

Comparative analysis on belonging of romulus

Life



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The 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road* by author Richard Yates links strongly with the autobiographical recount *Romulus, My Father*, by Raimond Gaita, and in so doing provides a greater understanding of the concept of Belonging. It charts the disintegration of the marriage of Frank and April Wheeler as they struggle against the oppressive conformity of suburban 1950s America. The texts together explore the processes undergone by the individual in their integration to society and its inherent cultural groups.

Revolutionary Road posits as its central idea that life is - entirely and inescapably, not only on the surface but right down to the core of human nature - an act. Every action of the characters in the novel, every single piece of behavior, thought, and reasoning are based on a structure of systematic etiquette. The central protagonist, Frank Wheeler phrases this concept perfectly in the way he describes the speech of his wife as having a " quality of play-acting, of slightly false intensity, a way of seeming to speak less to him and more to some romantic abstraction".

Though set in the cultural dead-end of the United States in the 1950s, a time when the American dream, entirely achieved, was beginning to ring hollow; it could easily be from any context that could be regarded as a ' society' - the text implying a sense of general universality of its central posit. The book shows that in any attempt for acceptance, true self expression will be limited - often severely so. Contrastingly, *Romulus, My Father* appears to espouse an entirely opposite premise: that an honesty of character equates to moral goodness, even in the face of great adversity, and will bring a sense of fulfilled connection in life. As Gaita puts it " Character... was the central moral concept for my father and Hora. " *Romulus* retains his own identity, despite

the barriers it creates in a society that seeks to assimilate; and it is this very attribute that allows him to belong to his family and those he loves. Romulus's ideals are based entirely on his true feeling, not prescribed to a specific formula of action and reaction such as is the case in *Revolutionary Road*; his values are what make him. Upon further analysis, however, this is no less a conformity to protocol than that of Frank and April.

Gaita states that "the sense given to me by my father and Hora, of the contrast between malleable laws and conventions made by human beings to reconcile and suit their many interests, and the uncompromising authority of morality, always the judge, never merely the servant of our interests", the perception of his son that certain rules are entirely unbreakable and inarguable is, in itself, a baseless social construct. No real contrast between human convention and morality actually exists. "Morality was for him as substantially a part of reality as the natural facts of human action and motivation. To belittle the feelings of Frank Wheeler as somehow less guiding than Romulus's is also incorrect, both use feeling based reasoning to choose one of several possible options, open to them as a result of combination of circumstance and the system they take as inarguable, infallible law. Gaita attempts no higher argument for the inherent goodness of his father than his strict obedience and conformist attitude to a moral viewpoint, and makes no further argument for the definition of what good is beyond what one perceives to be good.

Both are, at root, based on entirely nothing at all - to call one moral and the other etiquette is a farce, both are mere social construct, built by cultural conditioning, to establish and maintain a system of behavior deemed correct

for no true reason. They only exist as objectively unchangeable so long as their creators and keepers believe them to be so. So, to avoid the true baselessness of their society and everything they believe in, the protagonists of both texts resort to a method of delusion just as strong as that which they infer to abhor.

In *Revolutionary Road*, Yates uses a technique of not matching the internal dialogue or self-perception of his characters to the events of the plot or speech. Frank Wheeler will often imagine conversations in his head, or prescribe to himself some false grandiosity in his lines - contrasted to a third person narrative voice, which reveals the scene to be usually uneventful and mediocre. April envisions herself "a whole world of marvelous golden people somewhere... who made their lives work out the way they wanted without even trying, who never had to make the best of a bad job because it never occurred to them to do anything less than perfectly the first time. Sort of heroic super-people, all of them beautiful and witty and calm and kind, and I always imagined that when I did find them I'd suddenly know that I Belonged among them, that I was one of them, that I'd been meant to be one of them all along, and everything in the meantime had been a mistake; and they'd know it too. I'd be like the ugly duckling among the swans."

The Wheelers believe in something greater, something more, and that they are a worthy part of it; when in reality, such a thing is simply non-existent. All they truly have is the mediocrity of their suburban prison, and the paradox of a world which, with all options open, is so terrifyingly vast that they must cling to the safety and security afforded by familiar protocol. They hold firm to the excuse that it is necessary and inevitable to ensure societal acceptance,

and the vague general assumption that they are somehow different, somehow better or above their surroundings. They are not.

All that separates them is their own idea of separation, they do not think themselves to belong, yet in reality fulfil perfectly the 50s ' Nuclear Family' suburban stereotype. They are everything they claim to hate in a way so natural they probably couldn't have achieved if they'd tried. There is no ' backup' to their facade, no face behind the masks they craft, no true identity oppressed by circumstance. All that they have is, as Frank puts it, " the hopeless emptiness". This is mirrored in Romulus, but in regards to Raimond's perception of his father; he sees him not as he is, but as an archetype - some " romantic abstraction".

The novel is essentially a glorification. For Raimond, Romulus is a great man; someone special whose faults could either be excused to someone else's inadequacy, his madness, or an overextension of his stubborn moralism - him being too good. The events described clearly contradict this, however. Romulus was not remarkable nor extraordinary. He lacked ambition and intelligence (after not succeeding in gaining a scholarship he never again pursued any attempts at education, despite the fact that he had sufficient ability and opportunity - yet in reference to the event, Raimond makes the claim that " He cried bitterly, not because of lost employment prospects, but because his love of learning would never be fulfilled. "). He wasted his skills in beautiful metalwork (as the composer puts it " He was able to make almost anything to the most exacting standards", " his work was unsurpassed in quality and speed", and My father was not merely skilled, he was a man of practical genius") upon the construction of what even his son admits is ugly

furniture. He led a lifestyle that perpetuated the isolation that so caused him and those he loved to suffer. In his life he never did a single thing that could be regarded as brilliant that was not to the end of his or Raimond's continued survival; and though for much of it he lived through great hardship, in the context of humanity it was not especially severe. The greatest insight to this is found in the final pages of the book, in the speech delivered at Romulus's funeral, in which Raimond says (in regards to his father) that "he never intentionally caused suffering to anyone".

It would take a man of enormous stupidity not to realize that to inflict domestic violence onto his mentally ill wife and young child would cause them significant pain. The composer attempts to portray his father's wrongs as a product of circumstance, removed from choice or free will; but if such a stance is taken, there is no limit upon extending it to good deeds as well or, even to the very heart of a person - no line can be drawn between what is merely conditioning and what is one's true nature.

It is ironic that in attempting to portray a man who espoused no greater good than "real character", Gaita paints a nearly perfect archetype and ignores or downplays or re-interprets aspects just as real and significant to who his father was as those which play to what he seems to want to see. Raimond in his perception of his father and the Wheelers in their perception of themselves seem to assume that, would it not have been for that which life had thrown at them, they could have been something much greater; something truer to themselves or more realizing of their own potential.

In reality, they had the whole world at their hands, and as much time at their disposal as any who has lived. They were exactly as they were, and nothing

more. It was not circumstance that prohibited the fulfillment of these characters' potential - this was but a convenient excuse - it was themselves; the sad fact was that neither the Wheelers nor Romulus were actually so brilliant at all.

Ergo, from a collective analysis of both texts, it can be concluded that, in the processes undergone by the individual in their integration to society and its inherent cultural groups, the conformity to an idealized human archetype, though necessary to belong, will inevitably deny individualistic actualization of the true human condition. Through the ideas explored in Revolutionary Road text, strong links can be made with Raimond Gaita's Romulus, My Father, to provide a significantly furthered understanding of the concept of Belonging.