

It's all right to be resigned to your fate: Sam Mendes's *Revolutionary Road*

By Sandy English
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Directed by Sam Mendes, written by Justin Haythe

Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates, New York: Vintage Reprint Edition, 2008 [1961], 368 pp.

Revolutionary Road is director Sam Mendes's second attempt, following on *American Beauty* (1997), to say something meaningful about the tensions of American life in the emotional realm at the intimate level of the family. It is a more substantial effort, overall, than the weak and confused *American Beauty*, at least when it follows closely Richard Yates's 1961 novel.

When it does not, it undermines the tragic conclusion of Yates's work and offers a defense of the conformity that the novelist takes to task in his book. As a whole, the film version of *Revolutionary Road* is not a critical reworking of Yates's material, but a period piece that contains certain powerful representations of the 1950s. The film fails to add much to our understanding of American life at the height of the postwar boom or during the half-century that has followed.

April and Frank Wheeler (Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio) are a young, middle-class couple who have moved from New York City to a house in suburban southern Connecticut in 1955. They have two children. Frank works in sales for a business machine company in Manhattan and April is a homemaker.

They are both dissatisfied with their marriage, their community and with life in general. They think of themselves as intellectuals. They dislike the regimentation, banality and falseness with and in which they live, but at the same time, are themselves deeply conditioned by this falseness.

The film begins after April, who has studied acting in the past, gives a disappointing performance as the female lead in a community theatre production of Robert E. Sherwood's Depression-era *The Petrified Forest*.

After the play, April and Frank, neither one particularly sympathetic to the other's emotional needs, cascade into a bitter fight, complete with drinking, shouting and fist-pounding.

The next day, we see Frank commuting to work on his 30th birthday, his head bobbing, one hat identical to all the others in New York's Grand Central Station. Reaching his office, he encounters his dispirited colleagues. He does almost no work, but manages to have a somewhat cold and manipulative affair with a young woman.

April comes up with a scheme by which they might escape their condition: the family will move to Paris. She will support them with secretarial work at an embassy, and Frank will have months in which to "find himself" and do what he really wants to, whatever that is. Are writers and artists, she asks, the only people entitled to lives of their own?

Frank agrees, and for the next few weeks, the couple feels quite liberated. This is a truly happy sequence in the film. Frank feels so good that he even does some quality work at his job.

The couple informs their friends and next-door neighbors, Shep and Milly Campbell (David Harbour and Kathryn Hahn), who can scarcely believe that anyone would trade in the kind of life they lead in common

with the Wheelers.

Helen Givings (Kathy Bates), an annoying busybody realtor, and her husband Howard (Richard Easton) bring their unstable son John (Michael Shannon) for a visit on a day-pass from a mental hospital. The disturbed man is able to see and tell the truth about people.

The Wheelers confess they are selling their house and moving to Paris. John asks Frank why he is giving up his job, and Frank tells him that he doesn't like it. And John says, "You want to play house, you got to have a job. You want to play very *nice* house, very *sweet* house, you got to have a job you don't like."

Shannon's performance in this and another scene is among the strongest in the film.

Complications emerge: April becomes pregnant and Frank begins inadvertently to have some success at his job. He is offered a promotion and a raise. In manipulative and selfish ways, he seeks to undermine the move.

The couple returns to quarrelling. There are cool and face-saving explanations to friends and co-workers about changed plans. John Givings plays the role of a chorus in a classical Greek tragedy, showing us how we might respond to the Wheelers' decisions.

He sees through the cowardliness and conformity. When Frank tells him, "It's a question of money, you see," John nods and responds, "Money's always a good reason. ... But it's hardly ever the real reason. What's the real reason?" In both scenes with John, writer Justin Haythe has taken the dialogue verbatim from the Yates novel to good effect.

Things begin to slide further downward for the Wheelers. Compassion and caring flee the scene.

Mendes's *Revolutionary Road* demonstrates that artists and viewers are still affected by and grappling with the problems of American life in the postwar period: the dissatisfaction with work-life, the isolating conditions of suburbs and especially the longing to escape from generally tedious and regimented conditions. (Of course, one must ask, would life be different in a different location? Is moving to Paris a solution?)

The film captures the essential emptiness of this kind of existence. It is largely faithful to the dialogue of Yates's book. Winslet and DiCaprio have come together for the first time since James Cameron's dreadful *Titanic* (1997) and exhibit a real rapport. Their performances capture the mixture of confidence and uncertainty about each other that this uncomfortable couple must feel.

There is also a powerful aura of loneliness in the film's photography: wind and light on empty tables and chairs, the coldness of a manicured garden, the mechanized commute in Grand Central Station.

Revolutionary Road shows that filmmakers still have to grapple with what cultural and social history, including that of the immediate postwar years, have done to *them*. The unconscious impact of the past weighs heavily. Today's artists tend to accept the status quo far more uncritically.

In the British-born Mendes' case, this emerges most clearly in the way he concludes the film. Frank Wheeler capitulates to the pressures of life,

to what he regards as hateful and inhuman. Burdened now by sadness and loss, Frank seems to have changed. He lives through a disaster, but in the end, he is resigned to his fate—and the audience, presumably, is supposed to be as well. This is a noticeable departure from the ending of the novel, in which Frank has replaced one set of illusions with another, and his conformity has destroyed almost any chance of moral regeneration. In other words, Yates is openly critical of Wheeler's choices.

Revolutionary Road was a runner-up (along with Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*) for the National Book Award in 1962. It has been popular ever since with writers and critics, but it is less widely known to the general public.

In terms of artistic form—its grasp of the details of people and objects, its sense of symmetry, its revealing metaphors and symbols—Yates's novel is one of the major accomplishments of postwar American fiction. Its real strength, though, lies in its grasp of the tragic nature of life in the US beneath all the pretensions and wishful thinking. The plot and the nature of the characters themselves turn on the conflict between what social life actually is and what Frank and April imagine it to be.

Mendes's film grasps some of this, but at every point his version of things is far less uncompromising about American life in 1955 than the novel.

Yates's view of Frank and April Wheeler might be legitimately criticized as pessimistic, and it has often been called misanthropic. There is something relentless about the way in which a set of unappealing (although sympathetically portrayed) people reach bottom.

Yates does not let people's best instincts of kindness or human solidarity appear for long before he thrusts them back underneath a muck of phoniness and self-absorption. In the novel, Frank and April posture and strut more than they do in the film, and are more filled with illusions about themselves and about society.

They begin to grasp their own insincerity as the novel progresses. At one point, Frank sees himself as "the picture of a frightened liar." Ultimately, though, Frank and April are not equipped to understand what is happening to them or cast away their pretensions without destroying themselves.

The poignancy of that tragedy is lost in the filmed *Revolutionary Road*. In the last shot, Frank Wheeler watches his children play. He and April have fobbed them off on neighbors or taken them for granted in most of the film. His face seems drawn, but also stronger and more mature. There is a note of tenderness and hope. Hope is an attractive quality, but it needs to be based on something.

What does the movie's ending indicate? Perhaps that while escape from an unendurable life is not possible, knuckling under and living with what you are offered *is*. A healthier paycheck and praise from the boss are *something*, after all.

Yates as a young writer in the 1950s and early 1960s confronted a situation in which material betterment did not appear to be associated with the activity of movements critical of society's foundations, especially for the layer of the population to which the Wheelers belong. The boom seemed to be improving people's economic condition effortlessly. *Revolutionary Road*, the writer's first and best novel, reflects in a sad and desperate way the fact that the struggle for freedom for many people had been banished to the realm of individual, unrealizable fantasy.

Compared to Mendes, Yates was far more conscious of the historical and social nature of the stultification of American life. In his novel's opening pages, he describes the hopes and illusions that a whole group of people—young, middle-class and educated—has for the community theater that Frank and April help start. It is a finely crafted and revealing image of the thinking and feeling of a milieu, artistically both particular and generalizing.

Yates, not by accident, saw his characters' destructive evolution as part of a historical process:

"I meant [the novel] more as an indictment of American life in the nineteen-fifties. During the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity over this country, by no means only in the suburbs—a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price, as exemplified politically in the Eisenhower administration and the McCarthy witch hunt... I meant the title to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the Fifties" [1].

One senses that Mendes, on the other hand, has not looked at all for a social or historical origin to the problems of life presented in his version of *Revolutionary Road*. He does not appear to have asked himself if artists can learn something about these problems 50 years later.

It's as though the half-century since the action of the film takes place has lacked complexity and conflict. Has Mendes asked himself if there were historical periods when conditions would have allowed April and Frank (and others) to find a way out, and periods when life seemed less endurable once more?

This seems to be the filmmaker's outlook: no one has really been able to escape this kind of false and self-deluded life for decades, but people have been contented enough accommodating themselves to it. Through no fault of his own, Mendes view is ahistorical and all too influenced by the culture of wealth accumulation and professional success that pervades numerous sectors of American society. Unfortunately, in the end, his film gives its blessing to conformity and resignation.

1. Interview with DeWitt Henry and Geoffrey Clark in *Ploughshares*, Winter 1972, pp. 65-79, quoted in Blake Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*, New York: Picador, 2003, p. 231.

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