Revolutionary Road

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD YATES

Richard Yates was the child of an unhappy marriage. His parents were divorced by the time he was three. After the divorce, his mother moved to Paris to study sculpture. Yates flourished as a writer in high school, but had a difficult experience in the army, which he joined at age eighteen, during the last year of the war. Yates volunteered for a dangerous mission and permanently damaged his lungs. He did not go to college, feeling that a writer didn't need a traditional education, a decision he would always regret. He married, had two children, moved to Paris for a period, and divorced. Yates was an alcoholic and a badly behaved drunk. After his divorce, he lived in awful squalor, spending his time drinking, sobering up, and writing. His lung troubles caused him to start every morning by vomiting, but he remained a four-pack-a-day smoker until a year before his death at sixty-six, despite once setting his apartment on fire. Yates wrote six other novels and two collections of short stories. Although his writing was always praised by other writers, he never became a true success during his lifetime and supported himself at various times by teaching writing (although he did not believe it could be taught), writing publicity materials for Remington Rand (a company similar to Knox Business Machines), and writing speeches for Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Wheelers' generation grew up during The Great Depression, entered adulthood during the Second World War, and started families of their own during the 1950s, a time of unprecedented economic growth in America. The period was characterized by expanded opportunities and rapid technological innovation, but also widespread social conservatism. After the economic and social upheaval of the 1930s and 1940s, American society glorified the pursuit of peaceful domesticity and had less tolerance for individuals who wanted to go their own way.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Yates saw F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Charles Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as his novel's models. He especially sought to emulate Flaubert's unsentimental portrayal of Emma Bovary and his use of telling details. Yates was an outspoken critic of the "postrealist" or Postmodern movement in literature, but he was a friend and admirer of Kurt Vonnegut.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Revolutionary Road
- **When Written:** 1955-1960
- **Where Written:** Mahopac, New York
- **When Published:** 1961
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Realism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Western Connecticut, New York City
- **Climax:** Frank discovers a rubber syringe in the linen closet and confronts April, who declares that he cannot stop her from inducing an abortion.
- **Point of View:** The novel has a third-person limited point of view which shifts from character to character. The bulk of the novel is told from the perspectives of Frank, Shep, and Helen, while April's point of view is only given in a single chapter near the novel's end.

EXTRA CREDIT

Stage, Fil, Radio, TV, and Print. *The Petrified Forest*, the play put on by The Laurel Players, was produced on stage, for radio, and as a film in the 1930s. It was also remade as a television movie in May of 1955. *Revolutionary Road's* plot echoes the plot of *The Petrified Forest*, which is about a girl who dreams of escaping her dull life to a more artistic existence in France.

The Age of the Institution. 1955, the year during which the action of the novel takes place, happens to have been the year during which patients in American mental institutions peaked at 560,000 people. Between 1955 and 1961, a federal committee studied what could be done to reduce the number of people locked up in in state facilities like Green Acres, where John Givings is being kept.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel begins in western Connectictut, with an unsuccessful first performance by an amateur theater company, The Laurel Players. The lead actress, April Wheeler, begins with a strong performance but eventually becomes embarrassed and stilted once it's clear that the show is a flop. At the play's end, her husband, Frank Wheeler, goes to console her, but instead they argue over whether to go out for cocktails with their friends Shep and Milly Campbell. After a screaming match on the side of the highway, Frank punches the roof of the car, injuring his hand. April sleeps on the couch and Frank sits up drinking.

The next day, with a horrible hangover and with April refusing

to speak to him, Frank sets himself to work on a stone path he is building in the yard. He struggles with the work as his children, Michael and Jennifer, watch. Frank remembers his own father Earl's disappointment in his seeming lack of aptitude for this kind of practical labor. Frank mistakes the root of a tree for Michael's foot carelessly stuck into the hole where he is digging, and Frank then spanks his son, shocking both children.

The next evening, Shep and Milly Campbell come over to the Wheelers' house for cocktails. The two couples usually enjoy each other's company, but now there is awkwardness between them. Milly Campbell tells the group some gossip. Helen Givings, the local realtor, has a son John who has been placed in a mental institution. Frank holds forth, denouncing the complacency of their community, which ignores the tragedies in its midst. He expects the group to agree with him and chime in, but they all look embarrassed.

The next day is Frank's thirtieth birthday. He feels depressed as he goes into work at Knox Business Machines, where he works in Sales Promotion, but feels better once he sets in motion a plan to seduce a secretary named Maureen Grube. When Frank arrives home, he is shocked to receive a warm reception from April. She has prepared a birthday dinner for him and says she has something important to tell him. April has conceived of a plan to move to Europe. There, she says, Frank can figure out his true calling, and she will work as a secretary. She says that she blocked him from finding himself when she got pregnant with Jennifer and wanted to give herself an abortion. According to April, to convince her not to have an abortion, Frank had had to assume total responsibility for their lives, sacrificing his own fulfillment. Now, she wants to make it up to him. Frank initially resists this logic, but eventually agrees that they should carry out April's plan.

For the next few weeks, the Wheelers are in harmony with one another. The next day at work, Frank tells Maureen they shouldn't sleep together again. In a whirl of activity, he quickly solves a pressing problem by writing a brochure for a sales conference.

Over the weeks that follow, the Wheelers spend long hours talking about their plans, excluding everyone else, even their children. Frank begins to realize that he is nervous to move to Europe, especially when he sees how quickly April is preparing. She has assumed that they will move to Paris, because Frank gave her the mistaken impression that he learned French during World War II.

One weekend the Wheelers inform Helen Givings and the Campbells of their plan to move. Milly has been worried since the play that the Wheelers have become snobs, but Shep, who has a crush on April, brushes off her concerns. After hearing of the Wheelers' plans, however, he tells Milly he agrees with her about the Wheelers and thinks that their plan sounds very immature. Milly is relieved, but Shep is left deeply envious that Frank will get to live in Paris with April. The next night, Helen comes over to the Wheelers' and asks them if they would they be willing to meet her son John. She is mortified to see from their expressions that they have heard about John's hospitalization, but the Wheelers quickly agree to meet John. When they tell Helen of their plan to move to Paris, she is disappointed because she had hoped that they could become long-term friends for John.

Frank tells his best friend at work, Jack Ordway, about his plan to move. Frank feels a sense of relief from no longer keeping the move entirely a secret. That afternoon, however, he is called over by his boss. Bart Pollock, a senior executive in the company was impressed by the brochure Frank wrote and wants him to do a series of similar brochures. That night, Frank is disappointed when April shows no interest in his meeting with Pollock.

Soon after, the Wheelers get into a fight over how Jennifer is reacting to the upcoming move. When Frank expresses worry about their kids' ability to adjust, April asks if he is trying to back out of the move. Frank denies this.

The next day is their first visit with John Givings, so April sends Michael and Jennifer to stay with the Campbells. John behaves oddly and makes hostile remarks to his mother, but approves of the Wheelers' plan to move to Paris to escape the "hopeless emptiness" of suburbia. Despite feeling that they handled the visit well, there is distance and constraint between Frank and April again.

That week, Bart Pollock takes Frank out to a fancy, booze-soaked lunch at a hotel. Frank confides in Pollock, telling him about his father's history working for Knox. Pollock tells Frank that he would like to hire him to be a part of a new public relations venture he is putting together. Frank tells Pollock that he is leaving the company in the fall, and Pollock replies that if Frank he changes his mind, the offer stands.

Later that week, in a state of despair, April tells Frank that she is pregnant. Frank feels full of relief, thinking that this means they will not have to move to France. Then he finds a **rubber syringe** in the closet—which he knows April plans to use to abort the pregnancy. He feels he must convince April to have the baby.

For the next few weeks, the Wheelers debate what to do about April's pregnancy. Frank takes April out to fancy restaurants to demonstrate that their life can be more fulfilling in the suburbs with the extra money he will earn working for Bart Pollock. He also cultivates a new persona, acting the part of a decisive, responsible man. When April still wants to abort the baby, Frank suggests that this desire is the result of a psychological abnormality caused by April's unhappy, parentless childhood. April relents, agreeing not to have an abortion.

The Wheelers tell their friends that they will not be moving to Paris. Frank is disturbed to admit to himself that, although he is glad not to be moving to Paris, he doesn't actually want another child. He resumes his affair with Maureen.

One night the Wheelers and Campbells go dancing at a seedy bar called Vito's Log Cabin. Milly gets too drunk and they all plan to leave, but one of their cars is blocked in. April suggests that Frank drive Milly home while she stays out with Shep. To Shep's joyful amazement, they have sex in the back of his car.

Several days later, Frank goes to Maureen's house to break up with her. He is caught off guard when Maureen emerges from her room naked and dancing. Apologizing over and over, Frank breaks things off.

April has been sleeping on the couch since sleeping with Shep. That Sunday, immediately before a visit with the Givings, Frank tries to speak to her about how she is feeling. April declares that she doesn't love Frank. Frank speaks condescendingly to April, as if addressing a mentally ill person, then says he has also been acting neurotically and tells April he had a brief affair. April says she doesn't care.

When the Givings arrive, they can tell that April and Frank have been fighting. John asks why they aren't moving to Paris, and Frank points to April's pregnant belly as an answer. John says that isn't the real reason. He guesses that Frank impregnated April because he was too scared to move. Helen apologizes, saying they shouldn't have come, and the Givingses leave. Afterwards, the Wheelers have an enormous fight and Frank drinks himself to sleep.

In the morning, Frank is surprised when April makes him breakfast and listens to him talk about the conference with Bart Pollock that day and lets him kiss her goodbye. After Frank leaves, April writes a brief note for Frank and prepares to attempt to give herself an abortion. She dies in the hospital that day.

Frank takes Michael and Jennifer to live with his older brother and moves to New York City. Shep dislikes listening to Milly's dramatic renditions of what happened to the Wheelers, but he appreciates her supportive presence. Helen Givings feels that John played a role in April's death; she tells his doctors he is too destructive to leave the institution again, and she adopts a puppy.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Frank Wheeler – A vain, smooth-talking man of thirty, Frank Wheeler is deeply concerned with seeming manly, likeable, interesting, and exceptional to others. He worries that he is weak and sentimental, and makes a show of being hard-headed and confident. The result of an accidental pregnancy, Frank feels that his older, worn-out parents never gave him the attention he needed to thrive. Frank is self-conscious as a boy, but in the army and at Columbia College he discovers that he can win people's respect by being articulate. He is insecure about the kind of women he attracts, until he manages to win over April. He sees her as exceptional, and thinks that this reflects well on him, so he is keen to keep her under his control. From the beginning of their marriage he worries she will leave him. Frank is not sure what profession to take, so he takes a job in the New York City office of Knox Business Machines, the company for which his father worked as a struggling traveling salesman. He initially sees his job as a joke, but over the years, and despite continuing to pretend to hate his work out of a fear that April will look down on him if he admits to liking it, Frank grows to find the routine at Knox comforting and later discovers that he has real aptitude for public relations.

April Wheeler – Independent-minded and passionate, but chronically unhappy, April Wheeler is miserable with her life as a suburban homemaker. Brought up in an affluent setting by aunts, because her hard-partying parents did not want her, April wants to feel that she fits in among people who live a glamorous life like the one she imagined her parents led. When she first meets Frank, April believes that he is an intellectual who can introduce her to that world. She gives up her hopes of becoming an actress to marry him. She does not want to have children until she is in her late-twenties, but is convinced by Frank not to abort an accidental pregnancy, going on to have two children. April can come across as withdrawn and snobbish, but she is also widely admired for her good taste, beauty, and elegance. Desperate to make a change to her life, April comes up with a plan for her and Frank to move their family to Europe.

Shep Campbell – Coddled by his wealthy divorced mother as a child, by adolescence Shep Campbell feels determined to grow up to be tough. He feels that his wealth will make people think he is soft, and so he rejects all signs of it. After rising through the ranks of the army during the war, Shep goes to a technical college to become a mechanical engineer. He meets Milly and they marry, settling in Arizona. Several years later, Shep begins to regret that he rejected the world he grew up in. After a period of confusion, he moves his family to New York City, and then eventually to Connecticut. Shep has become reconciled to the compromises in his life, feeling grateful for experiences from his "tough guy period" and equal to people like Frank Wheeler who went to college in the East. Shep appreciates Milly for sticking with him when he went through a crisis, but their marriage is not romantic, and he has a deep crush on April Wheeler, whom he sees as the embodiment of good taste and the East coast culture he turned his back on.

Milly Campbell – Unlike April, Milly is happy with her life as a wife to Shep and mother to four sons. Milly is agreeable, loyal, pragmatic and conventional. Raised in poverty, she proves able to change her tastes to suit Shep's ideas of what is highbrow. She and Shep are good friends of Frank and April, but Milly feels status anxiety around the Wheelers, especially when they start to become withdrawn in the friendship.

Helen Givings – A high-strung perfectionist, Helen Givings escapes from the unfulfilling aspects of her life by throwing

herself into work as a realtor. She also expends her extra energy by renovating houses and then reselling them for greater value. Brought up in an affluent Philadelphia society, Helen looks down on many of the people she sells houses to. She has an air of trying too hard as she tries to make cheerful conversation even in the most uncomfortable situations. She is married to the old and frail Howard and is disappointed in her son John, who has been hospitalized for mental illness.

John Givings – An intelligent non-conformist and former mathematics teacher, John Givings has been put into a state mental institution and subjected to electrical shock therapy after holding his parents hostage for a period of several days. His insistence on speaking the truth as he sees it makes his mother Helen very uncomfortable. He is the only person who understands the Wheelers' desire to move to Europe. April especially feels that he understands her after he says that she is "female" instead of "feminine."

Howard Givings – A frail man who seems older than his sixty-eight years, Howard Givings leads a relaxed, unstimulating life. He is able to exert control over John when he becomes agitated and can calm Helen, but he often turns off **his hearing aid** to block them out when he feels like listening is unnecessary.

Earl Wheeler – A hardworking man who is good with his hands, Earl Wheeler doesn't understand or approve of his son Frank. He manages to keep a job as a regional manager for Knox Business Machines through many rounds of layoffs during The Depression, but his hopes for further career advancement are dashed. When Frank gets a job in Knox's New York City office, Earl is proud.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jennifer Wheeler – The Wheelers' six-year-old daughter, Jennifer is a sweet, anxious child. She hopes to gain her parents' attention by imitating them, but suffers from a sense that her life could be turned upside down at any moment.

Michael Wheeler – The Wheelers' four-year-old son, Michael is playful and loving.

Ted Bandy – Frank's boss at Knox Business Machines.

Bart Pollock – An executive at Knox Business Machines, Pollock is a physically huge man who is passionate about selling computers. He recognizes Frank's talent and recruits him to join his new public relations arm of the company.

Jack Ordway – An alcoholic who treats his life as a joke, Ordway is Frank's best friend at Knox.

Maureen Grube – A twenty-two-year-old secretary at Knox Business Machines with whom Frank has an affair. Maureen seeks to seem sexy and sophisticated, but she is actually confused about who she is and what she wants.

Norma – Maureen's older, more experienced, twice-divorced roommate.

Aunt Claire – April's aunt and guardian.

Oat Fields – A general sales manager at Knox Business Machines in the 1930s. Earl is disappointed when he is not given a promotion to work as Oat's assistant at the Home Office in New York City. Frank is repulsed by Oat's large size and sloppy eating habits.

Warren Brace – Nancy Brace's husband, Warren moves into the Wheelers' house on Revolutionary Road after Frank sells it.

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Steve Kovick – A mediocre drummer who plays at Vito's Log Cabin, the bar where the Wheelers and Campbells go to dance and drink.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MARRIAGE AND SELFHOOD

Revolutionary Road examines the way codependence can turn a disappointing marriage into a life-destroying one. For Frank and April Wheeler, the novel's protagonists, the way their spouse reflects on them and reflects them back to themselves defines how they understand themselves. For April, feeling that an exceptionally intelligent and promising man loves her is essential to her sense of self. She sees Frank less as an individual, and more as an archetype—the kind of person whose love makes her feel validated. Unfortunately, since she idealizes Frank, her image of him is easily compromised by the reality of who he is. April wants to have the love of a man with an independent identity, but Frank's self-esteem likewise depends on April's approval and his sense of control over her. To control April, Frank pretends to be the kind of man she admires. For instance, when his boring job, which April despises, begins to show signs of developing into an interesting career, his first impulse is to imagine how he will denigrate the job to maintain April's approval.

As the novel tracks Frank's effort to maintain control over April's view of him, it's slowly revealed that April is actually the stronger, more independent of the two. The bulk of the novel is told from Frank's point of view, but his fears that he cannot control April's perception of him are largely borne out at the novel's end, when the narration shifts to April's point of view in the moments before she gives herself an abortion. At this moment, it becomes clear that April feels she made a mistake

by marrying Frank and having his children. She sees through his attempts to pretend to be the kind of man she admires, and she looks down on him for his lack of independence. April reclaims her independence by attempting to abort Frank's child, although this leads to her death. Her abortion shows that she believes she cannot wrest control over her life from Frank except by endangering it—a damning portrayal of the confines of marriage.

Although the novel centers on the Wheelers, it also gives access to the points of view of Helen Givings and Shep Campbell, exploring the dynamics of their marriages as well. Shep's and Helen's ability to cope with disappointment in their own marriages provides a counterexample to the Wheelers' toxic codependence. Helen Givings is unhappy with her older, disengaged husband Howard, and she considers herself to be "constantly veering towards the brink of divorce." While Howard can exert a stabilizing influence on Helen in her frenzied and compulsive moments, the differences in their temperaments leave them incapable of drawing enjoyment from one another's company. But Howard does not stop Helen from working. Frenzied eighteen-hour days fill her life and allow her to cope with her marital disappointment by maintaining her own, separate interests.

The Campbells' marriage has also been through many ups-and-downs, particularly after Shep's mid-life decision to upend their life in Arizona and move to New York. Shep is not sexually attracted to Milly and has a deep crush on April Wheeler. He copes with his marriage, however, by focusing on his gratitude for all Milly has done to support him, and this trumps his desire for more romance and excitement than she provides. While Shep focuses on the good elements of his marriage so he can accept the bad, Helen finds fulfillment outside of her marriage so she can accept its drawbacks.

Each of the marriages Yates examines provides a different critique of the institution, resulting in a cynical, pessimistic portrait of marriage as a whole. Even in marriages that do not lead to either individuals' destruction, the compromises that are demanded are painful and the disappointments acute. Although the Wheelers' marriage is held up as a particularly toxic one, the Givingses and Campbells seem to have accepted a life of mediocrity, constant annoyance, and imperfect pleasures. The novel suggests that all marriages, even those in which each partner maintains some independence, require compromise. It does not suggest, however, that this compromise is usually worth it.

MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD

Rigid 1950s gender expectations threaten the happiness of all the characters in *Revolutionary Road*, both male and female. The pressures and stereotypes of masculinity instill insecurities in men that lead to empty posturing, manipulation, and self-denial. These men live lives they don't want and are cruel to women to bolster their own self-esteem. And while Yates shows the tragedy of male gender roles, his portrait of gender expectations for women is much more dire. The range of acceptable roles for women in *Revolutionary Road* is narrow, and women deny themselves to fit into stereotypes meant to repress and control them. While some women may flourish in these roles, others have no way to live a fulfilling life while meeting society's demands, and it ruins their lives. Thus, Yates shows how rigid gender expectations write a tragic and mutually destructive script for men and women, undermining their abilities to be themselves and have fulfilling relationships.

The novel explores the desire of boys to grow up to become "real men." Although this desire is motivated by a societal pressure to conform, *Revolutionary Road*'s male characters find that there is some flexibility when it comes to enacting masculinity while holding on to what makes them individuals. Frank Wheeler wishes to be respected by other men and desired by women. As a boy, he is acutely aware that his father sees him as insufficiently handy with tools and his peers find him overly dramatic. When he grows up, he is surprised and pleased to find that he can earn the approval of others by showing off his intellect. Although Frank is reassured that his eloquence has earned him respect, he still struggles to feel that he is truly manly in the way he hoped to be as a boy. By projecting confidence through his manner, clothing and expressions, by taking on home improvement projects and, most importantly, by manipulating and controlling April and other women, Frank makes himself feel adequately masculine. Shep Campbell, meanwhile, feels that his upper-class upbringing might stifle his masculinity. He abandons the moneyed life his mother wants for him, choosing instead to go to a technical college, become a mechanical engineer, and marry a woman from a different class. He realizes at a certain point, however, that he has given up too much of himself in the pursuit of being what he considers a "real man."

While the novel's male characters struggle internally to become "real men," the women in the novel are expected to be either cheerful, nurturing homemakers, attractive sex objects, or both. Both of these roles are strictly defined by society, leaving little room for individual expression. April Wheeler never wanted to settle down into a suburban life, seeing herself more as a bohemian living in New York City than a mother and housewife, but when she gets pregnant, Frank convinces her to keep the baby. For Frank, having April keep his house and bear his children testifies to his manliness more than anything else. And he further believes that she should be *happy* to be dominated by his wishes, because they are wishes sanctioned by society. Frank's mistress, Maureen Grube, tries to live up to a different female archetype: the ideal young, single woman living in New York City. Insecure that she can live up to the role of the sophisticated, sexy, fun woman, Maureen begins an affair

with Frank in the hope that his admiration for her will affirm her femininity.

Female gender roles are not only restrictive, they also give men like Frank Wheeler mechanisms for controlling the women around them. Frank suggests that April's desire to have a life outside of bearing and raising children is perverse, not because he wants to have more children, but because he recognizes that her pregnancies allow him to control her. By stopping April from aborting her pregnancies, Frank saddles her with responsibility for children, diminishing the possibility that she will be able to pursue a life outside of their home and outside of his control. When Maureen's roommate Norma tries to defend Maureen from being preyed on by Frank, Frank deploys gender roles to defeat her arguments. He accuses Norma of being a "latent lesbian," suggesting that a "real woman" would not step in to protect another woman from male domination.

The novel's critique of traditional gender roles is best voiced by the mentally ill John Givings. John says approvingly that April is different from other women who seek to conform to traditional ideas of "femininity." He also puts his finger on Frank's reliance on gender roles as a tool of control, saying that Frank probably impregnated April on purpose to sabotage their plan to move to Paris, and so he can "hide behind her maternity dress." John is the only one who sees the way conformity to gender roles can destroy lives. The fact that he is considered crazy, though, tragically suggests how rigorously this society enforces a specific set of ideas about gender.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Revolutionary Road portrays parents and children as locked in an imbalanced and damaging relationship. Adult characters spend their lives alternately rebelling against and seeking to fulfill their parents' wishes for them. On the other hand, these same characters feel disappointment and disconnection when it comes to their own children. Parents, in Yates's portrayal, are not as deeply impacted by their children as their children are by them, and they generally either neglect or try to change their offspring.

For all the characters, relationships with their parents are crucial, and the feelings of anger or love that motivate the desire to emulate or rebel against one's parents are portrayed as illogical, but visceral. The novel focuses on two adult characters whose youthful rebellions are slowly replaced with the desire to live lives similar to their parents'. Although Frank sees himself as a rebel and intellectual, when it comes time to get a job, he gets exactly the one his father always wanted: a desk job in Knox's home office in New York City. Initially, Frank tells himself that he has taken this job ironically, but eventually he finds that doing it well gives him satisfaction and pride. Shep Campbell rebels against his wealthy mother's coddling, deciding to renounce his upper-class roots and pursue the middle-class track of mechanical engineer. Only later, when he suddenly realizes he is unhappy with his life, does he regret his rebellion against his mother's lifestyle. He then moves back to New York and cultivates the life of a man of good taste. Neither Frank nor Shep feels sure that he has chosen the right path in life once he begins to emulate his parents, but both find that they are more at peace than they were while trying to shape their lives entirely in rebellion against their parents.

Yet these characters have little ability to treat their children in the way that they wish their parents had treated them. Instead, they often feel aggrieved by the way their children inconvenience and fail to gratify them. The Wheeler children, Jennifer and Michael, fail to stir much interest in their parents, who hardly consider how their decisions impact their children. On the one occasion when Frank suggests to April that their planned move to Paris might be disruptive for the children, he is more interested in assuaging his own fear of moving to Paris than sparing Jennifer from the fears she has expressed. Shep Campbell likewise feels little connection to his four sons, looking down at them for seeming "middle-class." And while there is no detail given about John Givings's upbringing, when his mother ceases to visit him and instead adopts a puppy, she finds great satisfaction in training it. This suggests that in raising her son, she saw him as a project, like a house that needs redecoration, something she could control and perfect.

Even as adults with children of their own, the characters in *Revolutionary Road* continue to react to the facts of their childhoods, remaining preoccupied with their upbringings rather than with bringing their own children up. As April Wheeler prepares to give herself a dangerous late-term abortion, she realizes that she may die in the process. Indeed, it is left somewhat unclear whether she *intends* to die in the course of this abortion. At this moment she does not reflect on the possibility that she will soon abandon her children, but instead considers her abandonment by her own parents when she was a child. She thinks back on a visit with her father, which the novel hints was the last time she saw him before his suicide. April now seems to be emulating her father, either in suicide, if that is what she intends, or by refusing to care for a child she does not want, as her parents did by giving up her care to her aunts. The children April already has hardly broach her thoughts. And for Frank, after April's death, his own fulfillment is far more important than his childrens'. When he visits the Campbells, he tells them about his work and about how he is exploring his feelings about his father in psychoanalysis, but he hardly mentions Michael and Jennifer. Further, although Frank abhorred April's parents' decision to allow her to be raised by aunts and resented his own middle-aged parents for having been so tired out by life by the time they had him, he takes Jennifer and Michael to be raised by his own much older brother after April's death. In this way, he provides his children with a life that combines the worst of both his and his deceased wife's upbringings.

As in its portrayal of marriage, *Revolutionary Road* presents childhood and parenthood in a bitter, pessimistic light. The novel suggests that most childhoods are painful and most adults are haunted by their childhoods. Children generally sense that they disappoint or fail to interest their parents, and will likely go on to repeat the same cycles of rebellion driven by resentment of their parents, or emulation out of a desire to feel they have finally earned parental approval. The novel rejects the possibility that having children will be redemptive or fulfilling, suggesting that what we all want is our parents' love, not to provide a parents' love to our own children.

CONFORMITY, MENTAL ILLNESS, AND PSYCHOLOGY

Revolutionary Road is set during an era when an intense pressure to conform caused many people to feel depressed and inadequate. Instead of helping the mentally ill cope with a conformist society, however, the profession of psychology was often used to pressure people to stifle their individual desires and submit to social norms. The novel suggests that the fear of being stigmatized for being different often stops people – particularly women – from pursuing the lives they would like to lead. The novel portrays this as a tragic state of affairs, because it is personal freedom—not conformity to a socially approved ideal—that allows individuals to come as close as possible to a happy life.

The lives of the novel's central characters suggest that it is a lack of personal freedom that makes them unhappy. Rather than childhood trauma or incurable mental illness, society's conformist strictures limit these individuals to unfulfilling lives.

For April Wheeler, her husband is the primary obstacle to her pursuing a fulfilling life. She wants to live abroad and pursue new experiences, but Frank is determined to keep her under his thumb. When April wants to abort her child so that she might still achieve the life she wants, Frank suggests that this is a sign of mental illness. Abortion might be an emotionally healthy decision for April, who doesn't want to repeat her parents' mistake of having unwanted children and failing to care for them. However, Frank parrots society's view that all sane women want children, and suggests that April's childhood has left her emotionally scarred. Ironically, Frank doesn't want another child, either. He and April have the same desire, but only in April—a woman—does this desire seem "insane."

Shep Campbell's story demonstrates that the ability to overcome depression in this conformist society is only open to those who can be happy with a life society approves of. Shep grows depressed when he comes to the realization that the life he has chosen is not the one he wants, but because he is a man, and because the life he wants is one that society embraces, he is able to overcome his unhappiness by making socially acceptable changes. He moves, switches jobs, and makes new friends, which doesn't make him ecstatically happy, but does eliminate his previous woes. Shep's ability to change his life for the better while still respecting social norms suggests that the ability to overcome dissatisfaction is more readily available to men who fit into traditional gender roles, because they are rewarded for showing initiative and ambition. By contrast, April's dissatisfaction cannot be resolved in a socially acceptable way, since her bohemian desires are seen as unbefitting of a woman. Thus, April is left mired in her dissatisfaction, her distress escalating until she dies in a desperate attempt to control her life.

John Givings, the novel's sole certified "insane" person, is an intelligent, intuitive non-conformist. The degree to which he is actually "psychotic" is left unclear. What is clear is that he is determined to rebel against a society that seeks to enforce conformity, especially when it comes to the proper roles for men and women. He sees his mother as the embodiment of this spirit of conformity, mocking her efforts to remain bright and cheerful in the face of his brutal truth-telling and derisively calling her "feminine" instead of "female." When he holds his parents hostage in their home – an act that could be a true sign of insanity – society strikes back, sending him to a mental institution, keeping him from seeing a lawyer, and subjecting him to painful electrical shock treatments. But it is when he maliciously but accurately describes the Wheelers' marriage—specifically, Frank's desire to assert his masculinity by controlling April—that his fate is sealed. After this, his mother decides that he is too destructive to be around other people. The price for telling the truth about the conformity he sees and the unhappiness it causes is an indefinite stay in a mental institution.

Overall, then, the novel presents a bleak picture of the possibilities for those who want something other than a home, a spouse, and children, as society says they are supposed to. In a rigidly conformist society that has commandeered psychology to back up its claims about the only good way to live, especially as these claims apply to gender roles, the pressure to conform is given scientific backing by the discipline of psychology. Those who fail to conform may be subjected to psychological treatment that is more a punishment for bad behavior than a treatment for illness. Meanwhile, the threat of this treatment regimen only adds to the pressure to conform, increasing the prevalence of mental illness and making the conundrum of the dissatisfied non-conformist all the more hopeless.

CLASS, TASTE, AND STATUS

Revolutionary Road takes place during a period after World War II when the American economy was booming and millions of Americans who grew up in poverty during the Depression were joining the middle class. Yet even with money-making opportunities being so plentiful,

the novel's characters are not content with run-of-the-mill success, and they seek other ways to prove their worth and cement their status. For many, this status became dependent on showing "good taste." Having a creative or intellectual profession could compensate for a moderate income, and a tastefully decorated home—even if modest—connoted more intellect and sophistication than an extravagantly decorated one. In a counterpoint to the characters' fear of being labelled psychologically abnormal, they also fear being exactly like everyone else. In order to prove to themselves that they are "exceptional," all the characters seek to demonstrate their good taste, but the significance of good taste varies depending on the characters' class background.

The characters in *Revolutionary Road* were born into different backgrounds, but all inhabit the same economic station during the events of the novel. Still, the social class of each character's parents remains the primary influence on what they see as a desirable way to spend their lives. Frank and Milly, who grew up poor or lower-middle-class, pretend to shun conventional, materialist values to fit in with their partners. They do this to cement their status as "exceptional" people by proving that they have refined taste. In reality, however, both draw happiness from the comfort and security of their material success. Frank believes he wants a creative career unlike his father's out of a mistaken belief that his father was ordinary while he is exceptional. He sees himself as a rebel, giving long, impassioned speeches denouncing the sentimentality and conformity of his neighbors and coworkers. But Frank is a born salesman, and he eventually finds that his skills suit him to working, as his father did, explaining complicated products in simple terms. He also finds that he enjoys the very normal pleasures of relaxing at home in the suburbs, sipping brandy and reading comic books to his children. Similarly Milly, who was raised in poverty, adapts attitudes that convey wealth and unsentimental "good" taste because she sees that this is important to Shep. But deep down, Milly wants to be a homemaker and raise children. Their house has a "spare, stripped-down, intellectual" look that Milly cultivates to impress others. Only in their bedroom does Milly allow her décor to reveal her true feelings: she is happy to be a homemaker living in the suburbs.

Those characters who came from wealthier backgrounds, like Shep and Helen Givings, see themselves as more refined and interesting than the other people living in their suburban community. Helen has found an occupation that expresses her belief in her own superior taste. When she renovates homes and then resells them at a higher price, she finds proof that her taste is superior to the taste of those around her. Shep is satisfied to have befriended the Wheelers, who make him feel like he is connecting to a world of monied, East-coast elites.

But while Helen and Shep have made their peace with their surroundings (all the while still signaling that they look down on their community), for April taste is more than a hollow status symbol, but an aesthetic experience which makes her feel truly herself. Those around April can sense that she has real taste, not the kind of taste that they feign for status. Shep aspires to have April praise Milly's design of the Campbell house, while Frank sees her as a trophy wife because she is "first-rate." Yet Frank also finds her expressions of taste infuriating, because they are a sign of April's continued existence as an independent thinker. He gets angry at her for her snobbishness, and fears that she will escape his attempts to control her with her ability to continue to speak independently. While Frank's fluent speech wins most people over, he can never keep April from reserving judgment until she has truly considered what he is saying. Despite her environment, and despite Frank's attempts to control her, taste sets April apart.

In a world in which taste differentiates the banal middle-class from those who are seen as "exceptional," April Wheeler stands above and apart from the other characters. Born into a wealthy background, she is not concerned with proving that she comes from the upper class. Further, she is not interested in defining herself by signaling that she has a higher status than those around her. She feels utterly sure that she is better than those around her because of her capacity to think independently, and she sees no need to prove it to others. For her, neither class nor status are as important as the freedom of thought that she is denied in her suburban world.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE RUBBER SYRINGE

April heard from a friend in drama school that a rubber syringe can be used to induce a miscarriage. Twice, April plans to use the syringe to end her pregnancy. For April, the syringe is a vehicle of taking control over her own destiny. But for Frank, who derives confidence in his own status as a man by convincing April to submit to his will, the syringe is a direct threat to his control over her. Frank sees April's pregnancies as a way for him to prevent her from leaving him. He also sees April's bearing of his children as an affirmation of his masculinity. Added to this, the syringe is shaped like a penis, and April intends to insert it into her vagina to induce a miscarriage. For this reason it not only symbolizes a threat to Frank's ability to assert his right as a man to control April's destiny, but it actually resembles a penis that is not Frank's, and that will do the opposite of impregnate her.

HOWARD'S HEARING AID

Howard often turns his hearing aid off to avoid

listening to his wife Helen talk. Although this can seem like a callous gesture, the novel suggests that it is emblematic of the kind of self-protection necessary to a working marriage. Unlike the Wheelers, who fight bitterly over everything, the Givingses live their lives in close proximity but without sharing much. Helen works eighteen-hour days to avoid too much coexistence with her husband, and during much of the time they are together, Howard is not listening. While this arrangement doesn't seem to make either of them very happy or fulfilled, the novel suggests that this kind of peaceful, separate coexistence may be the best that can be hoped for in a marriage.

SEDUM PLANT

Helen takes great pride and pleasure in undertaking home improvement projects, which solidify her feeling of superiority to those in her suburban community who come from lower class backgrounds. When she brings Frank and April a gift of a sedum plant (a kind of succulent) to improve their lawn, she is signaling that she sees them as her equals in terms of class and education. She expects that they will take the same care with the plant that she would, because she sees gardening and beautifying one's property as the kind of virtuous activity that well-adjusted, well-off people enjoy. Frank and April are irritated by the plant, however—reflecting their general dislike of the Givingses—and immediately put it in the basement.

STONE PATH

Frank is building a stone path in the yard, but for very different reasons than Helen undertakes her home improvement projects (see the **sedum plant**). For Frank, the hard labor of digging up stones from the woods and transferring them to holes he digs in the lawn is a way to assert his skill and ability as a man. He feels that he is proving himself to be a tough man, as his father never thought he was. At the same time, he reenacts his own father's disappointment towards him by lashing out unfairly at Michael, spanking him when Frank mistakes the root of a tree for his son's foot and thinks the boy is getting in his way. In the end, Frank fails to complete the stone path, thereby proving that he has never become competent in this kind of "manly" work.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Revolutionary Road* published in 2000.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

"It strikes me," he said at last, "that there's a considerable amount of bullshit going on here. I mean you seem to be doing a pretty good imitation of Madame Bovary here, and there's one or two points I'd like to clear up. Number one, it's not my fault the play was lousy. Number two, it's sure as hell not my fault you didn't turn out to be an actress, and the sooner you get over *that* little piece of soap opera the better off we're all going to be. Number three, I don't happen to fit the role of dumb, insensitive 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. Number four—"

She was out of the car and running away in the headlights, quick and graceful, a little too wide in the hips. For a second, as he clambered out and started after her, he thought she meant to kill herself—she was capable of damn near anything at times like this—but she stopped in the dark roadside weeds thirty yards ahead, beside a luminous sign that read NO PASSING. He came up behind her and stood uncertainly, breathing hard, keeping his distance. She wasn't crying; she was only standing there, with her back to him.

"What the hell," he said. "What the hell's this all about? Come on back to the car."

"No. I will in a minute. Just let me stand here a minute."

Related Characters: Frank Wheeler , April Wheeler (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Frank and April are driving home after The Laurel Players' unsuccessful debut performance of *The Petrified Forest*, in which April starred. April has said she doesn't feel like talking, and Frank has agreed to give her space, but then, caught up in his own thoughts about their lives, he begins to talk again. Frank can't help but take it personally that the play failed and that April doesn't want him to console her about its failure. When April doesn't react to Frank the way he wants her to, he lashes out. Frank defends himself as being culturally superior to his neighbors in the suburbs, saying he isn't a "dumb, insensitive suburban husband." At the same time, he accuses April of being a snob who blames others for saddling her with a boring life.

Frank's main source of frustration is April's insistence on her independence. April doesn't want to listen to Frank's explanation of the play's failure; she wants to experience her disappointment on her own. But Frank feels too bound

up in April to allow her this independent experience. At the same time, he knows from the past how desperately she wants to escape his emotional control and can even imagine her killing herself in a moment of pique (a foreshadowing of the novel's tragic climax). When Frank does not give April the space she wants, she tries physically to separate herself from him, if only for a minute.

Notably, Yates saw Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the 19th century Realist novel about a bored housewife living in the French provinces, as a stylistic and thematic inspiration for *Revolutionary Road*.

❝ Then the fight went out of control. It quivered their arms and legs and wrenched their faces into shapes of hatred, it urged them harder and deeper into each other's weakest points, showing them cunning ways around each other's strongholds and quick chances to switch tactics, feint, and strike again. In the space of a gasp for breath it sent their memories racing back over the years for old weapons to rip the scabs off old wounds; it went on and on.
"Oh, you've never fooled me, Frank, never once. All your precious moral maxims and your 'love' and your mealy-mouthed little—do you think I've *forgotten* the time you hit me in the face because I said I wouldn't forgive you? Oh, I've always known I had to be your conscience and your guts—*and* your punching bag. Just because you've got me safely in a trap you think you—"
"*You* in a trap! *You* in a trap! *Jesus*, don't make me laugh!"
"Yes, me." She made a claw of her hand and clutched at her collarbone. "Me. Me. Me. Oh, you poor, self-deluded—*Look* at you! Look at you, and tell me how by any *stretch*"—she tossed her head, and the grin of her teeth glistened white in the moonlight—"by any *stretch* of the imagination you can call yourself a man!"

Related Characters: Frank Wheeler , April Wheeler (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28-29

Explanation and Analysis

April had gotten out of the car to get space from Frank, who refused to stop talking to her about the play as they drove home after her performance in *The Petrified Forest*. Frank followed her, and now they are standing on the side of the highway in the middle of a vicious fight. This fight is one of the few points in the novel when April's honest perspective on her marriage comes to light. Usually, April either pretends to respect and admire Frank, probably in the hopes that by doing so she can convince him to make a change to their life, or she settles into a tense and unhappy silence. But in this moment, she expresses her dissatisfaction and lashes out at him for causing it. She says that he has trapped her, which seems to be a reference to her isolated life in the suburbs. Although this has not yet been explored in the novel, it will later become clear that April also feels Frank trapped her by pushing her not to abort an unintended pregnancy soon after their marriage. She asserts that she – not him – is the one with a strong character ("his conscience and his guts"), and she mocks him for needing her approval so much that he once hit her because she wouldn't forgive him. Frank needs to believe that he is the stronger one in the relationship, and usually April finds it easier to let him think she too believes this. But this early fight shows that he knows that these kinds of thoughts could always be going through April's mind, no matter how she treats him in the moment. April also lashes out at Frank by saying he is not a man, something she clearly knows to be an insecurity of his.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ She'd decided in favor of that, all right. And why not? Wasn't it the first love of any kind she'd ever known? Even on the level of practical advantage it must have held an undeniable appeal: it freed her from the gritty round of disappointment she would otherwise have faced as an only mildly talented, mildly enthusiastic graduate of dramatic school; it let her languish attractively through a part-time office job ("just until my husband finds the kind of work he really wants to do") while saving her best energies for animated discussions of books and pictures and the shortcomings of other people's personalities, for trying new ways of fixing her hair and new kinds of inexpensive clothes ("Do you really like the sandals, or are they too Villager?") and for hours of unhurried dalliance deep in their double bed. But even in those days she'd held herself poised for immediate flight; she had always been ready to take off the minute she happened to feel like it ("Don't *talk* to me that way, Frank, or I'm *leaving*. I *mean* it") or the minute anything went wrong.

Related Characters: Frank Wheeler , April Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

The day after their fight coming home from *The Petrified Forest*, Frank is reflecting on his marriage. April had said the night before that he "had her in a trap," and now Frank reflects on how she had never seemed fully dedicated to their marriage. Instead, before he had "trapped her," she always seemed ready to leave him. For Frank, April's apparent readiness to leave him creates both an insecurity about himself and a criticism of her. He relies on her admiration for his own sense of self, so the threat of her leaving is a devastating one to him. He also believes, in keeping with stereotypes about men and women, that a man ought to be the one in a relationship to feel more independent from a woman. The fact that he depends on April more than she does on him makes him feel insufficient as a man. But he also turns this around on April. To his mind, the fact that she is not submissive to him and fully dedicated to their marriage, children, and home is a sign that she is insufficient as a woman. April's intellectual interests and opinions seem like another encroachment on Frank's masculine territory. In the early days of their marriage, Frank worried that April loved to spend her time thinking about art, culture, and self-presentation, but did not really love him. And, feeling emasculated by April's independence, Frank portrays her interest in matters of taste as signs that she is inadequate as a woman. April's taste, just like her emotional independence, makes Frank feel insecure. To cope with this insecurity, he belittles her interests as signs that April is cold, snobbish, and lacking in the womanly softness, tenderness, and agreeableness that he expects her to possess.

> And the fight went on all night. It caused them to hiss and grapple and knock over a chair, it spilled outside and downstairs and into the street ("Get *away* from me! Get *away* from me!")...All that saved him, all that enabled him now to crouch and lift a new stone from its socket and follow its rumbling fall with the steady and dignified tread of self-respect, was that the next day he had won. The next day, weeping in his arms, she had allowed herself to be dissuaded.
> "Oh, I know, I know," she had whispered against his shirt, "I know you're right. I'm sorry. I love you. We'll name it Frank and we'll send it to college and everything. I promise, promise."
> And it seemed to him now that no single moment of his life had ever contained a better proof of manhood than that, if any proof were needed: holding that tamed, submissive girl and saying, "Oh, my lovely; oh, my lovely," while she promised she would bear his child. Lurching and swaying under the weight of the stone in the sun, dropping it at last and wiping his sore hands, he picked up the shovel and went to work again, while the children's voices fluted and chirped around him, as insidiously torturing as the gnats.

Related Characters: April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler (speaker), Michael Wheeler, Jennifer Wheeler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

The day after the debut of *The Petrified Forest* is a Saturday. April and Frank are not speaking after their fight the night before, and Frank is working on the stone path he is building in the backyard. As he works, with his children playing nearby and watching him, he remembers the terrible fight he and April had over whether she would abort an unintended pregnancy soon after their marriage. Although Frank fought April with all his might, it was not because he wanted to have a child himself or had strong qualms about the morality of abortion. Indeed, to this day Frank is not particularly interested in his children, as demonstrated by the comparison of them to irritating gnats at the end of the quote. Instead, Frank felt hurt and emasculated that April had not included him in her deliberations about what to do about her pregnancy. He had resented her ability to think independently about her future, because he got so much of his own sense of self-worth from being married to her. He also sensed that by getting April to bear his child, he would be able to bind her to him and reduce her independence. Just as April had run out of the apartment and Frank had pursued her to the waterfront during their fight over her

pregnancy, April had run away from the car and stood on the highway in a similarly desperate attempt to get space from Frank the night before. But now, because they have children, Frank does not fear that April will leave him in the same way.

It is no coincidence that Frank remembers a moment in the past that reassured him of his masculinity as he works on a stone path in their lawn. This home improvement project requires hard labor and technical skill, which Frank feels demonstrates his masculinity. During the fight the night before, April had questioned his manhood. Now, working on the path, he reasserts his manhood by trying to show mastery of the kind of hands-on work his father always thought he was unskilled at when he was young.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

He found it hard to keep his voice from thickening into a sentimental husk as he began to read aloud, with their two heads pressed close to his ribs on either side and their thin legs lying straight out on the sofa cushions, warm against his own. They knew what forgiveness was; they were willing to take him for better or worse; they loved him. Why couldn't April realize how simple and necessary it was to love? Why did she have to complicate everything?

The only trouble was that the funnies seemed to go on forever…

"Daddy, we skipped a funny."

"No we didn't, sweetie. That's just an advertisement. You don't want to read that."

"Yes I do."

"I do too."

"But it isn't a *funny*. It's just made to look like one. It's an advertisement for some kind of toothpaste."

"Read us it anyway."

Related Characters: Michael Wheeler, Jennifer Wheeler, Frank Wheeler (speaker), April Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Two days after Frank and April's fight on the night of the performance of *The Petrified Forest*, April is still refusing to speak to Frank. The day before, while building his stone path, Frank had mistaken a root for Michael's foot and, fearing that Michael had carelessly put himself in danger, had spanked his son. Frank had been wrong, but had not admitted it or apologized to his son. Now, when Jennifer and Michael ask Frank to read the comics in the newspaper aloud to them, he feels grateful that his young children seem to have forgiven him for the incident and want to spend time with him. He then compares their forgiveness to their mother's continued anger, since Frank's tender feeling towards his children has little to do with them and more to do with April. His children's love is no substitute for his wife's, and he feels irritated by their childish inability to understand the difference between an advertisement and a comic (although this also becomes a commentary on the materialism and shallowness of American suburban life, in which "art" and consumerism are indistinguishable). While Jennifer and Michael love to be around their father, he is impatient to finish the task he agreed to and to do something more interesting.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

By the end of the first year the joke had worn thin, and the inability of others to see the humor of it had become depressing. "Oh, you mean your *father* worked there," they would say when he tried to explain it, and their eyes, as often as not, would then begin to film over with the look that people reserve for earnest, obedient, unadventurous young men. Before long (and particularly after the second year, with both his parents dead) he had stopped trying to explain that part of it, and begun to dwell instead on other comic aspects of the job: the absurd discrepancy between his own ideals and those of Knox Business Machines; the gulf between the amount of energy he was supposed to give the company and the amount he actually gave. "I mean 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."

Related Characters: Earl Wheeler, Frank Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

After April gets pregnant with Jennifer, Frank needs to get a high-paying job to support his family. He gets a job at Knox Business Machines, the company where his father Earl worked his entire life, without mentioning that his father worked there. For Earl, keeping a job at Knox and the dream of promotion had been immensely important. Frank sees himself as a much less conventional figure, who could not be satisfied with a corporate job. So, when he takes the job at Knox, he sees it as an ironic joke. He is snubbing his father by getting the job his father always wanted and not feeling

proud or gratified in that job. This is too subtle a joke for most people to understand, since it depends on an understanding of Frank's cruelly dismissive attitude towards his father and his father's values. Frank is thus forced to enjoy the part of the joke that is about his father on his own. Instead, he uses the job as fodder for humorous commentary on the boring corporations that dominate America in the 1950s. It does not occur to Frank that some small part of him has always wanted to get a job that would make his father proud.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ All this was pleasing, and so was the way she had shyly slipped into calling him "Frank," and so was the news that she did indeed have an apartment with another girl—a "perfectly adorable" apartment right here in the Village—but after a while he found he had to keep reminding himself to be pleased. The trouble, he guessed, was mainly that she talked too much. It was also that so much of her talk rang false, that so many of its possibilities for charm were blocked and buried under the stylized ceremony of its cuteness. Soon he was able to guess that most if not all of her inanity could be blamed on her roommate...The more she told him about this other girl...the more annoyingly clear it became that she and Norma enjoyed classic roles of mentor and novice in an all-girl orthodoxy of fun. There were signs of this tutelage in Maureen's too-heavy make-up and too-careful hairdo, as well as in her every studied mannerism and prattling phrase...and her endless supply of anecdotes involving sweet little Italian grocers and sweet little Chinese laundrymen and gruff but lovable cops on the beat, all of whom, in the telling, became the stock supporting actors in a confectionery Hollywood romance of bachelor-girls in Manhattan.

Related Characters: Norma, Maureen Grube, Frank Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

Frank, who is still fighting with April, has taken a secretary from his office named Maureen out to lunch, intending to seduce her. Everything is going according to plan, and Frank is already getting a boost to his confidence from Maureen's obvious attraction to him. But Frank is turned off by the sense that Maureen is trying too hard to fill the role of a typical young woman living in New York. Frank feels that Maureen has shaped her persona after a roommate, who, in turn, has shaped her own persona after the women portrayed in Hollywood movies about young women living in New York City. Although Frank is critical of April's independence of thought, seeing it as a mark that she is cold or unwomanly, it may be what really attracts him to her. Maureen, on the other hand, tries to conform as closely as possible to a model of femininity popular at the time, but ends up seeming irritatingly artificial to Frank.

❝ Beginning with a quick, audacious dismantling of the Knox Business Machines Corporation, which made her laugh, he moved out confidently onto broader fields of damnation until he had laid the punctured myth of Free Enterprise at her feet; then, just at the point where any further talk of economics might have threatened to bore her, he swept her away into cloudy realms of philosophy and brought her lightly back to earth with a wise-crack.
And how did she feel about the death of Dylan Thomas? And didn't she agree that this generation was the least vital and most terrified in modern times? He was at the top of his form. He was making use of material that had caused Milly Campbell to say "Oh that's so true, Frank!" and of older, richer stuff that had once helped to make him the most interesting person April Johnson had ever met. He even touched on his having been a longshoreman. Through it all, though, ran a bright and skillfully woven thread that was just for Maureen: a portrait of himself as decent but disillusioned young family man, sadly and bravely at war with his environment.

Related Characters: April Wheeler, Milly Campbell, Maureen Grube, Frank Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100-101

Explanation and Analysis

During his lunch with Maureen, Frank has listened to her talk about herself with growing annoyance and now launches into his own monologue. As much as he wants to sleep with Maureen, he may want even more to talk to her and be found interesting and sexy by her. When Frank was in college, his ability to talk engagingly about a variety of topics earned him the respect he had felt he was denied as an unathletic, sensitive boy. His ability to talk had also made April interested in him. Now, he wants to reassure himself that he is still an interesting, exceptional man capable of attracting a woman. Self-indulgently, Frank talks about topics that he assumes Maureen will find boring, just to see

if he can make her find them interesting through the force of his personality. Finally, he paints a picture of himself as not only original and interesting, but moral and conscientious. Maureen, who is also seemingly more interested in the impression she makes on Frank than she is in Frank himself, expresses her admiration just as he hopes she will.

Part 1, Chapter 7 Quotes

"In order to agree with that," she said, "I'd have to have a very strange and very low opinion of reality. Because you see I happen to think *this* is unrealistic. I think it's unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working like a dog year after year at a job he can't stand, coming home to a house he can't stand in a place he can't stand either, to a wife who's equally unable to stand the same things, living among a bunch of frightened little—my God, Frank, I don't have to tell you what's wrong with this environment—I'm practically quoting you. Just last night when the Campbells were here, remember what you said about the whole idea of suburbia being to keep reality at bay? You said everybody wanted to bring up their children in a bath of sentimentality. You said—"

"I know what I said. I didn't think you were listening, though. You looked sort of bored."

"I *was* bored. That's part of what I'm trying to say. I don't think I've ever been more bored and depressed and fed up in my life than I was last night. All that business about Helen Givings's son on top of everything else, and the way we all grabbed at it like dogs after meat; I remember looking at you and thinking 'God, if only he'd stop talking.' Because everything you said was based on this great premise of ours that we're somehow very special and superior to the whole thing, and I wanted to say 'But we're not! Look at us! We're just like the people you're talking about! We are the people you're talking about!' I sort of had—I don't know, contempt for you, because you couldn't see the terrific fallacy of the thing."

Related Characters: Frank Wheeler , April Wheeler (speaker), John Givings, Helen Givings, Milly Campbell, Shep Campbell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115-116

Explanation and Analysis

April has prepared an elaborate birthday dinner for Frank, apologized to him for holding a grudge after the play, and told him she has a plan for how they can change their life. She wants the family to move to Europe, where she will support them by working as a secretary while Frank takes time off from working to discover his true calling. Frank, instantly made uncomfortable by this idea, tries to laugh it off and tell April that it is unrealistic. April then turns Frank's own arguments—made during his many speeches to her, to the Campbells, and to others—to her own purposes. In effect, she is calling his bluff. If Frank doesn't agree to her plan, then he will show that he does not really believe his denunciations of the tedium of suburbia and corporate life, but only makes grand speeches to inflate his own importance.

Frank is caught off guard. He had made another similar speech earlier that day during his lunch with Maureen. But the only reason he had wanted to take Maureen out and seduce her in the first place was because he felt depressed that April no longer paid attention to his speeches and admired his thoughts. Now, as it turns out, she can quote all his points back to him. But this is not wholly reassuring. April was listening to Frank and believed everything he said, but she no longer admires him for expressing true thoughts. She wants him to take action. If he does not agree to make a change to their life, she is suggesting that this means she was right when she listened to him with contempt the night before. Although April is apologizing to Frank, she is also threatening him with her continued disillusionment.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

And Frank was modestly aware that something of the same kind of change was taking place in himself. He knew for one thing that he had developed a new way of talking, slower and more deliberate than usual, deeper in tone and more fluent: he almost never had to recourse to the stammering, apologetic little bridges...that normally laced his speech, nor did his head duck and weave in the familiar nervous effort to make himself clear. Catching sight of his walking reflection in the black picture window, he had to admit that his appearance was not yet as accomplished as hers...but sometimes late at night when his throat had gone sore and his eyes hot from talking, when he hunched his shoulders and set his jaw and pulled his necktie loose and let it hang like a rope, he could glare at the window and see the brave beginnings of a personage.

Related Characters: Frank Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133-134

Explanation and Analysis

Frank has agreed to April's plan to move to Europe, and the

Wheelers are in complete harmony. Every night they talk over their plans, and April listens to Frank make long, impassioned speeches. She looks at him with admiration and pleasure and listens to him talk for hours, and he basks in her approval. Frank is impressed by April's beauty and poise as she listens to him talk, and begins to see signs of his own transformation into the kind of exceptional man he has always pretended to be. Aside from April's approval, however, Frank's sense of his transformation has only to do with the way he speaks, carries himself, and looks. He is not thinking about what kind of career might interest him more than his current one does. But, with April's approving eyes on him, it doesn't even occur to Frank that there is more to being "a personage" than talking eloquently and without hesitation and looking as if he is too focused on his thoughts to pay attention to how he looks.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ And she had managed to give every room of it the spare, stripped-down, intellectual look that April Wheeler called "interesting." Well, almost every room. Feeling fond and tolerant as he rolled his shoe rag into a waxy cylinder, Shep Campbell had to admit that this particular room, this bedroom, was not a very sophisticated place. Its narrow walls, papered in a big floral design of pink and lavender, held careful bracket shelves that in turn held rows of little winking frail things made of glass; its windows served less as windows than as settings for puffed effusions of dimity curtains, and the matching dimity skirts of its bed and dressing table fell in overabundant pleats and billows to the carpet. It was a room that might have been dreamed by a little girl alone with her dolls and obsessed with the notion of making things nice for them among broken orange crates and scraps of cloth in a secret shady corner of the back yard…and whose quick, frightened eyes, as she worked, would look very much like the eyes that now searched this mirror for signs of encroaching middle age.

Related Characters: April Wheeler, Milly Campbell, Shep Campbell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Shep is reflecting on Milly's adjustment to life in the East. When he married her, he was in "his tough guy phase," a period during which he thought of the cultured New York world he was born into as effeminate. He had pursued a blue-collar lifestyle and married Milly, who had grown up in poverty. Later, when Shep decided that he wanted to return to the world he was brought up in, Milly had worked hard to adjust to the new cultural sphere Shep introduced her to. Because Shep had wanted to fit in with cultured people who cared about the arts and ideas, Milly had made the décor in their home conform to the anti-conformist décor preferred by intellectuals and artists (like April). But Milly's true taste is still revealed in their bedroom, a room which is not open to their sophisticated friends' scrutiny. Milly does not actually like things to look utilitarian and stripped down: this was likely the look of her impoverished childhood home. Instead, she likes her rooms to express beauty and freedom from want. Although she has adjusted to what her husband wants, Milly has created a space in her home that fits her needs too.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ And she'd never been able to explain or even to understand that what she loved was not the job—it could have been any job—or even the independence it gave her (though of course that was important for a woman constantly veering toward the brink of divorce). Deep down, what she'd loved and needed was work itself. "Hard work," her father had always said, "is the best medicine yet devised for all the ills of man—*and* of woman," and she'd always believed it… [Work] was the substance of her love; it was all that fortified her against the pressures of marriage and parenthood. Without it, as she often said, she would have gone out of her mind.

Related Characters: Howard Givings, Helen Givings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Helen has always needed long hours of work to distract her from the pressures of marriage, motherhood and her own anxious temperament. Although her husband Howard has tried to convince her to quit working because they have enough money, she refuses to give up this sphere of life in which she has real autonomy from her family responsibilities. Unhappy in her marriage and constantly struggling with her son's mental illness, work allows Helen an escape. It is also, perhaps, the way she handles her own mental illness. It seems possible that Helen's father, like her son, struggled with anxiety, depression or mania, and that his prescription of hard work might have been meant to cure mental illnesses as much as physical ones.

Part 2, Chapter 4 Quotes

The trouble, he guessed, was that all the way home this evening he had imagined her saying: "And it probably *is* the best sales promotion piece they've ever seen—what's so funny about that?"
And himself saying: "No, but you're missing the point—a thing like this just proves what a bunch of idiots they are."
And her: "I don't think it proves anything of the sort. Why do you always undervalue yourself? I think it proves you're the kind of person who can excel at anything when you want to, or when you have to." And him: "Well, I don't know; maybe. It's just that I don't *want* to excel at crap like that."
And her: "Of course you don't, and that's why we're leaving. But in the meantime, is there anything so terrible about accepting their recognition? Maybe you don't want it or need it, but that doesn't make it contemptible, does it? I mean I think you ought to feel good about it, Frank. Really."
But she hadn't said anything even faintly like that; she hadn't even looked as if thoughts like that could enter her head. She was sitting here cutting and chewing in perfect composure, with her mind already far away on other things.

Related Characters: Bart Pollock, April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Frank has been pulled aside by an executive at Knox and complimented for his work on a pamphlet. He has imagined all day the way that April will react to the news, hoping that she will see the praise as a sign of his intelligence and value. This expectation is backed up by his expectations that a wife should always be supportive and encouraging, especially of her husband's professional successes. During the weeks since they have agreed to move to Europe, April has greeted everything Frank says as proof of his exceptional mind. Meanwhile, Frank feeds off of April's admiration. Her approval is essential to his self-esteem, but he also easily gets angry with her when she withholds approval. And instead of further complimenting Frank, April clearly sees that any recognition Frank receives from his current employer could threaten his desire to move their family to Europe as planned.

April has claimed that she wants to move to Europe so that Frank can find happiness and fulfillment. But her cold reception of Frank's good news from work reveals that she will only be happy to see him happy and fulfilled if the profession he chooses is something she considers interesting and exceptional.

Part 2, Chapter 5 Quotes

"You hear wrong. Taught it for a while, that's all. Anyway, it's all gone now. You know what electrical shock treatments are? Because you see, the past couple months I've had thirty-five—or no, wait—thirty-seven...The idea is to jolt all the emotional problems out of your mind, you see, but in my case they had a different effect. Jolted out all the God damned mathematics. Whole subject's a total blank."
"How awful," April said.
"'*How awful.*'" John Givings mimicked her in a mincing, effeminate voice and then turned on her with a challenging smirk. "Why?" he demanded. "Because mathematics is so 'interesting'?"
"No," she said. "Because the shocks must be awful and because it's awful for anybody to forget something they want to remember. As a matter of fact I think mathematics must be very dull."
He stared at her for a long time, and nodded with approval. "I like your girl, Wheeler," he announced at last. "I get the feeling she's female. You know what the difference between female and feminine is? Huh? Well, here's a hint: a feminine woman never laughs out loud and always shaves her armpits. Old Helen in there is feminine as hell. I've only met about half a dozen females in my life, and I think you got one of them here. Course, come to think of it, that figures. I get the feeling you're male. There aren't too many males around, either."

Related Characters: April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler , John Givings (speaker), Helen Givings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200-201

Explanation and Analysis

During John's first visit to the Wheelers, they take a walk outside, leaving Helen and Howard inside. John has been enthusiastic about the Wheelers' plan to move to Europe, but something about his excitement has made Frank uncomfortable. Frank changes the topic by asking John about his interest in mathematics, but John tells him that shock treatments have erased all memory of mathematics. He tells the Wheelers this with a kind of bitterness, as if he senses that Frank is trying to find a more neutral subject to discuss and John has a distaste for any avoidance of the truth. John does not seem insane, only unhappy and angry, yet he has been subjected to repeated painful treatments that have changed the workings of his mind. In John's

experience of his conformist society, women are even more shy to talk about ugly experiences like his. For that reason, he is surprised and pleased to hear April's frank response to his problem. He is especially surprised to be introduced to a woman who speaks so forthrightly by his mother, who is always trying to put a cheery face on unhappy facts. April's straightforward and honest reaction seems to be her actual opinion, not the opinion she thinks a woman ought to have. Having heard Frank sound off about how they plan to move to Europe to escape the "emptiness" of American society, and having heard April's straightforward response to his description of electric shock treatments, John concludes that the Wheelers are non-conformists who are willing to face down society's disapproval and live as they like.

Part 2, Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ He leaned back, smiling and cannily narrowing his eyes. "Wait a minute. Let me see how good a judge of character I am. I bet I know what happened. This is just a guess, now." He winked. "An educated guess. I bet you went ahead and let your dad think his name had helped you get the job, just to please him. Am I right?"

And the disturbing fact of the matter was that he was. On an autumn day of that year…Frank had taken his wife to visit his parents; and all the way out to Harrisburg he'd planned to be elaborately, sophisticatedly offhand in the announcing of his double piece of news, the baby and the job. "Oh, and by the way, I've got a steadier kind of job now, too," he had planned to say, "kind of a stupid job, nothing I'm interested in, but the money's nice." And then he would let the old man have it. But when the moment came…with his father doing his best to be benign, his mother doing her best to be tearfully pleased about the baby and April doing her best to be sweetly and shyly proud—when all the lying tenderness of that moment came it had robbed him of his nerve, and he'd blurted it out—a job in the Home Office!—like a little boy come home with a good report card.

Related Characters: Bart Pollock (speaker), Earl Wheeler, April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212-213

Explanation and Analysis

Bart Pollock, an executive at Knox, has taken Frank out to lunch. Frank tells Pollock that his father worked at Knox, but that he never mentioned it when he interviewed for the position there. Bart Pollock approves of this, because he assumes that Frank didn't mention his father to avoid garnering an unfair advantage over other candidates. Then Pollock guesses that Frank lied and told his father that his name *had* helped him get the job. This is true, but not for the reasons Pollock thinks. Instead, Frank had meant to use the job at Knox as a final sign of how little he cared about Eal and his opinion. He had meant to speak dismissively of the career that he had gotten so easily and that his father had always wanted. This seemed to him like an act that would finally prove that he no longer needed his father's approval. But instead he was overcome with a sentimental desire to make his father proud. Frank doesn't understand why he lost his nerve to mock his father in that moment. It did not occur to him that, deep down, he doesn't really look down on his job at Knox, but is only pretending to feel superior to it to impress April.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ When he lit a cigarette in the dark he was careful to arrange his features in a virile frown before striking and cupping the flame (he knew, from having practiced this at the mirror of a blacked-out bathroom years ago, that it made a swift, intensely dramatic portrait), and he paid scrupulous attention to endless details: keeping his voice low and resonant, keeping his hair brushed and his bitten fingernails out of sight; being always the first one athletically up and out of bed in the morning, so that she might never see his face lying swollen and helpless in sleep.

Sometimes after a particularly conscious display of this kind, as when he found he had made all his molars ache by holding them clamped too long for an effect of grim-jawed determination by candlelight, he would feel a certain distaste with himself for having to resort to such methods and, very obscurely, with her as well, for being so easily swayed by them. What kind of kid stuff was this? But these attacks of conscience were quickly allayed: all was fair in love and war; and besides, wasn't she all too capable of playing the same game? Hadn't she pulled out everything in her own bag of tricks last month, to seduce him into the Europe plan?

Related Characters: Frank Wheeler , April Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 231-232

Explanation and Analysis

April has gotten pregnant and wants to give herself an abortion. If she has another baby, she will not be able to carry through with her plan to work in Europe, because she

will be expected to take care of the child. However, Frank has realized that he doesn't really want to go to Europe, so he is determined to convince April not to abort the pregnancy. To do so, he has argued that he does not want to allow her to mutilate herself and is trying to show her what a strong, dominant man he is. He believes that by projecting confidence in his ability to live more happily where they are now, he will undermine her argument that he can only fulfill his potential if they move to Europe.

April acted out the role of the supportive wife to convince him to move to Europe, and now Frank acts out the role of the decisive, no-nonsense husband whose decisions should be respected. Both characters use these stereotypical roles to prevent the other from accusing them of being unreasonable—yet the details of the "performance" Frank thinks of here show just how absurd and artificial this act is.

"I think we *can* assume, though," he said, "just on the basis of common sense, that if most little girls do have this thing about wanting to be boys, they probably get over it in time by observing and admiring and wanting to emulate their mothers—I mean *you* know, attract a man, establish a home, have children and so on. And in your case, you see, that whole side of life, that whole dimension of experience was denied you from the start..."

She got up and walked away to stand near the bookcase, with her back to him, and he was reminded of the way he had first seen her, long ago...a tall, proud, exceptionally first-rate girl.

"How do you suppose we'd go about finding one?" she asked. "A psychiatrist, I mean. Aren't a lot of them supposed to be quacks? Well, but still, I guess that isn't really much of a problem, is it."

He held his breath.

"Okay," she said. Her eyes were bright with tears as she turned around. "I guess you're right. I guess there isn't much more to say, then, is there?"

Related Characters: Frank Wheeler , April Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

Frank has tried his final tactic for convincing April not to abort her pregnancy: suggesting that she is mentally ill for wanting an abortion. Even though Frank himself doesn't want another child (except as an excuse to avoid moving to Europe), he describes April's reluctance to have another child as a sign that April has been scarred by childhood trauma and is mentally ill. In a society that puts pressure on women to conform to the role of childbearing, housekeeping wives, Frank is able to force April to agree to have a baby in order to avoid being labeled mentally ill. April seems to realize that Frank is playing a trump card – she cannot argue that having an abortion is a normal desire, since society looks on it as abnormal. But, when she says that it doesn't matter whether she gets a good or a bad psychiatrist, April suggests that she knows she is being manipulated and doesn't believe that even Frank truly thinks she is mentally ill. She realizes that the question of her mental health is secondary to Frank's desire to control her and to keep her from demanding a life that would make her happier. In this moment, then, April seems to give up in her struggle with Frank, and this sad surrender is a crucial step on her path towards self-destruction.

Part 3, Chapter 4 Quotes

And that, of course, was the other really important difference: it didn't upset him. It annoyed him slightly, but it *didn't* upset him. Why should it? It was her problem. What boundless reaches of good health, what a wealth of peace there was in this new-found ability to sort out and identify the facts of their separate personalities—this is my problem, that's your problem. The pressures of the past few months had brought them each through a kind of crisis; he could see that now. This was their time of convalescence, during which a certain remoteness from each other's concerns was certainly natural enough, and probably a good sign. He knew, sympathetically, that in her case the adjustment must be especially hard...Next week, or as soon as possible, he would take whatever steps were necessary in lining up a reputable analyst; and he could already foresee his preliminary discussions with the man, whom he pictured as owlish and slow-spoken, possibly Viennese ("I think your own evaluation of the difficulty is essentially correct, Mr. Wheeler. We can't as yet predict how extensive a course of therapy will be indicated, but I can assure you of this: with your continued cooperation and understanding, there is every reason to hope for rapid . . .").

Related Characters: April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

Since having sex with Shep, April has stopped sleeping in bed with Frank. Frank reflects on how he would usually be

alarmed and upset by this, but now feels that he has gotten a new perspective on himself and his marriage. Frank congratulates himself on no longer needing April's approval to approve of himself. Frank has shifted his sense of himself since getting noticed at work by Bart Pollock and having his affair with Maureen.

Although Frank initially saw his theory that April's childhood made her mentally ill as nothing more than a strategy to ensure they wouldn't have to move to Europe, he now congratulates himself for being the strong, nurturing husband who recognizes what medical care his wife needs. He pictures his conversation with a distinguished male doctor about April's case and gives no thought at all to if this treatment will make April happier (and assumes that the doctor will agree with Frank's diagnosis, of course). He thinks of April as understandably struggling more because she is pregnant and doesn't want to be, but he thinks of this as "her problem." The idea that April might find another way to get out of his control – by sleeping with Shep Campbell, for instance – couldn't be farther from Frank's mind.

> And almost, if not quite, before he knew what his voice was up to, he was telling her about Maureen Grube. He did it with automatic artfulness, identifying her only as "a girl in New York, a girl I hardly even know," rather than as a typist at the office, careful to stress that there had been no emotional involvement on his part while managing to imply that her need for him had been deep and ungovernable. His voice, soft and strong with an occasional husky falter or hesitation that only enhanced its rhythm, combined the power of confession with the narrative grace of romantic storytelling.
> "And I think the main thing was simply a case of feeling that my—well, that my masculinity'd been threatened somehow by all that abortion business; wanting to prove something; I don't know. Anyway, I broke it off last week; the whole stupid business. It's over now; really over. If I weren't sure of that I guess I could never've brought myself to tell you about it."
> For half a minute, the only sound in the room was the music on the radio.
> "Why did you?" she asked. He shook his head, still looking out the window. "Baby, I don't know. I've tried to explain it to you; I'm still trying to explain it to myself. That's what I meant about it's being a neurotic, irrational kind of thing. I—"
> "No," she said. "I don't mean why did you have the girl; I mean why did you tell me about it? What's the point? Is it supposed to make me jealous, or something? Is it supposed to make me fall in love with you, or back into bed with you, or what? I mean what am I supposed to say?"
> He looked at her, feeling his face blush and twitch into an embarrassed simper that he tried, unsuccessfully, to make over into the psychiatric smile. "Why don't you say what you feel?"
> She seemed to think this over for a few seconds, and then she shrugged. "I have. I don't feel anything."

Related Characters: Frank Wheeler , April Wheeler (speaker), Maureen Grube

Related Themes:

Page Number: 292-293

Explanation and Analysis

Frank has tried to talk to April about how she is no longer sleeping in bed with him. April says she doesn't want to talk, but Frank presses her to express herself, talking down to her with a tone of a doctor lecturing a patient who won't follow through with treatment. Forced to talk, April says that she doesn't love Frank. Frank begins to intellectualize this, expressing sympathy for what a terrible summer April has had. Then, when he doesn't get the response he wants, he begins to confess, telling her a version of the story of his affair with Maureen. Frank tells the story with flair, making himself out to be exactly the kind of man he wishes he were

and the kind of man he thinks April must respect. Although he portrays the affair as a neurotic thing he did because April threatened his masculinity by wanting to have an abortion, it was actually that April threatened his confidence by not being pleased with his new promotion and happy to stay in the suburbs and have his babies. His intention is exactly what April thinks it is: to make her feel jealous and feel like she needs him, so that she will begin to treat him with admiration again. But at this moment April shows that she has passed the point where she can be manipulated by Frank into feeling anything, or even into pretending to feel anything.

Part 3, Chapter 5 Quotes

"Big man you got here, April," he said, winking at her as he fitted the workman's cap on his head. "Big family man, solid citizen. I feel sorry for you. Still, maybe you deserve each other. Matter of fact, the way you look right now, I'm beginning to feel sorry for him, too. I mean come to think of it, you must give him a pretty bad time, if making babies is the only way he can prove he's got a pair of balls."
"All right, John," Howard was murmuring. "Let's get on out to the car now."
"April," Mrs. Givings whispered. "I can't tell you how sorry I—"
"Right," John said, moving away with his father. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. Okay Ma? Have I said 'Sorry' enough times? I *am* sorry, too. Damn; I bet I'm just about the sorriest bastard I know. Course, get right down to it, I don't have a whole hell of a lot to be glad about, do I?"
And at least, Mrs. Givings thought, if nothing else could be salvaged from this horrible day, at least he was allowing Howard to lead him away quietly. All she had to do now was to follow them, to find some way of getting across this floor and out of this house, and then it would all be over.
But John wasn't finished yet. "Hey, I'm glad of one thing, though," he said, stopping near the door and turning back, beginning to laugh again, and Mrs. Givings thought she would die as he extended a long yellow-stained index finger and pointed it at the slight mound of April's pregnancy. "You know what I'm glad of? I'm glad I'm not gonna be that kid."

Related Characters: Howard Givings, Helen Givings, John Givings (speaker), Frank Wheeler , April Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 302-303

Explanation and Analysis

On the way to a visit with the Wheelers, Helen has told John that the Wheelers will not be moving to Europe. John is disappointed, seeing this as a cowardly failure to follow through with their plan to escape the monotony of contemporary America. Confined to a mental institution without a trial, John had wanted to live vicariously through the Wheelers' plan to get away. He doesn't buy Frank's explanation that they cannot go because of April's pregnancy, and then begins to voice his devastatingly accurate perception of the Wheelers' marriage. He recognizes that Frank sees April's pregnancy as an excuse not to move to Europe and that April's lack of real respect for Frank makes Frank doubt himself as a man. His indictment of their marriage is spot-on, and his final statement about how unhappy they will make their children also resonates. Although what John says is cruel and rude, it is too true to seem like the rant of an insane person. Instead, it is how he is expressing his disappointment that yet another person he knows is conforming to society's expectations.

Part 3, Chapter 6 Quotes

There followed a night of vivid and horrible dreams, while he sprawled sweating on the bed in his clothes. Sometimes, either waking or dreaming that he was awake, he thought he heard April moving around the house; then once, toward morning, he could have sworn he opened his eyes and found her sitting close beside him on the edge of the bed. Was it a dream, or not?
"Oh, baby," he whispered through cracked and swollen lips. "Oh, my baby, don't go away." He reached for her hand and held it. "Oh, please stay."
"Sh-sh-sh. It's all right," she said, and squeezed his fingers. "It's all right, Frank. Go to sleep." The sound of her voice and the cool feel of her hand conveyed such a miracle of peace that he didn't care if it was a dream; it was enough to let him sink back into a sleep that was mercifully dreamless.

Related Characters: April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 310-311

Explanation and Analysis

After the Givings depart, the Wheelers have a terrible fight. Frank says to April that he wishes she had had the abortion, and April continues to tell Frank that she doesn't love him. Frank feels something is different about this fight, but he doesn't know what. He cannot act out the part of someone

tough who doesn't care about these problems; instead, he becomes as weak as a sick child. This moment when Frank is unsure if he is dreaming, or if April has really come to his bed and comforted him, recalls a moment in the novel's third chapter, also after Frank and April had a fight, when he dreams that his parents are watching over him with tenderness. Perhaps because of what John Givings said about the miserable life awaiting Frank's unborn child, Frank seems to return in sleep to the desire he has had since his childhood to be doted on, approved of, and wanted. At this moment, April is both wife and mother to him, and he seems like a little boy who wants to be treated with tenderness and love.

Part 3, Chapter 7 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Steve Kovick, Shep Campbell, Frank Wheeler , April Wheeler

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 320-321

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after a blowout fight, during which Frank tells April he wishes she had had an abortion, April takes stock of her life (as the novel finally switches to her perspective as well). She thinks that her mistake was to make compromises and tell lies to make her marriage work. She feels that instead she should have preserved her own perspective and tried to build the life that she really wanted. She feels that she should have never allowed Frank to draw her so deeply in, and that Frank's need for her to boost his confidence has sapped her of her own identity. She feels that who she is has been taken over by the need to perform the identity of the person who supports and praises Frank. Even if she tries to escape this identity by refusing to give him her support or by having sex with another man, she doesn't come closer to living a life that feels authentic.

❝ He drew out a long brown bottle with the picture of a horse and the words "White Horse" on its label. Something very small was attached to its neck by a ribbon, but he concealed it from view until he opened his penknife and cut it free. Then, holding it by the ribbon, he laid it delicately in her hand—a tiny, perfect white horse.
"There you are, my darling," he said. "And you can keep it forever."
The fire was out. She prodded the blackened lumps of paper with a stick to make sure they had burned; there was nothing but ashes. The children's voices faintly followed her as she carried the wastebasket back across the lawn; only by going inside and closing the door was she able to shut them out. She turned off the radio too, and the house became extraordinarily quiet.

Related Characters: April Wheeler

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 326

Explanation and Analysis

April is outside of the house burning the letters she wrote to Frank while she was up all night after their fight. She has a reverie about seeing her father when she was twelve or thirteen. The novel mentions the Don Winslow radio show, which suggests that April's father's visit occurred in 1938, when that show was on the air. With this detail, and the fact that April's father is driving up to Boston, the novel hints that this visit may have been the last time April saw her father before he killed himself in Boston in 1938.

April is preparing to try to give herself an abortion, even though the time when she believes it is safe to do this has passed. She prepares for the abortion with the full knowledge that she may die in the process, never seeing her children again. And at this moment she does not think about her own children, who have been at the Campbells' house for the last few days, at all. Instead, she thinks about her own father and the last time she saw him before he killed himself. Jennifer and Michael have a far less important place in April's thoughts than her long-dead father does. Even though children's voices can be heard as the fire burns,

April's attention is on the memory in her head. When that memory ends, she goes inside to block the children's voices out.

Part 3, Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ A man running down these streets in desperate grief was indecently out of place. Except for the whisk of his shoes on the asphalt and the rush of his own breath, it was so quiet that he could hear the sounds of television in the dozing rooms behind the leaves—a blurred comedian's shout followed by dim, spastic waves of laughter and applause, and then the striking-up of a band. Even when he veered from the pavement, cut across someone's back yard and plunged into the down-sloping woods, intent on a madman's shortcut to Revolutionary Road, even then there was no escape: the house lights beamed and stumbled happily along with him among the twigs that whipped his face, and once when he lost his footing and fell scrabbling down a rocky ravine, he came up with a child's enameled tin beach bucket in his hand.

As he clambered out onto asphalt again at the base of the Hill he allowed his dizzy, jogging mind to indulge in a cruel delusion: it had all been a nightmare; he would round this next bend and see the lights blazing in his own house; he would run inside and find her at the ironing board, or curled up on the sofa with a magazine ("What's the *matter*, Frank? Your *pants* are all muddy! Of *course* I'm all right. . .").

But then he saw the house—really saw it—long and milk-white in the moonlight, with black windows, the only darkened house on the road.

Related Characters: April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 340

Explanation and Analysis

On the night of April's death, Shep has brought Frank home to his house. But when Shep falls asleep, Frank leaves the Campbells' house and runs to his house. At this moment, the truth of the things Frank says about suburban conformity have never been truer. When talking to the Campbells in Part 1, Chapter 4, Frank said that the community where they live is "a whole bunch of cute little winding roads and cute little houses painted white and pink and baby blue" and that "if old reality ever does pop out and say Boo we'll all get busy and pretend it never happened." Frank denounced the suburbs as a place where people hide from harsh reality in a fantasy about perfect, tranquil domesticity. Now, as he finds himself facing his wife's death, he cannot help but imagine that something so terrible is impossible in this suburban world, and that April will be waiting at home to reassure him. When he pictures her reassuring him, it is by paying attention to superficial details – his muddy pants – not his grief and terror. Although he has always denounced the suburban refusal to acknowledge unhappiness and grief, he deals with his own grief by pretending that it will be trumped by the cheerful, domestic traditions of the suburbs.

Part 3, Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ And the funny part, he suddenly realized, the funny part was that he meant it. Looking at her now in the lamplight, this small, rumpled, foolish woman, he knew he had told the truth. Because God damn it, she was alive, wasn't she? If he walked over to her chair right now and touched the back of her neck, she would close her eyes and smile, wouldn't she? Damn right, she would...Then she would go to bed, and in the morning she'd get up and come humping downstairs again in her torn dressing gown with its smell of sleep and orange juice and cough syrup and stale deodorants, and go on living.

Related Characters: April Wheeler, Milly Campbell, Shep Campbell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 350

Explanation and Analysis

Shep has been listening with frustration to Milly describe the day of April's death to the Braces, a couple who have just moved into the Wheelers' old home. But when Milly says that the experience has brought her and Shep closer together, Shep agrees. He feels grateful for his marriage, even though there is little romance or attraction there. Milly is reliable and supportive, even if she is not an original thinker, beautiful, or cultivated. Milly is glad to be a housewife living in an affluent suburb, and even though Shep dreams of a more cultured existence, in light of April's death he recognizes that to have a wife who is happy in the role of his wife is perhaps as good an outcome as anyone can hope for.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

The novel begins in the spring of 1955 in western Connecticut, where a newly established amateur theater company called the "Laurel Players" finishes its dress rehearsal of its first play *The Petrified Forest*. The director tells the anxious cast that they have finally mastered the play, and they are relieved. The Laurel Players have taken the play very seriously, fearing they would make fools of themselves, and they have put a lot of effort and money into the production which they have spent the winter rehearsing. But up until this point it seemed that the play would be a failure.

The novel begins by describing an anxious social environment. The actors in the Laurel Players are clearly affluent adults who can spare time and energy for purely recreational activities like putting on a play. On top of that, they are not acting purely for enjoyment, but with a strong desire to succeed. The play is meant to prove something about their own talents to themselves or those around them.

The next night, an audience of young, healthy and well-off suburbanites enters the high school ready to enjoy a night of theater. They feel the establishment of a good community theater is an important event for their area. At first, the play seems to the audience to be a success, although the cast sees that things are off to a bad start. Especially its female lead, an elegant twenty-nine-year-old blonde named April Wheeler, performs splendidly. Her husband Franklin Wheeler watches anxiously from the back row. The leading man has the flu, however, and the director plays his part badly, throwing all the other actors off.

The audience takes the play just as seriously as the actors do. They feel that, if the new community theater is successful, this will reflect well on the place where they live and, indirectly, on themselves. No one is as nervous, however, as Frank, who wants his wife's performance to reflect his own sophistication. Both the quality of the acting and the reaction of the audience feel acutely personal to Frank, even though he himself is not involved.

As April realizes that the play is falling apart, her performance also falters. Another distractingly bad performance is put in by Shep Campbell, who all the Laurel Players had only allowed to be a part of the production because he and his wife Milly were enthusiastic participants. During the curtain call, April looks tense and unhappy. As the uncomfortable audience members file out of the auditorium, the real-estate broker Mrs. Helen Givings can be heard repeating "*very* nice" over and over.

While the performers and audience seem to realize that the play was a failure, Helen Givings responds by trying to put on a bright face and praise the performance. We will see that this refusal to acknowledge unpleasant truths is characteristic of Helen, but also of this entire society, which sees unhappiness or misfortune as something abnormal and shameful.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

After the play, Frank makes his way towards April's dressing room, wondering what he should say to his wife. He is also twenty-nine, neatly dressed, and with an expressive face. All day long at his boring job in New York City, Frank had pictured himself soothing his wife's nerves and congratulating her on her success, and he is unprepared to deal with what happened. The performance was like watching the girl he fell in love with turn into the unhappy, tense, reproachful woman she has become.

Frank's investment in his wife's success in the play is about his own self-image. Her performance is a momentous occasion in his life, but not because he cares so much about her—instead, he had hoped that she would both succeed (making him slook good in the process) and need his reassurance to feel good about herself. With his fantasy destroyed, Frank must now deal with who his wife really is.

Backstage the Laurel Players are trying to laugh off their failure. Milly Campbell calls to Frank that she and Shep will see him and April later for a drink, and Frank agrees. He goes into April's dressing room and bends to kiss her, planning to say that she was wonderful, but she recoils, and he says, "I guess it wasn't exactly a triumph" instead. Stiffly, she agrees, then asks him to tell Milly and Shep that they can't go for a drink because they need to get home to their babysitter. Frank says he already told the Campbells they would go. April says she is not going and will go home without him. Apologizing, Frank goes back out and tells the Campbells the lie about the babysitter. Milly asks if April is very upset about the performance, but he says she is fine. Milly and Shep can tell he is lying, and they are hurt.

While most of the Laurel Players decide not to take the play's failure too seriously, for Frank and April this is impossible. April is determined not to admit how upset she is, conforming to the general practice of pretending everything is fine when she insists that Frank lie to the Campbells about the babysitter. She is also unwilling to pretend she hadn't taken the play seriously and doesn't feel personally wounded by its failure. For Frank, April's unwillingness to confide in him is a new hurt on top of his disappointment in the play.

Frank and April leave the backstage and walk silently through the high school towards the parking lot. Frank remembers his own high school experience, especially a time when he planned to run away and ride freight trains across the country. He had planned to go alone, but then impulsively asked a boy to come with him. The boy had belittled his plan and said he was a jerk. Frank begins to also think about the suffering in April's childhood, although he usually finds it difficult to sympathize with her because she talks about her childhood unsentimentally. He remembers a story she told him about a time when she suddenly got her period in school and had to run to the bathroom with a red stain on her white skirt, dripping blood on the floor.

As Frank and April walk through the high school, Frank thinks about humiliating experiences each of them had as adolescents. Frank's experience involved trying to do something adventurous and being mocked as insufficiently tough to pull it off. This memory relates to his preoccupation with not being tough and independent as he believes a man should be. April's experience was an instance in which she had been unable to control and hide her body. It is about having her status as a woman undermine and humiliate her.

April and Frank get into their car, and April sits far from him. Frank begins to give his opinion of the play, but April asks if they can drive in silence, and he agrees. To put the play's failure in perspective, Frank returns in his mind to his early twenties, when he was out of the army and studying at Columbia College, where everyone thought he would have a brilliant career doing something creative. He shared an apartment on Bethune Street with two other men who often brought women there. As college ended, Frank felt at a loss for what he would do, and it bothered him that he had never dated a "first-rate girl." Then he had met April at a party. After a week they slept together, and she said he was the most interesting person she had ever met.

Trying to recover from the blow to his self-esteem that April's failure dealt him, Frank thinks back on the time in his life when he gained self-confidence. Unlike when he was a teen, when people doubted his abilities, by the time he was a young man Frank inspired confidence and admiration in others. But what really helped him to believe in himself was seducing a "first-rate" woman. To Frank, "first-rate" is a combination of physical beauty, elegance, and good taste. It is because he thinks April has this quality that her approval of him means so much.

Frank begins to talk again, saying that it's bad enough that they must live among boring suburbanites; they don't also need to get hurt by them. April asks him to stop talking again. Frank pulls the car off the highway and tries to embrace her, but she asks to be left alone. Frank gets angry at April, calling her melodramatic, and she gets out of the car and runs to the roadside. He is scared for a moment that she means to kill herself and demands that she get back in the car. They begin to fight, insulting one another. April recalls a time when Frank hit her, and says that he isn't a man. Frank punches the roof of the car hard. They begin to drive home.

April wants to be alone with her thoughts, but Frank cannot bear this separation between them. Frank suggests that April should be above caring about the play's failure, because she ought to feel superior to the people around them and not care what they think—even though he clearly cares about the play as well. To get back at Frank for refusing to give her space, April attacks him at his most vulnerable point: his belief in his own masculinity. In anger and to prove himself, Frank acts violently, continuing the unhealthy cycle that is becoming apparent in their marriage.

Frank and April drive down Revolutionary Road, the same road they traveled two years earlier with Helen Givings, when she showed them their house. Helen had been impressed by them and had shown them a home she thought was more tasteful than the other, newer developments like the Revolutionary Hill Estates. The house had given Frank and April a sense that they might sort out their problems if only they lived in a clean house like this. They planned to arrange the furniture to make the cookie-cutter house look stylish. Arriving home now, the Wheelers see that the house did not live up to its promise: it doesn't look like a home.

When Frank and April moved to the suburbs, they thought that they would be able to infuse their home with their own characters, to keep it from looking too much like all the other homes around them and make it exceptional—like they believed themselves to be. In doing this, they thought they might be able to come closer together as a couple. In the wake of the show's failure, their inability to live up to their ideas of themselves hits them once again.

After driving the babysitter home, Frank returns to the house and enters the bedroom. He sits on his and April's bed and tells her he is sorry. He reflects that she cannot run away now, and that although it will take time, they will get through this fight like they have gotten through others. Then he realizes the bed is empty. He runs through the house until he finds April on the living room sofa. She asks him to go away. Frank apologizes to her, but she only asks him to leave her alone.

Unlike April, Frank believes that their problems can be fixed by apologizing and moving forward. For him, having April accept his apology would remedy the entire problem. But April has feelings that have nothing to do with Frank. She is not in bed waiting for him, but seeking solitude and personal space.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3

The next morning is Saturday, and Frank wakes up hungover to the sound of April mowing the lawn, something he promised to do the previous weekend. He had stayed up drinking all night after April went to sleep. As he washes up, Frank looks at the hand he injured punching the car roof, which reminds him of his father Earl's hands, and then of the fact that his dream the night before had been about his parents tenderly watching over him as he slept.

Frank deals with the upsetting fight by drinking and avoiding his responsibilities. April deals with it by taking on Frank's responsibilities. Her mowing of the lawn seems to be another way of suggesting that he is not fulfilling his role as the man in the house. Meanwhile, Frank's dream suggests his desire for more tenderness and nurturing—the opposite of the image he wants to project of masculinity and self-sufficiency.

Frank's parents had already raised two other sons and were tired and middle-aged by the time of his birth. Now they have both been dead several years, and he can hardly remember their faces. He does, however, remember the strength of his father's hands and the sense that he could master any tool. Earl Wheeler had disapproved of Frank's clumsiness, and later their relationship had soured. Frank had looked down on his father's work as a salesman, his hunting, and his carpentry. No matter how much Frank rebelled, though, he always marveled at his father's hands.

Frank's relationship with his father as a child and young man continues to influence how he thinks about himself even after his father is dead and gone. Frank had known that his father felt disappointment in his son's inability to master "manly" skills like carpentry, while Frank had looked down on his father's occupation, seeing it as lacking in creativity and prestige.

Although Frank feels that a psychoanalyst would have a lot to say about his troubled relationship with his parents, he always felt affection for them. April's upbringing seems to him much more dysfunctional. Her parents were a flapper and playboy, who divorced before April turned one. April's father killed himself in 1938, while her mother had died after spending years in rehab. April was raised by aunts, whom she said she never loved. She keeps a box full of small souvenirs, like a worthless white horse charm, from her parents' visits to her. When Frank first heard about April's parents at the Bethune Street place, he argued that April must have loved her aunts and not her parents. Her parents, he said, must have seemed glamorous, but she couldn't have loved them having seen so little of them. April disagreed, however, saying she did love them, and Frank embraced and pitied her.

April's parents were richer than Frank's and led a much more glamourous, if tragic, life. Frank believes a psychoanalyst would say she was damaged by a lack of parental love. Frank also thinks that he can understand how April viewed her parents. Because he finds their dysfunctional, wealthy, bohemian lifestyle interesting and attractive, he imagines that this is what she felt for her parents. He imagines that she admires her parents' freewheeling life for the same reasons he looked down on his own parents' boring working class one.

Frank plans to take over mowing the lawn from April after drinking some coffee, but at that moment Helen Givings drops by, bringing him a **sedum planting**. Helen is always in motion, always smiling and laughing falsely. Frank cannot bring himself to call her "Helen," and she has stopped calling him by name too. Frank sees Helen notice that April is mowing the lawn while he is still in his bathrobe as she explains in detail what to do with the sedum. Helen calls loudly to April that she enjoyed the play. April turns off the lawnmower to hear her.

Frank feels threatened by April mowing the lawn, because he sees it as hard labor that is supposed to be done by a husband. He is especially self-conscious about this when Helen arrives and he sees her notice that he is not playing the husband's role as she would expect. Helen's cheery demeanor seems unnatural. She is a conformist who wants to always seem happy, because unhappiness is suspect.

Frank says he thinks most people thought the play was not very good, but Helen says that it was fine except "Mr. Crandell" (Shep Campbell) was badly cast. Helen always speaks condescendingly of those who live in the Revolutionary Hill Estates, as the Campbells do. Helen seems to want to ask Frank something, but then reconsiders. She compliments him on the **stone path** he is installing in their lawn and departs in her station wagon.

Frank is annoyed at Helen for having caught him failing to live up to her expectations of a good man and husband. He counters her falsely upbeat praise for the play with a hardheaded assessment. Helen brushes this negativity aside and suggests that it was only the inclusion of lower-class people from the Estates that marred the play.

Jennifer and Michael, the Wheeler children, run up to their father to see what Helen brought him. April approaches and he asks her what he should do with the plant. He doesn't remember what the **sedum** is called or anything Helen said about it. April asks what she is supposed to tell Helen the next time she sees her, when they haven't planted the plant. Frank says she should tell Helen to mind her goddamn business. Jennifer puts her thumb in her mouth and Michael grabs the crotch of his pants, both growing anxious. April refuses to take responsibility for the plant, telling Frank to get it out of sight and get ready for lunch. Frank brings the sedum to the basement and kicks it.

The Wheeler children are no sooner introduced than they are ignored by their fighting parents. This is typical of the Wheelers' treatment of their children, as is their failure to notice that their angry behavior impacts Michael and Jennifer. Helen likely feels gardening is a woman's work and would have preferred to give the plant to April, but could not because April was doing "man's work" by mowing the lawn. Now April is upset that they will not be able to properly plant the sedum and angry at Frank for involving her in this embarrassing failure to conform to Helen's expectations, and Frank gets angry in turn, taking out his frustrations on the plant itself.

After lunch, Frank begins to work on the **stone path**. It is hard, tedious work, moving stones from the forest behind the house and digging holes in the lawn to lay them in, but he feels it is a man's work. Jennifer and Michael watch him, and he tells them to be careful to stay out of the way of his shovel. Jennifer asks him why April slept on the couch. Frank responds that she did it because she felt like it, and thinks to himself that she never has any other reason for what she does. He thinks that it was easy for April to feel like being with him early in their relationship, when it involved nothing but making love and discussing books and movies in their Bohemian apartment in New York City. Especially since it was the first love she had ever known. Yet even then she had always seemed to have one foot out the door whenever anything went wrong.

Frank tries to find reassurance of his manliness in the hard labor he is doing. He gives little thought to Jennifer's question about April and how she may feel about her parents' tempestuous relationship. Instead, his answer to Jennifer only spurs him to think about April. He feels angry that she seems only to love him when the life he can provide is stylish, easy, and fun. The possibility that April might prefer a Bohemian life without responsibilities does not occur to him. Instead, her threats to leave him whenever anything goes wrong make him think there is something wrong with her or with her love for him.

Frank remembers how April reacted to her unintended pregnancy. She had wanted to wait seven years before having a child, and after they learned she was pregnant, she wouldn't talk to Frank, seeming to be in a state of shock or to be angry at him. Frank thought it was wrong that he needed to try to win her back with little jokes and comfort. A week later, April spoke to him seriously, saying an acting school classmate had told her a foolproof way to induce a miscarriage with a **rubber syringe**. Although Frank didn't want a baby, he had fought with her bitterly, angry that she had planned the abortion without talking to him about it, as if he were nothing but an obstacle. After fighting all night, April had given in and agreed to have the baby, and this had seemed to Frank the best "proof of manhood" of his life.

April's independent streak is disturbing to Frank. He cannot seem to understand that April has a strong personality that resists domination. Instead, he sees dominating her as a goal, one that will prove his strength and worth as a man. For April to have Frank's baby would signal to him that he had achieved this dominance, while her decision to go out and buy the rubber syringe without consulting him signals how far he is from truly controlling her. Frank feels better about himself once he has convinced April not to have an abortion, even though he doesn't want children any more than she does—a bleak situation for the children they already do have.

Now, still digging a hole for the **stone path**, Frank thinks that having the baby he didn't want was the beginning of it all: then he got the dull job, had another baby to prove the first wasn't a mistake, moved to the suburbs. He did all this because he thinks April might feel like leaving him at any moment. Jennifer and Michael watch as he struggles to dig a hole, laughing as the shovel fails to cut through a root. He tells them to move away, but they come back. Suddenly, the tree root looks to him like Michael's foot. Frank knows he is mistaken, but feels that he came close to hitting Michael's foot with the shovel. He quickly grabs Michael and spanks him hard twice. Shocked, the children run to April. In his mind, Frank prepares to defend himself. Ignoring the truth, he thinks that it was only because he moved the shovel in time that Michael wasn't injured.

Frank feels dissatisfied with the life that he pressured April to accept. As his children laugh at his struggle to build the path, Frank likely remembers his father's disapproval of his lack of skill at such tasks. Frank feels that his children should admire his ability to do this kind of work the way that he admired his own father, but instead he feels undermined and belittled by his children as he once did by his father. Frank takes these feelings of disappointment in his own manliness out on Michael. From this incident we see that Frank is more than willing to lie – even to himself – to justify his actions in his own eyes and to April.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

The next day, Frank sits reading a magazine. April went alone to her second performance the night before, and they are still not speaking. A fashion photograph in the magazine reminds Frank of Maureen Grube, a girl from his office who he kissed at the last Christmas party. Feeling unhappy with himself, Frank approaches April as she does the dishes, taking her by her elbows and saying he doesn't care who was to blame. She rebuffs him, saying she is sick of pretending that everything is all right. Jennifer approaches and asks Frank to read her and Michael the comics. Feeling grateful for the children's forgiveness, Frank reads to them, but is annoyed when they insist he read a toothpaste advertisement aloud. He looks forward to that night's visit from the Campbells, because April will have to pretend they aren't fighting in front of Shep and Milly.

Frank struggles with his self-esteem when he is not on speaking terms with April, as her approval is important to his sense of worth. He tries to distract himself with sexual fantasies, but this is insufficient. Then he tries to make up with April so that he can feel better about himself, but she rejects him. Next, Frank tries to take pleasure in the love of his children, but finds that he is bored and irritated because they lack an adult's awareness of the world. In the end, he looks forward to a social occasion because he expects that April will conceal her anger with him to conform to their friends' expectations.

That evening, Shep and Milly arrive, and the four friends arrange themselves with their drinks in the living room in relaxed postures, ready to have a good time. They talk briefly about the play, and April mocks how the other cast members kept repeating "it was a lot of fun anyway." Then they talk about their children and prices, slowly realizing that, for the first time in their friendship, they have nothing to talk about. In the past, they would talk about the sad state of America, conformity, the suburbs, and the mediocrity of all their neighbors. It was because of this sense of isolation that they had initially become interested in participating in the Laurel Players, which seemed like it might be a step towards bringing culture to the suburbs. But there is no outside cause for the play's failure, and they are stumped to find a topic.

The Wheelers and the Campbells have created a friendship by making one another feel that they are exceptional. They are used to stroking one another's egos by belittling all the other people they know and creating the impression that they are superior to their surroundings. They also talk about topics that they consider sophisticated and fit for freethinkers like themselves. But the experience of the play's failure has made it difficult for them to sustain this attitude. The inability to find new topics reveals how shallow the friendship between the two couples really is—they're not true friends at all.

To fill the silence Milly talks about gardening, and Frank asks if she knows what "seecham" (**sedum**) is, saying Helen brought them some. Milly is unsure what it is. Milly suddenly remembers something to tell the Wheelers. She asks if they know that the Givingses have a son. The Wheelers remember seeing his photograph and that Helen said his name is John and he hated the navy, but is a brilliant mathematician. Milly shocks them by revealing that John is now at the state mental institution Greenacres. The other three begin to pepper Milly with questions, and Milly excitedly reveals that John had been in and out of a private sanatorium in California, quit his job and disappeared for several months, then turned up at the Givingses' house. He held them there, locking the doors, cutting the phone lines, and breaking the furniture. Only after a cleaning woman escaped and called the police were his parents freed. Then the state troopers came and took him to Greenacres.

Milly talks about gardening – a stereotypically female activity – in an attempt to fill the empty conversational space with an acceptable topic. She is trying to keep the evening from seeming awkward because, like Helen, she feels that maintaining a demeanor of cheerful pleasantry is part of her role as a woman. But when she recalls the story of John Givings, she is excited to be able to tell it, even though it sounds like a painful situation for the Givings. Whatever truly happened to the Givings, John Givings clearly acted in opposition to the prevailing ideal of domestic peace and harmony. The news of an acquaintance's child failing to act as a dutiful, loving son is an exciting, dangerous-seeming piece of gossip for this cloistered world.

April says that she has felt that Helen wanted to say something to them, but couldn't get the words out. Without quite looking at Frank, she asks him if he agrees, and reluctantly he does. Milly begins to talk to April about what it would feel like to have an insane child, while Shep begins to ask Frank practical questions about the legality of institutionalizing a person forcibly. Frank fears the night is turning into a boring, typical suburban evening during which women speak to women and men to men. He raises his voice to address the group and delivers a speech, railing against the overreliance of society on psychiatry, and the self-deceptive way everyone in the suburbs pretends everything is fine no matter what is happening under the surface. Usually, the other three would have rushed to agree with him and pontificate, but instead a silence falls when he stops speaking.

Frank is used to time spent with the Campbells making him feel good about himself. He immediately seizes on the topic of John's hospitalization as a topic that can reinvigorate the two couples' conversation—but Shep, Milly and April each likely have their own reasons for refusing this topic. After the experience of the play, they may feel themselves to be no better than their neighbors. Or they might be struck by the tragedy of the Givings's situation. Or, perhaps, they feel that a mental breakdown is not so foreign from their own experience. Either way, they do not want to use the story of what happened to John to boost their own egos, at least not publicly.

Disappointed, Frank goes into the kitchen to get fresh drinks. Seeing his face in the mirror, he is disgusted by its look of weakness. Then he remembers something and nods at his reflection with a bitter smile. Going back into the living room, he announces that his thirtieth birthday is tomorrow. Feeling drunk, he tells the story of his twentieth birthday during the war. In the past, talking about the war had always brought the four of them close together. But as he finishes telling his anecdote, Frank realizes that he told the Campbells this story the year before when he turned twenty-nine. The Campbells pretend to be amused, and the worst part is that April looks at him with a look of pitying boredom. Frank continues to stew over her look as he sleeps alone that night, and on into the next day as he takes the train to work.

Frank's self-esteem suffers when he cannot elicit the response he wants. He wants to be reassured that he is interesting and exceptional, because these qualities are what have earned him respect in the world and made him feel like a "real man." Trying to boost his self-confidence, he tells an anecdote about the war, because this was a time when he felt he was becoming strong, confident, and masculine. When Frank realizes that he told the story a year before, however, its telling takes on the exact opposite meaning, instead showing how unoriginal and desperate for approval he is.

PART 1, CHAPTER 5

Frank was first brought to see the Knox Building in New York City by his father Earl in 1935 when he was ten. A man at the Home Office named Oat Fields had invited Earl and Frank to the office for luncheon and a baseball game at Yankee stadium. Frank had been so nervous that he nearly vomited the morning of the trip. At the Knox Building, his father paused to explain the machines in the display room. Frank was impressed by his reflection in the plate glass and the building's staggering height. The rest of the day had been disappointing, though: watching the enormously fat Oat Fields eat sloppily disgusted Frank, and the ball game bored him. On the way home, Earl reprimanded Frank for failing to thank Oat Fields, and Frank saw his father anxiously touching his genitals on the subway. That night Frank vomited into the toilet, remembering watching Oat Fields eat.

The experience of going to see his father's company headquarters was a disappointing one for Frank. He was initially excited by the size of the building and impressed by his father's explanations of the machines. But seeing his father flatter the repulsive Oat Fields made Frank feel repulsion towards his father. Similarly, seeing how his father touched his genitals in an anxious tick (a symbolic origin for Michael's nervous act at the end of Chapter 3), Earl falls in Frank's esteem. He no longer seems powerful and manly, but poor and weak, concerned about his masculinity even in a physical manner. This visit to the Knox Building may have been a turning point, when Frank went from feeling that he disappointed his father to trying to rebel against him.

Only later did Frank piece together that his father had been under consideration to be Oat Fields's assistant, having clung to his job as a branch assistant-manager through the many layoffs of the Depression, but had learned that day during their trip that the promotion was not happening. This disappointment had been the beginning of Earl's decline. He had been demoted to a regular salesman and his health weakened, his wife had aged, and he was horrified by Frank's behavior. Frank took jobs that didn't require any education and tortured his mother by failing to write for eight months, and then sending a letter without a return address, announcing he had gotten married.

After managing to keep his job through the difficult years of the Depression, as so many other men could not do, Earl Wheeler is stunned by disappointment. He hopes that his son, who has a better education and better opportunities, will live a life he can admire, but Frank takes a malicious pleasure in hurting his father by squandering opportunities and treating his mother with disrespect.

Earl would not have understood how it happened that Frank came to work at Knox Business Machines. Frank had told a classmate he needed a job because April was "knocked up." He expressly asked for a boring job, saying he wanted to preserve a separate identity until he figured out what he really wanted to do. Knox had been on the list of employers the classmate showed him. Frank had gotten the job without mentioning that his father had worked for Knox. He thought of his job as a hilarious joke, doing boring work he didn't care about and putting in no effort, but it was a joke that no one else seemed to understand. Eventually he stopped explaining it to other people, only saying "he didn't do anything, really" but had "the dullest job you could possibly imagine."

Frank feels a perverse satisfaction in getting a job his father would have coveted, but that he himself looks down upon. He feels that this derisive attitude towards his job is proof that he is a more interesting and valuable individual than his father was. Yet the fact that Frank chose to work at the same company where his father worked shows that he is still preoccupied with Earl's opinion and cannot escape his father's influence. Frank takes the "joke" of working at Knox so seriously that he forgets to think about what he really does want to do, only assuming that working at Knox isn't it.

The Monday after April's performance, Frank enters the Knox building and makes his way up the elevator to the fifteenth floor automatically. Sometimes he feels aware that he does take some pleasure in the routines of the office. As Frank walks to his desk, Maureen Grube greets him and he thinks about sleeping with her. He asks himself, "why not?" He thinks that she has been encouraging him for months, and she probably lives somewhere with a roommate who is out all day long, which will make the logistics easy.

Although Frank takes a posture that his job is beneath him, in fact he enjoys its routines. The work environment also provides him with opportunities to boost his self-esteem when he needs it. It is likely no coincidence that Frank finally decides he wants to sleep with Maureen on a day when April is alienated from him and making him feel bad about himself.

Reaching his desk, Frank listens to his officemate Jack Ordway tell him about the weekend that has left him too hungover to work. His wife's friends had come to town and they had drunk cocktail after cocktail. Ordway is an alcoholic who married a rich woman and used up her inheritance. Although others in the office think Jack's life sounds glamorous, Frank has met Jack's wife and knows that she is discontent, and blames Jack for ruining her life.

For many in the office, the idea of marrying an heiress makes Ordway's life seem out-of-the-ordinary and interesting. Frank, however, has seen that Ordway's life is not glamorous and he is unhappy because his wife looks down on and resents him. The Ordway marriage may also remind Frank of his worst fears about his own marriage.

Frank begins to look through the papers on his desk, sorting them into piles without reading them and marking them to be filed away and returned to him later by a secretary. After going to coffee with several coworkers, Frank looks at a letter addressed to him by a branch manager in Toledo about a badly written pamphlet full of errors. The branch manager needs a better pamphlet to distribute at an important upcoming conference. This gives Frank an idea: he goes to Maureen Grube's desk and, showing her the pamphlet, asks her if she can help him locate files so that he can rework the pamphlet. He takes her into the archives and looks at her face: she is not very pretty, but if he ignores her imperfections he finds her very desirable. He tells her he will stop back in to see how she is doing.

Rewriting the pamphlet will turn out to be a pivotal moment for Frank's career, but at the time all he can think about is making himself feel better by seducing Maureen Grube. He sees seducing her as an antidote to his shattered self-confidence, and his job is nothing more than a means to that end. Maureen is also nothing more than a means to an end: he wants her to reassure him of his manliness and his attractive powers. He is not truly infatuated with her, but wants to seduce her to console himself for being rejected by April.

Frank goes back to his cubicle and thinks over his plan. He will go back to Maureen once most of the office has gone to lunch, and ask her to lunch. Ordway approaches to ask him to go to lunch, and Frank says he can't, disappointing Ordway. After waiting a bit, Frank returns and asks Maureen to lunch. She agrees and he goes to the elevator to wait for her, where he worries that his coworkers will return before they get out of the building. Outside the building, he thinks he catches a glimpse of his office friends as he ducks into a cab after Maureen, but he feels giddy with excitement and doesn't care.

Frank is now carefree and full of excitement as he throws himself into his plan to seduce Maureen. This excitement has little to do with Maureen herself. For Frank the fun is in the conquest and the process of skillfully trying to act in secret, getting around the obstacles office life creates to seducing a secretary. Frank has found a way to temporarily escape his dependence on April's admiration to feel good about himself.

PART 1, CHAPTER 6

At a restaurant, Frank orders drink after drink, then calls Maureen's boss and tells her that he will need Maureen's help for the rest of the afternoon. Maureen tells him about herself. She is twenty-two, from a small town upstate, and was briefly married when she was eighteen. She lives with a roommate named Norma. Frank gets the sense that Maureen copies many of her mannerisms from Norma, who is older and twice-divorced. He thinks that she probably sees Norma as her mentor in how to live a fun, sexy life in New York City. Maureen gets drunk, and Frank orders some food. Then, while Maureen eats, Frank delivers a charming and eloquent speech about himself, portraying himself as "decent but disillusioned" and "sadly and bravely at war with his environment." He can tell that Maureen is captivated.

Unlike April, Maureen seems to try to fit into a specific mold that society has envisioned for women. She tries hard to cultivate herself as a sexy, young, independent woman in the city and models herself on her roommate. Frank sees that he can easily take advantage of Maureen's desire to be desired and her lack of a clear sense of who she is. Frank gives Maureen the sense that he is much more confident about his own identity and place in the world: he portrays himself as an exceptional man trapped in an unexceptional life.

After lunch, Frank and Maureen walk through the streets. Frank worries he will see one of April's old friends, but before he knows it, Maureen has invited him up for a drink in her apartment. They have sex, and Frank feels an overwhelming sense that he is getting exactly what he needs. Afterwards, neither of them can think of what to say. Maureen cannot decide whether to put her clothes back on, and wonders what Norma will think. Frank cannot decide what to say to Maureen, but finally only says "you were swell" and kisses her goodnight. Frank feels jubilant. Leaving Maureen's apartment and making his way to the train station, he breaks into a run. On the train he stands between the cars, smoking and feeling like a man.

For Frank, the ease with which he has seduced Maureen is an intoxicating boost to his ego. He feels that this proves that he is attractive, strong, and interesting. At the same time, Maureen is also trying to prove something to herself about herself through her affair with Frank. When she hesitates about whether to put her clothes back on, it is clear that she is not acting spontaneously or passionately, but self-consciously cultivating her image.

As Frank pulls his car up to this house that evening, April comes outside dressed in a cocktail dress. She grabs hold of his arm and apologizes, saying how much she missed him all day. Frank is stunned. He is overwhelmed by his emotions, but he notices that there is something false about the way April is speaking that reminds him of Maureen Grube's affect. April has prepared a beautiful birthday dinner, and his children sing Happy Birthday to him.

Frank feels suspicious that April is feigning this total change of heart, since she seems to be acting more like the stereotype of a woman than she usually does—particularly in cooking the elaborate meal for him, dressing beautifully, and in the solicitous way she speaks to him. Frank feels so guilty for having cheated on April, though, that he can hardly process what her change of attitude means.

PART 1, CHAPTER 7

On Frank's birthday, after the children are asleep, Frank sits with April in the living room. She continues to apologize to him. She says that she has thought all day and has come up with a wonderful plan for their future. Frank feels guilty and wants to stop her from apologizing, so he begins to kiss her. April says that they should go into the bedroom, and he says he will shower first. In the hot water of the shower, he plans to tell her about Maureen, but then he turns off the hot water, as he used to in the army. The cold shower invigorates him, and he decides it would be stupid to tell April. He gets in bed and they make love. Frank wants to fall asleep, but April wakes him, saying she must tell him about her plan.

Frank slept with Maureen because he felt torn up by being rejected by April. He now feels guilty, then, because April is treating him with so much tenderness and respect, and he wonders how to handle his guilty conscience. At first he wants to confess, but then the cold shower reminds him of the army and the importance he places in feeling strong and superior as a man. He decides to enjoy having his confidence boosted by April's fawning over him, instead of trying to be honest and open with her.

April pours herself and Frank some brandy and he listens to the beautiful sound of her voice, only with some reluctance beginning to pay attention to what she is saying. April's plan is for them to move to Europe in the fall. She says that once they sell their car and house, they will enough money to live there until they become self-supporting again. She says that she will get a job as a secretary there, so that Frank can spend time figuring out what he really wants to do with his life. Frank laughs, but she says she is serious: in Europe, he can find himself the way he was supposed to seven years before, when she got pregnant unexpectedly and he got a job at Knox to support them. Frank hopes that by laughing he can get April to forget the idea, which frightens him.

April portrays her plan to move to Europe as necessary to allow Frank to do something with his talents. What she does not say, but likely feels, is that it is also a way for her to escape the tedium of life as a suburban housewife. April wants to be in a cosmopolitan, cultured environment, and she wants to have a life outside of their home. She suggests that she will take on working as a breadwinner, but reassures Frank that this is only meant to allow him to find his true calling, not for her to gain a professional identity of her own. Frank, meanwhile, feels instantly threatened by the idea of a drastic change to their lifestyle.

Frank says that her plan is not very realistic, but April counters that living in a place where they are miserable is what is truly unrealistic. She says it is all her fault that they are living this life because of her threat to abort Jennifer. She makes it sound like it was because he convinced her to keep the baby that he had to give up his dreams. She continues, saying that the idea that parents must give up their lives and live in the suburbs is a fallacy that she has forced Frank to live by. Frank can imagine that April has been rushing around all day, anxiously thinking about her plan and preparing for his birthday dinner. April says that ever since joining the Laurel Players she has been pretending that he dragged her away from an acting career, although she knows she never had any real talent. She says that she ruined Frank's life, but she has been pretending that he ruined hers.

April refers to their shared unhappiness as a reason why they should make a change. She says many of the things that Frank was thinking while he built the stone path – about her lack of talent as an actress, about her reluctance to keep their first child – and provides a radical new solution. She also uses Frank's own rhetoric, used in so many grand speeches about how exceptional he is, about the senseless pressure to conform to suburban values when raising children. Using Frank's own arguments, she presses him to agree that they need to change their life in the way she wants them to.

Frank asks to talk, and April sits back to listen, sipping her brandy in bed. Frank says she is being too hard on herself. In the same way that she may have never been meant to be an actress, he suggests that perhaps he never had an exciting career in his future. She retorts that everyone could see he was exceptional, but Frank uncomfortably senses that it might be possible to convince her that he never really was. He changes tack, beginning to talk in the heroic, theatrical voice that she has adopted. April thrills him when she says he is the most valuable thing in the world—a man. He agrees that they will move to Paris. April says she will get right to work planning it the next day, and they fall asleep peacefully.

Frank senses that April can only feel close to him if he is also made unhappy by their humdrum life. The idea that he might be meant to do exactly what he is now doing would be a deal breaker for her. Fearful that he will disappoint her and lose the warm attention she is now showing him, he takes up her tone. She rewards him by saying exactly what he wants to hear: the reason they must move to Europe is to allow him to flourish. He is precious, talented and, most importantly, masculine.

PART 2, CHAPTER 1

The next few weeks are a blur of planning and excitement for Frank and April. Looking back later, Frank can only remember the next day at the office. Feeling extremely powerful, he speaks kindly to Maureen, telling her there is nothing to regret and he hopes that they can be friends. She agrees. Then Frank tackles the problem of the branch manager in Toledo who needs a new pamphlet, dictating a straightforward sales message about the advantages of using a computer. He takes care of several other orders of business, too. He thinks the reason he is working so hard is because April said the previous night that he had slaved away for years at Knox, while he knows he has never worked hard there. Then he rebukes himself for worrying what April thinks of his job, which he will leave forever soon. At the end of the day, Frank dumps a large pile of paperwork into the trash.

Frank initially feels confident and nearly euphoric after he and April decide to move to Europe. This is not because he feels that moving to Europe will solve the problem that April explained it would – his need to discover his true calling – but because he finally feels united with April and confident that he is a man she respects and loves. He immediately tells Maureen that they shouldn't sleep together again, because he only ever wanted to sleep with her to boost his confidence. The only thing he is self-conscious about is using this energy to do his work, which he has led April to believe exhausts and frustrates him.

For the next few blurry weeks, Frank thinks of little besides his time at home with April. They spend their time talking confidentially about their plans. April is charming and graceful, not angry or tense. Frank feels also that he has begun to speak more confidently and eloquently. Jennifer and Michael are puzzled by their parents' announcement that the family will be moving to France. Their parents act strangely and pay little attention to them, but at least they no longer wake their children up by fighting late into the night. One night, Frank paces the living room, denouncing the sentimentality of their neighbors. Another night he tells April that he feels alive in the same way he did when he was preparing to go into battle during the war. April replies by saying she felt that alive the first time he made love to her.

Frank and April are in perfect sync as he acts the part of the man she loves and she showers him with affirmation. She supports his perception of himself as a powerful figure whom she respects, and his insecurities melt away. Frank thinks back on his experience in the army, when he first became confident of himself as a man, while April flatteringly suggests that having sex with him for the first time was one of the great moments in her life. Neither parent pays much attention to their children's feelings, however, while the children are acutely aware of the change in their parents' behavior.

A few weeks later, the perfect fantasy begins to crack for Frank. When Frank asks April why she seems set on moving to Paris instead of elsewhere in Europe, April explains that his knowledge of the language and the neighborhoods will be helpful to them. Frank feels shaken, wondering if he really gave her the impression that he knows French. He tries to reassure himself, but he hardly knows French, and only knows the city from wandering around it as a soldier and visiting prostitutes, feeling excluded from the sophisticated life of real Parisians. Frank is even more surprised one night to hear that April went into New York City that day and applied at an overseas employment agency, made arrangements for their passports and bought several books in French, including a French grammar for him that is much too advanced. Sensing Frank's discomfort, April apologizes for doing these things, saying that he would have been better at handling them.

Frank begins to realize that moving to Europe will force him to live up to his own portrayal of himself to April. He has always played the role of the sophisticated, brilliant man of the world trapped in a humdrum suburban life, and now he fears that these pretensions will be unmasked. He feels worried that he will lose April's love and respect if he doesn't live up to the image he has given her of himself. He is also made uncomfortable by the way April is doing things independently, without consulting him. This undermines his feeling that she depends on him, which is necessary to his sense of himself as a confident, strong man.

The next night, April tells Frank that she has bad news. Helen Givings invited them to dinner the next day. April declined, but then, realizing they needed to speak to Helen about selling the house, agreed that Helen should come visit them after dinner instead. Hopefully, she says, they can deal with Helen only as a realtor from then on. But after settling this with Helen, April remembered prior plans with the Campbells. Milly sounded so hurt when April tried to cancel that April agreed they would visit the Campbells that night instead. April apologizes for scheduling such a boring weekend, but Frank secretly feels excited to tell the Campbells about moving to Europe. He asks April not to tell Mrs. Givings their plan for Europe, and April replies that they don't need to tell the Campbells either. Frank is about to object that the Campbells are their friends and he wants to tell them, but stops himself.

April's attitude is that they will soon leave their boring life behind. She has already written off the Campbells as uninteresting people who are unworthy of their friendship. Frank, on the other hand, still cares about the Campbells. His self-esteem is boosted when he plays up his image as a freethinker and they applaud him for it. Yet Frank is also worried about telling Mrs. Givings that April plans to work in Europe while he makes no income. Just as when Frank was self-conscious about Mrs. Givings seeing April mow the lawn, he now worries that she thinks he does not take his responsibilities as a man and husband seriously.

PART 2, CHAPTER 2

Shep Campbell polishes his shoes in preparation for that evening's visit from the Wheelers. He relishes the task, which reminds him the army. As a boy and a young man, Shep had wanted to become tough and manly, despite being brought up by a wealthy single mother who coddled him and wanted to dress him in fancy clothing. He had rebelled against her, gotten kicked out of his private school, and then joined the army, where he had been celebrated for his toughness. After the war, he had studied mechanical engineering and married Milly, pursuing a middle-class life away from the soft, spoiled world of moneyed New Yorkers.

This is the first scene told from the perspective of Shep Campbell. It shows that, like Frank, Shep struggled in his youth to understand how to live up to a masculine ideal of toughness. Shep felt that wealth and luxury were for the weak and womanly, like his mother. During the war, the tough attitude he cultivated was appreciated, and he decided to continue to reject his upper-class roots after the war's end.

Shep and Milly were living in Arizona when he suddenly began to feel alienated from those around him. He fantasized about the East, where he thought people cared about the wider world and the arts, and imagined affairs with the sophisticated graduates of women's colleges. He became withdrawn from those around him and, one night, broke his hand punching a wall and called Milly "an ignorant cunt." A week later, they moved to New York. There, they discovered that Shep's mother's fortune was gone and went through their savings quickly, while Shep spent his days wondering how to find fulfillment. Finally, Shep got a job and they moved to the Revolutionary Hill Estates. Although this was not the life he dreamed of in Arizona, he felt more content and no longer regretted his "tough guy" phase. He feels that he is Frank Wheeler's equal, despite having gone to a midwestern technical college.

Shep suddenly realizes that his pursuit of masculine toughness has led him into a life that he doesn't love. He then feels depressed and anxious, worrying that he has rejected his cultural birthright. For him, this has less to do with money and class than it does with cultural experiences. Now Shep feels more reconciled to his life, although it is not what he dreamed of when he was in Arizona. He has worldly friends like the Wheelers, and he is their equal. At the same time, he thinks he would never have been such a successful soldier if his personal development hadn't included a "tough guy" phase.

Shep has also come to appreciate Milly, and feels grateful that he went through his "tough guy" phase because it brought him to her. Even though they have different backgrounds and their marriage isn't very romantic, she has stuck by him and even adjusted to the new life he thrust upon her. Shep admires how she learned to decorate their house in a way that April Wheeler praised. Now, preparing for drinks with the Wheelers, Milly asks Shep if he has noticed that the Wheelers seem to be acting a little stuck up lately. Shep says she is imagining it, then gives her a little hug. He is unpleasantly shocked that she smells bad. He offers to let her shower, but she says she is ready. Shep then showers and thinks about Milly's smell, deciding that it must be that she sweats more when she feels stressed.

Shep appreciates how Milly adjusted to the new lifestyle he thrust upon her when he moved them East. She has dutifully played the traditional role of a supportive wife, through thick and thin. He is grateful that she has learned how to fit in with people from a different class background, but only partially recognizes what a stress this places on her. Milly, for her part, knows that their friendship with the Wheelers is essential to keeping Shep happy. She feels that the Wheelers have been pulling away and worries about how Shep may react if they lose that friendship.

As Shep gets ready, he remembers an occasion, almost a year ago, when he danced with April at the bar Vito's Log Cabin and the smell of her sweat aroused him. Walking downstairs with a can of beer, caught up in his thoughts, Shep nearly trips over his four sons, who are watching TV and chewing gum. He feels slightly revolted by them. He gets another can of beer from the kitchen and goes into the backyard. He thinks to himself that he was not revolted, but disapproving, because they looked so middle class. But perhaps, he thinks, it was just that seeing them interrupted his thoughts about April Wheeler. Experimentally, he whispers, "I love you, April." Milly surprises him at that moment by calling out that the Wheelers have arrived.

Shep rebelled against his own upbringing, and hated the coddling of his wealthy mother, which made him feel weak and lacking in manliness. Now, he has the opposite reaction to his own children, feeling disappointed in their lack of refinement. He does not seem to notice or appreciate that they embody the traits of boyish brawn that he cultivated in himself when he was their age. His crush on April also shows his continued yearning for a life of culture and taste, as the tasteful, elegant April represents this more elevated world to him.

The evening feels awkward because the Wheelers seem to be in their own world. Frank looks around, snobbishly appraising the Wheeler's living room. April hardly speaks. Finally, the Wheelers announce that they are moving to Europe. The Campbells explode with questions, but the Wheelers keep looking at one another, as if deciding whether to include the Campbells in their secret. Shep conceals his distress, while Milly tells the Wheelers that they will miss them. Later, Shep tells Milly that the Wheelers' plan sounds immature. Milly is relieved, saying it seems like they have given no thought to their children. In bed later, Shep knows that Milly wants to keep talking and to cry while he comforts her, but he pretends to be asleep. He thinks back to his wartime experiences in Paris, feeling painfully envious of Frank for getting to go live in that exquisite city with the exquisite April.

The Wheelers act snobbishly, just as Milly feared, making the evening awkward. While Shep finds their behavior infuriating, he is also deeply envious of the richer, more cultured life that they are going to pursue. The idea of being in Paris with a sophisticated woman like April fits his fantasy perfectly. Still, he recognizes that their plan is an irresponsible one, reassuring Milly by agreeing with her that the Wheelers should give more thought to their children. The Wheelers' plan brings back Shep's internal struggle to balance his desire for a cultured life and his responsibilities to his family.

PART 2, CHAPTER 3

Helen Givings and her husband Howard live in one of the few preserved pre-Revolutionary houses in the area. Helen has a passion for renovation: she has bought and then renovated six homes, reselling them for a profit and then moving. On the day of her planned visit to the Wheelers, Helen had been to visit her son John's doctor at Greenacres. She finds it horrible there: the psychiatrist is undignified, overworked, poorly dressed, and seems to hardly know anything about her son.

Helen is a character nostalgic for a more genteel past (or her idea of the past as genteel), as shown by her settling down in a house built before the American Revolution, when America was a colony ruled by a king. She looks back on a time with firmer divisions between rich and poor and thinks that her life would have been more beautiful and less troubled then.

Helen is relieved to get home, because, after so many years constantly moving, she loves her current home, which reminds her of her affluent childhood home. She feels that her ability to love the house and feel settled there is a sign of a positive change to her personality, an overdue maturation into womanhood that coincides with her going through menopause. For years, Howard asked her to quit working as a secretary, saying they didn't need the money, but she insisted that she loved it. She couldn't explain this to Howard, but what she loved was the hard work, which gave her an outlet away from marriage and motherhood. The transition to become a real-estate broker had been difficult for her, because there hadn't been enough work to do initially, but then she had discovered that renovating houses could be an outlet for her energy.

Helen is an anxious person, but she has found that she can stave off unhappiness by keeping busy. Although the novel never shows Helen and Howard fighting, it emphasizes that their marriage has been a difficult one. This is part of the reason why Helen has seen it as particularly necessary for to work so much. She knows that she needs the outlet work provides to avoid becoming depressed or fighting with Howard. Renovating houses allows her to have a more creative and fulfilling outlet than being a secretary had, because Helen feels that her good taste is improving her surroundings.

Helen serves Howard tea. He has his **hearing aid** off, and although Helen talks to him about her plans for that night, he hardly listens, even after turning his hearing aid on. He is a fat, frail man, who looks older than his sixty-seven years. Helen thinks ahead to the evening, when she will ask the Wheelers if she can bring John to visit them. The idea came to her like a vision, and she can picture perfectly how her son will get along with the Wheelers. Recently, she and Howard had taken John for a drive during their visits, and today she had told John's doctor about her plan. She practices what she will say to the Wheelers as she readies herself.

Helen seems to get little companionship or moral support from Howard, who has very little energy. Meanwhile he seems to cope with the differences between himself and his wife by engaging with her as little as possible. Helen is used to this and makes plans largely on her own. In this case, she thinks that the Wheelers are the kind of interesting, intellectual, high-class people who her mentally ill son could benefit by meeting.

But at the Wheelers' house, Helen is surprised to see that the Wheelers are uncharacteristically calm, and seem perfectly content in one another's company. When Helen brings up John, she can see by a slight movement in their faces that they know about John's hospitalization. In a panic, she finishes asking them if she can bring him to visit the Wheelers. April says they would love to meet him, and suggests that he come next Sunday. As Helen is making excuses to leave, feeling awkward, Frank says that he needs to tell her some important news.

Usually the Wheelers seem disorganized and out of sync with one another, which puts Helen at her ease. Without knowing why they seem changed, Helen registers the alteration in their behavior. Their calm, collected demeanor likely makes her feel even more self-conscious to discover that they already know about John's hospitalization. She can imagine that she has been the object of gossip around the community.

Back at her home, Helen eagerly tells Howard the astonishing news that the Wheelers will be moving to Europe. She says it seems very irresponsible of them, because they aren't well-off and Frank doesn't have a job in Europe. She continues, saying that there is no point in introducing them to John now, since she wants him to make permanent friends. Howard seems hardly to follow her logic as she frantically pours out her anxious thoughts. Helen goes upstairs to change and, seeing herself in the hallway mirror, feels comforted because she looks young and spry. But taking off her shoes, her ugly, old feet shock her. She silently weeps out of disappointment with the Wheelers, her marriage, her child, and all the sorrows of her fifty-six-year life. She goes back downstairs, cheerful again, and continues to talk to Howard, who nods and comments, although he has already turned his **hearing aid** off.

Helen has been building up her hopes that meeting the Wheelers will help John to make "normal" friends and move towards reentering society and leaving the hospital. Howard has understood little about this plan, so now Helen must bear her disappointment alone. In light of this disappointment, all the other demons that Helen keeps at bay with her proactive and energetic attitude come rushing into her thoughts. She has a total breakdown, but then quickly regains her composure. In the depressing close to the chapter she then pretends her usual cheerfulness to Howard, while he pretends to be listening, but is actually ignoring her.

PART 2, CHAPTER 4

Frank tells Jack Ordway about his plan to move to Europe. He has struggled for weeks with the disconnect between his home life and the feeling he has at work that he will never leave the job. Ordway asks him what he plans to do in Europe, and Frank becomes defensive, saying he needs this trip to find his calling. Frank's annoyance turns into pity for Ordway and his depressing life, and he buys Ordway a brandy. Afterwards, they go to the bank to collect their paychecks and Jack remembers how he once mocked this scene to April, comparing Knox employees lining up to get paid to a litter of piglets sucking on their mother's teats. Afterwards, taking a walk with Ordway and his other friends, Ed Small, Lathrop, and Sid Roscoe, Frank feels a sense of comradery mixed with happiness that he will soon put the world of Knox behind him.

Although Frank doesn't admit it, he sees himself in Ordway. Both men drink too much, are creative but lazy, and have wives who feel let down by them. Now that Frank is diverging from their shared path of lazily passing their days doing busywork at Knox, he may wonder whether he is really meant for a life other than the one the two of them have shared. Frank wants to believe he is superior to the world of Knox, but it is one thing to feel superior while still feeling secure in that world, and another thing to abandon that world and try to find a new and fitting identity.

This sense of freedom disappears when Frank is called to Ted Bandy's cubicle after lunch. Frank is surprised to find Bart Pollock, an important executive, there waiting to meet him. Although Frank has never met Pollock before, he has mocked him to April. Anxious in Pollock's presence, Frank begins to think about how he will make fun of himself for feeling anxious when he recounts the afternoon to April later that night. Frank hardly listens to what Bandy is saying in introduction, watching Bart Pollock, who finally exclaims that he is very pleased with *Speaking of Production Control*, the piece Frank wrote for the branch manager in Toledo.

Frank's newfound confidence in himself results from feeling in harmony with April. But as a result of this confidence, he actually applied himself to his work writing the pamphlet, doing a good job for the first time. Now Frank feels both gratified and worried by Pollock's compliments. It feels good to him to be praised for a job well done, but he is already thinking about how he will portray it to April so as not to seem like he cares about his work at Knox.

That night, Frank tells April about the meeting. He says it's hilarious that, after all these years, he gets noticed by Bart Pollock for a stupid brochure he whipped up in a morning. April hardly pays attention, interrupting him to tell Michael to sit up straight. Frank tells her that Pollock asked him to do a whole series of the brochures, but he will have to let him know he is leaving in the fall if the work becomes too involved. April suggests that he tell everyone at Knox now, but Frank says it would be awkward to tell them before he gives his final notice. Frank feels enraged at April's reaction. When he pictured telling her the news, he imagined that she would say that he shouldn't be dismissive of Pollock's praise and should feel validated, even if the work isn't very interesting. Instead, she seems utterly uninterested in his news.

Frank pictures April reacting supportively, as he believes a wife is supposed to. Instead, she instantly feels that recognition at Knox could cause Frank to back out of their plan to Europe. She gives him no validation, even paying attention to Michael (whom both parents have been oblivious of for weeks) instead. April doesn't want to be married to a man who finds it exciting to be complimented for writing a pamphlet, and Frank knows this. Still, he is hurt by how completely indifferent his wife acts at this news of this success.

PART 2, CHAPTER 5

On Saturday afternoon, Frank is distracted from trying to study French grammar by the voices of April and Jennifer. Jennifer tells April which things she wants to pack, including her large doll house. April tells her she can only bring the small things, but Jennifer doesn't understand. April snaps that she doesn't feel like explaining everything to someone who doesn't listen. Half an hour later, Frank asks April where Jennifer is. They find her sucking her thumb in bed. April asks if Jennifer is worried about moving to France. Jennifer admits this, bursting into tears. April comforts her. Afterwards, Frank tells April that Jennifer's reaction left him feeling shaken. April briskly responds that the kids will get over it, and unless he is suggesting they call the whole thing off, there is no point in discussing it. It is their first fight since Frank's birthday, and both Frank and April feel tense for the rest of the day.

Although Frank allowed himself to be convinced to accept April's plan to move, it has always been a prospect that scared him. Now, seeing Jennifer's anxiety, he tries to leverage this to raise doubts about the plan. April rightly suspects Frank of using Jennifer as an excuse to stay in Connecticut and in their current life. While Frank may feel sympathy for Jennifer, he is first and foremost concerned with how the move will impact him. But April is not being honest about her motivations either. She is pretending that the move to Europe is meant to allow Frank to find himself, but it is really meant to allow her to get away from a life she loathes.

The next day is Sunday, the day of John Givings's visit. Jennifer and Michael go to the Campbells' house. April feels nervous, but Frank says he bets John is like all the other "uncertified insane people." April praises him for being so generous and openminded.

Frank is trying to follow through on his rhetoric. He has always criticized the suburbs as a place where issues are covered up and everyone pretends to be happy. Now, he plans to show April – through his treatment of John – that this is how he really feels.

The Givingses arrive. John Givings is dressed in clothes from the asylum, and smokes intently. His frown makes him look exhausted by physical pain, and his smile looks unnatural. He walks around the house, saying it looks like a place where people live. April offers the Givingses sherry, and Helen begins to refuse, but John says that he would like it in a highball glass. Helen feels humiliated: she had brought John nice clothes to wear, but he insists on wearing clothes from the hospital. Howard is no help, and Helen tries to fill the time by chattering about the zoning board, watching as John wolfs down the sandwiches April prepared, leaving his sherry undrunk.

John bucks convention in every way he can. The Givingses and Wheelers are well-dressed, but John refuses to wear nice clothing or conform to society's ideas about what he should look like. He wants his drink served in an unconventional way and eats without respect for table manners. All of this is seemingly done with a spitefulness towards conformity to social conventions, especially as he sees this conformity embodied in his mother.

John interrupts Helen and asks Frank if he is a lawyer. Frank tells John that he has an uninteresting job selling machines. John says he thought that only women and boys worried about whether a job is interesting. Mrs. Givings tries to interrupt to talk about the weather. John goes on, saying he knows he's being tactless, as his mother would say, and that he understands that you must have a job to buy such a nice house. Annoyed, Frank says that he agrees with John, which is why he and April are leaving. John says he remembers now: his mother said they were moving to Europe, and that it's very strange. He laughs loudly, and Mrs. Givings, no longer even trying to sound cheerful, pleads with him to stop.

John suggests that Frank's emphasis on whether his job is boring is a sign that Frank lacks masculine maturity. Frank is immediately threatened and insulted by this assessment. He wants to show that he is also unconventional and goes against the grain, but is at the same time a stable, confident and strong man. When Frank brings up their impending move to Europe, John takes another swipe at his mother's conventional instincts for how people should try to live their lives. There is no way for Helen to put a positive spin on her son's mockery.

Frank, April, and John go outside for a walk. April lets Frank do most of the talking, but looks at him with admiration as he explains their plan to move to Europe to John. John approves of their plan, praising Frank for describing American life as a "hopeless emptiness." Uncomfortable with John's ecstatic praise, Frank changes the subject, asking about John's work as a mathematician. John replies that he has had thirty-seven electrical shock treatments in the past two months and can no longer remember any math. April says this is awful, and John mocks her, asking if she thinks math is really "interesting." April retorts that shock treatments sound awful, as does forgetting something you want to remember. She says she thinks math is probably boring. John tells Frank admiringly that April seems "female," not "feminine" like Helen.

Frank explains why they want to move to Europe by making his usual speech about American life. This performance may be mainly for April's benefit, or to convince himself that he really is the exceptional non-conformist he purports to be. But John's enthusiasm goes too far for Frank. He is uncomfortable with the idea that John agrees with him. April, on the other hand, truly sympathizes with John. Instead of being embarrassed by his disclosure of his shock treatment, she speaks with honest sympathy about why his ordeal sounds awful. To John, this honesty is an act of non-conformity. Specifically, it shows that April is willing to go against society's belief that women should always be cheerful and pleasant.

Watching John, Frank, and April through the window, Helen observes to Howard that they seem to be having a nice time. Howard suggests that she relax and let the others do the talking when they come back in. Helen does this, and she is pleased that the three young people reminisce about radio shows, like Don Winslow, that they listened to in their youth, although this is not the topic she had envisioned her son and the Wheelers discussing. When the Givingses depart, Helen says they had a very fun time. She expects John to mock her, but he is too busy bidding the Wheelers a friendly goodbye.

For once, Helen lets go of her anxious impulse to try to control everything and make it pleasant. Released from this pressure to be a certain way, John no longer focuses on angrily mocking his mother, but relaxes and enjoys reminiscing with his peers about radio shows they listened to when they were twelve or thirteen, a time when John, Frank, and April were all experiencing the complicated feelings about parents that accompany early adolescence.

After the Givingses are gone, April praises Frank for how he handled John, adding that John seemed nice and intelligent; she especially appreciated what he said about their being male and female. She says that he is the only person who seems to understand their plan to go to Europe. Frank feels drained, the odd exhilaration of the visit had distracted him from the tension he felt all week, but now that tension comes back. He can tell that April feels it too and that the way she is touching him and complimenting him is an attempt to cover up her true feelings.

Notably, Frank does not join April in her praise of John. He feels drained by trying to perform like an independent thinker and non-conformist, and a bit jealous that April seems to admire John's original way of thinking. April senses this and also feels that the unity that emerged between her and Frank after they decided to move to Europe is slipping away.

PART 2, CHAPTER 6

Bart Pollock takes Frank out to lunch in the restaurant in the lobby of a hotel. Frank plans to tell April that it is the same hotel where he went with his father and Oat Fields. As he listens to Pollock praise his work, Frank anxiously thinks about how he will mock the experience to April. They drink martini after martini. Pollock explains that getting an old-fashioned company to adapt to selling computers is as difficult as getting two tired, old people to raise a newborn. Frank asks Pollock if he remembers a man named Otis Fields, then explains that his father worked as a salesman for Knox. Pollock says he remembers Earl Wheeler, but thinks that man must have been too old to be Frank's father. Later, when he is sober, Frank is unsure if he confessed to Pollock that his father and mother were just like the couple from Pollock's analogy—too old to raise a baby.

On the basis of the pamphlet that Frank wrote, Pollock believes that Frank has a real talent for selling the new technology of computers. Frank enjoys the special treatment Pollock is showing him, but he knows that April will look down on it. He also feels the presence of his father during the conversation. Frank thinks back on his old grievances against his parents: he thinks that they failed to invest energy in him because they were old and tired by the time of his birth. At the same time, he may have wondered if they didn't invest in him because they saw him as unpromising, because he was clumsy with tools and lacked a strong, tough, masculine side as a boy. As he gets wined and dined and praised by a bigshot executive, Frank begins to feel for the first time that he is finally doing something that would have made his father proud.

Pollock is surprised that Bandy never mentioned that Frank is the son of a Knox employee, and Frank admits that he didn't tell his interviewer about it. Pollock says he sees how it was: Frank didn't want to get the job out of an unfair advantage as the son of an employee. He says that he bets that Frank told his father that giving his name had gotten him the job. Although this had not been Frank's intention, it is true. Frank had meant to mock the job at Knox to his father, but when he finally brought April to meet his parents and told them about the coming baby and his new job, Frank had been so struck with emotion that he pretended that he had mentioned his father's name, and said the people at Knox had spoken highly of Earl.

Bandy is picturing a very different dynamic between Frank and Earl than the one that existed. He imagines that Frank wanted to feel a proud self-sufficiency about getting the job at Knox, whereas Frank saw the job a joke. He also thinks that Frank had intentionally told his father that his name had helped him to get the job, when Frank had actually meant to act spitefully towards his father in doing this. But in an emotional outburst, Frank had in fact felt proud of securing work at Knox and led his father to believe mentioning his name had been a part of that achievement.

Pollock tells Frank that he wants to start a new division in the company focused on selling computers. He tells Frank that he pictures Frank travelling the country and explaining the computer to people at business seminars. Frank interrupts to tell Pollock that he plans on leaving the company in the fall, telling him that perhaps he should have mentioned this sooner. In his head, he hears April criticizing him for apologizing to Pollock, and he defends himself against this imagined accusation. Pollock says that if Frank changes his mind, this opportunity will be waiting for him, and that to continue working at Knox would be a fine tribute to Earl. Frank feels he could never tell April that this sentimental speech of Pollock's almost made him weep.

Frank's desire to rebel against his father has always led him to pretend he does not care about his work at Knox. For as long as Frank has known April, he has always taken this stance on corporate, conformist American culture, assuming the role of an independent thinker trapped in a boring world. But now that he is being offered a new, interesting career direction, he has to force himself to pretend not to be interested. It begins to seem possible that, deep down, Frank wanted the job at Knox because he wanted to be like his father and have a career that would make Earl proud.

For the next few nights, Frank has no opportunity to tell April about his meeting with Pollock, because she seems exhausted, tense, and withdrawn. Eventually, on the third or fourth night after his meeting, he asks her what is wrong. Full of unhappiness, April tells Frank that she is pregnant. Frank hugs her, hiding the fact that he is smiling in joy because this means they will not be able to go to Paris. He tells the miserable April that they will still be able to go, they will just need to adjust their plans. April says that it is her own fault for being careless, and now they won't be able to go to Paris for three or four years. Finally, wiping her tears away, April says they should wait to talk until the kids are asleep.

Frank is scared about how April will react to the news that he has gotten an enticing job offer. He has not yet admitted to himself that he wants to pursue the job, but when he hears that April is pregnant he is overjoyed. Now, he feels, they will be able to stay in their current life, he will never have to live up to his pretensions to be an exceptional man and free-thinker by trying to "find himself," and April will be focused on the responsibility of raising a new baby and unable to entertain more ideas of independence. Of course, none of this has to do with the new baby itself, who is sure to grow up in a tense and unhealthy household just as Michael and Jennifer have.

Frank goes to wash up for dinner, practicing in his head the speech he will make to April later. He plans to tell her about the offer from Pollock and how much more money he will be making. He will demonstrate to her that they will be able to have a much more fulfilling life once he has that money. If she asks him about how he will find himself, he will just say that that is his business. Looking in the mirror, he sees maturity and manliness in his face. He goes to the linen closet for a towel and sees a paper-wrapped package on the top shelf. Feeling afraid, Frank takes it down and discovers a newly bought **rubber syringe** inside the package. Without thinking, he storms into the kitchen and demands an explanation from April. She defiantly says that he cannot stop her from giving herself an abortion.

Frank is glad that April is pregnant because this will make it impractical for them to move to Paris. Instead of working in Paris while Frank finds himself, April will be expected to take care of the newborn. Frank never really wanted to move to Europe, both because he doubts that he is really cut out for the bohemian life he has always pretended to want and because he fears April gaining more independence from him. When Frank sees the rubber syringe, then, he feels that April is determined to gain this independence. The stakes are even higher for Frank with this pregnancy than they were during her first pregnancy, which she had also wanted to abort, because now more than Frank's control over April is at stake. In this instance, Frank's control over his own life is also on the line. Frank wants to stay put, continue working at Knox, and keep his current life, but he doesn't want to admit this to April. The pregnancy will allow him stay while still continuing to pretend to want to leave—but an abortion will force him to make the move to Europe.

PART 3, CHAPTER 1

It is natural for all humans to make sense of distressing circumstances with reference to time, the narrator says. The synchronized watches of soldiers facing a bombing, the appointment calendar of the business executive who feels that his schedule is too full and so no tragedy can strike, even the ability of the old man to remember the year of his first wife's death: these things, along with the changing of the seasons, help to create a sense of order out of chaos. Frank and April place the date of conception in the first week in May, on an occasion when her diaphragm had felt loose, and this means they have until the first week in August to decide whether April should induce an abortion in the way her old friend from acting school told her to. They mark the passage of time on a calendar hanging on the kitchen wall.

At the beginning of the novel's third part, it broadens its scope to include the general human experience. Instead of looking at the Wheelers and their issues, the narrator considers the way humans rely on measuring time to bring order to their life. By comparing Frank and April to soldiers facing danger, a person pretending danger is impossible, and an old man reflecting back on a loss long after it has happened, the narrator emphasizes that the decision that Frank and April are facing during the summer of 1955 is one of the most momentous of their lives. They feel the weight of this decision, but do not recognize how universal their experience really is.

The night that Frank finds the **rubber syringe**, April and Frank decide that there is plenty of time to discuss what to do together. They both see the weeks leading up to the first week of the third month of her pregnancy as enough time to convince the other. Frank looks at convincing April not to have an abortion as something like a courtship or a sales campaign. He takes her out to fancy restaurants to show her how much more interesting their life can be once they have more money. When April argues that he will not be able to discover his true passion if they do not move, he says that he is not willing to let her mutilate herself for him. April says that women have abortions all the time, but he sticks to the position that abortion is a crime against her body, and eventually he sees that she is embarrassed to be advocating for something so indecent.

During this period of negotiation neither Frank nor April says what they really want. April pretends she wants to go to Paris for Frank's sake, while Frank pretends he wants April to have the baby because he is morally opposed to abortion. Frank pushes the idea that abortion is immoral, suggesting that, as a man, it is his responsibility to protect April from endangering herself for his sake. Deep down, however, they both know that April wants to go to Paris for her own reasons, and April knows that Frank will find this attitude too independent for a woman and will be hurt and angry that she does not want him to be the center of her life.

Frank also begins to try to show April what a strong, responsible, manly man he is. He holds himself very upright so he will look taller, clenches his jaw, and gets out of bed each morning before April wakes so that she won't see him asleep. He feels slightly uncomfortable when he thinks about how disingenuous he is being, but he comforts himself that she also play-acted to convince him to move to Europe. Frank feels he could easily win April over if he could use this technique to influence her all day every day. But while he is at work, she is stuck in the boring world of their home. Meanwhile, Helen Givings continually drops by, pretending to want to talk about the sale of their house, which they have not yet called off, but actually intending to schedule more visits with John.

For the first time in the novel, it becomes clear how well Frank sees through April's attempts to convince him that she wants to move to Europe so that he can find himself. He realizes that she is unhappy, but does not want to allow her to pursue a life that would make her happy. This is partially because controlling her makes him feel like a man, but Frank also doesn't question himself, because he lives in a society that sees women as living their best lives as housewives. April's desire for change not only feels threatening to Frank; it is illegitimate in his eyes.

After an exhausting Saturday spent with the Campbells, Frank's attempts to convince April enter a new phase. April says that Frank is a much more moral person than she is, but he replies that this has nothing to do with morality, or at least not conventional morality. April objects, saying that there is no kind of morality other than conventional. Frank wants to scream at her in frustration and tell her she is a snob, but he only says that she must be tired, and he knows she knows better than that. She disagrees, saying she doesn't understand the real meaning behind many of the things he says. Frank feels disheartened: he doesn't know how will he convince her if everything he says is just words.

Frank sees himself as an independent thinker who feels oppressed by social structures, but his arguments for why April should not abort her pregnancy are based on traditional ideas. When April says she doesn't understand why there is a moral reason not to have an abortion, she adopts the same non-conformist attitude Frank often does. But Frank likes for women to admire this attitude in him—as when he told Maureen his thoughts about society—but not hold it themselves. He feels threatened by April's insistence on thinking independently and considers it pretentious snobbishness.

Frank decides to use a method he thought of as a final resort to try to convince April. He says that her motives may not be straightforward, but instead spring from emotions about her childhood. She asks if he means that she is emotionally disturbed. He denies this, but then goes on to indirectly assert that she is. Frank suggests that rejection by her own parents may have made April reluctant to have children. April says that she has had two children, but Frank retorts that she has wanted to abort two of them. April says that she can't help what she feels, even if it is somehow the result of her childhood. Speaking very gently, Frank says that they ought to bring her to a psychoanalyst. April says she wants to stop talking and go to bed. Frank fears he has lost the fight.

Frank's attempts to convince April to keep the baby because her life will be better once he makes more money and because it is immoral to have an abortion have failed. Now he suggests that her desire to abort her child is a sign of mental illness. He does this in the hopes that the fear of being labeled crazy will push April to agree to keep the pregnancy and give up on the plan to move to Europe. Frank refers to Freudian psychoanalytic ideas that suggest that unresolved issues in childhood can create emotional disturbances for adults.

The next day is the Sunday of John Givings's visit. John is in an agitated state when he arrives with Helen and Howard. Frank hopes that seeing a "full-fledged mental case" will convince April that she ought to care whether she is crazy. John asks when they are leaving for Europe, saying he wants Frank's help finding a lawyer. He pulls Frank aside, saying that he needs Frank's help to get in touch with a lawyer who can help him determine whether he has any rights. Howard Givings slowly approaches and John yells for him not to interrupt his conversation with Frank. Helen apologizes to the Wheelers, saying they shouldn't have come, and the Givings family departs.

John exemplifies what can happen to someone who bucks society's expectations. Instead of being charged with a crime for the incident with his parents, during which he did not physically harm anyone, he has been locked up in a mental institution indefinitely. He is being denied access to a lawyer and treated like a child by his parents. Although she is not acting violent, April is also trying to go against social codes, and to break the law barring all abortions.

After the Givings family leaves, April says that John's childhood must have been bad with parents like the Givings, but says that Frank probably thinks he is better off than she is just because he *had* parents. Frank denies that he means this. Later, after a night of tense silence, April asks Frank if he sees her desire for an abortion as "sort of a denial of womanhood." He says that he doesn't know—only an expert could say for sure—but he remembers reading about a woman who kept trying to get rid of her pregnancies because of "an infantile penis-envy thing." Frank continues, saying that if most little girls initially want to be boys, but get over this desire by wanting to emulate their mothers in setting up homes and having children, then it makes sense that April never felt that way, since she had no mother.

April has clearly been thinking about what Frank said the day before, although it is unclear whether she agrees with him. Frank presents a vivid explanation for April's desire not to have children. In his account, she never learned how to be a real woman because she never had a mother. Frank makes up a theory that abortions are the sign of unresolved "penis envy," suggesting that April doesn't want to have children because she has an abnormal desire to be a man that she will need professional help to cure (though this is also based on some of Freud's now-debunked theories of psychoanalysis).

April asks how they will find a good psychiatrist, but then says it doesn't really matter. With tears in her eyes, she says there isn't much to more to say. Frank knows that in the remaining eleven days before the deadline she might change her mind. He decides he needs to be vigilant for these days, first letting everyone know that they are cancelling their plan to move to Europe.

Frank wants April to have the baby, and by telling her that she is crazy if she does not have it, he has forced her capitulation. April says that it doesn't matter whether they find a good psychiatrist or not, perhaps suggesting that she has given up altogether.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2

The next day, Frank and April tell Michael and Jennifer that they are not moving to Paris for now. The children don't know how to take this news. Outside afterwards, Michael asks Jennifer to play, but she refuses. She wonders why her mother looked sad when she told her they would be staying, and why her father stayed home from work when he wasn't sick. Jennifer goes and peeks inside and watches her parents talking.

Jennifer, the older of the two children, is intensely preoccupied with understanding her parents. She realizes that they hide their motivations from her and wonders whether they are happy or sad and what it means for herself and her life.

A few nights later, the Wheelers tell the Campbells that they are not moving. Milly and Shep say they are glad that Frank and April are staying, but Shep feels unsettled. Since the Wheelers announced their coming move, Shep had been picturing April ten years from now, looking old and unattractive. He had also been giving Milly extra attention. Now, he sees that April is going to stay in town and is still as attractive to him as ever.

Shep has been combatting his jealousy at the idea of Frank getting to spend time with the elegant April in sophisticated surroundings by imagining that April will age and lose her elegance once she starts working. Shep has also been trying to convince himself he feels romantically towards Milly—but the Wheelers' new announcement derails his attempts to persuade himself.

Frank tells Jack Ordway that April is pregnant and they will not be moving to Paris. Ordway says the plan had always sounded a bit unrealistic. Then Frank goes to see Bart Pollock in his office. It is the hottest day of the year, and Frank is struck by how much less impressive Pollock looks sweating in his office than he had in the hotel restaurant. Pollock is glad to hear that Frank intends to stay at Knox, but he does not have a new job to offer him immediately. He tells Frank to continue working on the promotion pieces and that he will be in touch once the project shapes up.

Frank has gotten what he wanted, but now he is faced with some disappointing realities about staying at Knox. First, he is forced to hear that Ordway always thought that Frank was all talk and never really believed he had it in him to carry out the plan. Next, Pollock does not shower him with praise and express joy that he has decided to stay. Both of these reactions go against Frank's understanding of himself as "exceptional."

Helen can hardly process the news that the Wheelers will be staying. She is exhausted after spending a day at Greenacres talking to John's psychiatrist. The doctor said that John's trips out of the hospital should be stopped for five or six weeks because he has been agitated when he returns to the hospital. Helen had felt hopeless, knowing that six weeks from now the Wheelers would probably be gone. Then she had called April to cancel their upcoming visit and heard the news that the Wheelers would not be moving after all. She feels overjoyed.

Despite the disappointment of the Givingses' second, difficult visit to the Wheelers, when John insisted on asking Frank to find him a lawyer, Helen still feels that contact with intelligent and interesting, but emotionally stable people like the Wheelers can exert a good influence on John. Of course, from the readers' perspective the Wheelers don't seem like good influences at all.

It is early August, and Frank wakes up one day with a sense of dread. He and April have not been talking much in the last week. She seems distant and reserved. The night before, Frank had asked her if she had any regrets, and April had simply said it would be too late for her to have any. That morning, as Frank thinks about his victory in convincing April to keep the baby, he realizes that the sense of dread comes from the fact that he is going to have another baby, and he is not sure he wants one.

Amazingly, Frank gave no thought to whether he actually wanted another baby when he was waging his campaign to convince April to keep the pregnancy. Frank wants to force April to bear his children without really wanting the children themselves. For him, the decision to keep or terminate her pregnancy represented a struggle between himself and his wife for control in their relationship—not a debate over whether or not to bring a new life into the world.

It has been several weeks since Frank's conversation with Bart Pollock. Frank makes excuses to April for why he hasn't heard yet what kind of raise he will get. He says he must finish the "Speaking-of" promotions before he can talk to Pollock about money, but April says she is not rushing him. Frank says that he will stay in the office late a few nights that week. He is having more difficulty producing the next Speaking-of piece. One night, he listens to his last revision in the Dictaphone and decides that he has produced something good enough. He is about to leave when he hears Maureen Grube's heels clicking on the floor. He realizes that she has stayed late to see him, and decides that he will take her out.

When Frank had agreed to move to Paris, April showered him with the affirmation he craves. Now, however, April has retreated into herself. Although she has agreed to have the baby, she is not happy about it and will not pretend that she is. Once again, without April's praise and admiration, Frank turns to Maureen Grube to make himself feel better. Unlike April, Maureen gives Frank affirmation and attention, partly because she wants affirmation and attention from him *in order to reinforce her sense of herself as a sexy, sophisticated young woman.*

PART 3, CHAPTER 3

In the two-year period when Frank, April, Shep, and Milly were becoming close, but before they had joined the Laurel Players, the two couples had often gone to dance at Vito's Log Cabin to the music of the Steve Kovick Quartet. Steve Kovick is a washed-up drummer who tries to put all his passion into his performance, but mostly hurts the audience's ears. The bar is full of high school students who drink without showing ID, tough guys in leather jackets, and lonely bar regulars. Frank discovered the place and decided it was "so awful it's kind of nice." The two couples stopped going to the Log Cabin during rehearsals for *The Petrified Forest*, and have not been back since the play ended.

Frank takes the position that he only likes Vito's Log Cabin for ironic reasons. During the period when April, Shep and Milly were working on the production of The Petrified Forest, *they stopped visiting the bar because they were looking to pursue a more culturally enriched life, instead of laughing at cultural failures like Steve Kovick. The name "Vito's Log Cabin" even seems intended to contrast to the name of the play—after all, a "petrified forest" is also made of logs: fossilized logs replaced with stone and minerals over hundreds of thousands of years. Thus, while* The Petrified Forest *may represent a rich cultural tradition created over generations, Vito's Log Cabin represents its low-brow opposite.*

One night, after failing to come up with conversational topics, Frank, April, Shep, and Milly go back to the Log Cabin. April is withdrawn and silent, but Frank thinks of her unhappiness as her own problem. Frank feels confident because he's wearing a new suit similar to Bart Pollock's, and because of his affair with Maureen. He feels he will have to end the affair soon, but in the meantime, it is satisfying him perfectly. Her roommate has been home lately, so they have gone to a hotel where the anonymity makes him feel free.

Frank has begun to think that he no longer needs April's affirmation to be happy. He feels a boost in his confidence from the upcoming new job and from the resumption of his affair with Maureen. Instead of feeling he must live up to April's standards, he has decided that this is no longer his problem.

Frank dances with Milly, because he knows if he dances with April, she will say she wants to go home. Milly gets too drunk and needs to be brought home, but when they look for their cars, one is blocked in. April says that Frank should take Milly home while she and Shep stay at the bar until the car is free. Shep can hardly believe that he is left alone with April. He realizes that it would have been just as logical for April to drive Milly home, leaving Frank, and wonders if this means April wants time alone with him. April and Shep go back inside. As they dance, he shyly touches her back and remembers pressing himself against her last summer, on a night when she had been too drunk to care. Now she seems receptive to his touch. They have another drink, but Shep can think of nothing to say. He goes to check the car, praying that it is still blocked in. It is. He feels angry at himself for thinking something might happen between himself and April, but cannot shake his hope that it will.

Frank feels self-satisfied and dismissive of April's mood. It does not occur to him that either April or Shep might be interested in one another and he readily agrees to be the one to drive Milly home. April, on the other hand, seems to realize that Shep has feelings for her. Whether or not she returns these feelings is unclear, but she is happy to be distracted by them and to spend a few hours away from Frank. Shep sees April as the embodiment of taste and elegance, things that are missing in his life because he decided to pursue the life of a tough guy when he was young. Unexpectedly left alone with her, Shep studies everything April says and does for clues about her feelings towards him.

Shep returns to the bar. To his pleasure, April says she doesn't mind that the car is still there and they must stay longer. She begins to talk about the music the band is playing, saying it doesn't make her nostalgic because she never had any dates in grade school to dance to it. Shep says it is hard to believe that she didn't have dates, but he is too shy to say that it is unbelievable because she is lovely. Instead he says she must have had fun on vacations. April says she never had fun on vacations either, which is a sure sign that it was her own "Emotional Problem" to blame for her unhappiness. Shep says he didn't mean that. April continues to talk, and Shep feels she is airing out grievances to him, without being interested in speaking to him.

April opens up to Shep in a way she no longer will to Frank. Although she may see Shep as nothing more than a sounding board, she knows he is a sympathetic one. But when she raises the idea that she has an "emotional problem," Shep is confused. April reveals how unhappy she was in social circumstances as a child and young adult, revealing that she has never felt that she fit in with those around her. Shep can relate to her experience because he has also felt alienated from those around him, but he is too shy to explain this, and April doesn't realize that they have anything in common.

Suddenly, April asks Shep to jitterbug. Shep abandons himself to the dance, enraptured by the way April looks dancing. They have another drink, and Shep is sure that April is interested in him. He thinks about going to a motel or finding a place in a pasture to lie on his army poncho under the stars. In the parking lot, April kisses him, then they get into the car. He says he wants to take her somewhere, but she insists on having sex in the backseat of the car. Afterwards, Shep tells April he loves her, but she tells him not to say that. Shep is shocked to remember that April is pregnant. He says she must think he is an idiot. April says she doesn't think he is an idiot, but she doesn't know who he is and she doesn't know who she is herself either.

For Shep, this sexual encounter is a dream come true. April, meanwhile, seems to be trying to forget her cares and feel free by dancing and sleeping with Shep, but she finds that her unhappiness is only more intense after they have sex. When Shep tells her he loves her, it doesn't matter to her at all, neither for his sake, nor for her own. Unlike Frank, who looks to Maureen for a confidence boost, April is far too unhappy to be cheered up by casual sex. She is so unhappy that she is unable to listen to, or connect with, a kindred spirit.

PART 3, CHAPTER 4

Three or four days later, Frank walks towards Maureen's apartment, determined to break it off with her. Frank feels up for the task. Similarly, he had felt himself up to the task of finishing the Speaking-of series that week and turning it in to Bart Pollock. Pollock told Frank that his new division was coming together, and he wanted to talk to Frank about salary. Frank had felt confident during the interaction, not thinking about what his father or April would think of his salary negotiation. Pollock gives him a $3,000 raise, which Frank thinks will cover his wife's bills with a psychiatrist. Pollock tells Frank that the coming Monday they will have a conference with other members of the new division to discuss the upcoming work.

Frank is filled with a new confidence. He is (for the moment at least) able to set aside the emotional ties that caused him to feel insufficiently manly in the past. He feels his father would be proud of him and that he no longer needs to rebel against him by pretending to be exceptional. He feels April's unhappiness is her problem and that he should be able to do as he pleases without regard to her. He feels he is fulfilling his responsibilities to her by promising to pay for her treatment, and even feels that he no longer needs the crutch of an affair with Maureen.

Now, Frank feels he needs to sort out his personal life. April has taken to sleeping on the couch again, saying she hasn't been sleeping well. In earlier times, this would have filled Frank with anguish, but now he congratulates himself on not being upset by it at all. He feels that he and April have been through a great deal, and he can now see that their problems are separate. It makes sense to him that this would be hard on her. He anticipates bringing her to see a psychiatrist soon, imagining that the psychiatrist will be an academic Viennese man who confirms Frank's opinion of April's difficulties. Frank thinks about what he will say to Maureen, promising himself he won't apologize to her for anything. Too much of his life, he feels, has been wasted apologizing.

Frank feels less and less responsible for April's unhappiness, now that he has written it off as the result of a mental illness caused by her childhood. Frank's idea of a psychiatrist is someone who reinforces his own ideas about how his wife should live. Part of his confidence in being blameless towards April carries over to how he feels about Maureen. He thinks that if he avoids apologizing, he will be able to retain the confidence in his own masculinity that the affair brought to his life.

As Frank approaches Maureen's apartment, he is stopped by a woman carrying a suitcase. It is Norma, Maureen's roommate, who is on her way out of town and asks to speak to Frank. Unwillingly, he follows her into a café, critiquing her appearance in his mind. Norma tells him that Maureen had planned to come on vacation with her, but backed out. Norma is annoyed, but also concerned. Maureen, she says, has been through a lot and needs guidance, not a pointless affair with a married man whom she thinks is in love with her. Norma asks Frank if he is in love with Maureen and Frank says that this is none of her business. Norma says she thinks Frank is probably a nice man with a nice wife and kids in the suburbs who probably made a mistake by starting an affair with Maureen. He denies this characterization, and says he thinks that Norma is a meddling pain in the ass and "possibly a latent lesbian." He leaves the café quickly. He thinks he will guffaw, but instead he feels like he can't breathe.

Frank has given little consideration to Maureen as a person, and instead used her for the way she makes him feel: like a man. He feels he doesn't need her anymore, so he plans to dump her. Similarly, by considering Norma's body and appearance, he is objectifying her and defending himself from what she might say by trying to think of her as less of a real person and more of a body meant to please him or not. However, Norma thrusts the reality of Maureen's thoughts and feelings into Frank's view. She also shows him all that he has led Maureen to believe about how he feels for her. He is particularly put off by being told about all this by a confident woman, because he himself has always been able to use Maureen's lack of confidence to his advantage. He is also particularly stung by Norma's characterization of himself as a nice, normal man from the suburbs, since he has always wanted to see himself as out-of-the-ordinary. When he lashes out at Norma by calling her a lesbian, he is suggesting that a woman standing up to a man for another woman is inherently abnormal. (During the 1950s, homosexuality was considered a mental illness.) But, as is obvious by his inability to laugh at his interaction with Norma, Frank feels shaken by their encounter. He no longer feels like a strong confident man as he goes into the interaction with Maureen.

Frank rings the bell and Maureen lets him in. She asks if he is alone, then emerges from her bedroom, naked and dancing. He struggles to escape her embrace, then finally says they need to talk. The rest of the conversation occurs in a haze for Frank. Maureen quickly puts on a robe, then asks how she is supposed to feel about the position he's put her in. He apologizes over and over. On the train afterward, he continues to think about how to convince her not to be upset. Through Saturday and until Sunday Frank thinks about Maureen, when suddenly it comes to him: he can forget the entire incident and put it out of his head. He recalls the $3,000 raise and looks forward to the conference with Pollock the next day.

Maureen is trying to overcome her self-consciousness by forcing herself to do what she thinks a sexy, vivacious young woman having an affair would do. Frank dashes these hopes for her, but he also leaves the interaction feeling like he has lost the extra confidence in his masculinity that he gained from their affair. He returns to his newfound sense of indifference to women's feelings, however. After thinking guiltily about his interaction with Maureen for a day, he decides to draw confidence from his upcoming new job and forget about Maureen's feelings.

Feeling better, Frank decides he will also talk to April that night about why she has been sleeping on the sofa. He plans to say to her that it's been a crazy summer, and he knows she may feel lonely and confused. Frank takes a long shower and spends a long time dressing and looking in the mirror. He goes to the kitchen, where he notices that April is wearing a maternity dress for the first time. He asks where the kids are, and she says they are at the Campbells'. Frank begins to launch into the speech he had been preparing, saying that it has been a crazy summer, but April cuts him off. She says that she doesn't feel like talking about why she isn't sleeping with him.

Frank talks down to April, as he would to an emotionally disturbed person. But April does not want to be condescended to by Frank. She does not tell him, but she may be sleeping on the couch after the unsettling emotional reaction she had to sleeping with Shep Campbell, and how little it offered her as an escape from her unhappiness with her life. Frank has forced her to have his child, but she is not willing to pretend to be happy to make him feel good.

Frank presses April to talk, and she says she is not sleeping in bed with him because she doesn't love him. Frank refuses to take this seriously, saying he wonders if her behavior has something to do with the fact that she will start psychoanalysis soon. April says she doesn't care how he justifies her behavior to himself. Frank says he has also acted neurotically lately. He tells April about Maureen, describing her as a girl he hardly knew with whom he had an affair after feeling his masculinity threatened by April's desire to have an abortion. April asks if he told her about the affair because he thinks it will make her jealous or fall in love with him. She says that she figured out this week that she doesn't love him and never has. Then she goes into the living room. Frank suddenly realizes that this Sunday the Givingses will be visiting. Realizing there is not much time before they arrive, he follows April into the living room, yelling that she loves him.

When April tells Frank she doesn't love him, he tries several tactics to keep from believing she is serious. First, he tries to talk down to her as if she is emotionally disturbed and acting out. Second, he tries to make her jealous, by telling her about his affair with Maureen. He expects that she will feel possessive, but instead she is scornful of him for thinking the affair will upset her. April's indifference to the news of Frank's cheating shatters Frank's new sense of detachment and independence. All at once, he feels a desperate need to get April to engage with him. The visit from the Givingses could not come at a worse moment.

PART 3, CHAPTER 5

Helen and Howard drive to Greenacres to take John out for a visit. In the car, Helen tells John that she has good news: the Wheelers will not be moving to Europe. John is shocked and asks why not. Helen says she doesn't know and didn't ask. She tries to talk about the scenery out the car window, but John is hostile. When they arrive at the Wheelers' house, the house looks somehow unwelcoming. Helen peeks into the window and sees Frank looking desperately upset. He sees her looking in the window before she has time to move away, and lets her in. Everyone feels awkward, and Helen realizes that they must have been fighting when she arrived.

John thought the Wheelers' decision to move to Europe was a sign that they were kindred spirits. Since he has been locked in a mental institution, he took an outsized interest in the Wheeler's plan to escape the boring life in the suburbs, feeling that they were escaping the very life that he was locked up for rebelling against. He thus feels personally let down that they are not following through with the plan.

John abruptly asks the Wheelers why they aren't moving to Europe. Frank says their minds were made up for them, gesturing towards April's visibly pregnant stomach. Helen exclaims her congratulations, but she notes that April doesn't look happy. John persists, saying that people have babies in Europe. Frank says that he needs to earn money to support the baby. John agrees that money is a good reason, but it's not usually the real reason. He asks if April talked Frank out of it, then says that she looks "tough and female." He says it must have been Frank who got cold feet. Helen and Howard try to stop John from speaking, but he continues. He says that Frank probably got April pregnant just so he wouldn't have to move.

John sees through Frank's explanations and expresses his contempt for Frank. He intuits exactly what happened: Frank used April's pregnancy as a reason to give up the plan to move to Europe. April is silent, not supporting Frank's conventional explanation. While Mrs. Givings gives the typical "feminine" reaction, responding with joy to the news of April's pregnancy, John reads April's silence to mean that she is unhappy that they are not moving and refuses to play the proud, happy mother as her society dictates women should.

Frank clenches his fists angrily and says that John should keep his opinions in the insane asylum where they belong. Everyone is uncomfortable except John, who says that he feels bad for April, but also for Frank, since "making babies is the only way he can prove he's got a pair of balls." Howard and Helen try to usher John out, apologizing to the Wheelers. John says he's very sorry, but of course he doesn't have very much to be glad about in life. Helen is glad to see that he is letting Howard lead him out the door. But John makes one last remark. He says he doesn't have much to be happy about in life, given his position in a mental institution. But, pointing at April's stomach, he says, "you know what I'm glad of? I'm glad I'm not gonna be that kid."

To defend himself against John's insulting remarks, Frank uses the same tactic he has used against April in the past. He suggests that it is a sign of insanity to question him, especially since he has the backing of society's expectations for how men and women should behave. John strikes back by suggesting that April and Frank's unhappiness will make the life of their unborn child unhappy. John is considered "crazy," but his insults are extremely perceptive.

PART 3, CHAPTER 6

After the Givingses leave, Frank takes a large drink of whiskey. He says to April that he knows what April is thinking: that John was right. April agrees. Frank says John is insane and that insanity is the inability to love. April begins to laugh hysterically. When she quiets down, she says that Frank is an amazing talker, and if black could be made white by talking he would do it. She asks if she is crazy because she doesn't love him; he says she isn't crazy and she does love him, then moves to touch her. She says she will scream if he comes close to her. Frank approaches and she screams at the top of her lungs. He yells that she is an empty shell of a woman, and that he wishes she had aborted the baby. Storming from the room, Frank congratulates himself on this stinging remark.

April refuses to let Frank convince her that his position is correct or control her. She also will not tell Frank she loves him to boost his ego. April finally sees that Frank is not destined to become someone she would consider exceptional. Instead, she sees, as Pollock does, that his strongest ability is as a salesman, convincing people to believe what he wants them to. No longer trying to convince April that she is angry with him because she is emotionally disturbed and needs psychiatric help, Frank lashes out at her.

Frank locks himself in their room and then hears the kitchen door slam. He fears that April is leaving him and follows her out of the house. She tells him to leave her alone or she will scream. He retreats to the house to watch her. Eventually, she comes back inside and calls Milly, asking her if she can keep the kids overnight. Then April lies down on the couch facing away from him. In the past, Frank would have gone on a drive, but now he feels weak with emotion. He locks himself in their bedroom with the bottle of whiskey and falls asleep to terrible dreams.

Frank feels completely drained by this fight. April is no longer susceptible to his arguments about her mental health. He has shown that he was bluffing when he acted like he disapproved of abortion for moral reasons by saying that he wishes she had given herself an abortion. He feels that he has lost all sense of himself as confident and restrained, as he believes a strong man ought to be. Instead he is utterly susceptible to his emotions about April.

At one point during the night, he thinks he sees April sitting by the bed. He says to her, "oh, my baby, don't go away," and she replies, "it's all right, Frank. Go to sleep." He wakes up extremely hung over, unsure if this was a dream. He realizes he must go to work, because today is the day of Pollock's introductory conference.

This moment echoes Frank's dream (in Part 1, Chapter 3) that his parents are watching him sleep and looking at him tenderly. It shows that Frank desires a similar kind of unconditional love from April as he did from his parents as a young child.

Frank is shocked to see the table set for breakfast for two. April speaks politely to him and asks him to tell her about the conference and the coming work for Pollock. Frank wonders if their fight finally got all their anger out of their systems. He draws a diagram of the way a computer works on a napkin, and April tells him it's actually sort of interesting. Struggling with his emotions, Frank thanks April for the breakfast. As he leaves, he doesn't know what to say. He asks April if this means she doesn't hate him. She says she doesn't. He leans in hesitantly to kiss her. She looks surprised, but then kisses him back, and he leaves for work.

April shows an interest in Frank's work that he has always hoped for, and Frank feels happy, surprised and confused at this change. Instead of wondering why she has had this sudden change of personality, Frank approves of April's behavior, which he sees as appropriate for a wife. He feels hopeful that the blowout fight has allowed them to come together as a couple again. For readers, however, April's drastic change of behavior signals something ominous.

PART 3, CHAPTER 7

April watches Frank leave, waving and smiling goodbye to him. She goes back in the kitchen and is still smiling when she sees the diagram he drew on the table. She begins to cry, but steadies herself as she washes the dishes. She calls Milly and asks her to keep the kids, saying she still doesn't feel well. April tells Milly that Frank may come pick them up later, but that they should keep it open-ended, and says to kiss the kids for her and tell them she loves them. After she gets off the phone, April tries to smoke a cigarette to steady herself, then vomits. She remembers her Aunt Claire telling her never to do anything until she had "thought it through" and then to do her best.

This is the first time in the novel that April's perspective is given, even though she is one of its central characters. The novel may only include April's perspective near its end to emphasize that April is no longer letting Frank's thoughts about her define her. April is not as calm and collected as she seemed to Frank, but she is trying to regain her composure so that she can do something. She thinks back on the advice of the woman who raised her, but whom she had told Frank she never loved.

April goes to the wastebasket and takes out crumpled letters she tried to write Frank the night before. They are full of blame and hate. She had tried to write until five in the morning, then had given up and taken a long hot bath. Coming into their bedroom to get dressed, she had seen Frank lying on the bed, looking ill. She felt shocked to realize that not only did she not love him, she also didn't hate him. She soothed him and told him to sleep, then she "thought it through. "

At first April felt full of blame and hatred towards Frank, but then she regained a senseof her own separateness from him. Instead of hating him, she sees him as pitiable in his dependence on her to make him feel better, so she tries to soothe him. This does not, however, reawaken feelings of love for him in her.

April feels that it was not dishonest or wrong to treat Frank kindly this morning—the thing she had done wrong was long before, when she had taken Frank seriously. She had let herself go down a path that led her to where she is now, saying the opposite of what she means. She feels she has been living her life the way the Laurel Players act, or Steve Kovick drums: "earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and all wrong." April straightens the desk, makes Frank's bed, then brings the wastebasket of letters outside to burn them. She can hear children's voices mixed in with the birdsong, but cannot discern Jennifer and Michael's voices.

April feels she has not been true to herself throughout her marriage. She thinks she never should have taken Frank seriously and tried to change herself and what she thought to suit his needs. She sees her life as being lived like a poorly executed performance that no one with good taste would want to see. Although she tries to hear her children's voices, Jennifer and Michael hardly enter her thoughts about the course her life has taken.

April plunges into a memory from her childhood. She is trying to tell the neighborhood children about the beautiful gifts April's mother brought her during a visit. Her friend Margie Rothenberg will not listen and asks why April's mother only stayed for two days instead of a week, as April had said she would. April invites Margie over, but Margie says she must go home to listen to Don Winslow. April hears her Aunt Claire call to her. Aunt Claire says that April's father is on his way up to Boston and will stop to visit her in fifteen minutes. April dresses in a frenzy, peppering her aunt with questions about how long her father will stay.

Don Winslow of the Navy (a radio show mentioned by John Givings earlier in the novel) was a radio show that aired between 1937 and 1939, so this memory occurs when April is around 13. By mentioning this detail, the novel hints that this visit may have been the last time April saw her father, who killed himself in Boston in 1938. April gets little attention from her friend, feeling left out and odd because her parents do not live with her.

April watches for her father's car. As he gets out of the car, she admires his tall figure, then runs to hug him, taking in his smell and voice. He tells her how much she has grown. She tries to take in every detail about him and laughs at the jokes he tells Aunt Claire, even though she doesn't understand them. After a short visit, her father gets up to leave. April gets upset, saying he has only stayed for an hour and didn't even bring her a present. Her father brings her out to his car and looks through his belongings to find a present for her. He finds a bottle of White Horse whisky and cuts a tiny charm in the shape of a white horse from the neck of the bottle. He gives it to her, saying she can keep it forever.

Earlier in the novel, Frank mentioned this white horse charm as one of April's worthless souvenirs of her parents. April feels desperate to take in and hold onto as much of her father as she can. She feels completely captivated by his physical presence and personality. This moment in her early adolescence defines for her what a man should be like—and, if this is truly the last time April ever sees her father, it makes sense she remembers everything vividly about this day.

Back in the present, April has finished burning the letters. She goes back inside, where she can no longer hear the children's voices. She writes Frank a simple letter. It reads, "Dear Frank, Whatever happens please don't blame yourself." She almost signs it "Love, April" but stops herself and just writes "April." In the kitchen, she fills a large stewing pot with water and sets it to boil. She puts tongs and the two parts of the **rubber syringe** into the boiling water. She then puts a pile of towels in the bathroom, writes the phone number for the hospital down, and props it up next to the telephone. April watches the syringe move in the boiling water, waiting to turn off the heat and let it cool. In her head, she again hears her Aunt Claire warning her to think it through, but she feels sure that she needs no further advice. She thinks that all truly honest actions must be taken alone.

April prepares to give herself an abortion, knowing that, this late in her pregnancy, the procedure could be fatal. Perhaps she thinks back on the last time she saw her father before his death because she knows she too may die. Her last act is to tell Frank not to blame himself. April believes that it is not Frank's fault her life has turned out this way, but her own fault for ever allowing him to convince her to live in a way she didn't want to. She feels confident that she is being true to herself at last by attempting to give herself an abortion. She thinks she has been dishonest to herself in making decisions with Frank, and she is determined to regain her independence.

PART 3, CHAPTER 8

At two o'clock that afternoon, Milly is resting, thinking that six kids are too many for one person to handle, when she hears a siren and sees an ambulance pulling onto Revolutionary Road. She has a feeling of foreboding, but thinks she will only seem silly if she calls April. Then she gets a call from Helen Givings, who tells her she saw an ambulance pulling out of the Wheelers' driveway. Milly calls Shep.

Milly has always worried about seeming good enough to be friends with April, and she feels too self-conscious about April's judgment to call her to see if she is all right. Helen, who usually pretends to be too good to know Milly's name, immediately calls her when she sees the ambulance. The usual attitudes about class seem to break down when there is an emergency.

At work, Shep is thinking about April and their incredible night together. He had called her afterwards and told her he was in love with her, and she had threatened to hang up on him. Shep gets called to the phone and hopes, against all logic, that it will be April. Instead it is Milly, with the news that April has been taken away in an ambulance. Shep feels suddenly filled with competence, like he did during the war. He calls the hospital, finds out that April is being treated for a miscarriage, and then calls Frank. Frank is pulled from his meeting and sounds shocked. Shep runs to the train station to wait for Frank, who is coming back from the city, so he can drive him to the hospital. Waiting for Frank, Shep calls Milly and the hospital back again.

Since sleeping with April, Shep has felt powerless to do anything about his feelings, particularly because April seems so completely closed off to hearing his professions of love. Now, he springs to action. The tough guy persona he cultivated as a boy trying to grow into a man, which served him well under high-pressure situations during the war, can be brought to bear on this situation. He feels competent as he directs Milly, Frank, and the workers at the hospital to do his bidding or give him information.

Frank arrives and Shep drives him to the hospital. Frank looks terrible and it scares Shep. When they arrive, the nurse won't let Frank in to see April. A doctor speaks to Frank. Shep sits down and thinks that it's impossible that April is dying: hospitals are places where babies are born and miscarriages are dealt with. Frank tells Shep that he hardly understood what the doctor said to him, but that the fetus was out of her before she arrived at the hospital and that she has lost a lot of blood and is unconscious. Shep says he will go get them some coffees. Frank says he doesn't need one, but Shep goes off because he has to go to the bathroom. It takes him a long time to go to the restroom and then to find coffee, and when he returns, he can tell that April has died.

Shep feels that his world is a stable place where predictable things happen. Although he is acting brave in the face of an emergency, as if on the battlefield, he cannot conceive of this suburban hospital as a place where death might occur. But Frank, who has guessed that April must have tried to give herself a late-term abortion, realizes that these assumptions (which also guide his understanding of his world) no longer apply. Shep is still following social codes that apply outside of emergencies, and so doesn't want to say that he needs to urinate, instead saying that he will get them coffees. This hesitance to mention a bodily function means that Frank is left alone for the crushing moment when he learns April has died.

Later, Shep can hardly remember what happens over the course of the next few hours. He drives around with Frank in his car and buys him a pint of whiskey. He calls Milly and tells her what happened, then tells her to calm down and not to let on to the children that anything has happened. During the ride, Frank tells Shep that April killed herself. He says she wanted to give herself an abortion the month before when it would have been safe, but he talked her out of it. Franks adds that she was so nice to him that morning. Shep feels he can never know for certain if this is true, or if he himself played any part in April's death.

Frank realizes that by convincing April not to give herself an abortion earlier in her pregnancy and by saying the previous day that he wished she had aborted the pregnancy, he played a role in her death. On the other hand, he cannot understand the way April treated him this morning. Was she trying to treat him kindly so that he would remember her as kind? Was she merely trying to get rid of him so that she could carry out her plan? Shep feels similarly uncertain about what it meant that April decided to sleep with him.

Milly thinks she did a good job keeping calm in front of the children, but when Frank and Shep get to the Campbells' house, Milly feels she is of no help. Shep tells her that Frank said that April killed herself attempting to abort her pregnancy. Milly tells Shep that they can take turns sitting with Frank in the kitchen, but she sits in the living room not daring to bother them. When she finally looks into the kitchen, Shep is asleep at the kitchen table and Frank is gone.

Despite the seriousness of the moment, Milly still feels self-critical about her ability to play the role of a woman. She wants to be nurturing and provide Frank comfort, but she also feels worried that she will not be able to handle it. When Shep falls asleep, Frank leaves the house.

Frank looks out of place as he runs through the cheerful, orderly streets of the Revolutionary Hill Estates in desperate grief. As he approaches his house, he pretends for a moment that it was all a nightmare, but then he sees its darkened windows and knows that it really happened. Inside the house, Frank observes that April was very tidy about cleaning up the blood. As he scrubs the remaining blood on the floor, he can hear her voice offering him practical advice for how to take care of it. Frank goes into April's closet and embraces her clothes, then finds the note she left him. At that moment, Shep arrives, looking for Frank. Frank hides in the closet, only coming out after Shep has left. After that interruption, however, Frank can no longer hear April's voice.

The sights and sounds of the suburban development convey the sense that death and disaster is impossible. Instead, the houses themselves seem to signify a world filled with happy, prosperous, wholesome families. In his house, Frank hears April's voice saying soothingly conventional things. She talks to him not about her death or their relationship, but about the practical task of cleaning up the mess. Despite her strong personality in life, April has now become a stereotype of a housewife in Frank's mind, because this idea of her is the most comforting one to him.

PART 3, CHAPTER 9

In the months following April's death, Shep listens to Milly describe what happened many times. He feels annoyed at the way Milly seems to get some pleasure out of the dramatic story. This is especially distasteful to him when he listens to her tell the story to Nancy and Warren Brace, the couple who have moved into the Wheelers' home.

In the same way that Milly told the Wheelers about John Givings's institutionalization, she sensationalizes the story of what happened to April Wheeler. For Shep, April was special, and he dislikes hearing how Milly seems to use her death as conversational material.

Milly tells the Braces that they didn't know where Frank was until the next afternoon at 2 PM. Meanwhile, Milly had continued to pretend to Jennifer and Michael that nothing was wrong. Frank then came to the Campbells' house after going to the hospital to sign papers. He told the Campbells that he had called his brother in Pittsfield, who would come down and help. Then Frank took the children out to break the news to them. After that, the children had gone to live in Pittsfield with Frank's brother, while Frank had moved to the city, going up to see them on the weekends. Milly says Frank's brother and his wife are wonderful people, although they are much older.

Frank used his children to bind April to him and keep her from leaving him. With her gone, he feels no real connection to them and sends them to be raised by an uncle. This is darkly ironic, as it combines the worst aspects of both April's and Frank's upbringings. He leaves his children to be raised by a much older couple who didn't plan on having children (as his parents did) and he himself essentially abandons them (as April's parents did). It seems likely that Michael and Jennifer will await Frank's visits with the same eagerness that April once awaited her own parents' visits, and the cycle of unhealthiness continues in a new generation.

Milly tells the Braces that she and Shep had not seen Frank again until he came back for the sale of the house. Frank told them then that he had found a note from April that night which kept him from killing himself. Milly says Frank had lost a lot of weight and had said that analysis was helping him. Milly says Frank seemed to be moving on courageously—he is now working for Bart Pollock Associates. Warren Brace says that this is an interesting new company working on industrial public relations in the electronics field. Shep goes into the kitchen to refill the drinks, then goes out into the backyard. He angrily thinks to himself that Frank would never have had the guts to kill himself. Shep thinks back on the way Frank talked only about his stupid job and his analyst, describing working through issues he had with his father.

With April gone, Frank has also given up pretending he doesn't find corporate work fulfilling. He has gone to therapy himself to confront his feelings about his father, which also kept him from admitting that he was interested in the work he did at Knox. Frank is actually talented at what he does and was only held back by the bored posture he took for many years to keep April's respect and rebel against his father's values. Shep still subscribes to the cultural ideals that Frank had only pretended to believe in. Although April never realized it about him, Shep shared her values more than Frank ever did.

Smelling the spring air, Shep is reminded of April on the stage during *The Petrified Forest*. He begins to cry, then stops himself and goes inside. Milly turns to him and says that this terrible experience had brought her and Shep closer together. Shep reflects that this is true. Although he still sees Milly as foolish, he can depend on her to stay by his side, alive.

Although Shep grieves for April, he also reminds himself to feel grateful for Milly. He sees that loyalty like hers is worth more in the long run than April's refined taste and elegant appearance. He can depend on her support, and he is grateful for this.

Helen Givings had also gone through a period of shock and then recovery after April's death. She feels that John was to blame for April's death and decides that he should no longer leave Greenacres because he is too destructive. She and Howard reduce the frequency of their visits to once a month. When John asks about the Wheelers, they lie to him. Helen buys a puppy and takes great delight in training him. After selling the Wheelers' house, she feels ready to put the Wheelers behind her. She is busy with work and finds the restful evenings in her comfortable house satisfying.

Although the things John said to the Wheelers about their marriage and future baby were unkind, they were not insane. Yet Helen, with the support of society, decides that permanent confinement in a mental institution should be the result of breaking taboos and speaking inconvenient truths. Helen then moves on from her son, and finds the puppy she adopts to be a much easier more gratifying project than her own child.

One night in May, Helen tells Howard that the Braces are the first really nice people she has ever found to live on the house on Revolutionary Road. She explains that the Wheelers were a bit neurotic for her taste. Although she never emphasized this, they were difficult to deal with and they let the house depreciate. Frank ruined the lawn by trying to build a **stone path**. Helen had also found a box of **sedum plantings**, which she collected for them, in a corner in the cellar, and she felt appalled that they would treat a living thing in that way. Howard Givings hears nothing, however, because he has turned his **hearing aid** off.

Although Helen saw the Wheelers as similar to her in class background, she now wants to forget she ever knew them. Although she has condemned her son to an endless term in a mental institution, she hypocritically criticizes the Wheelers for their treatment of the plant she got them. For Helen, not taking care of the plant shows that they did not share her values – either because they were mentally ill or not her cultural equals. While Helen is talking through her feelings about this, Howard has tuned her out completely, preserving their harmonious coexistence by ignoring his wife entirely, and closing the book with a last depressing image of marriage.

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