



Richard Yates' ***Revolutionary Road***

Comprehensive Guide for A Level

zigzageducation.co.uk

**POD
1281**

Publish your own work... Write to a brief...
Register at publishmenow.co.uk

Contents

Thank You for Choosing ZigZag Education.....	ii
Teacher Feedback Opportunity	iii
Terms and Conditions of Use	iv
Teacher’s Introduction.....	1
A Background on the Text.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter Analysis.....	5
Chapter Analysis: 1:1	5
Chapter Analysis: 1:2	7
Chapter Analysis: 1:3	9
Chapter Analysis: 1:4	11
Chapter Analysis: 1:5	13
Chapter Analysis: 1:6	15
Chapter Analysis: 1:7.....	17
Chapter Analysis: 2:1	19
Chapter Analysis: 2:2.....	21
Chapter Analysis: 2:3.....	23
Chapter Analysis: 2:4.....	25
Chapter Analysis: 2:5.....	27
Chapter Analysis: 2:6.....	29
Chapter Analysis: 3:1	31
Chapter Analysis: 3:2.....	33
Chapter Analysis: 3:3.....	35
Chapter Analysis: 3:4.....	37
Chapter Analysis: 3:5.....	39
Chapter Analysis: 3:6.....	41
Chapter Analysis: 3:7.....	43
Chapter Analysis: 3:8.....	45
Chapter Analysis: 3:9.....	47
Whole Text Analysis	49
Key Characters.....	49
Relationships	56
Genre.....	59
Themes.....	61
Yates’s Values and Attitudes	64
Language	66
Form	67
Structure.....	68
Historical Context.....	69
Literary Approaches	72
Key Term Glossary	74
Further Reading.....	76
Answers to Active Learning Tasks.....	77

Teacher's Introduction

This ZigZag Education resource has been created as a comprehensive guide for the A Level text *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates. Chapter-by-chapter analysis and plot summaries help students build up a familiarity with, and understanding of, the novel, while Active Learning Tasks and discussion prompts encourage them to develop their own interpretations of the text. While it can be used with any exam specification, this resource has been designed for teachers and students working towards AQA English Literature A (7712).

How this Study Guide Works

This resource is designed to provide a series of handouts which can be used in class to support A Level study of *Revolutionary Road*. Individual chapter analyses guide students through the text, referencing key quotations to show how themes and concepts are conveyed through language, form and structure. Each chapter analysis includes Active Learning Tasks and discussion prompts; these encourage students to engage with the novel on a personal level, enriching their study of the text, and could be used as starting points for class or group discussion. Notes on the author's background, historical events and critical reception help students to fit their interpretations of *Revolutionary Road* into cultural and historical context. This guide also offers a brief introduction to literary approaches to the novel, locating it within feminist and New Historical literary criticism.

The AQA exam encourages students to explore aspects of different texts connected through a period of time, in this case post-1945 to the present day. With this in mind, special attention has been paid to *Revolutionary Road*'s themes and concepts in order to encourage students to draw comparisons between the novel and other post-1945 texts they have studied.

Key Features	AO1	AO2	AO3	AO4	AO5
Chapter analysis	✓	✓			
Key characters	✓	✓			
Themes	✓				
Relationships	✓				
Language, form and structure		✓			
Genre			✓	✓	
Background on the text			✓		
Cultural and historical context			✓		
Critical reception			✓		✓
Literary approaches					✓
Key term glossary	✓				

A full glossary of literary terms used in this guide is included to help students expand their analytical vocabulary.

The theme of abortion is discussed throughout the novel and is therefore present throughout this guide. **In particular Chapter Analysis: 3:7 and Chapter Analysis: 3:8 (pp. 43–46) cover the section of the novel where April fatally attempts a self-abortion.** Please ensure that these are viewed, along with any additional content you intend to use, **before** using them in class.

The edition of the text used in this resource is *Revolutionary Road*, Richard Yates, Vintage, 2009 (ISBN: 9 780099 518785).

October 2015

A Background on the Text

Richard Yates

Richard Yates was born in the city of Yonkers, New York, in 1926. His parents divorced when he was young, and he spent his childhood moving from town to town with his family. As a young man, he served in the Army during World War II. When he returned to New York, he worked as a ghostwriter (writing for other people to publish under their own names) and as a publicity writer for a company. Remington Rand was a large American manufacturing company which made business machines and typewriters. In *Revolutionary Road*, Yates draws heavily on the Remington Rand to depict Knox Business Machines and the Knox Building.

As a young man, Yates also worked briefly as a speechwriter for a well-known politician. As well as giving him a keen insight into the political issues of his time, this would be a useful skill for his use of **rhetorical devices** in the novel. Examples of speeches in *Revolutionary Road* include Pollock's political monologue in Chapter 2:6, and Frank's address to the town hall about the state of 'our whole damned culture' (p. 65). Through these speeches, Yates reveals an astute knowledge of the way that society spreads its messages and persuades its citizens to adopt a certain view. This is arguably one of the main ideas he explores in the novel.

Yates married his wife, Sheila Bryant, in 1948. The couple had two daughters together. In 1968, Yates married again, this time to a woman named Martha Speer. They had both experienced episodes of mental illness, including depression, for much of his adult life, but had little faith in them.

In 1961 Yates's writing career took off when his first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, was published. For several decades, he made a living from writing and teaching at universities. During his writing career, he wrote several novels, including *The Easter Parade* and *Disturbing the Peace*. He also wrote two collections of short stories, *Kinds of Loneliness* and *Liars in Love*.

Richard Yates died from emphysema in 1992 in Birmingham, Alabama.

Active Learning Task

Many people regard Yates's fiction as autobiographical. When he adopts the character of Frank, it feels as if Yates is drawing heavily on his own life experience. Consider how Yates's career and personal life might have influenced *Revolutionary Road*.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Critical Reception

When *Revolutionary Road* was published in 1961, it was well received by critics and the *New York Times* called it 'a remarkable and deeply troubling book.' The playwright Tennessee Williams called it 'masterpiece in modern American fiction'. In 1962, *Revolutionary Road* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, a prestigious US literary prize which is awarded every year.

After his death in 1992, Yates became a little-known figure on the literary scene. In 1997, the writer Richard Ford called him 'a writer too little appreciated'.

In 1999, Stewart O'Nan published an essay in the *Boston Review*, questioning why Yates was neglected. Two years later, in 2001, *Revolutionary Road* was reprinted and interest in it grew. His short stories were also reprinted, collected together and published as *The Complete Stories*. In 2005, *TIME* magazine featured *Revolutionary Road* on its list of 'All-Time 100 novels in English' and in 2008 it was compiled by American literary critic Richard Lacayo.

A film adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* was made in 2008. Directed by Sam Mendes, it starred Leonardo DiCaprio as Frank Wheeler and Kate Winslet as April.

Discussion prompt:

After his death, all Richard Yates's novels went out of print. But in the 2000s, interest in *Revolutionary Road* began to grow again – in 2008, the novel was adapted into a film. Why do you think *Revolutionary Road* has become popular again?

Active Learning Task

Watch the 2008 film adaptation of *Revolutionary Road*. Is it a successful adaptation? Are any themes more prominent than others? Are there any ways you would have adapted it differently? It might be interesting to compare, for example, the ways in which the novel and film approach April's abortion (Chapters 7–8 in the novel).

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Plot Summary

Part One

At the beginning of the novel, the Laurel Players are putting on a performance of *Wheeler*; she plays the heroine; her husband Frank is in the audience. The play does not go well; she is embarrassed and angry. On the way home, she and Frank have a fight. The next morning, they receive a gift for the Wheelers: a box of sedum plants, but Frank and April don't know what the box is for. She puts the box out of sight in the cellar. The following evening, Shep and Milly Campbell come for drinks, but the conversation, usually lively and interesting, soon becomes stale and 'middle-aged' (p. 68). On Monday, Frank goes to work where he is seized by Grube, the office secretary. He takes her out for lunch at a restaurant and afterwards they have sex. That evening he returns home to a home-baked Sunday supper, prepared by April, and she asks him to make plans for them to move to France.

Part Two

At the office, Frank tells Maureen that nothing was meant by their affair. He gets a new job and needs rewriting for a company in Toledo. Frank and April are excited about the company and spend many evenings up late, talking over their plans. They tell the children, the Campbells, about the plans to move to Europe. At work, Frank tells Jack Ordway that he is leaving. A few days later, he goes to Ted Bandy's office and praised for the work he has done on the brochures. When she gives him the praise, she is unimpressed. At the weekend, the Givingses bring their son John over; his behaviour is uncomfortable, but he soon finds common ground with them. The following Monday, he is offered a new, better-paid job by Bart Pollock, who praises his brochures once again. He tells her about it, but she has news of her own: she is pregnant. In the bathroom, he finds a note and emerges that April has been planning to give herself an abortion.

Part Three

Frank spends several weeks trying to persuade April to keep the baby. She seems to change her mind and agrees to see a psychiatrist as he suggests. Over the following days, they tell everyone about moving to France. John Givings visits a second time, but has a tantrum and has to be taken home. In the evening, Frank restarts his affair with Maureen Grube. A few nights later, the Campbells arrive at the Log Cabin. Milly needs to go home early, but the Campbells' car is blocked in by the Givingses and Shep and April are left behind; they have sex in Shep's car but April rejects Shep afterwards. Frank tells Maureen Grube; when he returns home, he argues with April, who says she doesn't want to have the baby again; he is aggressive and cruel. Afterwards, Frank and April have a huge fight, and she decides to go through with the abortion. The next morning, April is surprisingly pleasant; she cooks breakfast and goes to work. She prepares the home-abortion kit. Milly Campbell hears April being sick and alerts Shep; Shep drives Frank to the hospital, where April dies. The Campbells are grief-stricken, he runs down Revolutionary Road to his own home. In the months after the death, his brother's family takes care of the children. Milly tells the Wheelers' story to the Givingses and Mrs Givings tells her husband that she always found the Wheelers 'strange'.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 1:1

SUMMARY

It's 1955 in Western Connecticut, USA. The novel opens at the close of an amateur dramatics company, the Laurel Players. The director praises the Players as they go their separate ways, pleased and excited. In a series of flashbacks, the history of the Laurel Players is sketched out, and previous rehearsal narrative cuts to the play's opening night, as the audience is arriving for *Petrified Forest*. They are excited by the idea of having a community theatre play itself. We are introduced to April Wheeler, playing the heroine, and her husband, Mr. Wheeler in the audience. The leading male actor is ill, so the director must replace him, but he doesn't do it well. The performance deteriorates until everyone is driven out by 'the virus of calamity' (p. 10) and even April, the strongest actor, begins to feel the end is in sight. The audience are reluctant to go back in, but they do so. The disaster ends, members of the audience make a quiet and grateful exit.



Disaster

During this chapter, Yates lays the groundwork for disaster, creating the sense of impending failure which will hang over the rest of the novel. He chooses to open the novel with an image of 'final dying sounds' (p. 3); it is significant that the play opens with an ending, as it suggests something that is over before it has begun and **foreshadows** the way in which the Wheelers' revolutionary plan to move to Europe will unfold and fail.

foreshadow

objective

Point of View

The point of view in this chapter is that of an omniscient narrator, who watches and describes the unfolding events from a detached, neutral position. This allows us to consider the Players and the members of the audience from an **objective** point of view. The narrator in this chapter often groups the characters together, assigning them characteristics and feelings in plural: 'they'd go reluctantly inside' (p. 5), 'they looked and moved as if a calm and orderly escape from this place had become the one great necessity of their lives' (p. 11).

Active Learning Task

Yates's omniscient narrator often assigns characteristics to groups of people. For examples of imagery, language and description used to portray the audience, look at the way they arrive and depart: 'a long clean serpent of cars' (p. 11). What impression does this give you about the suburban society the audience comes from?



INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Claustrophobia

The final sentence of this chapter contrasts the 'pink billows of exhaust' and 'crumpled' (p. 11) with a place beyond it, 'out where the black sky went up and up forever and thousands of stars' (p. 11). The image of exhaust clouds is one of concealment, with a lack of privacy, of being unable to walk or drive and go undetected. In contrast, the image of the clear night sky is a symbol of freedom and endless possibility. This **filmic** technique also implies a rapid zooming out, suggesting the bowing out of the narrator, who leaves the small world set in motion in the reader's mind. This reinforces the idea of the detached narrator, and the sense of the tiny, claustrophobic world into which they have zoomed.

filmic

romanticised

Characterisation

Yates's description of April is the only one which is **romanticised** and detailed: 'a kind of beauty that no amount of amateur lighting could distort, [...] she seemed to glow from within'. This sets her apart from the other characters, who are only briefly described. Even 'round-faced and intelligent-looking' (p. 7). This is one of the few times we get to see April, who will become the main narrator for much of the rest of the novel. The way April is described frames her as an isolated figure within her social group.

Acting

In this chapter April is shown as the struggling star of a failing play. This prepares the reader for the failed actor in the wider context of the novel. Later, she will be unable to fake the 'you know perfectly well I was never any kind of an actress and never really wanted to be' (p. 10) framed by the obvious presence of technical crew; as the play opens the set is 'so close to the stagehand's last-minute escape' (p. 7) and seconds after the final scene ends, a light goes out (p. 10). By bookending the play with the technical aspects of its production, Yates highlights the performance. This helps to set the scene for the fragile performance of subtext that April is to explore.

foil a character who acts as a foil provides an interesting contrast to another character



The lighting boy's presence on stage is a performance to that of the Players. Your character acts as a **foil** against which the Players' embarrassment are clearly shown.

Essay Question

How does Yates portray the people 'surrounded' in the first chapter of *Revolutionary Road*? See pp. 'Approaches to Exam Questions' for help with starting this essay. It is helpful to look at 'Assessment Objectives Explained'. In some of the essays you will not need to include comparative elements – these essays are to help you structure your response to the question), AO2 (the way meanings are shaped in your answers).

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter Analysis: 1:2

SUMMARY

After the play, as Frank makes his way towards the stage door to find April, he compares his expectations of the play to the reality. He is disturbed by April's suffering. April, he plans to praise her but she shrugs him off. She asks him to cancel the plans planned with Shep and Milly Campbell that evening. As they walk to the car, Frank plans to spend a summer 'riding the rails' (p. 17) when he was fourteen, but April laughed them down. He thinks of a story April told him once from her childhood when she started her period in class and ran out of school. On the drive home, he is angry and embarrassed. His thoughts go back to his college years, and how he met April on Bethune Street and how he met April. Jerked back to the present, he and April get in the car. He pulls over and they fight in the dark. They fight and Frank leaves. He arrives at home and the narrative cuts to a flashback which describes how he met April. Frank drives the babysitter home and returns to find April rolled in bed, wanting to be alone.

Expectations and Reality

In this chapter, Yates explores the difference between expectations and reality. The main theme; as the narrative progresses, we will see the contrast between the Wheelwrights' life to Europe, and the grim, eventual reality of relationship breakdown and death.

As he goes to find April after the play, Frank compares his expectations of the play to the reality. The play did not go well, he is unable to live out a fantasy he has pictured: 'a man tonight: himself rushing home to swing his children laughing in the air...' (p. 13). He compares the ways in which April has changed during his relationship with her, comparing 'a girl' with a version of April he saw emerge at the end of the play, a 'graceless, suffering woman' (p. 13). The meltdown that April experiences onstage could be considered as something she is experiencing in day-to-day life – she is trapped, and Frank is aware of it.

Frank has made plans for what he will say to April afterwards, but in reality, he cannot carry them out: 'He closed the door and started towards her with the corners of his mouth stretched tight in a look that he hoped would be full of love and humor and compassion' (p. 15). In part, his plans fail because April's reaction is not as he expected. He then fails to find the right words, nagging himself to think of 'better things to say' (p. 15). This phrase is repeated three times in three consecutive sentences, suggesting its weight on Frank's mind and perhaps also a frustration at having to improvise without a plan.

In April's eyes, you're right (nothing to think of)

Identity

At this early point in the novel, the reader gains a deeper understanding of Frank and April. They speak to and accuse each other during the fight scene (pp. 24–28). 'You know what you are? You're sick, I really mean that' (p. 27); 'And do you know what you are? ... You're not what you are, you're not what you are' (p. 28). At each other what they 'are', Frank and April are challenging and reconstructing one another. At this point, Frank tries to cast off the identity of 'dumb, insensitive suburban husband' given him, and she doesn't dispute it, but runs into the darkness. As the fight develops, the reader gains a deeper understanding of Frank and April.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



masculine identity: 'tell me how [...] by any stretch of the imagination you can call it touches a nerve and Frank lashes out in a physical attack in what is arguably the

Active Learning Task

Look at the fight scene (pp. 24–28). What do Frank and April accuse one another of? Do you sympathise with either of them at this stage? What do you think the fight is about?

Flashbacks – Form and Structure

In this chapter, Yates uses flashbacks to contrast idyllic memories of the past with **juxtaposing** scenes from the past with scenes from the Wheelers' present life, Yate's frustration and loss at a reality that he is ill-equipped to live up to expectations. In this chapter, Yates fills out the characters' backstories, giving them depth through history. As with his memories of his own, Frank reveals one of April's memories on her behalf: 'He wasn't often able to do this, for most of her memories were crisply told and hard to **sentimentalize**' (p. 18). As he tells this story from her childhood he can be seen to sentimentalise it, assigning motives and feelings to the young, imagined April, 'he thought of how she *must have* lurched from her desk' (p. 18). In this way, he writes his own version of her history – and in doing so, overwrites hers.

juxtapose

sentimentalise

This event, with its imagined 'tidy, well-spaced trail of blood drops' (p. 19) also vividly follows the abortion at the end of the novel, when Frank will find blood leading to a 'tidy trail of drops' (p. 324). This flashback presents April as someone who will also have to deal with issues relating to womanhood.

Essay Question

'Simple, clean lines, good lawns, marvelous for children.' (p. 29). What do the descriptions of the Wheelers' house in this chapter tell us about expectations of the 'ideal' American suburbia?

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



INSPECTION COPY



Chapter Analysis: 1:3

SUMMARY

Frank wakes late to find April cutting the lawn. As he washes, he thinks of his father and remembers that he was in awe of his father's hands as a child. Then he remembers his childhood; he remembers a conversation they had about love, in which he realised he had never loved her parents because she 'didn't even know them' (p. 39). He remembers when the Givings arrives; she has brought a plant as a gift. She praises April's perfect lawn and then leaves. Frank, April and the children inspect the plant. Frank and April decide to keep it before deciding to put it in the cellar: 'The best she can do is get it out of the house' (p. 40). Frank spends the afternoon building a stone path across the lawn. He remembers his father and April's marriage, and his father's anxiety with their first daughter Jennifer (p. 48) which April had wanted to abort. Frank continues building the path. As he digs, he tells them not to get too close to his spade; he eventually tells them all to go and leaves them away.

Gender Roles

At the opening of the chapter April is mowing the lawn, something which would be done by a man in 1950s suburban America. Frank is disturbed by the switching of traditional roles, April taking the lawnmower from her, by force if necessary, in order to restore as much balance as possible (p. 40). By mowing the lawn, April expands her own gender role to play the part of a man, which in theory leaves Frank with no role to play. This **foreshadows** a moment later in the chapter when it suggests she become the family's main breadwinner, and Frank will feel threatened and 'frightened him' (p. 109).

As he considers taking over the lawn-mowing from April, Frank is waylaid by the sight of her in a dressing gown. He exclaims on seeing his dressing gown, 'My, don't you look comfy!' (p. 40). In the chapter, Frank is portrayed using awkward images: 'bent into an ungainly pose, trying to hold the lawnmower' (p. 40). In this way, Yates suggests that he is anything but comfortable with his situation. Frank is in a dressing gown while his wife mows the lawn. This image also foreshadows Frank's feelings about becoming the main earner; when she tells him of her plans to do so, he is disturbed. Frank returns home from work in a smart suit and finding him 'hunched in an egg-stained bath' (p. 109).

Masculinity

In the first part of this chapter, Frank remembers the masculine ideal he admired in his father. He describes his father as an admirable man: his strong hands, his leather briefcase, and his ability to use tools. In the chapter, Frank works on building a garden path. The way that this chapter is structured, with Frank's father into a direct comparison, is a kind of contest of masculinity in which Frank must prove himself. Frank has a vision of his own manhood, seeing his work as 'a man's work' (p. 45). This is followed by a 'sanctuary' in the garden, a man's wife and children' (p. 45). This is followed by a description of the work, and his pleasure in noticing 'his own flexed thigh' and 'his heavily veined forearm that lay across it' (p. 45). Frank's ideas of a man's ownership of the garden, and his **romanticised** description of the male body, could be seen to present a sentimentalised idea of masculinity.

Essay Question

Compare ideas of masculinity explored in this chapter with those in one other chapter from *Revolutionary Road*.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



The Plant – an Unwanted Gift

The gift of the sedum plant, brought by Mrs Givings, is loaded with symbolism. It is the intrusion of suburban society into the Wheelers' lives, something thrust upon them, 'bothering them all the time?' (p. 40). At first, they name it wrongly, 'house leak' for it. Then, Frank asks April what to do with it, she doesn't know, and it causes friction. Eventually it is April who suggests that they put it in the cellar, 'The least we can do'. The sedum is read as a metaphor for society's interference, April shows here that by ordering that it is put in the cellar, she shows that she has authority over how much influence will be allowed to interfere with her household. Frank kicks the box of the plant into the cellar, showing his anger at Mrs Givings's interference, but in doing so, injures his foot. This suggests that the act of defying society's expectations is damaging for him, and not just physically.

Perhaps it is significant also that Frank is the one who is unable to escape Mrs Givings's influence. He cheerfully ignores her: 'He was rather annoyed to open the door and stand there for a moment' (p. 40). This hints that while April is able to resist and control the influence of suburban society, Frank is not. As the chapter develops, Frank and April's attitudes to the pressures of suburban society become more complex.



Active Learning Task

How does Yates characterise the children in this chapter? Pay close attention to the way they are described, and the way they are considered from Frank's point of view.



INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 1:4

SUMMARY

It's Sunday, and Frank sits reading the paper while April washes up. They are talking to each other, but they briefly start up their argument, 'this whole thing' before the children call Frank away to read them the 'funnies' from the paper. The Campbells come over to the Wheelers' house for drinks. They begin a conversation but soon they have 'nothing to talk about' (p. 59). The narrative describes the rhythms and topics of their conversations in the next paragraph and describes how the Campbells came to be involved with the Lower Players. Frank mentions that Milly remembers that she has 'heard' about the Givings's son, John, who was admitted to the 'reformatorium' (p. 62) after holding his parents for three days. Frank tries to begin one of their old conversations on this topic but enthusiastically ends it by telling the Campbells a story about his twentieth-century sinking ship, realising it is one he has told before. The next day, he goes to work and 'middle-aged' (p. 68).

The Campbells

With the Campbells, the Wheelers usually enjoy laughing at the 'extreme suburbia' (p. 60) of their neighbours and discussing intellectual topics such as 'American Socialism'. In this chapter, Frank and April are increasingly unable to connect with Milly and Shep of suburbia. For the first time ever, they even run out of conversation (p. 59); perhaps because having taken part in the play, they feel they can no longer gossip about it and 'sweated in their audience' (p. 61). With this detail, Yates creates a sense of frustration and suggests that the Wheelers and Campbells, without realising it, have started to become part of the society they are used to mocking.

Essay Question

Examine the way that the different characters react to news of John Givings's death. What does each character's reaction seem to suggest about themselves?

Frank's Meltdown

As the chapter opens, there is a tense atmosphere between Frank and April: 'no one [them] for what seemed a year' (p. 54). During the evening with the Campbells, April seems that the argument will continue indefinitely. At the end of the evening, she feels 'boredom' (p. 68) in response to a story about the ship, and over the following hours he feels 'hatred, 'with the look of a man condemned to a slow, painless death' (p. 68). The official punishment, as if Frank has committed a crime, or been accused of some 'painless' is not important – it develops the idea of a society in which there are no consequences and evokes a sense of numbness. Finally, the speed of the imagined death, 'slow', suggests that this chapter has been very slow. Nearly every detail of the conversation has been included, which has helped to create a sense of time dragging by.

Active Learning Task

What do you think has led to Frank feeling 'middle-aged' at the end of the chapter?

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Sentimentality

At the beginning of the chapter, Frank settles into a chair with his children to read and wash-up. On the surface, it is a picture of domestic bliss, and Frank realises it: 'his voice from thickening into a sentimental husk as he began to read aloud' (p. 56). Frank then lash out at this type of sentimentality, when he scorns the idea of bringing children up in a 'bath of sentimentality' (p. 66). With this example of hypocrisy, Yates sets the scene for Frank's absorption into suburbia; he could be seen to **foreshadow** Frank's failure to escape the society he finds so repulsive.

foreshadow

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 1:5

SUMMARY

The chapter opens with a flashback to Frank's childhood in 1935, in which a 10-year-old Frank goes to visit his workplace, the Knox Building. Frank is in awe and is less impressed by the offices inside. He and his father have lunch with his father's friend, called Oat Fields, and afterwards, Frank is sick. Another flashback takes place where Frank needs a job because April is pregnant. He takes a job at Knox, and in a year the joke begins to wear thin. We return to the present day in the novel. Frank goes to work. He greets Maureen Grube, the receptionist, and in his mind, begins to think about his work. His colleague, Jack Ordway, has a lot to say, and is telling stories from his work, and finds an old order book that needs rewriting. Inspired, Frank stays late at lunch, picking up all the material' (p. 89) on it. The rest of the chapter is about Frank and Maureen to go for lunch with him; keen for them to go, Frank calls a taxi to take them to another neighbourhood.

Work

At the beginning of the chapter, we are given two quite different descriptions of the Knox Building. The description, from the point of view of the narrator, describes it as an 'ugly' building, a part of town. Although it is average-looking, the narrator admits that 'if it lacked anything, it was charm' (p. 69). When the young Frank gets up close to the building, it is this bulk that impresses him, overwhelmed by wonder at its size: 'he felt a shiver of wonder down his spine at the scale and stillness of the building, Wow!' (p. 71). As well as being a word for a building, 'work' is used to describe someone or something which refuses to budge. Yates's use of 'work' in this way is solid and unchanging.

In the novel, the Knox Building can be read as a metaphor for the concept of work in 1950s America. Although the Knox Building is big and ugly, it is shown to have impressed Frank. Up at it, it even changes his perception of the sky: 'he saw his mistake: it was the scale of this metaphor suggests that although corporate America and the lure of a steady job are powerful ones which it is difficult for Frank to remain unimpressed by.

Later in the chapter, Yates describes an office department in the Knox Building: 'the swimmers far and near were moving, some making steady headway, some treading water, some of breaking to the surface or going under, and many submerged [...] as they drove on. On one hand, this can be read as a gently comical depiction of the way the workers' lives are divided by the office partition walls. On another level, it is a further metaphor for work, and the 'swimmers', Yates suggests, are workers experiencing varying success; those who drown in despair, swallowed up by their working lives. This is exactly the situation Frank has found himself in as a student placement officer: 'I value to retain my own identity' (p. 75).

Active Learning Task

How has Frank's attitude to his job changed over time? What do you think caused this change?

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Structure

In this chapter, Yates uses a series of flashbacks to show Frank's attitude toward a young man, and in his current stage of life. These flashbacks draw a path through first innocently appalled by the office lifestyle, but is steadily drawn into it over time. The structure suggests that Frank will become more and more entwined in his mediocrity. Frank's behaviour breaks the pattern. Yates features Frank's father prominently in these flashbacks, intertwining ideas of a family line with Frank's career at Knox, suggesting that although Frank has escaped following in his father's footsteps, 'a longshoreman! A cafeteria cashier! A clerk! He will come to do so.

Characterisation of Frank

In this chapter we learn that when Frank first took the job at Knox, he enjoyed the mindless aspect of the job, and had an ironic attitude towards it. 'It was a kind of joke' (p. 76). But as Yates develops the narrative of his career, Frank is portrayed as someone who has come to carry out his job mindlessly, 'he walked into the Knox Building like an **automaton**' (p. 78) – he has been sucked in, and little distinguishes him from the others working at Knox.

automaton

Throughout the chapter, Frank plans to do something out of the ordinary – have a drink. In order to carry out his plan, he has to break the pattern of a normal day at the office. He has to break with his colleagues so that he will have time to take Maureen to lunch instead. In this way, Frank is portrayed as someone with a revolutionary spirit, someone who is able to break out of the pattern.

Essay Question

How is Frank's father portrayed in this chapter? Discuss the way Yates develops the relationship between Frank and his father, and how it has changed since Frank's childhood.

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



INSPECTION COPY



Chapter Analysis: 1:6

SUMMARY

Frank and Maureen Grube have lunch at a restaurant. She tells him about her life in New York, while he orders more and more drinks. Afterward, Grube's flat and she invites him up for a drink. They sleep together, but not afterwards. Frank wonders whether to thank Maureen or apologise, but when he meets her at her flat, he is overjoyed with the sense of masculinity he now feels. He apologises to her, and she meets him, apologising for the way she has been too careful. He goes into the kitchen and brings out a birthday cake with candles. Frank sits at the table with his family as they sing 'Happy Birthday' to him.

Identity



In this chapter, Yates gives us more insight into the character of Maureen Grube. We see Maureen in her role as a secretary, but as Frank talks with her over dinner, details we learn that she lives in a flat with an older woman named Norma; it is clear that she has taken on many of her characteristics, 'her every studied mannerism and words like "mad" and "fabulous"' (p. 95).

Frank quickly becomes annoyed by her 'cuteness' (p. 95) which he considers to be a pretence (p. 95). This highlights something in Frank's character which has been developing: an idea that he despises pretence, and is searching for genuine ideas and emotions. We must bear in mind that Frank's point of view provides the narrative in this chapter. As we have seen, what is depicted is heavily influenced by Frank's personal view of her. For example, the 'up' and 'too-careful hairdo' (p. 95) are **subjective**.

Society

The thought of running into 'all the women who had once been April's friends and acquaintances' (p. 97) while out walking with Maureen causes Frank to feel 'uneasiness' (p. 98). The thought of seeing them – and their imagined gossip – is able to cause a physical reaction. Gossip is portrayed as a powerful force; just the threat of it is able to have an impact. In this way, Yates is highlighting one of the subtle, invisible ways that society pressures people into expected behaviours.

It is interesting to note that these women 'had once' (p. 97) been April's friends, which suggests that over time, she had distanced herself from them. But although he is reacting to something about their lifestyles, Frank still lets their imagined opinions of him have an effect on the way he behaves. This suggests a side of Frank's character that is afraid to break **social norms**.

social norms

Sentimentality

At the end of the chapter Frank returns to his family, and is moved to tears by 'the beef' (p. 103). The domestic images of dinner cooking and a glass of whisky suggest a life that is normal in the household. His tearful reaction to this could be read as an example of how Frank has been so scornful about in earlier chapters. In this scene, Yates shows how Frank's life, despite his disgust at the concept.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



During the earlier part of the chapter Frank has given little thought to his family. By creating this scene of domestic bliss at the end of the chapter, Yates sets up a contrast between Frank acting as a single man – selfishly – and Frank in the context of his family.

The image of the family around Frank's birthday cake could be described as a **tableau** of domestic family life. Suddenly illuminated by the light of the candles, it is a striking scene. Some of the description seems to mirror stage directions, 'It was a cake with candles. Then came their slow, shrill singing: "Hap-py birth-day to you..."' (p. 104) which gives it the sense of a performance.

tableau

Active Learning Task

The image of Frank and his family around the birthday cake could be described as a **tableau** of domestic family life. Can you find any other tableau in the novel, or in other texts they depict?

Masculinity

Ideas of masculinity are further developed in this chapter. When Frank leaves Maureen for the night, he feels 'like a man' (p. 102). As he journeys home, he builds up a portrait of himself as a man. He plays this role. He repeatedly compares himself to an eagle and a lion; both traditionally regarded as symbols of strength and bravery (an eagle appears on the US national flag). By including himself in the same category as them Frank is like – to a predator: an uncomfortable concept.

Isolation

By having Frank go physically outside his normal environment to sleep with Maureen, the affair breaks the pattern of normal life. In order to escape work for the afternoon, Frank and Maureen are told they will be in a department called 'Visual Aids' (p. 94). The affair, lunch, and the train home, Frank stands 'out in the loud iron passageway' (p. 102) – physically separated from the other commuters. In these ways, Yates could be suggesting that Frank must isolate himself to escape its pressures.

Essay Question

'Her hands were thinner than mine, more nervous than Maureen Grube's; she was older [...]' (p. 102). Compare the ways Frank considers Maureen and Apollonia.

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 1:7

SUMMARY

April and Frank are alone together in the living room, after the birthday of his affair with Maureen Grube, Frank goes to take a shower; then he and April. Afterwards, April begins to tell him about a plan she has been making for Europe. She says she will get a job in Europe as a secretary, while Frank tells her what it is he wants to do. Appalled at an image of April working to support the plan 'isn't very realistic' (p. 110). April says she is bored and that she is depressing. She says she regrets wanting to be an actress after her first pregnancy, and she wants an acting career. Frank says he is sure he has any talent worth challenging him, saying that his 'talent' is worth exploring simply because he is persuaded by April's plan, and they fall asleep.



Gender Roles

As part of her plan for moving to Europe, April suggests that she will find work as more and more women were going out to work in low-paid, 'white-collar' jobs – typists and assistants. While some women combined a career with looking after children, it was very unusual for the woman of the family to be the main breadwinner. Frank's disapproval of supporting him financially is typical of a wider cultural attitude at the time. Later in the chapter will echo Frank's attitude: 'what kind of a half-assed idea is this about her supporting a man is going to be able to take a thing like that?' (p. 150).

By planning to take on the 'man's role' in the family, April is challenging traditional gender roles. The role in the household is threatened, because he cannot see himself easily filling the gap. It is 'disquieting' (p. 109) (unsettling) to him. At this point in the conversation it seems like April has a plan, but she wins him over with a single comment: 'Don't you know? You're the only thing in the world. You're a man' (p. 115). This seems to be all it takes to restore Frank off a **romanticised** image of himself as a strong, muscled man, whose chest would 'fill the modelling of a medieval breastplate. Was there anything he couldn't do?' (p. 116). Yates plants the seed of an important idea here: Frank will not agree to move to Europe if he feels that it will threaten his masculinity. This is an important theme to consider as the novel progresses and their plans develop and change.

masculinity

Form, Structure and Language

The narrative in this chapter takes the form of a conversation between Frank and April, with short moments while Frank showers and April fetches drinks. By devoting an entire chapter to this conversation, Yates highlights its importance in the narrative.

By placing this chapter at the end of Part One, Yates creates a cliffhanger effect: the reader is left in Part Two and the next chapter to find out how Frank and April will begin carrying out their plan. This creates a sense of anticipation and gathering excitement which could be seen to reflect the feelings of his characters.

The final sentence of this chapter reads: 'And they fell asleep like children' (p. 116). The word 'children' Yates suggests that there is an innocent, possibly naive quality to April and Frank. The sentence is very short and simple, possibly to reflect the simplicity in the act of falling asleep after an intense, complex conversation they have been having.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Frank and April's conversation

It is interesting to note that the conversation in which Frank and April agree to meet in the middle of the night. This time of night – the 'small hours' – could be considered as atypical of typical suburban life. By staying up late, Frank and April are acting as rebels. At the end of Part One, Yates furthers the idea that the couple are shaking up the normal suburban routine. Frank says he will sleep during the day instead: 'I can sleep on the train. I can sleep at the office.' The dawn at the end of Part One could also suggest the beginning of a new period in their lives.

Essay Question

'All I'm giving you is what you've always been entitled to, and I'm only sorry I can't give you more so late.' (p. 113) Is April being 'revolutionary' in her plans? How/why (not)?



INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 2:1

SUMMARY

The day after his birthday, Frank goes into work. He talks with Maureen the previous day, and they agree to be 'friends' (p. 121). Then, he begins writing a letter to the company in Toledo about the brochure that needs rewriting, the papers which he has been 'avoiding for weeks' (p. 124). In the days that follow, Frank works his working days looking forward to the evenings when he and April stay up talking about their move to Europe. The children are confused by the change in their parents' behaviour. There are fewer arguments between them. One night Frank is scornfully talking about the families in the neighbourhood. He and Maureen agree that a move to Europe is 'that kind of an existence' (p. 125). In a later conversation, April thinks Frank is more fluent with French and the French language than he actually is. A few days later, Frank and April make arrangements for their trip. The following night she tells him to put on his coat and go to Mrs Givings and dinner with the Campbells at the



Gender Roles

At work, Frank decides to 'deal like a man with Maureen Grube' (p. 120) and reassesses the awkward feelings between them. During this exchange, Frank is very aware of his role and the image he wants it to have upon Maureen: 'his smile was so expert – not the least bit furtive, perfectly open, friendly smile' (p. 120). He is concerned that he looks the part; in Frank's mind, masculinity is a mask, or manner, which he can adopt.

Later in the chapter, April challenges traditional gender roles when she spends a day at work for the family's move to Europe. Although she first says she has found it 'sort of liberating', she apologises for 'taking charge of everything' adding that 'it's like when I mow the lawn, I'm portrayed as someone who knows her expected role and knows how far she has to go'. In 1950s America, women were expected to stay at home, cooking, cleaning and so on. In this case the dealings with the passport office and the travel agent – would have been done by a man. By doing them herself, April goes against society's expectations and places herself in a traditionally male role. This idea will become important as the novel develops.

Society

The theme of sentimentality as a disease is developed further in this chapter, 'This whole country's rotten with sentimentality' (p. 128). Frank's language here **personifies** the United States. He uses the language of disease, 'rotten', and 'kill' to describe sentimentality's effect upon it. This is the way that in American society, ideas and emotions are reduced to 'pre-digested intellectual baby food' (p. 128). This develops an aspect of Frank's character: his search for genuine feelings within a dulled-down society.

personification



Active Learning Task

Frank describes his and April's planned move to Europe as 'like coming out of a cocoon, like having been encased in some kind of Cellophane without knowing it was there' (p. 130). Cellophane is a man-made, non-breathable material. Can this be read as a metaphor for suburban society? How?

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Structure, Form and Language

There is a change of **pace** in this chapter, which coincides with Frank and April's decision to move to Europe. Up until now, the chapters of the novel have each covered one or two days, but the events of this chapter span several weeks: 'For an indeterminate number of days after that' (p. 125); 'It wasn't until a good many such evenings had passed' (p. 130). Yates uses non-specific terms such as 'indeterminate' and 'a good many' to suggest the way that Frank and April have lost track of time. At the same time, Yates speeds up his narrative in order to evoke a sense of time passing quickly.

Yates also uses language in this chapter to create a sense of the Wheelers' building excitement. He lists the things that April did during her trip to New York (p. 133) in a long sentence in list form: "On driving to New York [...], had undergone an interview, had bought two new travelling bags, a French dictionary, a street guide to Paris' (p. 133). Here, he uses **anaphora** to emphasise April's efficiency at working through a long list of preparations; it also creates a sense of something building: excitement, perhaps, or pressure.

pace

anaphora

Disc
'He was c
124). Com
to his w
previous
think ha

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



INSPECTION COPY



Chapter Analysis: 2:2

SUMMARY

Shep Campbell is getting ready for the Wheelers' visit later that evening, and describes his reaction against his middle-class upbringing. When he attended a 'third-rate' university (p. 138) and afterwards took a dull job. Craving intellectual stimulation, he moved his family to New York, where trying to 'decide whether to go on being an engineer' (p. 140). Eventually Stamford and the family moved to the suburbs. The narrative returns to shoes. While he takes a shower, he remembers how he danced with April arrive; they act strangely before announcing that they are moving to Paris. Campbells but they are supportive. When the Wheelers leave, Shep reassures sounds immature, but privately, he fantasises about being in Paris with April.

Class



In this chapter, Yates explores ideas of class in relation to Shep and Milly's character. Shep's middle-class upbringing in which he was raised by a 'wealthily divorced mother' who he tried to react against her. In this way, he tried to escape middle-class life but failed. He 'settled for the job with Allied Precision in Stamford' (p. 141). Yates presents Shep in his own trap: by trying to break out of the class he was born into, he has missed out on what he could have made his life more interesting.

It is also significant that Shep and Milly are from different social backgrounds – Milly's mother and her father was a housepainter. Shep considers that for a person with her background, it is 'easy' (p. 142) to adjust to intellectual, suburban life. From Shep's point of view, Milly is 'sticking by him even through hard times, she has expanded her social horizons as well as April Wheeler' (p. 142). Yates could be suggesting that while a person such as Shep escapes suburban life, for those from Milly's background, it is a social improvement.

Active Learning Task

Look for signifiers of class in this chapter. As well as looking at imagery ('flannels', 'a book-lined bachelor flat' (p. 139)), you could also look out for different social classes speak.

Characterisation

Yates portrays Shep as a man who lives through his own fantasies. As this chapter begins with his army days, which immediately characterise him as a daydreamer. Later, we see a fantasy about the East, 'a world of intellect and sensibility' (p. 139) that led him to move to New York. He fantasises, too, about April. When he began to wonder what April was doing right now, he and imagines her in a bachelor to Paris.

But Shep is shown to be someone who has learned to suppress his desires and feelings. By getting a job and moving to the suburbs, he has suppressed his fantasy of intellectual life in the East. Later in the chapter we see him feeling revolted by the smell of his wife (p. 144) and the sight of his children (p. 145); he explores these feelings briefly in his mind before dismissing them, 'what kind of nonsense was that?' (p. 146). His feelings for April are so suppressed and secret that they can only be whispered alone, outside, in the dark.

Dislike of 'the high class' to be so ashamed of background need to 'a

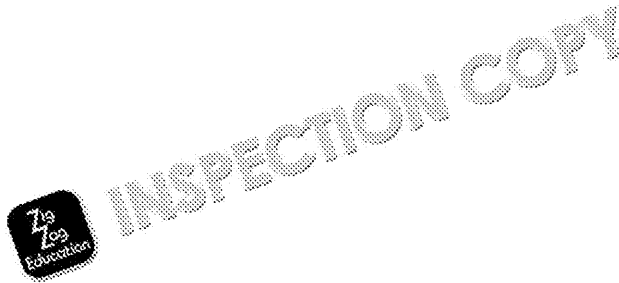
INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Shep and April

It is interesting to note the way Shep thinks of April. Although Shep longs to be in April is nearly always referred to by her full name, perhaps in order to emphasise his wife, but Frank's. Twice in this chapter she is described as smelling of lemons and as clean as lemons' (p. 144), 'the lemon-skin smell of her and the long, clean of lemons and cleanliness suggest the sharpness and freshness that April represents. Milly is described as having a 'rancid' smell (p. 144) – evoking something stale and identify. In this way, Yates develops the theme of Shep's dissatisfaction in his relationship.



INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter Analysis: 2:3

SUMMARY

It is the afternoon of Helen Givings's evening visit to the Wheelers'. The Givingses came to live in their house, and the joy and pride Helen has to get busy Saturday at work, Helen returns home and makes tea for herself and Howard. She is looking forward to the evening ahead; she plans to ask the Wheelers to meet her son John, who has been mentally ill. She believes it will do him good (p. 158). After tea, she heads to the Wheelers, excited to see April and Frank when she arrives. She is unnerved to find out that they've already heard of John when they agree to meet him she feels awkward. Before she can leave, the Wheelers plan to move to Europe. Later, back at home, Helen tells Howard the news upstairs and breaks down in tears, saddened by the loss of her own youth. Howard has turned out to be a disappointment. Coming downstairs, she continues to tell Howard how the Wheelers feel about John, but he isn't listening – he has turned off his hearing aid.



Helen Givings – a Working Woman

From the Wheelers' and the Campbells' point of view, Mrs Givings is an interfering mother-in-law. In this chapter, we are given more insight into her character. Mrs Givings has worked for her whole life 'because she's needed it' (p. 154) and has also worked hard to set up her own business. In this way, she is a working woman in a novel and in the context of 1950s America. It was generally expected that women in middle-class households would have either been homemakers, or gone out to work at low-paying jobs. Mrs Givings has done this in the past – she spent time working as an administrative assistant (p. 154) – but in 1936 the Givingses moved to the country so she could pursue a career. Now that her husband is retired, Mrs Givings is the family's main breadwinner.

Identity

Yates refers to Helen throughout the chapter as 'Mrs Givings'. By choosing to use her married title and surname, rather than 'Helen', he suggests that marriage has absorbed a part of her personal identity. In creating Helen Givings, Yates has created a complex female character. In her career she has pushed the boundaries of traditional gender roles, but still considers herself 'silly', 'wrong and foolish' (p. 156) to have worked so hard at setting up her business. Now, in her husband's retirement, she has taken on a typically masculine role in the family – as she sees herself going through a 'long-delayed emergence into womanliness' (p. 156). This is an interesting clash of personal and social identities. On a social level, Mrs Givings could be seen as revolutionary – her career and position in the family are certainly unusual for women of the time. But on a personal level, she feels embarrassed to think of how she has behaved in the past. Her reference to 'long-delayed' womanliness suggests that in her former lifestyle, she has not felt 'womanly'.

Did it work?
it was
take
name
them
exactly
How

Suppression

In this chapter Yates develops the theme of suppression. Although at the beginning Mrs Givings is satisfied with her life, she breaks down at the end, mourning her life. 'She cried because she was fifty-six years old and her feet were ugly and swollen because Howard Givings was the only man who'd ever asked her to marry him' (p. 160).

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



bathroom to compose herself before returning 'jauntily' (p. 165) downstairs and a more palatable version for her husband to hear. This could be read as an example of how Mrs Givings puts every emotion into some kind of pre-digested intellectual baby food' (p. 129) about earlier in the novel. In this way, Mrs Givings could be seen to be suppressing her true feelings that will be acceptable to society.

Active Learning Task

To cover up her disgust at seeing her aged feet, Mrs Givings pulls on 'bright socks' (p. 165). Disturbed by her strong feelings of self-disgust, she only puts on 'bright' socks before pulling on 'bright' slippers to cover her feet up. As you read the way Mrs Givings puts on a bright face or brings on a light-hearted discussion, think about the unsavoury feelings and topics. Why do you think Mrs Givings does this?



INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 2:4

SUMMARY

Eleven weeks before the Wheelers are due to move to Europe, Frank is having a drink with Jack Ordway. Frank is telling Jack about his plans, but Jack is finding it difficult to believe they are going to Europe. At the end of their conversation, Frank feels sorry for Jack and buys him a whisky. They go together to the bank to collect their pay, and afterwards, they go for a 'stroll around the block' (p. 171). Back at the office, Frank is called into the office of Bandy. There he is introduced to Bart Pollock, the general sales manager. Frank has been called to meet him because 'his brochure he wrote for the company was a success – 'a crackerjack' (p. 172). Later that evening, Frank tells April about his success. He asked her to write a whole series of brochures. He had hoped she would be excited, but she is unexcited. This leads him to tell Bandy about his plans to resign.

Imagination and Reality

In this chapter, Yates examines Frank's feelings about the planned move to Europe. The move has 'yet to penetrate the reality of the office', and that although it has been often discussed, at work it has become 'as insubstantial as a half-remembered, faded dream'. To develop the idea that home and the office are two sharply contrasting worlds, Yates uses the metaphor of a 'refuge'.

Frank enjoys imagining that this is the last time he will have to stand in line at the bank to go to Europe, 'he entertained himself by pretending it was the last time he would ever have to do so'. As he takes a walk with his colleagues, 'he pretended it was the last time he would ever have to do so'. The reality of leaving is portrayed as frightening, a 'silent threat of escape' (p. 168) from the 'refuge' (p. 170) from. The repeated use of the word 'pretended' hints that it is the act of leaving for Europe which brings Frank pleasure.

In this chapter we see how Frank uses his imagination as a refuge. In an effort to ease his stressed reaction to meeting Bart Pollock, Frank again dives into his imagination, imagining that he will describe the event to April: 'I suddenly caught myself *melting* in front of him'. When he gets home, Frank is troubled by April's reaction to his success at work – it is not what he expected. This sets up the idea of an 'ideal' April and a 'real' April. These examples develop the theme of the big difference between dream and the reality. There is always a discrepancy – they are not the same.

Frank

It is also interesting to examine the way Frank imagines himself; his imagination is often quite poetic and **fantastical**. At one point, Frank likens himself and his colleagues, in his mind, to 'soldiers from the same platoon' (p. 172). This shows that he feels a sense of macho camaraderie. In the 1950s, it would have been very common for men of Frank's age to have served in the army. In many ordinary Americans' minds, soldiers represented ideal men: they were courageous and noble. By using army imagery here, perhaps Yates is implying that this contributes to Frank's sense of his own masculinity.

fantastical

Active Learning Task

Look at Frank's reaction to meeting Bart Pollock (p. 173). What insights does this give you into Frank's character?

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Entrapment/Containment

Frank seems to be containing his anger in this chapter. When he perceives that he has been deceived by Knox, he thinks, “Noble experiment”? What kind of supercilious crap was that?” (p. 169) to frighten him. When, at dinner, April suggests he should tell his boss he is leaving and so won’t be able to write the brochures, Frank eats so ‘angrily’ (p. 175) that he bites his fork. But these acts of aggression do not escape into the wider world – the first is only a fantasy of anger, and the second is self-contained and only harms himself. Through these incidents of ‘bottled up’ anger, Yates shows that Frank has begun to keep his true, raw emotions contained – both at work, and at the family dinner table. This could be seen to reflect a wider theme of entrapment by society.

Language

At the beginning of this chapter, Yates uses machine imagery to describe how Frank’s office life, ‘he would find his mind sliding readily into gear with the slipperiness of the projects’ (p. 77). Machines are automatic, or programmed to carry out tasks. By something which can slide into ‘gear’, Yates creates a sense of the automatic way in which Frank continues the theme of Frank as an ‘automaton’ (p. 78) at work in Chapter 1:5.

Yates also continues the metaphor of the office as a lake. In Chapter 1:5, he portrays the office as a lake in which some swimmers make ‘steady headway’ and others ‘drowned’ (p. 79). In this chapter, Frank is portrayed as a ‘bright, dry, torpid lake’ (p. 168) – ‘torpid’ means sluggish and lacking in energy, and ‘dry’ could be interpreted as neutral, or even positive. Perhaps this descriptive change in Frank’s attitude towards his working environment, and Knox itself.

Essay Question

‘We’re all very well-mannered, very refined little pigs; we all stand very still and don’t jostle each other too much’ (p. 171). Examine the ways working people are portrayed in this chapter.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 2:5

SUMMARY

While sewing, April loses her temper with Jennifer, who is listing the toys in Europe. A moment later, Frank and April find her in her bedroom, upset. Frank is disturbed by the incident, pointing out how the move will be 'problematic' for the kids. In response, April asks if he is 'suggesting we call the whole thing off' (p. 181) and she thinks the adults ought to be 'in charge' (p. 181) in their family. Then Howard Givings brings their son John over to meet the Wheelers. The atmosphere is uncomfortable; Mrs Givings is embarrassed by her son's behaviour. After a while, April suggests a walk, and she, Frank and John go out to the park. John asks questions them about their 'reasons for coming' (p. 189) to Europe, and the treatment for mental illness. When they go back inside, the atmosphere is tense. They talk about child development programmes. After the Givingses leave, Frank feels depressed, and senses that April feels isolated.

John

In this chapter, we are introduced to a new character, John Givings. John's **diction** is casual; he runs words together: 'Glad to meetcha. Heard a lot aboutcha' (p. 183) and peppers his speech with 'Huh's' (p. 190). In this way, he speaks very differently to his parents, which has the effect of distancing him from them. His behaviour is also very casual: 'lagging behind his parents, he stood with his feet planted wide apart' (p. 183) and breaks the conventions of polite society, 'breathing' (p. 183). John does not seem to adapt his behaviour and way of speaking in order to match the situation. This helps to characterise him as someone who is unashamedly different from everyone else. His behaviour and way of speaking could be considered a good indication of whether or not they conform to the conventions of polite society and in this way, John does not conform.

John also plays with language, 'the nice young Wheelers on Revolutionary Road, Wheeler Road' (p. 184). He hones in on words that other people use, trying to understand their meaning. He checks that words have been used correctly: "'Interesting?" [...] You worry about it or not?' (p. 186), 'You know what the difference between female and feminine is?' (p. 186) as someone to whom it is important that language is used precisely.

Active Learning Task

In this chapter, Yates pays attention to diction in his characterisation of John. Which texts you have studied make use of a special kind of diction? Why do you think they do? What effects do you think they are trying to create?

Helen and Howard Givings

Howard Givings is a calming, steadying force. Yates likens him to a 'benign' presence, 'making sure the youngster stayed out of mischief' (p. 186). Howard's main action in this chapter is to 'steady down' (p. 188) when he challenges his mother's opinion that the Wheelers' move is 'a mistake' (p. 187). Howard makes this request 'gently' (p. 186); this contrasts his manner with his mother's more 'livelier'. Mrs Givings could be seen to represent a covering-up force. Most of her actions are to gloss over awkward or uncomfortable moments; for example, when she draws attention to the possibility of seeing a rainbow (p. 187) in order to break up a tense conversation about Frank's job. Her behaviour in this chapter could be seen to mirror typical 1950s American attitudes towards **subversion** and uncomfortable truths – those who revealed them, such as artists and writers, were treated with suspicion and hostility.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Mental Illness

While walking with April and Frank, John reveals that he has had 37 electrical shock treatments while in hospital, and this has erased his knowledge of mathematics. In the 1950s, electrical shock therapy was one of the main methods of treating mental illness, although as a cure, it was not as widely understood as it is today. One of its effects was its ability to 'erase' certain thoughts and memories from a person's mind – but there was no control over which things these would be. By making it John's mathematical knowledge – the basis of his career – which is erased, Yates highlights the arbitrary nature of this medical technique, and makes it seem even more so. The description of John's face as a 'lancet', 'blotched and tough with sea water' (p. 190) also suggests the violent and psychological treatment he has undergone.

femininity

social construct

Mrs Givings' attitude towards her son in this chapter reflects the widely held belief among Americans in the 1950s that mental illness was something embarrassing, which ought to be kept out of sight. Helen is embarrassed that John insists on wearing 'those hospital things' (p. 185) even though she regularly brings him 'good shirts and trousers [...] his cashmere sweater' (p. 185). By refusing to wear the clothes his mother wants him to, John refuses to let her gloss over the fact he has been 'certified insane' (p. 182). This could be seen as a way of forcing her, and the people he meets, to confront the issue instead of being allowed to pretend it doesn't exist.

Femininity

'A feminine woman never laughs out loud and always shaves her armpits' (p. 190). While talking to the Wheelers, John claims that there is a difference between the meanings of the words 'female' and 'feminine'. The examples of what makes a 'feminine' woman that John gives are based on the way a woman presents herself to society. Laughing quietly and having clean-shaven armpits are qualities desired of women by society. In this way, Yates emphasises the idea that **femininity is a social construct**.

Essay Question

'I guess that means we're as crazy as he is' (p. 187). Compare the way in which mental illness are explored in *Revolutionary Road* and one other text.

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**

Chapter Analysis: 2:6

SUMMARY

Bart Pollock takes Frank out for lunch. He praises the brochure Frank has a long speech on the art of 'good selling' (p. 196). When he has finished his father once worked at Knox. Bart is impressed that Frank took the job mentioning his father. In a flashback, Frank remembers the moment that his new job; he remembers the way he lied and told his father he had to get it. Back in the restaurant, Bart tells Frank that he sees him as a good the company. Frank tells him that he is not planning to leave the company as he won't be able to take on the job. Bart convinces Frank that it will be a 'bro higher salary, and asks him to reconsider leaving Knox. He says it will be tribute to your dad's. But these words have a sudden, emotional effect. Later, Frank is in a tense mood. She reveals she is pregnant, and the new plan secretly hopes the plan to move to Europe can be cancelled 'nothing ruined' (p. 207). Later, in the bathroom, he finds a rubber syringe abortion kit. He confronts April, who implies that she has been planning

Pregnancy

At the end of this chapter, April reveals she is pregnant. In 1950s America, it would have been extremely unusual for a man to be a stay-at-home father, and so being pregnant automatically means that she will not be able to work for 'two years? Three years? Four? How long do you think it'll be before I can take a full-time job?' (p. 207). April's pregnancy has forced her to give up the promise of becoming the family's main breadwinner – now she must step back into the role of stay-at-home mother which she has previously found so dull. In this way, pregnancy is a disaster for April's plans to be revolutionary.

Did you know Frank now bears the Seal of American Housekeeper women's in the mid circulation

It is significant that the news of April's pregnancy comes at the end of the chapter. Frank has been increasingly uneasy about the idea of the move to Europe. Hearing 'the pressure was off; life had come mercifully back to normal' (p. 207). Just as April agreed to change their plans dramatically (and move to Europe), the news of this chapter marks another enormous turnaround in the Wheelers' future plans – not move after all.

Active Learning Task

Analyse the way Frank's discovery of the rubber syringe is portrayed on page 207. (He reached for a towel ...'). Pay close attention to the language and imagery used in this paragraph. What connotations do these words

Structure

Frank's lunch with Bart Pollock closely echoes an earlier scene in the novel, a flashback where he accompanied his father to lunch with Oat Fields. Frank notices the similarity of 'ironic coincidence' (p. 195); it makes him feel 'ten years old' (p. 195). During the comparisons between Bart Pollock and Oat Fields. He is relieved to find that Bart

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



disgusting way as Oat Fields. However, the fact that he is comparing him to Oat Field suggests an idea that he is re-enacting, in a sense, his father's lunch, and that Bart is 'playing' ensures that the reader draws direct similarities between Frank and his father, and the inevitability, about Frank's future at Knox.

At a number of points throughout his lunch with Bart Pollock, Frank imagines how he will tell April about things they have said, and what 'April would say' (p. 208). By having thoughts of April interrupting Frank's narrative, Yates structures the chapter so that April is never far from the reader's thoughts either. It subtly encourages us to consider how April will receive the idea of Frank's new job. This helps build dramatic tension.

Selling

In this chapter, Bart Pollock tries to convince Frank of the importance of 'old-fashioned' values. The passage could be seen as an example of a **monologue**. Bart interrupts himself with questions, 'Should I order now, or wait a while?' (p. 197), 'You follow me?' (p. 197) to reply. At another, he says, 'Let me give an example' (p. 197) but he is not really ahead with 'one example after another' (p. 197). This reinforces the idea of a one-sided conversation which suggests that Bart has a kind of bulldozing power, or the power to entrance. Frank is drawn to certain personal magnetism' (p. 196). Yates is portraying Bart as someone who has a powerful force upon Frank – this is important, because he is offering Frank a job which will clash with his plans to move to Europe. Bart Pollock could be interpreted as a character who stands for the world of work, the concept of 'selling', a good salary and material goods. By this interpretation, his power over Frank is significant – it suggests that these things are powerful distractions for Frank.

Essay Question

Bart Pollock suggests that the job he is offering Frank would be a 'tribute to the past'. Does Frank's reaction suggest about sentimentality in his character?

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter Analysis: 3:1

SUMMARY

The chapter opens with a reflection on humans' ability to measure time. At a point later in the evening, on the day April has revealed she is pregnant, Frank is crying, and they agree to 'be together in this thing' (p. 216). For the next time together, going on drives and having long conversations about the future, Frank makes an effort to engage in 'masculine flirtation' (p. 218) to get round to his point of view. One night they have an argument about the 'moral' and 'conventional'. Frank suggests that April might have problems in her childhood, and suggests that she should see a psychoanalyst. She ends the conversation. The next day, John Givings and his parents visit again. John asks Frank to go but when his father tries to interrupt, he flies into a tantrum. That evening, another argument about the abortion and April tentatively agrees to see a doctor. Frank considers a victory, and makes plans to tell everyone that their move



Time

The chapter opens with a musing on time – this sets up an important theme Yates read on. Time is a concept that has become crucial to the narrative; Frank and April 'orderly days' (p. 215) to come to a decision about the abortion, but it must be careful of pregnancy. Later in the chapter, Frank realises there are just 'twelve days to go' (p. 234). By creating a sense of countdown, Yates builds drama.

The Debate

Yates uses battle and game imagery in his depiction of Frank and April's 'quiet, careful' (p. 216). At some points, the imagery that he uses is reminiscent of an army campaign, the final tactic, the dangerous last-ditch maneuver he had hoped to hold in reserve as a last resort (p. 224). At the end of the chapter, he considers that he has achieved a 'victory' (p. 234) with military undertones.

Another way in which Yates presents the debate is as a game: 'all was fair in love and war, she all too capable of playing the same game?' (p. 219). Towards the end of the chapter, 'losing' the game: 'He felt that he had played his last chance, and had almost certainly lost' (p. 234). Game imagery could suggest that each person has an equal number of turns, or chances, in order to try to win. This helps to create the sense that April and Frank hold equally powerful 'positions' in their debate.

Frank provides the main review in this chapter, and so it is possible that the idea of the debate as a delicate battle or game forms part of his romantic, poetic idea of himself and his life. This further develops the idea of Frank as a dreamer, in love with his own image.

Abortion

Frank describes abortion as 'a criminal mutilation' (p. 218) and 'a crime against you' (p. 218). In 1955, the year that the novel is set, abortion was illegal. For many decades, women went out and performing illegal abortions on themselves, but in the years following World War II – abortion became strongly frowned-upon by society. A woman's place was

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



as a wife and mother – abortion offered women independence, and threatened this chapter, April suggests that abortion is a ‘denial of womanhood’ (p. 231). This is the chapter that April’s reluctance to bear his child is the ‘bleakest and most unnatural’ (p. 220). Conjugal problems are those relating to a marriage – Frank is stating that within a marriage is not natural. In this way, his moral ideas can be seen to be quite different from the expectations of 1950s American society.

Active Learning Task

In this chapter, the narrative takes place from Frank’s point of view. How does this affect your view of the couple’s debate about abortion?

Selling

The theme of selling and commercialisation, explored in the previous chapter, is further developed in this chapter. Frank considers that his disagreement with the abortion is ‘an idea he had to sell’ (p. 217). Pollock’s comment in the previous chapter that ‘when you’re trying to sell an idea, the most effective instrument of persuasion is the living human voice’ (p. 203). Yates also describes Frank’s feelings about his side of the debate: ‘his main tactical problem in his campaign, was to find ways of making his position attractive’ (p. 217). In this way, the chapter explores Frank’s side of the debate and Bart Pollock’s persuasive appeal. That Frank is mirrored in April’s position has been impressed – and influenced – by Bart’s persuasive techniques. Perhaps it could be seen as a wider theme in 1950s America: the powerful effect of commercial influence upon society.

Essay Question

‘This bleakest and most unnatural of conjugal problems’ (p. 220). What does this imply about attitudes towards motherhood in post-war America?

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter Analysis: 3:2

SUMMARY

Frank and April tell the children that they're no longer planning to move, which leaves them confused. A few nights later, Frank and April tell the Campbells, and the children are disappointed. Frank has been trying to put lustful thoughts of April out of his mind. When Frank tells the whole plan had seemed 'a tiny bit unrealistic' (p. 237). Frank tells Bart Pollock to let him know of his 'decision' (p. 238), and is disappointed by the reception of the news. When April rings Mrs Givings to tell her they will not move, Givings is exhausted after an afternoon spent with John's doctor at the hospital. She is very pleased by the news. One morning a few days later, Frank wakes up with a 'deadline' (p. 241) for carrying out the abortion. The narrative of the night before, when Frank had reminded April of the date and asked her to have the abortion, she did, it was 'a little late for them now' (p. 242). She stays late in his office to finish his series of brochures. At the end of the chapter, she arrives in his office, and Frank knows that he will 'take her out tonight' (p. 243).

Imagination and Reality

Frank enjoys imagining that there will be a fanfare involved when he meets Bart Pollock. He discovers that in reality, his working life is more ordinary than he had thought. He would be 'cooler' (p. 238) than everyone else's, but it isn't. His shirt is described as 'plain' and his office 'smaller than it looked from the outside' (p. 238). His use of the word 'brochures' to refer to Frank's brochures hints that he has less interest in the brochures than he makes excuses for him in his mind, 'no man could be jubilant in a room like this' (p. 238). Frank unsuccessfully tries to relieve his feelings of uneasiness by pretending his face in a smile of contentment and his limbs in an attitude of total peace, but it doesn't work. These examples develop a theme which has been emerging in the novel: the difference between Frank's imagination and his reality.

Also in this chapter we learn that Shep, another daydreamer, has tried to stop himself from imagining her as an old, undesirable version of herself, 'thick and stumpy from her age' (p. 236). This further develops the idea that there is an 'imagined', ideal April who he cannot live up to, or match.

Active Learning Task

What does Shep's vision of April in ten years time (p. 236) suggest about what is considered desirable and undesirable in a woman in post-war America?

Language Structure

In the first part of this chapter, each section of the narrative deals with Frank and April having cancelled their plans to move. First the children, then the Campbells, then the Givings are told of the plans, and we see their reactions. Each section begins with speech from the characters concerned, 'We're not?' (p. 234), 'Changed your what?' (p. 239). April and Frank's reactions to the characters in these sections; the characters' reactions take centre stage in the narrative. The narrative switches frequently.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



In Mrs Givings's conversation with April, Yates creates a sense of her mixed mood of positive and negative **connotations** in **juxtaposition**: a feeling of 'wretched polite pressure' of the act of drawing is juxtaposed with the 'joyful shapes' she produces (p. 240). This could suggest an aspect of Mrs Givings's character that has been developing, her tendency to balance negative feelings with brighter, positive ones ('Maybe we'll see a rainbow. Wouldn't that be lovely?' (p. 187)) in order to cover up distasteful feelings.

connotations means
with a
juxtaposition the place
or context
to create

Uncertainty

When Frank and April tell the children, Jennifer's reaction to the news highlights their lives: 'it had become increasingly hard, lately, for either of them to know what was going on'. A feeling of uncertainty runs through the novel; Mrs Givings, too, is disturbed by how things always change, when all you can do is ask, all you had ever humbly asked of whatever was certain things, 'all I could ask is that they remain the same?' (p. 240). Shep is shaken by the news that 'he wasn't supposed to be anything' (p. 236). These characters' combined uncertainty brings a sense of disappointment and unsettlement in the novel. In the second part of the chapter, 'the dread' (p. 240). This could reflect a national feeling at the time *Revolutionary Road* was written and early 60s were characterised by an undercurrent of uncertainty. The threat of nuclear attack by the Soviet Union (the 'Cold War') was ever-present, and many writers of the time wrote of uncertainty and existentialism in their work.

Essay Question

Explore the role of imagination in *Revolutionary Road* and one other text.

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



INSPECTION COPY



Chapter Analysis: 3:3

SUMMARY

The Steve Kovick Quartet is playing at the Log Cabin, a beer-and-pizza place. Frank, Wheeler and the Campbells have come to spend the evening drinking and eating. Frank is unhappy, but puts the thought out of his mind. He daydreams about his affair with Maureen Grube, and we learn that the two have slept together and once in a hotel. Frank dances with Milly for a while, but she suddenly is sick; when she returns, she wants to go home. The couples go out to the Campbells' car is blocked in by other cars. April suggests that Frank drive home and wait at the Log Cabin with Shep 'till the other car's free' (p. 252). Shep and April have another drink. After a while, Shep checks the car, but it is still blocked. April is about her lonely childhood and they dance. Then, they go out to the car. Shep tells April he loves her, but she shushes him and goes home. April doesn't know who he is, and doesn't even know who she is.

Frank

In this chapter, we see Frank becoming more and more isolated. One way that Yates achieves this is by showing Frank considering himself independently from April. Early on in the chapter, Frank is shown who discovered the Log Cabin (p. 248) on an occasion when he was alone. This highlights his separateness from the group. He later distances himself from April's problem, saying 'her problem was unfortunate, but it was, after all, her problem' (p. 249). As the evening progresses, Frank is going home alone, 'preparing neatly for bed with book and nightcap, bachelor-style' (p. 250). This forms part of Frank's fantasy of himself as a single man; since a fantasy is usually an alternative situation, it could imply that his situation – life in a relationship – has become unbearable.

Structure

It is interesting to note how Yates switches between points of view in this chapter. The chapter starts with a point of view of Steve Kovick, a band musician playing at the Log Cabin. Then, the narrative switches to April's point of view, as he drinks, contemplates his affair with Maureen and dances with Milly. When Frank drives home, the point of view switches to Shep. By structuring the chapter in this way, Yates compares the men's attitudes towards April into comparison.

Active Learning Task

'The business with Maureen [...] had served its purpose' (p. 250). What does this suggest about Frank's affair with Maureen Grube?

April

It is not just Frank who is isolated in this chapter – April is isolated too. Among the 'aloof' (p. 249) and portrayed using language that makes her stand out: Frank likens her to a 'lidded queen among commoners' (p. 249). This image of April as haughty and superior is contrasted with the Laurel Players in Chapter 1:1, in which she is said to have had an 'occasional laugh' (p. 8). Later, she explicitly reveals her isolation to Shep, telling him that her childhood was growing up, she imagined that there would be 'a whole world of marvellous people' (p. 258) where she would fit in – but it is implied that she has not found them. At the end of the chapter, April admits that she doesn't know who Shep is, and doesn't know herself either. This suggests that April is unable to pin down her own identity, and is adrift from everyone.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



In the scene in which Frank and Shep are trying to work out what to do about the blocked-in car, April takes control of the situation: 'April's voice cut through the confusion with such sober authority that they all stopped talking' (p. 252). This helps to portray her as an unmuddled voice of reason and good sense. It could be seen to **foreshadow** her behaviour later in the novel when she will take control of her complicated situation by trying to end her pregnancy.

Are y
and S
this

Essay Question

Why is April's isolation significant in the wider context of the novel?



INSPECTION COPY



INSPECTION COPY

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 3.4

SUMMARY

Frank is walking towards Maureen's apartment to 'break off' the affair and remembers a meeting with Bart Pollock the day before, at which he agreed to a new job. He also remembers that April, for the last few nights, has slept on the sofa, looking for a 'reputable analyst' (p. 265) for her as soon as possible. As he enters the building, her housemate Norma takes him aside. They go to a cafe, where Maureen thinks he is in love with her, and suggests that it he has got himself into a 'human, very understandable situation' (p. 265). Frank is dismissive, but he is troubled by their meeting and is sorry for her. In Maureen's flat, while performing a nude dance for him, she tells her the affair is over, and appears embarrassed and upset. The next day, he is anxious at the thought of seeing her again. He goes away on holiday. At the weekend, he feels anxious and has handled the affair until early Sunday afternoon, when, while out for a drink (p. 273), he drives home, and finds April in the kitchen. She says she doesn't know why she's not sleeping with him, but then admits that it's because she doesn't want to hear about his affair with Maureen, but her reaction is neutral. She leaves and he follows her, insisting that she does love him.

Reality

In this chapter Frank frequently appears distanced from reality. At the beginning of the chapter, the narrative wanders to a series of flashbacks to the days before; it is some time (just over two weeks) after the end and the narrative resumes. This structural device helps to suggest that Frank is not fully engaged with the present than focusing on a present reality. The idea is developed further later in the chapter when Frank decides he wants to end their affair. In this passage, Yates draws our attention to Frank's 'distant consciousness was involved' (p. 271). Interestingly, the details of how he breaks the affair with Maureen is described as 'less like reality than a dream' (p. 271) and narrated as a series of disconnected events: 'her face clouded over [...], the way she sprang off his lap [...] the way he followed her'. This suggests that Frank experiences these things as 'memories before they were events' (p. 271). This is part of a wider thread in the novel: the failed plan to move to Europe, which fed many of Frank's daydreams. A daydream in which ten years had passed: the Wheelers were coming back and they were meeting the boat' (p. 236).

Language

From Frank's point of view, his affair with Maureen is described as 'the thing' (p. 263) and 'the whole stupid business' (p. 266). The fact that April is not sleeping with him is condensed down to 'this annoying business of the sofa' (p. 274) and April's earlier plan to have an abortion is 'all that abortion business' (p. 274). These are nearly all the main themes of the novel at this stage. Frank's 'business' in his life could be seen to further develop the concept of Frank's 'business' in his life in a businesslike way, rather than with emotion.

Yates uses business language elsewhere in the chapter, too. Phrases from Frank's talk with Bart Pollock are remembered in inverted commas: 'finalized', 'block out a few objectives' (p. 264). The inverted commas bring Bart Pollock's voice into the narrative, as if he is being quoted in Frank's thoughts. This could seem to suggest a new-found respect for Bart in Frank's mind. Another interpretation could be that the inverted commas make the business language seem removed from the language of everyday speech.

Don't
Use
(find
you
the
sho

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Active Learning Task

Look at the way Frank behaves, thinks and speaks in this chapter. Would you describe him as sentimental in this chapter? Why (not)?

Media

In this chapter, Yates emphasises how unreal the affair seems to Frank, and how it fits into a normal routine: 'the whole episode could now be dismissed as something separate from the narrative flow of his life' (p. 273). One of the ways he does this is by using media. The word 'episode' has media connotations; this links his affair with Maureen to a television programme. At the end of the break-up, Yates depicts Maureen at the centre of a 'final vignette' – a scene from a film or play – the image of which builds up a sense of unreality and detachment.

At the end of this chapter, Yates draws the noise of the radio into the narrative, interrupting Frank and April's conversation. Just after Frank tells April about his affair with Maureen, 'the only sound in the room [is] the music on the radio' (p. 277). Later, an advert for reduced sportswear cuts in directly after April has told Frank she doesn't love him. After such a dramatic statement, the advert's message seems petty and almost comical. Perhaps, by placing the sounds of the radio directly after dramatic revelations, Yates gives a sense of how reality seems suspended.

Discuss

'I think you're probably a serious boy [...] you're not yourself involved in it, it's understandable so about sum it up? ... do you think of Nick as having good intentions?'
analysis

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter Analysis: 3:5

SUMMARY

Howard and Helen Givings drive to the hospital to take their son John on and spend a few moments in the waiting room before John arrives. In the waiting room, Howard tells John that the Wheelers are no longer moving to Europe. John wants to know why, and Howard tells him it isn't her 'business to ask' (p. 283). When the Givingses arrive at the hospital, it is quiet, and it seems as if they are not expecting visitors. Frank and April Wheeler (p. 285) but quietly welcome them in. John demands to know why they are moving to Europe, and Frank announces that April is pregnant. John challenges the decision, asking 'babies in Europe?' (p. 286) and confronts Frank, suggesting that he has made a decision that is not comfortable, to move. Frank becomes himself angrily. John then turns on Howard, saying 'must give [Frank] a good time, if making babies is the only way he can get out of balls' (p. 288). As the Givingses are leaving, John tells Frank and April that he is an unborn child.

Mrs Givings

In this chapter, the narrative is informed by Mrs Givings's point of view. From the start, there is a contrast between what she says, and how she feels; she claims that 'it's such a relief to be driving' (p. 280) but in the same sentence, she is shown to be 'holding fast to the steering wheel' (p. 280). Where her words suggest relaxation, her actions are tense. This theme continues; in the car with John on the way to the Wheelers', she senses that there is something 'wrong' (p. 283) and tries to counter it with her actions: 'she forced the skin of her face to assume the shape of a jolly smile' (p. 283). Trying to diffuse, or cover up, an increasing tension in her conversation with John, she changes the topic completely, 'Oh, look at that lovely rainbow' (p. 284), which echoes a moment in Chapter 2:5 when she changes the topic abruptly to cool down the conversation with Frank: 'Maybe we'll see a rainbow. Wouldn't that be lovely?' (p. 187). Soon after, she learns that while talking, she has been 'grinding and tearing a book of matches into little pieces' (p. 284) with her fingers. This image of stressful body language hints that she is suppressing anxiety to maintain a sunny mood.

Active Learning Task

Look closely at the language, structure and imagery in the opening passage of Chapter 3:5. How do Yates make this passage comical?

The Psychiatric Ward

Yates describes the hospital in some detail. One of the effects of this could be that the reader, like Mrs Givings, to meet John. Will he appear? How will he behave? The reader is left with a sense of anticipation, which the narrative character has not yet appeared, creates an uncomfortable suspenseful atmosphere.

John refers to himself and the other patients as 'prisoners' (p. 282) but the word 'prisoners' is used in a way that suggests that the description of the hospital has made it sound prison-like. The lengthy visiting procedure 'take this slip' (p. 281)) and mention of keys, locks and corridors all have connotations of a prison. In this passage, Yates portrays mentally ill people as people who look, at first sight, like ordinary people. It is not easy to identify the man as a patient until you noticed that his other hand was hidden in a yellow-knuckled grip of desperation' (p. 282). One of the ways he does this is by using the word 'prisoners'.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



first as lovers, partners and children before going into the details – and symptoms structures these portraits so that we see ‘an old woman [...] combing the tangled our attention is drawn to increasingly absurd images, ‘his head wobbled submissively a peeled banana’ (p. 282).

Active Learning Task

Yates suffered from mental ill-health himself throughout his lifetime, and it was part of him. How does Yates present the psychological ward in this chapter? Look at the sounds and images he chooses to highlight. What undercurrents are there in his

John

This is John's third visit to the Wheeler's house. In the first, he made a scene, but on the ground with April and Francis. In the second, he threw a tantrum when challenged away. In this third visit, John can be seen to be aggressive and cruel. There is an air of menace for much of the first part of this chapter, most of his speech takes the form of questions, 'Why aren't they letting the prisoners out in the sunshine today?' (p. 282), 'What happened?' (p. 283), 'What's so obvious about it? I mean okay, she's pregnant; so what?' (p. 286). This last question is said with 'the stare of a prosecuting attorney' (p. 286): by likening John to a lawyer making a prosecution, Yates suggests the tense atmosphere of the courtroom, and John as someone who is in charge of creating it. John can be seen to put the Wheelers 'on trial' for not sticking to their plans.

observed
and

Essay Question

Examine and compare portrayals of mental illness in *Revolutionary Road* and another text you have studied.

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 3:6

SUMMARY

As soon as the Givingses leave, Frank angrily tells April that John is 'insane' as 'the inability to love' (p. 290). April becomes hysterical with him; Frank she loathes the sight of him. They fight, and Frank tells April that he is going through with the abortion. He shuts himself in the bedroom, and April runs to leave the house, Frank follows her; she runs into the woods behind the house. She screams if Frank comes closer, so he returns to the house and watches her. When she comes inside and rings Milly Campbell, asking her if she can keep the baby, Frank spends a restless night sleeping and half-awake; he thinks he sees her in bed, but isn't sure if he's dreaming. The next morning, he doesn't want to go to work, but remembers it is the day of the conference. He goes downstairs and April is there. She is pleasant to him; they eat breakfast together. Frank is touched by her interest in his work, and by the fact that she is not angry. As he leaves for work, he asks her, 'You don't really hate me, or anything?' April reassures him she does not. Before leaving, he kisses her goodbye.

Entrapment

While Frank and April are fighting in the house, Frank is aware of 'a sense of luxury' as 'the children weren't here [...] they had this whole reverberating house to themselves' (p. 291). This allows them to have a 'wide-open, all out fight' (p. 291). This sense of luxury, however, when the couple's fight spills outside the house and April runs into the woods, is unable to scream without the entire neighbourhood being aware of their argument. 'On this hillside they would hear her in every house on Revolutionary Road' (p. 293). This 'there was nothing for him to do but go back' (p. 293) implies that the very threat of Frank's behaviour; he doesn't want everyone else to hear their fight, so he goes back.

The idea that there is nowhere to escape to creates a sense of the claustrophobia. Underlines this idea when she shouts at Frank, 'Don't come any *closer*! Can't I even go into the woods?' (p. 293). This scene has visual echoes of a scene earlier in the novel: in Chapter 2, when the Wheelers when he is interrupted by his father, 'Pop! I told you not to interrupt!' he retreats 'up against the stone wall' (p. 230) in order to get away from him. In this scene, between April and John: is her behaviour 'insane' too? Is Frank playing the 'steady'?

Acting

In the first part of this chapter, April is portrayed as upset and unpredictable. But in the second part, by breakfast the next morning, she appears to have changed her mind. The way Yates structures this chapter juxtaposes two very contrasting 'versions' of April – it seems inconceivable and suspicious to the reader, and to Frank, that she could have changed so abruptly overnight: 'this strange, elaborate pretence that nothing had happened yesterday' (p. 296). During the breakfast, Frank looks for signs that she is acting, 'She wasn't eating her eggs, and he saw that her fingers were shaking a little as she reached for her coffee cup; otherwise she looked completely self-possessed' (p. 297). This observation helps to create the sense of his suspicion.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



By 'joining her in the playing of this game' (p. 296) Frank could be seen to acknowledge his act. He tries to find explanations for her behaviour, 'Could it be that they'd fought this was what happened when there was really and truly nothing more to say' (p. 296). He wants to believe that she is putting on an act. But as he eats breakfast with April, he hides his 'delight' (p. 297) that April has remembered the date of his conference, and he compliments him on his modesty about his work, 'He felt his smiling cheeks get warm' (p. 297). At breakfast, he is overcome by tears, but 'managed to hold it back' (p. 298). Yates shows Frank's happiness, trying not to seem too delighted by April's normality, and interest in him. In this way, he perhaps suggests that Frank is 'acting' too.

Active Learning Task

If Frank and April are acting in the second part of this chapter, what 'parts' are they playing?

Essay Question

How does Yates engage the reader emotionally in this chapter? Include discussion of imagery and structure in your answer.



INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter Analysis: 3:7

SUMMARY

April waits for Frank to drive away, then goes indoors and breaks down Campbell, and asks her to keep the children for another day. When she then begins to 'straighten up the house' (p. 302). In the wastebasket, she finds a written letter to Frank that she wrote during the night. In it, she writes that they loved each other. In a flashback to the middle of the night, she remembers going into the bedroom and sat on Frank's bed. She thinks of her life with Frank and how she has been wrong to think of Frank as 'crying in the night' (p. 304) than a party. She takes the half-written letter and burns them. The narrative then shows young April is playing with her friends in her Aunt Claire's garden, telling her mother. Then, Frank arrives at short notice; April is delighted, but he is leaving for a while. She goes out to his car with him, where he has a car accident; even though he cuts a white horse from a bottle top and gives it to her, he goes back to the garden, where April's fire has gone out. She goes back inside. Frank, then begins to sterilise the equipment she will need to carry out a

Point of View

This is the first chapter in which the narrative is seen from April's point of view. The chapter introduces April by her full name, 'April Johnson Wheeler' (p. 300); by stating her name at the beginning of 'her' chapter, Yates makes us aware of April's individuality. The two roles she plays: as April Johnson, the individual, and April Wheeler, Frank's wife.

In a passage on pages 304–305, ('a boy who'd danced with you and made you laugh when you didn't know who you were') she recounts all the events of the novel from her own point of view. We only see April through the lenses of Frank, Shep and Mrs Givings and the novel's time we have insight into her true feelings and motives, rather than those imagined for her by the other characters. Her repeated use of the **second-person** point of view in this passage, 'you found you were saying yes when you meant no' (p. 304), 'you were breathing gasoline as if it were flowers' (p. 304) implores us to put ourselves in her position, and encourages us to empathise with her.

second-person

Other voices interrupt April's narrative in the form of interruptions: "'Have you thought it through, April? Have you thought it through, April? Have you thought it through, April?'" (p. 302). One effect of these interruptions is to suggest April's feelings and objections are constantly being interrupted by her own thoughts. At the end of the chapter, her Aunt Claire again breaks into her narrative, 'Have you thought it through, April? Have you thought it through, April? Have you thought it through, April?' (p. 311). Her words are cut off, because 'April needed no more advice' (p. 311). Although April has been alone throughout the chapter, the presence of her aunt's voice is a reminder of her. By cutting off a memory of her aunt's voice mid-sentence, she takes control of the narrative and 'a thing that had to be done alone' (p. 311).

Essay Question

'if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always came down to a thing that had to be done alone' (p. 311). Consider April's statement in the context of the novel.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Individual Responsibility

In the 1950s and 60s, a philosophical movement called existentialism became popular. It is a way of thinking that dates from the nineteenth century. Existential thinkers see the world as having no meaning – they think people should take responsibility for their own actions, and writers of the 1950s and 60s explored and reflected ideas of existentialism in their writing.

In this chapter, the way April thinks could be interpreted as existential. When she takes responsibility for the way she has felt by admitting that she has made a mistake with him: 'the only real mistake, the only wrong and dishonest thing, was ever told to me than that' (p. 304). She attributes her mistake to not knowing 'who she was', 'and she was blamed for that?' (p. 305). In the letter she leaves him, April implores Frank not to blame her. This implies that she takes responsibility for the consequences of what she is about to do. A central theme of her assertion that 'something absolutely honest, something true [...] had to be done' is central to existentialism: that individuals have the power to shape their own destinies and take responsibility for their own actions.



Active Learning Task

Look at the passage in which April remembers her father's arrival (p. 307). How does the imagery and structure in this passage to create a sense of April's admiration for her father?



INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter Analysis: 3:8

SUMMARY

Later in the afternoon, Milly Campbell is resting when she hears an ambulance on Revolutionary Road. She has a feeling April is in trouble. Mrs Givings tells her she has seen the ambulance coming from the Wheelers' house. Milly phones Shep about his affair with April. He takes swift control, calling the hospital and the station to meet Frank from the train, and drives him to the hospital, where the doctor and Shep waits at the end of a corridor. Frank reappears and says he has lost a lot of blood. Shep goes to get a car for them both; as he is on the way back, April dies. He returns to the seats, where Frank is being loaded. Afterwards, he and Frank drive around for hours, and Frank tells Shep the truth (p. 320). The narrative then switches to Milly's point of view, after Frank and Milly are alone. She is in the living room, too upset to sit with Frank and Shep has told her that Frank thinks April 'gave herself an abortion, or tried to'. On the noise from the kitchen, she goes in and finds Shep asleep and Frank going running towards his house. When he arrives, he sees the bloodied towel and hears her voice in his head. He cleans up the bathroom, and walks around the house with the note she has left him. When he is interrupted by the Campbells, he hears her voice has vanished.

Structure and Language

The way Yates structures this chapter helps to create a sense of dread. Of the events we know only as much as Milly and Shep, the points of view which inform the narrative. We have seen April preparing for an abortion in the previous chapter, we can suspect she is badly wrong.

Yates's language in this chapter helps to build tension and panic. As Frank gets on the train 'shuddering the platform [...] Frank was a frantic figure clinging to its side, his face and then sprinting toward Shep with wild eyes and a flying necktie' (p. 316). The length of this sentence and the repeated use of 'and', has the effect of increasing the pace of the writing, suggesting Frank's panic. The image of Frank 'clinging' to the train further develops the idea that Frank is a 'frantic figure', suggesting desperation and a lack of control, while his 'flying necktie' is an uneasy image: the formality of a suit and tie is in stark contrast with the looseness of Frank's sprint towards the car.

Taking Action

Shep snaps out of his daze and takes control of the situation: 'for the first time a sense of control' (p. 314). As he drives towards the hospital Shep relishes the power he has had and knows that they will 'soon be over' (p. 316). It is interesting to note that Shep is likened to his time in the military, 'the old combat feeling, the sense of doing a job well' (p. 315). His psychological strength to deal with the situation is said, also, to be from his time in the army: 'Shep's mind went mercifully out of focus in the way that it had always in combat' (p. 316).

In this way, Yates suggests the efficiency of the military and its legacy on young men. Shep is able to deal efficiently with a difficult situation, but only if he suppresses his emotions until 'later' (p. 321). Throughout the novel, Shep has been portrayed as a character who separates his feelings from his actions. It could be considered significant that in this

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



daydream about April and immediately becomes a force of action, making phone calls to her. Later, in the hospital, he is tempted to flick through a magazine, but instead he sits back and forth, waiting for news of April. These examples could be seen to suggest that it is appropriate to dream, and when it is time to take action.

Active Learning Task

Look back at the novel. Which characters have taken direct action when they find out about April? Find examples of when characters have wanted to take action, but been stopped or prevented from doing so.

Entrapment and Isolation

'A man running down these streets in desperate grief was indecently out of place', Yates uses to describe the streets of the neighbourhood sound cheerful, which makes Frank's grief more poignant. The neighbourhood is described as 'a toyland of white and pastel houses' (p. 323); the houses and the windows are 'bright' and 'uncurtained' (p. 323). The contrast between Frank's grief and a sense of absurdity – when he trips and finds 'a child's enamelled tin beach bucket' – makes the absurdity only increased. Perhaps in a wider sense, Yates is hinting at the blandness of the neighbourhood, in which there is no place for genuine emotion. This idea echoes Yates' earlier about suburbia in the novel: 'Let's have a whole bunch of cute little winding roads painted white and pink and baby-blue [...] and if old reality ever does pop out and pretend it never happened' (p. 66).

When Frank arrives at his house it contrasts sharply with the other houses; it is 'a dead end road' (p. 324), suggesting the Wheelers' isolation within their neighbourhood. It is an appropriate place for him to experience his grief. When the Campbells arrive to look for April in chapter 10, Frank shuts himself in the closet to hide from them, increasing our sense of his isolation.

Essay Question

Why do you think Yates creates such a strong sense of Frank's isolation in *Revolutionary Road*? Has Frank always been isolated from other people, or is this the first time he is?

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter Analysis: 3:9

SUMMARY

Over the following months, Milly Campbell tells the Wheelers' story 'mar Shep becomes annoyed when one evening she tells the story to the Braces the Wheelers' old house. Her story picks up the narrative from the chapter how the next afternoon, Frank came to pick up the children from their home and break the news to them. Milly explains that after the funeral, Frank was with his family in Pittsfield, and a few months later he visited the Campbells to finalise the sale of the house. He was seeing a counsellor, and had lost a job. Shep describes him as 'keeping busy' and 'irascible' (p. 329). Shep leaves the garden, where he angrily reflects about Frank's visit: how he didn't seem to be boring to talk to, how he was remembering April and the Laurel Players indoors. Shep tells Milly that the experience has brought them 'close'. Shep's narrative then shifts to the point of view of Mrs Givings, who has felt respect for the Wheelers. She has asked John's doctor not to allow him out again. In the months that follow, she has bought a puppy and begun to visit John less often. One afternoon she always found the Wheelers 'strange' (p. 336) – but he isn't listening to his hearing aid.

The Wheelers' Legacy

By setting this chapter many months after the event, Yates gives a sense of the Wheelers' legacy, remembered, and the impact they have made on their friends and their neighborhood. The Wheelers' house is absent as we learn the final part of the Wheelers' story; it is told by Milly Campbell, one of the occupants of the Wheelers' house. Warren Brace describes it as 'the kind of thing you stop and think' (p. 329). Yet they do not 'stop and think' – the statement is immediate. Nancy continues the topic, 'Well, but how did he seem otherwise?' (p. 329). The Wheelers' story has been labelled important, perhaps even tragic, by their neighbors, but it is glossed over; Frank and the children have become uncomfortable memories.

Later, the literal marks the Wheelers have made on their house are described by Mrs Givings, 'crayon marks on the walls, filthy smudges all around the doorknobs' (p. 336). These could be considered evidence that the Wheelers lived fully in the house, rather than simply neatly occupying it, but Mrs Givings considers it 'defacing a property' (p. 336). She also tells Howard of her anger when, clearing the house for sale, she had found 'a lot of dead and dried out' (p. 337) in the cellar.

Discussion

In the final part of the chapter, Mrs Givings is rapidly lost to the Wheelers, 'they were a young couple. Irrespective of you think she could have been a 'strange couple' with sympathy for the Wheelers, decreasing in the

Frank

In this chapter, Shep's description of Frank suggests that he has changed dramatically. Shep says of him, 'how could a man be courageous when he wasn't even alive?' (p. 330). He describes him as a man who no longer walks, talking, lifeless man' (p. 330). He describes him as a man who no longer 'You couldn't picture him really laughing, or really crying, or really sweating or eating excited' (p. 330).

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



The repetition of the word 'really' suggests that there is a difference between, for crying'. It helps to underline the difference between dulled-down and genuine emotion that Frank no longer has. Shep also remarks on Frank's 'simpering giggle' (p. 330) which is significant because elsewhere in the novel, the word 'simpering' has been used to describe Frank. In Chapter 2:1 Frank is distressed when he notices that April's smile is not quite genuine. In Chapter 2:2 Frank is understanding simpler of the wife in a television comedy' (p. 134). By describing Frank's 'simpering' in this chapter; Yates suggests that Frank has become as false as he once feared April was.

Essay Question

'The whole point of crying was to quit before you corned it up. The whole point of honesty was to cut it out while it was still honest, while it still meant something' (p. 134). Discuss Yates's portrayal of grief in *Revolutionary Road*.

John

Two things are significant about John in the novel: he is mentally ill, and he is a member of a society, revealing uncomfortable truths. Mrs Givings manages to hide both these things when she tells the doctor it is 'out of the question for us ever to think in terms of outside people again' (p. 333) and her visits to John tail off to just once a month.

It is implied that Mrs Givings' purchase of a puppy fills a void in her life created by John's banishment to the hospital. John had frayed her nerves and caused her to think of her life as one of embarrassment, but the puppy brings her only 'pleasure' (p. 334). The puppy is a well-trained and predictable compared to John, who has been 'rude' (p. 287) and unpredictable.

With the coming of spring, Mrs Givings gets 'the sense of life beginning all over again' (p. 335) and develops the sense that she is erasing John from her life, and glossing over the implications of his illness.

Active Learning Task

Who has the last word in the novel? Which characters' points of view are most significant in this create?

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Key Characters

Frank

Frank could be considered the novel's main character. His point of view is the one which most often informs the narrative and, therefore, his thoughts, feelings and actions are those most deeply explored by Yates. In the novel, Frank is thirty years old; his life so far is characterised by disappointment and yearning. We learn that as a child he planned to 'ride the rails to the West Coast' (p. 17) but a school friend laughed at his plans and he never carried them out. As a young man he was among schoolboys and later among soldiers' (p. 21) failing to fit in with crowds and Frank has been lonely throughout his life. This strengthens the depiction of him in society, isolated at work, in his fatherhood and circle of friends, and even with Frank's past behaviour seen as the adult version of a lonely, dreaming boy.

Did you know?
In 1945, Richard Yates was 30 years old.

It is interesting to consider Frank's name; 'frank' is a word meaning honest and open. A person who speaks 'frankly' admits their true feelings, emotions or opinions, often without sparing others' feelings. When Frank's point of view informs the novel's narrative, we are given honest, open insight into his mind. We see him privately judging women on their attractiveness: 'he had to admit, watching her, that she wasn't unattractive. If she could loosen her hair instead of skinning it back [...] (p. 267). His self-awareness is also revealed to us, as he considers the way he looks, walks and comes across, 'he looked at himself in the mirror, tightening his jaw and turning his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look' (p. 15). We also get a sense of his fantasies and daydreams: 'he had pictured [April] taking long baths and devoting whole hours to trying on different dresses and new ways of fixing her hair' (p. 133). In this way, we see the intimate recesses of Frank's mind; his flaws, inconsistencies and best intentions and we cannot help but empathise strongly with him, even if his behaviour in the novel is often questionable.

Do you think Frank is a 'dreamer' or a 'realist' in the adult world of the novel? Do you think you can relate to him?

Frank is also portrayed as quite a poetic man. He takes pleasure in images of things. As a young boy, he is pleased by the way his clothes match his father's as they visit to see this bright image of the two of them, man and boy' (p. 71), and in his last day of pleasure in the image of himself among his colleagues, 'the comradely way they walked on the sidewalk' (p. 171). Throughout the novel, he is shown to be easily moved by experience and loyalty, such as when April cooks his birthday dinner, 'the hot brown smell of his eyes' (p. 103) and when Bart Pollock suggests that Frank's new job would be a good one. In Chapter 2:5 his emotional state is likened to his daughter Jennifer's, as April comes to see him. 'Watching from the doorway, Frank's eyes grew round as his daughter's. He swallowed hard. This way of thinking could have easily characterise Frank as a sentimentalist – a person who is easily moved by their emotions rather than by reason.

INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



April

April is another strong contender for the main character in *Revolutionary Road*. She is presented to us only by her actions and the things she says – we are not given insight into her thoughts and motives until right at the end of the novel, in Chapter 3:7. Until this point, April is presented to us only through the lens of other characters.

However, April's actions arguably drive the narrative in the novel. This idea is set in motion from the opening chapter, in which April is the star of a play. Her cool attitude and resentment towards Frank arguably drives the narrative in Part One. Part Two sees the Wheelers planning to move to France – a plan suggested by April. Part Three is concerned with April's pregnancy, and her desire to abort it. In this way, April could be seen as the novel's main character. The narrative seems to be driven by the other characters' reactions to her actions and decisions.

April is portrayed as the opposite of a sentimentalist – her behaviour in the novel is driven by logic and reason. Several details can be seen to characterise her in this way. April mows the lawn, a task that Frank sees as an issue of 'balance' (p. 40). At dinner one evening, April tells Frank about his meeting with Bart Pollock to tell the children not to 'take such big bites' – not swept up in the fantasy of achievement which Frank is telling her about; in reality, unable to understand why Frank doesn't tell the company he is planning to leave.

This pattern of non-sentimental, reason-led behaviour builds to a crescendo at the end of the novel, she aborts her own pregnancy, following through with her original plan (despite her initial reluctance) and demonstrating that sentimentality has been unable to persuade her otherwise.

In a similar vein, April is depicted as someone who follows through with her plans. She makes all the practical preparations for the family's move to France, including buying French textbooks, packing, and mending clothes. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the thing Frank has to do, in contrast, is to tell people he is leaving the company, and to deal with the consequences.

It is interesting to consider, however, that this portrayal is heavily influenced by the fact that for much of the novel, we are unaware of her point of view, and so denied access to her thoughts and feelings. In 'her' chapter, 3:7, it is suggested that April is, perhaps, affected by nostalgia. A flashback to her father's visit when she was a child suggests that she views her present life with a sense of sentimentality, despite Frank's earlier assertion that 'most of her memories were sentimentalized' (p. 18). The voice of her Aunt Claire intrudes into her thoughts, prone to being swayed by irrational intrusions too (Aunt Claire isn't actually there, but part of a fantasy). April considers, then dismisses these interruptions, and continues to do, 'she needed no more advice and no more instructions' (p. 311).

One interpretation of April could be that she is an actor within the novel. Early in the novel, she once had aspirations to act professionally and 'attended one of the leading drama schools' (p. 18). This characterises April as an actor, an actor by profession and hobby. But as the novel comes to an end, we see a different type of actor: someone who is 'acting' the role of a mother, obediently conforming in order to plot her own escape from suburbia. When she wants to persuade Frank to listen to her, she cooks roast beef and calls him her 'darling', but Frank notes that her voice has 'a quality of play-acting, of slightly false intensity' (p. 103). Throughout the novel she is portrayed as a caring, comforting mother to Jennifer and Michael; when the narrative switches to her point of view in Chapter 3:7, however, she notes that 'all children's voices sound the same' (p. 305) – suggesting a lack of specific love for her own children, and strengthening the idea that she has been 'acting' the role of a mother.

Why do we
of view
the view

con
ence

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



The Children

Yates portrays Frank and April's children, Jennifer and Michael, as secondary characters in the background to the novel's main events. They feature infrequently in the narrative of the novel – perhaps they are most notable by their absence from its main action. The sense of the children by the traces they have left behind, 'a stain of drying milk and a paperweight made at school' (p. 85). Occasionally, the children intrude into the action, but are portrayed as a hindrance – they threaten to stop Frank and April doing things. The construction of the path in Chapter 1:3; if the construction of the path is interpreted as a sign of masculinity, they stop him from asserting it. In Chapter 2:5, Jennifer is upset at the end after she has been comforted, her distress sparks an argument between Frank and April. The children are to be in charge' (p. 181) of the family's actions. Jennifer's distress can be seen, in view, to momentarily threaten the family's plans to move to Europe.

In general, however, the children are removed from the main thread of the narrative. The children are physically absent; they have been taken to the Campbells' in order to keep the Givings' visit. They remain there until after April's death at the end of the novel. April, too, is notable for its absence. Its looming birth threatens to change the family's plans, but it is a hindrance to the family's plans echoes the way that Jennifer and Michael have been portrayed.

Essay Question

Explore and analyse the ways that children and/or childhood are portrayed in *Revolutionary Road* and one other text you have studied.

Shep Campbell

Shep Campbell is one half of the Campbells, Frank and April's friends in the neighbourhood. He is also considered as an individual; his point of view informs the narrative several times. His thoughts, feelings, desires and regrets. In this way, Yates is able to portray Shep as a complex character. His wife Milly is somewhat more one-dimensional.

Shep's identity is full of contradictions. He is portrayed as someone who has once been a romantic, like Frank. A good example of this is in Chapter 2:2, when in a flashback daydream he had as a younger man: 'in the East, wearing rumpled tweeds and flannels, spending hours among ancient elms and clock towers, talking with his friends' (p. 139). As a man, he has to suppress these romantic urges; after a period of self-exploration and a move to London, he 'settled for [a] job with Allied Precision in Stamford' (p. 141). Yates could be suggesting that Shep stems from having suppressed his urges to be intellectual and extraordinary. By the end of the novel, Yates suggests, Shep has trapped himself.

Another contradiction in Shep's character is the way that he frequently thinks of himself as being something kinder or more appropriate. After the Wheelers' announcement that April is pregnant, he is upset, but pretends not to be for Milly's sake, 'his first duty, right now, was to be a good husband'. The Wheelers' news could be seen to characterise his role as a vicar in the rest of the novel. He has tried to do when a great many pieces of unsettling news hit him one after another. He took each fact as it came and let it sink in easily into the back of his mind, thinking that one later [...] so the almost constant part of his mind could remain free enough to deal with the situation' (p. 140). At the end of the novel, Shep is distraught by the news that April has died. At this time, he is allowed to be upset; he immediately becomes a force of action, making the necessary calls and arrangements for Frank.

Seen from Frank's point of view, Shep is 'massive and dependable, a steadying influence on the group' (p. 58). Shep himself is painfully aware of this perception of him: 'His role was to be big, dumb, steady old Shep' (p. 258). The word 'role' has connotations of acting. It could suggest a contrast between the way other people see Shep and the way he sees himself – between his personal and social identities.

Does Shep see himself as 'Big, dumb, steady old Shep' (p. 258). Does he mock himself? Or is it more than it first appears? Consider the character.

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Mrs Helen Givings

Mrs Givings is a real-estate broker. In having her own business, Helen Givings is unusual in the 1950s. In the 1950s, although many women did work, it was not expected of them. In most households, married women were expected to stay at home and be housewives. If women went out to work – typically as administrative assistants or as secretaries – it was often to support the family. We note how her husband Howard has gently pressured Mrs Givings to give up her job. Howard is revealed to have had an encouraging father, who believed that hard work was ‘the cure for all the ills of man – and of woman’ (p. 155). This statement, remembered from her father, has been brought up in a family that respected the ambitions of both men and women. Her father has not necessarily presented as a barrier to what she wants to achieve.

Although Mrs Givings has gained ‘independence’ from her own working, her main reason for working has been because she ‘loved and needed’ it (p. 155). This helps to characterise her as a woman who is a symbol of an independent woman who is not working in order to prove anybody. She is a woman who loves women’s independence, and she personally loves and needs to do it for her own sake. In this manner in which she works, she could be interpreted as genderless; she has arguably no gender constraints in her time.

Mrs Givings is nearly always referred to in the novel as ‘Mrs Givings’. The overall theme of the novel introduces her most fully, as ‘Mrs Helen Givings, the real-estate broker’ (p. 10). In the novel, he calls her ‘Mrs Givings’ because ‘Helen’ is ‘a name his tongue seemed all but unable to utter’. The name ‘Mrs Givings’ recognises her by her social identity – as a wife and estate agent. It is not meant to stand for her personal identity, recognising her as an individual. It is interesting that only John and April are able to call her ‘Helen’; these ‘outcast’ characters who ‘see her for who she is’ are only ones who feel able to recognise her by her personal identity before her social identity.

One way that Mrs Givings can be interpreted in the novel is as a symbol of society. In this role is to smooth over unsavoury things. The first time we see her, she is doing a social performance has been ‘very nice’ (p. 10) – smoothing over the grim reality of its role. She brings the Wheelers’ door with a gift of a box of plants – her unwelcome interference in their lives. She is to represent society’s meddling influence in their lives. When she brings her son to the house, he starts saying uncomfortable things, Mrs Givings tries to cover them up, ‘Oh, the salad, April’ (p. 228); ‘Maybe we’ll see a rainbow. Wouldn’t that be nice?’ (p. 187). She ‘smooths over’ April’s death at the end of the novel; after being physically sick for a while, her recovery is deemed complete when, a few months later, she declares that she is ‘a rather strange young couple’ (p. 336) after all.

Essay Question

Examine the way that Mrs Helen Givings is portrayed in *Revolutionary Road*. In what ways can she be considered typical of women in the 1950s? In what ways can she be considered atypical?

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



John Givings

John Givings is Helen and Howard Givings's son. Before we meet him in the novel, Campbell tells the story of how he broke into his parents' house, held them captive, eventually removed to the 'insane asylum' (p. 62). Over the course of the novel, John Wheelers three times. In the first, he makes a scene, but eventually finds common sense; the second, he throws a tantrum when challenged by his father and has to be led away; and the third, he is cruel and cruel to Frank and April, eventually declaring that he feels sorry for their unborn child.

One interpretation of John is as a bringer of 'truth' in the novel. His insights into Frank's insincerities of 1950s suburbia, could be considered refreshing. The suburban society suggests, that it takes a 'madman' to make observations about how absurd it is. Through John, we see that it is suburban America which is 'mad' rather than individuals within it who do not fit in.

By mixing good-natured humour and sinister realism – often in quick succession – creates a sense that he is difficult to like, but also slippery to wholly trust. At some points, he seems to be reminiscing with April and Frank over old radio programmes (p. 191) he seems lucid and 'sane' (p. 192) while at other times – such as when he is frightened by his father's approval of his behaviour – he seems clearly influenced by his illness and some not so subtle manipulation.

There is an aspect of comedy in Yates's portrayal of John. Some of the descriptions (p. 183) and behaviour: 'he spread his knees and dropped to a squat, sitting on his heels' (p. 184) are gently comical. It is a sympathetic portrayal, however – Yates has a little poke fun at him. Instead, he uses John to send up other characters – mainly Mrs Givings. Her humour: 'Why don't the three of us take a walk, and the folks can stay here and wait for us' (p. 187).

But there is also something darker about John, and it makes these slightly comedic moments instantly uncomfortable. He seems to have particular malice for his mother, and the way he repeatedly baits her, 'How about that, Ma? Still seem "very strange" to you? Huh?' (p. 187) is cruel. His name for her, 'Ma', is used too often, alternated with 'Helen' too often – it has become ironic, and has made her motherhood into a cruel joke to be used against her. John is also characterised as unpredictable and dangerous. Mrs Givings is shown to be so wary of him that she prefers to ride behind him in the car (p. 283) and on two separate occasions, he threatens to strike a blow at his parents. In a description of John on his first visit to the Wheelers', his face is described as 'big and lean, with small eyes and thin lips, and its frown was the look of a man worn down by chronic physical pain' (p. 183). This is a sinister and upsetting portrait, and the reference to physical pain evokes our sympathy for John – if not **empathy**.

empathy

Jack Ordway

Jack Ordway is Frank's colleague at Knox, 'the best friend he had in the office' (p. 168) with Frank, and is well known among his colleagues for his heavy drinkers and wild lifestyle (p. 82). On page 167 he is described as 'a clown, a drunk, a man unable to discuss anything in an elaborately derisive tone he used for talking about himself'. In 1950s and 60s America, for men to be heavy drinkers than 'just a few' having several drinks at lunchtime was not unusual.

Jack Ordway is only presented to us through Frank's point of view. Through Frank, we see a poor, silly clown (p. 170). This sense of pity implies that Frank thinks himself better than him.

We are told that in the past, Jack Ordway has had an unusual lifestyle: 'everyone girl and lived on her inheritance until it vanished just before the war' (p. 83). Since then, he has been a plain representative of the working society Frank is trying to escape from. Jack is not a victim because he represents someone who doesn't 'get it'. Frank confides in Jack about his weight of it is a burden. But Jack repeatedly finds the idea of the plan 'unrealistic' and doesn't understand why someone would want to escape a working lifestyle like his and Frank's. His devotion to his job suggests that he is already a victim of it.

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Active Learning Task

Which characters in *Revolutionary Road* drive the narrative? Which ones play secondary roles?

Howard Givings

Howard Givings is Helen's husband and John's father. He is 67 years old, and retired, working as 'a minor official of the seventh largest life insurance company in the world'. This characterises Howard Givings as old, slow, dependable and predictable. In the novel, he barely interacts with anyone. He could be seen to represent an older generation of society and happy to live in a comfortable, unchanging environment. It could be said that the novel is a steadying one: he only introduces a restore order to his environment, not challenged by his son, John: '... didn't you just [...] quit horning in? Turn off your horn' (p. 228). Otherwise, Howard is along in the story, uneventfully.

An interesting aspect of Howard Givings's character is the fact that he wears a hearing aid which he turns off. At the end of the novel, Mrs Givings is talking to him about the Wheeler Deal. Howard Givings heard only a welcome, thunderous sea of silence. He had turned off his hearing aid. This allows him to retreat into solitude – it blocks out the noise of society, his wife's criticism. He is presented as a character who can switch his involvement in society on or off.

Bart Pollock

Bart Pollock is a general sales manager at Knox Business Machines. He is first described as 'an august visitor' (p. 173) – 'august' means grand and imposing. In this way, from the start, he is a character with a sense of awe. This is important because it sets up the idea that Bart will have a large influence on Frank. In their first meeting, we learn that Frank has 'despised [Bart] for weeks' (p. 173). In the weeks that follow, Frank can be seen to fall under his spell, with a certain disgust.

In characterising Bart Pollock, Yates often mentions his size: he is 'a massive figure of the diamond type' (p. 196) with, according to Frank, 'a certain personal magnetism' (p. 196). He is huge; his stride is so long that Frank must run to keep up with him (p. 194) and his office is like a labyrinth, or maze. By presenting Bart as a physically big character, Yates suggests that he is someone who cannot be ignored.

Maureen Grube

Maureen Grube is a secretary at Knox Business Machines, where she works in Frank's office. Frank has an affair with her. Maureen is only ever presented to us from Frank's perspective. The view of her she is depicted is heavily influenced by Frank's personal view of her. For example, she is described as 'too-careful hairdo' (p. 173) and 'too-careful make-up' (p. 173). This is a subjective view. Because of this, she is not presented as a character in the novel by her attractiveness or beauty to Frank.

It ought to be said, however, that Maureen is an independent woman – she is self-supporting and career-minded. In the novel, she acts as an individual; her actions seem rooted in self-interest, and in advancing her life and career. She is young – twenty-two – and has recently moved to New York because it is 'what she'd always and really truly wanted to do' (p. 95). In the novel, as the affair develops, she can be seen to pursue Frank as avidly as he pursues her, 'she had purposely stayed late in order to be alone with him' (p. 244). By building up a sense of Maureen's motives and independence, Yates subtly undermines Frank's view of Maureen as someone he has power over.

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Essay Question

In your view, who is the main character in *Revolutionary Road*? Support your answer with evidence from the text, and make reference to the way Yates uses language.

Active Learning Task

Make a list of quotations for each key character in the novel in order to illustrate their role of them.



INSPECTION COPY

Discussion prompt:

Frank tries to present himself to Maureen Grube as 'a decent but disillusioned young family man, sadly and bravely at war with his environment' (p. 97). Do you agree with this characterisation of Frank? Why (not)?



INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Relationships

April and Frank

April and Frank's relationship lies at the centre of *Revolutionary Road*. The novel of their relationship. The first time we see April and Frank, they are fighting, but not seem to be clear – even to them, 'I don't care who's right or who's wrong or about' (p. 55). This sets up a sense of general dissatisfaction with one another w progresses. By Part Three their relationship is unsteady, and both April and Frank

One of the ways Yates suggests that Frank and April's relationship has soured is by contrasting the way it was in the early days of the relationship. In a flashback, when April first met Frank, she called him 'the most interesting person I've ever met' (p. 24). But April's current feelings are far from complimentary; she tells him, 'The first few days of their courtship contrasted sharply with her view of him in Chapter 1:4; he was charming, witty, and fun to be with. Now, however, she feels that her relationship with him has left her 'battered and depressed' (p. 110) and tells him, 'I remember looking at you and thinking, if only he'd been talking to me' (p. 110).

For most of the novel, April and Frank's relationship is presented to us only from the things April has said to him have made a big impact on Frank's own sense of being – for example, 'you're the most wonderful and valuable thing in the world'. In Chapter 3:7 the narrative switches to April's point of view, we learn that she co all these things, and that she hasn't meant them: 'you found you were saying yes'. Coming as it does at the end of the novel, this change in point of view throws Apr new light – we are suddenly made aware that Frank's impression of it might not be contrasting views of 'key moments' in their relationship, Yates creates a strong se individuals within it.

Shep and April

In the novel, Shep has strong feelings for April. We learn that the memory of dad has sustained Shep's fantasies for a year. Although Shep longs to be intimate with April, he nearly always referred to by her full name, 'April Wheeler'. This has the effect of creating a sense of intimacy. It could be seen to suggest Shep's awareness that she is not his wife but his daughter.

Shep's feelings for April are so suppressed and secret that they can only be whistled. "'I love you, April,' he whispered, just to see what it felt like' (p. 146). Later in the novel, they are together, but afterwards, she tells him that the affair has been meaningless because neither of them are. This throws Shep's feelings for her into a new light; it immediately shows that he doesn't really know April either.

At the end of the novel, in Chapter 3:9, Shep is growing over April in his garden. I memory which eventually stirs him to tears. One of April's lines from the play, "me?" (p. 331). This is the second time this line has been repeated in the novel as part of quoted as part of Shep's fantasy of himself in Paris with April. That he is moved is that his real reason has been for April to love him – and perhaps, to approve of him.

Shep and Milly Campbell

Shep and Milly's relationship is presented to us from Shep's point of view; Milly's into the narrative. In Frank's eyes, they are typically lumped together as 'the Car 2:2, Yates delves into the history of Shep and Milly's relationship. We learn that been through some rough times: 'the six months in New York [...] while he tried an engineer – that period had been, Shep, knew, the hardest time of Milly's life' marriage, however, Shep's devotion to her has remained strong; 'Maybe their ba

INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



he'd married her for reasons that were hard to remember and maybe it wasn't the world, but Milly was the girl for him' (p. 142).

Shep is frequently shown to be annoyed or revolted by Milly; the smell of her sweat, her damp clothes and gossipy manner all feature as things which irritate him. At the end of the novel, however, he is grateful for her once more, because although she is 'a small, rumped, foolish woman' (p. 332), she is 'alive' (p. 332). This implies a direct comparison between Milly and April – by this stage in the novel, April is no longer 'alive'. It suggests that Shep has come to realise that reality – represented by Milly – is more valuable than a romantic daydream of what life could have been like – represented by his crush on April.

The Campbells and the Wheelers

The Campbells' relationship is important in the novel because it provides a comparison to the Wheelers'. Frank and April are excited about their plans to move to Europe. The Campbells, however, when you think how close we came to settling into that kind of life, the Wheelers cannot be seen to distance themselves from the Campbells at times when they tell themselves that they are different. Yet in times of genuine human need, the Campbells are the kids for the night' (p. 294), driving Frank to the hospital, keeping him company.

As a young man, Shep is shown to have been similar to the young Frank – both men have something better, 'a world of intellect and sensibility' (p. 139) and both men have uninteresting jobs, and moving their young families to the suburbs. Frank does not see himself as a revolutionary equal; from his point of view Shep's role is to be 'massive and dependable for the group' (p. 58). But when the novel switches to Shep's point of view, we learn that he is still himself, still yearning to be extraordinary. Shep's jealousy at the Wheelers' plans, private, occasional disgust at his family and his longing for April all suggest that the revolutionary part of him is still unfulfilled. As a couple, the Campbells are portrayed as people who have learned to push their revolutionary longings deep under the surface. The Wheelers are *almost* like them, but they decide not to bury their urges; it is this difference which Yates explores in the novel. Perhaps, Yates is suggesting, the Campbells are the couple that the Wheelers might have been.

Do you think the Campbells are the couple that the Wheelers might have been? Consider the difference between them within the context of the novel. Do you think they managed to stay true to their ideals while Frank and April did not?

Helen and John Givings

To Helen Givings, John is a source of shame, embarrassment and fear. His behaviour is so warty of him that she prefers to ride behind him in the car (p. 183) where she can avoid embarrassing her by wearing his hospital clothes in public rather than the 'good suit' (p. 183). On two occasions, John's behaviour is so embarrassing to her that she wants to visit, when he asks for a full highball and a glass of sherry, and again at the end of his trip when Frank he's glad he's 'not a little kid' (p. 288). These extreme reactions to John's behaviour are closely linked to it – the way he behaves is a reflection of his character.

John is scornful of his mother; his malice seems particularly directed at her. His name for her, 'Ma', is arguably used too often to be considered genuine. Through overuse of it, he can be seen to challenge and mock her status as his mother – along with April; he is one of the only characters in the novel who calls her 'Helen'.

Why do you think John is so scornful of his mother? Consider the way he behaves and the way he speaks to her. Do you think he is justified in his feelings?

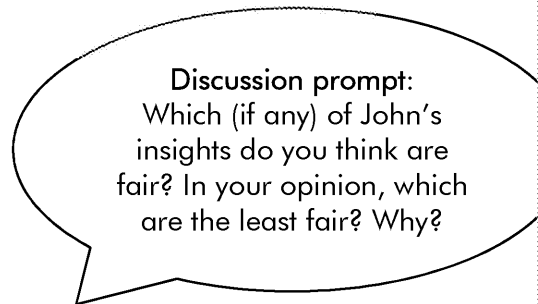
**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Frank, April and John Givings

Mrs Givings introduces her son John to the Wheelers in order to try to help him re-join the family. In Chapter 2:3, we learn that Mrs Givings has had a fantasy of John, April and Frank talking in an 'earnest conversation' (p. 158). Yates plants this idea early on in the novel so that later, when we meet the Wheelers, we compare the reality of the visit with the 'fantasy visit'. In some ways, the first visit, the three of them are chatting in a 'peaceful medley of voices' (p. 191). But as the visit progresses, the intrusions on the Wheelers' lives; they come to regard them with a sense of dread and discomfort, and the unwelcome insights.

John at first approves of the Wheelers, 'I like your girl, Wheeler,' (p. 190) and the second visit, he is in a different mood: angsty and self-absorbed; he leaves Frank confused. By the third visit, John is aggressive and hostile towards the Wheelers, and when he leaves, Frank and April's relationship is arguably at its lowest point. In this way, John comes across as a **provocateur**; it is the feeling he stirs up in Frank and April, rather than his direct effect upon them, which is the most powerful.



INSPECTION COPY

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Genre

One way of categorizing texts is by genre. A text's genre is its category – we classify according to their subject matter, form, structure and style. Each literary genre has elements which we would expect to find in it. For example, in a detective novel, we expect a crime scene and a detective, who investigates it. We would expect the narrative structure to be linear too: for example, the detective novel tends to end with a reconstruction of the crime.

Tragicomedy

Revolutionary Road can be seen to fit into several genres. Perhaps the most fitting is tragicomedy. Tragicomedy is a genre most often associated with drama – as a literary genre, it was used in Greek and Roman plays. A tragicomedy is a play which has comic elements within it. Aristotle claimed that tragedy naturally contains comedy within it: 'The point about tragedy is that it is serious, and then it becomes funny, and then it becomes serious again, and then it becomes funny again.'

The Greek philosopher Aristotle defined a tragedy as a story in which the main character is brought about by a flaw in his or her own character. Tragedies which fit this pattern are called Aristotelian tragedies. Yates's novel could be read as a multi-layered Aristotelian tragedy; both Jack and Maureen suffering could be said to have been brought about by flaws in their own characters. Jack's is a different kind of tragedy; the tragedy of people trapped by the expectations of society and influences beyond their control. The American literary critic Alfred Kazin (1915–1983) said of *Road* 'locates the new American tragedy squarely on the field of marriage.'

Yates's novel is also laced with subtle comedy. Characters such as Jack Ordway and Maureen provide comic relief, and to an extent, John's behaviour is comical. Much of the comedy comes from the characters' quirks, such as Mrs Givings's constant 'chatter' (p. 183) and the way that John's sense of manliness that he ends up making his face ache (p. 219).

Another comic aspect of the novel is the way that characters are serious one minute and then the next. In Chapter 2:6, Frank solemnly makes a telephone call to excuse Maureen from the phone, thinking how smooth he has been, he comes close to 'upsetting a tray of drinks'. At the end of the novel, as he tumbles through the woods on Revolutionary Hill, wild with emotion, 'with an enamelled tin beach bucket' (p. 323) – a comical image set against a tragic backdrop. Comical events such as these intervene to suggest that he is grounded – or trapped.

Essay Question

'[*Revolutionary Road*] locates the new American tragedy squarely on the field of marriage. Do you agree?

Realism

Realism is a literary genre in which writers aim to depict things as they are, rather than presenting a stylised version. Texts in this genre focus on everyday settings, often working-class communities, and depict dialogue in ordinary speech. Yates sets *Revolutionary Road* in middle-class suburbia – and depicts it as a dull place without glamorizing it. We see Maureen cooking; we also see her mow the lawn and mend clothes. Even at moments of crisis, we pay our attention to mundane details; while he comes to terms with April's death, Frank 'spits out the rubbish'. The way Yates presents dialogue, too, conforms to realist genre conventions: characters swear, use slang and pepper their speech with 'I mean' and 'you know', reflecting the way people in 1950s America. In these ways, it could be considered a realist novel.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Literary Fiction

Revolutionary Road could also be regarded as literary fiction. A focus on development rather than an action-driven plot – is typical of literary fiction. There are many conversations in the novel, but it could be said that there is not much action. Instead, Yates builds a story that explores the inner workings of their minds in relation to one another; the novel could be seen as a many-layered character study.

Active Learning Task

Can you think of any other texts you have studied which fit these genres (both literary fiction)?



INSPECTION COPY



INSPECTION COPY

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Themes

Ideas of Gender: Masculinity and Femininity

In *Revolutionary Road*, Yates explores ideas of masculinity and femininity. One of the themes is through his two main characters: Frank and April. The theme of Frank's masculinity is throughout the narrative. One of the ways we understand it is through things that he says. When Frank leaves Maureen's flat after sleeping with her, he feels 'like a man' (p. 18). He builds up a portrait of the ideal man – and in his mind, he plays this role. He repeats 'eagle and a lion'; both these animals are traditionally regarded as symbols of strength (the eagle appears on the US national emblem). But eagles and lions are also predators; by using this category as them Frank is likening himself – and the ideal man – to a predator: a man who is in control.

Another way Yates explores Frank's masculinity is through the things which threaten it. Perhaps April's plan to abort her pregnancy. Frank is appalled by April's plan to abort it 'a crime that would destroy your own substance. And mine' (p. 218). Later, he considers it 'a crime to want to 'bear his child' (p. 220). The words 'bear his child' suggest that Frank is talking about calling it 'his child' rather than 'their child' he suggests the primal concept of family – to further their genes through a family line. In Chapter 3:4, when Frank confesses his fear to confirm this idea, telling her that he has been feeling 'that my masculinity'd been threatened by the abortion business' (p. 277). It is made even more explicit by John's suggestion, on the way to the hospital, that 'babies is the only way [Frank] can prove he's got a pair of balls' (p. 288). If April's plan threatens his masculinity, then her abortion threatens it.

With the character of April, Yates challenges cultural ideas of femininity in the 1940s. In the thousands of women filled 'men's' jobs while their husbands were fighting abroad. In 1945, the returning soldiers needed jobs – and women were encouraged to give up their jobs as homemakers, mothers and wives. By the 1950s, the accepted view of an ideal 'feminine' woman embraced pregnancy, motherhood, the home and family.

In the novel, Frank thinks there is something wrong with April when she doesn't want to have a baby, that considering April's rejection of her pregnancy as a 'denial of womanhood' (p. 231).

It is interesting to note John Givings's distinction between the 'female' and 'feminine'. A woman never laughs out loud and always shaves her armpits' (p. 190). John's ideas of a woman are based on the way a woman presents herself to society – her social identity. Having clean-shaven armpits are qualities desired of women by society. In this way, Yates suggests that femininity is a **social construct**.

Suburbia and the American Dream

Yates presents suburbia as a 'dead-end' world of the novel; other classes and ethnicities are a few representations of different lifestyles, Yates creates a sense of claustrophobia. Suburban society is also an environment where people can 'poison' its inhabitants and influence their identities: 'Even if you live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being of this thing, always, was to remember who you were' (p. 20).

Another way in which Yates depicts suburbia is as a flattened, dulled zone where people are out of place. He uses sterile imagery to describe it, 'a dead-silent, dead-clean home, a childlike toy-town; cars are 'the colors of candy and ice cream' (p. 5). From this space, such as John, Frank and April momentarily rise up before being squashed again by the

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



down' (John), pacified with a better-paid job (Frank) or die while following their one society expects of them (April).

Frank and April's ambitions for something better suggest, in a way, the values of the characters in *Revolutionary Road* have followed the values of individual ambition and the American Dream, but for them, it has not led to fulfilment. Instead, they have become trapped and lost. This could be interpreted as Yates's acidic comment on The American Dream: that the pursuit of The American Dream is shown to have created a dull society, **epitomised** by the picture window.

The picture window is an important **motif** in the novel; always referred to as the 'picture window', never just the 'window', it can be read as a symbol of suburbia: a space through which society's influence can enter. A picture window is a large, single-panelled window, a common feature of houses built after World War II. We learn that when Frank and April looked at their house before they bought it, they were disappointed to discover that it had a picture window. 'Of course it does have the picture window; I guess there's no escaping that' (p. 29); it is suggested that it had come to stand for everything they didn't want in a house. However, they decide to take the house anyway; Frank suggests that the picture window won't 'necessarily destroy our personalities' (p. 29). When April makes the birthday cake and presents her suggestion that they go to Europe, the curtains are drawn across the picture window (p. 102) – this image suggests that she has momentarily carved out a space in which the family will not be observed by society (through the window onto the 'stage').

epitomise

motif

The American Dream

Active Learning Task

What is your interpretation of the picture window? Can you find more instances where the picture window seems to be significant? How does the recurring motif of the picture window contribute to your interpretation of the novel?

Resistance and Rebellion

April and Frank can be seen as 'revolutionaries', rebelling against societal pressures. John Wheelers on Revolutionary Road, the nice young revolutionaries on Wheeler Road (p. 184). This comment by John plays with language, but its connotations run deep. It overturns the idea that the Wheelers are revolutionaries by trying their identities in a circular sentence, with its interchangeable parts, to be seen to suggest that they are embedded in society – they will struggle to escape it.

Essay Topic

Who is the most 'revolutionary' character in *Revolutionary Road*? Why?

Mental Illness

Yates suffered from mental illness himself, experiencing bouts of depression throughout his life. His relationship with psychiatrists and analysts was negative, however, and his portrayal of psychological treatments in his writing is bleak.

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



In *Revolutionary Road*, the theme of mental illness is mainly explored through the novel, John has been arrested by the State Troopers and admitted to a psychiatric hospital. John has threatened his parents, holding them hostage in their home for three days. This illustrates the unpredictable nature of mental illness. During John's second visit to the Wheeler's, John 'kicks the rock out of the wall and throw it' (p. 230). We are told that Mrs Givings finds it 'odd' that John is sitting in the back seat 'when John was in front' (p. 283) – presumably so that she can keep an eye on him and not suddenly startle her from behind.

John consistently defies the 'normal' behaviour expected of him by society. He refuses to wear the clothes his mother asks, preferring to wear clothes issued to him by the hospital. When he is invited to sit down like his parents, who 'obey' (p. 184) April's invitation to do so; instead, he stands on his feet and dropped to a squat, sitting on his heels like a farm boy, bouncing a little on his knees' (p. 184). These contrary behaviours could be considered typical of John's behaviour. This is used to characterise him as a person whose mind is working in a contrary – or different – way, which is termed 'mentally well'.

This idea is important as it could be suggesting that there is not much to separate a person from the society of somebody who dares to defy expected behaviours, or someone who conforms to those of the society they live in. In *Revolutionary Road*, Yates explores the fine line between mental illness from a reluctance to conform. Later in the novel, April's reluctance to conform to societal expectations is labelled as a form of psychological disturbance. Her rejection of moving abroad suggest that she is a person whose way of thinking does not conform to the expectations of the society. Towards the end of the novel, April's behaviour becomes increasingly unpredictable. We are encouraged to draw parallels between her behaviour and John's and to view her as 'mad' (p. 192). Because she dares to think outside the box, Frank suggests that April needs to be 'treated'.

By challenging us to consider whether April is as 'mad' as John, and where the line between the two is different, Yates's novel questions the labels of 'madness' and 'normal'. Perhaps, in the 1950s suburbia itself; this society labels free thinkers 'mad' in order to ensure that they conform to the expectations of the society.

Acting

The novel opens with the Laurel Players' performance of *The Petrified Forest*; April is the star of a failed play. We learn that April once attended 'one of the leading drama schools' and was a 'successful' performer. However, during the performance, she is 'the only one who is not working, the only one who is not working alone, and visibly weakening with every line' (p. 9). By the second act, she is 'the only one who is not working, the only one who is not working alone, and visibly weakening with every line' (p. 10) until in her final appearance, she is 'paralyzed in a form of acting' (p. 11).

April's failing performance could be read as an extended metaphor for the 'performance' of the novel develops. Unable to act the part of suburban housewife and unsupported by her husband, she begins to falter, and the real April will begin to show. In the novel, however, she is 'the only one who is not working, the only one who is not working alone, and visibly weakening with every line' (p. 9). In order to get the outcome she desires, she is successful. In Chapter 3, April has breakfast for Frank, 'acting' once more to lull him into a sense that everything is fine. This excludes him from her 'real' life. She gives herself an abortion; for April, acting has become a way of life. She gets on with being – arguably – a revolutionary.

Other characters, too, can be seen to put on 'acts'. In Chapter 3:1, Frank notes that he is 'a display' (p. 219) version of himself in order to try to sway April's decision on the move. His constant brightness in the face of awkwardness could be considered acting, too; his cheerfulness even as Yates describes her feelings of discomfort and shame.

Essay Question

'It was the perfect exit line' (p. 292). Discuss the theme of acting in *Revolutionary Road*.

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Yates's Values and Attitudes

In the writing of *Revolutionary Road*, Yates drew heavily on his own experiences. Yates was the same age as Frank Wheeler. Like Frank, he served in the US army and, like Frank, he worked in the publicity department of a company that made 'business

Relationship breakdown and mental illness

Experiences in his personal life probably influenced Yates's choice of themes and in *Revolutionary Road* was published, Yates's own relationship broke down – he and his wife Sheila suffered from episodes of mental illness, including depression, throughout his life. As a psychiatrist, he didn't find them sympathetic or helpful. Yates's portrait of the psychiatrists is mocking and disdainful, and probably reflects his view of the psychiatric staff he encountered. What sort of people were psychiatrists supposed to be? Deep-voiced, fatherly sorts of people? Then he encountered a small, soiled, dazed, nail-biting little man who used adhesive tape to hold a piece of his shirt in place, and wore a piece of jewellery to keep his tie clamped flat' (p. 153).

In a wider sense, Yates's novel can be seen to reveal a liberal, understanding attitude towards mental illness. In *Revolutionary Road*, he questions whether someone who dares to challenge the status quo is 'mad' – or simply different. He explores this idea through the character of John; someone who 'thinks outside the box', while at other times his behaviour suggests a mental disturbance. It is up to us, however, to decide which times these are – we are encouraged to see ourselves.

Isolation

When questioned on the theme of his work, Yates said, 'If my work has a theme, it is that most human beings are inescapably alone, and therein lies their tragedy' (*Boston Review*). In *Revolutionary Road* Yates strongly communicates this idea. His characters are 'locked in' by their inability to connect with others. They experience confusion when they connect with others. The narrative's shifting consciousness means everything can be interpreted in multiple ways – but different interpretations isolate the characters from each other. Genuine, honest action and emotion is portrayed only when characters are alone. John cries in his garden, Frank runs down Revolutionary Hill and April gives herself an abortion. The isolation of the characters in the novel is almost certainly a product of their 'inescapably alone'.

American Society in the 1950s

In 1972, Richard Yates was interviewed for a literary magazine called *Ploughshare*. In *Revolutionary Road* was meant as 'an indictment of the American dream, condemning portraits of the nineteen-fifties'. He expanded on this, saying that

during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity all over this country. The suburbs were a kind of desperate clinging to safety and security at any price. American people were deeply disturbed by all that – felt it to be an outright betrayal of the revolutionary spirit – and that was the spirit I tried to embody in the character of John. The title to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something in the Fifties.

In the novel, Yates shows how hard it is to remain true to a 'revolutionary' spirit. John, 'the ordinary' (p. 28) in the novel we see how he, too, becomes swept up in the dream. From Frank's point of view on pages 30–31, we learn that although when he and April first met they were at first dismayed by its suburban ordinairiness, Frank came to love it – the fact that all its corners made right angles' (p. 30), and wondered 'who could

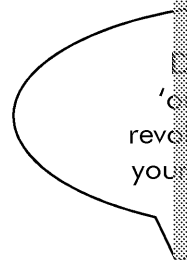
INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



bright, as clean and quiet a home as this?' (p. 30). In subtle ways such as this, Yates 'revolutionary'; he has not been able to escape being sucked into a longing for safety.

Yates said he intended to embody the revolutionary spirit in the character of April. At the end of the novel, April dies – arguably because of an attempt to stay true to her own plans, identity and feelings. Through April, Yates uses *Revolutionary Road* to put forward an interesting and disturbing alternative to the 'lust for conformity' he saw all around him: a desperate clinging to revolutionary spirit at any price.



 INSPECTION COPY

 INSPECTION COPY

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Language

Simile

Simile is a figure of speech that directly compares one thing to another; for example, in *Revolutionary Road*, Yates often uses simile for comic effect. In Chapter 2:4, when Jack looks 'as pleased as a stroked spaniel' (p. 170). This image of Jack as a smug, happy dog is a narrative, easy to visualise and immediately funny. Typically, Yates's use of simile is a subtle undercurrent. By likening Jack to a 'stroked spaniel' Yates suggests that he is simply a dog on some degree of superiority over him. Another example is a moment when, during a party, he tells April how to make his drink, gesturing towards her 'like a baseball coach' (p. 185). Baseball imagery is quite out of place in the relaxed atmosphere of the White House, and the absurdity makes it comical. However, to liken Jack to a baseball coach suggests that he has some kind of authority over them and can encourage them to do things in a certain way. This double-edged use of simile, which is both comical and serious – is one of the linguistic devices Yates uses to build a sense of **tragicomedy**.

Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech which indirectly likens one thing to another through the qualities of one thing by representing it as another. The description of the Fifteenth Street 'ablaze with fluorescent lights' (p. 79) suggests that the lighting is as bright as if the sun were therefore, over the top.

One type of metaphor is extended metaphor. An extended metaphor is one that runs over the course of a piece of writing. In the novel, the performance of *The Petrified Forest* is an extended metaphor for the way the main characters relate to one another (see Section 1.1 as a failing actor in Chapter 1:1 can be seen to symbolise her role in the wider novel and 'acting' the part of suburban housewife but failing to do so with conviction. Many other metaphors are seen to feed into extended metaphors; of April in the play, he writes, 'She was weakening with every line' (p. 9). The idea expressed in this sentence can be read throughout the wider novel as it progresses.

Colloquial Language

Colloquial language is language that is used in everyday speech. Yates uses colloquial language, such as 'kind of', 'sure' and 'the hell' in the main narrative of *Revolutionary Road*. This is a sense that the novel is about ordinary people, and that the narrator is one of them. The use of 'but', and 'and', as Yates often does in the novel, is informal, and hints that the narrator is a character 'thinking out loud'. This helps to suggest that we are being drawn into their thoughts. Yates also uses slang and blasphemous language in the novel, often to make a half-assed idea is this about 'the hell' (p. 150), 'and with God's help to get the hell on their way' (p. 150) for dramatic effect: 'Oh, Jesus God, to be there with April' reflects the way that ordinary Americans of the time would have spoken to sound more dramatic. Yates's use of colloquial language helps to build his readers' empathy for his characters.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Active Learning Task

Can you find examples of colloquial language in other texts you have studied? How do you think their authors are trying to create?

Form

Dialogue

One of the features of *Revolutionary Road* is its long passages of conversation. Yates uses dialogue to break up long sections of narrative. Dialogue is known as 'reported dialogue' because it is incorporated into the narrative:

Shep said that he personally was glad to have the damn thing over with

rather than depicted word-for-word in quotation marks.

'Would you please read us this, Mr. Jones?' (p. 55)

One characteristic of reported dialogue is that it is rephrased by the narrator – shep with feeling, Mr. Jones wondered, shyly, if it might not be fun' (p. 60). Because of this, one of the subtle ways in which one character can distort our view of another.

Yates's novel also makes use of internal dialogue: a character's internal conversation. For example, 'What if it hadn't been a dream?' (p. 295). By using internal dialogue, Yates is able to give a sense of his characters' unspoken anxieties.

Point of View

The novel is written from a third-person point of view. As the novel unfolds, the characters' points of view. Sometimes, the point of view will switch several times. Chapter 3:2 – but the main point of view is Frank's. This shifting point of view ensures that our sympathy cannot rest with just one character; it also ensures that our sympathy cannot rest with just one character's view in his narrative, Yates also gives the sense that his novel is about many people.

It is interesting to note that in terms of point of view, the first chapter is quite different. The voice is neutral, not informed by any one character. This allows the characters to be considered objectively. It also has a hovering effect – by keeping the narrative at a distance from the characters, Yates sketches out a portrait of the community before delving into the lives of the characters.

In Chapter 3:7, the narrative switches to April's point of view for the first time in the novel. In this chapter, 'you found you were saying yes when you were breathing gasoline as if it were flowers' (p. 304); it implores us to put ourselves in her shoes and to empathise with her.

Active Learning Task

Frank's point of view dominates the narrative. What effect might this have on our view of the other characters?

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Structure

Revolutionary Road is split into three parts. Part One shows the Wheelers bored with their lives. In Part Two, they make plans to move to Europe, while in Part Three their relationship begins to unravel. Each of the parts closes with a major turning point. At the end of Part One, April comes up with a plan to move the family to France, while in Part Two, she reveals she is pregnant. By the end of Part Three, she is dead.

Active Learning Task

Follow Frank's and April's separate 'stories' through each part of the novel and write a summary for each. Can you see points where their stories converge (converge) and points in the novel where their stories seem distant from one another?

Flashbacks

Yates uses flashbacks in the novel to fill out his characters' histories. These flashbacks help by creating a sense of their rich, complex personal identities. Typically, the novel's flashbacks are integrated into the narrative: 'And that time at the Christmas party (he could still remember the taste of her mouth) hadn't she trembled in his arms [...]' (p. 82). This helps create a sense of intimacy with the characters. To be drawn into a character's memories is an invitation to intimacy; it helps us to understand why they do and say certain things, and to empathise with them. Flashbacks could be considered central to Yates's portrayal of personal identity.

At some points, flashbacks are used to hint at events that will happen later in the novel, creating possibilities for the characters by showing what has happened in the past. In Chapter 2, Frank is taken to a time when he danced with April 'last summer [...] half-drunk on the stifling, humid air of the Log Cabin' (p. 144). Later in the novel, in Chapter 3:3, Shep will dance with April at the end of an affair. Another example is Frank's flashback to his childhood visit to the Knox farm, a memory of his father's lunch with Oat Fields (pp. 72–73) could be seen to foreshadow the relationship between Pollock twenty years later.

The Play

The performance of *The Petrified Forest* at the start brings together all the novel's characters. They are first introduced in terms of their relation to the play: April and Shep are actors, Milly has helped with the props and publicity, while Frank and Mrs Givings are in the audience. One of the functions of this chapter is that it **foreshadows** these characters' roles within the story: April as a lead actor, 'putting on' certain ways of being in order to 'act' with their situations, while Shep as a supporting role. Frank and Mrs Givings could be considered – very different kinds of

Active Learning Task

Look at the first description of April that April is first described on page 7 and at the first description of Frank on page 10. Can you see ways in which they foreshadow these characters' roles later in the novel?

John's Visits

John's visits to the Wheelers are important to the structure of the novel. John's visits are the only times when April must justify each change of their plans to him, the 'voice of truth'. Because of his visits, creating a sort of pre-truth and post-truth divide. After he has gone, what he says is often ignored by the Wheelers, unable to be ignored.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Historical Context

President Eisenhower

The president of the US in 1955, the year *Revolutionary Road* is set, was Dwight D. Eisenhower. He took office in 1953, and his presidency lasted until 1961, the year *Revolutionary Road* was published. Eisenhower was a Republican president. During his presidency, the United States entered a period of relative peace. The Eisenhower administration was responsible for setting up the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and creating a new and improved system of Social Security (a welfare system).

Fear of the Bomb

The period in which *Revolutionary Road* is set was characterised by the 'fear of the bomb'. At the end of World War II, the US had dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, causing devastation on a never-before-seen scale. But it turned out to be just the beginning of nuclear warfare. In 1949, the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb, and the US government began to prepare for a possible nuclear attack on America. In 1951, scientists began to develop a new kind of nuclear bomb – the hydrogen bomb or H-bomb. Children at school in the early 1950s were shown cartoons to help them prepare for a possible atomic attack; however, they were anything but reassuring. The fear of the bomb, which could strike at any moment, became widespread in American society, creating a national feeling of instability and uncertainty. Many writers reacted to it by reflecting themes of uncertainty and existentialism in their work.

Abortion

In 1955, the year that the novel is set, abortion was illegal. For many decades, women had been performing abortions on themselves, but in the late 1940s and 1950s, abortion became strongly discouraged. The typical view of the ideal woman was as a housewife and devoted mother. Because of this, women had little chance to choose when they became mothers – or choose not to be mothers at all. This lack of choice was a key theme of *femininity*.

As the issue of illegal abortion went 'underground' the pressure on women to be mothers increased, and abortion became even more dangerous. Thousands of women died each year, often from poisoning, injury or blood loss. The legal right for a woman to choose when to have an abortion passed in the US until 1973.

The McCarthy Investigation

The cancerous growth of Senator Joseph McCarthy had poisoned the United States, and with his reckless accusations and wild claims, he had convinced many Americans that they were in danger. They began to see themselves as members of an embattled, dwindling minority.

The early 1950s were difficult times to hold left-wing politics in America. Senator Joseph McCarthy, a politician, launched a campaign to seek out anyone who was considered 'un-American'. This led to a 'witch-hunt', and it targeted those with communist or socialist sympathies. Intellectuals, writers, and intellectuals, who were considered, with their left-leaning sympathies, to be a threat to life – and to national security. Ordinary Americans were terrified of being hauled before McCarthy and to name people they knew to have communist beliefs. Many began to adopt this way of thinking, considering their fellow Americans; this way of thinking was called 'McCarthyism'.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



As a result, artists and writers became viewed as **subversive** figures within society during this period. They existed outside the trends of society, and made their own rules; they were figures of rebellion. In *Revolutionary Road*, April's question to Frank, 'Can you really think artists and writers are the only people entitled to lives of their own?' (p. 115) reflects a wider cultural understanding of creative people as those whose lives were a little freer from the normal expectations of society than everyone else's.

subv

The Military

Between 1940–1947, more than 10 million men were 'drafted' – or made to sign up for – the army. As a result, by the 1950s, most families would have had some personal experience of war. In *Revolutionary Road*, Frank and Shep in *Revolutionary Road* were brought right at the very end of the war.

A spell in the military was a 'coming of age' for many young men. In the novel, the characters' experiences are closely tied to ideas about their own masculinity. Examples include Shep burning his shoes (pp. 136–137) and Frank's likening to himself and to the same platoon' (p. 172).

Television and the Media

The 1950s were the 'Golden Age' of television. In the early years of the decade, televisions were becoming widely available and affordable; every household that could afford it would have had one, and they were a staple of the middle-class, suburban household. In *Revolutionary Road*, Frank and April have been reluctant to buy a television (p. 31) but have eventually given in and bought one. This helps characterise them as people who have tried to resist – but eventually given in to – the pressures of society.

The popularity of television also helped to spread, and cement, certain attitudes in society. In the 1950s, the most popular film genre in the US was the Western. The cowboys in Westerns were strong, brave and heroic; these qualities helped shape a popular view of the 'ideal man'. The films portrayed a nostalgic view of **masculinity** which was admired and aspired to by men of the time. Television also helped to influence American attitudes towards the family. Shows such as *Leave It To Beaver* (1957–1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960) featured 'ideal American families' which soon became the standard against which families silently measured themselves. The woman of the family was typically the housewife, while her husband went out to work.

Among the things people could watch on television in the mid-1950s were the trials of the **McCarthy** investigation – this broadcast as a result of the **Red Scare** and suspicion directly into the living rooms of ordinary American families.

Are
fec
pop

Mental Illness

In the 1950s, the American public regarded mentally ill people with fear and contempt. A 'mad' person to be negatively stereotyped as frightening and unpredictable. People excluded from the rest of society – they were usually either kept quietly out of society or in psychiatric hospitals for treatment. As a result, few people admitted to having mental illness was rarely discussed.

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED

In *Revolutionary Road*, terms such as ‘the insane asylum’, ‘the State funny farm’ are a popular view of psychiatric hospitals in the 1950s and early 60s. At the time, many people viewed psychiatric treatment with suspicion. Seeing a psychiatrist – or ‘analyst’ as Frank refers to him – was something embarrassing. In Chapter 3:9 Shep reflects this view when he privately refers to his “my analyst that” – he had turned into one of those people that want to tell you everything all the time’ (p. 331).

In the 1950s, electroshock therapy (now known as ECT) was one of the main methods of treatment, although as a cure, it was not as well understood as it is today. One of its effects was to wipe out thoughts and memories from a person’s mind – but there was no control over what was wiped out. Another ‘treatment’ involved removing a section of a person’s frontal lobe (part of the brain). This procedure usually made a patient calmer and more docile, but they usually lost some of their intellect in the process. In *Revolutionary Road*, John is said to have had thirty-seven electric shocks during his treatment, he has lost all his motivation and knowledge.

Essay Question

Compare and contrast portrayals of mental illness in *Revolutionary Road* with the text you have previously studied.



INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Literary Approaches

In the exam, you will be asked to make connections across texts, and place them in context. This context is **literary context**. One way of discussing a text's literary context is to look at other texts written during the same period. Another way is to consider how literary theories have changed over time, and how these interpretations have changed over time.

New Historicism

New Historicism is a literary movement – a way of looking at literary texts which considers the time and context in which they were written. A New Historicist reading of *Revolutionary Road* would consider its meaning from a modern point of view, but it would also consider how the text reflects the attitudes of the time. For example, a modern feminist interpretation of the novel would be irrelevant – New Historicism is more important to analyse the novel in relation to 1960s attitudes towards women. Modern readings rely heavily on historical context. A New Historicist approach to *Revolutionary Road* would consider themes of unemployment, distraction and fear of mental illness which run through the novel, and how these reflect the attitudes during the period in which Richard Yates was writing.

Feminism

A feminist approach to literature analyses the ways in which women are portrayed in texts. A feminist reading of a text might consider the way female characters are portrayed in the story, and how women are portrayed in relation to men. Before the 1970s, feminist readings of literature were rare. In the 1970s and 80s, 'third-wave feminism' emerged, which focused on the way women were portrayed in literature, and the language used to write about them. A modern reading of *Revolutionary Road* might discuss the female characters of the novel, examining the ways in which Yates presents them to the reader. His portrayal of April as an independent woman, 'female' rather than 'feminine' (p. 190) and firmly committed to following a path of her own, could be interpreted as sympathetic to feminism. However, the way that male points of view dominate the novel – and how this informs our view of April, Milly and society in general – could be considered anti-feminist.

Discussion

Do you think *Revolutionary Road* has relevance as a feminist text? Are its messages about women the way they were in the early 1960s, or could it be considered a feminist text?

The Feminine Mystique

In 1963, Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* was published. In this book, Friedan discusses the 'problem that has no name'. The problem was, she suggested, that a sense of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, was spreading among American women of the time, who were expected to devote themselves to their husbands and housewives. Images of 'perfect' housewives appeared in the media – in women's magazines and in advertisements – but the reality was often quite different. Many women felt that their lives were unfulfilling. Friedan proposed that a better model for society was one in which women were encouraged to realise their potential by studying, working and using their talents. Although Friedan's book was published after *Revolutionary Road*, it brought to the surface a feeling that had existed among women at the end of World War II, and even years earlier. The 'problem that has no name' was a problem that had existed since the 1950s, when *Revolutionary Road* was set. Yates's novel can be seen to address this problem through the character of April Wheeler; her frustration at the role of suburban housewife, and her desire to do more at any cost, can be interpreted as a battle against the problem with no name, a problem that affected women by 1950s society.

Further Reading

You can read an excerpt from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2920960/> – in this excerpt, Friedan discusses the suburban housewife and the 'problem that has no name'.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Mary Allen and the 'Mad Woman' in Literature

In the late 1970s, feminist criticism developed the idea that women were portrayed in literature as 'mad women'. Mary Allen (b. 1939) is a feminist literary critic. In her essay *The Necessary Blankness* (1977), she discusses writers' portrayal of women in the 1960s, arguing that they are presented as inadequate characters. She argues that women are trapped by a society which leaves little room for individuality and so unconventional women become portrayed in literature as 'mad women'. She argues that a character 'goes mad [...] she is distinctly at odds with her society, but not in a way that is obvious to the reader'. She claims that society has sentimentalised the mother, so that a woman who is not a mother is sorely out of place: 'no one seems to know [...] quite what to do with the woman who joins her life to the lives of others'. In *Revolutionary Road*, April's desire not to be pregnant is seen as her way of 'joining her life to the lives of others'. The Wheelers' isolation within their neighbourhood is also discussed; no one seems to know quite what to do with them. In the light of Mary Allen's work, we could interpret April as an unconventional woman who has been labelled a 'mad woman' with an 'Emotional Problem' (p. 251). In the novel, it is suggested that because April is 'at odds' with society's expectations of her, she is in need of psychological help ('mad', 'mad woman' who wants to abort her pregnancy is arguably unacceptable and unacceptable to the reader. Yates does not romanticise April's character; she could be interpreted as what Mary Allen calls an 'ugly' heroine.



INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Key Term Glossary

The American Dream	the idea, embedded into the traditional American dream, that anybody is able to achieve success and wealth if they work hard enough
anaphora	(in literature) when a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of successive sentences or clauses for a literary effect
automaton	a machine that imitates a human being and carries out actions that are completely automatic
connotations	meanings or feelings, associated with a word or phrase, other than its literal meaning
diction	the way somebody speaks – especially their choice of words and how they pronounce them
empathy	the ability to understand somebody's feelings, as if they were our own
epitomise	to show a perfect example of; an epitome is the perfect example of something
fantastical	based on a fantasy
femininity	the idea of what it means to be a woman; a set of characteristics associated with being a woman
filmic	having the characteristics of film
foil	a character who acts as a foil provides an interesting contrast to the main character
foreshadow	(in literature) suggest events that will happen later in the story
juxtapose	a literary term for when two things are placed next to each other for effect
juxtaposition	the placing of two words, images or concepts next to each other for effect
literary context	a text's relation to other literary texts, and to literary movements and periods
masculinity	the idea of what it means to be a man; a set of characteristics associated with being a man
monologue	a long, uninterrupted speech by one person
motif	an important – often recurring – idea or theme in a story or text
objective	based on facts rather than feelings and personal opinions
pace	in literature, speed at which the action, or plot, moves forward
personifies	assigns human qualities to something that is not human

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



provocateur

somebody who provokes trouble

rhetorical devices

techniques used to persuade an audience of an

romanticised

made to seem more glamorous than it actually is

second-person

a style of writing in which the writer – or speaker

sentimentalise

consider something in an emotional or nostalgic

social construct

an idea which has been created and reinforced by

social norms

qualities and behaviours which are regarded as

subjective

a subjective view is based on somebody's own personal evidence

subversion

intention to undermine something, such as an institution or government

tableau

a scene which is visually striking. The term comes from the French meaning 'living picture': in the nineteenth century, models to pose together in a still performance, based on a story. They were often dramatically lit.

tragicomedy

a tragedy which has comic elements within it

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Further Reading

Comparative Texts

- 📖 Sylvia Plath's poetry collection *Ariel* (1965) examines mental illness in relation to the point of view of a mentally ill narrator. *Ariel* is a comparative set text.
- 📖 In her play *Top Girls* (1982) Caryl Churchill explores ideas of motherhood, work and containment. *Top Girls* is a comparative set text.

Other Fiction

- 📖 Richard Yates's *The Easter Parade* (1955) tells the story of two sisters, Sarah and Fanny, by their parents' divorce. The sisters go on to lead unhappy, yet very different lives.
- 📖 Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) is considered to be semi-autobiographical, based on her own experience of mental illness, and her journey through mental illness to recovery. Plath explores themes of mental health, social identity, motherhood and mental illness; the novel is relevant to *Revolutionary Road*.
- 📖 Peter Nichols' play *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* (1967) is about a British couple who are struggling to care for their daughter, who has cerebral palsy. A tragic situation explored through a tragicomic lens. Nichols' play deals with themes of marriage, social class and mental illness.

Criticism

- 📖 In Stewart O'Nan's 1999 essay in the *Boston Review*, 'The Lost World of Richard Yates: The Age of Anxiety disappeared from print', he calls Yates a 'chronicler of mid-century America'. O'Nan argues that his work deserves to be more widely read. O'Nan's essay can be found at <http://bostonreview.net/stewart-onan-the-lost-world-of-richard-yates>
- 📖 Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) explores 'the problem that has no name' – the unhappiness and dissatisfaction among American women of the time, especially housewives. She proposes a new, better model for society, one in which women can realize their potential by studying, working and using their talents. You can read an excerpt of *The Feminine Mystique* at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2920960/> Excerpt from *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY: W W Norton & Company, 1963).
- 📖 In his essay for *The Guardian*, Nick Fraser considers Richard Yates as a 'great American writer' and 'giant of American fiction': <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/17/richard-yates>
- 📖 *A Tragic Honesty* is the first-ever biography of Yates, written by American biographer John Burt Foster Jr.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Answers to Active Learning Tasks

This section includes pointers towards things students might consider in their responses to the Active Learning Tasks. They are by no means exhaustive; rather, they are points to think about.

A Background on the Text

- The breakdown of Yates's parents' relationship could have influenced his outlook on life and could be reflected in the relationship breakdown explored in *Revolutionary Road*.
- Yates's experience working at Remington Rand could have influenced him to explore the futility of work in a large, soulless corporation.
- Yates's own experiences of mental illness and psychiatry could have influenced his writing, challenging our perceptions of the mentally ill person, society's attitudes towards them, and the effectiveness of their treatment.

Critical Thinking

- Students might notice that the novel develops characters' inner worlds more fully than the film, through their thoughts and feelings, while the film, by the nature of the medium, depends on dialogue. They might consider the film especially bleak, as we have not come to 'know' the characters as well as in the novel.

Chapter 1:1

- 'a long, clean serpent of cars' (p. 6) – image of snake suggests something sinister, dangerous, even slippery! – about suburban society
- 'slim-cut trousers', 'graceful cotton skirts' (p. 9) – audience is well dressed, well-mannered
- 'anxious, round-eyed, two-by-two' (p. 11) – 'two-by-two' seems to evoke Noah's Ark; audience members are nervous, and can perhaps be herded or led – like animals

Chapter 1:2

- Frank accuses April of trying to 'hang' the 'role of dumb, insensitive suburban wife' on him; April says he knows his words cannot be twisted this time, and that in this mood, she cannot blame Frank of trying to make her talk about something she doesn't want to talk about (p. 27). She says that he doesn't deserve to call himself a man. Both April and Frank are trapping them.

Chapter 1:3

- 'romped behind her with handfuls of cut grass' (p. 31) – carefree image
- 'a small stain of milk and cereal...' (p. 41) – highlights their absence of responsibility and importance to the novel's immediate action
- 'I know it's leaking. Out of the joint.' (p. 44) – portrayed as mildly irritating and annoying
- 'We're holding up the house, Daddy?' (p. 46) – idea that they are unknowingly hindering their father physically in the way of Frank building the path, innocently sitting in the way
- 'one big thing went wrong right away' (p. 48) – we learn that April had wanted to have a child (with Jennifer, now their eldest child). Jennifer was the 'thing' that 'went wrong' and the hindrance is further developed.
- 'the look of their tulip-soft skin and of their two sunny skulls, as fragile as eggshells' (p. 50) – their appearance is emphasised; reference to flowers and sun emphasises how they are natural, beautiful

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED



Chapter 1:4

Perhaps:

- the typical suburban Sunday he has had, 'What the hell kind of a life was this that had come to him and made him feel claustrophobic
- the contrast between the dull evening he has just spent with the Campbells and the one they used to enjoy in the past – Frank's 'revolutionary' speech that evening has
- the realisation that he has just turned thirty, but his life is so uninteresting to

Chapter 1:5

- As a young boy, Frank regarded the Knox Building with awe, but was underwhelmed and repulsed by Oat Fields. As a young man recently employed at Knox, Frank is
- thinking that it was funny how little he could get away with. But soon, he is
- and his attitude to his job is one of the boredom and laziness – and embarrassment of
- avoiding the whole thing as far as possible' (p. 77).

Chapter



Some other tableaux in *Revolutionary Road*:

- Frank surrounded by his children reading the 'funnies' (p. 56) on the sofa – a
- Frank is suffocated by it
- Mrs Givings's imaginary scene in which John meets the Wheelers (p. 158) – a
- perfection; later in the novel, we can measure the reality against it to show how
- seems to Mrs Givings

In other texts:

- At the end of Act 1:1 in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, the dinner party made up of
- considered a tableau; the idea of the 'dream dinner party' turned on its head by
- repeated containment, violation and persecution

Chapter 2:1

- The cellophane bag can be read as a metaphor for the suburban society which
- it is out of; it suggests both that society has unnatural qualities, and that it has a suff

Chapter 2:2

- *Middle class*: having private tutors and English or French nannies, being dressed in
- brownstone and penthouse apartments, attending prep school, studying literature
- among clock towers (p. 139), a 'book-lined bachelor flat' (p. 139), listening to
- literary magazines
- *'not' middle class*: attending a Manhattan high school, being a 'tough son of a
- Mid-west, working in a factory, talking about cars, talking with regional dialect
- the man got caught in 'the lie of John' (p. 139)

Chapter



Mrs Givings might put on a bright face to cover up unsavoury feelings because:

- it is upsetting to face the truth
- she feels she must 'keep it together' for her family's sake
- she wants to spare herself (and others) from embarrassment
- she represents a society that cannot bear to recognise dissent (rebellion) with
- the stability of that society

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter 2:4

- 1) • 'feeling his own face twitch into a grimace of servility' (p. 173) – Frank's meeting Bart Pollock suggests that he is more caught up in the hierarchy to think, and it disgusts him: 'I suddenly caught myself sort of *melting* in' (p. 173)
- Frank cannot follow what Ted Bandy is saying because his attention is 'this suggests that he is in awe of him, or that Bart Pollock has some dis...' we will see how Bart Pollock's job offer can 'distract' Frank from his fan...

Chapter 2:5

Possible effects of specialised diction:

- to imply a character's class or ethnic background (by writing 'in their accent')
- to create a sense that a character is relaxed or casual with their speech – a lazy tone
- to give a sense of a character's personality through the way they speak and...

Chapter



- 'he saw, on the top shelf, a small square package freshly wrapped in drugstore' (p. 209) – here, Frank is being a 'naive narrator' – we only know as much as... leading up to the discovery of what is inside the box.
- 'a hidden Christmas gift' – connotations of excitement, delight, secrecy
- 'Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval' – connotations of reliability, safety, home
- 'dark pink bulb' – possible connotations of sinister growth (bulb), flesh (pink)

Chapter 3:1

- It colours our own vision of what is going on, persuades us to Frank's side of... us, perhaps, to see April as deranged and wrong

Chapter 3:2

- it is undesirable for April to be 'thick and stumpy from her decade of breadwinning' that the opposite (slender, tall) would be true if she had not been the breadwinner
- that being the breadwinner of the family would cause the woman to become...
- that smoking, 'a cigarette wagging in her lips' (p. 236) was perhaps considered...

Chapter 3:3

Perhaps:

- to show to himself that women still desire him
- to prove his own masculinity ('He felt... man' (p. 102))
- to prove to himself that he is still an 'interesting person' (p. 96) and a 'fascinating'



**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter 3:4

Yes, because:

- he fantasises about the way a potential analyst might think of him, 'essential' (p. 265) and how he would be 'owlish and slow-spoken, possibly Viennese' (p. 265) romanticising the action of finding April an analyst.
- he notices the beauty of the day, 'a thicket of elms whose leaves were just beginning to turn' (p. 265) going for a drive to try to forget his 'anxious thoughts of Maureen'

No, because:

- he rationally breaks off the affair with Maureen because it is a 'thing he had to do it, he has no emotion about it' (p. 263), and 'no more remained untainted by emotion; he has 'completely arranged his business' (p. 263)
- he is unemotional about April's situation (p. 263) 'It annoyed him slightly, but it did not bother him' (p. 263) 'It was her problem.' (p. 263)
- he remains emotionally detached while breaking up with Maureen (pp. 271-272)
- at the end of the chapter he is rational, noticing that he only has a short while to focus on how it has upset him (pp. 278-279)

Chapter 3:5

- 1) • Contrast between speech and body language: Mrs Givings opens the chapter with 'it's such a lovely luxury...' (p. 280) and yet her body language suggests a sense of unease around the door handle, her eyes fixed on the road, and her feet are pedalling imaginary pedals
 - imaginary pedals are funny, 'her feet would reach out and press the rubber pedals' (p. 280)
 - Contrast between cheerful speech and sudden panic: 'it always takes me a moment to get going' (p. 281); the seamless integration of her panic into the cheery chatter is a coping mechanism and serves to heighten the sense of her suppressed panic
 - Contrast between Mrs Givings and calm, composed Howard, 'I see it doesn't bother you' (p. 281)
 - image of her hands as 'frightened birds' (p. 281)
- 2) • Bizarre gallery of patients' artwork suggests the unpredictable, possibly violent nature of patients' illnesses
 - 'dim thudding of rubber heels' (p. 281) suggests a softened, dulled atmosphere that might make a sudden or sharp impact
 - 'it wasn't easy to identify the man as a patient' (p. 282) suggests that the man is not what he seems on the surface
 - 'plastic-topped tables and chairs' (p. 282) have connotations of children's play areas
 - 'jingle of keys behind the locked door' and 'ring of keys' (p. 282) have connotations of dungeons, security, efficiency
 - 'long expanse of waxed linoleum' (p. 282) suggests soullessness and uniformity

Chapter 3:6

- April could be seen as playing the role of the ideal housewife, while Frank is the husband who is not

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Chapter 3:7

- Image of April running so fast that her 'sneakers seemed hardly to touch the excitement at her father's visit
- Repetition of the word 'how' (anaphora): 'how tall, how wonderfully slender, golden the sunlight shone on his hair!' lends an epic tone to her vision of her father
- 'but his voice was the best of all' suggests that everything about him is brilliant
- The mention of his low voice 'deep and thrilling as blowing across an earthen jar', 'the short hairs at the back of his neck were bristly to the touch and stone' suggests that his manliness impresses her. Earthen jug and pumice stone for cleaning, implying that there is a naturalness and masculinity about her father

Chapter 3:8

Characters who have taken action when it was called for:

- April made plans to move to Europe in order to try to put an end to the misery that had been eating at her, and began to make practical arrangements for the trip
- April ordered the box of sedum to be kicked into the cellar, mowed the lawn
- Howard Givings interfered on three occasions to try to 'steady' his son John, the Wheelers'
- Frank slept with Maureen Grube when he wanted to – he didn't waver over his decision with her when he finally decided to do so
- April arranged to give herself an abortion when she had decided she did not want the child
- Shep drove Frank to the hospital and comforted him and Milly, when April died

Characters who have wanted to take action, but felt unable to:

- Frank wanted to reassure April that she was 'wonderful' after the play in Cheltenham when she recoiled from him in the dressing room
- Frank wanted to go out and seize the lawnmower from April, but didn't get to the house before he could
- Frank wanted to break off the plan to move to Europe, but was unable to voice his doubts for a series of interruptions to do it for him
- April wanted to abort her pregnancy, but Frank stopped her initially by persuading her to wait

Chapter 3:9

- Milly, Shep, and Mrs Givings have the last word on the Wheelers. Milly gives the final verdict on what happened, which is necessary to the plot, but her feelings about what happened are voyeuristic, in the eyes of Shep. Shep's description of Frank reveals a deeper understanding of April's death and the state Frank has been left in. Mrs Givings leaves us with the impression that she claims is 'very destructive' (p. 334) and the 'Venerable' who she declares 'is a very destructive' (p. 336).
- Frank's point of view is missing – this creates a sense that 'his story' has been told by a narrator for much of the time
- The children's point of view is missing – which emphasises their role as secondary characters
- John's point of view is missing – suggesting that as a mentally ill person, he is not able to see things as they are, but only through the eyes of those around him

Characters

- Characters driving the narrative: April, Mrs Givings, John, Bart Pollock
- Characters who can be seen as supportive: Frank, the children, Shep, Milly, Howard Givings

**COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED**



Form

Frank's point of view dominates the narrative, so we see the other characters 'through the effect that:

- we see April as 'mad' when her behaviour is simply at odds with Frank's expectations
- we see other characters as interfering (Mrs Givings) when they are actually trying to help
- we see characters from the outside as insensitive and 'dumb' (Shep, Milly), but in reality these are characters they undoubtedly are, with inner lives of their own

Structure

- 1) Students might notice that Frank and April's narratives converge:
 - at the end of the play, and in their fight in the woods
 - when April announces she has decided for them to move to Europe
 - in the days that follow, as Frank and April talk excitedly of moving
 - when April is pregnant and wants an abortion
 - when they fight in Chapter 3:6 and the next morning, have breakfast together

They might also consider their narratives to be far apart:

- after the fight in Part One, when Frank feels 'middle-aged'
 - when Frank is sleeping with Maureen and April is at home preparing a birthday cake
 - when April sleeps with Shep at the Log Cabin
 - when Frank gets offered a job by Bart Pollock but April doesn't care
 - when they fight in Chapter 3:6 and the next morning, have breakfast together
 - when April makes Frank breakfast and then carries out her abortion
- 2)
 - On page 7, April is said to have 'caused the whispered word "lovely" to be used'. This foreshadows Frank's and Shep's attraction to her, and the way in which April is prized throughout the novel. She is described as having the 'shy, sensitive quality' of a young girl, despite having had two children, which suggests and foreshadows the way in which she is seen as an individual – almost single – woman, rather than a mother, later in the novel.
 - Frank is described as 'round-faced and intelligent-looking', and looks like a successful businessman's wife. He is seen as a husband – someone who is dating her and trying to 'win' her affections. He is seen to do just this, trying to win her round to his point of view; the way in which April's decision not to have an abortion is described as 'like a courtship' (p. 216).

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT
PROTECTED

