

Revolutionary Road Study Guide

Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates (novelist)

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Contents

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| Revolutionary Road Study Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Plot Summary..... | 4 |
| Part 1: Chapter 1..... | 7 |
| Part 1: Chapter 2..... | 8 |
| Part 1: Chapter 3..... | 10 |
| Part 1: Chapter 4..... | 12 |
| Part 1: Chapter 5..... | 14 |
| Part 1: Chapter 6..... | 16 |
| Part 1: Chapter 7..... | 17 |
| Part 2: Chapter 1..... | 19 |
| Part 2: Chapter 2..... | 20 |
| Part 2: Chapter 3..... | 22 |
| Part 2: Chapter 4..... | 24 |
| Part 2: Chapter 5..... | 25 |
| Part 2: Chapter 6..... | 27 |
| Part 3: Chapter 1..... | 29 |
| Part 3: Chapter 2..... | 31 |
| Part 3: Chapter 3..... | 32 |
| Part 3: Chapter 4..... | 34 |
| Part 3: Chapter 5..... | 36 |
| Part 3: Chapter 6..... | 37 |
| Part 3: Chapter 7..... | 39 |
| Part 3: Chapter 8..... | 40 |
| Part 3: Chapter 9..... | 42 |



Characters..... 44

Objects/Places..... 47

Themes..... 49

Style..... 52

Quotes..... 54

Topics for Discussion..... 58



Plot Summary

Revolutionary Road is a tragi-comic novel that begins with an emphasis on absurd comedy but ends tragically. Long considered a literary cult classic since its publication in 1961, it is a searingly lucid exploration of the anesthesia of suburban middle America that can prove fatal to basic human decency and values. Frank and April Wheeler are a young couple in their late twenties with two children who follow the great suburban migration that characterized America in the mid-1950s. Somewhat reluctantly, fully aware that life in suburban Connecticut may not suit them, the Wheelers buy a home near a housing development generally referred to as Revolutionary Hill Estates. Frank is a graduate of Columbia University who works at a nebulous job which he hates at Knox Business Machines in New York City, to which he commutes by train daily.

The story begins with the spectacular failure of a play produced by the startup community theater group in which April Wheeler has a leading role. April—tall, beautiful, and talented—studied theater in college and had half-hearted ambitions as an actress before marriage followed pregnancy which followed a hot summer romance with Frank in a dingy apartment in the city. The Wheelers fight viciously after the play, Frank gets drunk, April sleeps alone on the sofa. A pattern is therefore established, which recurs with greater frequency and ferocity as the novel develops. The Wheelers judge themselves to be superior to the other suburbanites with whom they rub shoulders—more talented, more sophisticated, worthy somehow of a better and more interesting life. Heavy drinking and smoking are ubiquitous features of their marriage, as is the growing sense of alienation that creeps over both Frank and April.

Frank Wheeler drifts into an extra-marital affair with a young woman at the office. After the initial sex act, he finds her not particularly interesting, and with a guilt-ridden conscience, wonders whether he should break off the budding liaison. Returning home late and drunk after his encounter with Maureen Grube, Frank Wheeler finds in the pelting cold water of a shower the resolve not to tell his wife of his dalliance. There is a relative calm in their relationship, and April comes up with the idea that they should sell their house and move to Paris. She tells Frank that she's read in a magazine about how easy it is for Americans to get jobs in Europe and that the standard of living differential makes Americans wealthy in Old Europe. She offers to work part time to support the family—with the help of a domestic maid—while Frank wanders and explores ways to "find himself".

At first reluctant and skeptical of April's plan, Frank soon realizes it may be the best way to save his marriage and family, and agrees to go along. Just as soon as they've made up their minds and set a date to move, the top brass at Knox Business Machines become enamored of a sales brochure that Frank has produced and ask for him to produce more of the same, in anticipation of the coming computer age. Frank is shocked because he wrote the brochure in a what-the-hell frame of mind without really caring how it came out. Suddenly, he's a star at his company as his superiors tantalize him with the prospect of a bigger job and bigger salary. Torn in different directions,



Frank likes the recognition at the office and the prospect of more money but still finds the work dreadful and wants to keep his family together.

As Frank begins to feel more hopeful at work, his passive resistance to April grows and fuels their further alienation. Both drink too much; Frank begins to question April's sanity (but not his own) and suggests that she see a psychiatrist. More fights, standoffs, reconciliations and chilly disconnections ensue. Their children, a boy and girl, become confused and irritable about the on-again, off-again plans to go to Paris. In the midst of this marital meltdown, the Wheelers are approached by Helen Givings—the real estate agent who sold them their house—to ask whether they'd consider having their son, John, over for a visit one Sunday afternoon. John Givings is a patient at Greenacres, a state mental hospital, and is being allowed outside visits. Helen and Howard Givings, his parents, hope that pleasant encounters with people outside his family will help speed their son's recovery. John is a former mathematician who has been diagnosed as paranoid-schizophrenic; the electric shock treatments have erased all memories and abilities in the math area.

They agree, and John shows up with his parents looking every bit the mental patient with clothing that is obviously from some state institution, chain smoking, and guffawing awkwardly. After eating two plates of hors d'oeuvres, John drills the Wheelers about their plans to move to Europe, why and how they plan to accomplish the move. When Frank mentions the emptiness of their lives in America, John Givings nods in agreement. After he leaves with his parents, April and Frank agree that John is the only person who seems to understand their desire to move. And Frank quips that means they must be as crazy as he is.

April reveals to Frank a few days later that she's pregnant. After an initial shock, Frank tries to take a hopeful attitude that the new baby is good news and won't interfere with their plans. He then discovers a drugstore home abortion kit in the coat closet and confronts April. She tells him defiantly that she'll give herself an abortion whether he likes it or not. Frank asks April to reconsider the move to Europe and her attitude toward the pregnancy, suggesting that she's not altogether rational and urging her to see a psychiatrist. They go out for drinks and dancing at a local club with an older couple, Shep and Milly Campbell. Shep Campbell has burned with a secret desire for April since a similar outing the previous summer when they danced together, sweaty and inebriated. Through a complication involving parked cars at the nightclub, Shep gives April a ride home and Milly rides with Frank. In an instant, April and Shep are rolling in the back seat, making passionate love.

Frank breaks off his affair with Maureen and returns home to Connecticut, feeling pleased with himself. Tactfully, he tries to talk to April about their estrangement and why she has stopped sleeping with him. He confesses his affair and says it meant nothing to him, that he wants to strengthen his relationship with April. But she tells him directly that she doesn't love him, that she never did love him, and she couldn't care less who he sleeps with. John Givings, wacko mathematician, makes another appearance at the Wheelers' house with his parents, who've already told him they are not going to Europe and that April is pregnant. In his loopy fashion, John hones in on the real reason why



they've decided to stay, snarling condemnation at both of them and saying he's grateful he's not going to be their child. Frank, fists raised and trembling, angrily tells John to shut up.

Afterwards, Frank and April drink heavily and Frank goes into a rage, demanding to know why April didn't go through with the abortion. In a furious climax, he tells his wife that he wishes she'd done the abortion. She flees the house and disappears into the dark woods; Frank gives drunken, noisy chase but can't find her. He returns to his well-lit house, turns off the lights, and searches the woods for April. Frank sees a tiny point of light when she lights a cigarette, then nothing. He's on the phone talking to the babysitter when April cruises in, acting as if nothing had happened. When he awakens, Frank doesn't want to go to work but realizes he must. April, calm and caring, urges him to go and meet with his boss about his big promotion. She greets him with a hot breakfast, a smile and a kiss, and wishes him well at the office. April tries to write him a note, but crumples it and then burns it outside. When she returns to the house, she writes another brief note telling Frank not to blame himself, whatever happens. Then she gets out the abortion kit.

April, bleeding profusely, calls the rescue ambulance and is taken to the emergency room. Frank gets a call at work from Shep Campbell telling him that April is hospitalized following a miscarriage. The Campbells and Frank arrive at the hospital at the same time. As Shep is wandering in search of coffee, Frank gets the word from the doctor that April has died. Frank moves his children to Pittsfield, where they can stay with relatives, and he moves to New York City so he can be closer to work and visit his children on weekends. The long-darkened Wheeler home is finally sold to another young couple, who eventually hear the story of the Wheelers from their Realtor, Helen Givings.



Part 1: Chapter 1

Part 1: Chapter 1 Summary

The tone of *Revolutionary Road* is set in the first chapter as the Laurel Players stage their first production before an eager, expectant audience in suburban Connecticut in 1955. Somewhat tenuously, the New York director hired to work with the amateur actors gives them a pep talk the night before the opening, telling them they've got what it takes to put across a stunning performance. But a series of forgotten lines, backstage noises, onstage bumbling, and just bad acting doom the performance. The play is further handicapped by the fact that the leading man is sick and unable to act, so the director fills in because he knows the lines but does not fit the part physically at all. The opening does serve to introduce April Wheeler as a beautiful, poised young woman, possessed of a lot of stage presence.

During intermission, the members of the audience audience of other middle class suburbanites wander awkwardly around the high school building, disgruntled but unable to speak about the bad performance. They wander about, wiping perspiration from their hand onto their clothing while the cast members pace about backstage nervously wiping perspiration from their brows, wishing only to finish the second act and go home as fast as possible. Although no one wants to go back into the auditorium for the second half of the play, the suburbanites do return and politely sit through the play's conclusion, during which April Wheeler's acting descends to the level of the other cast members, or worse. The final conclusion is experienced as "an act of mercy".

Part 1: Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter serves to introduce most of the main characters and to set the mood for the novel, which begins in a tone of tragi-comedy then progresses steadily toward tragedy of the truest kind. From the vantage point of history, the reader is tempted to look at the failed first effort of a community theater in 1955 Connecticut with a kind of wise disdain. The reader of today wonders if these middle class participants know they are doomed and that everything they do to adjust the contours of their throttling suburban life is doomed as well. However, Richard Yates is up to something else. He wants the reader to come to know Frank and April Wheeler not as stereotypes of mid-century conformity and shallowness, but as human beings. Thus, the anguish of the community theater debacle causes tears through the reader's laughter as everything goes wrong onstage at *The Petrified Forest*. Then, poignantly, it becomes clear that this first chapter is nothing less than an omen of how badly people's lives, both onstage and off, can unravel in the featureless terrain of suburbia.



Part 1: Chapter 2

Part 1: Chapter 2 Summary

Frank Wheeler catches a glimpse of the girl he fell in love with as April acts out her part onstage, and his desire is white-hot as he makes his way backstage after the curtain comes down. He envisions giving her a great burst of love and approval, laughing off the disastrous production in a round of kisses and compliments. Instead, he finds a disgruntled, quarrelsome April Wheeler in her dressing room, in no mood to be humored. They begin snipping at each other and their bickering continues outside and into their car as April demands to be taken home without joining friends afterwards for a drink. The war of words escalates in the car until Frank pulls over and slides across the seat to try and take his wife in his arms. April, however, rebuffs him with a sharp "Leave me alone!"

Frank retaliates with a tirade about how it's not his fault she never became a real actress and that he's tired of being made a scapegoat. April, in a rage, jumps out of the car and starts walking down the dark highway. Frank follows, imploring her wildly to get back into the car. Finally, she turns back and rests for a moment against the front fender while her husband continues to rage, even threatening to hit her with his closed fist. Defeated, April returns to the car and they drive in silence back home. Once in bed, Frank tries to apologize to his wife but realizes the lump in their bed is nothing but piled up bedsheets—April has taken a blanket and gone to sleep on the couch downstairs.

When Frank approaches and tries to apologize and make up, April gives him only sarcasm and tells him, again, to leave her alone.

Part 1: Chapter 2 Analysis

Just as directly as the author presents us with the main characters, he rips away their social masks and lets us see the neurotic, quivering human beings inside complete with their fears and frustrations and complex relationships that result. In playing a role in the community theater production, April Wheeler seeks transcendence from those in her suburban neighborhood she considers inferior while at the same time exposing a critical vulnerability in her character—the need for approval. When the play bombs, April reacts angrily and withdraws from what instinctively seems to her as disapproval and embarrassment. Frank Wheeler, on the day of the play, entertains himself at "the dullest job in the world" with fantasies of returning home to happy, loving children, a cheerful and expectant wife who knocks them cold in her performance, and a deep sense of satisfaction and love. Instead, his early passion for April is reignited when he sees her onstage, and after rushing to connect with her he is driven back by her anger and bitterness. The resulting fight between the two is a vivid dramatization of how completely both have failed to have their needs met. By the end of the first chapter,

Frank and April have both withdrawn—from the company of friends and even from each other.



Part 1: Chapter 3

Part 1: Chapter 3 Summary

Frank Wheeler awakens with a debilitating hangover, having stayed up until 4 a.m. drinking alone after the fight with April. He hears a mechanical screeching from the backyard and realizes it's his wife cutting the grass he promised to cut the previous weekend. As he stumbles into his morning, Frank's booze-basted brain goes into flashback mode and the reader is given a lot of back story on the current situation. Frank can hardly remember his parents' faces, for example, without the aid of a photograph. He remembers his father's tough, always-competent hands that scorned him as a young boy trying to learn how to use woodworking tools; he remembers the pain of loneliness in his childhood; he emphasizes with April's own story of loneliness and lack of affection as a child. And he recalls how their love affair in a seedy shack near Greenwich Village turned serious when she got pregnant—years before they'd planned—which led to a fast marriage, then another child.

Frank recalls vividly how April wanted to get an abortion the first time she became pregnant and was far along in planning it before he knew anything about it. He recalls his anger at not being consulted, and her frank admission that she didn't want a child at that time. Frank admits to himself, through the haze of his hangover, that he never really wanted children either. In the midst of this lugubrious bout of self-absorption, Mrs. Givings—the real estate agent who sold them their house—shows up with a large box of sedum, which she describes as excellent ground cover for the yard. Unsure what to say, or even what sedum is exactly, he thanks her as Mrs. Givings tells him she loved the play, which makes him quite uncomfortable.

Frank gets to work placing stones in front of the house for a walkway. He uses gigantic stones dug up from behind the house, and must dig huge holes into which he rolls the stones—backbreaking labor. As he works, and tries to be pleasant to his children Jennifer and Michael as they pepper him with questions. He suddenly realizes that a thrust of his shovel comes close to his son's small, tennis-shoe clad foot. Frank loses his temper, yells at his kids, and they scatter for the house where Frank sees them taking refuge behind their mother's trousers.

Part 1: Chapter 3 Analysis

In Frank's flashbacks, some of the reasons for the tension in his marriage to April are revealed. Perhaps not ready for marriage or especially child rearing, their carefree affair has run aground on the realities of parenthood in suburbia. In fact, it seems that both April and Frank, whether consciously or unconsciously, hold each other responsible for their unhappiness because of their marriage and attendant responsibilities. Sensing this, April seeks escape in the community theater, but that failure only intensifies her sense of frustration and isolation. In Frank's self-pitying remorse during his hangover, he



searches for reasons why things are as they are and tries to find reasons in his own parents and in April's family, but none of those explanations seem to work. He stops short of finding fault within himself, however, and reverts to fault-finding with April. For her part, April has practically disappeared behind a wall of smoke caused by her resentment at life, which seems primarily focused on Frank. This is a very unhappy scenario, but one that explains the fights this couple can't seem to avoid.



Part 1: Chapter 4

Part 1: Chapter 4 Summary

On a quiet Sunday morning after their big fight, Frank Wheeler approaches April and tries to apologize once more. April shrugs him off coldly, telling him to take his hands off her and keep his voice down because of the children playing in the next room.

Frustrated and hurt, Frank finds temporary solace in reading the Sunday comics to his children but quickly becomes bored and irritable, wishing he could take a piece of furniture and hurl it through the large plate glass picture window. Morosely, he looks forward to the arrival of the Campbells—Shep and Milly—neighbors who usually make things more cheerful by their presence. However, this Sunday afternoon the drinks, cigarettes, and conversation fail to ignite the spirit of previous social encounters.

There is awkward talk of the failed play, in which Shep also had a role, and some half-hearted discussion of politics that falls flat—as does talk about the mindless neighbors and their barren lawns. The mention of Mrs. Givings brings forth a long scandalous disclosure by Milly Campbell that the Givings's son John had been a brilliant math student at MIT and was an instructor of mathematics at a university before he became insane. Expensive treatments at a private hospital in California were followed by an arrest by the Connecticut State Police for holding his parents hostage at their home, according to Milly Campbell, who adds that John Givings currently is a patient at Greenacres, the state mental hospital.

Sensing that this kind of gossip could ruin the entire evening, Frank tries to change the subject by launching into a passionate peroration about the numbness, the shallowness, the downright selfishness of people who come to the suburbs and leave the important issues of the world behind in a fog of denial. Frank rails against the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural desert that is America, arguing that psychoanalysis has become a kind of national religion. At the end of his diatribe, the others sit quietly, indifferently—unlike the howls of approval his outbursts usually provoke in the Campbells. Once again trying to rescue the evening, Frank talks about his war experiences and mentions tangentially that it's his thirtieth birthday. The Campbells show little interest, and April looks at him with pitying eyes. The next morning, after a sleepless night alone in his bed, Frank feels like "a man condemned to a very slow, painless death. He felt middle-aged".

Part 1: Chapter 4 Analysis

There seems to be no escape for Frank and April Wheeler from the suffocating banality of their middle class suburban life. Both are miserable and essentially blame each other for their unhappiness. Their relationship has become pro forma, at best, and Frank's irritation with his children is a sign of his displeasure with himself. Frank and April appear and act like biological specimens pinned to some kind of awful mounting board composed of middle class isolation and denial, bourgeoisie morality and sentiments,

and a vague yearning, an itch, for something different and better in their lives. Frank's sense of self-loathing only worsens when he realizes that the only thing he finds interesting about an evening spent with friends and neighbors is their gossip about another neighbor's insane son. With masterful strokes, the author has created living, breathing characters whose predicament fast becomes that of the reader. The reader sees and can understand the mechanisms by which this couple become estranged, as well as how their characters shape their behavior in response to this isolation. Escape, in the form of alcohol and day-dreaming, become substitutions for the sustaining benefits of true partnership.



Part 1: Chapter 5

Part 1: Chapter 5 Summary

The drab, ugly architecture of the Knox Building in New York City where Frank Wheeler works in sales promotion is an emblem of the drab, dull routines that workers inside go through daily. As Frank rides the elevator to the fifteenth floor, his mind races back to his first trip to this building as a young boy with his father, Earl Wheeler. The two had taken the train to New York from Pennsylvania so that his father could show him the home office and some of the sights of the city. Frank remembers that they have lunch with Earl Wheeler's boss, Oat Fields, a large, slovenly man who Frank Wheeler finds disgusting. After a long day in the city, they return home and Earl is crestfallen: the big promotion that he expected in New York has been shot down by a higher authority and he will remain on various field assignments until his retirement. Frank now sees that disappointment as the beginning of his father's decline in health, as well as his mother's, and recalls his mixed feeling on taking a job with Knox Business Machines, in part, because April was pregnant.

On this particular Monday, Frank's erotic obsession with a secretary named Maureen Grube becomes inflamed as they ride the same elevator to work and he fantasizes about removing her sweater and baring her breasts. He decides to make a pass at her, but determines to be careful and crafty in his approach. Before he can get to Ms. Grube, however, he is held prisoner in his own office as a co-worker named Jack Ordway recounts his drunken weekend exploits and encounters with his wife's relatives, using the ostensible "meeting" with Wheeler as a cover so he can recover from his hangover. Once Ordway leaves, Frank goes through his usual pile of papers trying to throw out, or file, as many as possible instead of reading them and taking action.

Frank fends off invitations from other co-workers to join them for lunch, then practices a ruse on Maureen Grube by asking her to retrieve copious files related to a brochure he wrote that has found favor with upper management. The ruse serves to keep her in the office, busy, in close proximity to him while the bulk of the workers leave for lunch. Once the floor is as empty as it will get, Frank steps into Ms. Grube's office, relieves her of her duties, and asks her to lunch. Further trying to conceal his actions from his co-workers, Frank gets a cab for himself and Maureen to take to a favorite restaurant. He sees other workers returning to the office as they leave, and wants to laugh out loud at them.

Part 1: Chapter 5 Analysis

Perhaps as an antidote to the dullness of his job, Frank dares himself to make a pass at the secretary Maureen Grube and then takes the dare. The reader gets a strong sense of how deeply dysfunctional the Knox Business Machine Co. is by the fact that Frank Wheeler can spend most of his morning running interference for a co-worker who has a horrible hangover. Frank's disdain for his job is evident, too, in the way that he cavalierly



tosses aside paperwork that comes his way. It's as if the job is nothing more than a game in which he tries to see how little work he can do and still collect his paycheck. Frank then decides to up the ante by making a move on Ms. Grube, who has been the object of his erotic fantasies for some time. Already Frank is in open rebellion against his job, which is to say, himself. Whether this behavior is pure self-destruction or merely an immature way of seeking escape is difficult to tell. In the context of this chapter, Frank's behavior seems to signal his desperation and the extent to which the monotony and boredom of his life have driven him to take risks as if the adrenaline rush will make him feel whole and alive again.



Part 1: Chapter 6

Part 1: Chapter 6 Summary

At an alcohol-fueled lunch, Maureen Grube tells her life story and sheds a few tears. She tells Frank of her early marriage at age eighteen because she couldn't stand her last name, that the marriage was soon annulled, then tells about the dead-end depressing job in her small hometown, and finally her escape to New York City so she could experience "life". Frank notes what he sees as affectations on her part, probably picked up from Norma, her older roommate who is twice divorced and more worldly-wise. As the alcohol flows, Maureen's affections and spirits seem to flag until the food is brought to their table; afterwards, her emotions seem like putty in Frank's hands.

He tells her stories about himself calculated to present an image of himself as a good and promising young family man, cast into a frustrating and disappointing marriage. Frank leaves the table briefly to call Maureen's supervisor at the office with a ruse that he has "borrowed" her for the afternoon to help him find some files and that she should not expect to see Maureen for the remainder of the day. After lunch, they stroll briefly about, but Frank worries that one of April's friends might see them near their old neighborhood and they go to her apartment, both quite inebriated. They couple in short order. Awkwardly, Frank tries to dismiss the afternoon as a pleasant interlude and nothing more; he gives Maureen a breezy farewell and goes late to his train home.

As he approaches his house, he notices that the curtains are drawn in the picture window and as he parks in the driveway, April rushes out to meet him and puts her hand on his arm to usher him inside. April says she missed Frank all day, is sorry for their fight, and loves him. Then she leads him inside and into the kitchen where she tells him to wait as she hands him a glass of whiskey and disappears. He hears furtive giggles in the darkened dining room, then the lights come on and everyone—Michael, Jennifer, and April—shout in joyous unison, "Happy Birthday!"

Part 1: Chapter 6 Analysis

The author wastes no time in showing the immediate effects of Frank Wheeler's self-indulgence—guilt, remorse, and a self-loathing that come from his unfaithfulness. Whereas the reader can probably sympathize with Frank's boredom and lack of meaning at his job with the Knox Business Machines Co., and can likely even "understand" how he seeks distraction with his secretary, whatever rationale he constructed for his actions quickly evaporates in a cloud of painful sorrow when Frank returns home to his loving family. It becomes evident that Frank's attempts at escape from his meaningless life only drive him deeper into absurdity and despair.



Part 1: Chapter 7

Part 1: Chapter 7 Summary

After eating birthday cake and putting the children to bed, Frank and April face each other in the living room. April asks his forgiveness, and he remorsefully asks her what he should forgive her for. She starts to go into a long explanation but he drags her bedroom, undresses her and starts to make love. Then he suddenly stops and goes to the shower to scrub off the "second skin" of Maureen Grube that sticks to him. Frank makes passionate love to April, and she stops him from going to sleep by addressing him in her theatrical voice, telling him how much she loves him and laying out her plan that they move to Europe for good. To Frank's protestations that he could never find a job there, April says it doesn't matter because she's prepared to work to support the family while he "finds himself." April believes it would be easy for her to find a job in a government agency in Paris, such as NATO and to have enough money to hire a servant to care for the children so Frank can do whatever he wants.

As they sip brandy in bed in the moonlight, Frank thanks her for her offer and tells her the idea is sweet but unrealistic. April counters that what's unrealistic is the notion that they should live in the suburbs and somehow be happy surrounded by shallow people with whom they have nothing in common. She apologizes again for being hard to live with since her involvement with the community theater, but tells her husband the experience had made her aware of what their problem is—as well as the solution. April says she doesn't want a husband who works himself into an early grave at a job he hates for a house and life in suburbia that means nothing to them. Europe, she assures him, will provide the correct cultural background for him to find a meaningful life for himself. April also recounts how she felt when she became pregnant with their first child, wanted to get an abortion but decided against it because of his protests. She admits they were not prepared to raise a family when it happened, but asks his complicity in now finding a new life.

As the night begins to become early morning and they finish the bottle of brandy, April asks Frank again in earnest if he'll go along with her plan and he agrees wholeheartedly.

Part 1: Chapter 7 Analysis

April identifies the cause of unhappiness for herself and Frank as being their lifestyle and location and has a remedy—the geographical cure often referred to as a classic symptom or alcoholic and addictive behavior. Tellingly, perhaps, she and Frank are consuming alcohol as they discuss her plan and envision their future in a utopian Europe. Frank, already tipsy and feeling profoundly guilty, is an easy sell because of how badly he feels about himself. For April, the geographical cure offers deliverance from her frustrations as an actress and as suburban housewife. Without exactly defining



why or how she and Frank are superior to those around them, April assumes they will be happier in France. At first Frank limply questions her idea, but accedes because he wants to keep April. Thus, both husband and wife are drawn further into their codependency and into the castle-in-the-air scheme hatched by a frustrated and unhappy woman.



Part 2: Chapter 1

Part 2: Chapter 1 Summary

With the decision to move to Paris, peace, serenity, and hope seem to return to the marriage of Frank and April Wheeler. He's more focused and comfortable at the office because he knows the end is in sight and because he wants to work hard to impress his wife, and happier at home because their love affair has been reignited. April is energized with tasks such as getting passports and looking into overseas employment. Their children, too, seem happier because their parents' late night fighting and loud noises have ceased. Frank makes what he thinks is a diplomatic break with Maureen Grube at the office, while trying to maintain a friendship. Perhaps because of his more relaxed frame of mind, Frank also seems better able to quickly dispatch accumulated paperwork as well as new communications. Contemporary readers will no doubt chuckle as Frank composes a letter on a Dictaphone recording device about what he sees as the future of the computer: keeping tabs on the Knox Business Machines parts inventory.

As they nurture and cherish their plan to move to Europe, April and Frank continue to ridicule the middle class folkways of their suburban neighbors and thank each other they're not like them. Having once boasted to April years earlier that he could speak fluent French from his time there after the war, Frank becomes sheepish at the possibility he'll be revealed as a fake. He therefore begins a subtle campaign to disabuse her of that notion, telling April that he can read signs and generally get around Paris. He reassures her that they will both pick up the language fast once they start living there. When he returns home Friday night, April informs Frank that through a scheduling snafu, they are booked for one night with the Campbells and another night with the Givings. Frank, who in another time probably would have protested, takes the news in stride since most of their life now seems dream-like and insubstantial to them both.

In an ironic way, the Wheelers become more and more like the shallow suburbanites they loathe as they progress further and further with their plans to leave the country.

Part 2: Chapter 1 Analysis

There is an atmosphere of unreality about life for April and Frank Wheeler after they decide to move to France. They become convinced that deliverance from their stultifying suburban life is at hand, and begin to act somewhat giddy. As if relieved of adult responsibilities, they move toward Paris as toward a resurrection. The black-and-white thinking that characterizes this state of mind is sometimes referred to as magical thinking, and is a strong component of the geographical cure; i.e., moving somewhere else to escape from one's reality. The fix that comes from such thinking and actions is not unlike the escape provided by drugs and alcohol, and does not last long.



Part 2: Chapter 2

Part 2: Chapter 2 Summary

As he polishes his shoes military-style, Shep Campbell ruminates about his life growing up as the son of a wealthy, divorced mother who sent him to prep schools and sought to civilize him into the cultivated upper classes of the East Coast. But Shep is a rebel and resents his mother's efforts to soften him. Instead, he chooses to go into the army, where he is a member of a famous airborne unit and receives a big promotion then attends a state college in the west to become a mechanical engineer. He wants nothing to do with the manners or mores of the upper class, contenting himself to identify with the blue collar working class folks on America. He meets Milly at college and has a son before they're married, then takes a job with a machinery plant near Phoenix, where he bakes in the desert heat and becomes disillusioned, sometimes picking fights with his wife, before he quits and the family moves to New York so Shep can decide whether he really wants to be an engineer. Meanwhile, his mother becomes ill and aged and spends the family fortune, which wasn't much money in the first place.

His shoe shine reverie is interrupted by his wife, Milly, asking about their planned evening with April and Frank Wheeler. As she talks to him, he thinks of April and the scent of her body on the night the two couples went to the Log Cabin to dance. Shep is in the grip of a fierce erotic obsession with April, a fellow actor in the doomed community theater production, and as his wife gets dressed for their social evening, Shep sits in the backyard alone, sipping a beer, and whispering under his breath, "I love you, April". When the Wheelers arrive, they seem quiet and withdrawn and Shep takes silent offense at what he interprets as Frank's snobbery in gazing pointedly at their books and furniture as if passing judgment. Finally, the tension is somewhat relieved when they announce, holding hands like newlyweds, that they're moving to France. Shep and Milly are both flabbergasted; Shep keeps asking Frank if he has a job there, and Frank answers no.

After their evening is over and the Wheelers leave, Shep tells his wife he considers their plan immature and poorly conceived, although he feels deeply hurt that April is leaving. When they go to bed, Shep lies awake with mad desire for April, to be in Paris with her, to feel and touch her skin.

Part 2: Chapter 2 Analysis

In his hyper-masculinity and cultivated redneck pose, Shep Campbell seems a stereotype of male chauvinism. Obsessed with April Wheeler, Shep carries on superficial conversations with his wife while he fantasizes about his neighbor even to the extent of forgetting that he has four sons. As a primitive male personality, Shep contrasts and conflicts with Frank Wheeler, the Columbia University graduate with undefined but pronounced intellectual pretensions. The Campbells, Milly and Shep,



discuss their neighbors as being "snobs", which probably reflects their discomfort with the better educated couple. When the Wheelers announce their plans to move to Europe, the Campbells dismiss the plan (to themselves) as childish as a way of rationalizing the feelings of inferiority they have when with the Wheelers. Firmly rooted in their middle class suburban life, the Campbells are the embodiment of what the Wheelers hope to escape.



Part 2: Chapter 3

Part 2: Chapter 3 Summary

Hard-working Realtor Helen Givings returns home after a long Saturday of showing and selling homes. A former stenographer at a machinery plant before she and her husband Howard moved to the suburbs in 1936, Helen is neat, orderly, and dedicated to her profession. Her home is clean and crisp with Currier and Ives prints on the walls and fresh wax on the cedar floors. As she fixes afternoon tea for her almost-deaf husband, Mrs. Givings reflects on her life before and after moving to her Connecticut home and feels satisfied with herself and her decisions. Sixty-seven-year-old Howard Givings looks and acts older than his years; his hands shake as he takes his cup of tea. She tells him there is no cake because she's going to the Wheelers' house for a drink and a visit after an early supper.

As they sip their tea, Helen Givings rehearses in her mind how she hopes the visit will go: pleasant conversation with the Wheelers as she mentions her mathematician son John, currently a patient at the nearby Greenacres psychiatric hospital, and asks if he might come for a visit. She's rehearsed the event for some time since getting approval from her son's psychiatrist for him to socialize outside the Givings' home, on "neutral territory". She recalls how open and inviting April Wheeler had been when she first brought up the subject and told her son's story. But Helen still isn't sure how to respond if the Wheelers press for details about the nature of his illness, and is apprehensive when April and Frank welcome them inside.

Mrs. Givings is surprised to find the Wheelers sitting calmly in their living room, having cocktails and chatting, as if they would go on in that way whether they had guests or not. When she raises the subject of a visit with the Wheelers, both April and Frank are extremely generous and suggest they come back with John the following Sunday. The pair then tell Helen Givings about their plans to move to Europe, which leaves her wide-eyed. By the time she returns home to Howard, Helen isn't sure she wants to introduce John to them because they will be leaving and their son needs permanent friends. Mrs. Givings judges the Wheelers' plan "unsavory" and weeps as she prepares for bed. She continues talking on and on about the Wheelers, but Howard, his hearing aid removed, is asleep.

Part 2: Chapter 3 Analysis

Helen Givings becomes a touchstone for measuring the depth of frustration and unhappiness that awaits American suburbanites in the 1950s. Her carefully-arranged, orderly world that revolves around real estate and taking care of her rapidly aging husband and institutionalized son comes unraveled after she learns of the Wheelers' plans to move to Europe. Hoping to establish some kind of friendship between the Wheelers and her son, John, because they are all in their late twenties, Mrs. Givings



tells her husband that April and Frank Wheeler must be unstable because of their plans to go to France, and thus they would not be good people for her mentally-ill son to become acquainted with. As she weeps uncontrollably after her visit with the Wheelers, Helen Givings' sorrow reaches all the way back to childhood rejections and she can clearly see the compromises she's made to have the life she has. There is a suggestion that part of her grief may be the realization that perhaps she, too, might have been better off choosing a different path in life.

Part 2: Chapter 4

Part 2: Chapter 4 Summary

Frank Wheeler struggles with the question of who to tell—and when—of his planned departure from the Knox Business Machines Co. At lunch with his co-worker Jack Ordway, Frank begins to realize that a lot of the business plans and meetings in which he participates concern future events that he won't be around for. After telling his friend of his plans, Ordway quizzes him on what he plans to do in Paris, asking if he's planning on writing a book, or painting. Resenting the question, Frank answers with a question of his own, borrowed from his wife, whether writers and artists are the only people entitled to a life of their own. Ordway asks Wheeler why he needs to go to Europe to "discover" himself and what he wants to do with his life; Frank answers that it's because he believes no one discovers anything on the fifteenth floor of the Knox Business Machines Co. As they return from lunch, Frank sees other co-workers strolling about in the sun, taking their last few minutes of freedom, and realizes that his freedom lies just two months ahead. Secretly, he delights in knowing that he'll soon be gone.

Frank's boss, Ted Bandy, asks him to come in his office to meet Bart Pollock, a large, genial man who is general sales manager for electronics. Pollock explains that he is simply crazy about the brochure Frank has written, *Speaking of Production Control*, and wants him to produce a whole series of them to support the sales effort. When he imagines telling April about the experience later, Frank imagines saying it only proves what "idiots" the people at his company are. In his imagination, April argues that's not the case, that his superiors recognize his good work, and he should also recognize when he's done a good job. Frank pictures protesting that he doesn't want to excel at such drivel, and April reminding him that's why they're moving to Europe—but in the meantime there's nothing wrong with accepting their praise.

But when he comes home and mentions it to April, she doesn't hear him at all because her mind is so far away.

Part 2: Chapter 4 Analysis

Frank Wheeler begins to experience conflicting feelings about his work. On the one hand, he's happy to be planning to leave for Europe, but unsure when to announce his departure. He seems to derive a certain amount of secret pleasure at knowing that he's leaving while most of his co-workers haven't a clue. He's ambivalent about praise from his boss for doing a good job on a project because he likes the praise but basically thinks the project and the praise are meaningless. April's apparent withdrawal from the events of the day surprises Frank, who imagines them discussing what happened. A sense of separation and disconnection between April and Frank becomes evident.



Part 2: Chapter 5

Part 2: Chapter 5 Summary

The Wheelers' daughter, Jennifer, becomes emotional at the thought of packing up and moving to Europe, breaks down, and cries into April's lap as Frank stands quietly at the door. April tries to comfort her by assuring Jennifer that the move to Europe will be for a very long time but that doesn't seem to work. April sends her outside to play with her brother, Michael. Frank Wheeler tells his wife he's concerned that the move might be too much for the children, and April replies brusquely that they'll get over it. Yes, Frank agrees, but asks if it also makes sense to break their arms and ignore them just because they'll eventually get over it. April and Frank have their first fight in weeks. On the next morning, a rainy Sunday, they realize that John Givings—the mathematician and mental patient—is to come to their house for a visit in the afternoon. They take the children to stay with their neighbors, the Campbells, for the afternoon, and prepare for the visit.

Helen and Howard Givings appear at their door and come inside from the rain while their son stands in the rain on the driveway, trying to light a cigarette. Once he gets it lit, he bounces quite nimbly inside too. John Givings strolls stiffly about their house, inspecting everything and offering words of approval. He asks for a glass full of sherry with ice cubes, takes two large drinks, then sets the glass down for the rest of the afternoon while he crams himself full of cocktail sandwiches. His clothes are rumpled and tattered, despite his mother's efforts to get him to wear new clothes she's bought for him. Finally, when he gets irritated with his mother's nervous chatter, John suggests that he and the Wheelers go outside for a while. John asks Frank if he's a lawyer, explaining that he wants to find one, presumably to challenge his confinement at Greenacres.

When Frank agrees with John that his job sounds stupid and meaningless, he also divulges their plans to move to Europe. John heartily agrees that their plan makes sense and explains that the thirty-five electroshock treatments he's had have wiped any mathematical ability clean from his brain and left him a kind of blank slate. When April remarks that John's situation sounds terrible, he mocks her and tells Frank that his wife is a very feminine creature. They go back inside the house, have a superficial conversation with John's parents about old radio shows, and then the Givings leave. April compliments Frank on how well he handled the encounter, and says John seems like the only person who understands their desire to move to France. As he thinks about going back to work, Frank feels a deep sadness and says he doesn't want to go to work on Monday. April suggests he stay home, but he answers that he needs to go.

Part 2: Chapter 5 Analysis

Frank Wheeler's sense of ambivalence about their planned move to Europe deepens as his daughter becomes emotional about the prospect while April maintains a steely



determination. After being united in their gung-ho support for their plan for several weeks, Frank's hesitation irritates April and they quarrel. A bizarre Sunday afternoon visit from a mental patient, the son of the Realtor who sold them their house, does nothing to brighten the Wheelers' spirits or to stiffen Frank's resolve. By the end of the visit, he's depressed about the prospects of moving to Europe as well as the prospects of returning to work at Knox Business Machines. John Givings, the mental patient, has lost his mathematical abilities to electroshock treatment and is stuck in a helpless, dependent state. The Givingses, too, seem stuck in their suburban life of real estate and superficial social encounters. It seems, to Frank at least, that he and April are just as stuck as those around them.



Part 2: Chapter 6

Part 2: Chapter 6 Summary

Bart Pollock, general sales manager for the electronics division of Knox Business Machines, takes Frank out to lunch at a nearby hotel and Frank immediately recognizes it as the same hotel where, years earlier, he had lunch with his father and Oat Fields. Pollock wines and dines Frank, flatters him, and when he learns of Frank's plans to leave the company, seeks to lure him into a high-paying position. The chapter unfolds in a series of flashforwards/flashbacks in which the conversation between Frank and Pollock is juxtaposed with his account that he later gives to April and her reactions. Pollock praises the direct and clear style of Frank's sales brochure, then orates at length on his philosophy of salesmanship. As Frank becomes more inebriated listening to Pollock, he interrupts to ask whether Pollock perhaps remembers his father, Earl Wheeler.

As the alcohol-fueled conversation sputters along, Pollock realizes that Earl Wheeler had worked his entire career in field offices in Pennsylvania while nurturing hopes of a transfer to the home office in New York. Frank tells Pollock that, when he visited New York with his father, Earl Wheeler expected a promotion to the home office from Oat Fields and was crushed when it didn't happen. Pollock dismisses it with a shrug, but flatters Frank's ego by telling him that one way to honor his father would be to accept the higher-paying position that he wants to offer him as part of a select team he's assembling to usher in the computer era. Frank is pleased by the recognition but says he's committed to his decision to leave. Pollock asks him to consider the offer and, if he decides later to take it, to have another chat. Frank agrees, but worries how to tell April that he's even agreed to reconsider. When he gets home, April doesn't feel like talking, nor does she feel like talking the next night.

The next night Frank notices April pacing about the kitchen nervously, and asks her what's wrong. Shocked that her husband hasn't noticed, April tells him she's pregnant. Frank is stunned, but happy, as he takes her in his arms. April is disconsolate and tells him there's no way they can go to Europe if they have the baby. But Frank tells her about his job offer and says they might benefit by waiting a couple of years so they can save some money for the move to Europe. April will have none of it, and asks Frank how he can ever find himself if they have another child. He answers with assurance and a newfound manliness that that's his business. Washing himself before bed, he discovers a box in the linen closet with a dark pink bulb at the end of a syringe.

Frank confronts April with the abortion kit and asks angrily what she plans to do with it. April defiantly tells him she's going to use it to terminate the pregnancy and there's nothing he can do about it.

Part 2: Chapter 6 Analysis

April and Frank take sharply divergent paths once more, after a period of being united in their plan to move to Europe. Frank finds that he likes the success he's experiencing at work and the prospect of more money, and is willing to wait a couple of years before making the move so they can have another child. April, who sees her pregnancy as a disaster, frets that having another child would put their dream on permanent "hold" and determines to induce an abortion. The relative peace and serenity of their marriage in recent months had fled and they are, once again, individuals alone and struggling both inside and outside their home with nothing to guide them but their own self-will.



Part 3: Chapter 1

Part 3: Chapter 1 Summary

The Wheelers consult the calendar to figure out the date of conception, then figure out that they have several weeks in which to make a decision about the self-induced abortion. In that period of time, Frank Wheeler goes on an all-out campaign to change his wife's mind. There are long discussions in exotic restaurants and on long drives through the woods and in New York as they try to regain the upper hand on what has become a hot emotional issue and to behave like the chic, sophisticated adults they believe themselves to be. April repeatedly asks Frank how he would feel even if they were able to take long vacations someday in Europe with his income as a successful employee of Knox Business Machines; she wonders whether Frank wouldn't feel that he'd somehow been forced to spend the prime years of his manhood in a meaningless job that he hated. And Frank counters, with his growing sense of self-confidence, that's something he'll worry about, and he especially wouldn't want to look back and say that he was able to find himself in Europe because April had committed a "criminal mutilation" of herself.

Meanwhile, Frank goes to lengths to project a strong masculinity of the sort that first drew April to him, to the extent that their life becomes like another courtship. Frank consciously walks a certain way, lights his cigarettes a certain way, keeps his voice at a low pitch and demonstrates his masculine mastery of everyday situations by hiding his feelings and acting out a macho role. Despite his orchestrations, they still fight over April's statement that Frank is a more moral person than her because he seems better able to accept her pregnancy. They quarrel over the word moral and whether it means the same as conventional, with April confessing she really doesn't know the difference and Frank explaining that to him it simply means the ability to face their situation as responsible adults. Frank suggests that April seems to be acting out some kind of compulsive behavior pattern and should see a psychiatrist. Then they fight over how the psychiatrist will be paid for.

Their predicament is temporarily suspended by the arrival of John Givings for another Sunday visit with the Wheelers. The former mathematician asks April and Frank whether they have time before leaving for Europe to help him find a lawyer who can tell him whether the inmates of mental institutions have any legal rights. Givings then delivers a strange soliloquy in which he discusses his own mental condition and admits he probably was insane when he menaced his mother and she called the state police to have him taken to Greenacres. His soliloquy is interrupted when he sees his father approach the house; John Givings's parents take him into their car, apologize, and leave the Wheelers.

April and Frank enjoy a kind of truce until after the children are put to bed, as they read the Sunday paper. Just at bedtime, April begins a discussion about whether a woman's refusal to have a child—as in abortion—is really a refusal or denial of womanhood.



Frank replies that he really doesn't know but recalls reading something in college about the psychological theory of penis envy among women, and wonders if that might play a role. As they go to bed, April asks about finding a psychiatrist and agrees to see one. Frank remains silent but schemes in his head about ways to get April through the next eleven days when she will be able to induce an abortion.

Part 3: Chapter 1 Analysis

The relationship between April and Frank shifts in this chapter to one of joyful cooperation and partnership to a real power struggle, as each tries to gain control over the other. The reason for the power struggle is April's pregnancy, which she sees as a disaster and a potential terminator of their trip to Europe and Frank's efforts to "find" himself. Her solution is to self-induce an abortion, according to a technique she learned from a school friend. Frank, on the other hand, feels more comfortable with himself and in his job since the idea of moving to France first developed, and is willing to stay put, have the third child, and save some money for a future trip to Europe. He is anxious and upset about the possibility that April will give herself an abortion and tries to talk her out of it and into seeing a psychiatrist. Finally, at the end of the chapter, Frank seems to have won a fragile victory as April agrees to see a psychiatrist, but Frank knows he must maintain his vigil until the danger period for an abortion is past.



Part 3: Chapter 2

Part 3: Chapter 2 Summary

The Wheelers get varying reactions as they announce they've decided not to move to France. Their children, Michael and Jennifer, are puzzled and confused. Jennifer, the older child, becomes sullen as she tries to figure out what's going on, partly because Frank and April have decided not to tell the children about her pregnancy until later. Shep and Milly Campbell display mixed reactions, too. Milly is glad that the Wheelers are staying but concerned that it's a disappointment for them; Shep is disabused of a fantasy he's created of April returning in ten years as an old and haggard woman after supporting her family for a decade—a protective device to blunt his desire for her. Frank's coworkers are pleased, and Bart Pollock praises his decision and tells him he's on track to bigger and better things at Knox Business Machines. Helen Givings, the Realtor, is shocked at the news but tells the Wheelers she's pleased while showing signs of stress that their house will be taken off the market.

Frank awakens on a bright August morning to realize that this is the last day, according to April's calendar, when she could successfully perform an auto-abortion. Gleefully, he tells April, who seems unenthusiastic. When he asks if she has any regrets, she replies that it would be a little too late for her to have any. When he awakens the next morning, Frank feels a sense of dread rather than relief as he realizes that he really doesn't really want another child either. Frank works harder on his promotional brochure, stays later at the office until one afternoon he encounters Maureen Grube after most of the other employees have gone home. They speak to each other in erotically charged voices, and Frank approaches her with "the loose, almost sleepy gait of a man who knows exactly what he's doing".

The tension at the end of this chapter propels the reader quickly into the next, as the author employs the narrative device of suspense.

Part 3: Chapter 2 Analysis

April and Frank, having played their manipulative games with each other about the trip to Europe and her pregnancy, seem poised to both lose whatever trust or honesty remains in their marriage. Frank tries to pat himself on the back for having out-manuevered April in her plan to induce an abortion, but then discovers afterwards that he doesn't really want a child either. The path to riches and status at his office seems more littered with obstacles now than before he made up his mind to stay, and in something like defeat he once again casts a lustful eye toward Maureen Grube. April, perhaps trying to be the good wife who defers to her husband, very tentatively agrees to his plan to stay in Connecticut, but seems remote and detached from her husband, her interactions with Frank now tinged with a note of bitter sarcasm.



Part 3: Chapter 3

Part 3: Chapter 3 Summary

Bored with each other's company, the Campbells and the Wheelers head out for an evening of dancing and drinking at Vito's Log Cabin, where a delinquent drummer who thinks he's Gene Krupa leads a retro jazz unit that plays swing music. It's a popular teenage hangout on Route 12 because couples can meet away from supervising adults, be served alcohol illegally, and because its spacious parking lot afford lots of dark spaces. In the rowdy atmosphere of the tavern, April remains her aloof self while Frank gets high and decides to stop worrying about whether she's happy any more. The loud gyrations of the drummer remind him of the erotic moves of Maureen Grube, and he smiles happily as the drinking and dancing progresses. Eventually, Milly Campbell gets sick after dancing with Frank and returns from the bathroom to announce that she needs to go home.

All four walk outside to the parking lot, past couples necking in cars, to discover that the Campbell's car is blocked in place because of other cars parked around it. In their booze-addled state, Frank and Shep try to figure out who should drive which car when and where. April coolly interjects that Frank should take Milly home so they can both release their babysitters, then she and Shep will return later once his car is liberated. Off they drive, and as he watches the red lights of the Wheelers' car disappear, Shep marvels briefly how it is that he's alone with April; he searches her face for any signs of complicity but finds none. He takes her in his arms and they dance and drink more until he's quite plastered. He checks to see if the car is still blocked in and is pleased to find it is, so he returns to April. She tells Shep of her lonely childhood and young adulthood, that she missed out on a lot of experiences young people usually have, such as love affairs.

During a break in the music, Shep and April go outside to the parking lot to talk wait until the car is cleared. They begin kissing in the parking lot, and by the time they're inside the car they're ripping each other's clothes off. Afterwards, Shep begins to mumble about his love for April but she hushes him, tells him to take her home and not to discuss their affair. She doesn't want to discuss love, April says, because she doesn't know who Shep is; or for that matter, she doesn't know who she herself is, either.

Part 3: Chapter 3 Analysis

The estrangement between April and Frank Wheeler that is fueled by conflicting agendas about whether to move to Europe and/or to have another child is manifested by April's adulterous behavior that mirrors her husband's. Shep Campbell, despite his longstanding crush on April, is probably someone she could never love. But, under the influence of alcohol and the right opportunity, she gives herself to him perhaps as a way to feel better about herself, to feel more desirable. The depth of her confusion is evident

at the end of the chapter when she confesses to Shep Campbell that she can't let anyone know who she is because she doesn't have a clue herself.



Part 3: Chapter 4

Part 3: Chapter 4 Summary

Having completed three more marketing brochures for Bart Pollock, Frank Wheeler confidently decides it's time for him to break off his affair with Maureen Grube. As he gets off the bus in her New York neighborhood on a Friday afternoon, he is approached by a brassy young woman on the street who identifies herself as Norma Townsend, Maureen's roommate, and asks Frank if they can have a chat. Seated at a nearby coffee bar, Norma grills Frank about his involvement with Maureen and tells him she's miffed that Maureen canceled plans to go to Cape Cod with her and some friends so she could be with Frank. Norma tells Frank that Maureen is a sweet young girl who's been through some hard times and needs friendship—not an affair with a married man. Frank listens, then tells her she's "a meddling, tiresome woman, possibly a latent lesbian and very definitely a pain in the ass". Frank storms out of the bistro and chuckles with delight as he watches the manly, awkward Norma hailing a cab to the airport.

When he encounters Maureen in her apartment, she asks Frank if the front door is locked, then proceeds to do a nude dance for him, writhing and moving suggestively in a sort of bawdy house hula. She pulls him to the bed and gives him a deep sexual kiss. Once he extricates himself, Frank soberly tells her their affair is over at about the same time as the air fills with the smell of burning veal scallopini. Frank tries to soften the blow, but Maureen orders him out of her apartment. He gets drunk on the train ride home, trying to expunge the memory of Maureen. By Sunday afternoon, Frank is ready to begin letting go of the whole affair and he approaches April in a conciliatory fashion, telling her that his big promotion—with plenty of money for obstetrics and psychiatry—is ensured. April seems only mildly interested, and when Frank asks why she hasn't been sleeping with him, April tells him it's because she doesn't love him and never has.

Frank decides to tell her about Maureen, stressing that she is "just some girl in New York" and not mentioning that they work together, and that in any event it's all over. April asks him why he did it. Frank tries to explain that it may have been because his masculinity was threatened by her talk of an abortion, or some other "neurotic" reason. April answers that she doesn't care about the fact he had an affair or even why, because she doesn't care about him. She asks why he told her, wondering whether it's because he wants to provoke some kind of jealous reaction on her part.

Frank becomes angry and follows her around the house with demands that April admit she loves him.



Part 3: Chapter 4 Analysis

All game-playing and role-playing evaporates as the Wheelers' marriage begins quickly to unravel. Trying to do the right thing, Frank breaks off his affair with Maureen Grube and expects to settle into a comfortable suburban domesticity with April as they await the birth of their third child. But he finds April is a deeply unhappy woman, stuck in a role she doesn't want with a man she no longer loves. Once she admits to Frank she has never loved him, neither a trip to Europe nor a promotion that will keep them in Connecticut seems adequate to bring them happiness, and both stare into the dark abyss that closes in on them—April with a kind of detached resignation and Frank with anger and a degree of panic.



Part 3: Chapter 5

Part 3: Chapter 5 Summary

Howard and Helen Givings drive to Greenacres to bring their son, John, home for another Sunday visit with the Wheelers. On the drive from the mental hospital John is aggressively rude toward his mother, mocking her and demanding to know exactly why the Wheelers have decided not to move to France. Mrs. Givings says she doesn't feel it's any of her business to probe and find out exactly why, but when they arrive at the Wheelers' house, John assumes a prosecutorial tone in grilling Frank about the issue. Frank moves closer to April and says it should be obvious why they made such a decision; Mrs. Givings, ever the Realtor, offers to find them a bigger house for their soon-to-be-enlarged family. But John persists with his questions, asking whether people in Europe have babies.

Mr. and Mrs. Givings both try to quiet their son, but he persists in transgressing every social norm of politeness and continues with his interrogation as to why the Wheelers changed their minds. Frank hints that it's because they decided they couldn't afford the move, after all, and John seems to accept that explanation for a moment, but then rejects it and demands to know the real reason. He suggests that Frank succumbed to April's desire for another child and doesn't have the masculinity to stand up for himself. Frank becomes enraged and threatens to pummel John if he doesn't shut up. Mrs. Givings protests that her son is not well, but Frank says that doesn't matter and he'll punch his lights out.

John continues with his sarcastic insults, turning to April and telling her that she and Frank probably deserve each other. Howard and Helen Givings take their son by the arms and try to gently move him out of the house and back into the car. John goes along peacefully, then turns and yells back to the Wheelers that he'd grateful he'll not be their next child.

Part 3: Chapter 5 Analysis

Out of the mouths of babes and madmen often comes the truth, so the saying goes, and this encounter with John Givings, the schizophrenic mathematician, mortifies his parents, Howard and Helen Givings, and enrages his hosts, Frank and April Wheeler. By asking obvious questions that would never be asked in normal social intercourse by normal people, John Givings exposes the raw nerves and emotions at the heart of the Wheelers' marriage. April, in typically cool fashion, more or less ignores the whole outburst, but Frank offers explanations and finally threats of bodily harm as John persists in demanding answers to the most intimate, personal questions. Jarring and unpleasant in the extreme, the encounter does serve to put into black and white terms the precise condition of health of the Wheelers' marriage, which is moribund.



Part 3: Chapter 6

Part 3: Chapter 6 Summary

After the Givingses leave, Frank Wheeler pours himself a stiff drink and practically invites April to argue with him about whether his behavior was inappropriate, and whether he should have fought with John Givings. Frank asks her if she can see why John's rantings about them and their marriage are so wrong, and April answers that she really can't. Clutching his hands into fists and shaking them furiously, Frank says it's wrong because John is insane. Neck veins bulging and voice rising out of control, he continues his peroration, raising the real question of who and what is sane or insane. April laughs at him and asks whether he thinks she's crazy because she doesn't love him. Frank answers that she's not crazy and does love him; April repeats that she loathes the very sight of him and that if he touches her she'll scream. Frank approaches and touches April; she screams and he then tears into her with a vengeance of cursing and name-calling. His tirade builds into a drunken rage of abuse, and Frank demands to know why she hadn't had an abortion while she could. April then flees outside in the darkness and climbs up the hill into the woods behind their house.

Frank sits alone in the quiet house with all the lights off, looking in the direction of where April is hiding in the dark. He watches as a cigarette glows in the darkness, moving to and from her mouth, then finally is extinguished. April slips inside, goes to the phone, and calls Milly Campbell to ask if their children can stay the night since it's late and they're too tired to come and pick them up. Suddenly the living room lights go on and April and Frank stare bug-eyed at each other; April quietly goes to the sofa and lies down, with her back facing Frank. He takes the whiskey bottle and goes to bed alone in their bedroom and dreams or fantasizes that April is beside him, holding his hand and soothing him. When he awakens alone, he realizes that he must go to work even though he doesn't want to. Frank drags himself to the kitchen, where a perky April asks whether he'd like his eggs scrambled or fried.

They have a pleasant chat about his work while they eat breakfast, as if nothing had happened the night before. April seems very attentive to her husband's every word and genuinely interested in his work. Amazed, Frank for the first time opens up to her completely as he wonders whether they may have finally gotten all the fighting out of their systems and have nothing to talk about except the surface pleasantries of life. Pleasantly delighted with their morning, Frank gives April a gentle kiss and they wish each other a good day as he leaves for work to learn more about the big promotion that Bart Pollock has in mind for him.

Part 3: Chapter 6 Analysis

The juxtaposition of John Givings's ranting and penetrating questions about the Wheelers' marriage with Frank Wheeler's drunken tirades afterwards raises quite clearly



the issue of who is insane and who is sane. When Frank tells April that the definition of insanity is the inability to love, she collapses in hysterical laughter which only triggers more rage on his part. The couple—with their children staying at the Campbells' house—gets into an apocalyptic fight that leaves them both emotionally raw and bleeding inside. But, strangely, the next day everything is calm and sunny as they go about their morning rituals and have breakfast together. At this point, the reader may wonder whether sanity has been restored to the Wheelers, or whether they've both pushed each other into a new level of insanity.



Part 3: Chapter 7

Part 3: Chapter 7 Summary

April Wheeler waves a smiling farewell to Frank as he drives off to work in an old Ford, finds a spot to sit in the sun, and splashes cold water on her face before calling Milly Campbell to tell her either she or Frank will be coming by to pick up the children today or tomorrow. Although her gums ache from too many cigarettes the night before, she lights another cigarette and retrieves the crumpled copy of a letter she tried to write to her husband during the night in which she declares there's no love between them and they both know it. Instead of finishing the letter, she takes it outside to an incinerator and burns it, sits down and has a flashback to her childhood when her itinerant, long-absent father comes for a rare visit to see her where she lives with aunts and uncles. She's ecstatic, and asks in natural childlike fashion if he's brought her a present. Her father, whom she adores, scratches around, looks in his car, then opens one of his suitcases and pulls out a bottle of White Horse whiskey. Attached to the neck of the bottle is a tiny white horse, which he removes and gives to her before leaving.

After the letter is burned, April returns to the house, pulls out a fresh sheet of paper and writes a brief note: "Dear Frank, Whatever happens please don't blame yourself." She takes her abortion kit out and puts the syringe in boiling water on the kitchen stove, then she goes to the bathroom and prepares for the abortion by laying out towels and writing down the phone number of the hospital on a piece of paper propped up next to the phone. As she waits for the syringe to become sterilized, she remembers what her parents, aunt and uncle told her: anything that is completely honest and true must be done alone.

Part 3: Chapter 7 Analysis

The reader gets a revealing glimpse of April's broken relationship with her father in the flashback. Evidently, he was a remote figure, probably an alcoholic like her husband, someone with whom she had great difficulty in making any kind of lasting emotional bond. April, despite her apparent grip on the practical side of life, is revealed as a very fragile and lonely person. Her black and white thinking and ritualistic preparations for the abortion are eerily suggestive of the kind of behavior that often precedes suicide. April's state of mind seems very foreboding and dark as the reader watches this fragile creature who admittedly does not know herself or her own mind struggle to cope with what has become, for her, an intolerable situation.



Part 3: Chapter 8

Part 3: Chapter 8 Summary

Milly Campbell hears a siren coming from the direction of the Wheelers' house, and has a strong sense that April is in trouble. Mrs. Givings calls to ask Milly what happened at the Wheelers' where she's seen the ambulance, but can get no one to answer the phone. Extremely agitated if for no other reason than the fact the Wheelers' children are still at her house, Milly Campbell calls her husband Shep at work to see if he can help. Shep makes phone calls to the hospital, the ambulance company, and around town with military efficiency and finds that, yes, April Wheeler has been admitted to emergency for uncontrolled bleeding following a miscarriage. He calls his wife to inform her, then calls Frank Wheeler in New York and gets him out of a conference to give him the news. Shep tries to reassure Frank that April is okay and getting good medical care, and plans to meet him at the Stamford train station when the next train comes in from New York.

At the hospital, Shep tries to reassure himself that everything is fine as Frank is whisked away by a nurse for a private talk. When Frank returns, he tells Shep that the doctor said the fetus was gone by the time the ambulance arrived, that she'd already lost a lot of blood, and that they had to operate to remove the placenta which caused more bleeding that they were now trying to control as April lay unconscious. Shep leaves for a moment to go to the bathroom and fetch them some coffee, and is elsewhere in the hospital when April dies. When he returns, he sees the empty corridor, then Frank being led out on the arms of two of the doctors, talking about hemorrhaging and the shock to April's system of the whole experience.

Shep takes Frank from the hospital and they drive aimlessly about for hours, sucking on a whiskey bottle, Frank repeating over and over the story of how sweet and pleasant April had been that very morning. Frank then follows that observation with the opinion that April took her own life deliberately. Milly Campbell, chewing on her handkerchief with grief and anxiety, awaits the return of her husband after putting the Wheeler children to bed early. When she sees Frank with his hollowed-out expression Milly begins to weep and runs to another room. Shep and Milly decide to take turns sitting with Frank, and when Milly returns to the kitchen a few hours later, her husband is passed out with his head on the table and Frank Wheeler is missing.

Frank, in a fit of drunken madness, has run through the dark and muddy woods from Revolutionary Hill Estates to his own house, where he finds that April has left no more mess behind than a few drops of blood from the bathroom to the telephone and back. There are a couple of blood and water soaked towels in the tub. After cleaning up, Frank wanders about the house turning lights on and then off, finding it impossible to believe April is dead with her presence so real and vivid in their house. He sits in her clothes closet, where he can smell and touch her clothes, until he hears the Campbells drive up his driveway, enter the house, and call his name. Then April's presence evaporates and she is gone.

Part 3: Chapter 8 Analysis

In what seems an inevitable but disturbing end, April Wheeler induces a miscarriage that leads to her death. Frank is convinced that she took her own life, knowing the risks of performing an abortion on herself. But he can't believe that she's really dead, and his heartbreaking search for her ghost in their house while their children sleep, unaware, at the Campbells' house, is perhaps symbolic of his search to connect with her while she was still living.



Part 3: Chapter 9

Part 3: Chapter 9 Summary

In the aftermath of April's death, Millie Campbell recounts numerous times the final resolution of the Wheeler family: the fact that their children moved in with Frank's brother and wife in Pittsfield while Frank lived in New York City and worked for the new firm of Bart Pollack Associates, a computer spinoff from Knox Business Machines, and saw his children on weekends. Millie recalls how nervous she was at the closing of the sale of the house of Revolutionary Road to another young couple named Brace, and how everything worked out fine with Frank's pleasant demeanor. Hearing his wife rattle on yet another time about the Wheelers to the Braces, Shep Campbell leaves his living room, heads for the kitchen and makes himself a stiff drink, snarling and cursing under his breath about how Frank had been turned into pleasant, empty shell of a man since April's death. With spring approaching, Shep recalls, too, the previous spring and working with April as a cast member of *The Petrified Forest* for the Laurel Players. Recalling April and her special way of moving onstage, Shep thrusts his fist into his mouth and weeps alone in the darkness until he decides to stop before he begins to embellish his pain and thus corrupt it.

Haunted at first by the thought that the visit of her insane son, John Givings, had some connection with April's demise, Helen Givings has a slow and painful recovery. She takes small comfort in the fact that she and her husband, Howard, had decided after his last visit to the Wheelers not to bring him home any more from Greenacres but to only visit him at the hospital. Mrs. Givings buys a puppy, too, for companionship and to help heal the emotional scars of the Wheelers' tragedy. Sitting at home one evening with her husband, Mrs. Givings chatters about how pleasant it is to be in their comfortable little suburban world, just the two of them, and how pleased she is that the Wheelers' old house that had stood dark and dreary all winter had finally been sold. She tells her husband, Howard, that she liked the Wheelers although there was something "whimsical" and "neurotic" about them. She tells him that she was offended when, as Realtor for the property, she found in the basement the box of sedum plantings she had gathered for the Wheelers, unplanted. As she continues with her monologue about the Wheelers, her husband turns off his hearing aid and smiles at the glorious silence.

Part 3: Chapter 9 Analysis

The final chapter emphasizes the tragedy of the Wheelers' marriage by showing how it affects other people such as the Campbells and Givingses. Milly Campbell uses the story as a kind of talk therapy, telling and re-telling the sad tale again and again, each time with more embellishments. And Helen Givings, too, finds that talking about the Wheelers gives her a kind of relief. The men, however, handle their grief differently from their wives but in a manner similar to each other—by not talking about it. Shep Campbell, overcome with emotion, drinks and paces outside in the dark as he fights off



a crying spell, and Howard Givings simply turns off his hearing aid when he tires of listening to his wife go on and on about the Wheelers. For Shep Campbell, April Wheeler represented freedom and an escape from the boring suburban life, a splash of color in his otherwise drab existence. For both of the Givingses, the Wheelers remain a mystery—something beyond their experience and understanding.



Characters

April Wheeler

Tall, blond, aloof April Wheeler is the twenty-nine-year-old wife of Frank Wheeler. Blessed and cursed with an "artistic" nature, she puts her years of study at a drama school in New York City to use in a community theater production that is a flop. April, the mother of two, has strongly ambivalent feelings about her husband and marriage, and her compulsion to escape initially takes the form of vicious arguments with Frank, then in a plan to sell their suburban house on Revolutionary Road in Connecticut and move to Paris. Her extremes of emotion and drunken destructiveness raise the question whether she is an alcoholic, and Frank recommends that she see a psychiatrist. April shrieks at Frank that she doesn't love him, then becomes warm and loving, then distant and cold. As the couple make plans to go to Europe, April finds out she's pregnant with their third child and her primary avenue of escape becomes blocked.

After an ill-considered sexual fling with a neighbor who was also in the community theater production, April is filled with guilt and the awareness that she doesn't really know herself and thus can't really love anyone else. She engages in a lengthy period of deception in which she convinces Frank that she won't try to abort the baby. But after a horrific fight with Frank, the next morning she is sweet and considerate, and Frank wonders whether they've finally reached a stasis in their marriage. But later that day April attempts to abort the child with a home suction device, begins to bleed profusely, and must be taken to the hospital. There she dies from loss of blood and septic shock. April has passed through everyone's life like a phantom, barely visible.

Frank Wheeler

Frank Wheeler is just as unrooted in his own life as April Wheeler is in hers. He works at a job in New York City that he hates, commuting on the train from their Connecticut home. Out of boredom, or perhaps out of spite for his wife, Frank indulges in an office affair that generates as much guilt as passion, and only tends to make him feel more trapped in his life. Although bright, like April, Frank is unfocused in terms of his own career and life ambitions and seems passively to accept his station in life without mustering the willpower to change things. Frank also drinks heavily, and his alcohol-fueled fights with his wife raise the real question whether both are co-alcoholics. However, there is no doubt that he loves April. Frank is a bit less flighty than April, and although he hates and ridicules the Knox Business Machines Co., he seems to like being groomed for a big corporate promotion.

Frank at first resists April's idea that they should move to Europe so he can "find himself", then goes along with it and the uncomfortable suggestion that she will work while he tries to locate himself. Before long, April is pregnant again with their third child and she immediately gets a home self-abortion kit, as she tried to do when their first



child, Jennifer, was conceived. Frank undertakes a campaign to prevent her from inducing an abortion and actually becomes more comfortable in his own life and career. Frank sighs with relief after the danger period for the abortion is passed, but gets a call at work one day that his wife is in the hospital with massive blood loss after a botched self-abortion attempt. After she dies, Frank becomes a hollow man without enthusiasms or grief, a shrunken shadow of himself.

Shep Campbell

Shep Campbell is a red-haired engineer who, with his wife Milly, is a neighbor of the Wheelers and who also plays in the community theater production with April. He becomes hotly infatuated with her, especially after dancing with her one night when the two couples go out for an evening together. Later, as the Wheelers' marriage becomes more unstable, Shep and April make love in the back seat of his car after the two couples spend another long, inebriated evening together. Shep is convinced he's in love with April, but she brushes him off and tells him there's no way they should try to make anything else of their brief encounter.

Helen Givings

Helen Givings is the socially aggressive, somewhat nosy Realtor who sells the Wheelers their house on Revolutionary Road. She takes it upon herself to fawn over the couple, visiting them and bringing them small gifts. With her husband, Howard, she entertains the Wheelers at her home, but Frank and April find the Givingses frightfully dull. Helen Givings eventually tells the Wheelers that their thirty-something son has been given passes from the nearby state mental institution for visits, and asks if they can bring him to the Wheelers' house to get acquainted. The first and subsequent encounters are disturbing and irritating to the Wheelers.

Maureen Grube

Pretty but vacuous, Maureen Grube is the office worker at Knox Business Machines with whom Frank Wheeler has a brief liaison. About eight years his junior and single, Maureen behaves like a country bumpkin who's just come to the city and adopted the more irritating dress, mannerisms, and figures of speech of more hardened secretaries and clerks. Almost as soon as he's slept with her, Frank asks himself why and feels guilty. He eventually breaks off their affair after they've slept together another time, still seems unclear why he did it and berating himself over his infidelity.

John Givings

John is the son of Helen and Howard Givings who is a patient at Greenacres, the state mental hospital. He says he's been diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic, a former mathematician whose memory of that skill has been erased by too many shock therapy



treatments. Tall, gaunt, chain-smoking, John is a disturbing presence if for no other reason than his uncanny ability to discern and speak the truth in harsh terms, which causes some social distress. As a foil within the narrative, John raises the question of who is really sane and who is insane.

Bart Pollock

A large, burly midwesterner, Bart Pollock is the head of the Akron sales office for Knox Business Machines. He presses Frank Wheeler to complete a brochure he's requested, then becomes so enamored with the result that he comes to the home office in New York to meet with Frank's boss and praise his work. Pollock also envisions a whole series of sales brochures in the same style that would prove useful in making the transition to the computer age (in 1955). This endorsement eventually leads to an offer of a bigger job with more responsibility and more pay.

Jack Ordway

Jack Ordway is a somewhat callous, happy-go-lucky co-worker of Frank Wheeler, in whom Frank decides to confide details of his personal life. When he tells Ordway about his plans to move to Europe, it's all over the office in a matter of a few days. Then Frank divulges to Ordway that April is pregnant and that they'll probably be staying where they are for a while. Ordway seems to serve as a touchstone to reality for Frank, who is prone to idleness and daydreaming.

Norma Townsend

Norma Townsend is Maureen Grube's older roommate in New York. Direct, authoritarian, and somewhat masculine, she confronts Wheeler over his affair with Maureen and tells him it's bad for her and he should break it off. Frank Wheeler listens politely, then tells her she's probably a closet lesbian and that he has no intention of doing what she says. Then he proceeds to break off the affair with Maureen.

Ted Bandy

Ted Bandy is Frank Wheeler's boss at Knox Business Machines. An outgoing, back-slapping type, he doesn't seem to notice that Frank has done nothing but shuffle papers on his desk for months, but becomes possessive of him when his sales brochures are a big hit in the company and Bart Pollock tries to recruit him for a special team to launch a computer team at Knox Business Machines.



Objects/Places

New York City

Frank Wheeler works at a company in New York City on the verge of making its first leap into the computer age. April and Frank met and conducted their courtship in New York City. New York City is where Frank has his affair with Maureen Grube, a secretary at his company.

Paris

Paris becomes the objectification of the Wheeler's escapist tendencies as they try to overcome the strictures of middle class suburban life. With its aura of bohemianism and culture, Paris becomes synonymous with a new life that will deliver them from the conformity of 1950s America.

Revolutionary Road

Revolutionary Road is the name of a path that American soldiers used to fight the British for independence in the Revolutionary War. That spirit of independence and freedom is ironically mocked by the spiritual deadness of Revolutionary Hill Estates where the Wheelers live (or die).

Knox Business Machines

Knox Business Machines, where Frank Wheeler's father worked, is the place where Frank goes to work after college and after World War II at a job he hates. Soon, though, he becomes ripe for a big promotion and resigns himself to the job and the company.

Bethune Street

Bethune Street is the location of the one-room apartment Frank Wheeler shares with some college classmates in New York City after the war. It is in an area where Greenwich Village tapers off to rows of empty shipping warehouses, near the river and its regular fogs. This is where April and Frank have their affair.

Vito's Log Cabin

The Log Cabin on Route 12 in suburban Connecticut is where April and Frank Wheeler usually go with friends when they get together for a good time. A sort of honky-tonk beer joint that features live music, its uninhibited spirit is perfect for dancing and drinking. It is



in the parking lot outside the Log Cabin where April Wheeler has drunken sex with Shep Campbell in the back seat of a car.

Knox 500 Electronic Computer

This machine is the prideful future of the Knox Business Machine Co. where Frank Wheeler works, its initial foray into what will become the computer age. In reality, the device is only a super adding machine that can "perform the lifetime work of a man with a desk calculator in 30 minutes."

The Fifteenth Floor

The Fifteenth Floor is where Frank Wheeler works in cubicle hell at the Knox Business Machine Co., and as he rides the elevator to work every day Frank feels that he's being carried to the executioner. Although every floor of the building is alike, Frank believes he has discovered certain individual traits about his floor that make it unique, "his bright, dry, daily ordeal, his personal measure of tedium."

Greenacres

Greenacres is the state mental hospital where John Campbell, son of Shep and Milly Campbell, is a patient. When the Campbells arrange for their thirty-something son to go on Sunday leave and visit them and the Wheelers, the interaction proves extremely awkward because of John's habit of bluntly saying whatever enters his mind—even to the point of embarrassing the Wheelers.

Laurel Players

The Laurel Players is the startup community theater group in Connecticut that stages its first production, "Petrified Forest", as Revolutionary Road opens. The group has been formed to provide some culture in the wasteland of suburbia, and although April Wheeler has studied drama and seems impressive onstage, the play is a flop. Another member of the cast is Shep Campbell, with whom April later has a brief fling.

Themes

Alcoholism and the family

Because both Frank and April Wheeler drink heavily and often, the question of alcoholism and its effect on marriage and the family naturally presents itself. Although strikingly different personalities, April and Frank share more than escapist tendencies and seem to reinforce each other's sense of superiority and disdain for their suburban life that leads to the ultimate "geographical cure" of moving to Paris. April exhibits more pronounced mood swings than Frank, perhaps a result of a further progression into her disease of alcoholism than her husband. One day she tells Frank, while drinking, that she doesn't love him and never did. The next day, she is serenely sweet acting the role of the perfectly submissive middle class suburban station wagon wife.

But there is a corrosive core to their marriage in the form of alcoholic co-dependency. Frank acts out his escape fantasy by having a brief fling with one of the secretaries where he works. April, while drunk, has furtive sex with a neighbor in the back seat of his car, then feels guilty about it, then tries even harder to escape from her life through booze and planning the move to Paris. When April learns that she's pregnant, her escapism assumes a truly desperate tone. In this and in many other instances in the book, April demonstrates the kind of black-and-white thinking characteristic of active alcoholism.

When Frank notices something strange about his wife's behavior, he suggests she see a psychiatrist—which she does not do, although the reader is left to wonder if the outcome of their lives might have been different had she chosen to get help. Again, in classic alcoholic behavior, both Frank and April can discuss and consider the possibility of getting medical help while the issue of their drinking never rises to the level of consciousness. One result of this sick relationship between April and Frank is a growing sense of anxiety and uncertainty among their two children as their plans to move come and go. In classic alcoholic family patterns, children learn not to trust because of the unpredictability of the alcoholic parent, or parents in this instance.

Conformity in 1950s America

Probably the best word to describe April and Frank Wheeler—indeed, all the adults in *Revolutionary Road*—is "stuck". The Wheelers' free-wheeling love affair in New York City becomes serious when April gets pregnant and they move to the suburbs, to Revolutionary Hill Estates in western Connecticut. Already, the author's sense of irony is apparent in identifying the Wheelers' residence and taking the title of his novel from *Revolutionary Road*, the path that American civilian soldiers used to fight the British in the Revolutionary War. If anyone is misled by the book's title that they are reading a political manifesto for revolution, they would be quickly disabused of that notion when



they understand the mind-numbing conformity represented by suburban America at mid-twentieth century.

In classic fashion, Frank Wheeler commutes to a job he hates in New York City home to a wife who is at best ambivalent about him, and who feels trapped in her life as mother and wife. In fact, both Frank and April Wheeler are very unhappy with their lives and drink to excess as a solution, an escape. When they first arrive in suburbia they hold onto their sanity by secretly ridiculing other middle-class suburbanites and affecting an air of intellectual superiority. April tries acting in a community theater production that bombs, which is another reason to drink. She, perhaps more acutely than Frank, feels the need to escape their cookie-cutter lives and envisions an idyllic life for the family in Paris. Eventually, both April and Frank succumb to extra-marital sex as another escape route.

Although both Frank and April seem to have vague artistic and intellectual pretensions, neither is clear about what form or direction those impulses should take. Thus, they are both as much confused about their own identities as they are about how to escape the creeping conformity that surrounds them. After Frank ends his office affair and agrees to move to Paris, then learns that his wife is unexpectedly pregnant, he seems to resign himself to his middle management position without a serious thought of what alternatives might look like for him. And April, lacking even a career to fall back on when she learns they won't be going to Paris, takes what she sees as the last route of escape and tries to induce an abortion—which causes her death.

The tragedy of the Wheelers is their paucity of imagination and lack of strongly defined individual personalities. Despite their misery within the American middle class, Frank and April are doomed to remain there because they lack the imagination and drive to develop as individuals, which prevents them from learning how to find happiness and fulfillment within themselves and thus to transcend "the system" that would become the object of bottomless scorn by the next generation of Americans.

Status of children

The status of the Wheelers' children, Jennifer and Michael, reveals much about their parents. Superficially the ideal American suburban couple with two children, a lawn, and a commuting job in New York City, Frank and April Wheeler really have no time or energy for their children because they seem too self-absorbed. When Frank sits down to read his children the Sunday comics, he quickly grows bored, irritable, then angry. When he's working on a stone walkway to the front of their house, Frank tries to be patient and inclusive with his children but roars at them when they get too close for fear they might be injured. When Frank and April discuss their plans to move to Europe, they don't discuss anything with the children but merely announce it as a *fait accompli*. Later, after they change their minds, they likewise announce the change to their children without explanation, which leaves them confused and uncertain.



The Wheeler children are frequently at someone else's house for the day, or for the night, or for a couple of days while Frank and April stage their drunken fights, reconciliations, and periods of estrangement. When April finally botches her self-induced abortion and is taken to the hospital while bleeding, the children are with the Campbells. Both April and Frank Wheeler seem to have an overarching sense of entitlement, as if their individual happiness and satisfaction is the most important thing in the world—which is eerily prescient of the Me Generation which was to appear in another two or three decades. Instead of personal responsibility for growth and maturity for the Wheelers, there is psychoanalysis. Each in their own way and for their individual reasons is incapable of being a fully adult parent for the simple reason they are both still children themselves.

When John Givings, the mathematician who is also a mental patient, visits the Wheelers and says he's glad he won't be the child that April Wheeler is carrying, he makes a telling point, albeit in a hurtful, insulting manner. The ambivalence of both Frank and April Wheeler about having another child stems from their own narcissistic needs to be center-stage as much as it reflects their financial insecurities—especially after Frank receives a major promotion at Knox Business Machines.

Style

Point of View

The primary point of view for *Revolutionary Road* is that of the ironic, omniscient narrator but the point of view shifts between characters to heighten dramatic moments and themes. For example, rather late in the novel and through the device of a flashback, the reader learns about April Wheeler's distant relationship with her own father as a child—a relationship characterized by alcoholic abandonment. The shift to April's point of view reveals a side to her character that is crucial to the novel's development—the deep-seated need to please the dominant male in her life (her husband, Frank) and her tendency to act alone on her own impulses that eventually leads to her botched abortion attempt, uncontrolled bleeding and death.

By shifting between the points of view of the various characters, the author contrasts the interior life of the Wheelers with the lives of their neighbors who are generally happy and well-adjusted to life in suburban Connecticut. A great deal of the struggle and conflict within the Wheelers' marriage centers on their attempts to find some way of adjusting to their situation as suburban parents. Although the Wheeler children play an important part in the story, they are mostly sidelined throughout the novel, which is a way of showing their status as relatively unimportant in their parents' lives. The author only hints at the children's point of view by showing their confusion and consternation about the ever-shifting plans to move to Europe. Tellingly, the Wheeler children are absent from their home when their mother dies.

Setting

The novel is set in suburban Connecticut and New York City, where Frank Wheeler works at Knox Business Machines. Frank's unrooted emotional life is mirrored in his peripatetic working life. In New York City, he finds his job on the fifteenth floor at the business machine company stifling and boring, so he starts an affair with a younger co-worker who has an apartment in the city. So he goes from his mindless, stifling job to sex in the city with Maureen Grube, to life in the rolling green hills of Connecticut with his wife April and their two children. Frank drinks to excess, and often April joins him in binging. Together, they seem like a bohemian couple with no roots at all—not in the city, not in suburbia, not in their family. Going to Europe seems for a time like a good idea, based as it is upon the notion that a change of setting will magically produce a change in their marriage and their state of mind. But this also becomes a major stumbling block for the Wheelers and ultimately hastens their downfall.

Language and Meaning

Language in *Revolutionary Road* is standard American English and in most cases the meaning is clear and not obscured by regionalisms or literary construction. There are a



few exceptions. Shep Campbell, who briefly becomes April Wheeler's lover, reveals through an internal monologue that his wife's family uses such expressions as "It don't matter none", and that he admires her for overcoming her lower class origins. Although the uniform language is English, class differences in speech are depicted to add dimensionality to characters and to help paint the socioeconomic landscape for the reader. Both Frank and April Wheeler are well educated and articulate; April's elocution and command of the language become strengths for her when, as a cast member of the Laurel Players, she dominates the stage and captivates her audience. At one point, April and Frank get into a heated fight over the meaning of the words moral and conventional.

There is, in addition, a sort of office slang among Frank Wheeler's co-workers at Knox Business Machines that in trying to be hip is actually dismally conventional. Jack Ordway, a weekend drunk and co-worker who sits near Frank, when he learns of Frank's plans to move to Europe, exults: "Fly the coop. Kick over the traces. Take off. Pretty nifty, Franklin". Frank discovers that his office paramour, Maureen Grube, is somewhat limited in her use of language and vocabulary and their verbal exchanges become stilted and awkward as a result, which emphasizes their class differences. When John Givings—the mathematician son of Helen and Howard Givings who is a mental patient—comes to visit the Wheelers, they find they can communicate quite clearly and effectively with each other, although the Wheelers haven't had a lot of luck communicating with their suburban neighbors, nor John Givings with his parents.

Structure

Revolutionary Road is arranged in conventional novelistic fashion; the narrative unfolds chronologically for the most part. The author makes very effective use of flashback and flash forward devices as appropriate to lend depth and motivation to the characters. The shifting point of view and use of judicious time changes helps to lend the structure narrative drive and a sense of drama and discovery. For example, April Wheeler's seemingly aloof and quixotic nature remain a mystery until rather late in the novel when, through a flashback to her childhood, the reader learns of her fractured relationship with her father that strongly colors her relationship with her husband, Frank, as well as with her children.

The structural pattern shifts in the last chapter. The central characters, April and Frank Wheeler, are gone but the narrative continues in the words of friends who remain in Revolutionary Hill Estates—the Campbells and Givingses. The chatter of Mrs. Campbell and Mrs. Givings as they relate the story of the Wheelers, reinterpreting and distorting events to suit their own needs, is the final irony as the agony and suffering of this couple seems to have served no purpose whatever in terms of awakening or enlightening the comfortably dull suburbanites among whom they lived, and died.



Quotes

"Her name was April Wheeler, and she caused the whispered word 'lovely' to roll out over the auditorium the first time she walked across the stage. She was 29, a tall ash blonde with a patrician kind of beauty that no amount of amateur lighting could distort, and she seemed ideally cast in the role." Chap. 1, p. 7

"There was nothing to watch now but the massed faces of the audience as they pressed up the aisles and out the main doors. Anxious, round-eyed, two by two, they looked and moved as if a calm and orderly escape from this place had become the one great necessity of their lives; as if, in fact, they wouldn't be able to begin to live at all until they were out beyond the rumbling pink billows of exhaust and the crunching gravel of this parking lot, out where the black sky went up and up forever and there were hundreds of thousands of stars." Chap. 1, p. 11

"He began to see the fiasco of the Laurel Players in its true perspective. It simply wasn't worth feeling bad about. Intelligent, thinking people could take things like this in their stride, just as they took the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs. Economic circumstances might force you to live in this environment but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were." Chap. 2, p. 20

"Then the fight went out of control. It quivered their arms and legs and wrenched their faces into shapes of hatred, it urged them harder and deeper into each other's weakest points, showing them cunning ways around each other's strongholds and quick chances to switch tactics, feint, and strike again. In the space of a gasp for breath it sent their memories racing back over the years for old weapons to rip the scab off old wounds; it went on and on." Chap. 2, p. 27

"They were hurrying toward him over the cropped grass, while April slowly and heavily brought up the rear, pulling the lawnmower behind her, blowing damp strands of hair away from her eyes with a stuck-out lower lip. Everything about her seemed determined to prove, with a new, flat-footed emphasis, that a sensible middle-class housewife was all she had ever wanted to be and that all she had ever wanted of love was a husband who would get out and cut the grass once in a while, instead of sleeping all day." Chap. 3, p. 43

"He felt as if he were sinking helplessly into the cushions and the papers and the bodies of his children like a man in quicksand. When the funnies were finished at last he struggled to his feet, quietly gasping, and stood for several minutes in the middle of the carpet, making tight fists in his pockets to restrain himself from doing what suddenly seemed the only thing in the world he really and truly wanted to do: picking up a chair and throwing it through the picture window. What kind of a life was this? What in God's name was the point or the meaning or the purpose of a life like this?" Chap. 4, p. 57



"The worst part of him was his mouth, which was so wet that a dozen shining strands of spittle clung and trembled between his moving lips; and it was this as much as anything that hampered Frank's enjoyment of the lunch, or luncheon, which took place in the restaurant of a great hotel. Oat Fields's mouth did not close while chewing and it left white streaks of food on the rim of his water glass. Once he softened the hard crust of a roll by holding it submerged in the gravy boat for some time before he lifted it to his reaching lips, allowing part of it to fall and leave a bright tan stain on his vest." Chap. 5, p. 72

"Could a man ride home in the rear smoker, primly adjusting his pants at the knees to protect their crease and rattling his evening paper into a narrow panel to give his neighbors elbow room? Could a man sit meekly massaging his headache and allowing himself to be surrounded by the chatter of beaten, amiable husks of men who sat and swayed and played bridge in a stagnant smell of newsprint and tobacco and bad breath and overheated radiators? Hell, no." Chap. 6, p. 102

"For the second time that day he discovered that the act of love could leave him speechless, and he hoped she would be willing to let the talking wait for tomorrow. He knew that whatever she had to say would be said with that odd, theatrical emphasis, and he didn't feel equipped to deal with it just now. All he wanted was to lie here smiling in the dark, confused and guilty and happy, and submit to the gathering weight of sleep." Chap. 7, p. 107

"And of all the capitulations in his life, this was the one that seemed most like a victory. Never before had elation welled more powerfully inside him; never had beauty grown more purely out of truth; never in taking his wife had he triumphed more completely over time and space. The past could dissolve at his will and so could the future; so could the walls of this house and the whole imprisoning wasteland beyond it, towns and trees. He had taken command of the universe because he was a man, and because the marvelous creature who opened and moved for him, tender and strong, was a woman." Chap. 7, p. 115

"The house seemed unnaturally still. Carrying his empty beer can, Shep went downstairs to see what Milly was doing and he was halfway across the living room before he realized that he had four sons. He almost tripped over them. They were lying on their bellies in a row, their eight-, seven-, five- and four-year-old bodies identically dressed in blue knit pajamas, all propped on their elbows to stare at the flickering blue of the television screen. Their four snub-nosed blond faces, in profile, looked remarkably alike and remarkably like Milly's, and their jaws were all working in cadence on cuds of bubble gum, the pink wrappers of which lay strewn on the carpet." Chap. 9, p. 144

"Helen Givings cried because she'd had such high, high hopes about the Wheelers tonight and now she was terribly, terribly, terribly disappointed. She cried because she was 56 years old and her feet were ugly and swollen and horrible; she cried because none of the girls had liked her at school and none of the boys had liked her later; she



cried because Howard Givings was the only man who'd ever asked her to marry him, and because she'd done it and because her only child was insane." Chap. 10, p. 165

"It was a perfectly, inescapably real fact at home, where nobody talked of anything else; it was real on the train each morning and again on the train each night, but for the eight hours of his working day it remained as insubstantial as a half-remembered, rapidly fading dream. Everyone and everything in the office conspired against it. The stolid or tired or mildly sardonic faces of his colleagues, the sight of his IN basket and his current work pile, the sound of his phone or of the buzzer that meant he was wanted in Bandy's cubicle—all these seemed constantly to tell him he was destined to stay here forever." Chap. 11, p. 168

"But he had begin to feel depressed in a way that couldn't be attributed to ordinary Sunday-evening sadness. This odd, exhilarating day was over and now in the fading light he could see that it had only been a momentary respite from the tension that had harried him all week. He could feel the resumption of it now, despite the reassurance of her clinging at his back—a dread, a constricting heaviness of spirit, a foreboding of some imminent, unavoidable loss." Chap. 12, p. 193

"But at her every mention of how safe it was he would puff out his cheeks and blow, frowning and shaking his head, as if he'd been asked to agree that an ethical justification could be found for genocide. No. He wouldn't buy it." Chap. 14, p. 218

"Only very gradually, there at the table, was he able to sort out and identify what it was that had haunted him on waking, that had threatened to make him gag on his orange juice and now prevented his enjoyment of the brilliant grass and trees and sky beyond the window. It was that he was going to have another child, and he wasn't at all sure that he wanted one." Chap. 15, p. 242

"The house looked very neat and white as it emerged through the green and yellow leaves; it wasn't such a bad house after all. It looked, as John Givings has once said, like a place where people lived—a place where the difficult, intricate process of living could sometimes give rise to incredible harmonies of happiness and sometimes to near-tragic disorder, as well as to ludicrous minor interludes; a place where it was possible for whole summers to be kind of crazy, where it was possible to feel lonely and confused in many ways and for things to look pretty bleak from time to time, but where everything, in the final analysis, 'was going to be all right.'" Chap. 16, p. 274

"During the painful silence that followed this, while Mrs. Givings continued to chew her lip, they all stood grouped in the middle of the room: Howard intently folding a light raincoat over his arm; April staring red-faced at the floor; Frank still trembling and audibly breathing with a terrible mixture of defiance and humiliation in his eyes. John whose smile was now serene, was the only one of them who seemed at peace." Chap. 18, p. 287

"He sat down and unfolded his napkin. It was incredible. No morning after a fight had ever been as easy as this—but still, he thought as he unsteadily sipped at his orange



juice, no fight had ever been as bad as that. Could it be that they'd fought themselves out at last? Maybe this was what happened when there was really and truly nothing more to say, either in acrimony or forgiveness. Life did, after all, have to go on." Chap. 19, p. 296

"What a subtle, treacherous thing it was to let yourself go that way! Because once you'd started it was terribly difficult to stop; soon you were saying 'I'm sorry, of course you're right,' and 'Whatever you think is best,' and 'You're the most wonderful and valuable thing in the world,' and the next thing you knew all honesty, all truth, was as far away and glimmering as hopelessly unattainable as the world of the golden people. Then you discovered you were working at life the way the Laurel Players worked at The Petrified Forest, or the way Steve Kovick worked at his drums—earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and all wrong; you found you were always saying yes when you meant the very opposite; then you were breathing gasoline as if it were flowers and abandoning yourself to a delirium of love under the weight of a clumsy, grunting, red-faced man you didn't even like—Shep Campbell—and then you were face to face in total darkness with the knowledge that you didn't know who you were." Chap. 20, p. 304

"The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy. Even at night, as if on purpose, the development held no looming shadows and no gaunt silhouettes. It was invincibly cheerful, a toyland of white and pastel houses whose bright, uncurtained windows winked blandly through a dappling of green and yellow leaves. Proud floodlights were trained on some of the lawns, on some of the neat front doors and on the hips of some of the berthed, ice-cream colored automobiles. How could she be dead when the house was alive with the sound of her and the sense of her?" Chap. 21, p. 323



Topics for Discussion

Explain how and why Frank Wheeler and April Wheeler have such different reactions to the failure of *The Enchanted Forest*—the first production of the Laurel Players.

What is April Wheeler's real motive for promoting the idea of moving to France? Is she more idealistic (and less realistic) than her husband, Frank?

How do Frank Wheeler's feelings about Knox Business Machines mirror his feelings about his own father?

Why does Frank Wheeler become romantically involved with the secretary Maureen Grube? How does this affair affect his relationship with his family?

Why does April Wheeler have a one-night stand with Shep Campbell in the back seat of his car, and how does that affect her relationship with her family and with herself?

What is the author's intention in having John Givings—the psychiatrically disabled mathematician—thrust into the Wheelers' lives? Would the story be stronger or weaker without his presence?

Why do the Wheelers' children, Michael and Jennifer, appear only briefly and peripherally in this family drama?

Why does April's third, presumably unplanned, pregnancy become the focal point of a power struggle between the couple?

To what extent is April's behavior (planning a trip to Europe, wanting an abortion) a reaction to Frank's gradual adjustment to success at his job?

Does it appear that April and Frank really love each other, or are they too self-obsessed to love anyone?