“Voluptuous narrative pleasure”: An Inter-Textual Investigation of Suicide in *Revolutionary Road*

In a 1974 speech mourning the death of Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich declared, “We have had enough suicidal woman poets, enough suicidal women, enough of self-destructiveness as the sole form of violence permitted to women” (75). Rich’s words protest a literary tradition that has interred many of its most compelling female voices. Though Rich addressed the suicide of a writer rather than a writer’s portrayal of suicide, her words resonate with the frustration of finding yet another woman’s corpse in the final pages of a novel. Across centuries and genres, the body of the female suicide has functioned as an icon and text onto which writers inscribe a gendered narrative of death, madness, and failed resistance. In *Revolutionary Road*, April Wheeler fulfills this suicide function¹, linking Richard Yates' novel of suburban suffering to a multi-era, multi-generic tradition of literary suicides. Thus, April Wheeler’s fictional life and death are not only the products of a culture that confined women to domestic spaces and denied reproductive agency; they are saturated in a discourse where women drown, overdose, and hurl themselves in front of trains. April’s associations with performance, madness,

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¹ Technically speaking, April dies of hemorrhaging after attempting a self-administered abortion. However, given the ambiguity of the “suicides” that claim the lives of literary heroines like Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, I use the term to denote deaths resulting from both a conscious choice to kill oneself and a conscious choice to do something known by the heroine as likely to result in death.
and watery death situate her among doomed predecessors spanning genres and centuries. Though Yates is typically framed as a realist detailing lives sculpted by the mid-century cultural climate he faithfully depicts, to overlook the influence of divergent literary works on any novel is to overlook the profound ways convention or resisting convention shapes the portrayal of imagined situations and characters.

A similar claim may be easily made concerning literary criticism itself: generic conventions and standardized patterns of interpretation highlight or disguise narrative strategies with the aim of establishing a coherent, compelling reading of the text. Given the relatively small body of criticism dealing with *Revolutionary Road*, it stands to reason that these patterns should be more apparent in Yates scholarship than in the criticism surrounding more routinely discussed authors. However, Yates’ paradoxical historical and literary position as a realist among post-modernists seems to have established twin axis around which investigations of *Revolutionary Road* gravitate. On one hand, Yates-the-Realist invites scholars to celebrate Yates as the insightful witness. On the other hand, the increasingly historical setting of *Revolutionary Road* calls for discussions of an era that provides both an iconic touchstone and ironic foil for contemporary American culture. As a result, readings of *Revolutionary Road* tend toward the historical, celebrating Yates as a stalwart chronicler of an era that only recently necessitated historical investigation—at least for a younger generation of scholars. Yet as Phillip Barrish points out, “In the impulse to make literary work line up with what we already know (or think we know) about broader historical developments…we risk moving too quickly past some of the wrinkles and folds that distinguish literature itself” (11). In other
words, in the attempt to corroborate realist literature with historical reality, scholars easily overlook divergent narrative threads. With these critical contexts in mind, Yates’ use of the suicide trope, with its inherent movement toward artifice and melodrama, necessitates a reading that questions the presence of the ghosts of Ophelia and Edna Pontellier (among others) in the suburbs along Revolutionary Road.

Many scholars frame Yates as a realist’s realist whose scathing vision reveals the pervasive isolation and despair of 1950s suburbia. For example, Lee Siegel observes that Yates “writes less as an artist than like a witness” (303) and has perfected “the art of the unaverted eye” (303). Morris Dickstein also adopts a visual metaphor, associating Revolutionary Road with a “psychopathic gaze [that] pierces the timid rationalizations of the ‘normal’ world” (123). References to the authorial gaze align Yates with modes of intellectual prestige that Phillip Barrish associates first with nineteenth century American Realism (14). Yet Barrish also compellingly shifts from James’ and Wharton’s literary treatment of viewer, objectivity, and power, to shifting theoretical perspectives in academia. For Barrish, both Realist authors and materialist scholars engage in a game of “realer-than-thou” wherein clarity of vision entitles the author to bear witness to an alternatingly physical or linguistic reality while maintaining the unbiased distance required for serious scholarship (129-130). Thus the clarity of a writer’s gaze -- the ability to bear witness to lived experience -- becomes a benchmark of authority and status. As Kate Charlton-Jones points out, Yates earned muted critical acclaim during his

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2 In “A Realism of Internal Others: Richard Yates’ Revolutionary Road,” Leif Bull observes that predominantly Realist readings overshadow the way Yates’ affirmation of silence and emptiness aligns his writing with the work of Postmodernist authors.
own lifetime as a skilled craftsman and subtle innovator within the realist tradition at a historical moment when “the literati—the scholars and editors of literature—regarded realist fiction as passe” (120-121). After decades out of print, the stylistic conservatism that rendered Yates “passé” now renders him a useful informant.

Intertwining historical and inter-textual analysis, Carlton-Jones situates Yates’ fiction alongside literary predecessors and contemporaries in the Realist tradition including James, Salinger, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Frank O’Hara (14). Such generic placement aligns with Yates' critical reception during his own lifetime and afterward, as well as the author’s assessment of himself. Charlton-Jones’s selection of companion-texts draws heavily on “Some Very Good Masters,” the New York Times Book Review literary auto-biography that Yates penned in 1981. Here Yates traces his evolution as a writer through “embarrassingly frequent attempts to talk and act like characters in the early Hemingway books,” a “nourishing” apprenticeship in the pages of The Great Gatsby, and a conscious study of Madame Bovary “as a guide, if not a model, for the novel that was taking shape in my mind” (3). Madame Bovary in particular warrants careful investigation as both a point of reference and point of departure for the novel. As “Some Very Good Masters” reveals, Yates saw himself as an heir to a predominantly male realist tradition; as Charlton-Jones’s investigation reveals, reading Yates within this tradition illuminates the author’s interest in performance, gender roles, and dialog as understated characterization, among other topics. Since these literary connections are thoroughly developed elsewhere, it seems imperative to unravel the resonances, allusions, and interactions that emerge reading Revolutionary Road alongside a selection of texts.
that explicitly inform April Wheeler’s death as an enduring, genre-crossing literary device.

In light of Yates’ conventional generic placement as a Realist documenting suburban disillusionment, studies of *Revolutionary Road* tend toward historicized explorations of gender roles. Gender identity fittingly takes center stage in *Revolutionary Road*. Frank and April Wheeler’s contentious marriage, as well as their attempts to perform their gendered roles within the marriage, inform many of the novel’s thematic concerns. For Michael P. Moreno, *Revolutionary Road* “reveals the origins of the male consumer identity and the disappearance of the frontier/war hero by the onset of the Cold War—all the while illustrating the crisis of contemporary tensions of masculinity” (93). Claudia Falk takes a similar approach by situating Frank’s personal identity crisis within a cultural crisis “informed by issues of anxiety, nonconformity, consumerism, and domesticity” (67). Consistent with his grounding of *Revolutionary Road* in 1950s suburbia, Moreno conceptualizes Frank and April’s relationship as a microcosmic Cold War enacted in domestic space (70). While Falk acknowledges “It is April who acts and Frank reacts,” this interpersonal dynamic is discussed primarily in terms of Frank’s besieged masculinity (63). Given these authors’ concerns with masculinity, April makes only brief appearances in Moreno’s and Falk’s analyses. In contrast, Constance Mui and Julien Murphy offer a reading of April’s struggles juxtaposed against Sam Mendes’s 2008 film adaptation of the novel and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Mui and Murphy propose, “Beauvoir’s existentialist-feminist framework enables us to analyze the

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3 In *The Problem of American Realism*, Michael Davitt Bell finds the genesis of Realism in Howell’s attempts to reconcile his identities as a man and a writer (36).
Wheelers’ actions in terms of the human endeavor to transcend the given, bad faith versus authenticity, and the existential costs of people’s choice” (69). Like the other scholars, Mui and Murphy contextualize their analysis in the material and social culture of 1950s America as it shapes the Wheelers’ attempts to live authentically.

Yates' realism and attention to material culture certainly invites the historicist approach adopted by such scholars. However, this framework erases the suicide trope as it unfolds throughout the text by disguising a pervasive narrative strategy as a realistic literary documentation of a single character in a specific historical milieu. Furthermore, if the purpose of critical conversations are to open up new and thought-provoking interpretations of texts, then the scholarly discourse benefits from multiple theoretical and aesthetic approaches. Texts continually unfold in shifting cultural and temporal contexts that warrant continual reconsideration and investigation. Though accepted, predominant interpretative currents invariably emerge through collaboration and repetition, while counter-currents can prevent rigidity and complacently. In *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, A.R. Ammons compellingly asks, “are we creators in fact/or collectors of relics:/do we make grow/or cast into stone” (89)? This question resonates with the work of scholars as well as poets. Academic conversations play a fundamental role in canon building by creating the framework through which others read a text and identify texts of significant value and complexity. It may seem foolish to assemble a vast stack of women’s corpses and ask: what do they have in common, and why do we find their bodies on so many famous pages? Yet counter-currents emerge from questions, and *Revolutionary Road*, as an artful, complex novel merits diverse interpretations and critiques. Exchanging
historical for inter-textual contexts is not to contest the accuracy of historicism, but rather to strive for a less easy fit. Doing so illuminates new perspectives on an often overlooked or oversimplified text. An intertextual perspective simultaneously reveals the artifice lingering at the borders of Yates’ Realist narrative and the ways realism disguises the troubling artistic appropriation of women’s bodies.

*Revolutionary Road* immediately acknowledges its relationship to other texts as it opens with the Laurel Players staging a production of Robert Sherwood’s *The Petrified Forest*. Sherwood's play originally ran 197 performances at the Broadhurst Theatre in New York, and its favorable reception from both critics and viewers compelled Warner Brothers to purchase rights for $125,000. The subsequent 1936 film, starring Leslie Howard, Bette Davis, and Humphrey Bogart, earned equally enthusiastic reviews (Bindas 29). Both film and play continued to exert their cultural influence over the following decades. In fact, Yates identifies the year that the novel opens as 1955, the year NBC aired a live television version of the play starring Lauren Bacall, Humphrey Bogart, and Henry Fonda (“Producer’s Showcase”). Fittingly, one nervous, lip-chewing audience member calls the play “a fine theater piece with a basic point of view that was every bit as valid today as in the thirties” (7). However, the “basic point of view” of Sherwood’s play and its position as a text-within-the-text remains ambiguous. Yates uses the play as both a point of reference and point of departure. On one hand, Yates builds on the play’s thematic concerns with futility and stagnation. On the other hand, he positions *The Petrified Forest* as an idealistic foil to the lives unfolding in his own text. Given the play’s consistently warm, but not particularly ground-breaking, popular reception, it
follows that the Laurel Players perceive *The Petrified Forest* as the “common-sense”
choice in contrast to works by Henrik Ibsen and Bernard Shaw (4). Thus Yates’ makes an
aesthetic and social distinction between the wide-ranging, inoffensive appeal of
Sherwood’s work and the scathing artistic vision of innovators like Ibsen and Shaw.
Yates positions *The Petrified Forest* as a safe, and therefore popular, choice for the both
the actors and audience in the novel. After all, reviews of *The Petrified Forest* tend to
describe the play in terms of melodrama, romance, and sentimentality—emotional
registers at odds with the stark, resigned tone of Yates’ novel. Nonetheless, Yates’
choice to open *Revolutionary Road* with this particular play informs the treatment of
suicide throughout the novel since the altruistic suicide of Alan Squire marks the climax
and conclusion of *The Petrified Forest*.

Despite Yates’ skeptical framing of the play, he nonetheless builds resonances
with Sherwood’s work. The title itself, *Petrified Forest*, with its connotations of
immobility, age, and the Arizona badlands, counterpoints the floral imagery of the Laurel
Player’s name. Similarly, the title *Revolutionary Road* echoes the opening line of
Sherwood’s play, “It’s a revolution!” (I). The speaker is a vocal lineman preaching
socialism to an unappreciative assortment of workers and American Legionnaires in a
restaurant with a sign reading “TIPPING IS UN-AMERICAN--KEEP YOUR CHANGE”
(I). The lineman’s lunchtime rhetoric, followed by rebuttals from a gas station attendant
who randomly shows newspaper clippings of his high school football triumphs to

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4 Alternatively, the fictional audience’s response may comment more on the audience than the play itself. Yates stresses the point that “Anyone could see they were a better than average crowd” defined by department store marketing demographics. With this in mind, the audience’s characterization of the play suggests a kind of echo chamber as the theater-goers simply reiterate cocktail-party aesthetics when they declare that “*The Petrified Forest* was hardly one of the world’s great plays” (Yates 7).
strangers, establishes a tone of muted resignation. For all their talk (of revolution, travel, or new business prospects) Sherwood crafts both a stage setting and a progression of events that negate the possibility of dramatic change. As Richard Wattenberg points out, *The Petrified Forest’s* plot, “revolves less around action than futility” (22). The concept of revolution operates similarly in Yates’ novel as the characters’ attempts at transformation are continually thwarted or abandoned. Frank and April’s residence on Revolutionary Road becomes increasingly ironic as Yates reiterates the futility of their actions.

This sense of futility haunts the struggling Laurel Players as they attempt to launch their own artistic revolution in their suburban community. *Revolutionary Road* begins with “the final dying sounds” of the fledgling actors standing “silent and helpless” in an “empty auditorium” at the end of their final rehearsal (3). The language of death and isolation dominates the passage, alongside memories of winter preparations that juxtapose “brown fields” lying “naked and tender between curds of shriveled snow” with the anxiety, self-doubt, and fear of the actors (5). Nonetheless, in their final dress rehearsal, the Laurel Players hover between resignation and optimism as they laugh, sing, and “allow… themselves to acknowledge the coming of spring” (4). Despite the predominant images of barrenness and anxiety, these passages also establish a tentative contrast between stagnation and regeneration that aligns with Sherwood’s artistic vision.

Furthermore, Yates’ fictional staging of the play highlights the “brains without purpose” speech that Sherwood identifies as “the essence of the play” (qtd. Brown 137-138). In this scene, the play’s hero and heroine discuss art, poetry, and thwarted
ambition under the glowing neon signs of the Black Mesa Café. Alan Squire, a washed-up writer hitchhiking across country in the wake of a European love-affair, laments “a vanishing race” of intellectuals and outlines the aesthetic vision of T.S. Eliot to Gabby Mapel, an idealistic Arizonian waitress. Though the conversation moves inevitably toward declarations of love, Yates’ depicts this stage-moment as a death-blow to the Laurel Player’s theatrical aspirations (Sherwood I). When the leading man comes down with the flu, the balding stage director attempts to fill in as Alan Squire. Yates notes that the stage director “looked all wrong in the part” and that his failure to look like a romantic lead contributes to the audience’s disbelief. Yates wryly undermines the melodrama of the moment as, “in the middle of his important first-act speech about his own futility…one of his gesturing hands upsets a glass of water that flooded the table” (9). In this inter-textual scene, Yates reveals the inhabitants of Revolutionary Road as incapable of performing the idealized roles in Sherwood’s play. By effectively “breaking” the play, Yates fulfills a two-fold purpose. First, he demonstrates the relevance of Sherwood’s underlying theme of futility and failed revolution. More importantly, he deconstructs particular stage-moments by revealing the artifice required to render the pitiful compelling and the hypocritical heroic.

Yates adopts a similar tactic by introducing April Wheeler as a more realistic incarnation of Gabby Maple. As Gabby’s last name contrasts with her home on the edge of the Petrified Forest, so April’s seasonal moniker contrasts with the images of winter that proceed her introduction5. Therefore, Yates positions The Petrified Forest in contrast

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5 Though it’s worth noting that Yates, who deeply admired T.S. Eliot, names his heroine after the “cruelest month.”
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to the Wheeler’s lived experience. While April performs as Gabby on the stage, in the social space, April and Frank share the role of Alan Squire. The distinction between theatrical performance and social performance quickly dissipates as Yates affirms the inherently performative nature of social personae. For example, after the play April greets Frank with “a small replica of her curtain-call smile” (15) and later puts on “a pleasant social face” when she steps from the dressing room back onto the stage of society (18). As the couple departs, Frank falls into a reverie where he recalls himself “rehearsing” and assembling the “wardrobe” required for a fourteen-year-old youth to abandon high school for the “hobo jungles” while train-hopping and hitchhiking west (18). In his memory, Frank imagines himself as a kind of Alan Squire: a traveler and misunderstood intellectual whose mental gifts are wasted in an apathetic world; on the stage, April tentatively assumes the role of Gabby Maple. However, Yates breaks down the boundary between theater and reality by revealing the ways small gestures, self-perception, and social conventions contribute to a perpetual performance. At the same time Yates highlights the fallibility of these performances and their inability to live up to the pathos of their theatrical foils.

Immediately after this memory, Frank recalls a story from April’s youth. Readers learn that April once ran out of a high school classroom “leaving a tidy, well-spaced trail of [menstrual] blood drops on the floor” (19). The memory is significant as it contextualizes April’s role throughout the novel. The memory associates April with a female body beyond her control, a body whose reproductive cycles take on a “nightmarish” quality as they invade her daily life (19). Furthermore, the scene
foreshadows her bloody death while the word “tidy” introduces a textual fixation with the ways women suicides sanitize their violent deaths. If Frank’s personal memory frames him as an ironic parody of the intellectual vagabond in the tradition of Alan Squire, the second-hand memory of April shifts the suicide act from actor to actress. April’s stage persona, Gabrielle Maple, is neither a suicide nor a madwoman, though April herself steps into those roles by the novel’s conclusion. Rather, Gabrielle is the beneficiary of a suicide when the play’s hero, Alan Squire, signs over his life insurance policy to the girl and then arranges his death at the hands of a mob-boss (Sherwood II). With April’s death, Yates inverts the suicide premise suggested by the play-within-the novel. In *The Petrified Forest*, death paves the way for the heroine’s escape to Paris. In *Revolutionary Road*, April attempts an abortion to preserve her Parisian dream, but dies as a consequence. Rather than liberating Frank, April’s suicide reduces Frank to “a walking, talking, smiling, lifeless man” (347). Thus Yates uses *The Petrified Forest* as a reference to deconstruct the myth of heroic self-sacrifice, as well as the idealistic dream of Paris.

Nonetheless, Yates exchanges one set of literary conventions for another by inverting the gender of the suicide. Because suicide is so dramatically gendered in fiction, the implied contrast between play and novel becomes muddled as it crosses two distinctive literary traditions. In their analysis of 61 literary texts containing 104 suicides, David Lester and Steven Stack conclude that suicide motives are clearly arranged along gender lines. While men commit suicide as acts of altruistic heroism or to “cheat the executioner,” women commit suicide in the wake of interpersonal (mostly romantic and familial) conflict or psychological distress (16-17). Men are portrayed as heroes who use
their deaths to either provide for others or defy oppression. Literary heroines, on the other hand, tend to commit suicide in fits of emotion or desperation after being ostracized from their communities. These motives align with traditional depictions of men as active players in public spaces and women as passive respondents in intimate social spaces.

*The Petrified Forest* fits this pattern by framing Squire’s suicide as an act of self-sacrifice that aims to provide for Gabrielle’s new life in Paris. Yet even as Yates undermines the heroism of Alan Squire’s suicide, April’s death in *Revolutionary Road* corresponds with the typical causes of women’s literary suicide prompted by relationship conflict, insanity, and socially unacceptable sexual-reproductive agency. Thus the legacy of women’s suicide as the final, theatrical gesture of a failed maternal-figure complicates Yates’ attempted shift from melodrama to realism. Rather than undermining the suicide trope, he exchanges one gendered trope for another. Rather than moving nearer a ‘real’ documentation of suicide, he engages with a parallel and equally artificial narrative tradition.

In addition to the narrative patterns outlined in Lester and Stack’s study, depictions of the female suicide fixate on theatrics and performance. April initially presides over the Laurel Player’s production of *The Petrified Forest* in a generative, maternal role. The audience thinks of the fledgling theater company as, “The brave idea of it, the healthy, hopeful sound of it: the birth of a really good community theater right

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6 In “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century,” Margaret Higonnet also affirms the gendering of literary suicide. However, she notes that in Classical texts, women suicides were perceived as masculine. According to Higonnet, the feminization of suicide did not take place until the 18th century when suicide was reconceptualized as a medical condition. Since women were seen as the weaker sex, prone to physical and psychological illnesses, suicide became a sign of feminine frailty (106-106)
here, among themselves” (7). They associate the company, and thus its star player, with birth and health. Similarly, the audience responds to April’s appearance on stage with the observation, “It didn’t even matter that bearing two children had left her a shade too heavy in the hips and thighs, for she moved with the shyly sensual grace of maidenhood” (8). April’s responsibility for “giving birth” to community art hinges on her capability to perform a stylized, youthful femininity that ironically conflicts with a body appraised negatively for its maternal characteristics. April’s husband, Frank Wheeler, reiterates the audience’s progressive disillusionment with April’s performance as “the swaying, shining vision of a girl he hadn’t seen in years…changed into the graceless, suffering creature whose existence he tried every day of his life to deny” (13). For Frank, the audience, and the Laurel Players, April exists as a performing body rather than a person. She carries the “static, shapeless, inhumanly heavy weight” (6) of their play (and the hope that play embodies) like she carries the extra weight on her hips: a momentary defiance that hinges on theatrical illusion and collapses against monotonous reality. By intertwining April’s performing body with her maternal body, Yates’ begins and ends his novel with a miscarriage.

In Revolutionary Road, as well as other texts, pregnancy, madness, and suicide are linked through the performing body. Fittingly, many of the world’s most well-known heroines meet their end on the stage rather than the page. Ophelia and Hedda Gabler offer two insightful examples of the continuity of the suicide trope across centuries and genres, while also revealing the way Yates draws on these conventions as he depicts April on literal and figurative stages. Foremost, all three women carry the burden of unwanted or
unacknowledged pregnancies. The abundance of reproductive imagery in *Hamlet* has long lead readers and theatergoers to speculate Ophelia’s pregnancy. Though reluctant to declare that the textual Ophelia is *physically* pregnant, Maurice Hunt claims that Shakespeare’s language compels readers to “imaginatively construct a pregnant whole from scattered parts” (645). From Ophelia’s lunatic songs of sullied maidenhood to Hamlet’s ribald tants, the possibility of pregnancy haunts Shakespeare’s text, as the consequences of pregnancy haunt Ophelia herself as she decks herself with flowers and bids farewell to the Danish court. Indeed Ophelia’s association with flowers hints at an intriguing correspondence with unwanted pregnancy in both Elsinore and Revolutionary Hill Estates. Robert Painter and Brian Parker note that many of the flowers (rosemary, fennel, rue, violets, and, willow) that Ophelia wears or distributes at court are included in contemporary herbals for their antifertility and abortive properties (qtd. Hunt 653).

Though April carries out her abortion with implements gathered from a department store rather than a garden, plants nonetheless signify death and aborted growth in *Revolutionary Road*. Early in the novel, Mrs. Givens brings the Wheelers a box of flowering sedum to plant in their driveway. April and Frank bicker about what to do with the plants while their children turn “their hopeful eyes from one parent to another.” Despite April’s apparent “determin[ation] to prove, with a new, flat-footed emphasis, that a sensible middle-class housewife was all she had ever wanted to be” and Frank’s assertion that “I thought you’d probably know all about it,” April does not know what to do with the plants and banishes them to the basement (45-46). The presence of the children and the focus on April’s conventional appearance imbues the plants with
maternal significance. Mrs. Givens makes this connotation explicit on the final page of the novel. After finding the plants “dead and dried out” in the cellar, she laments, “That’s the kind of thing I mean. Wouldn’t you think that when someone goes to a certain amount of trouble to give you a perfectly good plant, a living, growing thing...” (355). Her tirade trails off, but the implication is clear. The plants are a “living, growing” responsibility, like a child. Therefore, their neglect reveals April as “strange” and “unwholesome” (355) as the plants become another unwanted, aborted child.

Mrs. Givens’ scathing assessment of April in wake of her death contrasts dramatically from the persona April attempts to cultivate throughout the novel. Indeed, as April grows increasingly discontent with her maternal responsibilities, the more she mimes conventional motherhood. For example, April launches into a convincing performance of the suburban homemaker in the days that precede her pregnancy announcement. Frank notes that, “She had spent the day at a kind of work she had always hated and lately allowed herself to neglect: cleaning the parts of the house that didn’t show” (217). These Herculean trails of scrubbing, dusting, and hauling leave her “too tired to feel like talking” and thus provide an effective way to avoid conversation (218). Furthermore, April embraces her role as a good housekeeper to conceal or compensate for the abortion tools carefully stored in the linen closet. Yates highlights the performative nature of April’s domestic toils by returning to theatrical metaphors. Frank discovers April “pacing the kitchen in the same tense, high-shouldered way she had paced the stage in the second act of The Petrified Forest.” When she finally reveals her pregnancy, “the perfection of her curtain-call smile began to blur and moisten into a
winkled grimace of despair” (218). April attempts to perform perfect motherhood on the domestic stage, but like the disastrous community theater, her role is unsustainable. Her forced smile collapses into despair, and then her tears turn to defiance as both her pregnancy and her abortion plan are revealed.

While April’s pregnancy and abortion plans are swiftly exposed, Henrik Ibsen follows Shakespeare’s technique of hinting rather than clearly revealing Hedda’s pregnancy in *Hedda Gabler*. Nonetheless, Joan Templeton offers a compelling reading of the various references to Hedda’s body and the possibility of motherhood. Templeton concludes that Hedda is “pregnant by a boy/man entranced by his slippers,” yet she stubbornly “denies her pregnancy because it is the dire sign of her entrapment” (212–218). Hedda employs her considerable skills as a social performer to deflect inquiries and conversations about her “flourishing condition.” Whether hiding her fury by opening the drapes (Ibsen 24) or redirecting conversations with trivial-seeming niceties (35), Hedda performs the role of the detached aristocrat housewife to disguise her growing desperation and avoid addressing her pregnancy.

While both April and Hedda perform conventional gender roles to hide their socially unacceptable responses to pregnancy, Hedda’s troubled relationship with maternity extends beyond her physical condition. Throughout the play, Eilert Løvborg’s manuscript becomes a symbolic child that Hedda works to destroy. After Løvborg claims to have torn apart the manuscript, Thea Elvsted declares, “Do you know, Løvborg, that what you have done with the book--I shall think of it to my dying day as though you had killed a little child.” Løvborg accepts Thea’s proclamation and her assertion that the
product of their intellectual and emotional collaboration belonged to her as well (73).

After the collaborators lament the loss of their artistic child, Hedda initiates a plan to destroy the child-manuscript and create a new piece of embodied art in its place. Lövborg declares, “I will only try to make an end of it all” and Hedda encourages him to “do it beautifully.” She compels Lövborg toward a suicide that would transform him into a tragic hero (75). By offering the gun rather than the manuscript (both concealed in her desk), Hedda attempts to supplant one artistic object with another. Unlike Thea, she cannot collaborate with Lövborg to write a book, nor does she seem interested in vying with Thea for the affections of the man she once scorned. However, by staging his suicide, she can make his death into a work of art rendered in the trappings of theatrical melodrama: Bacchanalian hair and a gunshot to the head.

To ensure the primacy of her artistic vision, she must destroy the manuscript. Hedda performs an uncanny, symbolic abortion as she feeds the pages into the fire, whispering, “Now I am burning your child, Thea! --Burning curly locks! Your child and Eilert Lövborg’s. I am burning--I am burning your child” (76). Hedda’s refrain launches an attack in all directions. She burns Thea’s child and the femininity exemplified by Thea’s curly hair. The repetition of “I am burning” in the final line establishes a sinister cadance, yet it also directs the abortive act inward. Hedda wishfully destroys herself and the unborn child she strives to conceal. The burning of the manuscript and gift of the guns thus reiterates the connection between performance and distorted maternity on multiple levels. Hedda, as a social actress, disguises her pregnancy and her unwillingness to accept a mother’s role. This allows her to shift from performer to director as she strives
to choreograph the final moments of Løvborg’s life and replace the aborted child-manuscript with her own tragic narrative.

Unsurprisingly, early reviewers of Ibsen’s play condemned Hedda as a senseless, cynical illustration of corrupt womanhood (Templeton 204-207). A 1981 reviewer for the *London Times* described the play as “a demonstration of the pathology of mind, such as may be found in the pages of the *Journal of Mental Science* or in the reports of the medical superintendents of lunatic asylums.” The reviewer goes on to observe, “There is even something of the gleam of madness” in the eyes of the actress playing Hedda who “succeeds in giving a most life-like embodiment of the ‘moral insanity’ of the medical text-books” (“The Times”). These early reviews speak to a tendency to view deviations from conventional femininity and motherhood as a form of insanity. At the same time, the reviewer’s half-veiled condemnation of the actress’s ability to enact Hedda’s dysfunctional womanhood illustrates an exchange between the imagined and the real in the construction of madness.

Hedda undoubtedly offers a disturbing example of the disjunction between maternal and performing bodies. Nonetheless, she is only one heroine in an enduring tradition that conflates the lunatic actress with the distorted femininity. In her 1908 biography, *The Story of My Life*, actress Ellen Terry writes, “Like all Ophelias before (and after) me, I went to the madhouse to study wits astray. I was disheartened at first... Strange as it may sound, they were too theatrical to teach me anything” (qtd Bloom 165). Terry’s conceptualization of madness, informed by script and print, takes precedence over actual observations of insanity dismissed as too theatrical to be convincing. Elaine
Showalter addresses this paradox by proposing that Ophelia exerted such influence over the cultural imagination that women mimed theatrical and artistic representations of the fictional madwoman as a way to express and validate their suffering (86). Terry’s contemporaries, who savored the idea of an actress among lunatics, enacted this process in reverse as they imagined a Ellen Terry who corresponded with her theatrical subject. For example, one writer proposed that after a production of *Hamlet*, Terry “felt she had failed, and sped off, like the mad girl she had studied, . . .with the intention of drowning herself,” (qtd. Bloom 165). Terry’s conceptualization of madwomen and her construction as a madwoman reveal the complex cultural transference between performance, insanity, and women’s bodies. This transfer from stage to life and back again complicates attempts to realistically depict women’s suicide or the psychological states that compel them to end their own lives. If the maternal body is inseparable from the performing body and both embody hints of madness, then any act of self-harm is inherently theatrical. From this perspective, abortion too becomes performative as the-woman-as-actress strives to assert control over her ability to create both life and art. Ibsen’s parallel between child and manuscript and Yates’ conflation of play and pregnancy make this connection explicit.

April never decks herself in garlands nor recites fragments of scathing, dissociative poetry. Nonetheless, she becomes progressively associated with mental instability as the novel unfolds. Frank begins a gas-lighting campaign to convince April that her desire to have an abortion is “neurotic,” and “emotionally disturbed,” adding, “You don’t seem to be entirely rational about this thing. I just wish you’d think about it a
little, that’s all” (238). Though Frank couches his comments in the language of
psychoanalysis, he appeals to conventionally feminized mental conditions. April’s female
irrationality is contrasted with Frank’s detached and rational assessment of the situation.
Furthermore, Frank defines insanity as, "the inability to relate to another human being.
It's the inability to love" (305). Frank’s definition valorizes the stereotypical loving and
self-sacrificing mother-role he pressures April to perform. Given April’s difficulty
connecting to others, it is no surprise she begins laughing hysterically (305). By Frank's
very definition, she is insane, and her “hysterical” response only confirms the diagnosis.
She retorts, "I'm crazy because I don't love you--right?” (306). April calls out Frank’s
hypocrisy, but nonetheless accepts his diagnosis.

Though there is space to argue that Yates presents Frank’s diagnosis as a cruel
and successful manipulation, rather than an accurate assessment of April’s mental state,
April’s death effectively confirms Frank’s verdict. Frank claims that April fears maternity
because of her neglectful upbringing. He proposes, “Wasn’t it likely, after all, that a girl
who’d known nothing but parental rejection from the time of her birth might develop an
abiding reluctance to bear children?” (237), and April concedes when she characterizes
her behavior as a “denial of womanhood” (244). April accepts her role as a woman
psychologically disturbed by her tumultuous upbringing. Given April’s confession that
words have little meaning (236), it may be misguided to accept her spoken
acknowledgment as agreement. However, the single moment in the novel that shifts to
April’s perspective contains a flashback where April relives a particularly poignant
example of “parental rejection.” Undoubtedly, this is one of the most carefully crafted
and compelling moments in the novel. Having existed for 300 pages as Frank’s verbal sparring-partner and imagined judge, April steps back into the floodlights as Yates’ third-person limited narrative momentarily assumes her perspective.

Yates renders each movement toward the fatal abortion in precise detail: the final wave to Frank, the call to Milly, the trip to the incinerator. Then the passage breaks with the observation, “From a distance, all children’s voices sound the same” (321). With this single line, the text shifts from the adult-April listening to the echoes of distant children’s voices, to the child-April’s voice crying, “And listen! Listen!” The line thus functions as a bridge connecting April’s current experience to her past experience. Similarly “all” and “same” describe not only the children’s voices of the previous paragraphs, but the subsequent memory as well. The child-April demands to be heard and the adult-April cannot hear. Yates thus juxtaposes the adult- and child-April with April’s children, implying a cross-generational inability to communicate and empathize. The child-April’s plea, “Listen! I’m trying to tell you something” (321) serves to validate April’s deep distrust of language. Similarly, the passage moves into a brief visit by April’s father. April is revealed as a child starved for attention and affection, willing to throw a tantrum to win a few more moments with her father. The gift of a horse charm from a discarded liquor bottle clearly reveals the family’s emotional impoverishment (325-6). However, given the psychoanalytic subtext attached to April’s familial relationships, it’s important to note that the horse itself is a phallic symbol. Freud associated horses with the phallus and the father, even proposing that young girls’ fascination with horses represents repressed Oedipal desires and the shame of emerging adolescent sexuality (Hall 170).
This detail lends a Freudian layer to April’s memory that corresponds with her position as a psychologically disturbed daughter and mother undergoing psychoanalysis.

Yates creates a moment of empathy by returning to April’s past. Yet at the same time, by presenting the childhood memory as a necessary for understanding April’s actions, Yates confirms Frank’s assessment that the abortion impulse is rooted in April’s childhood experience. This moment may help readers empathize with April, but it also reduces her to a woman unable to reconcile her tumultuous upbringing with her role as a mother. Any consideration of the social and marital conditions contributing to her choice is erased in a sigh of pity. The abortion, though carried out methodically and rationally, reveals its origin in childhood trauma. Since childhood trauma can be treated by psychoanalysis and psychoanalysis encodes narratives of madness and mental instability in a sanitized vocabulary, the abortion impulse becomes the culminating moment of April’s “madness.”

Furthermore, the abortion preparation sequence and April’s memory correspond with the final moments of other literary heroines whose thoughts turn to their children and their own childhood. For example, a child features predominantly in the drug-induced haze that frames the death of Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. Though alone, Lily perceives, “Nettie Struther’s child was lying on her arm…For a moment she seemed to have lost her hold of the child. But no--she was mistaken--the tender pressure of its body was still close to hers” (341). Lily’s struggle to grasp the phantom child resonates with April’s attempts to reach out to her children in the final moments before her death. Both texts take time to reiterate the heroine’s feminine,
maternal impulses as if these characteristics redeem and justify the heroine’s failure to adequately perform these roles throughout the novel.

In addition to remembering children and childhood, depictions of literary suicide tend to focus on memories of the father. Hedda Gabler commits suicide with her father’s pistols. Queen Gertrude assigns Ophelia’s madness to “the poison well of deep grief; it springs/ All from her father’s death” (4.5.76-77). Though other circumstances clearly contribute to these heroines’ suicides, descriptions of the women’s final moments highlight the importance of their father either through objects or dialog that recalls his memory. In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier drifts into the following reverie as she surrenders to the current:

> “She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father’s voice and her sister Margaret’s. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch” (Chopin 139).

Like April, Edna fixates on sounds and voices that blur the distinction between past and present. Male authority figures feature strongly in the passage, as April’s father dominates April’s final memory. Though it is unlikely Yates would have read *The Awakening*, as the novel did not emerge from literary obscurity until the 1970s (Koloski 1), the novel helps contextualize April’s death by revealing the tropes diverse authors employ to frame their heroines’ demises. In fact, the likelihood that *Revolutionary Road* did not directly draw on motifs from Chopin’s novel speaks to the ubiquity of these images. Like subterranean currents, they run unacknowledged through countless works,
silently shaping the representation of literary heroines. Therefore, while Yates' use of a flashback creates a moment of empathy between readers and the character, this memory also “encapsulates” the heroine. The readers are given a final clue for understanding April’s motive and this information defines April in well-worn tropes reiterating the importance of fathers and children, in addition to confirming Frank’s diagnosis of April’s mental instability.

In all these texts, the woman’s suicide serves an important narrative function. In her discussion of Eustacia Vye in Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*, Sarah Malton concludes that, “the positioning of a woman’s dead body as material evidence that serves to incriminate the living and vindicate the dead is not unique” (161). Malton observes that Eustacia’s suicide serves the dual purpose of punishing the heroine for sexual misconduct while rendering her sympathetic to readers of the text and the characters who “read” her body (162). The process is articulated clearly in *Hamlet* when Laertes describes Ophelia as “a document of madness, thoughts and remembrances fitted” (4.5.179). The body of the heroine is positioned as a text through which the on-looking survivors assemble a narrative of her life, death, and the conditions that prompted her demise. The resulting narrative takes many forms. Ophelia’s body, for example, serves an aesthetic function. Queen Gertrude’s description of the drowning damsel with “her clothes spread wide; and mermaid-like” transforms Ophelia’s suicide into an alluring image that countless painters adapted in the following centuries (4.7.178). At the same time, her death condemns the corrupt Danish court and ignites the vengeful rivalry between Hamlet and Laertes. Thus, the suicide propels the plot forward while also
creating a dazzling spectacle as the suicide gives her final performance.

In Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, a neighbor literally describes Emma’s death as “a lesson, an example, a momentous spectacle” that his children “would remember later” (1285). Flaubert makes the moral and aesthetic implications of Emma’s death explicit. However, the spectacle extends beyond her actual death-scene. Emma fittingly transitions from her “gala days” to her deathbed via a masquerade ball. After spending the night celebrating in “velvet knee breeches and red stockings and a peruke, and a cocked hat over one ear,” Emma suddenly recalls her daughter. She rushes home to discover a notice on her door demanding the immediate repayment of her debts (1263-1264). Emma’s costumed escapades draw attention to her transgressive double-life. Instead of tending her daughter like a proper mother, she wears a man’s clothes and indulges in stereotypically male vices: drinking, adultery, and dim after-party cafes. The masquerade party thus becomes the culminating moment of Emma’s deception. In a sequence of scenes that once again establishes the connection between performance and transgressive womanhood, Emma submits to punishment for her failure to conform. Instead of standing in the “center of an admiring throng,” Emma endures three assessors inspecting “her dresses, the linen, the cabinet de toilette: and her very being, down to its most hidden and intimate details, was laid open, like a dissected corpse, to the stares of those three men” (1267). Flaubert’s language invokes both rape and the medical examination of a dead body. The inspectors put Emma’s body on display and reduce her to a corpse while she still lives.

Though Yates’ conceals April’s actual death, he stages the events leading to her
suicide as a theatrical spectacle that recalls Ophelia and Emma Bovary. Both Frank and Shep Campbell, the awkward neighbor with whom April has had a drunken tryst, observe April through windows that frame her final moments like a stage or screen. When April brings the children to his house, Shep hides “trembling in the bedroom and peeked down through the dimity curtains to watch her get out of her car--a tired, pregnant woman--and he couldn’t see her steadily for the beating of his heart” (Yates 330). The curtains recall a curtained stage with Shep as an audience-of-one witnessing his object of desire in a final performance. April’s polished, composed appearance gives way to the reality of her pregnancy. Like Emma, April’s costumed persona collapses under the weight of her maternal obligations, but she remains on display. Shep does not see her clearly though he continues to observe her. His desire and emotions continue to undermine his perception, thus perpetuating the idealization of a fictional April in the minds of the men who desire her.

Nor does Frank seem capable of comprehending April’s desperation or self-destructive purpose as he observes their final domestic dispute through the dual screens of his imagination and the kitchen window. Even as Frank thinks that in films, “when women got hysterical like this, men slapped them until they stopped,” he condemns April for her “false scream, done while she looked coldly into his eyes” (306). Frank recognizes he isn’t “calm enough” to play the stern movie-hero, but he is nonetheless unable to see April as anything but a “hysterical” actress (305). Fittingly, Frank perceives April’s flight to the wooded hill surrounding their subdivision as a surreal melodrama. When he cannot find April in the house, he concludes, in panic, that
“She was nowhere. She had disappeared” (308). By leaving the house, April abandons her typical stage. Frank intuitively identifies this place as an absence, a “nowhere” space that recalls the temporarily and geographically displaced stage. The movement from the house to the the hillside also parallels a similar movement from domesticated to borderland or wilderness spaces in *Hamlet* and *Madame Bovary*. Ophelia drowns “in the weeping brook” surrounded by trees and flowers, yet near enough civilization that onlookers carried back a poetic description of her death (Shakespeare 5.8.177). Similarly, Emma’s final days consist of criss-crossing the fields and woods between Yonville, Rouen, and the surrounding chateaus as she desperately tries to borrow money. The landscape mirrors the heroines increasingly wild mental state. If the home corresponds with each woman’s performance of conventional femininity, then the move outside signals a shift into madness as those roles are abandoned.

Frank expresses this shift when he follows April up the hill, “wondering if she really had gone crazy this time. … Would she, when he caught up with her and took hold of her arm and turned her around, would she have the vacant, smiling stare of lunacy” (Yates 308). He images an April that corresponds with literary and theatrical madwomen as wide eyed and raving. Ironically, the publicness of the space, “well within sight and earshot of houses down on the road” (308) prevents Frank’s imagined spectacle from unfolding. The threat of an audience sends Frank back inside where, “he gave all his attention to the grim business of keeping watch on her through the window” (309). As in the scene with Shep, Frank voyeuristically observes April through the window screen as a solitary audience watching an actress on a television screen. Throught the scene, Yates
seems to purposefully mediate conventional depictions of women’s mad flight from the home before their suicides. Yet he undermines the tragic spectacle with references to Frank’s “loose cheeks” and by keeping April motionless except for the flicker of her cigarette as Frank expectantly watches through the window (309).

In line with his constrained use of the trappings of melodrama, Yates exchanges an aesthetic appraisal of the suicide's corpse for a final reckoning that concentrates on the objects left behind. This substitution stands to reason given women’s association with domestic spaces and the material objects that decorate the home. Women’s possessions become stand-ins for their bodies and the home is transformed into an uncanny extension of the woman’s presence. While Yates refuses Flaubert’s graphic description of convulsive, screaming death or a Shakespearian grapple over the suicide’s grave, Frank’s return to the house on Revolutionary Road maps out the same journey Lawrence Selden takes in the final pages of *The House of Mirth*. Both men experience a bizarre contrast between tragedy and the site of the tragedy. Frank observes, “The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy. Even at night, as if on purpose, the development held no looming shadows and no gaunt silhouettes. It was invincibly cheerful, a toyland of white and pastel houses” (Yates 339). While the woody hillside of the previous night invited Frank to image tragedy, the subdivision resolutely denies this impulse. Since Frank already knows April is dead, he is personally aware of the irony of the setting. Selden, on the other hand, learns the news of Lily’s death as “the sunlight slanted joyously down Lily’s street…When such a day coincides with the inner mood, there is intoxication in its breath” (Wharton 344). Neither setting fits the reckoning at
hand as each man surveys the jarringly normal space the dead woman left behind.

In the house itself, Frank fixates on the fact that April “had been very careful about the blood” and attempted to minimize the scandal by gathering the bloody towels in the bathtub and hiding the instruments of abortion out of sight. He imagines April’s thought-process: “I mean I just thought it would be best to get it out of sight; I didn’t want to have to answer a lot of dumb questions” (Yates 341). The material details illustrate April’s composure and attention to domestic order even at the end of her life. The passage effectively brings the novel full circle. While the early memory of April’s “tidy” menstrual blood suggested a body out of control, this reference connotes both April’s mastery and inability to master her body (19). Obviously the blood reveals that her attempted abortion went terribly wrong. It is, after all, hemorrhaging that ultimately kills her. However, despite this crisis, April is “careful.” She may not be able to control the blood pouring from her body, but she can control the results--at least in regard to the mess and tools that might expose the cause of bleeding as an abortion rather than a miscarriage. Thus, April arranges the scene to avoid scandal. Edith Wharton presents Lily’s home in a similar fashion by highlighting the continued propriety and cleanliness of the room, despite her drop in social class. Selden observes that among Lily’s trinkets and lace, “there was no token of her personality, unless it showed itself in the scrupulous neatness of the scant articles of furniture” (Wharton 347). Tidiness again signifies the suicide’s moral character. Selden also finds signs that Lily arranged her final days to minimize scandalous questions of motive: the conveniently placed checkbook absolves the heroine from financial wrongdoing (Wharton 347). The focus on material
objects serves a dual purpose. The objects themselves offer partial clemency for the
cwomen by implying positive feminine characteristics like cleanliness, domesticity, and
restraint. Furthermore, each woman carefully choreographs her space to create these
impressions. If death is a spectacle, then by manipulating the objects around her, the
heroine exerts some control over the narrative that unfolds in wake of her suicide.

This measure of creative control is important because each survey of the suicide
site leads to a moment of reflection that defines the literary suicide. If suicides are viewed
as an avenue for social critique, then this reflection makes the critique explicit. Wharton
outlines her message as Selden grieves alongside Lily’s body,

   He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart…But at
   least he had loved her, had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her, and
   if the moment had been fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw
   now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives”
   (349-350).

The question of Selden’s sincerity aside, Wharton constructs a moment that can only
happen in the wake of the heroine’s death. As such, the reveal that social conditions
distort lives and affections, but love can survive the ruin, depends on Lily’s death because
her survival would either complicate the message or necessitate a deplorably happy
ending. Although Yates exchanges sentimentality for cynicism, the final chapter of

*Revolutionary Road* serves the same function. April’s death enables Milly to endlessly
repeat the macabre tale in an increasingly theatrical fashion, thus affirming Yates premise
that society necessitates inauthentic performance (343-344). Similarly, if the novel is read
as a chronicle of Frank’s strangulation by society, his final appearance, destroyed by his wife’s suicide, provides a compelling illustration. Thus the literary suicide emerges as more of a literary device than an aspect of character.

April’s performance as Gabby Maple sets the stage for Yates’ critique of the heroic suicide as a liberating and altruistic act. However, by inverting the gender of the suicide, Yates fails to exchange theatrics for reality; rather, he exchanges one set of romanticized death-narratives for another. Despite the suburban setting, April’s death conforms to a long-standing literary tradition that frames the female suicides as victims of insanity and failed personal relationships. As actresses who fail to perform conventional gender roles, suicide becomes a theatrical spectacle that heroines either endure as punishment or attempt to choreograph. Though the literary suicide can be read as a critique of the oppressive circumstances that lead to a heroine’s demise, the staging of these suicides often fails to address those circumstances; rather they utilize memories and material objects to affirm traditionally feminine values, relationships, and behaviors. Social critique only reenters the conversation after the heroine’s death as her tragedy invites commentary from the survivors.

Paradoxically, when critics attempt to re-contextualize the oppressive cultural conditions that compel literary women to suicide, the artifice of these depictions often disappears in favor of aligning artistic representation with history. Margaret Higonnet suggests that the treatment of material and historical contexts reveals a fundamental difference between the suicides written by male and female authors. Higonnet observes, “The great works of the subject written by men in the 19th century reduce to a subtext the
facts of women’s suicide. The voluntary act often appears involuntary, the quest for autonomy is replaced by the breakdown of identity.” In contrast, she proposes that women’s depictions are not as clearcut or reductive. Using Edna Pontellier as an iconic example, Higonnet proposes that in literary suicides written by women, the suicide act becomes an open-ended image, a possibility rather than the conclusive gesture found in the “overdetermined” works of male authors (116-117). With Higonnet’s framework in mind, Yates’ treatment of suicide in *Revolutionary Road* seems to occupy a contradictory, but illuminating, middle ground. On one hand, Yates bleakly voices the contexts of April’s suicide in the final visit with John Givens. When John declares, “I wouldn’t be surprised if you knocked her up on purpose, just so you could spend the rest of your life hiding behind that maternity dress” and “I’m glad I’m not gonna be that kid” (301-303), readers recoil from the brutality of the statement—but nonetheless acknowledge the insightfulness of his assessment. Similarly, Yates’ shift to April’s perspective in the final moments of her life creates a compelling and sympathetic image in place of a meticulous or indulgent depiction of the suicide act. On the other hand, Yates’ final image draws purposefully and consistently on the “overdetermined” suicides of Flaubert and Ibsen while carefully invoking and then negating the more melodramatic portrayals on stage and screen.

Yates seems keenly aware of the tradition in which he operates. As Milly recounts April’s suicide in the novel’s final chapter, Shep complains, “Mostly it was that Milly’s voice had taken on a little too much of a voluptuous narrative pleasure. She’s *enjoying* this, he thought” (344). Here Yates clearly acknowledges the narrative function of
suicide. The association of “voluptuous” with women’s bodies makes explicit the way suicide enables both readers and characters to inscribe their own narrative onto the body of the victim. While Shep’s criticism could be directed toward authors who submerge their heroines in a narrative tradition of madness and death rather than imaging an alternative, *Revolutionary Road* skirts the banks of this tradition without drowning in its well-worn tropes. Yates creates correspondences with familiar heroines like Ophelia, Emma Bovary, Hedda Gabler, and Lily Bart. However, by continually reiterating the performative nature of madness and suicide itself, he subtly undermines the tropes he uses. Critics have consistently praised Yates’ keen Realist gaze and insightful representation of lives shaped or distorted by social pressures. Examining April alongside her literary, rather than historical, counterparts demonstrates Yates’ equally incisive depiction of the narrative traditions that shape or distort the artist’s depiction of reality.
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