

## Unseen extract 4: *Revolutionary Road*

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Read the extract carefully. It is taken from *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates which was first published in 1961. The novel, set in suburban America in 1955, follows the hopes and aspirations of Frank and April Wheeler who see themselves as very different from their suburban neighbours and plan to escape their dull existence by moving to Paris so that Frank can ‘find himself’.

### Sample question

Explore the significance of the emptiness of modern life in this extract.

Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that Yates shapes meanings.

### Extract

‘This whole country’s *rotten* with sentimentality,’ Frank said one night, turning ponderously from the window to walk the carpet. ‘It’s been spreading like a disease for years, for generations, until now everything you touch is flabby with it.’

‘Exactly,’ she said, enraptured with him.

‘I mean isn’t that what’s the matter, when you get right down to it? I mean even more than the profit motive or the loss of spiritual values or the fear of the bomb or any of those things? Or maybe it’s the result of those things; maybe it’s what happens when all those things start working at once without any real cultural tradition to absorb them. Anyway, whatever it’s the result of, it’s what’s killing the United States. I mean isn’t it? This steady, insistent vulgarizing of every idea and every emotion into some kind of pre-digested intellectual baby-food; this optimistic, smiling-through, easy-way-out sentimentality in everybody’s view of life?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes.’

‘And I mean is it any wonder all the men end up emasculated? Because that *is* what happens; that *is* what’s reflected in all this bleating about ‘adjustment’ and ‘security’ and ‘togetherness’ – and I mean Christ you see it everywhere: all this television crap where every joke is built on the premise that daddy’s an idiot and mother’s always on to him; and these loathsome little signs people put up in their front yards – you ever notice those signs up on the Hill?’

‘The ‘The’ signs, you mean; with the people’s name in the plural? Like ‘The Donaldsons?’

'Right!' He turned and smiled down at her in triumphant congratulation for having seen exactly what he meant. 'Never 'Donaldson' or 'John J. Donaldson' or whatever the hell his name is. Always 'The Donaldsons.' You picture the whole cozy little bunch of them sitting around all snug as bunnies in their pajamas, for God's sake, toasting marshmallows. I guess the Campbells haven't put a sign up like that yet, but give 'em time. The rate they're going now, they will.' He paused here for a deep-throated laugh. 'And my God, when you think how close we came to settling into that kind of existence.'

'But we didn't,' she told him. 'That's the important thing.'

Another time, quite late, he walked up close to the sofa and sat down on the edge of the coffee table, facing her. 'You know what this is like, April? Talking like this? The whole idea of taking off to Europe this way?' He felt tense and keyed up; the very act of sitting on a coffee table seemed an original and wonderful thing to do. 'It's like coming out of a Cellophane bag. It's like having been encased in some kind of Cellophane for years without knowing it, and suddenly breaking out. I felt like this going up the line the first time, in the war. I remember acting very grim and scared because that was the fashionable way to act, but I couldn't really put my heart in it. I mean I was scared, of course, but that's not the point. What I really felt didn't have anything to do with being scared or not scared. I just felt this terrific sense of life. I felt full of blood. Everything looked realer than real; the snow on the fields, the road, the trees, the terrific blue sky all marked up with vapour trails – everything. And all the helmets and overcoats and rifles, and the way the guys were walking; I sort of loved them, even the guys I didn't like. And I remember being very conscious of the way my body worked, and the sound of the breathing in my nose. I remember we went through this shelled-out town, all the broken walls and rubble, and I thought it was beautiful. Hell, I was probably as scared as anybody else, but inside I never felt better. I kept thinking: this is really true. This is the truth.'

'I felt that way once too,' she said, and in the shyness of her lips he saw that something overpoweringly tender was coming next.

'When?' He was as bashful as a schoolboy, unable to look her full in the face.

'The first time you made love to me.'

The coffee table tipped absurdly and banged straight again, rattling its cups, as he moved from its edge to the edge of the sofa and took her in his arms; and the evening was over.

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