Seventeen years after his death, the literary world is still left with a specific, narrowly interpreted legacy of Richard Yates. The young, sorrowful writer with round eyes, squinting and piercing through a cloud of cigarette smoke, with unforgivable honesty, at a world he was never long for (Bailey 39). A hero, whose magnum opus is totted around by young, suicidal romantics who hope that a copy of *Revolutionary Road*, discovered amongst their corpses, can explain it all (Hornby). However, what we haven’t held onto—and perhaps couldn’t have until the Yatesian revival led by the British, heralding such triumphs as a long-awaited film adaptation of *Revolutionary Road*, as well as a championing biography, springing him into the mainstream culture of our early century—are his sincere examinations of joy. Though everything else in life may have been on fire, under the scrutiny of social institutions, coming to the disengagement of an unresolved war, and entering into uncertain times, aside from those harsh realities Yates so tragically rendered, there always remained the quiet worlds where peace, identity and joy existed. For the purposes of this essay, I will examine two related spaces offering such potential joys: the TB wards of Yates’s stories and the conceptual ‘sanctuary’ of art making.

Reading through Yates’s collected works, as well as working through his life in search of these spaces of happiness, can at first seem a daunting task; there is little in the way of happy childhood memories, and barely any time given to ‘honeymoon’ periods. However, to call the search off and limit the work of Yates to sorrow and loneliness, would be a repetition of the same mistake that critic Anatole Broyard made when, during a final blow at the entirety of Yates’s
career, he described the writer’s approach to his characters and the world as the controlling of pawns, who exist for the sole purpose of evoking a cheap emotional response from the reader (Bailey 535). What Broyard had tried so hard to do was to discredit Yates as an insensitive writer who possessed very little beyond formal craft, and thus resorted to tricks of emotional persuasion to get people to read his books.

In hindsight, however warranted and accepted Broyard’s claims, published in the *New York Times Book Review*, were at the time of his writing in response to the novel *Young Hearts Crying*, they could not have been more absurd and incongruous with the way that we remember and read the work of Richard Yates today. In accepting Yates as a stark realist with the aid of Blake Bailey’s biography, we have come to know that very little of Yates’s work is pure fiction, and that his characters, while often syntheses of various people he knew as well as himself, were absorbed from reality and situated in a space historically, politically and topographically identical to our own—New York was New York and Emily Grimes was Richard Yates. Although he altered the outcome of specific events and at times placed himself in positions of others to develop a continuity of behavior in the development of ‘heroes’ in his works (an old friend Bob Parker brought this to the public’s attention after discovering his stand-in “Tom Nelson” in *Young Hearts Crying* and made note that Yates had rewritten history as to place his stand-in “Davenport” in the position of another old friend Peter Kane Dufault so that he could effectively punch out “Paul Maitland,” the stand-in for one of their colleagues at the time) to be critical of such instances would be to revoke artistic license (Bailey 539). In no way can the effective construction of plot or meaning be said to undermine Yates’s characters or their humanity in any of his works. Contrary to Broyard’s claims, at times the characters seem even wholly out of the writer’s control; for instance, April’s running into the woods is less reminiscent of a masculine
interpretation of ‘feminine mania’ than it is the utter helplessness of the man left behind, whether Frank or Dick. Therefore, to limit our perspective of Yates as a master craftsman of formal elements (although he was) who understood very little in the way of how people function and behave, possessing little emotional intelligence, is to miss the point of his work entirely.

Fortunately, as time has gone by, we’ve lost many of Yates’s Broyard’s and can now more honestly and vehemently uncover the rich complexity of the emotions of Yates’s work, including the seemingly elusive joy. In cross-referencing Yates’s novels, short stories and biography, one notices a nearly transcendental path Yates takes in discovering happiness. This is not to say that the popular notion of natural escape is rife in Yates’s work—it’s nearly nonexistent—save the Wilder’s vacation in Disturbing the Peace and some other select scenes, but rather its aversion to intellectualism, concern with the constructs of society and culture, disinterest in religion and, at times, openly self-interested aims, that are all themes and motifs in the life and work of Richard Yates.

I propose the path of the transcendental not with the interest of pinning Yates as a neo-Transcendentalist (such a claim would be absurd to state), but rather to illustrate and compress the battle Yates’s work raged against the status quo. Hardly a revolutionary in either politic or craft—he writes in the short story “Regards at Home,” “[e]xcept that we lived there, Eileen and I weren’t really Village people at all. Bohemians made us nervous. The very word hip held vaguely frightening overtones for us”—Yates spent his whole adult life in a Brooks Brothers suit, discounting the works of Robert Coover and other fabulists who had gained much popularity at the time (309). Yates fought a far less benign force than ‘the classic novel’ or the local police department; he took on the sociological institutions that were stunting and strangling America in the age of anxiety. The job world, capitalist culture, family, and marriage were at the center of all
his works, along with the characters who were stuck in them: suburban dads gone mad, housewives yearning for escape, veterans bearing scars of ineptitude and regret, struggling young women traversing realms beyond social expectations, delusional artists sculpting a delusional world, devoted amateur writers willing to sacrifice everything. All men and women seeking identity in a uniform world, fighting the legacies of their forefathers, reaching for greatness and finding only defeat. Yates was a revolutionary of human emotion, erupting from a period of social stoicism. Before a literary world responsive to little other than irony and cynicism, Yates pioneered the honesty of the heart.

Many readers stop here, amidst the breathtaking despair, the heartbreaking bravery of Yates’s greatest failures. They stop when April Wheeler writes her final note to Frank, follow her to her grave and leave all of Revolutionary Road behind—but where are Frank, the kids, the Givings? We can’t forget Shep’s quiet insolence and struggle over drinks in the kitchen, a kind of testament to all things passed before he admits that perhaps all the horrible things that came to fruition had in some peculiar way brought he and Milly closer (Revolutionary Road 349-50). Howard Givings turning down his hearing aid, where he “heard only a welcome, thunderous sea of silence,” confronting the unknown alone (355). These are small, cerebral spaces where characters achieve not only solace, but honesty and strength. They are like the painful memories Yates himself rifled through, sitting stunned and focused, dwelling on in order to create his fiction in the first place. Hardly what we’d call places of joy, these private arenas of the mind may not adhere to a stereotypical definition of happiness, but afford time and room for the most rewarding and liberating revelations and experiences some of these characters will ever have in their highly mediated lives—a qualification suitable to our purposes in an analysis of joy within this realist’s spectrum.
Although the private facets of characters’ minds function as mental sanctuaries used frequently in the work of Yates, it would, perhaps, prove more effective to first examine physical spaces to develop a firmer grip on the matter. In 1950, several weeks after the birth of his first daughter, Sharon, Yates found out that he had advanced tuberculosis (Bailey 113). Twenty-four years old at the time, he was working through the tumultuous beginnings of a young marriage with his first wife, Sheila, in Greenwich Village, and crafting his early short stories in the style of Salinger and Fitzgerald when he was taken to the Bellevue TB ward and then eventually moved to Holloran on Staten Island (110-113). In physical and emotional pain, separated from his wife and newborn child, the months in Holloran were inherently trying, but in Blake Bailey’s words, “In some ways it would prove one of the best things that had ever happened to him” (114). Unbothered by the troubles and seemingly frivolous responsibilities of the outside world (at the time Yates was working a dead end job at Remington Rand), Yates felt at ease, and Holloran would prove to be not only an honest and relaxing environment, void of the pretensions and struggles of Village life, but a productive one as well: “He could talk and listen as much or as little as he liked, and for the most part he felt a genuine sense of solidarity with his fellow consumptives” (113, 114). It also afforded him time to focus on the art of writing. Bailey notes:

He had plentiful means to distract himself from morbid thoughts: A group of Remington Rand friends had chipped in and bought him a large box of Modern Library books; as his future publisher Seymour Lawrence put it, Halloran became Yates’s “Harvard, Yale, and Princeton,” (114) thus beginning his “lifelong process of autodidactic recompense” and development of an anti-intellectual understanding of his craft (114).

This odd blessing-in-disguise afforded time and perspective early in his life, the kind of
‘outside looking in’ stance that placed him at once inside the bedrooms of quarreling lovers (because these were his bedrooms) and at a sincere, critical distance that established his nonjudgmental, emotionally intelligent gaze. After all, just as the TB ward established the divide necessary to write a story like “No Pain Whatsoever” and the stand-in character for Sheila, Myra, wrought with quiet suffering and despair, the ward also elucidated Yates’s sense of mortality and virility, as well his understanding of the expectations placed on a man’s body and the needs of women through the same sterile estrangement. In doing so, Yates wrote an emotionally charged, exceptional piece that found its balance in the dividing element of the yellow TB ward.

Although it would be both easy and tempting to stop and revel at what Yates has done at this point, we must press forward to understand what this story not only detests and condones, but what it celebrates as well. We’ll traverse the story as it unfolds and take note here that all the aforementioned themes are established by the basic premise of the story as well as the old photograph Harry keeps by his bedside of he and Myra before his illness, reminiscent of a better time and Myra’s personal needs.

Myra’s initial action after being dropped off by her lover and friends is to enter the ward, lay her coat down and say hello to Mr. Chance (‘No Pain Whatsoever” 50) Mr. Chance is a black man and the year is circa 1950. His open discourse with the men of the ward as well as Myra offers an air of progressivism to the environment (this will be addressed more directly in “Out with the Old”). There is a sense of solidarity, clear of racial divides, which Harry addresses when speaking of the new, not-yet-indoctrinated patients on the ward:

“Oh, they’re all right, I guess,” Harry said. “I just mean, well, I get along better with guys like Walter, that’s all. We’ve been through a lot together,
or something. I don’t know. These new guys get on your nerves, the way they talk. For instance, there’s not one of them knows anything about TB, and they all of them think they know it all; you can’t tell them anything. I mean, a thing like that can get on your nerves” (52).

There is a nearly fraternal bond amongst the men, like a brotherhood of suffering, equipped with a natural order of seniority. This discussion marks a point of interest in an otherwise disinterested Harry. When Myra begins to talk about a co-worker who was nearly fired, Frank becomes dismissive and aloof (52-3). Within the ward, issues of the workplace and gossip, notions of corporate climbing, suddenly become totally frivolous; none of these things that generate stress and pressure in the real world play any role here.

However, the ward is hardly unaware of the outside world. Harry keeps the old photograph not only for comfort, but as a constant reminder of his life outside the ward. None of the patients actually want to stay there; they recognize that it is a place which exists in a delicate stasis between the struggles of life and peacefulness of death, and no one is weak-spirited enough to consider the latter the better escape. Instead, the men of the ward regain a kind of youthful innocence. The two look at the picture and Myra realizes, “[b]ut now with the loss of weight there had been a softening about the lips and eyes that gave him the look of a thin little boy. His face had changed to suit the pajamas” (54).

Then, when the Christmas entertainment begins, it is difficult not to imagine how juvenile it all must appear to Myra who had just been felt up in the backseat of a friend’s car (54-5). She demonstrates a certain motherly patience toward Harry who cannot begin to feign interest in the life she has independently from him. He becomes like a boy, incapable of fathoming the needs of his mother. However, it is Harry, the struggling consumptive who champions the story, who
awaits either recovery or death in patience, while Myra suffers and struggles with a world faced alone. She leaves, incapable of celebrating Christmas with Harry, and breaks down, out of guilt and pride, fear and bravery, while Harry waits, accepting his world, brave in his boyish way. It is impossible not to celebrate the peace and wisdom of the TB ward and its inhabitants.

Essentially, the TB ward forces us to question the principle priorities of our world. Yates reaffirms these questions, and their answers, with the other TB story in Eleven Kinds of Loneliness, “Out with the Old.” Here he revisits the sense of solidarity when he writes about the relationship between the paraplegics and the TB’s: “...but there had been no neighborliness between them since the summer of 1948, when the paraplegics got up a petition demanding that the TB’s be made to stay on their own lawn” (“Out with the Old” 125). This humorous anecdote gives way to more serious implications of their identity:

...meanwhile, they did not think of it as home or even as life, exactly, but as a timeless limbo between spells of what, like prisoners, they called “the outside”...Building Seven was a world of its own. It held out a daily choice between its own kind of virtue—staying in bed—and its own kind of vice: midnight crap games, AWOL, and the smuggling of beer and whiskey through the fire-exit doors of its two latrines. (125-6)

What Yates does is develop a sense of magic about the place, without abandoning the gravity of the patients’ situation. What “Out with the Old” accomplishes that “No Pain Whatsoever” does not, is an intimacy with the space, what Yates refers to as a “stage for its own kind of comedy” (126). This comedy, however, seems to be that of the passage of time, from the chaos of everyday life to the calm resolve of death, complicated by the childish behavior exemplified in the previous story.
Yates uses the child metaphor more openly with this piece. Tiny’s name and demeanor, the ward’s clown who decided to keep his nephew’s rubber ducky instead of giving it to him as a birthday present, becomes a jovial figure in an otherwise depressing atmosphere (127). He urges others to live life more fully, and the laughter and joy that erupts in the ward in this story makes it more morbid than the last through such stark juxtaposition. However, most poignant about this story is the transformation the patients undergo when dawning their street clothes.

Many of the men were a revelation in one way or another when they appeared in their street clothes. McIntyre had grown surprisingly humble, incapable of sarcasm or pranks, when he put on his scarcely worn accounting clerk’s costume of blue serge, and Jones had grown surprisingly tough in his old Navy foul-weather jacket. Young Krebs, whom everybody called Junior, had assumed a portly maturity with his double-breasted business suit, and Travers, who most people had forgotten was a Yale man, looked oddly effete in his J. Press flannels and his button-down collar. Several of the Negroes suddenly became Negroes again, instead of ordinary men, when they appeared in their sharply pegged trousers, draped coats and huge Windsor knots, and they even seemed embarrassed to be talking to white men on the familiar terms. But possibly the biggest change of all had been Tiny’s. The clothes themselves were no surprise—heir family ran a prosperous restaurant in Queens, and he was appropriately well-turned-out in a rich black overcoat and silk scarf—but the dignity it gave him was remarkable. (128-9)

In this powerfully rendered passage, Yates addresses all of the divides amongst the men that disappear in the ward, but suddenly return once emblems of society come back into focus. For the black men who feel like had betrayed themselves, the childish zeal now evaporated, it’s
an end of innocence. Likewise, the return to civilization, to families and responsibilities seems the most dooming of all. The enlightenment of the ward is that of coming to terms with purpose and mortality. Just as McIntyre finally dismisses his attempt to recapture his fatherly presence in his daughter’s changing life and his role in the uncertain world beyond the ward, to dawn his sash in a last metaphorical gesture of letting go, and welcoming the unknown future, we realize his greatest triumph and the bravery implicit within it (137). The celebration is overwhelming, fraught with meaning, and is one of the grandest and simplest events in all of Yates’s works.

Recalling his time in the TB ward years later for these stories in Eleven Kinds of Loneliness, and again for “Regards at Home,” Yates distilled the months of recovery into one of the best times of his life. He wrote in his later story, “...but all I knew then was how good it felt to be encouraged—even to be ordered, by a grim ex-Army nurse wearing a sterile mask—to lie down and stay there” (“Regards at Home” 317). It was a memory and in many ways Yates’s writing is also a function of memory. The process of recollection and representation through honest sentences is the nature of his art, and however controversial or unsuccessful his contemporaries tried to make this process seem, it is the key to his craft.

The nature of art making was a near constant in Yates’s life and work. From his sculptor mother in real life to her stand-ins in his fiction, to Bill Grove, the editor-in-chief, his childhood self, to Emily Grimes and even Evan Shepard, an artist with cars, they flood the pages of his stories and novels. Art is key in all of their attempts at developing joy in their mediated worlds.

If the TB ward afforded a physical space separated from the struggles of modern life, with its emphasis on marriage, financial gain and stability, then the private practices of art making also allowed for a cerebral disconnect from the anxieties caused by modern life. Although Blake Bailey’s biography goes to great lengths to conclude that Yates never came to
terms with his mother, I feel that it would be nearly impossible for Yates not to have developed a sense of understanding through their mutual devotion to their crafts. In many ways, Yates’s life mirrored his mother’s: a failing parent figure, crippled with insecurities, who, although, he met praise infrequently, pursued his art unfettered. Yates sought a great deal of emotional healing in his work, acting out fantasies and nightmares, in order to develop a better understanding of reality and its outcomes. However taxing and tumultuous his writing became, it was something always precious and sacred that was tended to with great care. Perhaps this was the only joy Yates ever experienced with some degree of frequency in his entire life.

Yates’s character Evan Shepard from the novel *Cold Spring Harbor* is a hybrid character of himself and his much-hated brother-in-law. In an empathetic attempt at marrying their two struggles, Yates creates a character who is abusive and sensitive, reminiscent of his own later self. He starts the novel with Evan and writes, “All of the sorrows of Evan Shepard’s loutish adolescence were redeemed at seventeen, in 1935, when he fell in love with automobiles,” at once capturing his metamorphosis into a devoted writer (in the shape of a car enthusiast) both critical of his own past as well as that of his brother-in-law (*Cold Spring Harbor* 1). Yates allows for the driving metaphor to continue throughout the novel, the most pure and important part of young Evan’s life. It is a powerful pleasure that cures him and brings him the most joy, until it becomes a perversion of itself, the emblem of Philip’s hatred for his brother-in-law and the symbol of Yates’s own self-hatred.

Yates’s greatest joy in life is also a means of self-purging and atonement, a painful self analysis that allows him to reveal himself to himself, and in turn illuminate the nature of a human’s existence, the heart of his writing’s honesty. Just as joy is a kind of coming to terms in the physical space of the TB ward, so it is a process in the sublime practice of art making, the
practice from which the liberating revelations his characters experience are derived. Richard Yates was a student of human emotion. Hypersensitive and focused on the genuine portrayal of feelings in his fiction, we remember and celebrate his work for its heartbreaking analysis of the human condition. When we think of Paris, we think of an aborted dream or two Americans faking jazz aficionados, lightly buzzing the lapel of a broken man. When we envision the bustling bohemia of Greenwich Village we see a couple, married too young, struggling through the uncertainty of their times. We think of war that, in a strange way, ended too soon. The grotesque sculpture of a President’s head made too small. But perhaps most of all, we feel these things, deeply and honestly, as if they were unfolding in our own lives.

It took time for readers and critics alike to see the beauty in Yates’s honesty, and I believe it will take even more time for us to feel the joy. Yates proves to us, in the spaces he constructs, outside of the confines of popular society, whether quarantined or forgotten, within the recesses of our minds and the passions they hold, that there is room for triumph—even in a world on fire. If there is no hope or celebration in Yates’s world, then there certainly is none in ours. For Yates, joy is a process, of recovery and salvation, creation and recollection, that possesses the same force of destruction that exists within hatred and love.

Works Cited


Celebrated in his prime, forgotten in his final years, only to be championed anew by our greatest contemporary authors, Richard Yates has always exposed readers to the unsettling hypocrisies of our modern age. Classic novels such as Revolutionary Road and The Easter Parade are incomparable chronicles of the quiet and not-so-quiet desperation of the American middle-class. Lonely housewives, addled businessmen, desperate career-girls and fearful boys and soldiers, Yates's America was a panorama of high living, self-doubt and self-deception. And in the tradition of other great realistic writers of his time (Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Cheever and Updike), Yates's fictional world mirrored his own. Richard Yates was a man of my Dad's generation, a group of anxious men too young to qualify for the Greatest Generation and too old to be hippies. And damn could he write about that generation. Yates' world is full of rich, humane portraits of whole classes of people I've never met, drunk World War II vets and blue collar Jersey housewives in the '40s and Depression-era New York street kids. And yet, unlike his contemporary Updike, Yates was never a flashy writer. His turns of phrase aren't espec...