

The “Second Lost Generation”: a Reading of Suburban Emptiness in Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*

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Abstract

Paying close attention to the suburban landscape of the 1950s as conducive to a generalized malaise and anxiety caused by the strategy of conformity and domesticity in post-World War II America, this text offers a critical reading of the novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961), by Richard Yates (1926-1992). Taking as a starting point Yates’s understanding that the post-World War suburban generation was a “second lost generation”, as stated in his novel *Young Hearts Crying*, we will discuss the claustrophobia and the inescapable mundanity caused by the suburbs, from where the characters in *Revolutionary Road* dream to escape, seeming thus to follow the path of the bohemian Lost Generation of the 1920s. In his biography of Richard Yates, entitled *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*, Blake Bailey describes the author as an “unabashed worshipper” of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The Great Gatsby* as Yates’s “formal introduction to the craft” and “the definitive milestone of his apprenticeship”. *Revolutionary Road* is a novel that explores the contradictions in pursuing dreams and fantasies, where, as Steven Goldleaf states, “[we find a] persistent theme of characters striving toward some ideal of behaviour and always falling short of achieving that ideal.”

Keywords: Richard Yates; *Revolutionary Road*; “Second lost generation”; Suburbs; American Frontier

Resumo

Tendo como ponto de partida uma abordagem em torno da paisagem suburbana na década de 50 do século XX enquanto responsável por um mal-estar e ansiedade generalizados, resultantes da estratégia de conformismo e domesticidade, que marcou o pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial nos Estados Unidos da América, propomos aqui uma leitura crítica do romance *Revolutionary Road* (1961) de Richard Yates. É no romance de Yates *Young Hearts Crying* (1984), na intervenção súbita de Al Damon, personagem cuja função parece ser somente a chamada de atenção para o facto de a geração dos subúrbios do pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial ser uma “segunda geração

perdida”, que se sustenta a nossa problematização do romance *Revolutionary Road*. Discutiremos o sentimento de claustrofobia e de vida mundana trazido pelos subúrbios; uma paisagem de onde os personagens em *Revolutionary Road* sonham poder escapar, parecendo assim regressar aos passos da boémia Geração Perdida dos anos 20, também ela armadilhada. Na sua biografia de Richard Yates, intitulada *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*, Blake Bailey refere o autor como um “unabashed worshipper” de F. Scott Fitzgerald, para quem *The Great Gatsby* representa uma “formal introduction to the craft” e um “definitive milestone of his apprenticeship”. *Revolutionary Road* é sem dúvida um romance que explora as contradições da busca por sonhos e fantasias; um romance onde, como afirma Steven Goldleaf, encontramos um “persistent theme of characters striving toward some ideal of behaviour and always falling short of achieving that ideal.”

Palavras-chave: Richard Yates; *Revolutionary Road*; “Segunda geração perdida”; subúrbios; Fronteira Americana

The suburban landscape of the 1950s, marked by a pulsing anxiety for a rebirth of the American Dream, initially both offered a retreat from the menacing influence of the cities and was faced as a token of the democratic ideals that informed the American nation from its inception. However, the strategy of conformity and domesticity in post-Second World War America resulted in generalized malaise and anxiety. In fact, the suburbs proved to be devoid of meaning, not only because of the post-World War II suburban experience *per se*, but also because of the shadows left by the Great Depression and the participation in the traumatic world conflict, which caused Americans to become less prone to taking risks. Furthermore, the entrapment in the suburban landscape fostered also by the Cold War and the fear of a nuclear conflict, as well as the creation of a geographical space that denied individuality by imposing a homogeneous social identity and reified roles, led, in turn, to an overall feeling of introspection, loneliness, and anxiety. Anxiety is, in fact, one of the most commonly used expressions to characterize post-Second World War America, as confirmed by W. H. Auden’s 1947 six-part poem titled *The Age of Anxiety*, where the poet focuses on the struggle to find meaning and authenticity in an increasingly industrialized world.¹

In *Young Hearts Crying*, published in 1984 but set in the 1950s, Richard Yates’s character Al Damon uses the expression “second lost generation”, which we believe denounces this feeling of anxiety. *Young Hearts Crying* is a novel populated by characters with artistic ambitions which they hope will help them overcome the emptiness and mundanity of their suburban milieu. While at a get-together, the main character, Michael Davenport, overhears Al Damon stating:

Well, I’m not going to charge you with ‘*selling out*,’ my friend, but I suggest that you’re chasing after false gods. I’ll suggest that you’re still hooked on the ‘lost

generation' crowd of thirty years ago, and the trouble is we no longer have anything in common with those people. We're *the second lost generation*. (Yates, *Young Hearts Crying* 85-6; emphasis ours)

Following down the suburban route, the characters in the novel feel that they have ultimately “sold out” and so they wish to escape through art. However, despite their claims to an artistic superiority, their entrapment in suburbia brings with it a sense of claustrophobia, and the characters feel unable to forge new roads of possibility.

Taking as a starting point Richard Yates's understanding that the post-World War II suburban generation is a kind of “second lost generation”, as stated in his novel *Young Hearts Crying*, we discuss in this essay that parallel to the Lost Generation of the 1920s. This “second lost generation” has also lost faith in the traditional values endorsed by the nation. The suburban landscape was viewed as the opportunity to preserve the promises of the American Frontier by those who moved to the suburbs in the 1950s. However, that geography ended up denying the yearned possibilities of its reinterpretation. As a result, this materialization of the American Dream for the post-World War II middle class led to an overall disillusionment and alienation, to a rejection of the suburban ideal, and to the belief that American culture had become narrower.

In Richard Yates's critically acclaimed *Revolutionary Road*, published in 1961 but set in 1955, the author offers a “chronicle”² of this movement toward the promises of suburbia. In this novel, there is, then, an attempt to recover the promise and the inclinations that paved the way to the American Frontier. However, in our opinion, the characters are plagued by their inability to move and change. Confronted with the entrapments, the homogenization, and the inertia of the oppressive geography of the suburbs, despite all its promises, the characters in *Revolutionary Road* end up feeling unable to forge new roads of personal possibilities, as they each become just one more in the crowd. This is evident in April Wheeler's desire to move again to a different geography that she hopes will allow her to fulfill her personal dreams. Thus, by circumscribing the physical and mental landscapes of the characters, the suburbs in *Revolutionary Road* confront them with their limitations, calling into question the validity of the American Dream.

In fact, the roots of this movement to the suburbs go much deeper into the nation's past. According to James Howard Kunstler, social critic and author of *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*, one of the most important works on suburbia and urban development, the New World

provided a vast stage to act out “the romance of redemption, of a second chance at life” (17), an idea that is ingrained in American thought.

In the 19th century, as factories spread all over cities, metropolises became places less and less desirable to live in. Consequently, in Kunstler’s words, “[there was a] yearning to escape industrialism [that] expressed itself as a renewed search for Eden” (37), which led to the search for territories outside the cities. According to Robert Beuka, author of *SuburbiaNation - Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*, the suburbs served in the 19th century as “the physical embodiment of an ongoing agrarian impulse in the national culture” (24), offering thus a pastoral retreat from the harmful city environment.

However, as Kunstler defends, with the arrival of the 20th century, the suburban landscape soon proved to offer no more than “an artificial way of life in an inorganic community that pretended above all other virtues to be ‘natural’” (57), as constant developments kept engulfing the countryside, and a new machine - the car - started penetrating the American “garden”.³ On the other hand, by the 1920s, as Catherine Jurca explains in her work *White Diaspora - The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*, “the suburban home emerged as a crucial symbol of consumer prosperity and fulfillment”, as government and business interests promoted a nationwide “Own Your Own Home” campaign. Consequently, the American Dream became even more closely associated with owning a home, the true marker of success, rather than owning a business (Jurca 6).

The mass movement of the population to the suburbs in post-World War II is considered one of the most significant social aspects of modern life in America. Armed with their constant belief in self-sufficiency, individualism, and in a return to traditions inherited from the nation’s past, Americans in the suburbs kept looking for a new frontier that would allow them to start anew. There was, in fact, as Beuka defends, “an emerging sense of the suburbs as the promised land of the American middle class” (5).

However, despite the initial enthusiasm, both during and after the Second World War, to escape the damaging effects of the cities, this utopia of suburbs ended up failing, proving to be, as Kunstler asserts, “a cruel parody” (105). The separation of the population in the suburbs from the unwanted communities, which stayed behind, in the cities, inaugurated the failure and the ending of interpersonal relationships. In the suburbs, in the 1950s, Americans became more and more isolated and lost.

This is evident in Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*, where his representation of a “second lost generation” and the depictions of a homogenized suburban milieu

completely subvert the daring American spirit and the Romantic conceptions of nature as a retreat. As Castronovo and Goldleaf state in their work titled *Richard Yates*, the author writes about “psychologically and socially stifled characters living in an atmosphere of official optimism” (1), echoing, as many have defended, F. Scott Fitzgerald.⁴ This connection to Fitzgerald was also underlined by Blake Bailey in his biography of Richard Yates, where he describes the author as an “unabashed worshipper” of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The Great Gatsby* as Yates’s “formal introduction to the craft” and “the definitive milestone of his apprenticeship” (Bailey 108-9).

Revolutionary Road is a novel that explores the contradictions in pursuing dreams and fantasies. The story revolves around April and Frank Wheeler, a married couple who move to the suburbs in western Connecticut after April unexpectedly becomes pregnant with their first child. In the suburbs, April and Frank hope to find the promised safe place for raising children and building a family. Both April and Frank are painfully aware of the numbing effects of their suburban sphere, which they denounce and mock throughout the novel, always establishing for themselves a position of superiority as if they are untainted by their milieu. As the narrator expresses from Frank’s viewpoint, “the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 20). In fact, April and Frank view their suburban condition as temporary, as they believe the standardization of the environment poses a threat to their identities.

Although the post-World War II suburbs in America were based on the pastoral and organic vision of nature as a retreat to the quintessential place for the reinvention of the individual, in *Revolutionary Road* the suburbs are represented as a plastic and homogenized environment; an inauthentic place that stifles individuality by promoting a standardized collective society. The description of Revolutionary Hill Estates as a “dreadful new development” with “great hulking split levels, all in the most nauseous pastels” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 29), and the reference to the Wheeler home requiring “a sparse, skillful arrangement of furniture” to mask the “too-symmetrical living room” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 30), denounce this homogenous and plastic environment. There is also the overwhelming presence of the large “picture window”⁵, one of the most common features of suburban homes, which is described as staring at

April and Frank “like a big mirror” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 29). Furthermore, the novel opens with the failed performance of the play *The Petrified Forest* - performed by The Laurel Players, with April Wheeler starring as the lead character, Gabrielle - which is, in our opinion, a metaphor for the suburban landscape. Despite being designed to offer a closer contact with a more natural environment (as suggested by the word “forest”), this landscape in *Revolutionary Road* is no more than a mock “forest” of identical homes, which the Wheelers end up rejecting.

Both April and Frank struggle to find meaning in and attachment to their home because the sameness of the houses around them contradicts the individuality that the characters were seeking. Although the suburbs were supposed to be an escape from the city, described by the narrator as a “[a place of] mildew and splinters and cockroaches and grit” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 30), they end up becoming a trap, a standardized environment from which the characters feel unable to escape. “Trap” is precisely the expression that April Wheeler uses to characterize her condition as a suburbanite. In consequence of the fiasco of *The Petrified Forest*, April accuses Frank of being a “poor, self-deluded [person]” and the one that, by getting married and moving to the suburbs, had gotten her “safely in a trap” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 27).

We see in *Revolutionary Road*, then, the depiction of disillusionment, the end of the fantasies of a “second lost generation” tormented by entrapment and by failed human relationships, which in turn culminates in a growing feeling of anxiety and solitude. This becomes even more tragic as the characters continuously fail not only in their efforts to understand each other and to relate to one another, but also in their attempts to forge new roads of possibility. As a result, they take refuge in alcohol, promiscuous behaviors, and meaningless get-togethers with neighbors who share their discontent.

The Wheelers fully believe, however, that they are better than the average crowd. At a get-together with her fellow suburbanite Shep Campbell, April confesses that somehow she had always believed she belonged to “[a group] of marvellous golden people [...] who made their lives work out the way they wanted”. However, as April admits, this belief was “the most stupid, ruinous kind of self-deception” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 258). On the other hand, her husband Frank never fully realizes his limitations and lack of willpower. Frank is a self-professed nonconformist who not only constantly mocks the complacency and conformity of suburbia, but also refuses to believe that a couple like he and April could ever fail at anything. He tries to dismiss the humiliation of *The Petrified Forest* by saying that “[i]ntelligent, thinking people

could take things like this in their stride, just as they took the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 20). As Castronovo and Goldleaf explain in their work titled *Richard Yates*, this feeling of superiority causes the characters to become trapped in a world of fantasy with “warped ideas about personal authenticity and individualism”, as they refuse to connect to their present and their actual space. Instead, they pursue “vanishing horizons”, obviously echoing “Fitzgerald’s dreams of love and social ambition in a minor key” (4-7). In fact, as Goldleaf confirms, there is in Yatesian fiction this “persistent theme of characters striving toward some ideal of behavior and always falling short of achieving that ideal” (233).

The characters in *Revolutionary Road* struggle to come to terms with the banality of their geography and with an ingrained cultural belief that nothing is impossible to an American. The dramatic impact in Yates’s novel comes precisely from the fact that the characters never understand what they want to become, nor do they know how to achieve it, especially because their willpower is directly proportional to their lack of courage. As Castronovo and Goldleaf point out, “unlike the clear-headed strivers of an older America, [the characters in Yates’s stories] do not look to a definable goal” (11). Moreover, they never understand each other, as confirmed by Sewart O’Nan, who states that in *Revolutionary Road* Yates highlights precisely “the lack of communication (let alone communion) between people” (O’Nan n.p.).

In our view, the domestic tensions of the Wheelers are representative of the crisis of identity that affected the middle class in 1950s America. Frank Wheeler is split between the idealism of the frontier spirit, marked by virility and adventure, and his role as a husband, father, and “organization man”.⁶ Although he wishes to retain his identity, he never fully realizes his limitations and lack of willpower. Instead of looking for other geographies of possibility, he ends up giving in to the temptations and comforts of the suburban landscape because these are the (possible) indicators of a masculinity he believes is threatened by what he likes to call “the dullest job you can possibly imagine”, and by a wife he believes is always “poised for immediate flight” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, 13; 48).

Frank’s crisis of identity is pitted against the frustration of his wife. April is too aware of her husband’s disappointment as a member of an unfulfilling corporate world, as she tells him: “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” (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 110). Moreover, she is disillusioned by her failure as an actress in *The Petrified Forest*,

as well as by the loss of freedom and the lack of fulfillment that comes with the suburban experience.⁷

She realizes that her marriage did not result in the bohemian and intellectual life that Frank's courtship seemed to promise. In consequence, April romanticizes a geography outside the suburban sphere and suggests the movement to Europe, where Frank had been stationed as a soldier in World War II, and a place he often describes as "the only part of the world worth living in" (Yates, *Revolutionary Road* 22). In Paris, a place with all the allures that the suburban landscape lacks, April believes Frank would have the time to find himself, while she could revert the traditional roles to support her family. By placing her ambitions in a new geography of possibilities, April is, then, attempting to recover once again the freedom of movement. Frank is, at first, motivated by April's plan to move to Europe; however, it all comes crashing down as he is promoted at work and April becomes pregnant again.

Frank views himself as a "nonconformist", but, indeed, he ends up compromising to the suburban landscape, while April, with her decision to terminate her third pregnancy, becomes the last defender of nonconformity.⁸ However, even April is unable to forge a new road, as the self-inflicted abortion culminates in her death. Undoubtedly, much like Gatsby, she is trapped in the past. The abortion is an attempt to recover the empowerment that both she and Frank did not manage to assert in an environment that promised personal dreams, and so, as Castronovo and Goldleaf posit, they succumb to an inherent flaw in the American character: "the tendency to imagine that ideals liberate Americans from limitations" (53). As April finally understands that she can never achieve her ideal, she can finally stop playing the role of domesticity. With her death, Frank finally frees himself from his suburban milieu, but not without paying the ultimate price: the loss of his family.

The novel is, indeed, a succession of failed expectations: the expectations with the performance of *The Petrified Forest*; the expectations with the suburban experience that, despite promising a protective place for the family, ends up posing a threat to the identities of its inhabitants; and the expectation to escape their condition as suburbanites by standing out in a geography they deem oppressive. April and Frank fail to forge a new road, to find "the new frontier" where they could reinvent themselves. They cannot escape their condition as members of a generation that is "lost".

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¹ According to Edward Callan, with *The Age of Anxiety*, Auden attempts to “construct an allegorical drama of modern man in search of a soul” (155).

² Richard Yates is considered one of the most important chroniclers of suburbia. In the July-August 2001 issue of *The Atlantic*, Stephen Amidon refers to Yates as “the supreme chronicler of American solitude” (Amidon n.p.).

³ In his book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Leo Marx “describe[s] and evaluate[s] the uses of the pastoral ideal in the interpretation of American experience... and its subsequent transformation under the impact of industrialism” (Marx 4).

⁴ Fitzgerald also focused on the failures of Americans in one of the most optimistic periods of the 20th century.

⁵ The “picture window” is a commonly employed trope in 1950s American fiction. As Robert Beuka explains, in the Cold War environment, the “picture window” “symbolically eliminated the distinction between the public and private sectors” (79), thus leading to a sense of constant surveillance and control, necessary to protect the suburban ideal. Another example of this trope can be found, for instance, in John Updike’s *Rabbit, Redux*, where the “picture window” allows the “outdoors to come indoors, other houses to enter yours” (328).

⁶ As explained by William H. Whyte, the “organization man” is “deeply beholden to the organization” he serves. According to author of the book *The Organization Man* (1956), in postwar America average citizens subscribed to “an increasingly collective society”, subverting the notion of “rugged individualism” that is deeply ingrained in the American ethos (8). This collective ethic played a fundamental role in effacing individuality by establishing collective identities.

⁷ Betty Friedan, in her her seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), stresses the feeling of entrapment and unfulfillment of mid-century women. Friedan calls this feeling “a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone... afraid to ask even of herself the silent question - ‘Is this all?’” (16).

⁸ Curiously enough, Robert Sherwood’s *The Petrified Forest* is a Depression-era play about Gabrielle, a woman who cannot find meaning and purpose in her unglamorous life in the Arizona desert. There, she explains, “it’s just the same thing over and over again” (*The Petrified Forest* 27), and so, like April Wheeler, she wishes to escape to Paris to find herself by becoming an artist. In the play, the character Alan Squier also refers to the location of the Petrified Forest as “the graveyard of [...] civilization” (113), which is somehow evocative of a barren place where identities are eliminated, very much like in the suburbs.