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*Life in the Hopeless Emptiness:
The Search for Authenticity in Revolutionary Road*

by

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in

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Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* opens, appropriately, with the "final dying sounds" of the Laurel Players' dress rehearsal of *The Petrified Forest*. The suburban community theater is preparing for its inaugural show, and from these opening words, it is clear that this is a novel of performance—of failed performance, specifically. Even though the Players have little theatrical experience, both they and the community have allowed themselves to begin to believe in the "brave idea" of the show (7), and they "let the movement of the play come and carry them and break like a wave" (6). *Revolutionary Road* is populated by characters who, like the Laurel Players, rely on rote behaviors and staged actions to guide them through life. Indeed, the idea of performativity, or the ongoing effort to act in the manner of a social type, is a central theme of the novel, as the characters attempt to act as "the people they most wish to be" (Cheever 194). From the pimply-faced stagehand at the Players' opening night, to the brilliantly insane mathematician on leave from the asylum, and the earnest, sour-smelling housewife next door, every character in *Revolutionary Road* continuously acts out various 'selves,' and none more so than the novel's central characters, Frank and April Wheeler.

The Wheelers are a couple who moved from Greenwich Village to the Connecticut suburbs out of necessity after an unexpected pregnancy early in their marriage. There, they try desperately to hold mid-twentieth century American culture, the suburbs, and even their own cheerful home, accountable for their problems and failings—by which they mean the fact that rather than being wry intellectuals still living in the Village, they are trapped (of their own doing) behind the picture window of suburbia. Frank and April spend their time complaining often and loudly that they are so surely *not* part of this world. But, as Richard Ford notes in his introduction to the novel, "none of the characters . . . have much

of a clue about who it is they are” (xxx). What Ford does not mention is the Wheelers’ certainty of who they are not. Frank and April remain convinced that they simply do not belong in the suburbs—“they are just people who happen to live in a suburb” (Jurca 148). In *Revolutionary Road*, suburbia is “treated as a living space that is in constant danger of contaminating you, of turning you into something that you’re not—someone who belongs there” (Jurca 148), a danger that only increases the Wheelers’ desire to constantly affirm their other-ness. “[I]t wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t so typical,” Frank maintains, bemoaning the mindless conformity: “It’s a disease. Nobody thinks or feels or cares any more; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity” (62). Frank and April remain convinced that they alone can see through the pitiful nature of suburban life.¹ They might live in the same neighborhood as everyone else, have the same two children, commute to the same boring corporate job, and speak the same inane conversations with the same neighbors, but underneath it all there is a certain smugness, a conviction that they do not really belong—that they are merely playing the roles of bread-winning husband and dutiful wife until they are able to make their escape.²

Carrying out the specific performances necessitated by various social situations is a strength of the Wheelers’; from the first description of the young couple, the novel marks

¹ Any aspects of suburban life, therefore, which suggest otherwise are seen by the Wheelers as signs of oppression. This sense of victimization is precisely what Catherine Jurca argues transforms the white flight of middle-class Americans to the suburbs into a “white diaspora”. In her reading of postwar suburban novels like *Revolutionary Road*, Jurca claims that “perhaps nothing comes more naturally to the affluent white middle class than feeling bad—maltreated, rather than angry or guilty—about being the white middle class” (19).

² By imagining themselves as actors rather than victims, Frank and April push against Jurca’s reading of “postwar representations of the middle class.” Jurca argues that the typical postwar suburban character’s “fundamental dissatisfaction with the suburb and the corporation proves an engine of mobility that frees them from the constraints of each . . . Thinking of oneself as a victim may be the necessary condition for not becoming one” (139). Yet rather than feeling oppressed or victimized by these social institutions, Frank and April see themselves as *victors*—the only people who are able to comprehend the mind-numbing conformity of suburbia and therefore the only people who can somehow outsmart the system.

them as deliberately constructed characters whose role playing allows them to navigate successfully the world in which they live. April is first presented as she steps onstage in *The Petrified Forest*, a narrative tactic that figures her immediately as a performer. She is “twenty-nine, a tall ash blonde with a patrician kind of beauty that no amount of amateur lighting could distort, and she seem[s] ideally cast in the role” (8). Though “bearing two children had left her a shade too heavy in the hips and thighs” (8), she is able to pass convincingly as a shy young maiden. In the audience, Frank, meanwhile, appears to be “more like her suitor than her husband” (8). The ability to appear as someone other than his true self is characteristic of Frank, a man who is “able to suggest wholly different personalities with each flickering change of expression” (12). Though they are separated by the audience and stage front, Frank and April enter, from the novel’s opening pages, into a codependent performance, in which they play both the roles of the happy suburban couple *and* the roles of their former selves: the suitor and the actress.

These roles, however, are not sustainable indefinitely, as suggested by the Laurel Players’ disastrous opening night. As the play disintegrates, “the virus of calamity” spreads from person to person. It is this failure that prompts April to reconsider the role of the happy suburbanite that she plays in everyday life and insist, finally, that she and Frank move to Paris and begin living as the “intense, nicotine-stained, Jean-Paul Sartre sort[s] of [people]” (23) they have always believed themselves to be. According to April, the move would give them “the time and the freedom” (114) to find and to realize their true selves. Armed with this knowledge, life in the suburbs seems to be a prelude of sorts to a vague, bohemian future where they will discover and live as the selves they believe they truly are. Importantly, however, the novel expresses that their idea of a future in Paris is simply

that—an idea. Though Frank “might talk wistfully of Europe” (62) at dinner parties, the Wheelers’ dream of Paris is best kept hypothetical, as it allows them to continue play acting the roles of the closet bohemians and reinforces their belief that, though they *seem* like typical suburbanites, they are simply keeping up a performance.

This paper concerns itself primarily with performativity and the way that Frank and April slowly begin to realize the complicated layers of their identities, which have served as protection for what they believe to be their true selves, and how those layers are intertwined with their various performances. In so doing, the novel reflects postwar America’s growing concern with the collapsing distance between a presumed inner and outer self, the way the performances necessitated by social institutions affect the self, and what happens when, in a world governed by pretense, one refuses to continue performing. For April, identity is intrinsically linked to action; she both validates her identity through her actions and justifies her actions through her sense of identity. To continue playing at being suburbanites, for April, is the same as *being* suburbanites. All of her and Frank’s invective, she says, is “based on this great premise of ours that we’re somehow very special and superior to the whole thing . . . ‘But we’re not! Look at us!’” (116). April insists that by performing as the happy suburban couple for eight years, she and Frank have become (or are on the verge of becoming) the very people they swear they are not. Because she finds action and identity to be linked, April longs for a more authentic life, or a life lived with intention, where her actions reflect her ‘true self’ rather than mutate it. Frank, meanwhile, considers his identity to be completely separate from his actions; he believes that there is no connection between what he does and who he is. Yet there is a self-consciousness to Frank’s actions; it seems as though he is constantly on guard, constantly over-acting for

fear that if he is not careful, he might be contaminated by the suburbs, by his corporate job, and even by his sappy neighbors.

In what follows, I will provide a close analysis of the way performance functions in *Revolutionary Road*, using Frank and April's attempts at authenticity and their ultimately tragic ends as a guide for understanding how the novel grapples with what it means to strive for authenticity in a performative world. Moving to Paris, according to April, is the key to escaping the performance of postwar life. The Wheelers decide finally to leave suburbia behind, but when April discovers that she is pregnant with their third child, tensions rise. What April sees as an insurmountable roadblock to their authentic future (in which they will finally be able to align their actions with their 'true' selves), Frank sees as the perfect excuse to continue safely playing at being not-really-suburbanites. As April refuses to continue playacting and Frank commits himself further to the performance, the Wheelers' lives begin to unravel irrevocably, signifying that both abeyance of and adherence to performativity leads to crisis. To continue performing prompts a crisis in that it forces the actor to worry about the effect of the performance on her true self (for both Frank and April believe in an essential self)³; to cease performing, however, is not necessarily an expression of authenticity, as the novel does not explicitly endorse Frank's and April's faith in their true selves. Rather, *Revolutionary Road* presents a complicated view of postwar performativity that asks both its characters and its readers to come to terms with the desire for authenticity in a world of pretense.

³ Throughout this paper, I use the terms "authentic self," "essential self," and "true self" interchangeably, held mainly in contrast with the "inauthentic" or "performed" self, which signifies a disparity between how one acts and how one truly is.

The first section of this paper sets out to define performativity as it is used both in the novel and in contemporaneous sociological literature. I look to Erving Goffman's influential treatise of the era, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which figures human as actors engaged in performance at all times. This section provides a close reading of the novel's opening chapter, which serves as a microcosm of the novel as a whole; that is, it features the failed performance of both the Laurel Players and Frank and April Wheeler as they realize that the versions of themselves that they portray to the outside world are less easy to maintain than they thought. Goffman's work establishes the way that performativity works in the novel and in the period, especially in relation to Frank's and April's models of self, which inform the way they perceive their 'roles.' Yet Yates puts Goffman's terms in play in a way that forces the reader to reconsider entirely the way she thinks about performance and authenticity. For, to believe fully in Goffman is to reject the idea of authenticity, as he figures the self as entirely performative. Neither Frank nor April, however, is willing to admit that they are essentially performative—nor are they able to agree on what, exactly, it is that they essentially *are*. While both Frank and April believe in a true self, they are unable to reconcile their views. April believes that the authentic self, though elusive, can be found if only one quits performing and takes the time to find one's true essence and align her actions accordingly. Frank seems to figure his true self as a set of nesting dolls, in which his authentic self is hidden beneath layer after layer of performance, which act as protection against contamination.

These two models of self, come into further conflict as Frank and April attempt to maintain their identities within the context of larger social institutions, such as the corporation and suburbia. This tension is the focus of the second section of this paper, as I

explore Frank's attempts to maintain an "authenticating distance" (Cheever 218) between his outer and inner selves. Frank's various selves nest inside one another, becoming more and more 'real' as the outer layers fall away. He appears to be a corporate suburbanite, but *really*, he is an intellectual meant to live anywhere other than suburban Connecticut, but *really*, he is simply a "little wise guy with a big mouth . . . showing off a lot of erudition [he doesn't] have" (Yates 119), but *really* that is just false modesty, and he *is* meant for great things, and so on. Frank protects his inner self through performance, for he fears contamination from the social institutions with which he has almost constant contact: that of the corporation and the suburb. Contamination here is viewed as the corruption of the inner self—or, more accurately, as what will halt the process of discovering the true self. However, this section also notes the collapsing distance between Frank's 'true' and performed selves, as evidenced by his inability to remove himself completely from his actions.

Frank's stratified identity is viewed in contrast with April's understanding of the self, in which she views action and identity as connected, as explored in the third section of this paper. In this way, April appears to follow a Sartrean model of 'good faith,' as outlined in "Being and Nothingness," whereas Frank exemplifies 'bad faith.' Like Frank, April believes in an inner 'self' that must be protected from contamination, though April manages to escape contamination by continually rewriting and revising her actions so that they align with what she views as her 'true' feelings. (Through this revisionist authenticity, April also lives in bad faith; she is unwilling to believe in an evolving self and instead insists that every iteration of herself is what she 'truly' felt all along.) April yearns for the opportunity

to begin living authentically—or, how she has always meant to live. This, April imagines, can be attained by moving to Paris and escaping the trap of suburbia once and for all.

Escape from performance, however, is not so easily achieved. As April pushes Frank toward the move to Paris and a more authentic existence, a plan that adheres to her conception of selfhood, she meets much resistance from her husband. Frank's reluctance to leave the safety of pretense is tied closely to his model of self—to move to Paris is to finally face the authentic self he has been protecting for so long, and he fears that underneath his stratified identity, he might not be the person he always thought he was. Rigid conceptualizations of gender roles in postwar America also play into this resistance, as evidenced by his fears of being emasculated in Paris, where April would get a job while he 'found himself.' I look at this fear in the context of postwar masculinity, which was already endangered by social institutions such as the suburb and the corporation. Frank struggles to navigate the world of postwar masculinity, which requires him to participate as an Organization Man (as defined by journalist William Whyte) while simultaneously believing any masculinity found therein to be substandard to old pre-war models. Though he despises his corporate job and the dullness of suburbia (an unease outlined by David Riesman), Frank also fears an imagined future in which even this lesser form of masculinity is lost. April, meanwhile, is excited to picture herself going back to work and finding a sense of purpose and of self, her desire to quit performing the role of happy housewife having been long established. This lack of fulfillment reflects the real-life struggles of many mid-century women, as described by Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. April and Frank believe that escaping to Paris will provide them with the time and space necessary to break away from these performances and begin living authentically, though the novel suggests

through the continued tension between the couple that any attempt to cease performing leads to crisis.

This breakdown in performance grows harder for the Wheelers to ignore, and eventually April realizes what the reader already knows: what she thought was an honest attempt at authenticity was little more than yet another performance. To exacerbate the problem, when April becomes pregnant with their third child, the Wheelers argue over whether or not they should keep the baby, thereby postponing their plans to move to Paris. To do so, April fears, means a perpetuation of the inauthentic roles that she and Frank have been playing for the past eight years. After a tense period of debate, it appears as though Frank has won, but despite her apparent capitulation, April is not so resigned to suburban life. April decides to reject the notion of performance entirely and chooses to induce a miscarriage, even though she knows that it is extremely dangerous. The fifth section of this paper explores April's final refusal to perform, as she takes a stand against a world that she recognizes as being comprised of unending cycles of performance. Though she ultimately does not survive the abortion, April *is* able to live authentically, if only for a few hours. With this final rejection, April also affords Frank the opportunity to find authenticity for the first time on *Revolutionary Road*, though to everyone else in the narrative, Frank's post-April life is seen as tragically conformist. That the end of the novel sees both characters achieve authenticity—but only after completely isolating them from one another—sheds light on what *Revolutionary Road* understands to be the role of performativity in postwar America.

By examining performance in this way, the novel becomes a profound consideration of mid-century American identity. For both Frank and April, performance is used to mask

or mold what they believe to be the essential 'self,' though that self may be difficult to define. Despite Frank and April's belief in the authentic self, the novel refuses to confirm its existence; for, after all, if the true self is so malleable that it requires constant monitoring, is it really a 'true' self? The only claim that *Revolutionary Road* seems willing to make is that everyone is constantly performing, though not everyone is aware of the extent of this performance. To resist the social constructs that encourage performance is dangerous, as it requires faith in the equivocal 'self,' which may or may not exist, but to submit completely is equally troublesome, as it could mean sacrificing authenticity. *Revolutionary Road* does not supply an answer to the problematically performative nature of American life, but it does attempt to portray a nuanced depiction of one couple's struggle to survive in the "hopeless emptiness" (Yates 200) of the postwar world. By placing the Wheelers' narrative in conversation with other contemporaneous texts and through the consideration of more recent literary criticism of the era, I hope to create a more comprehensive portrayal of the way Americans were thinking about authenticity in the postwar era—both at the time and in retrospect.

**"Sloppy and earnest and full of pretension" : The Function of Performance in
*Revolutionary Road***

By opening the novel with the Laurel Players' performance of *The Petrified Forest*, Richard Yates immediately presents the characters of *Revolutionary Road* as actors whose performances do not end when the final curtain falls. Yates is not alone in doing so—from *The Catcher in the Rye's* troublesome phonies to Tom Rath's corporatized identity in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, questions of performativity figure prominently in the minds of

postwar Americans. Importantly, these concerns are not limited to literature; many sociological works of the era raised important questions about authenticity and performativity, through varying lenses. Erving Goffman looks specifically at performance, while David Riesman's work concerns itself with the influence of population demographics on character type; William Whyte focuses on professional managerial corporate culture, and C. Wright Mills discusses on the alienation of white-collar labor in late-industrial capitalism. Works such as these betray anxieties of the period, as Americans worried about the influence of performance on individual identity. In his 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman claims that every action undertaken by an individual is framed within performative motivations. That is, everyday human interaction can be viewed through the lens of performance, as all interactions are couched in the desire to present one's self to others in a certain manner; moreover, Goffman suggests, the true intention of this performance is to "[guide] and [control] the impression [others] form" (preface). In his dramaturgical approach to human interaction, Goffman figures humans as actors.

Goffman notes that true theater consists of an actor, his cast-mates, and the audience, but in real life, "the three parties are compressed into two," with the actor's performance "tailored to the parts played by the others present," while the others "also constitute the audience" (preface). The others here rotate between being audience and cast-mate, depending on who is engaged in a scene at any given time. Every interaction between humans is so structured: "when an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed" (13). A 'performance,' then, "may be defined as all the activity of a

given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (18). This exchange of information (often done inferentially rather than explicitly) is necessary as it “helps to define the situation” and “[enables] others to know in advance what [an individual] will expect of them and what they may expect of him” (13). This information allows the individual to understand how he must act in order to “control the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of him” (15).

Goffman notes that “there must be some assurance that no individual will be allowed to join both team and audience” (97), as to do so would be to break the fourth wall, so to speak, and compromise the integrity of the performance. Yet April Wheeler does exactly this during an argument with Frank after the Laurel Players’ disastrous opening night. In the dressing room, Frank busies himself by staring at his reflection in the mirror, “tightening his jaw and turning his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look . . . until with a start he [finds] that April [is] watching him” (Yates 16). As the two share “an uncomfortable moment” (16), April ceases to perform as the failed actress waiting to be comforted by her well-intentioned husband and instead steps outside the exchange to serve only as audience. The disrupted performance only escalates on the Wheelers’ drive home, when they have a brutal argument on the shoulder of the highway. April refuses to get back into the car, much less continue acting in the way in which Frank expects. Previously he had entertained visions that when they got home, “they would have a few drinks and maybe she would cry a little—it would do her good—and then they would laugh about it and shut themselves in the bedroom” (25). When this fantasy is revealed to be impossible, Frank attempts to salvage whatever is left of their evening. When another car curves around the road, he “[puts] one hand in his pocket and [assumes] a

conversational slouch for the sake of appearances" (27), though it is clear that their presentation as the happily married couple has been broken, suggesting that a return to playacting as The Wheelers is impossible. Since, as Goffman notes, individuals "select as team-mates" (by which he means fellow performers) "those who can be trusted to perform properly" (95-6), it is unsurprising that April's suspension of performance is clearly upsetting for Frank, who longs for the "long quiet aftermath" (Yates 34) of the argument that he is sure will lead to reconciliation and a resumed performance.

The following evening, Frank, shaken by April's failure to sustain her role the previous night, looks forward to a dinner party with the Campbells, noting that it "[holds] a certain promise" of reliable behavior (59). April "would have to laugh and talk in their company," thinks Frank, "she would have to smile at him from time to time and call him darling" (59). Even though her actions would be forced and devoid of any real affection, the performance would be comforting to Frank, and he eagerly awaits the evening's routine festivities. But what follows is a representative instance of the failure of a team to perform consistently. The evening starts well: from the cheerful hellos ("the traditional herald of an evening's entertainment" [59]) to "the handshakings, the stately puckered kissings, the sighs of amiable exhaustions" (59-60), the two couples self-consciously inhabit the roles of themselves as they "[sink] into various postures of controlled collapse" (60). Yates' description of the four reads more like stage direction than narrative: Milly, whose "good sport's smile" marks her immediately as secondary to beautiful, regal April, who settles into a chair "with careless elegance" and "[blows] sad, aristocratic spires of cigarette smoke at the ceiling"; Frank, who appears immediately "alert for conversational openings," as the resident wit; Shep, the "meaty" and somewhat dopey presence who serves as "a steadying

influence” for the group (60). After all four players take their place and assume their set roles, “they were ready to begin” (60) what should be a continuation of their usual dramatics.

As they settle into their roles, are the Wheelers and the Campbells aware that their actions are part of an ongoing performance? That is, does the individual realize that her interactions with others are motivated by the desire to both present herself in a certain manner and to control the way in which others view her, or is she blissfully unaware of her pretense? The answer, paradoxically, is yes. According to Goffman, individuals cycle through stages of awareness and ignorance of their role-playing, often realizing that a shift has happened. In some cases, “the performer can be fully taken in by his own act” and can “sincerely believe that the definition of the situation they habitually project is the real reality” (28; 77). By contrast, sometimes the performer is completely aware of his acting, instead “[guiding] the conviction of his audience only as a means to other ends, having no ultimate concern in the conception that they have of him or of the situation” (28). In this vision, the actor is consciously performing (and often has ulterior motives that motivate his simulation); as such, he is less concerned with the ‘reality’ of the situation, as he believes it to be completely false (even when the other players are unaware of his pretense). The danger lies in the space between these two extremes; as actors slip between cycles of awareness, they run the risk of disrupting the performance and revealing the artifice of the situation. This realization (and the rupture that results) is a major concern of *Revolutionary Road*, as the characters, situated in the Wheelers’ living room, realize their performance is faltering.

Where they had always been able to figure themselves excitedly as “members of an embattled, dwindling intellectual underground” (Yates 61) that most certainly did *not* belong in suburban Connecticut, the Wheelers and the Campbells now find themselves unable to continue. As Goffman notes, refusing to acknowledge openly that performance is happening is intrinsic to its success; if an actor attempts to break the illusion, the audience “often prevent[s] such an action” (57). Accordingly, the two couples “[shift] awkwardly in their seats,” “[fill] awkward pauses with elaborate courtesies about the freshening of drinks,” “[avoid] one another’s eyes,” and “[do] their best to avoid the alarming, indisputable knowledge that they [have] nothing to talk about” (Yates 61). The failed performance of the Laurel Players has revealed the artifice of their *own* performance as not-really-suburbanites, and in so doing, the Wheelers and the Campbells are faced with an opportunity to think critically about the foundational truths of their identities.

While this realization could easily be seen as simply the beginning of a cycle of disbelief, it is tempting to read their failed performances as signals that they are not as “painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture” (Yates 63) as they have always purported to be. That the Wheelers and the Campbells have merely been acting as the people they wish they were aligns conceptually with Goffman’s claim that an individual’s performance “will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole” (45). In doing so, the individual acts as a better version of herself in the hopes that she will “train” (Cooley, qtd. in Goffman 44) himself to *be* better. By suggesting that an individual’s performance has the ability to change her inner self, it then stands to reason that an authentic or essential ‘self,’ if it exists, is therefore malleable. Yet Goffman is careful not to lay claim to the existence of an

essential self; in figuring the self as completely performative, “a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented” (245), he eschews the notion of rating the authenticity of one’s actions, choosing instead to draw from Jean-Paul Sartre’s views of the self as a result of action.⁴ Yates, however, is not so willing to glibly ignore the desire for authenticity. Instead, Yates asks, through the characters of Frank and April Wheeler, what it means to believe in a true self and desire authentic action, or action in which the outer and inner selves are aligned, in a world that seems completely performative.

What “Can’t Possibly Touch Him”: Frank’s Protected Identity

In the performative world Goffman describes, to believe in an essential self requires a certain amount of protection. If humans are primarily actors and if performances might have the ability to train the inner self, then that inner self must be kept safe from all unwanted contamination. For Frank, a stratified identity consisting of layer after layer of performance protects his true self from being tainted. Frank Wheeler is a man for whom every action is part of an elaborate performance, in which he plays the role of Frank Wheeler, suburban husband and closet intellectual. From his first appearance, Frank is marked as someone who is painfully aware of how he appears to others and who is able to shift this perception with ease. After the disastrous production of *The Petrified Forest*, Frank moves against the flow of the crowd, toward the dressing rooms “with apologetic slowness and with what he hoped was dignity” (12), armed with pleasant nods and smiles should he happen upon any familiar faces along the way. Notably, Frank here is described as “among the few who bucked the current” [12], which is precisely how Frank enjoys

⁴ Throughout *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman cites Sartre (most often *Being and Nothingness*) multiple times. (See: Goffman 24n, 42, 82n)

thinking of himself—as one of the only people who is able to resist suburban conformity. Even more enjoyable for Frank is the idea that he is able to execute convincingly any role required of him; he “shoulder[s] ahead through the crowd,” smiling like the type of “kindly, witty man who would have exactly the right words of comfort for his wife,” though “in the intervals between his smiles . . . you could see the faint chronic fever of bewilderment in his eyes” (13 ; 12; 13) as he attempts to navigate the various parts he plays.

The “wholly different personalities” (12) that Frank is able to portray are predicated on a model of self in which outer appearances do not necessarily align with an inner ‘core.’ As previously noted, Frank fervently believes that what he *does* bears little effect on who he *is*; rather, Frank’s life is a series of performances wherein he tries constantly to insure that his inner self is protected and secure from outside influence. Consistently, Frank prepares for life in the same way that the Laurel Players prepared for their opening night—often with the same calamitous results. Frank remembers with “sweet nostalgic pain” (18) the childhood memory of a plan to escape the mid-Atlantic coast and “[ride] the rails to the West Coast” (18). In his careful planning, he “traced several alternate routes” and “rehearsed many times the way he would handle himself (politely, but with fist fights if necessary)” (18); he even went so far as to select the perfect costume for his trip, a hodgepodge collection of borrowed, blue-collar clothes that would “lend the right note of honest poverty” (18). The best part about this vagabond plan, according to Frank, was its “absolute secrecy” (18), and, as most childhood dreams of running away do, it is rendered hopeless the instant he shares it with another person. His schoolmate, Krebs, laughs off Frank’s plans, saying “You want to know something, Wheeler? You want to know why everybody thinks you’re a jerk? Because you’re a jerk, that’s why” (19). Despite Frank’s

careful attempts to portray himself in just the ‘right’ way, Krebs cuts through this pretense and collapses the distance between Frank’s proposed outer and inner self. There, hidden in the eye-rolling insult of a chubby boy who was not even truly his best friend, is Frank’s greatest fear: that the version of himself he presents to the world is no different from his ‘true’ self.

To combat these fears, Frank takes preventative measures in the form of even *more* performance; he doggedly conceptualizes a world in which he must constantly remind himself that no matter how he might act, regardless of how convincing his portrayal may be, the image of Franklin H. Wheeler: suburbanite, is just that—an act. “The important thing, always, was to remember who you were” (21), Frank tells himself on the drive home from *The Petrified Forest’s* opening night. He reassures himself with what he deems as the “true perspective” (21) of the situation—“that it simply wasn’t worth feeling bad about” (21) because, in the end, the play (or anything relating to their suburban lives) has no effect on their *true* selves. Indeed, the failed play is nothing to worry about, for “intelligent, thinking people” like he and April “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” (21). In believing that the Laurel Players’ disaster, like all other aspects of their lives, is simply another act to endure, Frank paints himself and April as merely victims of circumstance, for whom an unplanned pregnancy early in their marriage resulted in the tragic but necessary move to the suburbs.⁵

⁵ In so doing, Frank is not alone. Catherine Jurca, in *White Disapora*, notes that general complaints of postwar America’s “mass production, standardization, dullness, and conformity,” especially in relation to the suburb, “generate[s] a twentieth-century model of white middle-classness based counterintuitively and, indeed, incredibly on the experience of victimization” (6).

Indeed, *Revolutionary Road* emphasizes the fact that the Wheelers' lives are in constant contact with social institutions which necessitate specific performances, most notably suburbia and the corporate sphere. These performances, according to the model of self to which Frank subscribes, should have no effect on their 'true' selves and should be viewed as facetious actions in-and-of-themselves. Yet, the novel figures Frank and April (or at least April as far as Frank understands her) as incredibly concerned with the idea that "the organizations and conventions of postwar America erode the fundamental natures of the men and women who live within them" (Cheever 204). Frank himself notes that, though "economic circumstance might force you to live in [the suburban] environment" and participate in its required rituals, "the important thing was to keep from being contaminated" (21). Avoiding contamination, however, presupposes a level of self-knowledge that neither Frank nor April possess. Instead, Frank finds comfort in the tangible aspects of his role (the "grown-up, sophisticated feel of [his] silk tie and Oxford shirt," the "confident, fluid grace" with which he steers the car, the commanding sound of his own voice, etc. [21]) even though he has little understanding of any 'true' Frank that exists beneath them.

In so doing, Frank's performances become mere placeholders for a more ideal existence in the future, when he will have a complete understanding of his true self and will finally be able to live honestly. Self-knowledge exists as a progression—it can be attained if only one has "the time and freedom" (22). In the meantime, play-acting his way through various stages of his life is a necessary evil, for even in his youth, Frank "hardly ever entertained a doubt of his own exceptional merit" (22-3). Instead, Frank entertains fantasies of idealized, fully-realized people whom he denotes as "first-rate" (23), though he

had “never yet come close enough to one to touch [their] hand” (23). These ‘first-rate’ people appear to inhabit the same world as Frank, “disdainfully unaware of him” (23). The first-rate men “[look] as if they’d never been boys at all” (23), a tantalizing, ideal future prospect for Frank, who appears to stumble through life, completely insecure in his own masculinity. To recognize that his ‘true self’ is no different from the organization man persona he portrays to the outside world would be devastating to Frank’s sense of self—this world of authentic action and dropped performance, then, is very dangerous to Frank, for it could represent the realization of his greatest fears.⁶ Frank’s fear of contamination, then, is both a worry that outside structures will influence his inner self and a fear that contamination will prevent him from ever *knowing* his inner self. Even though he does not know exactly who he ‘truly’ is, protecting his inner self through layers of play-acting is of the utmost importance to Frank, for contamination from social institutions such as suburbia and the corporate world represent a halt in the process of self-discovery. Not only is it important to “remember who you were” (21) but also to maintain a comfortable distance between action and identity.

Maintaining this buffer, however, is no easy feat in the context of social institutions like suburbia, which threaten always to render Frank and April indistinguishable from the

⁶ Though April’s view of performance differs from Frank’s, she too harbors fantasies of “a whole world of marvelous golden people . . . sort of heroic super-people, all of them beautiful and witty and calm and kind” (272). April believes that if she only keeps moving through life, she will one day be able to join them and “[she’s] suddenly know that [she] belong[s] among them, that [she] [is] one of them, that [she’d] been meant to be one of them all along, and everything in the meantime had been a mistake; and they’d know it too” (272). Like Frank, April imagines the world of the golden people as an authentic destination, and ‘everything in the meantime,’ including her and Frank’s various performances, becomes simply a stage in the process of self-realization.

rest of the conforming masses. As an institution, suburbia “purports to be an identity category,” notes Catherine Jurca; “unlike the term *city-dweller*, which designates only a place of residence, *suburbanite* implies that where you live has something to do with who you are” (148). It seems as though taking up residence in the suburbs automatically means that one’s individual personality is superseded by the identity of suburbanite; along with this new identity comes a set of expectations. Rather than being Frank and April, they will be the Wheelers (who live alongside the Campbells and the Donaldsons and “the Cramers too, and the whaddyacallits, the Wingates, and a million others” [62]). They will “[fool] with [their] power mower[s] and [talk] about the rat race and the soft sell” (62) rather than cultivating individual interests. This sense of conformity is to be expected in a non-metropolitan community, as David Riesman explains in “Suburban Dislocation”: whereas a city “has enough music lovers [for example] to organize highly differentiated groups” that can coexist without interaction, “in the suburbs, the music lovers—if they are to support communal activities at all—must in some measure homogenize their tastes and hence create a local market” (133).⁷ Essentially, suburban comforts come at the cost of some individuality. To Frank and April, of course, combatting this conformity—this contamination—is of the utmost importance.

⁷ Riesman’s 1957 article, seeking a cause for the postwar sense of American dispossession, studies the effect of suburban life on the American psyche, a theme that has since become standard among postwar critics. (See also Catherine Jurca’s *White Disapora*). Riesman outlines the fragmentation of American life and notes that in the postwar years, the town/country dichotomy all but disappears, as the city is “not necessarily the seat of urbanism” any longer, while the suburbs differ from the city “only at the polarities of each” (124). As a result of this conflation, the ways in which Americans are labeled relies less and less on location, occupation, and ancestry, and more and more on “style and social character” (124) and who one projects him- or herself to be. This, combined with an overwhelming sense of conformity, leads to a nation-wide identity crisis; the desire to project a self that fits into suburban, middle-class culture struggles against an innate desire to exert one’s individuality.

Though necessary, Frank and April find it difficult, despite their best efforts, to resist suburban contamination.⁸ Eight years ago, Frank and April moved to the suburbs out of necessity rather than desire and attempted from the beginning to resist the suburban yoke. When looking for a house, they “wanted something out of the ordinary—a small remodeled barn or carriage house, or an old guest cottage—something with a little charm,” the likes of which Mrs. Givings, the realtor, said “simply weren’t available anymore” (30), presumably because everyone else also wanted them. Instead, she finds and sells them a “sweet little house” that she assures them was built “right after the war, you see, before all the really awful building began” (30). This house, on Revolutionary Road, has “absolutely no connection” with the “dreadful new development called Revolutionary Hill Estates” (30); that is, the Wheelers buy their home only after convincing themselves that though it might be suburban, it was at least *less* suburban than other houses, much in the same way that they agree to live in the suburbs only after agreeing that they are at least not ‘of’ the suburbs. The house on Revolutionary Road “did have possibilities” (31), even if it did feature a damnably suburban picture window, which Frank quickly rationalizes: “Still, I don’t suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities” (31). Yet, when the Wheelers return from *The Petrified Forest* eight years later, their house is not the anti-suburban refuge they imagined it could be. They still use the cheap furniture from the early days of their marriage, and though they have a “solid wall of books” meant to “take the curse off the picture window” (31), the only part of the house that “show[s] signs of pleasant human congress” is “the alcove they had established with reluctance less than six months ago: the province of the television set” (32). Rather than becoming the

⁸ Though, according to Jurca, “resistance is what binds [them] most closely to [suburbia]” (158).

revolutionaries they always imagined they would be, the Wheelers' attempts at resistance are as thinly worn as the carpet in front of their reluctantly-purchased television—and nearly as ubiquitous.

In fact, the novel “brilliantly defines the postwar suburbanite as the antisuburbanite, whose existence is a protest against everyone else’s putative conformity” (Jurca 148). Essentially, the Wheelers convince themselves that they do not belong in precisely the same ways everyone else convinces themselves of the same thing. Even in the midst of an anti-suburbia tirade with the Campbells, during the dinner party after the play, Frank notices that “if he allowed things to go on this way the excitement of the topic might then degenerate into the dreariest kind of suburban time filler, the very kind of evening he had always imagined the Donaldsons and the Wingates and the Cramers having, in which women consulted with women about recipes and clothes, while men settled down with men to talk of jobs and cars” (67-8). Fearing this development (which would signify suburban contamination), Frank decides that it is “time to act” (68) and launches into an even more impassioned rant than before. But his diatribe has “no effect” on April and the Campbells (69), and even his desperate attempt to salvage the evening with war stories fails, as he realizes that he told the same stories the year before. This inability to properly perform as suburban revolutionary tends dangerously toward suburban contamination, a thought that “haunt[s] him all night” (71) and throughout the morning, as he travels to the other site of institutional contamination: the corporation.

Just as the suburban neighborhood represents a blending of performance and identity, so does the corporation. Like the identity category of *suburbanite*, the postwar

corporate world features *organization men*, who are not simply “the white-collar people in the usual, clerk sense of the word,” according to sociologist William Whyte. Rather than simply working for The Organization (or the corporation), organization men “*belong* to it as well” (3, emphasis in original). These men are completely subsumed in the corporate lifestyle, “domesticated cog[s] in the corporate wheel” (Moreno 86) whose participation in the collection is deplorable to Frank.⁹ In order to prevent the superimposition of the organization man identity onto his own, Frank is careful to insist that “his job [is] the very least important part of his life, never to be mentioned except in irony” (Yates 68). In fact, he chose to work for a “big, swollen old corporation” in order to help maintain his individual identity; when looking for a job, he specifically told the employment officer that “the thing [he was] most anxious to avoid [was] any kind of work that can be considered ‘interesting in its own right’” (78). Frank described his perfect job as “something that can’t possible touch [him]” (78): “I want to go into that kind of place and say, Look. You can have my body and my nice college-boy smile for so many hours a day, in exchange for so many dollars, and beyond that we’ll leave each other strictly alone” (79). Essentially, Frank was and is prepared to perform any role expected of him in the corporate world, with the understanding that it has no effect on his true, inner self.

Performance, it seems, is precisely what is required of Frank in his white-collar employment at Knox Business Machines. Even as a child visiting Knox with his father, a longtime salesman, Frank’s interaction with the company was necessarily performative. After being informed that he would attend “luncheon” (73) with an important executive

⁹ Whyte, however, is clear to state that *The Organization Man* is neither “a plea for nonconformity” nor “a censure of the fact of organization society” (10; 11). Rather, Whyte explores the complicated allure of organization life: “For it is not the evils of organization life that puzzle [the organization man], *but its very beneficence*. He is imprisoned in brotherhood” (12, emphasis in original).

(rather than the usual—but lower register—“lunch”), Frank went to the office, looking “surprisingly dignified in his new suit, with its coat and tie almost exactly like his father’s” (74). These presumably required yet unspoken shifts in presentation (what Goffman would note as important changes made to Frank’s ‘front’) are indicative of the postwar business model that Frank would enter as an adult. In order to belong to the corporation, it is more important to fulfill the role of employee than actually to possess the skills needed to complete a task. Yet again, the unspoken, unrecognized nature of this performance is of the utmost importance. Goffman notes that “executives often project an air of competency and general grasp of the situation, blinding themselves and others to the fact that they hold their jobs partly because they look like executives, not because they can work like executives” (55). Corporate performers are quick to package themselves in the most corporate way possible—through new clothes, a sharp hairstyle, the ‘proper’ manner of speaking, even a new name in the case of Otis “Oat” Fields, who Frank recognizes needed to make himself more “jolly” in order to fit in with “a world of mandatory diminutives” (77). Yet more important than simply acting the role of white-collar worker is doing so inconspicuously. Goffman explains the importance of behaving as though every aspect of corporate life is routine—yet more than routine, it is “their only routine, or at least their most essential one” (56-7). The rote tasks and performances of the white-collar worker are expected to be repeated “until the rules of salesmanship and business become a ‘genuine’ aspect of oneself” (Mills 183); that is, the persona of the organization man should mask one’s true identity to the point where it *is* the true identity. The process is one of gradual internalization—or, as Frank would view it, co-optation.

This process, according to sociologist David Riesman, is symptomatic of what he terms “other-directed” society (*Lonely* 21). The other-directed person is someone who looks toward others for guidance in life. Importantly, this process is completely internalized and always shifting; the various goals toward which people strive shift according to social custom, but “the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others . . . [remains] unaltered throughout life” (21). This “exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others” (22) assists people in navigating successfully the various layers of performance necessitated by social institutions, and the process’s internalized nature allows for certain ‘slippage’ in terms of consciousness. That is, because a person’s tendency to align their life goals with what they perceive is deemed ‘correct’ by others is so deeply internalized, it ceases to be recognized as an outside structure. Rather, it becomes possible to perceive that one’s actions are truly done of one’s own volition instead of being the result of outside direction. It then is easy—and indeed comforting—to believe in the sort of separate selves that Frank does and to find sanctuary in the authenticating distance between one’s true identity and one’s socialized actions. This distance, then, provides a buffer through which people can safely perform without feeling as though they are betraying their inner selves.

In order to commit so fully to the performance, employees work “to sell themselves by marketing attractive images of themselves” (Jurca 152) and “[tend] to conceal or underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of [themselves]” (Goffman 56). Internalization is the key component to the organization man’s success—beneath his exterior, there is only more of the same. This collapse is frightening to Frank, who is determined to play the game (that is, to *appear* to be

an organization man) without ever losing his 'true' identity. This necessary masking and marketing of one's identity is what C. Wright Mills, writing in 1953, deems participation in the "personality market" (182). As employees become the corporation's most important material, their personalities become its most important commodity. The Organization is as much a lifestyle as corporation—where employee personas are of equal importance to whatever product or service the business might provide. The corporate employee is, like the shopkeeper or service worker, required to mask and eventually subsume any preexisting identity with that of the ideal employee; in so doing, his "personality becomes the instrument of an alien purpose" and he "becomes self-alienated" (Mills 184). This, of course, is an ideal situation for Frank, who firmly believes that "the great advantage of a place like Knox is that you can sort of turn off your mind every morning at nine and leave it off all day and nobody knows the difference" (81). Every aspect of Frank's job (what he describes as "his bright, dry, daily ordeal, his personal measure of tedium" [84]) is routine—he even knows the exact number of steps it takes him to walk to his cubicle and "could [do] it in his sleep" (84). Frank, who actively searched for a job that "[couldn't] possibly touch [him]" (74), is perfectly content to perform the actions required by corporate life, with the sole provision that doing so does not compromise what he believes is his true self.

This "protective coloration" (Whyte 11) is necessary in order to keep safe any inner self, and, as with Frank's attempts at resisting suburbia, ultimately fruitless. In the beginning stages of his performance and the early days of his marriage, Frank was perfectly happy to pretend to be a Knox man, knowing that "the best part of the joke was what happened every afternoon at five," when he could escape the stultifying corporate office

and come home to April and their apartment in the Village, “a girl as totally unlike the wife of a Knox man as the apartment was unlike a Knox man’s home” (80). But soon, “the joke had worn thin” (80), and after their move to the suburbs, Frank began “avoiding the whole topic whenever possible” (80). Despite every effort to keep himself distant from Knox Business Machines, when Frank goes to work the day after the flustering evening with the Campbells, he admits to himself that “in a funny way he guessed he would miss old Knox when he quit” (83) and that “in all honesty he could not have denied a homely affection for the place itself. . .It was a part of him” (84). In spite of his most furious protestations, his insistence “as a gray flannel rebel, that he somehow transcend the stereotype of the organization man” (Moreno 89), Frank cannot help but to diminish yet again that gap between what he does and who he is. It is unclear if internalization has simply taken place, though this inability to resist the organization life and his affection for Knox, like his gentle decline into suburban complacency, is yet another in a long line of suggestions that even though he and April “pride themselves on being different . . . the implication grows that the young couple are indeed their culture’s most representative members” (Klinkowitz 18). The difference between the Wheelers’ outer and inner selves, it seems, is not nearly as distinct as Frank would like it to be.

After eight years at Knox, the barrier between Frank’s corporate actions and his identity has collapsed in key ways. He does the bare minimum amount of work necessary to stay employed, shuffling a pile of memos through the same file folders until the most unavoidable are placed into a desk drawer designated “Real Goodies” (90). But this desk drawer, which should be yet another inconsequential part of the routine “had come to occupy a small nagging place in Frank’s conscience: he was as shy of opening it as if it held

live snakes" (90). In allowing this desk drawer to situate itself in his consciousness, Frank fails to maintain the buffer between his job and his self. This, Catherine Jurca notes, is the expected result of the new, public relations-focused business model, which "theorizes the development of a self whose very identity is collapsing with its projection" (152). Rather than simply acting as an organization man, Frank is dangerously close to *becoming* an organization man. Frank's failure to maintain the integrity of his stratified identity hints at the novel's ultimate dismissal of his model of self, though for the time being, Frank is completely unwilling to see that he is at risk of contamination—or, more accurately, he is unwilling to admit that he was never at risk because there is no difference between his authentic and performed selves.

Easy, Agreeable Lies: April's Attempts at Authenticity

Despite the collapsing distance between Frank's outer and inner selves, for the majority of the novel, he still firmly maintains that a difference between the two exists. In order to find comfort in an inconsequential outer self, it would seem that he must have a comprehensive knowledge of his true self, so as to distinguish between performance and authenticity. Yet this is not the case for Frank, who believes self-knowledge to be an elusive destination rather than an inherent possession. Instead, Frank believes his actions to be distanced from this 'true' self, which does not require real self-knowledge—simply a knowledge of who he is *not*. Frank is a man who seems to have a very limited understanding of who he truly is (based vaguely on his experiences abroad during the war and on puffed-up ideas of himself as a bohemian intellectual) but an extensive understanding of who he is not (a 'real' suburbanite, a 'true' white-collar worker, a "dumb, insensitive suburban husband" [Yates 26]). Rather, Frank believes that he is merely playing

at his current life, secure in the notion that he is not really meant to live on Revolutionary Road, or to work at Knox Business Machines, or even to be the father of two small children. Even though he performs the actions necessary to take him through this life, he is actually waiting for his 'real' life to begin.

This attitude, in which a person's actions have no bearing on his identity, is defined by Sartre as living in "bad faith" (*EP* 153) and is found when a human "consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself" (*EP* 153). That is, rather than defining one's self through action and through the negation of others (i.e. Frank is Frank because he is not Shep), a person of bad faith turns that negation inward and begins to separate their various 'selves.' In this disconnect, Sartre notes that people find themselves in transcendence in those moments where they flee from and escape themselves (*EP* 178); this is dangerous, as it leads to people "chaining [their] movements as if they were mechanisms" (*EP* 182) and finding comfort in a distance that does not truly exist. That is not to say that people who act in bad faith are completely ignorant of what they are doing—just the opposite. Sartre notes that "[a] person can *live* in bad faith, which does not mean that he does not have abrupt awakenings to cynicism or to good faith, but which implies a constant and particular style of life" (*EP* 160, emphasis in original).¹⁰ Indeed, it seems as though every character in *Revolutionary Road* lives within this context, led by Frank's living-room tirades against the "extreme suburban smugness" (Yates 62) to which he so clearly, in his opinion, does not belong.

¹⁰ The cyclical nature of good and bad faith is reminiscent of the cycles of belief-to-disbelief noted in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (See: Goffman 28-32).

April, however, cannot so easily deny the connection between her self and her performance. She places a greater importance on the perceived authenticity of her actions than other characters in the novel, and for this reason, she finds herself, particularly after the Laurel Players' performance, 'breaking character' more than anyone else, much to Frank's dismay. Like Frank, the Laurel Players also find comfort in the distance they place between their actions and their senses of self. Rather than commit to *The Petrified Forest* and accept that perhaps if their play failed that they too, in some ways, had failed, they nervously giggle and drop the performance, giving into their earlier fears of being "afraid they would end [the play] by making fools of themselves and . . . being afraid to admit it" (5). But unlike the others, April cannot simply turn the play into a joke and cannot treat it as though it does not (and never did) matter; for her, this performance is as important as any other performance—it is inextricably linked to who she is. So, despite the fact that she can sense herself failing, with "the warmth of humiliation rising in her face and neck" (9), April is left at the end of the show "paralyzed in a formal smile" (10), unable to allow herself to act as though her performance does not matter. For April, identity seems to hinge on the actions she performs, placing her in direct opposition with the rest of the characters.

In this way, April appears to hold a Sartrean view of the self by exemplifying what Sartre would call "good faith," in that she sees her identity as something created by her actions. This conception is perhaps best described by the existentialist mantra "*existence comes before essence*" (Sartre *EH* 26); that is, man creates who he is (his essence) through his choices and actions rather than having an inherent essence. "Man is nothing else but that which he makes himself," declares Sartre (*EH* 28), and he is "no other than a series of undertakings" (*EH* 42). In order to subscribe to this belief, April must think that each action

is fundamentally linked to who she is as a person and must therefore consider carefully the times in which she acts out a social role.¹¹ April, however, does not seem to view her existence as “a constant *striving*, a perpetual *choice*” (Cooper 3, emphasis in original) in the same way an existentialist would. Rather, April constantly revises and justifies her actions so that they align with what she believes is her true self. For example, after the disastrous failure of *The Petrified Forest*, April insists that she had never cared about the play.

Admittedly, in Frank’s memory of their decision to become involved with the Players, April “had been disdainful at first” (63) but was eventually swayed by the Players’ “tasteful advertisement” and the apparent genuineness of those involved (63). Yet after the play’s failure, April swears to Frank that she “was never any kind of actress and never really wanted to be” (118). She admits that over the years, she had created a “completely corny, soap-opera picture” of herself as someone whose dreams were stilted by marriage and parenthood. But, as she says to Frank, “[Y]ou know I only went to the Academy to get away from home, and I know it too. I’ve always known it” (118). Yet this is yet another retroactive revision of April’s, for if she “never really wanted to be” any sort of actress and “always knew it” (118), she never would have participated in the Laurel Players, so many years after supposedly giving up her dream. By refusing to believe that her true desires have shifted over time and by insisting that what she feels in the present is what she has always felt, April is able to maintain a correlation between her actions and her identity. In this way, she can believe her inner self remains constant and instead it is her *actions* and the way she views them that are continually revised.

¹¹ Goffman would argue that there are no instances in which the individual *does not* play out a social role, as all human interaction is inherently performative, but *Revolutionary Road* seems to make a clear distinction between the characters’ ‘true’ actions and their performances, often signaled by their stiff, self-conscious movements and an “odd, theatrical emphasis” (Yates 112-3) in their speech. (See also: Cheever 205-6)

Given this process of revision, it would be a misapplication of the term to say that April operates fully within the structures of Sartre's good faith, though her view of the relationship between one's self and one's actions is much closer than that of the other inhabitants of the novel. Instead of seeing her actions and identity as fully separated, she recognizes that they are somehow linked. Because she feels this link between her actions and herself, whenever April allows herself to be moved in various directions, she always rewrites the actions in her own mind as active choices, thereby retroactively giving all of her actions significance. For quite a bit of the novel, April is presented mainly through Frank's memories of her, and even when she *does* gain a presence toward the end of the novel, it mostly consists of flashbacks. In doing so, Yates creates a character who must be thought of in terms of process; April is constantly justifying her actions through her identity while simultaneously validating her identity through her actions, as seen most clearly through her various flashbacks. The abandoned child of a young, party-going couple (described by Frank as "flickering caricatures of the twenties" [39]), April remembers her adolescence as being guarded by a cold, unloving aunt whom she hated, a sentiment which Frank resists, saying that she could not have 'always' hated her, even if "maybe it seems that way now, looking back" (40). April responds crisply that no, her aunt did not love her, and she felt little in return for her; her parents were the only ones she loved. Again, Frank pushes back against the idea that April loved her parents, conceding that while their infrequent visits must have seemed "romantic and everything. . .very dazzling and glamorous and all that" (41) but that they could not have constituted love. April brushes him aside, insisting that she *did* love them. At the same time, April also reveals that "[she] always knew nobody cared about [her] and [she] always let everybody know [she] knew it" (19). This is an

important insight into April's character in terms of her understanding of the relationship of the self and identity—whereas Frank (and most other people) would most certainly play along, April has little trouble dropping the performance and speaking the truth. April is simply unwilling to continue a performance that she feels is inauthentic, or if she does continue, she must then recontextualize the performance in a way that reflects what she considers to be her true self.

This revisionist tactic is seen clearly in April's actions in Frank's account of their first decision not to have an abortion. April's accidental first pregnancy, which "according to their plan. . .came seven years too soon" left the young couple unsure of what to do and completely "out of kilter" (50). Without Frank's knowledge, April sought out information on how to induce a miscarriage (an "absolutely infallible" plan that "was simplicity itself" [51])." Frank refused to entertain such a notion—not, importantly, because he was opposed to abortion (an idea which "God knew, was more than a little attractive" [51]) but because April had not consulted him in the formulation of this plan. Despite her firm conviction that she would induce a miscarriage, "the next day, weeping in [Frank's] arms, [April] had allowed herself to be dissuaded" (52). "Oh, I know, I know . . . I know you're right," April wept, thereby figuring the decision to keep the baby as what she had always known as the 'right' choice rather than an acquiescence to Frank's will. In so doing, April is able to perform the role of wife and mother without compromising her sense of self, for she never *truly* wanted the abortion. By reconfiguring even her most passive of moments as an active choice, April never does anything that she does not want to do—for even if she does, she will soon recontextualize it as what she wanted to do all along.

While an unplanned pregnancy is not perhaps what Goffman might define as a break in performance, its function in the narrative is not dissimilar to the failed performances that figure prominently later in the novel. It presents a tension between what Frank and April think they should do, what they want to do, and what they *actually* do. Furthermore, the pregnancy (or rather, their reaction to the pregnancy) reveals the lack of understanding between the newlywed couple that ultimately causes the unraveling of their marriage. For, it is not the pregnancy or even the suggestion of an abortion, that upsets Frank—rather, it is the lack of communication:

Whatever you felt on hearing the news of conception, even if it was chagrin instead of joy, wasn't it supposed to be something the two of you shared? Your wife wasn't supposed to turn away from you, was she? You weren't supposed to have to work and wheedle to win her back, with little jokes and hand-holdings, as if you were afraid she might evaporate at the very moment of your first authentic involvement of your lives—that couldn't be right. Then what the hell was the matter? (51)

Frank's inability to understand April's thoughts both frustrates and infuriates him, yet it is her reluctance to perform that contributes to his sense of thinly-veiled outrage. As always, Frank has a clear idea of what the "right" way to act in any given situation is, and April's unwillingness to conform to the roles he has set out for them is bothersome. Unplanned though this pregnancy might be, it is "supposed to be something the two of [them] [share]," and it is clear to Frank that he should not have to work quite so hard to maintain a connection with April.

Yet it is the unscripted nature of this pregnancy that seems to cause the break in communication. "That was the trouble," Frank thinks years later, "and if he'd known her better then he might have guessed how she would take it and what she would happen to

feel like doing about it” (50). Like their conceptions of identity, the Wheelers’ marriage is a model of progression: after eight years of marriage, the couple would know each other well enough to start a family, much like how an appropriate amount of time and space will allow them to understand themselves. In this context, April’s first pregnancy serves as a sort of contamination—one that prevents them from continuing the process of understanding one another. Riding back from the doctor’s office, Frank feels that he is “wholly in the dark” and unable to read April’s expression as she “[carries] her head high in a state of shock or disbelief or anger or blame—it could have been any or all or none of these things, for all he knew” (50). Frank’s inability to comprehend April’s emotions signifies, in some ways, his inability to know her at all, which proves to be a problem that haunts the entirety of the Wheelers’ marriage.

This lack of understanding leads to a serious disconnect between the ‘real’ April and Frank’s version of April. For the majority of the novel, Frank’s version of April is the only version that the reader sees, aside from her dialogue; her thoughts and intentions are completely mediated through his understanding of her. This understanding of April is essentially a vision of her as both calculating and mercurial—someone who has never “had a less selfish, more complicated reason for doing anything in her life” than doing it simply because “she just happened to feel like it” (49). Even their marriage seems to have been decided on a whim, as Frank imagines April saw it as saving her from “the gritty round of disappointment she would otherwise have faced” as an actress and provided her with the opportunity to “languish attractively through a part-time office job” (50). (It is important to note, however, that this is more of a comment on *Frank’s* ideas of marriage than April’s.) Frank sees April as a conditional woman—a woman who “love[s] him when he [is] nice,

who live[s] according to what she happen[s] to feel like doing, and who might at any time—this [is] the hell of it—who might at any time of day or night just happen to feel like leaving him” (53). Yet Frank’s vision of April does not coexist neatly with the April written on the page, if only because it envisions a version of April in which her outer self is constantly masking a shifting, temperamental inner self. April, however, sees her inner self as constant, because she unfailingly revises her actions to match. Rather than being as mercurial as Frank believes her to be, April sees herself as unflaggingly consistent, for though her beliefs change, she always convinces herself that they are her true feelings—the feelings she has always meant to have.

Despite the disconnect between Frank’s version of April and April’s vision of herself, Frank is surprised time and time again to see the reality of April, which he always perceives as her ‘not acting like herself.’ Frank has a very clear vision of how April should react in any given situation (and, as Frank plays out these reactions in extended daydreams, as does the reader), and when she fails to live up to his ideal performance, he is often disappointed and angry. Indeed, for the first third of the novel, April essentially functions as a supporting cast-mate for Frank. Thinking back to when they first met, Frank remembers how she served as the perfect counterpart to his newfound identity as a young intellectual. Indeed, April seems to be little more than a prop during the early parts of their relationship. Frank is delighted to find that he can make her laugh and “hold the steady attention of her wide gray eyes” (24), and that “the small of April Johnson’s back rode as neatly in his hand as if it had been made for that purpose” (25). Who April is and what she wants seems to matter less than how well she fits the role Frank needs her to play. Even in the context of the Laurel Players, Frank has an idealized vision of acting the supportive husband, “driving her

to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand” and “pushing his way through the jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss” (13); he is simply not prepared for the “weight and shock of reality” (13) of watching April fail. As her performance falters, she is transformed into the “graceless, suffering creature whose existence he [tries] every day of his life to deny but whom he [knows] as well and as painfully as he [knows] himself” (13). By interjecting these fond memories of the ‘old’ April (or, perhaps, the April who was more potential than reality) with the anxious scenes of tensions rising after the play, the novel underscores the idea that Frank cannot deal with a failed performance.

Frank’s inability to function in the context of a failed performance is seen time and again as he attempts to return April to a situation in which she will be forced to perform as his version of herself. April, “who from the beginning [of the novel] is shown as two women (at least)” (Bailey 230), is constantly held up against this other, more agreeable version of herself, and her lack of presence on the page makes finding the ‘real’ April difficult. Even when the reader sees her dialogue, it is tainted by Frank’s perspective and by previous descriptions of her character. Just as onstage when she weakened from a beautiful, skilled thespian to a dramatic, false amateur, after the performance, she transforms from a cold, slightly unstable housewife to a shrill, shrieking woman on the edge. The reader has already seen Frank’s version of April—the *better* version of April—, who goes home to fix a drink and cry submissively over her failure; instead, the real April bolts out of the car and screams at her well-meaning husband. Even as their argument builds, Frank stubbornly imagines a way for them to return to their roles as a happy, young, intellectual couple—if they can just make it home, have a few drinks, maybe even cry about it (“It would do her

good" [25]), then "there [isn't] any reason why it couldn't be like the old days" (25). The 'old days' Frank longs for are explicitly described as performances, when the couple played house in a shabby apartment. By retreating into play-acting, Frank is able to maintain the distance between his actions and his 'true self' and therefore can create the illusion that nothing he does or says has any real effect. As his world becomes more and more unstable, the more Frank wishes to return to the safety of a performance, which he seems to view as a way to pause reality.

April, meanwhile, is decidedly less willing to continue performing; the first third of the novel is peppered with moments in which April subtly reveals that she is no longer willing to assume the role of Mrs. April Wheeler, dutiful suburban wife and secret bohemian. April, it seems, is sharply aware of the reality Frank tries so desperately to ignore. "Oh you've never fooled me, Frank, never once. . . . Oh, I've always known I had to be your conscience and your guts—and your punching bag" (28), she says during their argument after *The Petrified Forest*. Whereas Frank is always ready and willing to forgive all in order to go back to their role-playing, April refuses. "Until the next time, you mean?" she asks when he asks if they can quit fighting, "Make everything all nice and comfy-cozy until the next time? I'm afraid not, thanks. I'm tired of playing that game" (57). Indeed, from this point on, April steels herself against the allure of slipping back into the play-acting she and Frank have created. Interestingly, however, this newfound resolution to not perform manifests itself both in stilted, dropped performances *and* in over-the-top play-acting. The morning after the disastrous *Petrified Forest* and subsequent quarrel, Frank wakes to find April outside, stolidly mowing the lawn. As he watches her push the lawnmower across the yard, he notes that "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 ever wanted of love was a husband who would get out and cut the grass once in a while, instead of sleeping all day” (45). Ironically, it is this conspicuous performance that reveals to Frank that April simply is not willing to perform anymore. This flat refusal is brought to painful fruition during the post-*Petrified Forest* dinner with Shep and Milly Campbell, in which April simply abstains from participating in Frank’s worn-in performance of the stifled suburbanite, choosing instead to stare at him with “pitying boredom in her eyes” (74). Worse yet, when April *does* eventually deign to participate, she does so in the barest of ways, by “[turning] to her husband, but without quite meeting his eyes and without adding the ‘darling’ or even the ‘Frank’ that would have filled his heart with hope” (67). April’s unwillingness to fully participate signifies in some ways the beginnings of her refusal to submit fully to this suburban life of pretense.

That life of pretense, in which she plays the role of Mrs. April Wheeler and cannot seem to achieve any semblance of authenticity, is described by Simone de Beauvoir as “[reveling] in immanence” (597), or a state of never-ending presence. In her seminal text, *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir outlines “Women’s Situation and Character” as a state of being in which women are “shaped as in a mold by [their] situation” (597), their situation being the routine housework and performative roles necessitated by suburban life. Housework, de Beauvoir claims, “teaches her patience and passivity” (598), as meals are made, eaten, and cleaned up just in time for the next meal’s preparation to begin, laundry is pressed and folded and put away just in time to be collected again, and the proclamation of one room’s cleaning being finished signifies only that the next room’s cleaning must now begin. By subjugating herself to an endless routine, time for women “has no element of novelty

because she is doomed to repetition, [the woman] sees in the future only a duplication of her past" (599). Clearly, this presents a problem for April, who views her identity as so intrinsically linked to the actions she performs. If she cannot break out of her routine, she will never escape this sense of immanence. What April does not realize, however, is that through continually revising her actions to reflect her true self, thereby authenticating performance after performance, she is already dooming herself to a life of imminence. April believes that her only hope at transcendence is through a radical change that will allow her to disentangle herself from her routine, inauthentic suburban life; in so doing, she will reach the 'land of the golden people,' where she will be able to live as she was always meant to live. If Frank's inability to keep protected what he believes to be his authentic self signifies the obviolation of his model of self, then the never-ending cycle of April's revisionist authenticity suggests also that April's ideas of selfhood are not cohesive with the postwar world. Like Frank, however, April is unwilling or unable to recognize just yet this futility and maintains that she will be able to achieve authenticity if only she can align her actions with her essential self.

Face to Face, in Total Darkness: Crises of Performance

It is by moving to Paris that April believes she will finally be able to leave her performances behind and discover her truest self. However, this is where she loses Frank; though she intrigues him at first with the prospect of sitting dreamily in Paris, she insists on authenticity, which terrifies him. Where Frank has been perfectly willing for seven years to spout off tirade after tirade about the inauthenticity and the foolishness of all the other suburbanites without ever acknowledging that he and April are just the same, April now

sheds light on “the terrific fallacy” (116) of their lives by exclaiming that they are “just like” the people they had always ridiculed (116). “[M]y God, Frank, I don’t have to tell you what’s wrong with this environment—I’m practically *quoting* you” (115, emphasis in original), April says, turning Frank’s empty rhetoric against him. For the first time, it seems, April brings the performative nature of their lives to the forefront, wondering “[h]ow did [they] ever get *into* this strange little dream world” (116, emphasis in original). With every declaration, it becomes clear that she is finished with sitting-room sermons and empty derision—she is going to fix the mess they have made of their lives, no matter what.

April then swiftly explains away the reasons they have fallen into this sentimental trap, taking care to make their dismal situation seem inevitable while also exonerating Frank from any fault. Rather, it is *April* who takes the blame for their unsatisfactory lives, saying that by buying the supplies for the abortion when they first became pregnant, she “put the whole burden of the thing” (117) on Frank, who played along:

That’s how we both got committed to this enormous delusion—because that’s what it is, an enormous, obscene delusion—this idea that people have to resign from real life and ‘settle down’ when they have families. It’s the great sentimental lie of the suburbs, and I’ve been making you subscribe to it all this time. I’ve been making you *live* by it! (117)

April berates herself for allowing herself to become so self-deluded and so willing to participate in suburbia, whose aim is only “to keep reality at bay” (115). Moreover, she shoulders the brunt of the responsibility for allowing her and Frank to fall prey to the “great sentimental lie of the suburbs.” April decides that their entire life in the suburbs has been merely a diversion in their process of self-discovery and authenticity—a process that can be best continued in Paris.

Importantly, however, it is only when April invokes the idea of masculinity that Frank begins to succumb to the idea of moving to Paris, rather than her various pleas against the dullness of suburbia or the stifling of Frank's supposed genius. "It's what you *are* that's being denied and denied and denied in this kind of life," she says desperately, and when Frank inquires what he *'is,'* she "[brings] his hand gently up her hip and around to the flat of her abdomen, where she [presses] it close again" (121). This motion, which figures Frank as dominant (over April—and specifically over her womb), is accompanied by the crux of April's argument: "You're the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You're a man" (121). *This* is how April convinces Frank, who is immediately swayed and agrees to Paris not with words but by "taking his wife" (121) sexually in what he describes as a victory. Never, Frank thinks, "had he triumphed more completely over time and space. . . . 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" (121). With this "triumph," Frank is able to reclaim the masculinity he has struggled all his life to secure.

For Frank, willing participation in (or contamination by) suburbia and the corporate culture signify a loss of masculinity. Michael Moreno describes this perceived emasculation as typical of the postwar American man. As the GIs return from Europe, they are faced with a new corporate landscape, a displacement in the "waning era of manual industry and the emerging computer age" (Moreno 85) where men are now transformed "from the GI Joe image of masculinity to an emasculated body—an anonymous, gray-flanneled consumer" (Moreno 85). This transition is not an easy one, as it requires a complete reinterpretation of what it means to be masculine. As Moreno notes, by yielding to suburbia and corporate

culture, “the organization man inevitably loses his masculine identity as the war-hero” (89) and instead must face life as the sort of suburban drone Frank professes to despise. To escape this fate, Frank seeks to “[avoid] the traditional expectations of suburban life” (89). In Moreno’s terms, these “traditional expectations” consist of participation in the consumer culture of the era, in which the reliance on material goods represents a loss of pre-war ideas of “rugged, individualistic, self-reliant” masculinity (89). Frank, however, does not seem especially concerned with the consumer culture Moreno describes—after all, his participation in suburban culture is nothing but a performance. Of course, his inability to maintain the comfortable barrier between illusion and reality—that is, his failure to perform successfully belies Frank’s concerns of emasculation.

However, Frank’s discomfort with the postwar model of what it means to be male is perhaps best read as an anxiety about possessing the *wrong* type of masculinity. Earl Wheeler, Frank’s father, represents the ideal pre-war man—someone who worked doggedly his entire life, providing for his wife and children and relinquishing neither his individuality nor his dignity. His hands were strong and powerful, full of enviable “sureness and sensitivity” and possessing an “aura of mastery [that] they imparted to everything [he] used” (37). They handled with ease “the creaking pigskin handle of his salesman’s briefcase, the hafts of all his woodworking tools, the thrillingly dangerous stock and trigger of his shotgun” (37)—namely, the hallmarks of traditional, rugged masculinity. Frank, in contrast, is unable to use properly his father’s carpentry tools, and his hands are “bloated and pale. . .as if all their bones had been painlessly removed” (36), less impressive than his father’s hands (which had “looked stronger and better than his son’s” even “when they lay loose and still” in death [38]). Unable to possess the assuredness and capability of his

father, Frank instead “[draws] strength” (13) from projections of himself as perfectly playing (but not actually *being*) the role of suburban husband and father.

Yet, just as Frank finds the distance between his performance and his identity collapsing, so does he begin to take pleasure in new models of postwar masculinity. He dedicates an entire weekend afternoon to building a stone path, a project that quickly “was turning into mindless, unrewarding work, the kind of work that makes you clumsy with fatigue and petulant with lack of progress” (47), much like every other aspect of Frank’s life. Despite the Sisyphean nature of this project, Frank finds comfort in the rugged physicality of the task, for “at least it [is] a man’s work” (47), as compared to the meaningless tasks set forth by Knox Business Machines. He “take[s] pleasure in the sight of his own flexed thigh . . . and of the heavily veined forearm that lay across it and the dirty hand that hung there—not to be compared with his father’s hand, maybe, but a serviceable, good-enough hand all the same” (47). Here, dressed in “an old pair of army pants” (47), Frank is able to weave together the unraveling threads of his masculinity. He is not the master of physical labor his father was, but he is capable of shifting dirt and rock with a shovel; he is not the war hero he once was, but he can repurpose his uniform and conquer the muddy bank of his lawn. With his children playing by his side and his wife thankfully retreated to the kitchen, Frank is able to conquer suburbia and to begin constructing a stone path that would bring his home closer to “the way a house ought to look on a fine spring day, safe on its carpet of green, the frail white sanctuary of a man’s love, a man’s wife and children” (47). This masculine supremacy is quickly foiled as he cannot properly sever a stubborn tree root and loses patience with his children, sending them crying to April, where they “[hide] their faces in her trousers” (55). Her trousers, which she had worn that

morning to mow the lawn, coupled with her comforting the children, shows a blurring of gender roles as April inhabit both the maternal and paternal spheres. Though “the suburban male is a role Frank does not want [but] as the only form of masculinity offered to him, he cannot allow that role, however ridiculed and demeaning, to be usurped from him as well” (Moreno 90). Frank’s concern with possessing the ‘wrong’ kind of masculinity is second only to his fears of not possessing any masculinity at all, and to see his fatherhood appropriated by April signifies to Frank the dangers of failed performance. If he cannot rely on acting like the ideal suburban male—the “only form of masculinity offered to him”—and must depend instead on whatever version of masculinity is inherent within him, then Frank is faced with his greatest fears. What if, beneath his stratified identity and layer after layer of protection, he is simply not the man he has always envisioned himself to be?

In fact, the surrender of his masculinity is at the forefront of Frank’s mind as April begins to suggest their move to Paris. Immediately, he imagines their new life, in which April, “wearing a Parisian tailored suit, briskly pulling off her gloves,” would come home to their apartment, “her spike-heeled pumps [clicking] decisively on the tile floor and her hair [pulled] back into a neat bun” to find him “hunched in an egg-stained bathrobe, on an unmade bed, picking his nose” (115; 119; 115). To imagine that April would be the breadwinner, thereby robbing him of what he has defined as his masculine role, is terrifying to Frank. Though April does suggest that she take a job instead of Frank, she is careful to frame the change as a trivial time-filler until he “find[s] out what it is [he] want[s] to do” (114). For, April insists that finally, in Paris, Frank will have enough “time and freedom to start doing it” (114), whatever it is. Frank, fixated on the image of himself realizing in his egg-stained bathrobe that he has no “definite, measurable talent” (120),

seems to envision Paris as the site of nightmares rather than authenticity—it is there, without the comfortable safety of suburban performance, that he will potentially realize that his inner self is not the romantic intellectual for which he had always hoped, but rather the organization man he detests and in so doing, will lose also the only form of masculine power he has (even if it is less than ideal). It is only when April creates a vision of Paris as the potential fulfillment of his masculinity that Frank begins to agree to the idea. Puffed up with a sense of his own dominance, Frank again takes stock in the physical manifestations of his masculinity, such as the “rise and fall of his own chest, which felt broad and deep and muscled enough to fill the modeling of a medieval breastplate” (121-2). Here, he stretches past the GI model of his past and the prewar image of his father to an ancient, almost mythical model of masculinity: that of the medieval knight. “Was there anything he couldn’t do?” he asks himself, “Was there any voyage he couldn’t undertake and any prize in life he couldn’t promise [April]?” (122). Frank is assured by the ‘rightness’ of their plan and by its promise of authenticity (as envisioned by April’s desperate assurances that in Paris they would have the *time* to discover their true selves). The two “[fall] asleep like children” (122), secure in the honesty and goodness of their plan.

Despite the earnest nature of April’s plan, it quickly becomes clear that ‘Paris’ is really just another performance. When she first begins to speak to Frank (before descending into an almost-frantic diatribe), April sets the performance up entirely by wearing her “best white nightgown” (112) and plying him with alcohol and sex. Whereas April does not seem to be conscious of the fact that her great moment of authentic revelation is yet another performance, the reader and Frank himself are much more aware. As soon as Frank takes his first drink, he becomes reluctant to hear April’s ‘plan,’ for he

knows “whatever she [has] to say would be said with that odd, theatrical emphasis” (112). But April *does* go on, and Frank finds himself soothed by “the pleasure of sitting with her under the double cloak of a blanket” (113). Frank allows himself to acknowledge her falseness, saying “Play-acting or not, her voice in moods of love had always been a pretty sound” (113), then quickly moving on to allow himself to believe in her performance. He imagines that her plan of moving to Paris was “born of her sorrow and her missing him all day and her loving him” (113), though the reader understands that for *April*, the move is less a reinforcement of play-acting than a rejection of it. In this moment, performing is a means to an end for April, whether she knows it or not. In order to make the break and move to Paris, where they can stop pretending to be young, misunderstood intellectuals and can actually begin *living* as young intellectuals, she must make one final performance—the one that will convince Frank to go along with the plan.

But as their plan progresses, it becomes clearer and clearer that *everything* about Paris is just another performance. Frank describes the time in the wake of their decision as one “of such joyous derangement, of such exultant carelessness” (124), and his day at work is marked by an increase in performance (in all senses of the word). Frank is “a demon of energy” (131) who both commits himself more firmly to the demands of the corporation and who finds comfort in the fact that “in another few months he would leave [Knox] forever. All of it—lights, glass partitions, chattering typewriters—the whole slow, dry agony of this place would be cut away from his life like a tumor from his brain” (131). By envisioning his time at Knox as a “tumor” that can be cleanly and efficiently excised from his interior, Frank further convinces himself that his actions bear no effect on his identity. Yet despite Frank and April’s belief that moving to Paris is indicative of their true selves,

the text reinforces the fact that the “brave beginnings of a [new] personage” (134) inhabited by the Wheelers are just as scripted as their old roles. After work each day, Frank and April “take their places in the living room” (132) and speak with the same “conversational intensity . . . [as] they’d had before they were married” (132), a time characterized by Frank earlier as performative, “where half the fun of having an affair was that it was just like being married, and where, after a trip to City Hall. . . , half the fun of being married was that it was just like having an affair” (49-50). Frank and April resume their anti-suburban tirades with renewed vigor, enthralled with the knowledge of “how close [they] came to settling into that kind of an existence” (“‘But we didn’t,’ April insists, ‘That’s the important thing’” [136]). Every aspect of their new lives seems “original and wonderful . . . realer than real . . . really true” (137), but from the overly rehearsed way they prepare for their move, it is clear that Paris is yet another performance in an endless chain that will have to be broken if there is any hope of finding an authentic existence, rather than the means to an end that April hoped it would be. The crisis here is that by determining an end point for their pretense, the Wheelers are forced to imagine themselves living outside of the realm of performance. They return to their roles as secret intellectuals under the assumption that they soon will be able to live as their true selves, though the narrative consistently stages these performances in the same terms as their old, seemingly futile acts. By noting this reinforcement of the endlessness of performance, the reader is able to recognize what the Wheelers are not: that more drastic action than simply purchasing airplane tickets and brushing up on one’s college French is necessary in order to escape the hopeless emptiness of postwar performance.

Something Absolutely Honest, Something True: Halting Performance on Revolutionary Road

The need for drastic action becomes even more necessary as Frank and April begin to understand the incompatibility of their models of selfhood—and as both models have been frequently portrayed by the novel as unsuited for the postwar world, a happy ending for the Wheelers' story seems impossible. Frank and April's role reprisal as not-really suburbanites becomes strained after April discovers that, once again, she is pregnant, a development that she fears signals the end of their plans to move to Paris and represents in terms of the narrative a culmination of the Wheelers' crisis of performance. Frank, who has been secretly tempted by a promotion at Knox, is elated at the possibility of pushing back their expatriation. He imagines a scenario in which he firmly "[draws] the picture of a new life" (220), a life where his increased salary could afford them "a better house—or better still, if they continued to find the suburbs intolerable, they could move back to town. . . to a brisk, stimulating, new New York that only money could discover" (220). He goes so far as to imagine himself getting a job with Knox International, thereby blending their dreams of Paris with the validation of succeeding at his job. But Frank does not tell April his plans, as in the midst of his daydreams, he discovers in the bathroom closet "the dark pink bulb of a rubber syringe" (222) and realizes that April intends to give herself an abortion.

This discovery leads a stalemate for Frank and April, as Frank tries to convince April to keep the baby and postpone their plans while April remains insistent that they do whatever necessary in order to move to Paris and begin their new lives immediately. They both agree that "[they've] got to be together in this thing" (228), and so "the way [is] cleared for the quiet, controlled, dead-serious debate with which they [begin] to fill one

after another of the calendar's days" (228) as they draw nearer to that "mysterious time 'right at the end of the third month' when [April's] schoolfriend, long ago, had said that it would be safe to apply the rubber syringe" (227). Within a relatively short, four-week timeframe (a time "very like a courtship" [228]), Frank must woo April away from the syringe and toward another attempt at suburbia. He begins arranging evenings in the city, where he can show April "a world of handsome, graceful, unquestionably worthwhile men and women who had somehow managed to transcend their environment . . . [and] who had exploited the system without knuckling to it" (229-230), just as they themselves could certainly do. Frank also carefully presents himself as he did when he first courted April: he tries to walk "in the old 'terrifically sexy' way" and "when he [lights] a cigarette in the dark he [is] careful to arrange his features in a virile frown before striking and cupping the flame" (231). He convinces himself that "all's fair in love and war" and that "hadn't [April] pulled out everything in her own bag of tricks last month, to seduce him into the Europe plan?" (232). Frank therefore "[frees] himself to concentrate on the refinement of his role" (232) as he presents the best version of himself in the hopes that it will convince April to surrender. In so doing, Frank further commits himself to the performance, whereas April does her best to resist.

April goes through the motions of Frank's courtship but refuses to give in; frankly, she seems to find the entire performance baffling. April holds court in the living room, which Frank thinks of as "the worst possible place for getting his points across" (233). Unlike the chic backdrop of New York City or their cozy, romantic bedroom, the living room is the "merciless" stage of their most unforgivably suburban habits: "the furniture that had never settled down and never would, the shelves on shelves of unread or half-read or read-

and-forgotten books that had always been supposed to make such a difference and never had; the loathsome, gloating maw of the television set” (233). After an exhausting day at the beach, April arranges herself in the damnable living room and begins to pry at Frank’s careful rhetoric as he explains patiently that “the only mature thing to do is to go ahead and have the [baby]” (236). “I don’t know what ‘mature’ means, either, and you could talk all night and I still wouldn’t know. It’s all just *words* to me, Frank” (236, emphasis in original), she says, staring at him with the same exasperated, pitiable boredom as she had during that first disastrous dinner party with the Campbells, after *The Petrified Forest*. This prompts Frank to suggest that perhaps April’s resistance to pregnancy stems from her troubled childhood, to which April responds bleakly, “All right, suppose all of that is true. . . . So what? I still can’t help what I feel, can I? . . . Am I supposed to just Face Up to my Problems and start being a different person tomorrow morning, or what?” (238). Here, April’s inability to understand how she can become a new person simply by acting like a new person (for she believes that her actions always reflect her true self) comes into direct conflict with Frank’s sense of self, as he suggests that she see a psychoanalyst. (Psychoanalysis fits perfectly with Frank’s ‘layered’ model of self, as it presumes the notion that if one can sift through the various layers of consciousness, one can find the truth.) Yet this argument, it seems, is what finally prompts April to realize that if she has the baby, they will never escape the suburbs.

With the realization that ‘Paris’ is simply another performance, never to be carried out, April suddenly realizes that for years, she has been revising her identity to match her behavior rather than moving toward the authentic life of intention she has always envisioned for herself. In so doing, she realizes that she has no real sense of self outside of her various performances. Her long-held belief that she might someday join the ranks of

the “marvelous golden people” (272) and be able to live her ideal, authentic life, she realizes, is what allowed her for so many years to fall into the habit of performativity. April seems to see clearly for the first time that this line of thinking is “the most stupid, ruinous kind of self-deception there is, and it gets you into nothing but trouble” (272), the “trouble” being a complete loss of self. When Shep Campbell tries to indicate that he loves her and wants perhaps to engage in a continued extramarital affair, April refuses, telling him that she does not really know who he is (since, as it seems, no one is immune to inauthentic performances). “And even if I did,” she explains, “. . . I’m afraid it wouldn’t help, because you see I don’t know who I am either” (276).

Two years after the publication of *Revolutionary Road*, Betty Friedan would attempt to understand this problematic loss of identity that so many American women—particularly suburban American women—felt during the postwar period. “What happened to women is part of what happened to all of us in the years after the war,” Friedan writes, noting that “[w]e found excuses for not facing the problems we once had the courage to face . . . The whole nation stopped growing up [and] all of us went back into the warm brightness of home” (273-4). Friedan argues that this push toward the domestic is inextricably linked to a sense of masculine inadequacy and impotence¹² (277), in which the only way to help American men reassert their masculinity in a postwar world is to take away the role of women outside of the home.

¹² As previously outlined by Moreno, Riesman, Whyte, and Mills, the changing landscape of American masculinity in the postwar era does not go unnoticed by Betty Friedan, who directly links it to the stultifying of women: “The unremitting attack on women which has become an American preoccupation in recent years might also stem from the same escapist motives that sent men and women back to the security of the home ... [T]he compromising, never-ceasing competition, the anonymous and often purposeless work in the big organization ... also [keeps] a man from feeling like a man. Safer to take it out on his wife and his mother than to recognize a failure in himself or in the sacred American way of life” (Friedan 295).

By allowing (or forcing) women to resume the roles of wife and mother (and, more specifically, *only* those roles), society allows them to “evade tests of reality and real commitments” (Friedan 403) and teaches them that they will only find fulfillment through performing the social roles required of wives and mothers.¹³ That women often do *not* find fulfillment through the performance of these roles is an issue that Friedan argues goes unspoken. Rather, women are “encouraged to evade human growth” (437) and take comfort in fulfilling a role—or, as Frank instructs April, to find solace in the performative aspects of these roles. In so doing, women are left with an “inevitably weak core of self” (403), unable to understand who they are outside of these social archetypes.¹⁴ Without a strong sense of autonomy, women become trapped in a cycle of domestic performance, in which they are unable to transcend their situation and seek true fulfillment or, in April’s case, authenticity. April’s lost sense of self, coupled with the sudden understanding that the revisionist authenticity through which she has always defined her identity will never allow her to escape the endless cycle of performance, leads to the culmination of April’s crisis.

After a particularly brutal fight with Frank, April stays awake all night considering her lost identity, the role she seems to be continually playing, and how she can possibly move forward and find some sort of authenticity. Having decided to put off the move to Paris for the foreseeable future, and, with the date for the supposedly safe application of the rubber syringe having passed, it appears as though April is stuck continuing in the way

¹³ Friedan labels this phenomenon as “the Feminine Mystique,” and her book of the same name serves as an exploration of the “mystique of feminine fulfillment” that she argues “became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture” (60).

¹⁴ Friedan uses Riesman’s terminology (“other-directed”) to describe women whose sense of self relies heavily on the fulfillment of a set social role and the views of others. In order to avoid this and become “high-dominance” women who “[feel] free to choose rather than be bound by convention” (440), Friedan suggests that some sacrifice of traditional femininity is necessary. For further exploration of Friedan’s analysis of the postwar woman’s sense of identity, see “The Forfeited Self” (*The Feminine Mystique*, 429-62).

she has been living for the past eight years. Yet, after taking the time to ‘think things through,’¹⁵ she realizes that everything in her life—from her obsession with the golden people to her marriage to Frank, which she realizes consists mainly of “easy, agreeable lies” (320), has been merely a hollow performance. The discovery that she is “working at life the way the Laurel Players worked at *The Petrified Forest*” and that this performance is “earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and all wrong” (320) serves as a sign to April that even though she *thought*, for so many years, that she was attempting to live an authentic existence, she was not. She *could* not, in fact, since she had not the self-knowledge necessary to be true (or untrue) to herself. Rather than return to her old model of self, in which she would simply convince herself that she is doing what she always meant to do, April comes face to face with the realization that in following this model for so long, she has condemned herself to a life of pretense masquerading as a progression toward authenticity. It is with this in mind that April revisits her childhood memories, remembering a particular visit from her father, in which he could only be bothered to see her for a few moments and gave her the present of a tiny white plastic horse that was the decoration on a bottle of whiskey—this same trinket that April used to so vehemently defend her parents’ love during an argument with Frank when they first met. There is no transition from this memory to the present narrative, only a declaration that “The fire was out” (326). This dousing refers both to the physical fire with which April had been burning attempted letters to Frank (to be left for him just in case she did not survive the abortion) and to a

¹⁵ April repeats this phrase multiple times throughout the chapter, as she reflects on her life. She remembers it as a saying of her Aunt Claire: “Never undertake to do a thing until you’ve thought it through; then do the best you can” (Yates 318). April’s decision to go through with inducing a miscarriage comes only after “she’d thought it through” (Yates 320).

metaphorical fire that symbolized April's faith in her golden parents and in all of the "easy, agreeable lies" that she had told herself for years.

For the last time (or, perhaps, for the first time), April makes the decision to refuse absolutely to perform again, regardless of the consequences. With new resolve, April makes preparations for her next task, for which she needs "no more advice and no more instruction" (327). April decides to go forward with the at-home abortion, even though she knows that it is a dangerous gamble. The abortion is indeed a *gamble*, not a suicide as most critics perceive. April's final note to Frank ("*Whatever happens please don't blame yourself*" [326]) recognizes multiple outcomes, and she makes the necessary preparations to get as much medical assistance as she can—she writes down the hospital phone number and places it beside the telephone, and presumably, she is the one to call the ambulance for herself, as Frank is not home when Milly Campbell hears the sirens roaring down Revolutionary Road. For April, the risk of death outweighs the inauthentic experience of carrying to term a baby she does not want, of returning to life of a suburban housewife's immanence, and of performing the roles of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Wheeler, secret intellectuals. The abortion might be a "gesture of harsh honesty that [April] turns on herself" as Morris Dickstein suggests (139), but it is also the only option that will give her the time and freedom to answer the question of who she truly is. To have the baby is to ensure that she will return to the domestic, maternal, suburban role she has been playing for years; to attempt the abortion is a risk, but it is the only choice she has that will afford her any hope of authenticity.

In the moments before she takes action, April is “calm and quiet now with knowing what she had always known” (Yates 327). This turn of phrase (“what she had always known”) signals perhaps another instance of April’s revisionist authenticity in which each revelation is reconfigured as reflective of her true self. Yet somehow, *this* instance rings truer than any other instance of April’s retroactive authenticity. Here, April finally, truly rejects any aspect of performance. She refrains from writing “I love you” on the card (what she deems an “old, insidious habit” [327]) and instead simply signs her name. This moment marks the first time that April recognizes that she is able to possess opposing emotions without one negating the other—a trait that would be impossible within her revisionist paradigm, where she would insist that one feeling is what she truly meant all along. But here, April notes while she might not love Frank in the way she had often believed (or performed), it is “much more” than that—“it [is also] that she [doesn’t], she couldn’t possibly hate him” (319). This is when April decides that “she’d thought it through” (320) and recognizes “what she had always known . . . that if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone” (327). With this final dropped performance, April chooses from this moment forward to live authentically, even though it ultimately results in her death.

In her declaration that the only way she can act authentically (to do “something honest, something true”) is to do so alone, April finally breaks free from the hopeless endlessness of performativity, recognizing that aloneness is the only state of being that promises the absence of performance. April, armed with her reflections on the way that her revisionist authenticity has trapped her in cycles of performance, recognizes that as long as she is in the presence of another actor, she will inevitably continue performing. Going

through with the abortion, even though it means risking her life, is the only way that April can escape the world of performativity—and importantly, it is the only way that she can allow Frank to do the same. April takes responsibility for her life—she accepts the consequences of deluding herself into a happy, if inauthentic, marriage, and she accepts the consequences of refusing to continue. April's final refusal to perform becomes also *Frank's* opportunity to stop performing. Regardless of whether or not she survives her attempted abortion, April has the opportunity to allow the both of them to begin living authentically—to living as “the people they most want to be” (Cheever 205), which will hopefully be the people they truly are. She may hold herself accountable for her actions and may believe that this honest thing “must be done alone” (Yates 327), but it is not done *for herself* alone.

April's final declaration marks the last time she is present in the narrative, marking her act as truly and completely solitary—not even the reader is privy to her thoughts after her final rejection of performance. Similarly, Yates chooses to end the novel not through a return to Frank's point of view but through the eyes of the Campbells. Milly and Shep relate what they view as the tragedy on Revolutionary Road, coloring the events with their own disappointment in Frank's reactions. However, what Shep sees as Frank's tragic, pitiful succumbing to conformity, the reader is able to see as Frank's own version of “something absolutely honest, something true.” From the moment he first learns about April's admittance to the hospital, Frank is unable to continue performing in the same way he always has. He answers the phone in a “shocked, insubstantial voice” (331) and seems incapable of maintaining any level of self-control. After learning of April's death in the hospital, Frank breaks completely and literally runs home to Revolutionary Road—

attempting, perhaps, to find stability in what had served for so many years as the comfortable stage for his and April's performances.

April's death, however, serves as an irrevocable break in performance, one that cannot be repaired by even Frank's best efforts. The novel insists that "the Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy" (339) and that "a man running down [the] streets in desperate grief [is] indecently out of place" (340). Frank's unrestrained attempts to recover the stability of his former life represent an inability for him to continue performing like he always has. Running home, "intent on a madman's short-cut to Revolutionary Road" (340), Frank envisions for the last time a staged version of what would happen upon his return home. He imagines that "he would round this next bend and see the lights blazing in his own house; he would run inside and find [April] at the ironing board, or curled up on the sofa with a magazine" (340). This is not, of course, what Frank finds. Instead, amid the "invincibly cheerful" houses, he finds his own house "long and milk-white in the moonlight, with black windows, the only darkened house on the road" (340). Even when faced with this reality, Frank cannot help but to imagine a conversation with April as he sets about cleaning the house, "his head [continuing] to ring with the sound of her voice" (341). But even this attempt at recapturing his version of April (and, along with it, the comfortable performances of their marriage) cannot be sustained after one final break when Shep calls out Frank's name:

But after that interruption, April's voice no longer spoke to him. He tried for hours to recapture it, whispering words for it to say, going back to the closet time and again and into the drawers of her dressing table and into the kitchen, where he thought the pantry shelves and the racked plates and coffee cups would surely contain the ghost of her, but it was gone. (342)

From this moment forward, Frank is unable to rely on his old habits of performance; instead, this final loss of April's voice marks a final collapse between Frank's outer and inner selves. Without the ghost of April's voice, Frank is left alone onstage; he has no cast-mate with which to continue performing, and accordingly, he is forced to recognize that what he thought was a performance might actually be the most authentic representation of his true identity. After Shep's interruption and his own failed attempts at recovering April's voice, Frank "[comes] out of hiding, carrying his note [from April], and [sits] in the darkness by the picture window" (342). This is the final vision of Frank the reader gets in the novel where the narrative dips into his own perspective—sitting alone in the darkness, enveloped by the damnable picture window that has always represented all that he and April professed not to be. Frank is finally alone, and in this aloneness, he is able finally to cease performing.

As with April, after this final break in performance, the novel does not reenter Frank's mind; instead, the remainder of the novel is written through the gossiping, performative eyes of the Campbells and the Givings. Shep in particular seems acutely aware of his own participation in the performance of recounting the tragic demise of the Wheeler family. While Milly recalls all of the salacious details for the Braces (the new bright young couple occupying Frank and April's house), Shep knows that "his role during these recitals [is] to sit and stare gravely at the carpet, occasionally shaking his head or flexing his bite, until she [cues] him to make certain small corroborations" (343). Clearly, Shep is aware of the performative nature of these recitals, and he holds in contempt all other players. He abhors Milly, who "[makes] such a God damn soap opera out of" Frank and April's story (347). He detests the Braces, a benign couple more like the Donaldsons than the Wheelers,

who are more interested in discussing Frank's work with Bart Pollack Associates and the Knox corporation than continue railing against the hopeless emptiness of suburban life.

Yet Shep reserves his deepest scorn for Frank himself, whom he believes has committed the ultimate betrayal by conforming to the social institutions he denied for so long. Recalling the last time he saw Frank, Shep thinks with disdain that "the life had gone out of him" (348). He sees Frank as a shambling shell of his former self, someone incapable of "really laughing, or really crying, or really sweating" (348) or *really* doing anything. Instead of insisting that his job is "the very least important part of his life, never to be mentioned except in irony" (68), Frank now "spend[s] at least an hour talking about his half-assed job" and, even more shamefully, his psychoanalyst (348). This, Shep thinks, is "what you'd have to know about, if you wanted to know how things had really worked out" for Frank (348). The implication here is that "Frank has at last fully succumbed to the institutions of the corporation, the suburbs, psychoanalysis, postwar masculinity, and so on" (Cheever 218), much to Shep's dismay. Frank here has become what Abigail Cheever notes as "a real phony, a person who can no longer maintain the authenticating distance between himself and the institutions of middle-class adulthood that surround him" (218). Yet perhaps what Shep reads as reprehensible conformity and what Cheever notes as an authenticity created by the absence of authenticity is actually the manifestation of Frank's unperformed self. As evidenced by Frank's inability to maintain a firm buffer between what he saw as his outer and inner selves (and his worrisome doubt in his own vision of his true self as different from the social roles he professed to flout), it seems that Frank's post-April life is somehow truer than anything in his past.

Rather than returning him to the role of suburbia-stifled intellectual, April's death (and her absolving him of blame) provides the opportunity for Frank to live as authentic a life as he is able; this does not mean, however, that April must die in order for Frank to be authentic—she must die in order for him to be *alone*. The potentially problematic implications of April's death (in that she serves as a sacrifice that allows for her husband's achievement of authenticity) are mitigated by her declaration that authenticity can only be achieved alone. April's pregnancy represents further entrenchment into suburban performance—quite literally, it brings another actor into the fold. With her decision to terminate the pregnancy, no matter the risk, April takes a stand against performance and seeks the aloneness that will give her the opportunity to be authentic. Frank, in the wake of April's death, is also able to achieve aloneness, as the conventions of mid-century society dictate that the Wheelers' other two children be sent to live with relatives rather than be raised by a single father. By granting both Frank and April some measure of authenticity but in so doing isolating them completely from society, the novel crafts for itself and for its characters a new space—a compromise between the wholly performative world of Goffman and the Wheelers' entirely authentic world of the golden people.

Finding Authenticity in the Hopeless Emptiness

Revolutionary Road is, in every way, a brutal book, and a hopeful message is difficult (if not impossible) to find. For most of the novel, it seems as though April is the true heroine, the titular revolutionary who might have the means to break free from an inauthentic life, whereas Frank is painted as the “would-be rebel, the imagined free spirit who never leaves home, who never quits his job” (Dickstein 136), and who relishes in his moral superiority rather than in any real accomplishments. The end of the narrative, in

which Frank lives in relative happiness while April's life is ended, invites a sense of unease and frustrates any search for a moral to take away from the novel. Is April's refusal to continue performing, even though it means risking (and losing) her life meant to be a sort of nihilistic victory or simply an admirable tragedy of circumstance? April's final realization that all honest and true actions must be taken alone seems to insinuate that all actions taken with other people are inherently false or performative. Accordingly, the possibility of true authenticity in the context of society is rather murky—is isolation (even in death) the only way to be truly authentic?

The novel does not give any definitive answers to these questions, but it does suggest that *these* are the questions that need to be asked of post-war America. Frank's and April's models of self, both of which presuppose an essential 'true' self that must be protected from outside influence until one has the time and ability to realize it, seem to be obsolete in the postwar world. No longer is it applicable to figure identity as consisting of 'outer' and 'inner' selves—the distance between pretense and reality is rapidly collapsing, as seen most clearly through Frank's inability to keep separate his various selves as his stratified identity fails to hold up against the fear of contamination. Are social institutions such as the corporation and suburbia, which necessitate specific performances and threaten to overtake one's identity, to blame, or is the problem of performativity symptomatic of the entirety of post-WWII American culture? The novel's stance on the problem of postwar authenticity is rather vague. Frank and April's 'revolution' against societal expectations of performance seem to be at once brilliantly successful and tragically futile; it is altogether unclear whether the Wheelers' attempts are ultimately worthwhile. Yates sums up his intentions with this explanation of the novel's title: "I meant it [the title]

more as an indictment of American life in the nineteen-fifties . . . I meant the title to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the Fifties” (“Interview” 66). Pinning the blame on the Fifties seems like precisely what Frank and April would like to do, and Yates’ words could be lifted straight from one of Frank’s diatribes as he rails against “the hopeless emptiness of everything in this country” (Yates 200), completely assured in his belief that he is a victim of society.

As a novel, however, *Revolutionary Road* is not so willing to locate the blame for the Wheelers’ demise quite so definitively, despite Yates’ explanations in interviews. The force of evil in the novel is deceptively difficult to place.¹⁶ Everything which could be perceived as villainous (i.e. institutions such as suburbia, marriage, the corporation, even the generality of postwar American life) do just as much *good* as they do bad. Rather, as F.J. Warnke said in an early review, the novel “is really about the inadequacy of human beings to their own aspirations, and its target is not America but existence” (Bailey 229). Yates, hailed by Michael Shinagel as “the literary laureate of the loners and losers of middle-class America” (51), wrote simple, effective stories about well-meaning men and women, “men who fought in the war but were not war heroes, who married too young, had children too young, and were swallowed up by the suburbs and the large corporations” (Dickstein 135-6). As Kurt Vonnegut noted at Yates’ memorial, he was a man who could not escape his middle-class life and therefore wrote about it instead, celebrating the “utterly unglamorous gallantry of Americans who had not and could not amount to much” (79). When asked why

¹⁶ This is a literary tactic of which Yates was admittedly quite fond. In Blake Bailey’s *A Tragic History*, he expounds upon Yates’ obsessive love of two great novels (*The Great Gatsby* and *Madame Bovary*), both of which Yates used as models for his own writing. Yates says of the novels: “Another thing I have always liked about both *Gatsby* and *Bovary* is that there are no villains in either one. The force of evil is felt in these novels but is never personified—neither novel is willing to let us off that easily” (Bailey 176).

his writing so often focused on people who, by all accounts, could be considered failures, Yates simply replied, “I guess I’m not very interested in successful people” (“Interview” 68). Indeed, “successful people” are hard to come by in Yates’ work, as tragedy seems to befall every character, be it the untimely death of April Wheeler or the unavoidable madness of John Givings.

A dedicated social observer, Yates built in his fiction worlds of tight “nuclear relationships which always threaten to explode” (Klinkowitz 15) and often result in tragedy, leaving the reader to sift through his clear prose and sharp dialogue in order to place blame. As a result, at the end of the novel, “the reader is left wondering who’s to blame until it begins to dawn on him that he himself must bear some of the responsibility because he’s human and therefore infinitely fallible” (Yates “Interview” 69). Indeed, shining a light on the fallibility of humans is one of *Revolutionary Road*’s, and indeed Richard Yates’, greatest strengths.¹⁷ Yates does not romanticize his characters; instead, he looks critically at them and writes them honestly, these “mediocrities and strivers who pretend to be something they’re not because life is lonely and dull and disappointing” (Bailey “Poor” 54). His characters are hapless dreamers, convinced that they are something more than they are and struggling to be their best selves in the face of the relentless conformity of society. This conviction is what defines the Wheelers and what ultimately defeats them, as they project

¹⁷ In an interview with *Ploughshares*, Yates reflects that his characters are people who “all rush around trying to do their best—trying to live well, within their known or unknown limitations, doing what they can’t help doing, ultimately and inevitably failing because they can’t help being the people they are” (69). It is this proclivity toward sharp observation and relentlessly brutal honesty that can be traced throughout Yates’ oeuvre. For instance, Bobby Prentice, the protagonist of Yates’ second novel *A Special Providence*, is a perpetually second-rate soldier struggling to live up to his own expectations and those of his mother, whose “insistent belief that a special providence would always shine on [them]” (18) is painfully misguided and, quite obviously to both characters and readers, unfounded. They are typical Yates characters, as his daughter Monica describes in an interview with biographer Blake Bailey—“People who hide their insecurities but are cringing inside” (“Poor” 55).

their failings onto societal structures rather than considering the role they have played in their own downfall, until it is too late.

Frank and April's firmly-held belief in the inauthenticating properties of postwar American society and in their own secret superiority is validated (ironically, perhaps) through their interactions with John Givings, the recently-institutionalized son of their realtor. Givings is "brilliantly mad: grievously dangerous but lucid, dysfunctional but clairvoyant" (Dickstein 138), and he is "the tragic demon the suburbs are designed to repress, the bad news no one welcomes in this pastoral utopia" (Dickstein 138), but he is welcomed with open arms by Frank and April Wheeler. At first, the Wheelers see him as an intellectual equal, someone else who understands the "hopeless emptiness" (200) of suburban life. John Givings is impressed by Frank's pretty turn of phrase and commends him for the brutal honesty of it:

Hell, plenty of people are on to the emptiness part . . . Nobody ever [says] 'hopeless,' though; that's where [they] chicken out. Because maybe it does take a certain amount of guts to see the emptiness, but it takes a whole hell of a lot more to see the hopelessness. And I guess when you do see the hopelessness, that's when there's nothing to do but take off. If you can. (200)

In affirming Frank and April's belief that they alone are able to see through the stifling tribulation of suburban life, Givings also validates their decision to move to Paris. He defines Frank and April as a true 'male' and 'female' (201), thereby supporting the Wheelers' long-held belief that they both have true, authentic selves that must be protected and realized (a process that can only take place, according to them, away from suburbia). Yet, on the whole, the novel seems to "[evoke] a model of self that is less fundamental than performative" (Cheever 205), despite Frank's and April's fervent belief that they have true

selves that are being stifled by the suburbs. Frank, in so desperately resisting commitment to the move, is at least partly wise to the truth—that the ‘ideal’ selves they will find in Paris are less the people they truly are than “the people they most want to be” (Cheever 207). April as well, in her constant attempts to quit performing, seems vaguely aware of this fact, though neither of the Wheelers, by the time they call off their move to Paris, are willing to conceptualize concretely the hypocritical, paradoxical nature of their beliefs.

The novel, however, is not willing to be so lenient with them. In the character of John Givings, the Wheelers get more than they bargained for. He serves to shake the Wheelers from their delusions, to hold up a “distorting mirror that reflects back the compromises and denials that enabled the Wheelers to construct their little world” (Dickstein 139). When John Givings learns that Frank and April have decided to forego their escape to Paris, citing April’s pregnancy and financial constraints as excuses, he openly condemns them. He first wonders if April is to blame (“Wife talk you out of it or what? . . . Little woman decide she isn’t quite ready to quit playing house?” [301]) and then rounds on Frank, giving voice to the thoughts that neither Frank nor April are willing to speak aloud: “What happened? You get cold feet, or what? You decide you like it here after all? You figure it’s more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness after all[?]” (301). In this denunciation, Givings clearly censures Frank’s desire to continue performing as weak—even villainous—, thereby painting April’s eventual final refusal (and resulting death) as heroic and noble.

Yet to pass such clean judgment on the Wheelers is to do a disservice to the novel, and quite frankly, the text resists such a reading. As previously discussed, Frank’s

assimilation into the organization man culture after April's death is perhaps less contemptible than Shep Campbell would view it, and April's attempt at authenticity, no matter how noble her intentions, results in her death and therefore cannot easily be read as didactic. As the Campbells relate the Wheelers' story to the Braces, the new couple that move into Frank and April's house, the text makes it quite clear that there are no easy answers on *Revolutionary Road*. Nancy Brace asks question after question, trying to parse out a happy ending from Milly's tale; she "[likes] her stories neat, with points, and she clearly [feels] there [are] too many loose ends in this one" (345), much like the average reader of *Revolutionary Road*. Yet Nancy's questions seem rather silly in the context of the novel, which offers more nuance than her simple inquisitions allow. She wonders if Frank "made a—a fairly good adjustment" (346) after April's death, and while Milly assures her that he is courageously carving a new life for himself, Shep privately scoffs at the idea, choosing instead to view Frank as weak and cowardly. The text itself does not value one reading of Frank higher than the other—he is a victim and a hero and a coward all at the same time, just as April's actions are both commendably valiant and regrettably reckless. There is, it seems, no right answer.

Rather, *Revolutionary Road* is the type of story where the characters, like the reader, are "unheroic, rightfully ashamed of their worst selves, and hoping to do better" (O'Nan). *This* is the best that one can achieve in *Revolutionary Road*: the awareness of the performative aspects of life and the desire to be as authentic as possible. Ultimately, the novel does not condemn performativity quite as harshly as the Wheelers or even Yates himself might have the reader believe. In the final chapters of the book, Shep considers his

mourning of April and rails against the pretense of performance and attempts to draw a line between authenticity and artifice:

The whole point of grief itself was to cut it out while it was still honest, while it still meant something. Because the thing was so easily corrupted: let yourself go and you started embellishing your own sobs, or you started telling about the Wheelers with a sad, sentimental smile and saying Frank was courageous, and then what the hell did you have? (349)

Yet in the same breath, Shep willingly participates in the role expected of him by Milly and the Braces by agreeing that the “whole experience” had brought him and his wife closer together (350). “And the funny part, he suddenly realized, the funny part was that he meant it” (350), and Shep quite honestly takes comfort in the knowledge that he and Milly will continue with their lives in the same set, rote patterns of performance they always have and that they will simply “go on living” (350). The novel does not pass judgment, does not value Shep’s acknowledged continuing performance any more than April’s refusal to perform or Frank’s submission to conformity. Rather, *Revolutionary Road* starkly and honestly presents the hopeless emptiness of the world of Frank and April Wheeler and raises the same questions of authenticity, performance, and identity as many contemporaneous texts. In so doing, Yates does more than simply get his own aims across in terms of skewering postwar America; through *Revolutionary Road*’s profound meditation on performance and authenticity, Yates taps into the mid-century zeitgeist and creates a document that explores and analyzes postwar American anxiety.

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