The Canal Study Guide

The Canal by Richard Yates (novelist)

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Introduction

□The Canal□ is a short story by Richard Yates, an author many literary critics in the early 2000s consider one of the great fiction writers of the twentieth century, even though he was practically forgotten by the reading public at the time of his death in 1992. Yates's most famous work, his 1961 novel, *Revolutionary Road*, is an examination of the search for meaning in mid-1950s America. In □The Canal,□ Yates visits the same terrain, presenting a man who is trying to reconcile memories of World War II combat with the mundane reality of urban socializing, a problem many veterans faced when they returned home and entered the business world.

The story concerns two couples at a cocktail party. When the two husbands discover the fact that they both were present at a certain military action in 1945, one man wants to compare the details of their war zone experiences while the other man would prefer to forget them. For Tom Brace, the fight at the canal signifies his luck and courage in the face of danger; for Lew Miller, the same proof of his fumbling, incompetence, and humiliation. With characteristic precision of detail and the peripheral bafflement of the two wives who try in vain to comprehend war, Yates portrays a man who is doomed to be haunted by events that he hardly understood at the time.

This story was not published during Yates's lifetime but was included in *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates* (2001), a book that increased its author's reputation in the years since his death.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1926

Deathdate: 1992

Richard Yates was born in Yonkers, New York, on February 3, 1926, to a middle-class family. His parents were divorced when he was two years old. Yates was raised by his mother, a sculptress, and by his older sister. He attended Avon Old Farms School as a teenager and left to serve in World War II immediately after graduation. After his discharge from the army, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent more than a year in a sanatorium run by the Veterans' Administration. He married his first wife, Sheila Bryant, in 1948, and they moved to France after his release from the hospital.

In 1953, *Atlantic Monthly* accepted one of his short stories, and Yates's writing career began. Yates returned to the United States and worked as a freelance writer of advertising copy while working on his novel *Revolutionary Road*. In the following years, he taught creative writing and wrote. Yet he was dragged down by depression and alcoholism, which ended his marriage in 1959.

Revolutionary Road was an instant success when it was published in 1961, and as of the early 2000s, it was considered one of the great American novels of the twentieth century. The celebrity that it brought to Yates led to his serving as a speechwriter for Robert Kennedy, who was then the U.S. attorney general. When Kennedy's brother, President John F. Kennedy, was assassinated in 1963, Yates left government life: he went to Hollywood to write screenplays for a brief while then he became an instructor at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop. He remarried in 1968, to Martha Speer. After seven years, he left Iowa when he was denied tenure. He taught at several Midwestern universities before returning to New York City. After the dissolution of his second marriage in 1974, he moved to Boston, where he wrote four books between 1976 and 1986.

In 1991, after spending more time in Hollywood, Yates took a position at the University of Alabama. Though the position was temporary, he found, after a two-year stint, that he was too ill with emphysema to leave Tuscaloosa. He was working on a novel about his time as Kennedy's speechwriter when he died at the VA hospital in Birmingham on November 7, 1992, of complications arising from surgery on a hernia. Yates's short story, □The Canal,□ appeared in print for the first time in *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates*, which was published by Holt in 2001.

Plot Summary

□The Canal□ starts at a cocktail party in 1952. Two couples, the Millers and the Braces, are in the middle of a long conversation that has already been going on for about an hour when the story begins. Lew Miller and Tom Brace work for the same advertising firm. As the story opens, Lew Miller tells Tom Brace the division that he was in during World War II, and Brace, who has been telling a war story about the advance across a canal in Europe in March of 1945, recalls the divisions involved and realizes that Miller's division was in the same action. With this link established between them, Brace starts a more personal conversation with Miller, while the wives, who do not understand the experience of being in war, stand aside and remark with wonder on the coincidence. Brace presses Miller for details about his experience of what he calls, almost casually, □the canal deal.□

Unlike Brace, Miller does not look back upon his war experience with fascination or wonder. He has a difficult time remembering the details at all, having spent most of his time in the army in North Carolina, working in public relations. For most of the war, he had a desk job stateside; he only joined the infantry in 1944. In all, then, his army experience was easier, in general. Concerning the night at the canal, he recalls that his division was somewhat removed from direct action. He was one of a line of soldiers further upstream, where there was less enemy resistance, and their orders were to deliver spools of communications wire to the other side, while Brace's division faced head on central artillery fire.

Miller recalls the events of the night at the canal, although he does not speak about them because what he remembers does not make a good story or show him in a positive light, while Tom Brace's story spotlights Tom's heroic actions. While Miller's division was crossing the canal on a partly submerged footbridge, Brace's division crossed in boats that made them easy targets. While Miller climbed a wall and ran to his destination when he reached the other side, Brace still had to face gunfire until he was able to get near enough to the enemy to throw a grenade that killed the German artillery soldiers.

Mentally reviewing the events that he has mostly forgotten or suppressed for years, Miller thinks of his panic and humiliation as a minimally competent soldier. He recalls being berated for losing his raincoat by his commanding officer, a skinny nineteen-year-old boy named Kavic. Walking in a line along a road toward the canal and under fire, Miller recalls the difficulty of following Shane, the soldier in line ahead of him: when they were crawling to avoid gunfire, the only way Miller could keep track of the man ahead of him was by feeling for the bottom of his boot. This method failed him when, just as they stood to run, the agonized screams of a man who had been shot distracted him. When he turned back to the advancement, Miller realized he had lost track of the men in his division. He looked around for them, asking other soldiers, but no one could tell him where his men were, so he crossed the canal and climbed up the ladders along the retaining wall on the other side. Wandering around on the far bank, Miller ran into the assistant squad leader and was reunited with his division. He was ordered to report to

Kavic, who reprimanded him for getting separated, calling him □more [g□□d□□] trouble than all the rest of the men in this squad put together.□ Miller does not relate this humiliation at the cocktail party, but he does tell what happened after that: having accomplished their mission of carrying the wire across the canal, his squad went to a safe house away from the action, where they slept in shifts for about twenty-four hours.

Tom Brace is amazed to hear that Miller's outfit had the leisure to sleep, since his canal crossing put him right into artillery fire. Nancy Brace, Tom's wife, asks if his killing the artillery soldiers earned him a Silver Star. Brace dismisses Nancy's question with a wink, patronizing her supposedly superficial focus on the decoration, but Betty Miller gushes that he probably □should have gotten *several* Silver Stars.□ Of his success as the grenades he threw hit their target, Tom says, □I want to tell you, I've never been so lucky.□

The conversation is interrupted by the hostess who jokes about preparing for the next war, a joke that she repeats several times in a bout of drunken silliness. The Millers and the Braces use this disruption as an excuse to say goodnight and leave the party. The men retrieve their coats, and Lew Miller feels embarrassed about his own, noting that it looks dirty and wrinkled in Tom Brace's hand.

The rainy night makes Betty Miller fear they will not find a taxicab. Able to save the moment, Brace leaps forward into the rain and hails one, showing himself to be, as he was in his war stories, competent and in control. He tells the Millers to take that cab, that he will find another one, and, while they are still objecting, Brace runs off up the block to hail the next cab.

While they are riding home, Betty Miller talks about Tom Brace. Although she hung on his story and complimented him while he was telling it, in the cab she says that she thinks both of the Braces are conceited. She then turns on her husband, criticizing him for letting Tom Brace □*eclipse*□ him for the whole evening and pointing out that Lew always lets others outshine him. She is totally unaware of all the thoughts her husband has had during the party. The story ends as Lew tells his wife, □for God's sake shut up.□

Characters

Nancy Brace

By contrast to her husband's powerful personality, Nancy's personality does not develop very clearly in this story. However, she admits she can imagine his war experiences because he is able to describe them so vividly. This statement cannot be taken too seriously, though, because Nancy's understanding shows nothing close to an understanding of the horrors of warfare: several times, she comments on how "marvelous" it must have been.

Tom Brace treats his wife's support in a fond but belittling manner. When she makes a point of mentioning the Silver Star that he won, he acts as if her interest in the medal misses the more serious aspects of the story, attributing her lack of understanding to the fact that she is a woman. During much of the conversation, Nancy is gone to retrieve drinks for both couples, having heard Tom's stories over and over already, but she still acts upon her return as if she would have been very interested in hearing the parts that she missed. She is a doting wife who is taken for granted by a husband who has lived a successful life and expects the best.

Tom Brace

Handsome, athletic, Tom Brace is one of the two main characters of this story. He is the force that drives it, as his curiosity about Lew Miller's war experience and his willingness to prod Miller for information about it forces Miller to remember details that he has suppressed for years.

Brace is a forceful, tactless man. He is an account executive for an advertising firm, a salesman, which indicates that he is an outgoing person who is used to convincing people to do what he wants.

Yates implies that Brace is something of a boor, monopolizing the conversation with stories of his former glory, reveling in the bygone days when he was a war hero. At the end of the story, Betty Miller calls him "conceited," though there is no way of telling whether she is giving her true assessment of him or is just trying to build up her husband, who pales in comparison to Brace. More telling is the fact that at the start of the story the subject is already on the night at the canal, even though, at that point, no one knows that Brace and Miller both experienced that particular event: Brace has been telling his army stories even though he has no reason to believe that they are relevant to anyone else in the conversation.

Brace is presented as having a streak of genuine selflessness in him. When telling of his attack on the German gunmen that threatened his squad, he gives ample credit to the machine gunner who provided him with cover. When he runs into the rain to capture a cab, a feat which had just been pronounced impossible by Betty Miller, he chivalrously

turns it over to the Millers, and when they try to reject his generosity, he cuts the conversation short by running off to hail another cab.

Yates also shows that, despite his good looks, confidence, and heroism, Brace is fixated on the war. He is obsessive about the details of Miller's experience, focusing on the calibers of guns and the type of resistance that was being put forward further up the canal from him. When Miller gives the number of the outfit he served in, Brace is able to recall exactly where that outfit was situated during the canal crossing, which Miller himself is unable to do. It is clear that Brace has studied the details of that maneuver, that he has thought a lot about the whole war, quite possibly to confirm the difficulty that he himself overcame and describes so humbly.

The Hostess

Near the end of the story, the conversation about the canal crossing is interrupted when the party's hostess joins her guests. She is drunk and jokes several times about the pointlessness of talking about the last war when there is always the next war to be planned.

Kavic

Lew Miller recalls being reprimanded several times by Kavic, his squad's leader. Yates describes Kavic as a “scrawny, intensely competent, nineteen years old,” implying that in any social situation other than the army, Kavic would be considered Miller's inferior by far.

Not only does Kavic shout at Miller, but he does so with exhausted patience, as if he finds it difficult to believe that anyone could be as inept or mindless as Miller is. He berates Miller for losing his raincoat and for losing his way in the dark. Kavic overreacts to events that actually come out all right in the end, and Miller is both indignant and shamed by having to take reprimands from such an unimposing authority. Yet, Miller still realizes that, on some level, Kavic is right: he should not lose equipment or get lost. It would be easy for Miller to forget his own shortcomings during the fighting by blaming the army for making a boy like Kavic his superior, but instead Miller accepts responsibility for his actions. That said, Kavic is contrasted with other soldiers and a lieutenant who act and speak politely to Miller.

Betty Miller

Betty Miller is aware that her husband, Lew, did not see much action during the war, but she is also protective of his reputation. Therefore, she looks for ways in which to build up his self-esteem. The story opens with her interrupting a war story by Tom Brace to ask if the division Brace is describing is the same one in which Miller served. Though it is not, they find that Miller's division was at the same action Brace is describing, though on the periphery of the attack. Betty's failed attempt to connect Lew to Brace's story

serves to emphasize the contrast between Brace's "lucky" heroics and Miller's recollection of his own awkward, plodding functionality.

During the conversation, Betty draws out details about Tom Brace's experiences at the canal, asking him about his actions and exclaiming, "My *God*" at particularly dangerous moments in his tale. In the cab on the way home, though, she denounces both Tom and his wife as "those damn conceited Brace people," and she berates her husband for allowing them to "*eclipse*" him. Betty may actually be interested in Tom Brace's exploits, only pretending to be dismissive of him later, to show her husband that she is not impressed by the other man's actions. Or she may actually have found his war stories as irritating as her own husband's self-deprecating reserve.

Lew Miller

The story is told from Lew Miller's perspective, including his memories of the canal crossing which he does not verbalize. Miller is a copywriter for an advertising agency, working at a creative but unglamorous job. At the cocktail party, in conversation with Tom Brace, an account executive at the agency, and listening to his dramatic telling of a war story, Miller is forced to remember his own version of that story, the one he experienced himself. While the one veteran enjoys recalling his "lucky" advance across the canal, Lew Miller would prefer not to revisit the humiliating and scary experience he had in the same advance.

In the army, Miller served mostly in a public relations squad stationed in North Carolina. Late in World War II, he was sent to Europe. As Brace tells his war story, Betty Miller tries to introduce Lew Miller's own service and make it sound as if his military experience is comparable, an effort that has the opposite effect on her husband.

In Europe, Miller served as a private, a rifleman replacement. One vivid memory of the day and night at the canal is that he lost his raincoat that afternoon, and he had to suffer the indignity of being given a patronizing reprimand by the nineteen-year-old squad leader, who talked to him as if he were a fool or a child. While other soldiers at the canal, like Tom Brace, would remember charging into enemy gunfire, Miller remembers the confusion under fire of trying to follow the man in front of him in the night. While other soldiers were responsible for killing the enemy, his squad only had to deliver communications wire. While Brace was able to keep his wits about him enough to make a "lucky" throw that kills a German gunner, Miller is distracted enough by a soldier's cries to lose contact with his squad, which prompted another belittling reprimand from the squad leader when he rejoined them.

As a result of this cocktail party, Miller shrivels into himself with self-consciousness. He notices how handsome and athletic Brace is; when Brace holds Miller's topcoat out to him, the coat itself takes on his poor self-esteem, looking wrinkled and dirty in his hand.

In the cab on the ride home, Betty gives him a chance to salvage his self-esteem by belittling Brace as a conceited bore, but Miller refuses to go along with her. Instead, he tells his wife to □shut up.□

Shane

Shane is in front of Lew Miller in line as they advanced toward the canal. Miller could just barely keep sight of Shane, and, when a loud wail from an injured soldier distracted him, he turned back to find that he had lost track of Shane, severing his connection to his squad.

Wilson

Wilson is the assistant squad leader, after Kavic, a somewhat ridiculous authority figure. He is overweight, a farmer from Arkansas, not exactly the kind of keen military mind that inspires confidence. Unlike Kavic, Wilson is not belligerent toward the troops under him: he seems to have no particular agenda in mind, and instead shows himself to be just following Kavic's orders. When Miller runs into Wilson at the far side of the canal, Wilson does not reprimand him for having gotten separated, but later he brings him an order that he is to see Kavic, who does the reprimanding.

Themes

Memory

Yates dramatizes in this story how individuals remember shared experiences (perhaps especially of war) in separate ways and how those different ways of remembering determine or express the person's sense of self. Tom Brace selects from all his military experience in order to shape his story. Soldiers have many experiences in military service, but only some of them offer material for good stories in later civilian life. Tom's story about the night at the canal conveys a picture of himself as lucky, agile, and courageous. Now an account executive at an advertising agency, a salesman, Tom uses his charisma to draw attention to himself and to influence others. His war story in a sense advertises him as a certain kind of man, an image he wants to project. His repeating his favorite war stories helps enliven the present situation, where he dominates a conversation at a cocktail party. That he drinks a lot at that party suggests he may use alcohol to insulate himself and reduce his inhibitions at the same time. It is implied that the Braces and the Millers do not know each other very well, and keeping a conversation going with strangers may be uncomfortable or difficult.

Lew Miller's memories of that night at the canal similarly reinforce his sense of himself, and yet in the present at the cocktail party, what he remembers of that night emphasizes what he wishes no one would see in him. In addition to showing how complex a given military action is and how people engaged in it may have very different tasks and perceptions of it, Miller's memory reinforces his sense of his own physical inferiority and timid personality. Miller is a man more suited for desk work; he is ill-suited for manual work or military action. He is not athletic or agile. What he remembers of that night convinces him that he lacks those traits traditionally associated, particularly in romantic literature and in the movies, with combat. In each case, the memory of the man is an expression of his self-concept. The tour of military service entails many experiences across months, even years of service, and the selected memories work to highlight the man's positive sense of self or to emphasize the man's sense of personal inadequacy. Either way, memory of past performance contributes to the way these men present themselves in a social situation.

Self-Aggrandizement

Self-aggrandizement is the act of exaggerating one's own importance. In this story, to some extent, Tom Brace is self-aggrandizing when he tells his war story which shows himself in a positive light, when he dominates the conversation and yet appears to eschew compliments that come from his wife and Betty Miller.

The story Brace tells suggests that he was heroic in combat. At the canal, while Miller recalls having muddled across a bridge in the dark, Brace remembers how he and his squad rowed across in boats, in direct artillery range. Brace was in the first boat. They

were fired upon when they were about halfway across. The men in his boat led the assault once the canal was crossed, with a machine gunner armed with a Browning automatic rifle (B.A.R.) keeping the enemy distracted while Brace moved close enough to throw a hand grenade at the German guns firing on them. Though some of the men in his squad drowned in the crossing and others were shot, quite a few probably were saved by Brace's being able to throw a grenade and take out the enemy artillery. Luckily for Brace now, his wife is the one brings up his being awarded a Silver Star for his deed.

Clearly, Brace has an ongoing fascination with the war. He initiates the discussion with Lew Miller and specifically recalls troop locations and gun calibers. When his wife says, “I never get tired of Tom's war stories,” it is clear that she has heard many stories, often repeated. The insistence on reliving the time when he proved himself to be heroic may be a sign that Brace needs attention and approval, but Yates also includes evidence to suggest an alternate interpretation, that he is not needy at all. He is generous in sharing the glory for his successful assault at the canal with the B.A.R. man who provided him cover, emphasizing what a good soldier that man was. That in itself might be false humility, but Brace has been professionally successful since the war, so the question remains about why he needs to relive old victories. He is athletic, handsome, and confident. He generously runs out into the rain to hail one taxi for the Millers and then another for him and his wife. He seems self-confident, but his continual return to his wartime success may hint that something is missing in his present life for which he is compensating. In any event, in the story, Betty Miller has the final word: he is conceited and self-aggrandizing.

The Subjectivity of Interpretation

This story suggests that interpretation is subjective. Readers see the memory that Lew Miller has but does not share at the cocktail party, a memory that shows him in a negative light. But Yates also provides details about Miller's past which Miller does not emphasize, which might modify Miller's judgment of himself. For example, Miller dwells on the anger of his commanding officer, on feeling demeaned by him in front of the other soldiers. He is ashamed of the small failures, his losing his raincoat, his getting separated from his men, and over all, he remembers Kavic's caustic criticism. He does not dwell on the fact that his men also caught direct artillery hits, which caused them to roll off the road into the ditches and plausibly contributed to their line getting broken. Then, too, Miller had spent “most of his service at a public-relations desk in North Carolina” before he was transferred into the infantry in 1944, toward the end of the war. Desk work for three years did not prepare him for the intense physical strain of infantry combat. Also, Kavic may be in charge at age nineteen because he has seen more action than Miller has before the night at the canal. Like Brace, Miller remembers good things about his fellow soldiers, how a lieutenant spoke politely to him, how the men at the wall gave each other a hand as they climbed over it. But these details do not work to sabotage Miller's self-esteem, and so he does not dwell on them. Similarly, in the untold memories Brace has, there may be more than a few that do not show him in a heroic light, yet those details of his military experience he chooses not to describe, or he may have selectively forgotten what he does not want to remember. Over the years, memory

fashions the stories, refining, deleting, all to serve the teller's purpose and as an expression of the teller's subjective view of the past and of himself.

Style

Point of View

Point of view is the angle from which the action of the story is seen. In this case, the story is told in third-person, limited omniscient point of view. The story is told in the third person, and readers are given the inner thoughts of one character, but not the inner thoughts of others. In The Canal, readers are allowed to know Lew Miller's thoughts. Most of his memory about the night at the canal is not spoken aloud to Tom and Nancy Brace. The story moves from the past to the present and from Brace's narrated story to the story Miller recalls but chooses not to narrate. As the story progresses, the contrast heightens between the two men: Brace becomes more heroic, more competent, the longer he talks; Miller becomes more focused on his own inadequacy as he reviews his own memory of that night. At one point, the story cuts away from the cocktail party while Miller and Tom Brace are discussing the guns that were aimed at Brace's squad. The text includes a long vignette of almost three pages, including dialogue, all depicting Miller's attempts to follow the man marching in front of him and his becoming lost, crossing the canal, and eventually rejoining his squad. These are his thoughts, as Brace speaks. Then Brace asks, So what happened after you got to the other side? The readers know what happened, but Brace, who has so far been talking most of the time, is only now ready to hear Miller's story. Miller and his men drew fire on the road as they approached and that contributed to Miller's getting separated from his squad. Miller could make a story of that approach and the cries of injured men and how the soldiers helped each other, but that part he neglects in order to focus privately on his own inadequacy. Miller remembers certain parts of the canal crossing and what he focuses on now does not make a story he would want to tell. In these ways, the story is shaped and interpreted via the point of view of the person through whose eyes the action is seen.

Foil Characters

Juxtaposed contrasting characters serve to underscore each other's distinctive traits. In The Canal, Tom Brace and Lew Miller are presented as opposites in style and experience: Brace is an extrovert, who enjoys telling complimentary stories about himself; Miller is reserved, perhaps even introverted, and, according to his wife at least, he tends to allow others to eclipse him. Brace is tall, athletic, and talkative, while Miller is less physically capable and tends to be a listener. Miller wants to forget the war, and Brace wants to remember certain details of it. Because they are so different, they draw each other out, making readers more aware of each character's personality traits by seeing those traits missing in the other.

The wives, though, are not so explicitly contrasted. At least at the party, which is the only view the story provides of her, Nancy Brace is a big supporter of her husband's war stories, hanging on his every word and explaining that he makes her feel as if she were

there. At the party, Betty Miller seems both admiring of Tom and quietly supportive of her husband. She acts as though she envies Betty, wishing that her husband would talk more, even though she knows that he saw little action during the war. In Betty's comment that “Lew never talks about the war,” Miller sees his wife as romanticizing him as “a faintly tragic, sensitive husband, perhaps, or at any rate a charmingly modest one.” Miller sees this as proof of her love, though he resolves to tell her privately that she must “stop making him a hero whenever anybody mentioned the war.” So publicly, both wives appear supportive and loving. Yet the conversation in the cab between the Millers suggests otherwise: Betty attacks Tom Brace and his wife and then she attacks her husband, too. Whether Nancy has this same duplicity is left open to conjecture. It is possible that she also has her private resentment: she listens repeatedly to Tom's stories, and perhaps repeatedly in public, he dismisses her. If this reading is logical, then the wives serve less as foil characters than the husbands.

Historical Context

The Last Days of World War II

Yates does not say where the battle described in the story took place, but it is possible that it took place in Germany, given that it occurred in March of 1945 and involved American troops advancing against the Germans.

The conflict that Yates describes has some similarity to the battle for Remagen on March 7, 1945. Remagen is a city in the Rhineland-Palatinate region of Germany, along the Rhine River, just south of Cologne. After the Battle of the Bulge in December of 1944, as Allied forces pushed their way into Germany, the Rhine provided the German army with a natural barrier of defense. The Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen was the last remaining bridge, a valuable asset for the invading army as it moved heavy equipment in its advance toward the capitol, Berlin. The Allies used the bridge, despite German efforts to destroy it before the Allies arrived. After the Allies' conquest on March 7, the bridge withstood ten more days of German air assault before collapsing. The fictional conflict in this story takes place at a canal and not at the Rhine River, but this area of Germany is full of canals dating back hundreds of years. Moreover, the strategic importance of the battle at Remagen indicates that it had some influence on Yates in conceiving the conflict in the story.

The war in Europe only persisted a few weeks after the canal assault in this story took place. In late April, the last of the German army was cut in two by American and Soviet troops, devastating its chances of survival. In Berlin, Adolph Hitler, the German chancellor who had pursued dominance over Europe and Africa, committed suicide on April 30. By May 7, the remaining commander of the German army signed an unconditional surrender. May 8 is celebrated as Victory in Europe Day, or V-E Day.

Postwar Corporate America

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the United States enjoyed a level of economic stability that had not been known since the start of the Great Depression in 1929. The U.S. economy thrived, having the distinct advantage of profiting from wartime spending. Since bombing had caused damage throughout countries that had previously been economic powerhouses, such as Great Britain, France, Germany, and Japan, the United States had a distinct advantage.

The booming manufacturing economy led to the development of a new corporate culture. The war years had led to innovations in both product development and in public relations, and this, along with the easy access of money for research and development, gave U.S. businesses new opportunities for expansion. In addition, the postwar boom in college education for returning veterans led companies toward structuring their internal workings around scientific principles.

A corporate culture and worldview arose that was specifically associated with the 1950s. If that decade was later seen as conformist and self-satisfied, it may be because the previous decades had been so difficult, shaped as they were by a global economic depression followed by World War II. People who might have held blue-collar jobs or worked as manual laborers before the war (provided that they could find jobs in the 1930s) had an opportunity, after the war, to move into respected white-collar office positions. The corporate culture made it possible for these people to move up into jobs requiring intellect and verbal skills in the same way that, half a century earlier, Henry Ford's theory of division of labor had made it possible for unskilled farm workers to hold assembly line factory jobs, building automobiles.

The advertising agency came to be seen as the epitome of the corporate culture. Referred to throughout the 1950s by the general, sometimes disparaging term, Madison Avenue, due to the large concentration of the country's most prominent advertising firms on that street in New York City, advertising was seen by cynics as the ultimate end product of corporate culture: a huge industry that produced nothing but images, creating fears in its viewers intended to manipulate them into buying products. Books such as Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955); William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956); and Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) and *The Status Seekers* (1959) described a corporate culture, epitomized by Madison Avenue, that was mercilessly conformist. Madison Avenue men were characterized as group thinkers who spent their days worrying about job security, advancement, and social status, feting clients over martinis at lunch and comparing themselves to coworkers at cocktail parties at night. It is significant that the main characters in □The Canal□ are coworkers at an advertising firm, given that the advertising firm came to represent the drive for consumerism, competition, and conformity in the 1950s.

Critical Overview

During his lifetime, Richard Yates was read and respected by other writers to a much greater degree than he was read by the general public. His 1961 novel, *Revolutionary Road*, sold well, and over the years, it continued to be widely known, mostly due to its being assigned in literature classes. But from 1961 until Yates died in 1992, his literary career was a long slide into oblivion.

In 2001, though, *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates* was published, sparking admiration from all corners of the literary world. “The Canal” first appeared in print in this book, though many of the other stories from the collection had been previously published. *Esquire* magazine named the collection one of the “Best Books of 2001,” noting, “It's simply criminal that [these stories] were out of print so long.” Christine DeZelar-Tiedman, writing in the *Library Journal*, warns readers that Yates's worldview can be bleak but tells them outright that “Despite the general pessimism of the stories, they never seem contrived or self-indulgent.” She goes on to recommend the collection for all academic and larger public libraries. In *Booklist*, Brad Hooper goes even further with his praise, asserting that “No public library catering to short story lovers should be without this career-encompassing collection of the work of an important American story writer.” He ends his review by noting that Yates “deserves a wider audience among contemporary fiction readers.”

The admiration for this book is best summed up by John de Falbe, who wrote a long review of it for *The Spectator*. “Though many aspects of the world he describes have gone, the stories transcend time,” de Falbe writes. “They are about loneliness and loss, failure and dreams, dignity and grace. They are tough, unsentimental, compassionate and beautiful in their apparent simplicity.”

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at two schools in Illinois. In this essay, Kelly argues that the independence of thought shown by Betty Miller marks this as a story against gender stereotyping.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, Richard Yates's short story □The Canal□ offers a look at the post-World War II years that is both familiar and revealing, particularly in the ways that Yates treats the subject of gender relations. There is a tendency in the early 2000s to over-generalize the roles of women in the 1950s, to see their place in society as auxiliary at best, and Yates's story plays to that perspective by focusing on the men. Still, his female characters are not just extras in a drama that hardly concerns them but are indeed primary forces in giving meaning to the war story (or stories) that are considered in □The Canal.□

The main focus of this story is the cocktail party conversation between two men, Lew Miller and Tom Brace, about their experiences during the war, especially in a particular conflict in which they both took part some seven years earlier. Brace was in the thick of enemy gunfire and had the chance to distinguish himself as a soldier, killing several Germans, winning a medal and probably saving the lives of some of the men who served under him, though he is too modest to say so: he is the one who initiates the conversation and drives it forward with his insatiable curiosity about events of that day. Miller has mostly suppressed the events of that conflict: prodded by Brace, he recalls losing equipment, becoming separated from his squad in the dark, and being mercilessly reprimanded by his squad leader.

It is as important to the story that Brace's war experience be idealized as it is that Miller's be as humiliating as possible, because this is, at its core, the story of Miller's looking back at a certain moment which he would rather not revisit. His humiliation is rounded out by the presence of women. The wives listen to their husbands' conversation with apparent awe and admiration, even though what Miller is willing to say varies noticeably from what he thinks about the night at the canal. Both women prompt the men to tell their war stories and express fascination about an aspect of life that they never lived and never will. Though they are peripheral to the main thrust of the story, Yates develops their characters subtly.

Nancy Brace sets the standard for wifely behavior in this story, taking on the role of subordinate to her husband, acting as his assistant and biggest admirer. In this way, she comes close to the stereotypical 1950s wife. Nancy reminds Brace of details he has missed, and she marvels at his feats. She compliments his storytelling ability as being so varied that she could listen to his tales over and again and being so vivid that she feels she has lived his war experience. It is all nonsense, of course, as she proves by describing the experience of combat as □marvelous.□ If the whole conversation that □The Canal□ centers on is just one long display of Tom Brace on his □luck□ night at the canal, then it is a conversation that could not proceed without Nancy as the audience.

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In return for her support, Brace treats Nancy with dismissive indulgence. With such a complimentary audience, it is perhaps easy for him to take her for granted. When the maid does not come at his summoning, Nancy fetches drinks for the couples, for which he thanks her, but abruptly. When she brings out that his actions earned Brace a Silver Star, he uses the opportunity to underline at her expense his own presumed disinterest in the honor. He points out that a medal is a silly thing to care about, winking at Miller and asking patronizingly, “Isn't that just like a woman?” Though Nancy says that her husband's repetitious war stories are meaningful to her, he assumes that, because she is a woman, she can never grasp their meaning.

Throughout the story, Betty Miller's behavior seems to parallel that of Nancy Brace. She, too, tries to build up her husband's military career, even though she has far less to work with and is met with resistance from Miller. The story begins with Betty cutting into Tom Brace's monologue about his war experiences to point out that Lew Miller was in the war too and has his own tales to tell. When Miller discusses his service, she attempts to clarify for the Braces that he was an officer, but he shoots down her clarification by saying that he was only an officer stateside and served as a private when he was in combat. As Miller sees it, she glorifies his military career precisely because he never talks about it, having built what he thinks is “a special kind of women's-magazine romanticism” around it. Unlike Brace, who relies on his wife's encouragement, Miller discourages his wife's promoting him.

Yates presents Betty Miller as a complex character with too many contradictions for her to be easily interpreted as either building her identity around her husband's experiences or not. Throughout the story, she is generous with her praise for Tom Brace, often blurting out her admiration for his story that he clearly intends his audience to admire. If she sees this conversation as a competition between Brace and Miller, where one's achievement attempts to overshadow the other's, then she would have a natural interest in tempering her enthusiasm: the flip side of her attempts to get Miller to open up about his war experiences may be to get Brace to say less about his own. The fact that Betty Miller is so free with her praise for Brace indicates that she does not see this as a competition at all, that she is an impartial audience, an independent thinker.

On the other hand, Betty lets go of her social mask once the Millers are in a taxicab, driving away from the Braces. In private conversation with her husband, she pronounces that Nancy and Tom Brace are conceited. This comment may indicate that she feels hurt about losing the competition on which husband served more nobly in the war: if so, it would mean that her own ego is tied to Lew Miller's achievements, affirming the 1950s stereotype of the dependent woman. Her outburst in the cab may also be an invitation to her husband, intending to draw out his own anger. If she believes that Miller has been waiting all night to badmouth the Braces with her, she proves to be mistaken: she apparently does not understand him well at all.

It is clear that Yates has given Lew and Betty Miller separate interests, and, in doing so, he has subverted traditional gender expectations. A traditional wife could be thought to be, like Nancy Brace, supportive of her husband, building her ego as she builds his and losing status when he loses social ground. To some extent, the Millers have that kind of

relationship, too. They can also be understood as a conflicted, mismatched couple, where one partner gains self-esteem by belittling the other. If Betty Miller were angry with her husband, disappointed when he does nothing to promote himself, their marriage might be seen to fit this formula. Instead, their marriage is a mixture of both: she wishes the best for him, she dislikes his competitor, but she does not hold Miller's defeat in the social arena against him. Yates has made their relationship too complex and real for that.

Understanding Betty Miller is a bit easier because readers are also presented with Nancy Brace, who is a standard for loyal wifely behavior. Even so, Betty Miller is not an easy person to understand. Because this story focuses on Lew Miller, his memories and his thoughts, there is enough temptation to not try to decipher Betty at all, and the fact that she does not fit into standard patterns or expectations discourages getting to know her.

A clue about Betty might be provided in the drunken words of the party's hostess, who repeats, thinking that she is clever, that they should be preparing for □the next war□ instead of focusing on the last. As a woman, Betty Miller is as detached from World War II as Lew Miller wishes, unsuccessfully, that he could be himself. She does give a fair effort toward understanding it, either through her own husband's stories or through Brace's, but finds herself unable to feel drawn in as Nancy Brace does. That leaves her looking toward the future in a way that her husband does not, giving her an independent identity that in some sense subverts the stereotype of the good wife.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on □The Canal,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Tom Brace recalls vividly details about the night at the canal in March 1945, at the end of World War II, while Lew Miller would prefer not remembering anything about his night there. Talk to at least three people who have served in the military and from your interviews draw a conclusion about whose experience is more common. From your findings, develop a questionnaire that will help returning service people record their experiences, along with an explanation of why you think your particular questions would be useful.

Recall a time when you did something that others assumed was more exciting than it was. Write a story that compares the experience that you had with the experience that others think you should have had.

Nancy Brace and Betty Miller find it hard to understand what their husbands went through at the canal. Look through some books about war at your library, and make a list of five or more that you think they should read, with a short explanation about why you think each one would help them understand.

One point implied in this story is that people tend to forget about wars soon after they are over. Read about the official memorials in Washington, D.C., commemorating World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War. Write a brief description of each, and explain which you think is most effective.

Why do you think Yates gave Miller and Brace the jobs that they hold at the advertising firm where they work? Explain what a copywriter and an account executive do and how these two jobs would be suitable to these men.

What Do I Read Next?

Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, captures the mood of young advertising executives (like Tom Brace in this story). It is funny, poignant, and filled with mixed emotions about the struggle to succeed in commercial America and the fear that such success comes at the expense of one's soul.

Yates's best known work is his 1961 novel, *Revolutionary Road*, about a young husband and wife in the fifties who are upwardly mobile but eaten away by insecurity and discontent. It has been in print since its initial publication and is available as of 2006 from Vintage Contemporary.

Yates's short story, □The B.A.R. Man,□ is about an army veteran, John Fallon, who works as a clerk at an insurance company and remembers his former glory in the war. He recalls that he was often referred to as □a damn good B.A.R. man,□ using the exact words that Tom Brace in □The Canal□ uses to refer to a fellow soldier, implying that he might be the same character. This story is included in *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates* (2001).

Yates is believed to have been a major influence on Raymond Carver, a master short story writer who also dealt sparingly with domestic issues. Carver's story, □What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,□ concerns a situation similar to the one described in □The Canal,□ with two couples talking about love instead of war. It is available in a collection by the same name, published by Knopf in 1989.

Another writer who examined the discontents of postwar suburbia is John Cheever. Cheever's story □The Country Husband□ offers a meticulous look at the times and begins with a surrealistic scenario that mirrors the problem of Lew Miller in this story: a man returns home after being in a plane crash, but his family, having heard no news of the crash, does not see the significance of what happened to him. First published in 1954, it is frequently reprinted in literary anthologies and is included in *The Stories of John Cheever*, published by Knopf in 2000.

Critics regularly point out how Yates's precise, illuminating writing style resembles that of F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the great writers of the twentieth century. No one Fitzgerald story is particularly like those by Yates, but Fitzgerald's stories are available in *Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection*, published by Scribner in 1995.

Further Study

Bailey, Blake, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life of Richard Yates*, Methuen Publishing, 2004.

As of 2006, this work is considered the definitive biography of Yates, written by a man who is a preeminent Yates scholar.

Castronovo, David, and Steven Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, Twayne Publishers, 1996.

A scholarly review of Yates's work, this survey of criticism was published after the author's death but before the publication of *The Collected Stories* helped to rejuvenate his neglected reputation.

Simon, Linda, "Twenty-Seven Kinds of Loneliness: The Short Fiction of Richard Yates," in *World and I*, Vol. 16, No. 12, December 2001, pp. 239-44.

Ostensibly a review of the *Collected Stories*, this long essay contains a good overview of Yates's work and the esteem in which he is held.

Yates, Richard, "Excerpts from the Correspondence of Richard Yates and Barbara Singleton Beury, September 1960-November 1961," in *Harvard Review*, No. 25, Fall 2003, pp. 64-77.

This series of letters written in the early sixties shows Yates at his most charming and infuriatingly nonsensical. His triumphant novel, *Revolutionary Road*, had just been published, and he was drinking heavily and driving himself toward a nervous breakdown that would send him to the Men's Violence Ward at Bellevue Hospital.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale’s“For Students” Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on “classic” novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of “classic” novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

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“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

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Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

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