



Reese, Sam VH ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0023-3333> (2022) Eleven Kinds? Loneliness and Reading for Type with Richard Yates. *American Literature*, 94 (2). pp. 357-380.

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Eleven Kinds? Loneliness and Reading for Type with Richard Yates

Abstract

Richard Yates' collection of short stories, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962) was written at time when loneliness was increasingly seen as a cultural crisis in the US, and loneliness is at the forefront of the collection. But Yates was equally concerned with the rise of typing in postwar culture, connecting the two in ways similar to the sociological study *The Lonely Crowd*. Yates' apparently straightforward catalogue of "Eleven Kinds" reveals the influence that personality tests, corporate typing, and social typologies had on the rise in loneliness in midcentury America—a relationship so far critically unexplored. Arguing that, in not only Yates' stories, but midcentury fiction more broadly, loneliness is a space of contest between individuality and group belonging, and is intimately connected to larger political and social narratives, the article reframes American loneliness in light of the cultural changes of the midcentury and writer's struggles with the possibilities and limitations of type.

"Perhaps at last she had found him, the one she kept looking for, the one who could tell her
what she was really like."

—Mary McCarthy, *The Company She Keeps*, 1942.

You know the type. The diligent, industrious one, lost without a checklist. The insecure one, bordering on neurotic and in need of constant validation. The sensitive creative, who chafes against the arbitrary limitations of someone else's brief. You might know them from your workplace. Your classroom. Your love life. Or you might recognise in them literary characters—for these should all sound familiar, not just as personality types, but as characters.

Typing has long exercised wide imaginative power. Myths provided us with heroic archetypes; cultural norms led to distinctive social types more familiar from folk tales or romances. But early twentieth century advances in psychology—most notably Jung's 1921 *Psychological Types*—offered up a structured and (ostensibly) scientific system for understanding type as a function of our personality. Jung's delineation of our psychological type into four

preferences (for thinking and feeling; for sensation and intuition) was quickly adopted both by analytical psychologists and, with some linguistic massaging, by corporations, in the form of personality tests. By the mid-twentieth century, typing had moved from the fringes of folk wisdom to the centre of institutional policies, and the most famous of the personality tests, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, continues to be taken by millions each year.

Yet in spite of its association with corporate control, the MBTI originally grew out of aspirations towards shared freedom through self-knowledge. Isabel Briggs-Myers, who developed the Type Indicator with her mother, dedicated the later manual for type, *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type* (1980) “to all who desire to make full use of their gifts.” The MBTI’s long and fruitful life since its first version in 1944—to say nothing of the plethora of similar typing tests—is as much due to its popularity in self-help books and guides to romantic love. The ubiquity of type, from office-oriented corporate identities, to the MBTI’s characteristic four letter chains with their implications of canonical authority (INFP; ESTJ), to more recent permutations, like Gary Chapman’s *Five Love Languages* (1992), suggests that typing answers a deep-seated psychological need. Meg Sergeant, the protagonist of Mary McCarthy’s 1942 short story cycle-cum-novel *The Company She Keeps*, refracts this yearning through her search for romantic fulfilment, describing in striking terms her longing for “the one who could tell her what she was really like” (72).

Meg’s desire is telling. Her need is not that of a corporate middle manager, looking for the best way to maximise his workers’ efficiency, but of a young woman looking to understand herself. And her search culminates in a visit to her psychoanalyst, Dr James, where they discuss the necessity to have “a good eye for social types”—an important sign of just how deeply psychological ideas of type had imbricated themselves into both older ideas of social type, and broader US culture by the early ‘40s. Perhaps most importantly, it signals how tightly the use of typing is pinned to ideas about the self, narratives of self-discovery, quests for friendship or love and, crucially, their counterpart: stories of loneliness.

By the late 1940s, sociologists were making the same connection as McCarthy: that an increase in the practice of typing—and a surge in the discourse around type—was connected in some crucial way to a perceived rise in loneliness. The most prominent articulation came in David Riesman’s epoch-framing study *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), written with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney.¹ *The Lonely Crowd* profoundly shaped the way later generations understood the culture of 1950s America, and is regularly invoked to explain the corporatist, conformist, and increasingly lonely culture of the 1950s, its title a byword for a distinctly modern phenomenon of loneliness. And yet Riesman admitted that the title wasn’t the authors’ choice, and in the 1969 preface conceded that certain moments of “nostalgia” in the book “contributed to these misreadings” (xiii). As Gideon Lewis-Kraus has recently pointed out, the *Lonely Crowd* was not just “a simplistic critique of epidemic American postwar conformity” but a book about “social types,” Riesman insisted on this very point in revised introductions to the book, broadening his initial proposition to something bolder and clearer than his original argument: that we should “think of social organization in terms of a series of ‘ideal types’ along a spectrum of increasingly loose authority.”² Rather than a book about loneliness or conformity *per se*, it was a study of social character, and drew on an important sociological discourse that divided people into readily classifiable *types*.

Perhaps the author who best understood this tight connection between midcentury typing, corporate culture, and a dominant affect—loneliness—was Richard Yates. The very title of his 1962 collection of short stories, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, signals his attention to the role that *kinds* of identity were playing in the formation of midcentury loneliness. And while his fiction is now mostly associated with a clichéd genre of men-in-grey-flannel-suits (he certainly understood this social type better than most—see *Revolutionary Road*), Yates’ stories also push up against questions of class, race, and gender in complex and revealing ways. Even in the often

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² Gideon Lewis-Kraus, “Yelp and the Wisdom of *The Lonely Crowd*,” *New Yorker*, May 7, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/yelp-and-the-wisdom-of-the-lonely-crowd>.

exclusionary and oppressively patriarchal white-collar workforce of the mid-twentieth century US, the discourse around personality types interacted with race and gender in complex ways, and Yates' yoking of type and loneliness offers a lens for understanding how peers from McCarthy to Ralph Ellison engaged with similar cultural ideas, while also opening their analysis out to consider how whiteness and white supremacy, say, or patriarchal chauvinism, create not self-identifying typing systems, as in the MBTI, but racist or sexist stereotypes.

Literary studies has seen a recent turn to character, heralded by Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters* (2016) and Jeremy Rosen's *Minor Characters Have their Day* (2016). But what would be at stake if we shifted this conversation away from character, and onto type? In general, the value of type, like genre, lies in its ability to chart the growth of norms—but unlike character, type maps individual writers' works against social, rather than literary, expectations. Within the context of midcentury US fiction, where (as *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* and *The Lonely Crowd* both signal) loneliness had not only become the dominant affect, but was imbricated in the very process of typing, a turn to type allows us to unpack an ongoing contest between individuality and group belonging—where playing to type meant both learning what you were really like, and becoming like how everybody else already was.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Loneliness

So what exactly is lonely about *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*?³ On the surface, loneliness seems to be everywhere in Yates' stories. But one of the more autobiographical pieces, "Jody Rolled the Bones," illustrates how Yates' conceptualisation of loneliness is at once more straightforward and more complicated than it might first appear. Early in the story, the narrator (in army basic training) takes on a communal voice, describing the "bitterness" that was "the fashionable mood" in an army camp in 1944, and regularly using the first-person plural to narrate his platoon's experiences—especially once they are introduced to their martinet sergeant, Reece.³ "He alienated us on the first day by butchering our names" (38) the narrator explains, and yet the exaggerated "loyalty" to one another that Reece's bullying provokes, perversely, makes the men more effective soldiers (41). From a jaded and disillusioned recruit, the narrator is surprised to find that he has soon grown accustomed to his communal existence, so that "it was almost a disappointment when [Reece] gave us route steps on the outskirts of camp and we became individuals again" (46). Against the comfort of their "proud soldierly alliance" (48), a return to singular existence could only provoke loneliness, and Yates takes pains to emphasise the way the soldiers' "emotional life became ingrown" whenever they left the base to visit the local town, a place that "yielded only loneliness" (48). As in so many of the stories in the appositely titled collection, this affective state is shaped not so much by physical isolation (being alone) as by a larger lack of purpose, a sense of being cut off from a shared goal or identity.

Yates was hardly alone in exploring loneliness; even as early as the 1930s, it was coming to be seen as the dominant affect in American culture, literary and otherwise loneliness (think of Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* [1933], or Carson McCuller's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* [1940]). What makes Yates' representation of loneliness so distinctive is how closely he entwines

³ Richard Yates, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (Little, Brown and Co., 1962), 39. All further references will be made with in-text citation.

it with ideas of group belonging and a broader culture of typing—where individual identity cleaved closely to narratives about the *kind* of person someone was. In this, Yates was both responding to his own knowledge of the prevailing rhetoric in contemporary corporate culture, and also foreshadowing the conclusions of twenty-first century sociological research into loneliness. The loneliness of the soldiers on leave speaks to their need for a shared narrative—it is, in simple terms, the feeling of lack they suffer when common narrative is gone.

Over the last fifteen years, there has been an explosion in loneliness research, which has pushed the field increasingly towards the humanities at large, and literary studies in particular. In part this has been driven by a growing awareness loneliness is more than just a negative affect—it is “linked to depression, anxiety and interpersonal hostility... an increased vulnerability to health problems... and even to suicide.”⁴ In fact, loneliness is now closely associated with a range of negative health outcomes—with one 2017 study suggesting it is as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.⁵ But it has also been spurred on by a recognition that the rates of loneliness are rapidly increasing—according to another study from 2017, “25 to 48 percent” of people suffer from some degree of loneliness, with that proportion increasing between 3 and 7 percent each year.⁶ Researchers have long understood that loneliness arises out of specific cultural conditions, including official policy, systems of values, and social narratives (especially those influenced by literature and mass culture)—and, in what is sometimes described as the ‘loneliness loop,’ loneliness begets loneliness. But now, research is bearing out the observation Yates made in “Jody Rolled the Bones”: loneliness is closely connected to the kind of stories that individuals tell about themselves. As leading loneliness research John T. Cacioppo and others’ research shows, the narratives that individuals maintain around their experience of loneliness have practical consequences for their physical health: “perceived social isolation,” or in other

⁴ Ami Rokach, “Loneliness and Life: From Beginning to End,” in *Psychology of Loneliness*, ed. Sarah Bevin (Nova Science, 2011), 70.

⁵ Cacioppo, “Loneliness.”

⁶ John T. Cacioppo and Olga Khazan, “How Loneliness Begets Loneliness,” *Atlantic*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/04/how-loneliness-begets-loneliness/521841/>.

words, an individual's own narrative of loneliness, is "in normal samples... a more important predictor of a variety of adverse health outcomes than is objective social isolation."⁷

This understanding has led, on the one hand, to sociologically and psychologically-oriented studies like Olivia Sagan and Eric Miller's collection *Narratives of Loneliness* (2018), which draw insights from literary studies, and on the other, to recent humanities works like Fay Bound Alberti's *A Biography of Loneliness* (2019) and David Vincent's *History of Solitude* (2020) that seek to bring psychological research to bear on literary history. The long historical sweep of these studies, however, tends to obscure or even ignore the specific cultural conditions that shape the experience of loneliness in favor of a metanarrative that places a current crisis in a longer history. But while the rise of loneliness in midcentury America does share similarities with contemporary surges in loneliness, it was also a product of specific social and political changes.

Like Yates, Riesman and the other authors of *The Lonely Crowd* understood that their observations of increased loneliness were more than atmospheric changes. They argued, in strikingly prescient terms that technology, urbanization, and consumer culture had created a society where a majority of people lived more closely (and were more closely connected) than ever before, yet were also increasingly defined by loneliness and disconnection. This certainly chimes with Alberti's contention that "loneliness as a modern social affliction has grown up in the cracks, in the formation of a society that was less inclusive and communal and more grounded in the scientific, medicalized idea of an individual mind, set against the rest."⁸ For what was intended to be a specialist sociological study, *The Lonely Crowd* sold phenomenally well; Riesman himself expressed surprise at the book's success, explaining that the authors "had no expectation" that the book "would be widely read outside the relevant academic fields" (xi). Yet it *was* widely read, becoming a cultural touchstone, and yielding several successive editions, with Riesman penning additional prefaces in 1960 and 1969. These prefaces reveal more than just the

⁷ David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (Yale UP, 1950), 4.

⁸ Faye Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness: A History of an Emotion* (Oxford UP, 2019), Kindle.

book's ubiquity—they also point to other ways that critics and general readers alike misconstrued the authors' key arguments. Like Yates collection, the focus of Reisman et al's attention was not so much loneliness as the processes by which it was made.

Where Yates' collection tends to categorize more obliquely with 'kinds', Riesman et al focuses squarely on what they saw as the culprit: typing. Riesman opens the book by addressing the "notion of social character permits us to speak, as I do throughout this book, of the character of classes, groups, regions, and nations."⁹ While the concept of, say, national types was well-worn by the 1950s—examples as early as Dr Alexander Hamilton's 1744 *Itinerareum* linking identity to specific regional and ethnic types—the connection between individuals, types, and 'social organization' marked an important development in US cultural discourse, by way of Jung's *Psychological Types*. Jung's binary pairs of sensation-and-intuition and thinking-and-feeling provided the basis for a new approach to type, squarely focused on classifying and organizing individuals—a special demand of the industrial capitalism that Reisman et al. pinpointed as the cause behind the shifting nature of American society. Indeed, corporations quickly adopted principals drawn from Jung, so that by 1951, C. Wright Mills could note in the introduction to *White Collar* that "images of white-collar *types* are now part of the literature of every major industrial nation."¹⁰ When Riesman et al. referred to 'social types,' they had this particularly corporatized identity in mind. Indeed, type had taken over as the dominant way of understanding identity, and was leveraged by political and commercial institutions alike in the early years of the cold war.

One of the most enduring and far-reaching interpretations of Jung's work on types was the Isabel Briggs-Myer's MBTI, developed by way of her mother's extrapolation of Jung's theory. The test made its commercial debut in 1943, and though it ostensibly promised self-revelation—it would match you to "one of the sixteen possible four-letter combinations that

⁹ Riesman et al, *Lone Crowd*, 4.

¹⁰ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (Oxford UP, 1951), x (emphasis mine).

revealed your true self”—the test was also firmly designed with commercial application.¹¹ As Merve Emre makes clear, Isabel Briggs-Myer was driven to devise a solution to “the problem of the intelligent division of labor”; Briggs-Myer “gravitated to type’s modernizing prospects: how it seemed to offer a perfectly rational, yet inspirational, system for managing people across very different domains of society, from her modest four-person household to the entire U.S. workforce.”¹² The MBTI continues to be used widely, with one-to-two million tests being administered annually in the first decades of the twenty-first century—despite the fact that, as Emre explains, “for some time, it has been a well-known fact that the type indicator is not scientifically valid; that the theory behind it has no basis in clinical psychology.” More crucially—and as critics like Mills would have suspected—the test also performs poorly at matching employees to suitable work. Despite a range of studies attempting to show the test’s underlying value in matching kinds of workers to roles, as David Pittenger points out, to date “there is no evidence to show a positive relation between MBTI type and success within an occupation.”¹³

What fueled this impulse towards understanding individuals by type? Surely something larger was at play than the promise of self-knowledge, especially given the concept’s rapid and wide-ranging adoption by corporations. William H. Whyte offered one answer in his 1956 study of identity in postwar America, *The Organization Man*. Here, Whyte argued convincingly that although the embrace of type was, for many individuals, motivated by an ideological gap—in a secular, capitalist society, “the organization man seeks a redefinition of his place on earth—a faith that will satisfy him that what he must endure has a deeper meaning than appears on the surface. He needs, in short, something that will do for him what the Protestant Ethic did once”—but on a larger scale, the “growth in personality testing” and the use of types to organise

¹¹ Merve Emre, *What’s Your Type?: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing* (William Collins, 2018), Kindle.

¹² Emre, *Type*.

¹³ David J. Pittenger, “Measuring the MBTI ... And Coming Up Short,” *Journal of Career Planning and Employment* 54.1 (November 1993), 50.

workers was part of a much larger process of “social engineering”.¹⁴ Mills argued much the same thing five years earlier, in *White Collar*, pointing out that typing was a product of a midcentury shift in “the picture of society,” which viewed the workplace “as a great salesroom, an enormous file, an incorporated brain, a new universe of management and manipulation.”¹⁵ In this worldview, types were understood as commodities, or in Mills’ term, “marketable activities,” that could be invested in or traded by employers.¹⁶ Mills linked this dehumanising application of type to wider changes in the US workforce. Understanding personality by way of type matched neatly to the technocratic division of workers based on “a hitherto unknown specialization of skill.”¹⁷ As much as individuals may have turned to typing to help fill an existential gap in their identity, tests like the MBTI succeeded because they fitted with a larger paradigm shift in the US economy, which conceived of workers with ever greater instrumentality.

The title of Yates’ collection (like the underlying logic of *The Lonely Crowd*) points to a connection between a generic view of identity and the experience of loneliness. This is more than just a matter of coincidence: the rise of type was directly connected to the growing numbers of lonely individuals. On the surface, the rhetoric of type seems to affirm individuality through a positive framework of revelation. This empowering promise of understanding one’s true nature, and pursuing the lifestyle to which you were most suited, aligned neatly with the self-help logic of postwar capitalism. The emphasis on individuality, too, reflected the political rhetoric of the early Cold War, where US “democratic freedom” was set “in opposition” to the collective identities and “formal limitations associated with Soviet totalitarianism.”¹⁸ But the application of type, far from recognizing an individual’s true defining characteristics, instead classified them by way of interchangeable categories. No longer did a personnel team need to fit an individual to company; instead, they could merely choose someone who fit ‘the type.’ It was with this

¹⁴ William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (U of Pennsylvania P, 2002), Kindle.

¹⁵ Mills, *White Collar*, xv.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁸ Sam V.H. Reese, *The Short Story in Midcentury America* (Louisiana State UP, 2017), 1.

understanding of type—not as a system that validated individuality, but that stripped it away—that Whyte offered a famous crib at the end of his *Organization Man*, where in an appendix titled “How to Cheat on Personality Tests,” he explained that “the important thing to recognize is that you don’t win a good score: you avoid a bad one.”¹⁹

If this sounds dehumanizing at the corporate level, then the implications for workers themselves should hardly be surprising. Mills could already note, in 1951, that modern corporate workers “are expert at dealing with people transiently and impersonally; they are masters of the commercial, professional, and technical relationship.”²⁰ Rather than forming personal relationships with one another, “they live off the social machineries that organize and coordinate.” Likewise, in the new introduction to Whyte’s *Organization Man*, Joseph Nocera notes the extent to which subscribing to a type still means “sublimating your identity” to a corporate signifier.²¹ The signifying logic of type at once limits the extent to which one understands oneself, and puts a block in process of forming relationships with others. As Mills noted “glimpses of types” are quickly “frozen into the language with which [corporations] see the world”; the signs of typing overlay the individual so that “previous images” associated with type, “linked deeply with feeling, blind them to what stands before them. Experience is trapped by false images.”²² The end result is an individual “estranged from community and society,” and “alienated from work and, on the personality market, from self.”²³

Between estrangement from others, an inability to have meaningful interactions, and an alienation from self, the consequences of typing match up directly to what Morrison and Smith identify as the three main conceptual markers of loneliness: “social needs, interaction and cognitive discrepancy.”²⁴ And contemporary research into workplace loneliness supports Mills’

¹⁹ Whyte, *Organization Man*.

²⁰ Mills, *White Collar*, 65.

²¹ Joseph Nocera, “Introduction,” *The Organization Man*, William H. Whyte (U of Pennsylvania P, 2002), Kindle.

²² Mills, *White Collar*, xii.

²³ *Ibid.*, xviii

²⁴ Morrison and Smith, “Loneliness,” 14.

and Riesman's suppositions. In a 2018 study, Hakan Ozcelik and Sigal Barsade found that the "negatives outcomes" of loneliness are higher in workplaces when workers' "social bonds do not meet... expectations or... need to belong."²⁵ Workplace connections and affiliations are lowest in highly competitive, highly atomised workplaces, which foster a "loneliness loop," whereby "lonelier employees are less affiliative—and that lack of affiliation relates to poorer job performance." This poorer performance, in turn, leads to a lower connection with others, and a greater sensitivity to the signs of being lonely.²⁶ The irony is that type's initial appeal was predicated on its potential to maximise workplace productivity. But "employee job performance is significantly tied to an employee's ability to build and maintain a relational support system and interpersonal networks", as Ozcelik and Barsade explain; by putting barriers in place to forming nuanced relationships with others, the logic of type thwarted its own promise.²⁷

Eleven Types?

The work of midcentury sociologists like Mills and the authors of *The Lonely Crowd* (along with journalists and urbanists like Whyte) was so significant because it theorized and mapped out a relationship between an instrumentalized workforce and an increase in loneliness. Even if psychological research has only now substantiated this connection, early works of public-facing social criticism shaped a public discourse that placed loneliness in close conversation with type. But in Yates' collection, the concept of 'kinds' was overtly related to loneliness in a way that went beyond a simple binary of authentic individuals and dehumanised, lonely 'types.' Drawing on central midcentury preoccupations around conformity and belonging, the collection stages a series of conflicts between group affiliation and individualism that critique type without simplistically blaming it for all loneliness. After all, as the characters in "Jody Rolled the Bones"

²⁵ Hakan Ozcelik and Sigal Barsade, "No Employee an Island: Workplace Loneliness and Job Performance," *Academy of Management Journal* 61.6 (2018): 2343

²⁶ Ozcelik and Barsade, "Workplace Loneliness," 2344

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2349.

recognise, there is a comfort to be found in a certain loss of individuality. Yates' case is telling, reflecting a much larger dialogue in midcentury fiction.

There is no doubt that Yates deliberately framed his collection as *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* to deliberately draw attention to such a relationship. All but one of the stories that were eventually published in the collection in 1962 had been written in the 1950s and (the question of a publisher aside), the collection was effectively ready for print by 1958, sitting on Yates' backburner throughout the writing of his 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road*.²⁸ The holdup? The framework for the collection was already set, but Yates was unable to write a final story, the eleventh of his *Kinds of Loneliness*. The delay would turn out to be the right decision—the story he produced after two years' pause, "Builders" (his eleventh kind), received favorable mention in contemporary reviews, and when Yates' publisher, Sam Lawrence, finally got to read the story along with the completed collection, he described it as "the most poignant and profoundly moving" of the eleven pieces.²⁹ By the 1980s, the collection as a whole had "become something of a cult book," with "Builders" continuing to be singled out.³⁰ But Yates's determination to add this final kind of loneliness to the collection reflects more than his notorious obsessive streak. It draws attention to the importance he placed on the framework of the collection: the eleven kinds of the title are not just an arbitrary reflection of the number of stories Yates managed to compose, but a calculated statement about the role of typing in shaping contemporary experiences of loneliness.

Yates was particularly well-placed to comment on such a relationship. As Brian Rajska has argued convincingly, Yates' fiction responded directly to the emergence of new systems of classification and organization. After working as a copywriter and editor for materials promoting Remington Rand's UNIVAC computer system, Yates turned to writing fiction that Rajska argues

²⁸ Kate Carlton Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream: The Life and Fiction of Richard Yates* (University of Alabama Press, 2014)

²⁹ In Blake Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (Picador, 2003), 262.

³⁰ Robert Tower, "Richard Yates and his Unhappy People," *New York Times*, November 1, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/01/books/richard-yates-and-his-unhappy-people.html>.

must be regarded as “a response to the systemization of business communication and the spread of data processing as much as an extension of the aesthetics of literary modernism.”³¹ In some ways, this thematic turn parallels a deeper current in American literature, characterized by Leo Marx in the 1960s as ‘the machine in the garden’—the threat of technological and capitalist intrusions on the self-determined freedom of the American psyche. This is certainly a recurring theme across Yates’ oeuvre, but here the writer connects the ‘machine’ specifically to typing, by way of data classification, machine organization, and a removal of personality that leads to a single, dominant affective and psychological response: loneliness

Even if Yates had not supplied us with a formula in the title, it would not be hard to discern the condition that links his characters. Loneliness pervades the collection. It manifests as both a physical and psychological condition, with Yates mirroring intense emotional isolation with vivid images of characters standing apart, as if spotlighted, or framed as in an Edward Hopper painting. So, when Myra, the protagonist of “No Pain Whatsoever,” thinks that she “would much rather have taken the bus, alone, as usual” (57), the reader is uncertain as to whether the alone-ness she longs for is physical space or emotional distance. Not that Yates suggests that you need to be alone to feel lonely. Myra’s strongest feelings of loneliness occur when she is around her friends, or her husband in the hospital tuberculosis ward—those times where people “acted as if they were doing her a favour” and she “had to be polite” (58), masking her emotions.³² Throughout the collection, the crowds of towns and cities are synonymous with feelings of isolation, “yield[ing] only loneliness” (48) so that their inhabitants’ “emotional life became ingrown” (49). So far, so familiar; this was the dynamic that Riesman et al had identified a decade earlier, pinpointed in their title’s *lonely* crowd. Yates’ additional insights were twofold: that lonelinesses could be distinctive and classified, and that they were addictive. For Myra is not alone; Yates’ protagonists *crave* loneliness, searching for those moments when, like Walter in “A

³¹ Brian Rajske, “Writing ‘Systems’: Richard Yates, Remington Rand, and the Univac,” *Contemporary Literature* 54.3 (2013), 554

³² An experience that Morrison and Smith note is common among those who report high levels of loneliness today.

Glutton for Punishment,” they could “at least... be alone” (84). Being alone, for both Walter and Myra, sometimes borders on the more positive territory of solitude, but the collections’ overarching framework of loneliness—alongside specific, affective cues—reminds us that this state is also a source of pain and distress.

In Yates’ stories, these two insights are interrelated. On a surface level, the eleven stories deliver on the title’s promise of eleven kinds; each piece offers up a distinctive type of loneliness. But these ‘kinds’ are more than just categories—the process of typing has its own dynamic which, Yates suggests, fosters and sustains the experience of loneliness. Yates signals his awareness of a social tendency towards typing from the first paragraph of the first story. In a pattern he replicates across the collection, characters understand one another by fitting them to predetermined frames—in this case, the teacher “Miss Price” ignores the specifics of her students and is, instead, “content with the rough outline” (1). But Miss Price is forced to attend to the specificity of a new transfer to her suburban school. The student, Vincent Sabella, is marked as an outsider in several respects. Not only a new student joining a group with its own established dynamics, Vincent is also an orphan who has grown up in New York City—a monstrous location for the other students, “an awesome, adult place that swallowed up their fathers every day” (2). The other students read the same monstrous difference onto Vincent’s appearance (“even if you could ignore his tangled black hair and gray skin, his clothes would have given him away” [2]), and in the end “decided that he wasn’t very nice and turned away” (2); as with Myra, Vincent’s physical and emotional isolation are twinned, and the two experience culminate together when Vincent “went to the boy’s lavatory and vomited” (13). As for Myra, being lonely for Vincent is represented in keenly physical terms.

Crucially, Yates depicts the children’s collective rejection of Vincent as based on the same kind of typing towards which their teacher is drawn. Vincent is shunned not just because he is different, but because he fits a type the students recognize and despise: someone who has emerged from “straight, deep streets, one after another, all alike in the clutter of their sidewalks

and all swarming with gray boys at play in some desperate kind of ball game” (2). The effect of being typecast drives Vincent further into isolation where, almost perversely, the more he seems to be a type, the more he seems drawn towards that very difference, so that “by the end of the week he was well on the way to becoming the worst possible kind of teacher’s pet, a victim of the teacher’s pity” (7). Typing, for Yates, is like loneliness: prone towards a self-fulfilling loop.

This pattern is not unique to the schoolyard, either; a majority of the stories focus on the ostensibly more mature environments of corporate workplaces. But the ‘white collar types’ that Yates depicts in these stories, like the hapless office worker Walter in “A Glutton for Punishment,” continue to be precisely that: types. In many ways, Walter resembles many of the other social-climbing, aspirational, corporate cogs of Yates’ collection—after all, he and his wife have “moved to an expensive apartment in the East Sixties” (73) on the back of his job—and like many of them, he lives in fear of being fired and losing this precarious status. But Yates hones in on Walter’s peculiar passivity. “Letting things happen and taking them gracefully had been, in a way, the pattern of his life,” Walter realizes; his life has grown increasingly towards playing “the role of a good loser” (73). Like Vincent, the process of typing has pushed him further towards playing a specific part—a development that shocks him, in a rare moment of self-reflection. When “he realized how completely he had enjoyed himself” in playing the part of the good loser, Walter “felt as if he had surprised himself in some obscene and shameful act, and he had never felt more helpless” (78). Yates orients the narrative towards this revelation: the discovery not of loneliness itself, but of his character’s own cultivation of the role that has made him so lonely.

Where experiences such as Vincent’s or Myra’s might suggest that loneliness comes about through victimization (either at the hands of specific individuals, or from the larger structures of midcentury society, as Reisman or Mills would argue), the case of Walter presents an alternative: that individuals might have some agency over their loneliness. The parallel that Walter himself imagines between his attitude as an adult, and the game he played as a child

where he and his friends each pretended to die from gunshots suggests that he is dimly conscious of this role-playing. Certainly, it matches up to one of Yates' lifelong preoccupations. Blake Bailey quotes one of Yates' close friends as saying that "the ordeal of inauthenticity—what was real versus feigned—was a drama enacted in every gesture of his," while another suggested that "Dick was both melancholy and played the role of a melancholic."³³ This complicity recasts the process of playing a type as something not entirely negative, even akin to the self-realization that Briggs-Myer hoped to offer her test takers—a sense of finding a label fitting to one's nature, that would guide one's future actions. Such an interpretation chimes with Russo's assessment that "Yates' message is not nihilistic," but instead that "he metes out disappointment and failure and mortification to his characters with a marked sense of justice."³⁴ It is precisely this kind of underlying inevitability—a sense of what is just or fitting—that explains the peculiar pathos Yates is able to endow his loners with. When asked by an interviewer "what brings on the tragedy" in his fiction, Yates replied that it comes from his characters' desire "to do their best—trying to live well, within their known or unknown limitations, doing what they can't help doing, ultimately and inevitably failing because *they can't help being the people they are*."³⁵ Walter may have been cast as a loser by his friends and co-workers but, Yates implies, there is something essential about him that draws this label forth. It is this kind of trueness to type that "brings on the calamity at the end".

Naturally, there is a danger here at taking Yates at his word too uncritically—particularly when each of the eleven kinds of loneliness his stories present us is tied so closely to a particular institution. As much as a corporate drone like Walter might be playing a type that he 'can't help' but be, Yates' stories also make clear that he is encouraged towards playing this type by the priorities of the corporation. Tellingly, when his boss finally comes to fire Walter, he couches his

³³ Blake Bailey, "Richard Yates on the Edge of Success," *New England Review* 24.3 (Summer 2003), 7

³⁴ Russo, Review.

³⁵ Richard Yates, Interview with Geoffrey Clark and DeWitt Henry, *Ploughshares* 3 (Winter 1972), <https://www.pshares.org/issues/fall-2011/archive-interview-richard-yates> (emphasis mine).

dismissal in the language of type, explaining that, “in your case particularly, we really feel you’d be happier in some organization better suited to your—abilities” (75). Yates’ first-hand knowledge of the way that midcentury corporations encouraged such a classifying culture—aided and abetted by new business computers—certainly colors his language. Yet even as this experience pushed Yates’ style in one direction, it must surely have also influenced his thematic interest in systems and typing—an obsession that manifests in the various institutions of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, and in Yates’ attention to their mechanisms of identity-definition.

It is hard to miss the way that Vincent Sabella’s isolation, for instance, stems from particular schoolyard dynamics through which students are defined as part of subgroups. Yates pans across the school at recess, showing the reader that Vincent “wasn’t in the group of boys that clustered around the horizontal bar... nor was he in the larger group, of which even Arthur Cross was a member, that chased itself in circles... he couldn’t join the girls, of course, of the boys from other classes, and so he joined nobody” (6-7). And this stratification is mirrored in the corporate dynamics of “The Best of Everything,” where Ralph is nothing but a cog, “a little *white worm*” indistinguishable from the other ‘types’ he works with: “all those friends of his, his Eddie and his Marty and his George with their mean, ratty little clerks’ lives,” notes one character, “they’re all *alike*, those people” (24). But perhaps the most obvious place where the mechanisms of corporate classification are exposed in Yates’ stories are those stories that touch on the military. There, identity is reduced purely to function. An ex-seaman observes that “the best part about the Navy is, you’re somebody, know what I mean? Every man’s got his own individual job to do”—and although he maintains that “in the Army all you do is walk around and look stupid like everybody else” (120), his interlocutor disagrees, noting that “every son of a bitch *in* a rifle company’s a specialist... I was a B.A.R. man” (121). Being somebody in the armed forces doesn’t mean having a personality—it means fulfilling a practical, impersonal function. For “The B.A.R. Man” who gives this story its title, identity is depersonalized to the extent that his humanity is subordinate to the Browning Automatic Rifle that was his ‘specialism.’ For Yates,

what is more insidious than a tendency towards type *per se* is this institutional seduction, the mechanism that makes soldiers, secretaries, and clerks feel like individuals when really the institution's only aim is maximizing their instrumental use.

As the navy man's comments attest, this institutional shaping of identity into types is not imposed on subjects against their will; like the hundreds of thousands who continue to take the Myers Briggs test each year (to say nothing of the other typing tests that are its kin) Yates' characters yearn for the profound 'revelation of a true self' promised to them by type. The one idea that offers the protagonist of "The B.A.R. Man" any satisfaction is the belief that he is still *the B.A.R. man*—that he still fits his type. This is a process that maps onto the structure of Yates' novels, too; in longer fiction, as Carlton-Jones argues, "Yates picks apart his characters' idealized versions of themselves" (6). In this repeated movement, Yates contrasts the promise of the ideal—the type, in all its "substance and three-dimensionality"—with the lack that manifests in his characters' lives. If loneliness, as a *negative* experience, represents a *lack* of connections, then the relationship between loneliness and 'kind' suggested by Yates' title is particularly instructive. Rather than simply diagnosing kinds of loneliness, Yates is pointing to the way that the mechanisms of defining oneself, of finding one's kind, create a template against which the individual's life always comes up short, creating loneliness. If, as Carlton-Jones concurs, the "dreams of Yates's characters become a blueprint for the way they seek to live," then the kinds of loneliness his collection tracks are the product of the kinds of people his characters long to be. In this sense, although loneliness might have its own specific kinds, it occupies a common space: the gap, the dissatisfied space between their lives and the ideal that type promises—a gap they fail to close.

In the final story of the collection—the elusive "Builders," whose complex composition dragged out the book's final publication—Yates focuses squarely on this gap. In fact, in a deft turn, it becomes a metaphor for a kind of hope that the bleak assessments of sociologists overlooked. The motif is particularly striking not only because it closes the collection, but because

the story suggests, for the first pages at least, that the author is stepping out from behind the curtain of fiction. The sense of the autobiographical is built not only by the narrator's profession (a writer) and the correspondences of dates and ages (the story is set "thirteen years ago, in 1948" when the narrator, like Yates, "was twenty two and employed as a rewrite man on the financial news desk of the United Press" [179]), but also by the disarming first-person voice trying to pin down "what I'm getting at" (180). This is a marked change from the detached, distant third-person perspective that dominates the collection, and though Yates eventually pulls the rug out from under the reader's assumptions when the narrator is finally addressed as "Mr Prentice" (182), the story still departs from the institutional settings of the other ten stories, and points instead towards Yates the author—and the larger question of storytelling. For in spite of the narrator's professed wariness of "writers who write about writers" (179), that's exactly what we are presented.

In "Builders," the narrator reflects back on an odd episode earlier in life when, answering an unusual advertisement, he took on a ghost-writing commission for a taxi driver, Bernie Silver. From the start, Prentice signals that this is a story about types: "this is going to be a straight, no-nonsense piece of fiction about a cabdriver, a movie star, and an eminent child psychologist," he tells us, and though the movie star and eminent child psychologist are eventually (and fictitiously) named, they are more important as signifiers of a kind of person, with Prentice comparing them with lists of (real) celebrities who match their type. The larger, emblematic structure of the story is matched by the typecast stories that Prentice ends up writing under Silver's name. Taking inspiration from the cab driver's filing cards with prompts like "High class man & wife... story about marriage, etc" (190), Prentice produces work that is equally familiar and predictable, featuring lonely old widowers, or "a frightened boy" and "a hardened criminal type" (197). Though he likes to pretend he is better than the hackneyed, patterned work he is producing, Yates shows us that Prentice is himself stifled by type, clinging to ideal templates, falling into all-too predictable patterns. At the start of his career, he is desperate to draw parallels

between his life and that of his literary idols. “I was Ernest Hemingway reporting for work at the *Kansas City Star*” (180), he tells us, and when he is forced to give up on “building my life on the pattern of Ernest Hemingway’s,” he moves onto a different template—“an F. Scott Fitzgerald phase” (215). Yates seems to round out the collection, then, with a bleak picture of the writer as caught in the same loop as his characters: subscribing to an external template for his life, and ultimately lonely and unhappy because he cannot live up to this pattern.

But the collection does not end with total darkness. In the final moments of the story, Yates makes an uncharacteristic turn away from total closure. He takes this turn by way of Bernie Silver’s analogy for writing—the motif of building that sustains the story. He asks Prentice, “do you see where writing a story is building something too? Like building a house?” (189), before turning to (what Silver considers to be) the most important question about narrative construction: “where are the windows? (189), or, more figuratively, “where does the light come in?” (190). Although the analogy comes in the homespun words of a taxi driver, rather than directly from Prentice-as-Yates-surrogate, the image of constructing a short story the way one would a building resonates with Yates’ attention to craft. Many critics have noted that his short fiction is more successful than his novels; as Tower explains, his focus on construction allows for a paradoxically greater freedom, so that “the longer fiction seems less able than the short to escape the prison of an (apparently) autobiographical self into the freely imagined lives of others.”³⁶ In part this is a product of the short story form’s tendency towards a focus on the individual, rather than on larger communities. And, like the pieces that Prentice ends up writing, the short story form also lends itself to the allegoric—to variations on Silver’s ‘story about marriage, etc.’ Taken together, it can seem as though Yates is, like Prentice, building versions of the same story again and again, with different types plugged into the same allegoric structure.

³⁶ Tower, “Unhappy People.”

Against this pattern, the story and the collection as a whole close by returning to Bernie Silver's question—though this time, it is Prentice who turns to the reader to ask, “where does the light come in?” (221). Gone is his earlier mixture of superiority and ironic disdain towards Silver; he now asks, sincerely, “Bernie, old friend, forgive me.” Prentice, and Yates it seems too, really hope to find a little light in the buildings that make up the collection. But what exactly is the light? For Prentice, it seems like something between gentleness and grace; when he reveals that he believes “there certainly ought to be a window around here somewhere, for all of us,” the reader cannot help but think of the darkness that Yates' other characters endure, and the difference that a little light—comfort, kindness, peace—would have made. But this is to ignore the structure of the metaphor; if the stories are buildings, then the window is an opening, an aperture—a gap. It is the space left open in the frame. And when it comes to Yates' collection, the frameworks are the types that govern the characters' expectations of their lives, what Yates called ‘their known or unknown limitations.’ If we look at the stories in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* this way, then the windows form the space between imagined template and actual life—they are the places where the characters' individuality shines through. Because, however much the characters might cling to type, and try to tie each another to being certain kinds of people, Towers is right: these are not the caricatures of Silver's filing cards, but ‘freely imagined lives.’ Here, Yates offers the reader another way of thinking about loneliness: as singularity, being *oneself*. The collection offers us eleven kinds because Yates presents us with eleven windows, eleven insights into individuality. That individuality is contingent—constantly in flux between being subsumed by type or intensifying into loneliness—but when it shines through, it illuminates everything.

Where the light comes in?

In its metatextual turn, “Builders” connects the collection's meditations on loneliness and type to the larger pressures on the writer in the Cold War-era US. Prentice, with his idealistic aspiration

towards the style of Hemingway or Fitzgerald, reflects the cultural (and political) pressure on writers to replicate a particular model of individualism. As Geraldine Murphy argued, with the ideological stakes of the Cold War at play, US critics and editors “pitted a socialist realism controlled by the State for its own propagandistic purposes against a subjective, symbolic, abstract modernism—the kind of art that readily symbolized the independent, critical role of the artist in democratic society.”³⁷ For Prentice—and, the sensitive reader suspects, for Yates, too—this symbolic outsider artist is Hemingway, is Fitzgerald (both examples of what Murphy calls “American writers [who] explored the individual consciousness estranged from society”).³⁸ But whatever Yates’ own allegiance to these exemplary ‘writers outside of type,’ the story pulls the rug from under Prentice and his sneering at conformity—for Yates’ collection is riven through with ambiguity. Many of the characters find peace in losing their individuality. Like the soldiers under Sergeant Reece, loneliness hits them hardest when they are cut off from a collective identity. Moreover, just as this final story maps out the gradual disenchantment with the Hemingway ideal of the realist individual (itself really another literary ‘type’—a mold that Prentice tries to make his own image conform to), so too does the collection as a whole incrementally imply that types can be more complex than critically-sanctioned ‘round characters’. Yates contrasts the promise of the ideal—the type, in all its “substance and three-dimensionality”—with the lack that manifests in his characters’ actual lives. Even as typing creates loneliness throughout the stories, “Builders” suggests that there can be more truth—or else, more fulfilment (as in “Jody,” “The B.A.R. Man,” or “A Glutton for Punishment”)—in playing to type than in trying to exist outside of its rules.

This turn away from the critical conventions of realist fiction, coupled with an ambiguous attitude to typing, reflects a larger tension in postwar fiction. Like Yates, American writers repeatedly turned to loneliness as an affective field against which to question the rise of

³⁷ Geraldine Murphy, “Romancing the Center: Cold War Politics and Classical American Literature,” *Poetics Today* 9.4 (1988), 738.

³⁸ Murphy, “Romancing the Center,” 737.

typing, and the associated questions of organizing an increasingly instrumental workforce. And like Yates, these writers refused a single, simple interpretation—although they linked categorization and loneliness, they regularly did so in ambiguous or contradictory ways. Mary McCarthy's 1963 novel *The Group*, for instance, played the comfort of group identity (the protagonists fitting a recognizable type, the Vassar girl) against the loneliness and self-destruction of individual, post-college life. Norman Mailer derided the book as “a failed communal novel,” arguing that McCarthy offered a “collective novel in which the most interesting character is missing, a collective novel in which none of the characters have sufficient passion to be interesting in themselves, yet none have the power or dedication to wish to force events.”³⁹ Yet this failure was precisely McCarthy's point—although, individually, her characters broke down, the alternative of a collective identity is not a viable solution either. In fact, as the typing that her protagonists face as women in the workforce makes clear, the problems of both loneliness and classification are connected to much larger social questions.

Just over a decade earlier in 1952, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for instance, framed the experience of loneliness as expressly connected to a dialectic of group vs individual identity. The unnamed narrator explains that, when “left alone, I lay fretting over my identity,” while the picaresque structure of the novel shuttled him from one group attempting to define him by type to another—from the wealthy patrons sponsoring his place in college, to the Marxist ‘Brotherhood,’ to the black nationalists led by Ras the Exhorter. The stakes for Ellison's narrator, however, are much further reaching than anything in Yates' collection—Ellison's invisible man is typed not by a personality test, but by ingrained and institutionalized racism that means he is not seen as an individual, but as a racial type. As the narrator explains in the prologue to the novel, his invisibility “occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes

³⁹ Norman Mailer, “The Mary McCarthy Case,” *New York Review of Books* 17 Oct. 1963: 1

with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.” Characters like Sybil, wife of one of the Brotherhood’s leadership, repeatedly try “casting” the narrator “in fantasies,” such as one “in which I was Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things are-possible” (391). Sybil’s dehumanizing image of the narrator as “a brute, huge, with white teeth, what they call a ‘buck’” (392) makes manifest the narrator’s invisibility as an individual—he is merely a type to her, a “domesticated rapist” (394). The experience is, for the narrator and reader alike “painful” and isolating—and as throughout the novel, the narrator initially looks for a way to avoid playing to type. Certainly, in refusing her invitation to mock-rape, the narrator turns away from conforming to a prescriptive and dehumanising paradigm.

But then he turns again. Deciding to play to type (though in such a way as to destabilize Sybil’s typing eye) he writes “SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED/ BY/ SANTA CLAUS/ SURPRISE,” on her stomach in luminescent lipstick. As several critics have argued, such moments see the narrator using his invisibility as an insurrectionary force—subverting type to undermine the social order that validates typing. Indeed, as he maintains in his opening address to the reader, there is something freeing in this potential; “it is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves.” Still, in a final turn of vacillation—one that would not look out of place in a story by Yates—he erases his words, and with them his insurrectionary gesture, overtly embracing loneliness in favor of playing a part. Although he confesses that he had “never been more loved and appreciated than when I tried to ‘justify’ and affirm someone’s mistaken beliefs,” in this moment he chooses loneliness, despite knowing that he “was never more hated than when I tried to be honest.” Like Yates, Ellison seems to refuse commitment to either an overt opposition to categorization (however destructive, the narrator of *Invisible Man* does find strategic benefit, along with comfort, in playing to racial type) or an overt rejection of individualism (however much he longs to be seen, the narrator turns away from the opportunity to have Sybil recognize his individuality). And like

Yates, Ellison stages the final contest between type and isolation in the final section of his book—*Invisible Man's* notorious epilogue.

In a “retreat” that David Yaffe notes many critics would “dub a cop out,” the narrator holes up in underground isolation, rejecting the (literal and metaphorical) conflict on the streets of Harlem. In a novel that seemed to advocate social commitment, it is hard not to see this final turn towards the subterranean as a turn away from contesting racial typing. But in a striking image that anticipates Bernie Silver’s windows and light, the invisible man explains that his “hole is warm and full of light. Yes, full of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine.” In a novel obsessed with what is visible and what is not, surely these endless lightbulbs are a plea to be seen not as a faceless shadow but an individual. And in his closing words, the narrator turns outwards to the reader, seeking a direct connection. “Who knows,” he asks, “but that, on the lower frequencies I speak for you?” While the narrator admits that this possibility of genuine connection is “frightening,” this moment of revelation affirms the novel’s recurring theme that although type offers a comfort, it is not a substitute for being seen.

At first glance Ellison and McCarthy might seem like unlikely bedfellows for Yates; not only are their novels centred on different types of character, negotiating different forms of typing, but they do so through radically different forms. McCarthy’s communally-driven collective novel and Ellison’s individualist, but widely expansive picaresque seem like far departures from the minimalism and fragmentation of Yates’ turn to the short story form. But these writers share a common approach—routing an overwhelming loneliness through a larger question of identity—that explicitly connects their interrogation of affect to a culture of typing. They show not only the benefit of bringing typing into the analysis of midcentury literature, but also remind us of the need to go beyond the cliché of midcentury types as mere corporate drones, as Yates himself does to a surprising degree. Reading for type reveals not just a single kind of loneliness, but a myriad of ways that writers negotiated the pressing bind of self-definition and group belonging, and the lonely feelings that both could provoke.

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