April's mind, she had no alternative, and that makes her life and her death a tragedy. By forcing April through the trials of various roles, Yates illustrates the struggles, both internal and external, with which suburban American women grappled during the postwar era. April repeatedly engages in rebellious behavior in a futile attempt to shed the constricting containment that traps her as both a suburbanite and as a woman. Through the development of this tragic character, Yates condemns the hypocrisy of an America that claims freedom for all while restricting opportunities for existence outside of societal stereotypes, an America that still exists today. The fate of April Wheeler reflects the irony

of postwar America, land of the free—or rather, land of individuals contained for the sake of maintaining societal status quo.

WORKS CITED

- Edmunds, Susan. “Accelerated Immobilities: American Suburbia and the Classless Middle Class.” *American Literary History* 15.2 (2003): 409–421. *Project Muse*. Web. 18 April 2013.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963. Web. 14 April 2013.
- Henry, Dewitt and Geoffrey Clark. “From the Archive: An Interview with Richard Yates.” *Ploughshares* 3 (1972): 207–224. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 April 2013.
- Nadel, Alan. “Failed Cultural Narratives: America in the Postwar Era and the Story of Democracy.” *Boundary 2* 19.1 (1992): 95–120. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 April 2013.
- Tran, Jonathan. “The Otherness of Children as a Hint of an Outside: Michel Foucault, Richard Yates, and Karl Barth on Suburban Life.” *Theology and Sexuality* 15.2.189 (2009): 189–208. *Equinox Online*. Web. 18 April 2013.
- Yates, Richard. *Revolutionary Road*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2000. Print.

SABRINA PATRIZIO is a member of the School of Management’s class of 2016, intending to major in Business Administration as well as to minor in Italian. She is also a proud member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars. Writing is her passion and to date she has written numerous short stories and plays, several of which have been published or performed. She enjoys performing in both dance and theatre productions.