

## Dystopian America in *Revolutionary Road* and 'Sonny's Blues'

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America as a nation is often associated with values of freedom, nationalism, and the optimistic pursuit of dreams. However, in *Revolutionary Road*<sup>1</sup> by Richard Yates and 'Sonny's Blues'<sup>2</sup> by James Baldwin, the authors display a pessimistic view of America as a land characterised by suffering and entrapment, supporting the view of literary critic Leslie Fiedler that American literature is one 'of darkness and the grotesque'.<sup>3</sup> Through the contrasting communities of white middle-class suburbia and Harlem, the authors depict a dystopian America, where characters are stripped of their agency and forced to rely on illusions, false appearances, or escape in order to survive. Both 'Sonny's Blues' and *Revolutionary Road* confirm that despite America's appearance as 'a land of light and affirmation',<sup>4</sup> it hides a much darker reality.

Both Yates and Baldwin use characteristics of dystopian literature to create their respective American societies. *Revolutionary Road* is set in a white middle-class suburban society fuelled by materialism and false appearances. In particular, the community demands conformity. Men must succumb to a bland office job that 'would swallow them up'<sup>5</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> R. Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, London, Random House, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> A. Baldwin, 'Sonny's Blues', in *Going to Meet the Man*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> L. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Stein and Day, 1960, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Fiedler, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, p. 119.

women must accept the feminine role as submissive housewife. The inevitability of these banal futures provides a dystopian image in which society, rather than the individual, dictates a person's fate. The community explored in 'Sonny's Blues' focuses on the most traditional dystopian feature of suffering. If a dystopia is an inescapable place where all things are bad, then it aptly befits the narrator's portrayal of the Harlem 'killing streets',<sup>6</sup> where poverty and addiction are rife. Baldwin makes repeated reference to 'the darkness',<sup>7</sup> (the inevitable future of hardship), that is always 'closing in on'<sup>8</sup> the children living there, highlighting how many good boys 'turned hard or evil or disrespectful, the way kids can, so quick, so quick, especially in Harlem'.<sup>9</sup> Both depictions of America are characterised by dystopian traits: Harlem by a life of unavoidable hardship and suffering, and suburbia by its obsession with de-individualisation and conformity.

In *Revolutionary Road*, Yates explores how characters in pursuit of conformity tend to bury their inner-selves, contributing to a dystopian vision in which individuals are more preoccupied with appearance than reality. Frank, in particular, is willing to sacrifice his own wants, needs, and happiness to preserve a respectable image, obsessing through exaggerated repetition over the need for 'proving; proving',<sup>10</sup> proving himself, and particularly, his manhood, to the world. Frank goes on a 'personal odyssey to recuperate his masculinity'.<sup>11</sup> Yates suggests that this odyssey stems from his reverence for traditional manhood, a trait

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<sup>6</sup> Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Baldwin, p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> Baldwin, p. 104.

<sup>9</sup> Baldwin, p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> M. Moreno, 'Consuming the Frontier Illusion: The Construction of Suburban Masculinity in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, no. 3, 2003, p. 89.

which he can only measure through the comparison with a woman's femininity:

He had taken command of the universe because he was a man, and because the marvellous creature who opened and moved for him, tender and strong, was a woman.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, Frank grows to detest anything that compromises his wife's facade of womanhood, seeing it as an assault on his masculinity. Frank is determined to 'take the lawnmower away from [April]'<sup>13</sup> so she would not be seen doing a man's job, and he is disquieted by the image of April 'coming home from a day at the office'.<sup>14</sup> He is willing to make any decision to enhance his masculine facade, in spite of his own feelings, admitting to 'taking a hopelessly dull job to prove he could be as responsible as any other family man',<sup>15</sup> and having children simply to gain 'proof of manhood'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Yates presents a dystopian view of the American family structure where love and dreams are traded for fragile veneers of perfection.

Yates' truly negative vision, however, arises from Mrs Givings, who epitomises a citizen brain-washed by the attractive facade of her dystopia. Determined to conform to society's expectations, Mrs Givings desperately tries to salvage her family's image after her son is imprisoned in an insane asylum. As a real estate agent, she champions the image of a perfect life, but her obsession with creating the ideal American family is futile: her son is 'mad' and

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<sup>12</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> Yates, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> Yates, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> Yates, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Yates, p. 51.

her husband barely registers her existence. Mrs Givings' view of life is so illusory that the pinnacle of truth is to be 'as real as a magazine illustration'.<sup>17</sup> This mindset is characteristic of a dystopian society without free-thought, as Yates suggests that in suburban America, pursuing perfection in magazines (a perfection more real than life itself), is one's only aspiration.

In 'Sonny's Blues', Baldwin also uses false appearance to convey a negative image of America, but to differing effect. The narrator attempts to escape his Harlem upbringing by adopting a 'carefully ordered middle class existence',<sup>18</sup> but he does so mainly through fragile external appearances. He moves to a housing project, where the homes are 'a parody of the good, clean faceless life',<sup>19</sup> suggesting his attempt to achieve the perfect family seen in *Revolutionary Road*. However, the houses are clearly a failed imitation, the word 'parody' connotes a false veneer, rather than a true achievement of the ideal family life. Baldwin's narrator pessimistically notes how the facade of the houses cannot change their dystopian characteristics; 'the beat-looking grass lying around isn't enough to make their lives green',<sup>20</sup> and the playgrounds that should connote a thriving community are re-appropriated for nefarious after-dark activities. The narrator is aware that despite changing his external environment, he will remain haunted by the 'killing streets of [his] childhood'<sup>21</sup> – his brother's drug addiction a constant reminder of his inescapable upbringing. Baldwin paints a negative picture of this society; despite attempts to change the facade of the Harlem streets,

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<sup>17</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> E. Ognibene, 'Black Literature Revisited: Sonny's Blues', *The English Journal*, vol. 60, no. 1, 1971, p 36.

<sup>19</sup> Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*, p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> Baldwin, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*, p. 112.

the fate of the people inside is unlikely to change, and their future suffering remains unavoidable.

While Baldwin's America acknowledges the futility of false appearances in evading reality, Yates' depiction is perhaps more dystopian, as illusion becomes more meaningful than life itself. This pessimistic view is highlighted most aptly through John Givings. As the antithesis to his mother, he delivers blunt commentary that cuts through the pretence of the suburban facade. His refusal to conform to society's prescribed niceties, particularly the external manners of the way he dresses or how he inappropriately puts 'sherry in a highball glass',<sup>22</sup> forces him to be exiled. In his most scathing remark, he tells Frank:

You knocked [April] up ... so you could spend the rest of your life hiding behind that maternity dress.<sup>23</sup>

Although this statement is true, it becomes John's final condemnation to a diagnosis of insanity. Thus, Yates paints a dystopian American society in which truth-tellers are locked away in psychiatric wards and those who live in delusion are able to succeed.

The extent to which characters are reliant on appearance rather than reality is highlighted in the fear of exposure that exists in 'Sonny's Blues' and *Revolutionary Road*. Both texts begin with unwanted revelations, where light, normally a literary symbol for goodness and truth,<sup>24</sup> takes on a negative character. In 'Sonny's Blues', the narrator discovers that his brother has

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<sup>22</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> Yates, p. 288.

<sup>24</sup> M. Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 112.

been arrested on drug charges under 'the swinging lights of the subway car',<sup>25</sup> which provide a flickering, eerie illumination of a fact that the narrator has long sought to avoid. *Revolutionary Road* begins with April's failed theatrical endeavour, her whole performance captured in the stage lights and her subsequent pain obvious in the dressing room 'shadows cast by naked lightbulbs'.<sup>26</sup> Both uses of light are linked to cruel and inescapable revelations, exposing the false appearances of the characters. Sonny's brother must accept that though he has moved to a housing project, he cannot escape the pain of his Harlem upbringing, and April's failed performance symbolically exposes her inability to successfully fulfil the domestic role that society expects of her.

Throughout both texts, Baldwin and Yates use light as a motif signifying danger and unsightliness, a bright force that destroys the well-manufactured appearances and false realities characters seek to create. This is perhaps best explained through Baldwin's statement that Sonny must be drawn out of 'the depths of his private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light',<sup>27</sup> using zoomorphism to emphasise the innate fear associated with revealing personal truths. In particular, the sun, a literary symbol associated with power and beauty, adopts the effect of revealing imperfections. Baldwin writes that 'the bright sun ... made his eyes look yellow and showed up the dirt in his conked hair'<sup>28</sup> and Yates observes how 'the dying sun shone crimson through her husband's earlobe and made his dandruff into flakes of fire'.<sup>29</sup> Light is also linked to dire outcomes. It is upon stepping out

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<sup>25</sup> Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*, p. 103.

<sup>26</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> Baldwin, p. 106.

<sup>29</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, pp. 158-159.

of darkness into moonlight that Sonny's uncle is killed, and it is in the 'merciless stare of ... hundred-watt light bulbs'<sup>30</sup> that Frank sees his and April's failings as parents. Both authors continually invert the role of light to give it a dystopian character, making it the agent of ugliness, guilt, and even death, cruelly unravelling the lives that characters seek to create.

By establishing a dystopian setting that forces characters to seek some means of solace, both authors are able to explore the theme of escape. In *Revolutionary Road*, this takes the form of spatial and emotional escape, with characters romanticising travel and seeking love affairs. However, in 'Sonny's Blues', Baldwin's characters preference internal forms of escape, with characters using mind-altering drugs and music to alleviate suffering. Due to the Wheelers' joint awareness of their banal suburban fates, seeking escape becomes one of the few uniting forces in their relationship. Both prate about suburbia existing 'to keep reality at bay',<sup>31</sup> yet they decide to combat their suburban unreality with an equally illusory idea that they will move to Paris. The idea itself is born out of fiction, something April 'read about it in a magazine'<sup>32</sup> and something Frank found in 'his reading of *The Sun Also Rises*'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, their means of escape only reinforces their current position. Even their private individual escapes, both seeking extramarital affairs, are merely mundane and hackneyed forms of suburban rebellion. Yates uses these attempts at dissent to further his negative depiction of American suburbia: escape is futile in a society that ensnares and suffocates its citizens.

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<sup>30</sup> Yates, p. 223.

<sup>31</sup> Yates, p. 110.

<sup>32</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, p. 108.

<sup>33</sup> Yates, p. 132.

In 'Sonny's Blues', Baldwin views escapism as a more viable means of avoiding a dystopian society, but the methods of escape he suggests, particularly moving house or pursuing a career in music, are not without their pitfalls. The narrator is partially able to overcome his Harlem upbringing through physically leaving and coming to accept 'the bourgeois values of the white community',<sup>34</sup> evidenced through his instructing Sonny to pursue an education and reasonable job rather than follow a dream. Although this escape does afford Sonny's brother more security, he grows increasingly aware through the text of his move's shortcomings: leaving behind Harlem has separated him from his childhood community and created a great divide between him and his brother. When the brothers do pass through Harlem they end up 'seeking ... that part of [them]selves which had been left behind',<sup>35</sup> suggesting that there is some scope for positive outcomes in Baldwin's otherwise pessimistic view of society.

Baldwin also explores drugs and art as methods of escapism. 'The darkness of movies'<sup>36</sup> and the 'in control'<sup>37</sup> feeling of heroin are most favoured, but both are problematic as fleeting and hedonistic ways to mask reality rather than means of overcoming it. Even music, which is arguably Sonny's main form of escapism, is inextricably linked to a world of drugs and addiction. However, Baldwin's view on escapism is not purely negative, as displayed in the final pages of 'Sonny's Blues'. Sonny gets a chance to perform his music, and though the stage lights are, again, a dangerous force, so bright 'that if they moved in the light too suddenly

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<sup>34</sup> Ognibene, 'Black Literature Revisited: 'Sonny's Blues'', *The English Journal*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>35</sup> Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*, p. 113.

<sup>36</sup> Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*, p. 104.

<sup>37</sup> Baldwin, p. 132.



without thinking, they would perish in flame',<sup>38</sup> Sonny finally finds freedom.<sup>39</sup> The final image of the 'cup of trembling'<sup>40</sup> alludes to the biblical moment when suffering is taken away,<sup>41</sup> indicating hope for the possibility and viability of escape. However, the dystopian vision of America is not entirely negated. The cup glows and shakes precariously above Sonny's head, leaving an ambiguous image, where escape is possible, but it may be fleeting and fragile, and it cannot be achieved without sacrifice or suffering.

In contrast, Yates' final comment in *Revolutionary Road* leaves no scope for positive outcomes: suburban America necessarily destroys its citizens. Throughout the novel, Frank outwardly projects hatred towards his office job, trying to live up to April's ringing compliment of 'you're the most interesting person I've ever met'.<sup>42</sup> However, he grows to love his mundane work. He finds himself helplessly beguiled by Pollock's compliments to his advertising sense, he is sentimentally drawn to the offer to follow his father's footsteps, and he even turns his family life into sales work, viewing the non-abortion of their baby as 'the idea he had to sell'.<sup>43</sup> By his final conversation with his wife, when he joyously explains how the office computers operate,<sup>44</sup> there is little doubt that he has become what he once despised. Shep condemns him to the image of the faceless grey suit that he had so desperately

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<sup>38</sup> Baldwin, p. 141.

<sup>39</sup> Baldwin, p. 142.

<sup>40</sup> Baldwin, p. 142.

<sup>41</sup> K. Byerman, 'Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity in Sonny's Blues', *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1982, p. 371.

<sup>42</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, p. 24.

<sup>43</sup> Yates, p. 219.

<sup>44</sup> Yates, p. 299.

tried to avoid, confirming the thing that Frank fears most: 'he was boring'.<sup>45</sup> Tragically, Yates' dystopian America has triumphed over individual identity.

April, in contrast, fails not by succumbing to the banal domestic image, but through her complete inability to fulfil this role, despite her best efforts. She attempts to support her husband and give him a sense of control through the vision of him 'finding himself' in Europe, but she ultimately emasculates him by suggesting that she be the temporary provider. Even without this shortcoming, April's desire to escape suburbia is thwarted by her pregnancy, her lack of freedom becoming so total that her own body restricts her. Still unable to play the role of wife, she aborts her pregnancy – rejecting the ultimate symbol of femininity, submission and motherhood – and the consequence of her dissent is death. Ultimately, Yates uses this tragic ending to confirm the dystopian elements of America, a society that either forces citizens to conform, or makes them die trying.

The visions of American society created by Baldwin and Yates condemn the nation as a land of illusion, hiding negative traits behind the guise of 'light and affirmation'.<sup>46</sup> The narrator in 'Sonny's Blues' attempts to escape his Harlem upbringing, but he cannot avoid suffering and remains haunted by his brother's drug problem and the death of his daughter. Baldwin offers only music as a means of escape, but this outlet is inextricably linked to drugs, danger, and family breakdown, and even music's viability in alleviating suffering is left ambiguous. In *Revolutionary Road*, the Wheelers feel suffocated in their banal suburban environment, but

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<sup>45</sup> Yates, p. 332.

<sup>46</sup> Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, p. 29.

are nonetheless forced to conform to its vision of the American family. When April is unable to fulfil her role as wife and mother, suicide is her only means of escape. Both 'Sonny's Blues' and *Revolutionary Road* confirm that despite America's bright and sunny veneer, light is not always a force of good, and appearances don't always reflect reality.

### References

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