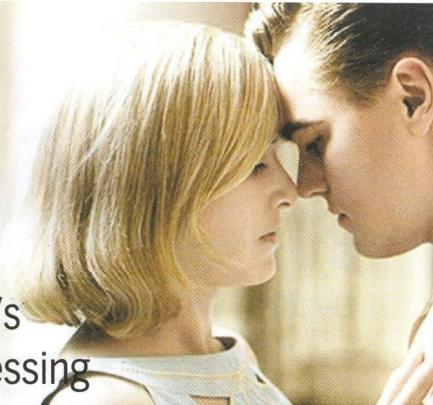


# Film

# Revolutionary Road

Nick DiCharlo asks if it's existential, or just depressing



All April Wheeler wants is for her husband Frank to shut up.

Chances are you've felt a similar frustration. You suffer a setback in life – not your run-of-the-mill disappointment, but a game-changer, one of those epic collapses that forces you to take a long, hard look at who you are and what it means to be alive in a world that has turned against you; a moment that makes you reassess a life-long dream and decide whether it's time to give up on it for good – and you just need a little time and space to think it through.

This is exactly where April is in the opening scene of *Revolutionary Road*, the film based on Richard Yates' classic 1961 existential novel. April always wanted to be an actress, and she went to acting school before she met Frank. When she joined the local production of *The Petrified Forest*, it was mostly to remind herself of her former life, to rediscover the flame that once burned brightly inside her. Connecticut isn't exactly Broadway, but for a woman of thirty-something, mother of two, opening night at the high school was a big deal. If

hard up against truth and comes out the worst for it. Frank does his best to console her, make her feel better about her failure; but all she really wants him to do is shut the hell up so she can think, put it all in perspective and rearrange her psyche to cope with the death of her dream. Not too much to ask for – but Frank is incapable of giving it. During the ride home the couple argue violently, each saying things they know will deeply hurt the other. Welcome to the lives of Frank and April Wheeler.

*Revolutionary Road* is directed by Sam Mendes (*Farhead*, *Road to Perdition*, *American Beauty*), who makes the most of Justin Haythe's inspired screenplay. Viewers follow the Wheelers from setback to setback as the unhappy couple readjust and compromise their dreams of living interesting, artistic, *avant garde* lives, and conform to the standard roles of husband and wife, just like all the other husbands and wives in the falsely idyllic suburb in which they live. They always imagined themselves better than the rest; but this illusion fades before their eyes and ours as the film inches forward.

Frank once laughed at his father for toiling his life away as a salesman for Knox Business Machines, but through a cruel twist of fate, Frank ends up working for the same company, toiling in much the way his father had toiled. Every time reality becomes too much for the Wheelers, they fight. The kids they never wanted; the job



Kitchen table drama

she had performed admirably – if she had gotten a standing ovation, or even a sincere round of applause – it might have been enough to justify her existence. But she was awful – so awful that she knew she would never act again, and most likely had no talent to begin with. Although this scene is passed over quickly in the film, Yates gives it a good measure of attention in his novel. It is an important moment, a moment in April's life when desire runs

that's stealing Frank's best years; the dreadfully boring existence of a housewife... neither of them asked for this life (did they?) – and yet both of them are living it, hating each other for it in their own small ways, and denying one of the most important tenants of existentialism – taking responsibility. Their fights lead to affairs, their affairs to fights. Time and again April asks Frank to shut up because she doesn't want to talk about it; and Frank, who loves April

and is terrified that at any moment she might leave him, can't stop talking. Their relationship is built on needs not met, and through the first half of the film there seems to be no way out. But is there a way out after all? April comes up with an idea, another potential game-changer.

She's the real star of this story. Without her inner torment there would be no existential conflict. April decides to take control, to meet the enemy head on. Existentialism is concerned with the freedom of choice and what one does with it. It tells us that we are not only fundamentally free to choose, but obligated to make authentic choices. To choose *authentically* means we are individually responsible to undertake the challenge of continually creating ourselves. This existentialist responsibility is too often misunderstood as dark, moody, and just plain depressing, when in fact it is a call to action, what Sartre describes as "the sternness of our optimism." After years of denial April finally sees her responsibility for her own life and understands that she and Frank have not been true to themselves. She comes up with a plan to go to Europe "for good." Frank was stationed in Paris during his stint in the military, it's the only place he ever talked about returning to, so April decides they must move there. She sees this as her chance to change their course, set things aright. She discovers that she can make good money as a secretary for NATO, or in any number of government agencies overseas. Frank can then, finally, take some time off and discover what he really wants to do with his life. "Don't you see?" April begs, "You'll be reading and studying and taking long walks and thinking... For the first time in your life you'll have time to find out what it is you want to do, and when you find it you'll have the time and the freedom to start doing it." Paris is Shangri-La, and if she can convince Frank of this they'll leave the wretched burbs behind forever. But be prepared, there is a problem, and the viewer can see it coming from a mile away. Only April doesn't see what is obvious to us: the plan instantly frightens Frank. For all his brave talk, he

seems to fit the role of coward just fine. He says he despises his job, but appears to find comfort in it. He claims to be disenchanted with the dull routine of his days, but discovers relief in the tedium, in the daily ride on the train, in the office banter, and in the meaningless affair with the secretary.

Make no mistake, this is the stuff of existentialism, and existentialism is perhaps best served on a literary plate. Many seminal works of existentialism can be found in the stories and plays of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. But rarely do dramatic works of existentialism translate well into film, especially of the Hollywood blockbuster type. The internal monologues; the ruminating, self-evaluation and angst; the subtle things that make living in the world absurd, have all produced great literature, but not always riveting cinema. Mendes, however, pulls it off through an intuition for picking the dramatic scenes from Yates' novel and squeezing the intensity out of each one – the bitter fights, the horrible things the characters say and do to each other, the affairs, April's clumsy attempt at aborting her unexpected pregnancy... Mendes lets us become intimate voyeurs, and in this way breathes a certain kind of awful life into the film. Even the tortured and psychotic John Givings is used mercilessly to shine a light on the protagonists' flaws. John at first admires the Wheelers for their plan to escape to Paris; but when he learns that they've abandoned the idea he becomes distraught and demands to know why. Frank tells him that April is pregnant – a shock to them both, they hadn't planned on it, but "suppose we say that people anywhere aren't very well advised to have babies unless they can afford them. As it happens, the only way we can afford this one is by staying here. It's a question of money, you see." He explains this to the psychologically-damaged John as if he's explaining it to a five-year-old rather than to an adult who once had a brilliant career as a mathematician. But John is not so easily convinced. Money is an excuse, not a reason, and he lets Frank know this: "Don't people have babies in Europe?... What's the *real* reason? You get cold feet, or what? You decide you like it here after all? You figure it's more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness, or – Wow, that did it! Look at his face! What's the matter, Wheeler? Am I getting warm?" It's a brutally honest scene, and the most damning in the film: the patient out of the psychi-

atric ward on a half-day pass is the only one who has the courage to speak the truth.

It's an existential wake-up call, but it comes too late to stop the downward spiral of events that lead to the tragic climax. Everything has already been set in motion. April has missed her window of opportunity for a safe abortion, and Frank is responsible for the cold, calculated dismantling of their dream. In the end, the Wheelers suffer not from what they perceive to be the trap society has set for them, but from refusing to act.

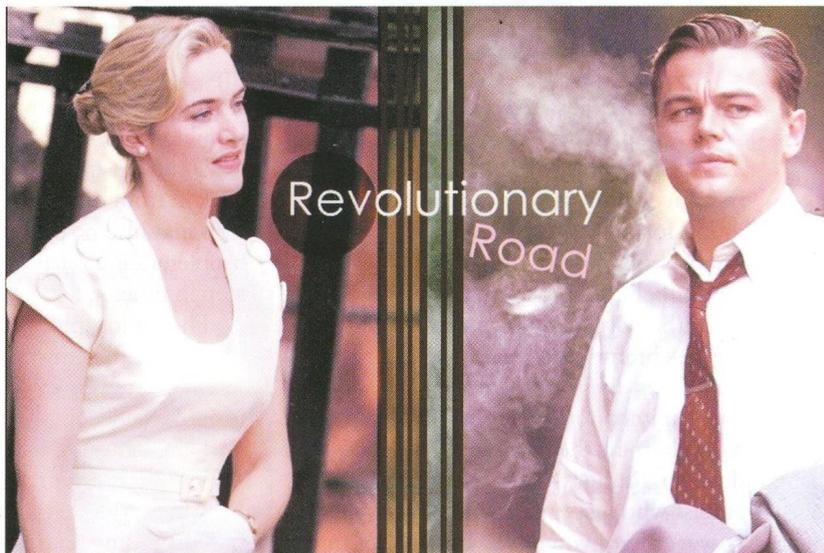
### Revolutionary Reassessment

*Revolutionary Road* is a brilliant novel, and I highly recommend the film. You won't often get a chance to see good existentialism on the big screen. In fact, I have not seen a better attempt since *Lo Straniero* (1967), based on Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. To his credit, Mendes is unfailingly faithful to the novel, picking up on the high-drama points of Yates' story and paying attention to the nuances. Kate Winslet as April and Leonardo DiCaprio as Frank play their parts magnificently. The minor characters are wonderful as well, especially Kathy Bates as the well-intentioned and irritating Mrs Givings, the real estate agent who sells the Wheelers' their house on Revolutionary Road.

There is no 'tosh' (the word Virginia Woolf was fond of using for frivolous or silly writing) in this tale of self-inflicted wounds. In his famous lecture *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, Sartre tells us that people must take responsibility for themselves, whatever the situation: "We are alone, without excuses. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free." Yates seemed to have been intimately aware of this. He struggled as an author, and never achieved great success or notoriety in his lifetime, suffering acute alcoholism, and mental problems which sent him to a psychiatric ward. This novel is about the truth of human experience, and Yates' life experiences were pretty ugly. Perhaps the anguish of his own life allowed him to read between the lines of his generation and identify what was ailing it. He



## Film



used his personal adversity to feed his work and wrote through it all with a clear, sharp, realism that wasn't appreciated nearly enough in his day. I first read this novel in college and thought it was okay, although a bit boring. It's amazing what thirty years of perspective can do for a work of art... I have more of an appreciation and sympathy for Yates' personal sufferings now, and the obvious influences they had on this classic story of disappointment and loss in America. He expertly pulls apart the social order and how we all compromise ourselves to death behind a veneer of cozy acquiescence. Although set in the post-WWII era, it could just as well have been written today.

I can understand why the story might have seemed dull when I was a kid in college; but today, after having inevitably lived some of the disillusionment Yates wrote about, it's a whole new disturbing ball game. There must have been times when, much like his character April, Yates just wanted everyone to shut up so he could put it all in perspective. In the final scene of the book, and as the film fades to black, in one of the few humorous moments in an otherwise uncompromisingly relentless tale of existential angst, April finally gets her wish.

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*Nick DiChario was nominated for the Hugo and World Fantasy awards. His novels A Small and Remarkable Life (2006) and Valley of Day-Glo (2008) are published by Robert J. Sawyer Books.*