Revolutionary Road, Richard Yates’s first novel, was published in 1961 and set in 1955 American suburbia. This novel tells the story of Frank and April Wheeler, inhabitants of the Revolutionary Hill Estates, who want to escape the monotony of their suburban lives. Revolutionary Road displays an image of a postwar society that is entrenched in the false promises of the American Dream, and the Wheelers find themselves unable to maintain what April describes as an “enormous, obscene delusion” in which “people have to resign from life and ‘settle down’ when they have families” (153). According to the 1950’s American Dream, a man should obtain a corporate career and support his family, while his wife manages the home and the children. The Wheelers, however, do not find happiness in this so-called “dream.” Frank hates his job at Knox; April feels bored and trapped at home. Married with two children, Frank and April no longer get along, and they give the impression that they see their children as a burden rather than a blessing. April comes up with the solution that they move to Paris to start anew, and they make love in a fit of passion over their plans. Ironically, this sexual escapade leads to April’s pregnancy with a third child, and the Paris dream gradually fades from the horizon. April attempts to administer an at-home abortion to herself, which ends tragically.

Barbara Ehrenreich, in her 1983 book The Hearts of Men, offers a history of American masculinity. One of the types of masculinity she discusses is “the breadwinner role” in the 1950s, which created a prescriptive masculine identity. Ehrenreich writes, “In the 1950s, there was a firm expectation (or as we would now say, ‘role’) that required men to grow up, marry, and
support their wives… and the man who willfully deviated was judged to somehow be ‘less than a man’” (11). This expectation arose after World War II and the Great Depression, so the hope of people was to acquire a lifestyle that overshadowed the darkness of the previous decades.

Richard Yates, according to his biographer Blake Bailey, had a humiliating experience as a soldier. In A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates, Bailey notes that Yates was “depressed and moepy” (88) after being discharged from the army, and was uncertain of what to do with his future. Several of his school friends “had already settled on their future wives,” and all Yates wanted was to “escape and figure things out” (87). After his stint in the army, Yates would descend into a life of alcoholism, and as Bailey and other critics note, a life that was consumed by social class anxiety. He would never become the breadwinner man that completed the typical middle-class family unit. Whereas the nation’s postwar hopes were fully invested in American Dream, Yates’s writing would focus on what Stewart O’Nan calls “the mundane sadness of domestic life in language that rarely if ever draws attention to itself.”

Like Yates himself, Frank Wheeler spent time in the army, as did his next door neighbor Shep Campbell. During a visit from the Campbells, Frank Wheeler recalls that his twentieth birthday was “pinned down by mortar and machine-gun fire in the last week of the war” (91). Shep and Frank go on drunkenly to sing an old cadence from their army days. Yates’s war experience is transferred into Frank’s life, perhaps to show a man’s desperation to avoid the uncertainty Yates felt when he was discharged. Frank and Shep both found wives and started families after their military service. Unlike Yates, Frank knew what to do with his life after the war—he started a family and attained a corporate job in order to leave the tragedy of war experience and the Communist scare behind him. The breadwinner role can be understood as a symbol of the prevalence of capitalism and the revival of the American economy. According to
this newfound American Dream, a man got a good corporate job to support his family, which, according to Ehrenreich, “guaranteed that middle-class men were not just working to keep food on the table, but to buy a second car, landscape the front lawn and stock the kitchen and basement with the kind of capital equipment that might (in an urban center) only be found in a laundromat or restaurant” (39).

Most of the critical work on Yates has focused on his failure to achieve a stable breadwinning position, and how those failures impacted his public and private life. His critics struggle to find a way into Yates’s head, and perhaps to gain insight into what contributed to his image as a “chronicler of disappointed lives” (Pace). The critical dialogue on Yates’s writing of Revolutionary Road centers on significant moments in his life that influenced his creation of what Richard Ford sees as a world in which “almost nobody’s character shows capacity to change, but only to suffer.” Substantial pieces of Yates’s identity appear to be constructed by a range of biographical information. By the time he wrote Revolutionary Road, Yates had developed what James Wood calls “a very cold, appraising eye” on the world around him.

Through the lens of Yates’s biographical information, this paper will focus on how issues from Yates’s life are reflected in Revolutionary Road. Yates’s alcoholism, his social class anxiety, and the models of adulthood displayed by his parents are at the center of the efforts of critics to sympathize with Yates and the characters in Revolutionary Road. Secondly, this paper will discuss director Sam Mendes’s 2008 film adaptation of Revolutionary Road. Whereas Yates’s novel appears to reflect the problems of traditional masculinity, Mendes’s film deals with matters of traditional femininity. The novel provides insight into Frank’s thoughts, while the film focuses more on April. Mendes centers on April by increasing solo scenes of her and flashbacks that the film suggests are from her perspective. Mendes creates a connection between
the audience and April through her flashbacks. While Mendes’s film is too current to have gained the same critical attention as Yates’s novel, both texts are rife with issues of gender identity. Because the critical conversation surrounding Yates’s novel has left out the discussion of gender, this paper will pick up where those critics left off. The film’s focus on April will be considered in terms of how it reflects current political debates on abortion legislation. The discussion of the film will also take issue with the popular argument that we have entered a “post-feminist” age in which feminism is no longer relevant. This paper will conclude by arguing that gender must be added to the critical discussion on both the film and the novel because it helps us gain sympathy for the characters, and perhaps understand the role gender relations play in our societies. Sympathy bridges the gap between the reader and the text and between theory and practice, and can help create a better understanding of real-life questions about identity.

Ehrenreich, in reference to questions of identity associated with 1950s marriage ideology, states, “By the 1950s and ’60s psychiatry had developed a massive weight of theory establishing that marriage—and, within that, the breadwinner role—was the only normal state for the adult male” (15). Since the provider role for the husband and father was the only acceptable form of masculinity, any man who failed to subscribe to that role was subject to unflattering social judgment. Borrowing from Betty Friedan, Ehrenreich applies the “problem without a name” to masculinity (30). In terms of Friedan, the problem is that of women, but Ehrenreich theorizes that men were experiencing something similar. Moving forward with the notion of the only acceptable type of 1950’s masculinity as the breadwinner, she maps out several “deviant” masculinities that developed as a response. She deals with the images of the “breadwinners and losers,” which include the successful breadwinner and the failures; the “gray flannel dissidents,” who only partake in an internal revolt; the “playboys,” who celebrate bachelorhood with fancy
cars and women; and the “Beat hero,” who shirks responsibility altogether to find his masculine roots. All of these images are present in the *Revolutionary Road* film and novel, but first they will be discussed in reference to the novel.

Yates has been coined by several critics as a “chronicler of disappointed lives” (*Poor Dick* 53), whose “good looks, talent, discipline, and whatever else left him with nothing in the end” (54). Yates’s father Vincent had a degree of artistic talent, but was said to have “accepted the truth of his relative mediocrity and spent the rest of his life, sadder but wiser, as a corporate drone” (*Tragic Honesty* 13). Even Yates’s mother Dookie dreamed of becoming a sculptor, and she married Vincent under the misconception that he would support such a dream. Dookie would later express her disappointment at having married “such a tedious man” (15). Yates’s parents were both alcoholics and were divorced by the time he was three (*Tragic Honesty* 15-18).

Vincent faced the same feeling of imprisonment that the book portrays in Frank Wheeler, and the description of Vincent and Dookie’s marriage is mirrored by the Wheelers. The novel’s opening scene includes April’s horrid performance of *The Petrified Forest* with the Laurel Players. The opening line of the novel is as follows: “The final dying sounds of their dress rehearsal left the Laurel Players with nothing to do but stand there, silent and helpless, blinking out over the footlights of an empty auditorium” (3). The Laurel Players are a “costly but a very serious company” (5), but it turns out their performance is an atrocity. Like Dookie, April’s dream of pursuing her art is mocked by her “false theatrical gestures and white-knuckled immobility” (11), and she finds that Frank has little compassion for her. The Laurel Players have anticipated the performance with dedicated enthusiasm, which is contrasted by the humiliating performance that sets the tone for the rest of the novel.
On the drive home from the awful night, Frank and April have a shouting argument. Frank exclaims, “It’s sure as hell not my fault that you didn’t turn out to be an actress… I don’t happen to fit the role of dumb, suburban husband; you’ve been trying to hang that one on me ever since we moved out here, and I’m damned if I’ll wear it” (34). The novel jumps immediately into the reality that Frank and April are unhappy, and that they have a history of disappointment. In Frank’s single statement of rebellion, he exposes the fact that neither of the Wheelers is especially happy with the roles they occupy. April “didn’t turn out to be an actress,” and Frank has felt pressured to be the perfect husband for what sounds like years. Both of them appear to have once believed they would lead very different lives than the ones introduced to the reader in the opening scenes. His lack of sympathy for April echoes Vincent’s scornful treatment of his wife’s artistic endeavors. According to Bailey, “Vincent didn’t take these [artistic pretensions] seriously enough, or at any rate he balked when she asked him to pay for a year of study in Paris” (Tragic Honesty 16). But Frank and April, unlike Vincent and Dookie, have built a life upon false promises. Throughout the novel, Frank and April try to fill the emptiness of their lives. April’s idea to go to Paris is an example of such an attempt—she believes they will rediscover their “true” talents there and find happiness that is not available to them in the suburbs of Connecticut.

The different between Frank Wheeler and Vincent Yates, however, is the fact that Frank cannot accept his mediocrity. He must create the illusion in his head that whatever he is doing is just the beginning of a bigger, more special plan. While he claims that he refuses to wear the cloak of “dumb suburban husband,” the details of his life often appear close to that image. Frank, when he took the job at Knox, considered himself somehow superior to the dullness of corporate life. In his memories of his father Earl Wheeler, Frank remembers the disappointment he felt as a
boy when Earl took him on a visit to Knox. Frank recalls that “he felt a shiver of wonder down his spine at the enormous granite strength and stillness of the building. Wow!… But as things turned out, the preliminary moment on the sidewalk was the high point of the day” (98). Following that visit, Frank explains that his father was offered a promotion that was later withdrawn: “It must, for that matter, have the been the first of many events that passed Earl Wheeler’s understanding, for it came at the beginning of his decline” (101). Frank, when he takes the job at Knox, follows the advice from his old friend that the corporate world had changed since the Depression. Frank believes that he can be different from his father, as long as he remains untouchable to the Knox firm. He explains to April:

I want something that can’t possibly touch me… 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 alone… No but it’s pretty funny isn’t it? Wait’ll I tell the old man.

(103-104)

As long as Frank can maintain the illusion that he is superior to the job and different from his father, he does not have to believe that he is following in Earl’s footsteps.

Frank’s almost uncontested willingness to take the job at Knox seems unlikely when his childhood images of it are considered. There is no comic effect to Earl’s boss, Oat Fields. Frank remembers Oat Fields as follows:

The worst part of him was his mouth, which was so wet that a dozen shining strands of spittle clung and trembled between his moving lips; and it was this as much as anything that hampered Frank’s enjoyment of the lunch, or luncheon, which took place at the restaurant of a great hotel… It was his memory’s vision of
Oat Field’s eating mouth that made the spasms of vomiting come again and again.

(99-100)

Frank’s horrific image of Oat and his knowledge that Earl’s personal decline coincided with his decline at Knox cast such a bad light on the possibility of Frank working there that it seems odd he did. But, as Ehrenreich would say, the breadwinner role was a powerful influence.

April reveals their past consideration to abort her first pregnancy, and how Frank went on, in Ehrenreich’s terms, “manfully forbidding” it (31). Later, when they are discussing her third pregnancy, the one that Frank uses to bolster his argument of not going forward with the Paris plans, Frank confesses, “I think the main thing was simply a case of my feeling that my—well, that my masculinity’d been threatened somehow by all this abortion business; wanting to prove something; I don’t know” (379). This information sheds light on why Frank took a sales promotion job at Knox as automatically as he did—to protect the image of his masculinity.

Ehrenreich states the following:

For most gray flannel malcontents, this was as far as their rebellion went: They cultivated an acute awareness of the problem of conformity—much as everyone else did—and achieved, through their awareness, a kind of higher, more reflective conformity. Frank Wheeler was a gray flannel rebel and a brilliant practitioner of this higher conformity. (31)

Frank, as Ehrenreich claims, has constructed his own little world of internal rebellion, which he convinces himself has a higher purpose.

He thinks he will use the Knox Machine as it used his father, and that all he will ever have to give it is his “body and college-boy smile.” His insecurities, which he later reveals surrounded the idea of abortion, make him feel inadequate in terms of the family supporter. If his
wife did not want to have his child, what did that say about his ability to attain the breadwinner status? The breadwinner ideal, as Ehrenreich says, called for the provider role both in terms of financial success and in terms of fatherhood. For Frank, the job at Knox seems a simple solution for both. April did not need to have the abortion if he showed he was willing to accept the breadwinner role, and he believed he could do so without selling himself to it completely. But Frank, unlike Yates’s father, ends up depending on his role at Knox to reinforce his masculinity without realizing it, which we later see through his affair with his secretary Maureen Grube and from the way he portrays himself to his coworkers. Frank loses the ability to remain untouchable, and he declines further and further into anguish and unhappiness.

At Knox, Frank seeks empowerment through whatever source is available to him, whether through his affair with Maureen, through the way he believes he is superior to his fellow employees, or through a final promotion that proves he has become enveloped by the corporate world. Before Frank and April decide on Paris, Knox is arguably the only place in which Frank is able to feel desirable. In the earlier days at Knox, his “lazy duties” symbolized what April had once called his “terrifically sexy” stride (104), and now all that has melted away. Now, that feeling of desire is replaced by his secretary Maureen. Jerome Klinkowitz writes, “Considering an affair with a girl in his office, Frank learns he can change reality by the way he looks at it” (19-20). As Yates’s novel relates, “He found that if he focused his eyes on her mouth so that the rest of her face was slightly blurred, and then drew back to include the whole length and shape of her in that hazy image, it was possible to believe he was looking at the most desirable woman in the world” (125). Just as Frank once concentrated on his assertion that he could remain separate from the Knox machine when he first started the job, he now concentrates on the ability Maureen has to make him feel important. Frank’s focus on his own “exceptional merit” made the reality
that he had ended up with a life as dull as his father’s “a hazy image” as well. Similarly, as long
as he can manipulate the affair to boost his ego, Frank can ignore the facts that Maureen is not
actually attractive or that she talks too much or that “he had to keep reminding himself to be
pleased” (129).

In the same way that Frank took the job at Knox to feel better about the situation he was
in with a pregnant April, he has an affair with a woman he does not even like to feel like a man
again. Frank has control over an unsuspecting Maureen, who listens wide-eyed to his description
of himself as “sadly and bravely at war with his environment” (132). By contrast, Frank feels
unloved by April, a feeling that is communicated to him in such ways as a “pitying stare of
boredom in her eyes” (93), or from her “constricting heaviness of spirit, a foreboding of some
imminent, unavoidable loss” (263). Frank’s control over his situation with Maureen is something
he has not felt in a while, and imagining that he will soon break it off with her, he thinks, “But
the only honest thing he could say was that he’d never felt more grateful to anyone… He felt like
a man” (138). Frank is grateful because Maureen has the played the role of admiring woman, and
has made him feel the masculinized gratitude of Ehrenreich’s playboy man. Ehrenreich writes,
“No one pretended that the adult sex roles—wife/mother and male breadwinner—were ‘fun’…
But Playboy culture shed the burdensome aspects of the adult male role at a time when
businessmen were still refining the ‘fun morality’ for mass consumption, and the gray flannel
rebels were still fumbling for responsible alternatives” (45-46). Maureen, who as an individual is
meaningless to Frank, offers a momentary escape from his breadwinner reality.

Yates’s father demonstrated the same type of behavior as Frank. Bailey writes, “As for
Vincent, there were probably times when the dull grind of breadwinning got him down… he may
have been driven to the odd bout of debauchery. He would disappear for three or four days at a
time and come home reeking of gin, with lipstick all over his shirt” (16-18). Yates paints the same image of Frank in the scene after Frank has just had drunken sexual relations with Maureen. Upon his arrival home, April greets him with his birthday cake. Frank tries to appear pleasantly sober, while “the floor began to tilt at dangerous angles,” before he rushes to wash off the scent of his adultery (145). This is the same evening that April surprises Frank with her Paris idea, and she makes the resounding statement, “You’re the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You’re a man” (157). Now that April has made the timely appeal to his masculinity, his source for empowerment shifts. He feels that the Paris plan is stifled by his work day: “For the eight hours of his working day it remained as insubstantial as a half-remembered, rapidly fading dream. Everyone and everything conspired against it” (230). Frank’s feeling of oppression likely comes from within, since no one at the office knows about the plans at this point. His immediate need to defend his plan before he has even revealed it indicates that he has insecurity about it from the beginning.

From the sound of his phone, to the buzzer in his boss Bandy’s office, to the “sardonic faces of his colleagues” (230), Frank feels stuck in a whirlwind of opposition. His paranoia leads to his conviction that the only way to end the silent conspiracy against him is to announce his plan, which he defends by saying, “I don’t think it’s possible to discover anything on the fifteenth floor of the Knox building, and I don’t think you do, either” (232). Frank leads his small audience of colleagues to believe that he is on the verge of self-discovery—a journey of sorts. He wants them to envy his plan to find his roots, his goal of leaving his “half-assed job” to live like people who are “better off doing some kind of work they like” (230). Frank’s portrayal of himself as being on some search for his “true” self echoes Ehrenreich’s description of the “Beat hero” whose purpose was to “establish a vantage point from which the ‘normal’ could be judged,
assessed and labeled—square” (67). Because Frank will not be working in Paris, he is giving up an amount of responsibility, like the Beat hero, without having to abandon his family. In a sense, Frank believes he can “have it all” in Paris—he can feel like a family man again, and he can also feel that he is getting in touch with his true masculinity. April’s assurance that Frank is the “most valuable thing in the world” suggests to him that his Beat hero-esque type of masculinity will allow her to find him attractive again. Only when the Paris plan seems real does April genuinely desire him, which is demonstrated through the sexual act that leads to April’s third pregnancy. It is the only passionate sex scene between them in the novel, and it is as good as nonexistent once the superficiality of Frank’s commitment to the move is exposed.

Frank’s decision to stay at Knox marks another shift in the place Frank feels masculinized. His promotion offer, which comes after he carelessly creates an ad campaign for Knox, becomes the force behind Frank’s major turning point. Frank states his new advertising scheme with Paris in mind, not expecting it to be noticed by general sales manager Bart Pollock. Instead, however, Bart offers him a promotion, which Frank knows he must turn down. Upon Frank’s tentative refusal, Bart replies, “I believe it’d be a fine memorial and tribute to your dad” (280). Bart’s statement is arguably the one that causes Frank to consider accepting the position, even when he has already promised April to turn it down. Frank has the opportunity to get and succeed at the promotion that sparked what he saw as his father’s decline. Now, rather than being untouchable to Knox, Frank feels honored by it. Not only can he be the heroic son who will resurrect what his father never got, but he will be the ultimate breadwinner. As Richard Ford maintains, “Revolutionary Road stands at the beginning of the new computer age, and chronicles its early fascination with empty communication… Frank Wheeler is that new man.” Frank’s slavery to portraying the breadwinner image is more productive for his masculinity than the Paris
The choice to take a promotion that promises higher pay and, perhaps, a move from the suburbs, one that he thinks can bring the same happiness as Paris, gives him a tangible vision of success. His opportunity to be what Ford calls “the new man” is something he believes everyone around him will envy and admire. Frank’s concern for how the public sees him is another aspect of Yates’s life that his critics claim was a dominant force.

While Yates admired what he saw as his father’s ability to accept the terms of his life, his obsession with social class status suggests that he identified with Frank’s romanticized self-image. Bailey asserts, “The worst of Yates’s outbursts were almost always related to matters of class,” and adds that Yates often had a way of dressing Ivy League “because he was so ashamed of living with his mother and not finishing college” (Tragic Honesty 251). Yates’s awareness of his place in a class-conscious society was somewhat instilled in him in his childhood, and it was also a theme of 1950’s mentality. What Ehrenreich calls “the problem of conformity” (31) implied that the breadwinner role was not only about the private sphere of the family, but also about outward appearances. Many of Yates’s critics argue that one of the main reasons he never established a stable career was because of his alcoholism, a condition he denied in all of his relationships. As Martin Naparsteck remembers, who conducted years of interviews with Yates, “Drinking ruined his life. Broke up two marriages. Damaged every friendship he ever had” (79). Yates refused to admit that he had a problem because he did not want to indicate to anyone that he was not in control of his life (Tragic Honesty 222).

Considering Yates’s first divorce, Bailey writes, “Yates was unable to accept rejection on the basis of his drinking” (222). Yates’s second wife indicated something similar: “I have gotten the impression you would rather believe your own version of things than hear mine” (Tragic Honesty 479). Like Frank, Yates wanted to maintain an illusion of himself to his wives and to the
public, even at the risk of sacrificing his relationships. When Frank and April are in their most vicious fight, and she has admitted she hates the sight of him, Frank responds, “No. Wrong. You’re not crazy, and you do love me” (397). Frank would rather go on believing that he is a successful family man even in the face of the truth, because if he lets that illusion go, he has to answer to his society about why he failed.

Another character in which Yates’s social class anxiety is acted out is that of John Givings. Despite extensive education, John has failed to keep a functional position in society. He is the son of the unfavorable Mrs. Givings, who tries to conceal the condition of her son’s diagnosed dementia. John demonstrates an unconquerable commitment to brutal honesty, of which he feels no one is exempt. Frank temporarily sees the appeal of going to Paris, but he is not willing to give up what John and April are ready to leave behind. Frank’s enslavement to the breadwinner ethic echoes Yates’s class insecurities and Yates’s unwillingness to cast a critical eye on his flaws. John, upon learning that the Wheelers have retracted their Paris plans, challenges what they claim is the reason for their choice to stay. The reason, they claim, is April’s pregnancy, which April has unwillingly accepted as an obstacle too large to allow the plan to go on. John demands, “I mean, okay, she’s pregnant; so what? Don’t people have babies in Europe?” (390). When Frank switches the excuse to the fact that they cannot afford the move, John continues with these comments:

Money’s always a good reason, but it’s hardly ever the real reason. What’s the real reason? Wife talk you out of it? Huh? Little woman decided she isn’t quite ready to quit playing house? Nah, nah. That’s not it. I can tell. She looks too tough… must’ve been you… You figure it’s more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness after all… I wouldn’t be surprised if you knocked her up on purpose,
John exposes truths that Frank cannot tolerate, and Frank nearly punches him.

After John leaves, Frank insists on the severity of John’s insanity so that he can discredit the possibility of John being right. April disagrees, asking, “Why is it wrong?” (396). The final decline of the Wheelers takes place in the following scenes, with April running into the woods to escape Frank’s refusal to believe her heated declaration that she no longer loves him. The next morning, both Frank and April are eerily calm, and April listens to Frank’s description of the new Knox 500 computer. She reassures him that she loves him, and the reader later learns this is the morning that she administers the abortion. Perhaps April realizes that John’s predictions are correct, and that bringing another child into a life she cannot bear would be more tragic than an abortion. The child growing inside of her has become a symbol of a role she has never been happy playing, and it can be argued that she regrets her decision not to abort her first child. After the mistake of having two children when she knew she could not be happy as the suburban housewife, April refuses to maintain the illusion any longer. Unlike the gray flannel dissident, April’s long-running verbal rebellion turns into action, and this action tragically ends her life.

In the film, Mendes’s shift to focus on April is significant because it reflects current abortion debates. She has awakened and found herself in a life not meant for her, a fact that becomes completely unbearable. Unlike Frank, a woman in 1950’s America had very little choice of what to do with her life. April’s identity was clearly laid out for her—she was supposed to keep the home and tend to the children. Frank, as Ehrenreich claims, had a “problem without a name” in the novel and was never successful in naming it. It makes sense that a novel written in the 1950s would have a larger focus on problems of masculinity, since men were in a
position of power and assumed to be happy with that position. At the same time, since second wave feminism was on the horizon, women were beginning to understand their limitations and their feelings of entrapment in the domestic world. By 2008, when Mendes made the film, American women had already experienced second wave feminism and were experiencing third wave feminism. Third wave feminism, in the popular imagination, is equated with the term “post-feminism,” which implies women have accomplished enough to render feminism irrelevant.

Mendes’s focus on April, however, reflects otherwise. By using a story that is set in 1950’s suburbia in a time that prescribed fairly static gender roles, Mendes’s film shows how close we are to reincorporating that ideology into our lives. The reentry of the American Dream philosophy into current policy issues comes in the form of abortion legislation. The fact that Mendes frames a statement about abortion and the maternal role in a film set during the 1950s emphasizes the fact that feminism is not irrelevant. The shock value that April’s lack of choice carries in the film is a haunting image, perhaps because it forces the audience to think about what it would mean to outlaw abortion today. One way Mendes shifts the focus onto April, to show the problems that still exist for the feminine role, is through her flashbacks. In the novel, the memory of the Wheelers’ first sight of their Revolutionary Hill home is focalized through Frank. Frank is driving home after the fight about the *Petrified Forest* performance, and the scenes they pass spark the memory for him. In the film, April is home alone all day, and she goes outside and stands on the curb. She gazes off into the distance, a pensive look on her face, and then the flashback comes. When her memory is over, she slowly trudges back up to the house, which is not nearly as pristine as it appeared to her in the flashback.
Mendes’s decision to focalize this flashback through April is important because it enhances her feelings of confinement to the domestic sphere. When she and Frank are riding along with Mrs. Givings, April listens intently as their real-estate broker describes the house as “a sweet little house and a sweet little setting.” April’s eyes fix on the house, and she agrees with Frank and Mrs. Givings that the “perky way it sits on its little slope” is appealing. Mendes frames this flashback in April’s world to contrast how different her life has become. Kate Winslet, who plays April in the film, comments, “She’s sick of the predictability of her day-to-day existence, and the fact that it isn’t really going to change. She has no choice. Women in the 50’s American suburbs really had very little choice in life” (“Junket”). April’s distant look as she stands on the curb as she remembers this scene accentuates her realization that what she believed would be a happy home has not played out that way. As she says later to Shep in the film, “I saw a whole other future.” In the moment in the car with Frank and Mrs. Givings, April sees a different future in that white house on the hill than she finds herself living. Just as Frank thought he could take the job at Knox, remain detached from it, and be a wonderful family man, April briefly buys into the hopeful image that the Revolutionary Hill home will deliver fulfillment. Perhaps the Paris plan becomes a more promising symbol than the house proved to be, and then that plan proves just as faulty as the “clean lines” and “good lawns” of the Revolutionary Hill illusion.

Another change from Mendes is when Mrs. Givings pays a visit to the house to bring a pot of sedum. In the novel, Frank answers the door and hosts the visit, but April has purposely escaped to the outer perimeter of the yard to avoid it. In the film, April answers the door to greet Mrs. Givings while Frank is at work. April looks exhausted and irritated that she has to feign happiness so that the nosey Mrs. Givings will not ask questions. Before leaving, Mrs. Givings
takes April by the hands and remembers her first impression of April, saying, “I remember when you first came off the train. You weren’t like most of my clients. You were different somehow… You just seemed… special… of course you still are.” This is an emotional moment for April in the film, especially since she has just experienced the horrible performance. Again, Mendes’s choice to place April in the host role for Mrs. Givings in this scene is significant because it builds on April’s growing dissatisfaction. The scene in the novel mainly highlights Frank’s lack of knowledge about what to do with a sedum plant, as he obsessively asks, “Would you mind telling me what I am supposed to do with this?” (59). Frank is frustrated that April cannot enlighten him because he expects her wifely knowledge to contain information about what to do with the little plant. April treats Frank like he is stupid since he has not bothered to ask Mrs. Givings how to keep the plant alive; this exchange is an early scene in the novel that illustrates Frank’s role as “dumb suburban husband” when he thinks he is anything but such a man.

In the film, however, Mrs. Givings is alone with April, so the conversation they have becomes centered on her. Despite the fact that Mrs. Givings makes a point to reassure April that she is still special, April’s face shows disappointment; she once had hopes of becoming more than she is now. In the novel, this scene is limited to a hurried visit, mainly with Frank, in which Mrs. Givings sees April as she is departing. In the film, April watches Mrs. Givings leave after the heart-wrenching conversation, and the film flashes to Frank’s affair with Maureen. The arrangement of these scenes shows April’s loneliness at home, interrupted by another lonely woman, Mrs. Givings, and contrasted with Frank’s markedly “un-special” affair. Again, as with the flashback to their Revolutionary Hill house, Mrs. Givings’s memory of April emphasizes April’s dashed expectations. April no longer feels special; she is not happy as a housewife, and she does not know what to do to change her feelings.
Additionally, in the scene in which Shep and April stay behind at the bar because the car is blocked in, and Frank takes Shep’s sick wife home, the conversation is slightly different. In the novel, April recalls her time in boarding school, and remembers how she “had this idea that there was a whole world of marvelous people somewhere… people who knew everything instinctively, who made their lives work out the way they wanted without even trying” (353). In the film, April’s story about realizing that her life did not fit with the American dream is specific to her experience with Frank. She says, “I wanted in. I just wanted us to live again… How pathetic is that? To put all your hopes in a promise that was never made? See? Frank knows… he knows what he wants. He’s found his place. He’s just fine. Married, two kids. It should be enough. It is for him.” In the novel, April’s complaints are limited to the images she had of herself in her teenage years. She does not compare her happiness with Frank’s, and the addition by Mendes of that comparison refers to her maternal role. She believes Frank is happy with his father/breadwinner role, and she sets herself against his satisfaction. She expresses a feeling that sounds like envy—envy of Frank’s ability to settle for what his life has dealt him. Shep and April’s conversation, in the film, follows Shep’s apology to April that they are no longer going to Paris, an apology that is not present in the novel. Winslet remarks, “I think Paris for April represents possibility, hope, change, and the notion that she might be forced to live a life without that possibility is just the kiss of death, ultimately” (“Chasing Dreams”). The film zeroes in on April in this scene to show that the change in plans to move is specific to April. Frank’s life is changing ever so slightly with his promotion, or so he believes, but April’s life is staying the same. Her rekindled dreams for “possibility, hope, change,” as Winslet claims, are ruined again. Only when John Givings makes sense of the cowardly quality of the choice to stay in the suburbs does the reality become completely unbearable.
In the novel, after John’s outrageous accusations of Frank getting April pregnant on purpose, Frank sees April outside “climbing unsteadily up the hill, looking very small among the rocks and trees” (400). He follows her, and she insists he leave her alone, and he retreats back into the house. Yates focalizes this scene through Frank from this point on, as he goes back into the house to give “all his attention to the grim business of keeping watch on her through the window” (401). He sees her come back across the street after some time has passed, and she leans against a tree, which we still see through Frank’s vigilant spot in the window. Afterwards, he “listens to her pick up the phone and dial a number” (402). April is making a phone call to Milly Campbell to ask her to keep their children overnight because she “may be getting the flu or something, and Frank’s tired out” (402).

In the film, April returns across the street from the woods being watched by Frank, as in the novel. When she leans against the tree, however, the camera zooms in on her face and Frank’s watchful eye is forgotten. April does not speak, but the camera remains on a close shot of her face for an extended period of time. She is shaking as she smokes a cigarette, and the focus on her face allows the audience to pause with her in a moment of what looks like critical thought about the recent events. The scene in the novel in which Frank overhears her calling Milly is omitted, and is switched in the film to the scene alone with April. The movie portrays April, the next morning, making the call to Milly after Frank has gone to work, explaining, “I’m afraid I’m not feeling any better” and asking Milly to keep the children into the afternoon.

Following the phone call to Milly, the most significant difference between the novel and film, one that shows Mendes’s commitment to deal with problems of femininity, takes place. In the novel, we do not know that April has tried to give herself an abortion until Frank gets to the hospital. In the film, after April’s shaky voice makes what she knows may be her last telephone
conversation, we witness the moments leading up to the abortion, from the point when April waves goodbye to Frank as he goes to work, to the moment when she takes out the syringe, to the moment when she shuts the bathroom door. Then, we see her come downstairs washed in sweat. She stands gazing out of the picture window with a large pool of dark blood forming beneath her, and then we hear her emergency phone call. Mendes’s focus on April, alone, making the decision to go through with the dangerous procedure, shows the decision as hers only. We watch it happen with April, rather than learning of it through hearsay about how the events might have played out. In the novel, we learn from Frank, “She was so damn nice this morning… She did it to herself, Shep… She killed herself” (438). Frank is alerted by the Campbells to go to the hospital after Milly has seen an ambulance at the Wheelers’ home. The novel relays the events to the reader in scattered statements, from, “she had a miscarriage” (431), to “the emergency” (435) to “hemorrhaging” (437). We do not learn that April had made a choice until, much later, Milly tells her new neighbors that April “gave herself an abortion” (440).

In the film, it is never doubted that April is making a choice, and the scenes surrounding the abortion are solo scenes of the progression of the events. The audience experiences the privacy of the matter in the film, aware all the while that April is making a private choice. She shuts the bathroom door onscreen, and we know what she feels she has to do. Winslet, of the abortion, claims:

I feel that April is a heroine. I didn’t feel she was a coward, neither did I feel she was suicidal, and I certainly didn’t think she was bipolar. But I do believe she was a woman taken to an emotional brink in her pursuit of happiness, and I think it literally sent her mad, I really do. And in giving herself an abortion, I don’t think
she was intending to kill herself, but she knew that it was a very big risk.

(“Chasing Dreams”)

Mendes’s choice to follow April up until the moment of the act, and then to follow her down the stairs with the graphic pool of blood underneath her, illuminates the awful reality of what women’s lives could look like if abortion were illegal again.

By looking at specific events in the film and novel, and at moments in Yates’s life that deal with the harmful limitations of gender identity on people’s public and private lives, we gain sympathy for the people involved. Yates, his father, and his mother were victims of a 1950’s ideology that told them they were only valid if they were certain types of people, and those types included specific ideals of femininity and masculinity. As Ehrenreich argues, men were victims of the American Dream world of the 1950s, and can hardly be blamed for their inability to find a way to be happy. O’Nan claims that these characters “earn their downfall,” but this does not seem to be the case when all the characters in the novel are placed within the big picture of their environments. Yates, the “chronicler of disappointed lives,” created Frank and April to show that even formerly “special” and beautiful people fall for the false promises of the American Dream, and he effectively provides a history of good intentions gone bad.

Without looking at the problems of masculinity in the 1950s that the critical conversation has omitted, we cannot fully sympathize with Frank and April because we cannot fully understand them. As we see in the discussion of the film, gender is as current an issue as ever. But perhaps the problem is further from being named now than it was in the 50s, because of the argument that feminism is no longer relevant. Feminism is relevant, and Mendes does a good job of pointing that out through his choice to focus on April’s experience. Third wave feminism has prided itself on getting past the ethnocentrism of second wave feminism, yet there are still stories
to hear. April’s is one of those stories. In the novel, Yates focuses on Frank’s story because it most closely resembled his own. The critical work on Yates’s life and work enables the reader to better understand Frank Wheeler, and to see him as a victim rather than a perpetrator.

Mendes takes the text of *Revolutionary Road* and makes it his own in his film, not taking away from Frank’s story, but adding emphasis to April’s. Both April and Frank make choices influenced by external and internal forces, and they are never able to find a place of solitude in the midst of those opposing forces. The film and the novel, considered side by side, allow the audience to understand the relational meanings of masculinity and femininity, and to see that one identity cannot exist without the other.