

Article

# The Modern American Family in *The Easter Parade*

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**Abstract:** In the work *The Easter Parade*, Richard Yates takes the perspective of two sisters, Sarah and Emily, to expose the dilemmas faced by the modern American family in the mid-twentieth century. He focuses on the changes in the shape of the family and the mental state of people in family relationships, especially the fate of women in the family. This paper combines the family systems theory to sort out and interpret the family patterns in *The Easter Parade*, and analyses the modern American family in Yates' works.

**Keywords:** Richard Yates; *The Easter Parade*; family patterns

## 1. Introduction

Richard Yates is one of the representative writers of the American "Age of Anxiety". During his literary career, he published a total of ten works, including seven full-length novels and three collections of short stories. The family is a vital topic in his works. Based on his personal experience, Yates focuses on how people live in their families, showing the anxiety and confusion of ordinary Americans. *The Easter Parade* unfolds from the point of view of the youngest daughter, Emily, who talks about the emotional state of her parents, her sister and herself, from which Emily's thoughts on family and intimate relationships are shown, thus exposing the existential dilemma of women in the family and society. The current academic study of Yates didn't have a discussion about the generational impact of the family. The family, as the mediator of social and personal connections, indirectly reflects the development of society as well as its impact on the individual. This paper will sort out and interpret the family patterns in *Easter Parade*, highlighting the qualities of the family in Yates's modernity.

## 2. The Delivery of Anxiety in the Family

According to psychologist Murray Bowen's family systems theory, the family emotional field is the product of emotionally driven relational processes that are present in all families. Emotions in the family are fields that systematically influence the psychological states of family members. Psychologists have found that people have less autonomy in their emotional functioning than is commonly believed, and that the environment plays a more important role. Yates argues that "During the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity all over this country, by no means only in the suburbs — a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price." It's because the politically in the Eisenhower administration and the Joe McCarthy witch-hunts. This causes young people to be enveloped in anxiety, which spills over into family life. According to Bowen's theory, the manifestation of family systemic anxiety in different people depends largely on the degree of self-differentiation. The higher the degree of self-differentiation, the more people are able to maintain an emotional connection with their families while retaining a certain degree of individuality. Whereas such feelings and abilities are influenced by family members prior to adolescence, the basic level of individual differentiation is stable, which in turn leads to the repetition of the pattern in subsequent interpersonal relationships

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standing for intimacy. Anxiety, as an important factor in family relationships and personal life, is also a cause of family tragedy [1].

Sarah and Emily are confronted with the emotional entanglements of their parents in their lives. In the text of the novel, divorced couples involve their children in their "triangular relationship", which results in the children being overburdened with emotions that hinder their personality development. At the beginning of *The East Parade*, Yates said that "Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents' divorce." The anxiety that comes with family breakdown affects both sisters for the rest of their lives. Mum Pookie bounced from suburb to suburb with her daughters for her career, and she couldn't always juggle work and family. Frequent moves prevented both sisters from forming lasting friendships with their peers. Pookie is the source of anxiety in the family, and she neglects to care for her daughters. The demand for oneself and one's children to be "stylish" is an expression of the middle-class ideal of life, including external conditions such as dress, demeanor, and housing. This reliance on external standards of evaluation is one of the manifestations of anxiety in the context of self-differentiated standards of measurement. At the same time, Pookie aspires to the rich life above the middle class. Pookie is obsessive in her pursuit of the apartment described as "a once-grand, shabby old floor-through on the south side of Washington Square, with big windows facing the park," in which she insists on living, even though it is beyond her means; but it makes her look respectable. This apartment not only assumes the need for living, but more importantly is valued for the status symbol it represents. In modern urban life, the living environment symbolizes one's social status, which has become a common perception among the middle class. The characters in Yates's works are constantly relocating and escaping in their lives, attempting to explore dwellings that will satisfy both body and spirit. The pursuit of decency in the middle-class ideal leads to women facing both professional and domestic pressures. Pookie's anxieties are naturally transferred in life to Sarah and Emily and have a lasting effect on their lives [2-3].

The father of the Grimes family is near-perfect in the girls' minds. Their father's untimely death has made his image excessively grand in the girls' minds, and years later Sarah still chooses to go to the restaurants in New York where she has dined with her father and confesses that she loves him more than her mother. Emily, on the other hand, has always craved her father's love, so much so that she still gets jealous when she hears details of his time with her sister. Emily searches for her father's shadow by pursuing a career in advertising copywriting, which bears a resemblance to her father's job writing headlines for *The Sun*; emotionally, Emily chooses a partner who projects her imagination of her father's love. While attending her sister Sarah's funeral, she became very shyly, like a child seeking her father's forgiveness, she put her fingers through Howard's arm. Howard is her partner who is elder than Emily. Emily kept searching for the kind of relationship that could replicate her dependent attachment to her family of origin in her life, and she never really got rid of the molding of her inferior character by her family of origin. She always played the silent role in her intimate relationships, which was one of the reasons for the tragedy in her life. Emily was more emotionally attached to her family members, which manifested itself in her greater insecurity and sense of belonging. When Emily was a child, she would be disturbed by her mother's behavior of coming home late to pick her up from work. As an adult, she chose to quit her job because of her partner's career change, which negatively impacted her career advancement, and she struggled to find a job even after nine months of unemployment, claiming to see nothing more than Social Security benefits. This anxiety directly interfered with Emily's normal life.

Sarah's anxiety is more insidious. It seems to Emily that Sarah is following the rules that have long been imposed on women by traditional society. But Emily accidentally learns that Sarah has actually been enduring domestic abuse. She eventually realizes that her sister's deepest and real fear is that Tony might leave her. Her unstable childhood has made Sarah long for a stable family, and she is willing to put up with domestic violence

to keep her family intact. Yates skillfully employs a dual parallelism in writing about the choices both Sarah and Emily make about marriage and family, presenting readers with an intense collision of traditional and modern family concepts. In modern life, people always yearn for both emotional needs and independence, which is originally a choice question full of paradoxes. In the midst of stability and freedom, people always seem to be standing at a fork in the road, choosing between swinging and the unknown. In Yates's observation, no choice is inevitably happy, and the tragedy of Sarah and Emily is an generational manifestation of problems within the family [4].

### 3. New Women in Family Life

Although Richard Yates is a male author, he presents many vivid and complex female characters in his works, a tendency that is closely related to Yates' personal experience. His parents divorced when he was three years old, and he and his sister grew up with their mother in the suburbs of New York City. Yates's married life was also full of ups and downs; he was divorced and remarried, and his relationships with his two wives and close interactions with his three daughters gave him a deeper understanding of the situation of women. The women in his works are rich in emotional experiences that resonate with people. *The Daughters of the Grimes Family* presents a new image of women in American family life in the middle of the last century. Sarah represents the image of the housewife caught between tradition and modernity, while Emily is the career woman who aspires to independence.

In the American society of the 1950s and 1960s, the external threat of the Cold War and the domestic political atmosphere created a tense double pressure, and the tense social atmosphere also made people want to live in a safe and cozy family. Yates portrayed the revolutionary wife in his work. A woman who chooses family doesn't mean that she agrees with the traditional gender values for women. Sarah, despite her choice of marriage, attempts to rebel against the banality of everyday life within her traditional identity. As a traditional wife, Sarah does her best to raise the children and take care of the family, even suffering domestic violence, but she keeps it to herself. Emily, as a bystander in the story to Sarah's life, doesn't really understand her sister at first, and the tedium of having children one after another seems almost unbearable to Emily. Emily even resents her sister a bit, and she doesn't want to host her sister, who wants to come to New York to look for a job. Sarah's sudden death greatly touches Emily, who recalls that in the old days, Sarah wasn't exactly a woman who was contented with her family. She longed to write a book and had written some plays, but eventually gave them up because it was difficult to leave home to travel to another city to gather information. Later in her married life, Sarah longed to find a job, but her long home life had left her disconnected from society, and her employment options were limited. The competitive job market could hardly accommodate such a housewife, so she had to return to her familiar home. The American housewife of the 1950s and 1960s faced resistance in her search for herself. Suburbia here represents the dominant force that shapes the lives of those who live in it. Unlike men who work outside the home and have the opportunity to maneuver between public and private spaces, housewives spend their days in the kitchen, the living room, and the bedroom, which can be quite depressing in life. They are dissatisfied with their boredom, but it is difficult for housewives to break the structural dilemma by their personal will alone. The housewives are trapped in suburban family life [5].

Yates believed that no matter what paradigm of life she followed, urban women faced many trials in their lives, making it difficult for them to truly pursue happiness. Emily is the first liberated independent woman in Yates' work. She studied English in college. As her father said, "You'll live in the world of ideas for four whole years before you have to concern yourself with anything as trivial as the demands of workaday reality—that's what's nice about college." Emily's career choices were not limited to tradition. She held many jobs, including several years as a librarian at a Wall Street brokerage firm.

She then worked in developing headlines for trade magazines. She felt self-actualized in these jobs. As an idealist, her liberal arts education in college taught her that it doesn't matter what kind of work you do to make a living, it's what kind of person you are that counts. This belief sustains Emily as she continues to explore the possibilities of life. There are always many contradictions and troubles in the pursuit of an independent self. Women are expected to prioritize their family, and the stereotype of gender roles restricts the space for women to develop in the professional field. Society's stereotypical view of women is that it is difficult for them to work in managerial positions, and their age also prevents them from advancing in the workforce. So when the editor-in-chief vacancy at the Food Field Observer came up, instead of promoting Emily, they hired a man in his forties from the outside. This invisible ceiling is ubiquitous in women's career advancement. Even when they achieve some success in their careers, women's professional value is often not respected on the same level as that of men. In the traditional perception, women's aging means that they are no longer young and beautiful, and their personal value is lost as a result. This contradiction between societal expectations and professional bottlenecks brought Emily profound anxiety. Emily not only struggled financially—she had to move to a smaller and more isolated house—but also experienced a combination of challenges to social identity, gender roles, and age discrimination [6].

#### 4. The Development and Modern Transformation of Family Forms in the United States

American family fiction can be traced back to the family novels of Hawthorne and Faulkner. These classic authors were influenced by European traditions, and their fictional characters tended to live in large and ancient families. The American family paradigm shifted after the 1950s, with the traditional family model being shaken by the constant postponement of the age of first marriage for young people and by the fact that divorce was no longer bound by traditional morality. In *The Easter Parade*, Yates does not mention the history of the Grimes family; the marriage of Pooch and Walter is the first generation the reader is exposed to. This is inextricably linked to the predominantly nuclear family form in the United States. Early immigrants to the American continent often arrived alone, only later bringing their families with them. Families re-established in this new continent were therefore predominantly nuclear, and the newborn second-generation inhabitants knew only their fathers and not their grandfathers and earlier families, which somewhat diminished the influence of patriarchy and set the stage for the development of family patterns in the United States afterward.

The degree of industrialization of cities has had a direct impact on modern American family patterns. With the advance of industrialization and urbanization in the United States, the average number of people in a household unit in the United States is decreasing, and the organization of the family gradually tends to. First, industrialization reduced people's dependence on land, more people left the towns where they originally lived, and social mobility increased; second, industrialization increased individual independence, and children rarely chose to live with their parents in adulthood. Industrialized cities and the increase in the number of nuclear families are inextricably linked. The survival of the nuclear family is simpler because of its smaller population, which requires only one laborer to support it, as opposed to the expanded family, which requires a larger number of young and strong laborers. In the Grimes household, Pooch can support the expenses of the entire family by working outside the home. At the same time, they can also change their place of residence as job opportunities arise, making the mobility of the nuclear family consistent with the capital market's need for free labor.

But industrialization has not had only a positive impact on the nuclear family; industrialized societies have contributed to a reduction in the amount of time people spend with their families in the home, and the activities of the family collectively have suffered, leading to a decline in the cohesion of the family. Chaos and anxiety are symptomatic of

modernity, with the emergence of new things in rapid succession impacting on the stability of tradition, and modernism influencing the establishment of a new order in the family system. Traditional families tended to be tightly knit. At the same time the traditional mode of production allowed the family to serve both emotional and economic functions, whereas the modern family takes on more emotional needs. The modern corporation has achieved the organization of business and is completely separated from the family, which has become a place to simply take on emotions. Emily is accompanying Jack to teach at Iowa State University when Jack and his students go for a drink, but he forgets to tell Emily, who is still waiting for him at home. Emily is in a state of loneliness and she feels lost as a result. The bond between family members fades in such neglect, and as Emily begins to enjoy her loneliness, her relationship with Jack comes to an end. This phenomenon reveals the instability of modern family relationships and the reality of increasing alienation among family members in modern society.

### 5. Conclusion

The family life in Yates's works is full of misfortunes, whether it is a house in the suburbs or an apartment in the city, people seem to be confined in the exquisite domestic space, and he acts as a microscopic mapping of the social conflicts through writing about the family. The characters in Yates's novels are always lonely and prone to fall into dependency; they struggle with the conflict between reality and ideals, and ultimately only have to sink and compromise in the process of reality. Yates's family focuses on people's repressed emotions within the family, highlighting the phenomenon of individual loneliness in modern society. The loneliness and barrenness of the spirit of modern citizens are revealed in the story of the family.

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