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# Mise En Abyme of Escape: Theatrical Reflections, Performance, and the Illusion of Freedom in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*

Kaçışın *Mise En Abyme*'i: Richard Yates'in *Bağımsızlık Yolu* Adlı Romanında Teatral Yansımalar, Performans ve Özgürlük Yanılsaması

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## ABSTRACT

The opening chapter of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961) introduces the Laurel Players, a newly formed suburban theater group, and their production of *The Petrified Forest* (1934). The play, overshadowed by the 1936 film adaptation, reflects a shared disillusionment that mirrors the internal struggles of Yates' characters. Both works center on individuals trapped in mundane small-town life, longing for escape, a clear parallel to the Wheelers' suffocating suburban existence. The play's themes resonate strongly with April Wheeler's sense of missed opportunity and thwarted ambition, while also reflecting the emotional stagnation and frustration experienced by male characters such as Frank and Shep. The deliberate inclusion of *The Petrified Forest* within *Revolutionary Road* highlights mid-century anxieties surrounding gender roles, domestic entrapment, and the longing for alternative paths. This study argues that the Laurel Players' selection of *The Petrified Forest* serves not merely as a play within the novel but as a dramatic vehicle for exploring the characters' yearning to escape suburban confinement. The production functions as a *mise en abyme*, foregrounding the scripted routines of their daily lives and underscoring how the stage becomes a space where the characters can briefly entertain fantasies of freedom, even as those fantasies remain unattainable. By examining the theatrical elements in *Revolutionary Road*, this study situates the Wheelers' predicament within the broader context of mid-century American culture, where the longing for self-expression is staged yet never fully realized. Through this framework, Yates critiques the stifling postwar norms while simultaneously revealing the pervasive desire for self-expression and escape.

**Keywords:** *Revolutionary Road*, Richard Yates, *The Petrified Forest*, contemporary American novel, performance, theater

## ÖZ

Richard Yates'in *Bağımsızlık Yolu* (1961) adlı romanının açılış bölümünde, yeni kurulmuş bir banliyö tiyatro topluluğu olan Laurel Oyuncuları ve sahnelemeyi seçtikleri *The Petrified Forest* (1934) adlı oyun tanıtılır. 1936 tarihli film uyarlamasının gölgesinde kalan bu oyun, Yates'in karakterlerinde gördüğümüz içsel çatışmalarla örtüşen ortak bir hayal kırıklığını yansıtmaktadır. Hem oyun hem de film küçük kasaba yaşamının tekdüzeliğinde hapsolmuş ve bu sınırlardan kaçmayı arzulayan bireyleri merkezine alır ve bu durum, Frank ve April Wheeler'in boğucu banliyö yaşantısıyla açık bir paralellik taşır. Oyunun temaları, özellikle April'in gerçekleştiremediği hayalleri ve bastırılmış potansiyeliyle örtüşürken, Frank ve Shep gibi erkek karakterlerin yaşadığı duygusal durgunluk ve tatminsizlikle de derin bir bağ



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## ÖZ

kurar. *The Petrified Forest* oyununun *Bağımsızlık Yolu* romanı içerisinde bilinçli bir biçimde yer alması, yalnızca bir “roman içinde oyun” işlevi görmekle kalmaz; aynı zamanda, toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine, ev içi tutsaklığa ve alternatif yaşam ihtimallerine dair dönemin kültürel kaygılarını görünür kılmaktadır. Bu makalede Laurel Oyuncuları'nın *The Petrified Forest* oyununu sahneleme tercihinin, karakterlerin banliyo yaşamının tekdüzeliğinden kaçma arzusunu görünür kılan dramatik bir araç olarak nasıl işlev gördüğü değerlendirilmektedir. Söz konusu tiyatro prodüksiyonu, bir *mise en abyme* işlevi görerek gündelik yaşamın sahnelenmiş doğasını açığa çıkarır ve karakterlerin sahne aracılığıyla özgürlük fantezilerini bir anlığına da olsa deneyimlemelerine olanak tanır; ancak bu fanteziler, gerçeğe dönüşmeden yerini kaçınılmaz bir hayal kırıklığına bırakır. Romandaki teatral tercihler üzerinden yapılan bu inceleme, Wheeler çiftinin çıkış arayışını 20. yüzyıl ortası Amerikan kültürü bağlamına yerleştirmektedir. Bu kültürel bağlamda, bireysel ifadenin arzusu sahnelenir; fakat hiçbir zaman tam anlamıyla gerçekleşemez. Yates, bu çerçevede, II. Dünya Savaşı sonrası dönemin baskıcı normlarını eleştirirken aynı zamanda bireysel özgürlük ve kendini gerçekleştirme yönündeki yaygın arzuyu da gözler önüne sermektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Bağımsızlık Yolu*, Richard Yates, *The Petrified Forest*, çağdaş Amerikan romanı, performans, tiyatro

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study provides a critical examination of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961) as a contemporaneous critique of postwar American suburbia, focusing on the ways in which performance, theatrical and social, structures the characters' attempts to negotiate identity, conformity, and the illusory promise of escape. Situated within the cultural and ideological context of the immediate post-World War II era, the novel interrogates the constructed ideals of the American Dream, particularly as they relate to suburban life, gender norms, and consumerism. Drawing on the novel's opening scene, which depicts the Laurel Players' staging of Robert E. Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* (1934), the study argues that Yates employs this embedded theatrical production as a *mise en abyme*, a self-reflexive device that mirrors the characters' own entrapment within the performative structures of mid-century domesticity.

The 1950s in the United States marked a period of significant cultural and demographic transformation, driven by economic growth, industrial expansion, and mass migration from urban centers to suburban developments. The nuclear family emerged as the idealized domestic unit, and suburbia became the geographic and ideological space in which this vision was to be realized. However, as scholars such as Frank (2015), Skolnick (2023), and Horowitz (2015) have shown, this postwar consensus concealed deeper anxieties about identity, repression, and alienation. Consumption became a primary mode of self-definition, encouraged by mass media and a consumer economy eager to capitalize on wartime deprivation. The ideal of suburban life, characterized by material comfort, familial stability, and social conformity, was disseminated through popular culture, thereby naturalizing expectations around marriage, gender roles, and middle-class success. Within this broader cultural context, *Revolutionary Road* exposes the emotional and psychological costs of conforming to these ideals. The novel's protagonists, Frank and April Wheeler, are initially presented as individuals who believe themselves exceptional, above the mediocrity and performative rituals of their suburban neighbors. Yet their self-perception is gradually undermined as the narrative reveals their complicity in the very structures they purport to reject. Their planned escape to Paris, conceived after April's performance in *The Petrified Forest*, functions as a symbolic gesture of defiance against suburban conformity. Yates demonstrates, however, that this fantasy is shaped by the same illusory logic that sustains the consumer-driven American Dream. Escape thus becomes another form of self-deception.

The reference to *The Petrified Forest* carries particular symbolic weight within the novel. Sherwood's play and its 1936 film adaptation center on characters trapped in the monotony of small-town life and yearning for transcendence. The play's resonance with the Wheelers' predicament is unmistakable. April's portrayal of Gabby, a disillusioned waitress longing for escape, mirrors her own struggle with unfulfilled ambition and domestic entrapment. Frank's malaise as a disaffected office worker similarly parallels the emotional stagnation of other male characters in the novel, such as Shep Campbell. The amateur theatrical production thus operates not merely as a narrative parallel but as a formal strategy that underscores the novel's central theme: the inescapability of performance in a culture that privileges appearance over authenticity. Yates extends the metaphor of theatricality throughout the novel, presenting suburban life as a realm governed by meticulously rehearsed gestures, scripted conversations, and curated emotional displays. This performative dimension is particularly evident in the Wheelers' interactions, which oscillate between rehearsed intimacy and eruptive confrontation. The novel's third-person omniscient narration offers limited yet strategically revealing glimpses into the characters' interior lives,

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highlighting the emotional opacity that defines their relationship. Through this narrative technique, Yates emphasizes the disjunction between external appearances and internal realities, a tension that ultimately culminates in tragedy. The study argues that Yates' critique of postwar suburbia is contemporaneous and urgent rather than retrospective or nostalgic. While later historians and cultural critics have exposed the 1950s domestic ideal as repressive and ideologically charged, Yates dramatizes its psychological and emotional toll in real time. By chronicling the Wheelers' descent into despair, culminating in April's death following a self-induced abortion and Frank's emotional withdrawal, *Revolutionary Road* reveals the devastating consequences of sustaining the illusion of fulfillment and stability. Central to the analysis is the concept of *mise-en-abyme*: the Laurel Players' production of *The Petrified Forest* functions as a recursive reflection of the Wheelers' own efforts to stage meaning and authenticity within a conformist society. This play-within-the-novel mirrors the performative nature of suburban life, demonstrating how social norms and fantasies of fulfillment are enacted and reflected in miniature. In dramatizing the quiet desperation behind picket fences and manicured lawns, Yates critiques the cultural myths of postwar America, exposing the emotional costs of a society constructed upon performance, denial, and spectacle. Through this *mise-en-abyme* structure, the novel positions itself as a literary intervention that renders visible the hidden mechanics of suburban life.

## Introduction

The immediate post-World War II era in the United States marked a profound transformation in the nation's cultural, economic, and social fabric. Mass migration from heterogeneous urban centers to increasingly uniform suburban developments coincided with the elevation of the nuclear family as the ideal domestic unit. Suburbanization constituted not only a demographic shift but also a symbolic reorientation toward a newly configured American Dream, one grounded in domestic stability, upward mobility, and material abundance. Sustained economic growth and a surge in industrial production to meet pent-up postwar demand fueled the emergence of a consumer-driven society. Americans, as Thomas Frank observes, encountered a “dazzling array of consumer goods” and embraced them with “unmatched exuberance” (Frank, 2015, p. 32), thereby transforming consumption into a primary marker of identity and social status within a homogenized middle-class ideal. Mass media, particularly television and advertising, played a central role in perpetuating this vision, promoting an image of family life centered on suburban comfort, consumer satisfaction, and social conformity. As Arlene Skolnick explains, the postwar family ideal echoed Victorian domestic values and the communal utopianism of later countercultural movements, constructing a cultural imaginary in which “perfected family life” was naturalized as the societal norm (Skolnick, 2023, p. 51). This convergence of economic prosperity and ideological conformity redefined traditional understandings of class and gender, embedding expectations of early marriage, large families, and corporate participation into the fabric of suburban existence.

Yet this cultural consensus concealed deeper undercurrents of discontent, repression, and isolation. As Daniel Horowitz notes, the postwar embrace of consumerism assumed the character of spectacle, with Americans consuming not only goods but also meanings, in a manner reminiscent of how Roman emperors distracted the masses with lavish entertainments (Horowitz, 2015, p. 16). Beneath the surface of postwar optimism lay a society increasingly shaped by performative identities, gendered pressures, and a collective reluctance to confront emotional and psychological realities. Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961) emerges as a piercing critique of this cultural moment, one that has been nostalgically preserved in the American imagination as a period of clarity and prosperity.<sup>1</sup> Yates exposes the hollowness of this postwar ideal through his portrayal of Frank and April Wheeler, whose attempts to resist suburban conformity ultimately reveal the futility of escape in a culture sustained by illusion. The novel's depiction of domestic life, marital breakdown, and personal disillusionment lays bare the emotional costs of a society that privileges appearance over authenticity and consumption over connection. In dramatizing the quiet desperation behind freshly painted doors and picket fences, Yates not only interrogates the suburban condition but also challenges the foundational myths of American postwar identity.

*Revolutionary Road* opens with April Wheeler performing in a local amateur production of Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* (1934), a choice that immediately establishes performance as central to the novel's thematic structure.<sup>2</sup>

1 *Richard Yates' Revolutionary Road* was adapted into a film in 2008, directed by Sam Mendes and starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. As Richard A. Voeltz observes, the path to adaptation was protracted: interest from director John Frankenheimer in the 1960s never materialized, and the rights remained dormant until the British Broadcasting Corporation acquired them in 2007, commissioning Justin Haythe to write the screenplay. Winslet's strong enthusiasm for the script ultimately persuaded Mendes to direct, thereby bringing the project to completion (Voeltz, 2013, p. 5).

2 *The Petrified Forest* (1934) is set in a remote diner in the Arizona desert, where a drifting intellectual, a young waitress longing for a better life, and a ruthless gangster on the run become trapped together. As their lives intersect, the play examines themes of disillusionment, freedom, and the search for meaning in a hostile world.

From the outset, Yates presents a social world steeped in performativity, in which behaviors, gestures, and expressions are meticulously curated and controlled. Genuine emotional insight into the characters, particularly Frank and April, emerges primarily during their confrontations and through the novel's third-person omniscient narration. Even this narrative access remains selectively restricted, creating an atmosphere of emotional opacity that contributes to the novel's tragic trajectory. Yates' emphasis on the theatrical dimensions of everyday existence generates a pervasive sense of discomfort, compelling the reader to confront the dissonance between outward appearances and internal realities. This disjunction functions as a potent metaphor for the paradoxes of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century suburban life, a realm in which stability and contentment are projected yet seldom experienced. As the narrative unfolds, Yates immerses the reader in an environment dominated by surface-level performance, intensifying the tension as the inevitable collapse of this fragile façade exposes the Wheelers' profound dissatisfaction.

In the opening chapter of *Revolutionary Road*, Richard Yates delivers a sharp critique of social pretense, rigid conformity, and the hollow promises of consumer culture. The chapter centers on the Laurel Players, a newly formed suburban theater troupe, and their production of *The Petrified Forest*, a play more widely known through its 1936 film adaptation. Both works depict a disillusioned small-town waitress yearning for escape and a despairing traveler equally desperate to transcend the monotony of existence. Even before the reader encounters the full extent of the Wheelers' disillusionment, their participation in this production aligns them with characters burdened by existential dissatisfaction and fantasies of liberation. As Raab (2009) observes in *The New Yorker*, the themes of *The Petrified Forest* resonate deeply with April Wheeler's personal history and psychological struggles, as well as with broader postwar anxieties concerning gender roles and identity, particularly among men such as Frank and Shep. The integration of *The Petrified Forest* into the novel thus appears deliberate, serving to illuminate the characters' internal crises. This study contends that the Laurel Players' selection constitutes more than a thematic parallel: it manifests a collective yearning for escape and dramatizes the desire to break free from suburban confinement. From this standpoint, the play-within-the-novel functions as a *mise en abyme*, a self-reflexive device that mirrors the performers' own entrapment and reinforces the cyclical nature of their emotional and social stagnation. By examining the theatrical elements in *Revolutionary Road*, this study situates the Wheelers' predicament within the broader context of mid-century American culture, in which the individual frequently found himself at odds with a homogenizing community. Through this framework, Yates critiques the restrictive postwar

norms while simultaneously revealing the enduring desire for self-expression and escape.

### **Staging Disillusionment: *The Petrified Forest* as a Mirror of Suburban Entrapment**

The deficiencies of the Laurel Players' performance expose the characters' inability to engage meaningfully with the reflections of their own lives contained within the play. Although the choice of *The Petrified Forest* might suggest an incipient self-awareness, an implicit recognition of their dissatisfaction and desire for change; this awareness remains superficial and ultimately unproductive. The characters prove incapable of translating the symbolic potential of the play into genuine transformation or escape from their repetitive, constricting routines. The play thus becomes a mirror that reveals without enlightening (Mayhew, 2015, p. 623). The production does not pass unnoticed by its audience; some spectators appear to perceive the work's deeper emotional resonance. Yet even this recognition yields no consequence, leaving performers and viewers alike trapped in the same unchanging reality. As the narrator observes:

*anyone could see that they were a better than average crowd, in terms of education and good health, and it was clear too that they considered this a significant evening. They all knew ... The Petrified Forest was hardly one of the world's great plays. But it was ... a fine theater piece with a basic point of view that was every bit as valid today as in the thirties.* (Yates, 2009, p. 8)

The Players and the local audience approach *The Petrified Forest* in the expectation that it will reflect elements of their own experience, offering a means of confronting and comprehending personal disillusionment and frustration. The performance constitutes more than mere entertainment; it serves as a muted act of resistance against the monotony and emotional stagnation that dominate their existence. Nevertheless, as Maria Teresa Castilho and Rita Pacheco argue, the characters in *Revolutionary Road*, when faced with the homogenization and confinement of suburban life, ultimately prove unable to forge new possibilities and instead dissolve into the indistinguishable crowd (Castilho & Pacheco, 2019, p. 58). The production's failure to provide the cathartic release sought by actors and spectators alike thus symbolizes a broader incapacity to achieve the self-recognition required to break free from the pervasive sense of purposelessness that defines their lives.

The protagonist, April Wheeler, performs the role of Gabby in the Laurel Players' production, a figure who dreams of escaping her dreary existence by traveling to Europe, thereby mirroring April's own yearning for a life beyond suburban limits. As the narrative progresses, April likewise fixates on Europe as the sole viable escape from the restrictive expectations imposed



upon her as wife and mother. Her unsuccessful portrayal of Gabby acquires symbolic weight, illuminating two central aspects of her character. First, it reveals her inability to inhabit convincingly the roles assigned to her, whether onstage or in daily life, underscoring her profound discomfort with the identities she is required to perform. Yu Wu examines this tension, observing that a “schism and opposition exist between April’s spirit and her physical self”; despite seeking recognition through performance, she remains “working alone,” “lost her grip,” and alternates “between false theatrical gestures and a white-knuckled immobility,” with the fall of the stage curtain becoming “an act of mercy” (Wu, 2024, p. 2977). Second, April’s vision of relocating to Europe does not arise from genuine insight or existential clarity but emerges instead from an unsuccessful enactment of a fictional character, demonstrating her tendency to absorb representations without the critical distance or creative agency necessary to generate authentic meaning. Her internalization of Gabby’s longing thus constitutes another layer of fabrication, a narrative she adopts uncritically as her own. April’s projected escape is thereby revealed as a mediated fantasy, a performative fiction mistaken for reality, which reflects a deeper crisis of self-awareness and identity formation.

The failed staging of *The Petrified Forest* serves as a symbolic precursor to the larger breakdown of the carefully curated routines and identities within suburban homes, lending the episode an ominous weight, especially given its early placement in the novel. It most clearly anticipates the psychological limitations of key characters like April Wheeler and Shep Campbell, whose inability to convincingly portray their roles onstage reflects a deeper disconnection from their own emotional lives. Their performances falter not simply from lack of theatrical skill, but because they are fundamentally estranged from their own identities, unable to access or represent authentic inner experience. This dynamic resonates strongly with Judith Butler’s theorization of performativity, which maintains that identity does not precede performance but is itself the effect of repeated, socially legible acts. As Butler states in *Gender Trouble*, “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; the ‘doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed” (Butler, 2006, p. 33). What collapses in Yates’ scene is thus not merely a local theatrical performance but the fragile scaffolding of identity itself, which, because it depends on continual reiteration, always risks exposure and breakdown. April and Shep’s failure to inhabit their stage roles mirrors their broader incapacity to convincingly embody the suburban ideals of fulfillment, romance, or family stability. Their breakdown dramatizes Butler’s assertion that identity is “tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 2006, p. 179), where failure to sustain repetition lays bare the constructed nature of the self.

Similarly, the episode illustrates Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical account of social life, in which the coherence of identity depends on “impression management” before an audience. As Goffman argues in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, everyday interaction is structured like a play, with “front stage” performances oriented toward sustaining social scripts and “back stage” spaces where individuals can drop their masks (Goffman, 1990, p. 78). In *Revolutionary Road*, the suburban household functions as a perpetual “front stage,” a space where conformity must be endlessly rehearsed. Yet the failed performance of *The Petrified Forest* underscores how thin the boundary is between “front” and “back” regions of selfhood, as private discontent inevitably bleeds into public display. By failing as actors on stage, April and Shep inadvertently reveal the artificiality of their larger social roles; their inability to sustain theatrical illusion foreshadows the broader collapse of their suburban.

Placed in a wider cultural frame, this collapse of performance also recalls Guy Debord’s critique of modern society as a “spectacle,” in which social relations are mediated by appearances rather than lived authenticity. As Debord states in *The Society of the Spectacle*, “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (Debord, 2021, p. 2). The failed play within *Revolutionary Road* exposes the fragility of this mediation, dramatizing how suburban existence substitutes appearance for genuine experience. The characters’ yearning for emotional articulation through theater is thwarted not only by lack of dramatic skill but by the deeper impossibility of sustaining authenticity within a culture organized around spectacle. What begins as a small theatrical mishap thus becomes emblematic of a pervasive crisis of identity, revealing suburban subjectivity as performative and spectacular, tenuously sustained by repetition, display, and illusion. When such performances falter, as Yates shows, moments of self-recognition erupt not in reflection or creativity but in destructive outbursts, dramatizing the profound instability of identity in the suburban spectacle.

Yates’ depiction of the awkward and ultimately disastrous staging of *The Petrified Forest* is particularly striking because it reveals a layered failure in performance. With the exception of April, who once studied drama, the members of the Laurel Players are not trained actors. They are therefore clumsily attempting something for which they lack the necessary skills, pretending to be actors when they are not. This double layer of pretense underscores the novel’s broader theme of failed performance. Their inability to perform convincingly onstage subtly reinforces their larger inability to fulfill the roles demanded of them in daily life. In this sense, they do not merely fail at acting in a play; they fail at the very act of pretending, exposing a profound discomfort with self-presentation and

identity. As the narrator observes, “the trouble was that from the very beginning they had been afraid they would end by making fools of themselves, and they had compounded that fear by being afraid to admit it” (Yates, 2009, p. 7). Through such narratorial insight, Yates shows how third-person narration can serve to uncover, and potentially unsettle, the routines of performance and conformity that govern the characters’ lives.

The Laurel Players are not only afraid of making fools of themselves; they also refuse to acknowledge that fear, despite its being silently shared by all. This suppressed emotion mirrors the culture of conformity and isolation in which they exist, where open communication is stifled by fear of vulnerability (Kobre, 2020, p. 65). Individuals thus feel alone in their struggles, convinced that their anxieties are unique and incomprehensible to others. This dynamic renders the play’s failure all the more devastating for performers and audience alike, as evident in the tense scene following intermission:

*None of [the audience] wanted to go through with the second and final act, but they all did. And so did the Players, whose one thought now, as plain as the sweat on their faces, was to put the sorry business behind them... It seemed to go on for hours, a cruel and protracted endurance test in which April Wheeler’s performance was as bad as the others, if not worse... When the curtain fell at last it was an act of mercy.* (Yates, 2009, p. 12)

The audience and actors struggle to process the failed performance because they cannot openly share their reactions. Surrounded by others, each person nevertheless experiences disappointment in isolation. Everyone is affected by the same event, yet no one can seek comfort from another, not even through shared laughter. Instead, they seek only to escape the uncomfortable truth of their collective failure. As the narrator remarks, “there was nothing to watch now but the massed faces of the audience as they pressed up the aisles... Anxious, round-eyed, two by two, they looked and moved as if calm and orderly escape from this place had become the one great necessity of their lives” (Yates, 2009, p. 13). The audience’s quiet, anxious departure reveals how deeply shaken they are. Their response suggests a profound underlying fear: that their everyday lives, shaped by the expectations of suburban America, may be just as artificial and liable to collapse as the performance they have just witnessed.

Alongside themes of conformity, control, and performance, Yates presents a world dominated by consumerism and devoid of authentic meaning. The community theater group was intended to bring culture and purpose to the residents of Western Connecticut. This effort, however, manifestly falls short, laying bare the emptiness at the core of their aspirations. As the novel notes, “all winter, gathering in one another’s living rooms for excited talks about Ibsen and Shaw and O’Neill, and then for a show of hands in which a common-sense majority chose *The Petrified Forest*”

(Yates, 2009, p. 5). The theater group offers the characters a means of clinging to a sense of purpose, allowing them to believe they are contributing to something meaningful rather than merely enacting the routines of daily existence. The director’s words reflect this conviction: “remember this. We’re not just putting on a play here. We’re establishing a community theater, and that’s a pretty important thing to be doing” (Yates, 2009, p. 5). The play and the theater are meant to foster shared experience within the community; when the production fails, it signifies more than a theatrical setback; it exposes the community’s broader inability to unite and enrich their collective lives.

### Behind the Façade: Suburban Homes and the Theater of Everyday Life

In the context of communal failure, the symbolic resonance of *The Petrified Forest* becomes particularly pronounced, for it mirrors the artificial and desolate quality of suburban existence. Just as petrified wood derives from once-living matter gradually replaced by mineral deposits, the suburban landscape represents a comparable inorganic transformation, spaces deliberately engineered to foster belonging, yet ultimately reinforcing isolation and alienation. These developments, positioned beyond organically evolved urban centers, emerge not from natural social processes but from calculated planning, thereby subverting the very community ideals they purport to uphold. On the surface, petrified wood retains the appearance of a living tree, though its vital elements have been supplanted by inert stone. Extending this analogy, Yates presents suburban life as a realm in which the neighborhood may appear socially cohesive and the Wheelers an ordinary family, yet their inner realities contradict these external impressions. The built environment of the suburbs, combined with a culture of conformity and consumerism, empties the promise of fulfillment. What is offered as stable and contented existence is, in reality, devoid of authentic substance, beneath the façade lies not vitality but petrification.

The hollow character of consumption that governs the lives of western Connecticut’s residents, together with the artificial and incongruous nature of their homes, which swiftly become extensions of their identities, is established early in *Revolutionary Road*. As the narrator observes,

*the Players, coming out of their various kitchen doors ... would see a landscape in which only a few, very old, weathered houses seemed to belong; it made their own homes look as weightless and impermanent, as foolishly misplaced as a great many bright new toys that had been left outdoors overnight and rained on. Their automobiles didn’t look right either—unnecessarily wide and gleaming in the colors of candy and ice cream, seeming to wince at each splatter of mud, they crawled apologetically... down Route Twelve.* (Yates, 2009, p. 6)

Within this landscape, the Players' houses and cars appear markedly out of place. The narrator describes the dwellings as "foolishly misplaced toys," a phrase that emphasizes their disconnection from the surroundings while implying a lack of substance or gravity, as though they possess no greater permanence than children's playthings. This image is intensified by the suggestion that they have been "left outdoors overnight and rained on," conveying neglect and impermanence. These descriptions frame the homes as fragile cultural constructs, lacking durability or authenticity, an impression sharpened by their contrast with the "old, weathered houses" that appear organically rooted in the setting. Most telling is the implication that these newer structures will never acquire the quiet dignity of age; rather, they are fated to deteriorate, shaped and ultimately diminished by the very lives enacted within them.

Beyond the isolation produced by the enclosed domestic spaces of the suburbs, Yates further examines the influence of consumer culture through his depiction of automobiles and, later, the highways, symbols that acquired considerable cultural significance in the postwar period. These elements were essential to the expansion of suburban living, enabling workers to separate home from workplace. Yates presents the cars in vivid, candy-like colors, associating them once more with childhood fantasies and superficial gratification. This imagery reveals a deeper compulsion to consume objects that are striking yet lacking in substance. Like sweets or ice cream, indulgent yet nutritionally void, these vehicles function primarily as markers of status and self-image rather than as responses to fundamental needs. Although the cars, like the houses, appear incongruous within the residential neighborhood, Yates observes that they seem "able to relax once they reach the highway," portrayed as "a long bright valley of colored plastic and plate glass and stainless steel—KING KONE, MOBILGAS, SHOPORAMA, EAT ..." (Yates, 2009, p. 6). This transition underscores the cars' true cultural context: as emblems of conformity and consumerism, they belong to a landscape constructed entirely around consumption. Each advertised sign promises immediate satisfaction—whether ice cream, fuel, or shopping, culminating in the imperative "eat." The insistent focus on consumption defines a terrain sustained not by meaning or individuality but by surface desire. Simultaneously, the designation of the residents as the Players signals a fundamental crisis of identity. Rather than existing as autonomous subjects, they are rendered as performers enacting prescribed social roles within an environment prioritizing appearance over authenticity. As Jameson (2010) notes, postwar American architecture and spatial organization became profoundly shaped by the era's preoccupation with consumption and commodification:

*The immediate postwar heritage of this virtually natural ... species protection has been the diversion of such aesthetic*

*instincts ... into instant commodification—fast foods ... and, on the other hand, the kitsch interior decoration and furniture ... which has been explained as a kind of security blanket—chintz of the first postwar domestic production—designed to ward off memories of the depression and its stark physical deprivations.* (Jameson, 2010, p. 97)

What renders the postwar suburbs artificial is not merely their contemporary design but the deliberate effort to supplant a more complex and painful past with a simplified, idealized version of American life. In this respect, Yates' comparison of the houses to "carelessly discarded toys" acquires further resonance, they emerge as symbols of a juvenile rebellion enacted by a generation eager to distance itself from prior hardship and to claim comfort and luxury as entitlements rather than privileges (Yates, 2009, p. 6). Yates thus articulates a vision that captures broader postwar cultural anxieties, a period in which the pursuit of the "new" begins to erode stable identity. The growing fixation on novelty and consumerism in the late 1950s and early 1960s invests the title *Revolutionary Road* with irony. Far from denoting political or social transformation, "revolutionary" echoes the rhetoric of advertising: revolutionary homes, revolutionary appliances, revolutionary cars, all pledging convenience, prestige, and modernity. Here, the "revolution" signifies not rupture but intensified immersion in the cycle of mass consumption orchestrated by the culture industry. Moreover, given April's inability to recognize herself in the theatrical production—an image she can only consume rather than shape, "revolutionary" assumes another connotation: a circular, self-repeating motion from which escape proves impossible (Ehrenreich, 1984, p. 32).

The design and architecture of the American suburban landscape are central to understanding the fear, desire for conformity, and emphasis on appearances in *Revolutionary Road*. Suburbs generate containment and isolation, leaving residents feeling trapped (Jones, 2014, p. 20). For the Wheelers, relocation to the suburbs, and adoption of a lifestyle they initially scorn, ignites profound tension and anxiety that fuels much of the novel's conflict. Suburbs were not organic communities that developed gradually but deliberately planned environments intended to provide an idealized retreat from reality. Frank and April's initial visit to *Revolutionary Road* exposes the enforced uniformity and artificial character of the neighborhood. Their unease stems from this homogeneity and contrived atmosphere. Significantly, the scene follows a violent argument after the performance of *The Petrified Forest*, a confrontation marked by vicious insults and Frank's near-physical outburst, revealing how precarious their relationship already is when they encounter the suburban ideal.

The placement of this episode, immediately before they select and purchase their home, carries considerable weight, implying that the house itself becomes a primary catalyst for their



escalating mutual resentment. April's accusation that Frank keeps her "safely in a trap" articulates her perception of suburban domesticity as a confinement that binds her to prescribed roles. Frank's caustic retort: "You in a trap! You in a trap! Jesus, don't make me laugh" (Yates, 2009, p. 37), reveals that he, too, experiences their marriage and lifestyle as imprisonment. The word "trap" acquires powerful symbolic force, illuminating the central contradiction of suburban ideology: the endeavor to construct security and order produces instead emotional confinement. By sealing themselves off from the wider world, the Wheelers become enclosed within a structure of isolation—one that breeds entrapment rather than safety.

By placing the couple's intense and emotionally charged argument immediately before their move from city to suburbs, Yates emphasizes that suburban life constitutes the true trap from which neither Frank nor April can escape. This structural decision also highlights the disjunction between outward appearance and inner reality, between superficial calm and underlying tension. The violence of their quarrel lays bare the raw strain in their marriage, only for it to be succeeded at once by a scene of performance, Frank and April enacting the role of a contented couple pursuing the American Dream through home ownership. Their hesitation, however, remains evident as they survey the suburban landscape. The standardized design, polished uniformity, and rigid order of the neighborhood mirror the very fears they harbor: that relocation will entail the surrender of individuality. In response, they instinctively seek to differentiate themselves from both setting and future neighbors. As the narrator indicates, the real estate agent, "Mrs. Givings understood that they wanted something out of the ordinary—a small remodeled barn or carriage house ... something with a little charm—and she did hate having to tell them that those things simply weren't available any more" (Yates, 2009, p. 38). In *Revolutionary Road*, the house reflects the inhabitants themselves. If the Wheelers can resist the rigid prescriptions of suburban planning, they may yet reject its underlying ideology. Sensing their ambivalence, Mrs. Givings appeals to their disdain for uniformity by disparaging the nearby Revolutionary Hill Estates: "great hulking split levels, all in the most nauseous pastels..." (Yates, 2009, p. 38). She insists that the house she wishes to show them bears no connection to that development, thereby feeding their need to regard themselves as exceptional. Though reluctant, Frank and April are drawn to the neat appearance of the property on *Revolutionary Road*. April's ironic remark—"of course it does have the picture window ... Still I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities" (Yates, 2009, p. 40)—reveals an uneasy recognition of the conformity they are entering. The picture window functions not merely as a standard feature of the suburban home but as a symbol of the culture of visibility and performance the Wheelers are now joining. As Francesca

Vavotici argues, April's resigned comment that "I guess there's no escaping that" and Frank's dismissive reply that "I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities" (Yates, 2009, p. 29) foreshadow the novel's central concern: the mystification of female entrapment within a project of architectural reconstruction that "symbolizes a social discourse whose primary manufacturer is patriarchal authority" (Vavotici, 2020, p. 5). Frank's minimization of April's concern exemplifies the broader pattern of treating female anxieties as "secondary, irrational, and unimportant in the broad scheme of things" (Vavotici, 2021, p. 5). No longer anonymous urban dwellers, the Wheelers become conspicuous figures in a closely observed suburban setting, required to perform the idealized roles of mid-century family life. In this context, the picture window operates as a theatrical "fourth wall," reinforcing the performative character of suburban identity and the gendered constraints that define it. In Sam Mendes' 2008 film adaptation, this symbol acquires particular force in the climactic scene, where April gazes through the window as she bleeds to death after a self-induced abortion (Mendes, 2008). Although the novel's final pages do not describe this image, the film's emphasis on the picture window intensifies April's desperate, violent rejection of the social, domestic, and ideological structures that confined her and precipitated her end. In chapter two, Mrs. Givings displays a quiet unease with the neighborhood's growing emphasis on novelty and surface appeal. In her view, her own home stands apart, not as part of the new developments built for urban families raising children, but as a place possessing authenticity. Its age confers substance and historical depth, rendering it genuine and meaningful against what she perceives as the shallow, artificial quality of the surrounding houses. As the narrator observes,

*it was one of the few authentic pre-Revolutionary dwellings left in the district, flanked by two of the few remaining wine glass elms, and she liked to think of it as a final bastion against vulgarity ... she might have to stand smiling in the kitchens of horrid little ranch houses and split levels, dealing with impossibly rude people whose children ... spilled Kool-Aid on her dress; she might have to breathe exhaust fumes and absorb the desolation of Route Twelve, with its supermarkets and pizza joints and frozen custard stands, but these only heightened the joy of her returning.* (Yates, 2009, p. 210)

Once again, Yates employs omniscient narration to strip away the layers of performance and reveal the underlying reality of a character. Mrs. Givings regards the emerging suburban lifestyle as "vulgar," "horrid," and emotionally barren. Her yearning for something authentic, untouched by the glossy allure of modern convenience, distinguishes her from the dominant values of the community. The term "revolutionary" acquires further irony in this context: her older home stands as a "bastion" amid the



encroaching sprawl, resisting the purportedly revolutionary ideals of mass-produced living that champion convenience and futurism while eroding authenticity and depth.

As the Wheelers begin to modify, or perhaps relinquish, their own ideals in order to justify the suburban move, they gradually develop an appreciation for the pristine appeal of their new surroundings. The brand-new, impeccably designed, and spotless suburban house begins to appear more attractive than the older, worn city apartments they once inhabited:

*The place did have possibilities ... a sparse, skillful arrangement of furniture would counteract the prim suburban look of this too-symmetrical living room. On the other hand, the very symmetry of the place was undeniably appealing—the fact that all its corners made right angles, that each of its floorboards lay straight and true, that its doors hung in perfect balance and closed without scraping ... they could see their children running barefoot down this hallway free of mildew and splinters and cockroaches and grit. It did have possibilities. The gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made to fit these rooms ... What could be frightened in as wide and bright, as clean and quiet a house as this? (Yates, 2009, p. 40)*

The contradictions inherent in suburban life surface through the Wheelers' internal deliberations as they assess the property, exposing their ambivalence toward the sanitized comfort it offers and the deeper anxieties it masks. This ambivalence manifests in hesitant phrases such as “on the other hand” and “the place did have possibilities,” signaling a mounting tension between their professed ideals and the seductive pull of suburban order. The contrast between the traditional and the modern, the authentic and the fabricated, is stark as the couple confronts the appeal of a space meticulously cleansed, engineered as a refuge from the perceived disorder of urban existence. Although they continue to criticize the conformity and artificiality of the suburbs, they cannot resist the attraction of a home that promises safety and control. Free from mildew, cockroaches, grit, and other markers of urban decay, the house represents a retreat from chaos. These physical details, which Yates emphasizes, symbolize a broader fear of intrusion, of unpredictable, unwelcome elements penetrating the domestic realm. The suburb, by contrast, offers the illusion of containment: a controlled environment that excludes the external. In accepting this illusion, the Wheelers persuade themselves that the structured, orderly space of the suburbs may also impose clarity and containment upon the unraveling complexities of their own lives.

Suburban life in the novel is characterized by exclusionary practices, rendered particularly visible through the figure of John Givings, who struggles with mental illness. At her insistence, Frank and April agree to meet him, yet it is evident from the outset that John has been expelled, literally and symbolically,

as the neighborhood's inconvenient truth. Removed from the community and institutionalized, John embodies what suburban order seeks to suppress. Mrs. Givings's eagerness to reintroduce him to the Wheelers reveals her desperate attempt to maintain appearances and restore respectability by reintegrating what the neighborhood has already rejected. Her own description of John's situation underlines how decisively he has been marked as an outsider:

*What with overwork ... he'd had what amounted to a complete nervous breakdown.... Fortunately, he was back in this vicinity for a time ... but all the same it was worrying to his father and to her. His doctors had thought it wise for him to have a complete rest, so just for the present he was ... 'well, actually, just for the present he's at Greenacres.' (Yates, 2009, p. 222)*

The disjunction between the narrative voice and Mrs. Givings's spoken words exposes her profound discomfort in acknowledging that her son fails to conform to suburban standards. John's physical removal from the community, his institutionalization, highlights how domestic space serves as a visible marker of social conformity. By residing outside this meticulously maintained environment, John becomes a source of unease, a disruption to the suburban ideal. Mrs. Givings's anxiety stems not only from her son's condition but also from what his existence suggests about her own inability to project the flawless image that suburban life requires.

Mrs. Givings's preoccupation with appearances is further evident in her idealized vision of John's encounter with the Wheelers. This imagined scene is less about authentic connection than about restoring a polished façade, one in which her family appears whole, respectable, and fully aligned with suburban norms. As the narrator observes,

*This would be no ordinary visit to the Wheelers' ... April Wheeler was there, seated in a white wrought iron chair and turning her pretty head to smile with affection at some wise and fatherly remark by Howard Givings ... Frank Wheeler was engaged in one of his earnest conversations with John, who was reclining in dignified convalescence on a white wrought-iron chaise lounge ... she could see him turn his head to look up at her and say 'Mother? Won't you join us?' The picture kept recurring for days until it was as real as a magazine illustration, and she kept improving on it. (Yates, 2009, p. 218)*

The phrase “as real as a magazine illustration” is especially revealing, for it acknowledges the power of commercially produced images to persuade consumers of their authenticity despite their manifest artificiality. To describe something in such terms is to admit its unreality. The repeated emphasis on “white” in Mrs. Givings's fantasy intensifies its dreamlike quality, evoking purity, innocence, and a thorough sanitization

of experience. Within this vision, disturbing realities such as John's mental illness are not confronted but aestheticized and neutralized. He is transformed from a patient struggling with psychological distress into a figure of "dignified convalescence," reclining passively on a chaise longue (Yates, 2009, p. 218). This tableau exemplifies the internalization of idealized imagery: a meticulously curated world in which disorder is rendered invisible and social acceptance appears effortless. Even the Wheelers' children are incorporated into the fantasy, "playing quietly in the shadows ... dressed in white shorts and tennis shoes, catching fireflies in Mason jars" completing an illusion in which every disruptive element is subdued by the soothing veneer of suburban perfection (Yates, 2009, p. 220).

Far from emerging organically from American cultural traditions, the postwar suburban ideal was deliberately constructed as a national response to Cold War anxieties. In this climate, the home ceased to be merely a private refuge; it was recast as a bulwark against ideological threat. The widespread promotion of domestic containment reflected a broader strategy to manage fears of instability, deviance, and un-American activity. Historian May (2017) analyses this transformation in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, noting that urban cosmopolitanism came to be regarded with suspicion as a force that undermined the entrepreneurial independence central to American identity (May, 2017, p. 9). The domestic sphere, by contrast, offered a stabilizing counterweight, a space in which traditional values could be reaffirmed and perceived threats of internal subversion neutralized (May, 2017, p. 10). Suburbia thus functioned not simply as a geographical entity but as a performative arena in which ideological conformity was continually enacted and reinforced.

The ideology of domesticity in the postwar period extended beyond the celebration of the nuclear family; it also drove a mass migration from urban centers to the presumed security and stability of suburban environments (Horowitz, 2015, p. 21). Central to this vision was the cultivation of domestic bliss through the acquisition of consumer goods, including homes, automobiles, household appliances, whose visible display signified economic success and patriotic allegiance. This materialist existence, rooted in consumption and conspicuous prosperity, came to embody the essence of American capitalism, a system interrogated by theorists such as Fredric Jameson and the Frankfurt School's Adorno and Horkheimer. May (2017) likewise examines the linkage between suburbanization and consumer culture within the framework of Cold War containment, presenting both as mechanisms through which American capitalism asserted its supremacy. In her chapter "The Commodity Gap: Consumerism and the Modern Home," she contends that political leaders frequently invoked the apparent

triumph of suburban family life and material abundance as proof of the moral and practical superiority of the American system.

But for Nixon, home ownership represented more than a comfortable way of life; it was the validation of the free enterprise system. Nixon's frame of reference was the family:

*There are 44 million families in the United States ... Thirty-one million families own their own homes and the land on which they were built. America's 44 million families own a total of 56 million cars, 50 million television sets, and 143 million radio sets.* (May, 2017, p. 155).

Homeownership and the accumulation of material goods emerged as powerful symbols of American identity, signifying full participation in the nation's cultural and economic ideals. Yet this vision of the "American way of life" was, in many respects, a deliberately constructed illusion. It systematically excluded those who fell outside the suburban norm, particularly urban populations comprising racial minorities and economically disadvantaged groups. For those who did inhabit the suburbs, the pursuit of this ideal frequently imposed severe social and psychological burdens. Rather than representing genuine fulfillment, suburban existence increasingly constituted a performance, a meticulously staged simulation of success and contentment. The idyllic imagery associated with suburban living thus concealed a more troubling reality: beneath the polished surfaces lay anxieties, disillusionment, and repression. This suburban duality, between appearance and reality, reflects broader contradictions within American society, where uniform, sanitized spaces serve to obscure deeper structural inequalities of race, class, and region. Coontz (2007) likewise examines these dynamics in *The Way We Really Are*, highlighting how suburban consumerism contributed to the erasure of racial and ethnic difference from dominant cultural narratives.

The message was clear: Buy these ranch houses, Hotpoint appliances, and child-raising ideals; relate to your spouse like this; get a new car to wash with your kids on Sunday afternoons; organize your dinners like that—and you too can escape from the conflicts of race, class, and political witch hunts into harmonious families where father knows best, mother is never bored or irritated, and teenagers rush to the dinner table each night, eager to get their latest dose of parental wisdom (Coontz, 2007, p. 48).

The emergence of the suburbs during the Cold War era represented more than a retreat from urban diversity; it also embodied a national obsession with domestic stability as a psychological defense against the existential threats of nuclear war and ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union. This climate of fear permeated daily life and was reinforced through governmental policies that encouraged citizens to monitor

neighbors and report behavior deemed suspicious or potentially subversive. Within this context, the suburban landscape operated as a carefully sustained illusion of tranquility and order, a constructed environment in which the appearance of domestic harmony masked profound underlying tensions. As the Wheelers' experience demonstrates, however, those inhabiting this space struggle to reconcile themselves with its performative and fundamentally deceptive character, exposing a persistent dissonance between idealized image and lived reality. Like the characters in *The Petrified Forest*, the Wheelers initially regard themselves as intellectually and emotionally superior to their neighbors, convinced that their lives will transcend the surrounding conformity and mediocrity. Over time, however, they become ensnared in the very structures they profess to reject, Frank in his empty corporate position, April in her role as housewife, both of which progressively erode their sense of self and mutual connection. Their aborted plan to escape to Paris symbolizes the collapse of their aspirations and the inescapability of the system they sought to oppose (Kimberly, 2023, p. 112). The novel thus exposes the psychological toll of suburban conformity, revealing how the promise of autonomy and fulfillment is replaced by a stifling enactment of normalcy that culminates in alienation, disillusionment, and tragedy.

For Jameson (2018), the rise of suburban life, consumer culture, and media saturation constitutes the very foundation of postmodernism. He contends that this transformation, rooted in the postwar capitalist expansion of the late 1940s and 1950s, produces a society dominated by spectacle, commodification, and the erosion of cultural depth (Jameson, 2018, p. 1760). Within this framework, high art forfeits its critical capacity, absorbed into a homogenized mass culture where boundaries between art and commerce dissolve. In *Revolutionary Road*, the Wheelers' struggle reflects this broader crisis of meaning. Their attempt to reject suburban conformity fails not solely through personal inadequacy but because their rebellion remains inscribed within the consumerist logic they seek to escape. As Jameson observes, even resistance is incorporated into the system it challenges, a revolutionary gesture that ultimately circles back into the structures it aims to dismantle (Jameson, 2018, p. 1761). The novel thereby captures the postmodern predicament of individuals trapped in a world where identity, agency, and authenticity are continually undermined by an all-encompassing capitalist culture.

As Jameson's analysis highlights the postmodern collapse of meaning under late capitalism, *Revolutionary Road* functions as a literary intervention that challenges the dominant suburban narrative from within. In this regard, it aligns with what Keith Wilhite describes as the role of suburban literature in contemporary American fiction: replacing traditional regionalism by presenting the suburb as a contested space where

changing demographics and evolving notions of American identity are negotiated (Wilhite, 2012, p. 618). Rather than treating the suburbs as a neutral or idyllic setting, Yates' novel exposes their ideological role in shaping personal subjectivity and national mythologies. The suburban landscape, far from incidental, becomes central to the novel's critique, positioning *Revolutionary Road* as a deliberate disruption of the postwar cultural script. The Wheelers' disillusionment and eventual collapse are not merely personal tragedies but symptomatic of the larger cultural fabrication sustained by media and state power. By revealing the staged and fabricated nature of suburban life, the novel attempts to uncover a buried authenticity, a rupture within the spectacle, that destabilizes the suburban ideal as the normative center of American existence.

## Conclusion

In the novel, the Wheelers view escape as the only viable response to the alienation and dissatisfaction that define their suburban existence. The domestic sphere, rather than providing comfort or stability, has become a site of mounting anxiety and disillusionment, prompting them to imagine alternative spaces, most notably Europe, as potential sources of renewal. However, their plan to relocate abroad emerges as little more than a desperate fantasy, a fragile illusion that ultimately underscores their inability to confront the deeper issues within themselves and their environment. For the reader, the futility of this escape is apparent from the outset, lending the narrative a tragic inevitability. The persistent self-deception between Frank and April creates a growing sense of dread, as their idealized vision of liberation is gradually revealed as unsustainable. As Chris Richardson argues, April suffers from "the exposure of an empty self, of the lack of individual essence" (Richardson, 2010, p. 10). April's impassioned declarations about the oppressive nature of their lives emphasize that escape, for them, is imagined not simply as geographical relocation, but as a necessary rupture from the suffocating structures of suburban conformity. As she states,

*because you see I happen to think this is unrealistic. I think it's unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working ... 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, living among a bunch of frightened little—my God, Frank, I don't have to tell you what's wrong with this environment ... remember what you said about the whole idea of suburbia being to keep reality at bay?* (Yates, 2009, p. 150)

The notion of Europe, initially introduced through April's role as Gabby in their amateur production of *The Petrified Forest*, emerges as a symbolic alternative to the stifling monotony of Frank and April's daily existence. For the Wheelers, Europe,



specifically Paris, represents the possibility of liberation not only from their uninspiring jobs and hollow social routines but also from the performative identities they are compelled to maintain within suburban life. They envision the continent as a realm free from the artificial structures and emotional inertia that characterize their current environment: no more obligatory social gatherings, rigid gender expectations, or the oppressive aesthetics of postwar consumerism. In this imagined space, they believe authenticity and fulfillment await. Yet their projected escape ultimately functions as a coping mechanism, another illusion constructed to defer confrontation with their internal discontent. In exposing this disillusionment, Yates critiques the superficiality of 1950s suburban culture and the deeper psychological denial that enables individuals to perpetuate cycles of dissatisfaction and alienation under the guise of aspirational change.

In conclusion, Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* stands as a contemporaneous critique of the postwar ideal of the suburban American family, dismantling the very myths that were being actively constructed during the period it portrays. Rather than retrospectively deconstructing the 1950s domestic ideal, as historians such as Daniel Horowitz, Stephanie Coontz, or Elaine Tyler May have done, Yates exposes, in real time, the psychological and emotional toll of maintaining that illusion. This portrayal of Frank and April Wheeler reveals how the suburban experience was steeped in performance: carefully curated facades of marital bliss, gender conformity, and middle-class success that thinly veiled an undercurrent of alienation, dissatisfaction, and existential dread. The novel repeatedly stages a form of *mise en abyme*: the Wheelers' engagement with fantasies of escape, most notably April's role as Gabby in *The Petrified Forest*, mirrors and reflects their own desires, failures, and illusions within suburban life. Their imagined relocation to Europe functions as a recursive representation, a story within a story, wherein the fantasy of liberation illuminates the deeper structural and psychological constraints they face. This layering underscores how performance, whether on stage, in marriage, or in society, creates a reflective space that highlights both the fragility of individual identity and the pervasive influence of societal norms. The novel's tragic conclusion, April's death from a self-induced abortion and Frank's subsequent emotional withdrawal, lays bare the cost of such denial. Their imagined escape to Paris, introduced through April's role as Gabby, never transcends its status as a romanticized vision, echoing the futile yearning for liberation seen in *The Petrified Forest*. In both narratives, the desire to escape becomes a form of entrapment, reinforcing the theme that performance ultimately distances individuals from their own truths. By foregrounding this recursive mirroring, Yates critiques the social fabric of 1950s America and illustrates the devastating consequences of self-deception and the myths people create to avoid confronting the emptiness of their realities, situating *mise*

*en abyme* a central structural and thematic principle that frames the Wheelers' tragic predicament.

### Ethical Statement

It is hereby declared that all rules specified in the *Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive* were followed in this study.

### Ethics Committee Approval

Since this study did not require ethics committee approval, no ethics approval was obtained.

### Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

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