

Superficial values in revolutionary road

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



When colonial settlers arrived in North America on the Mayflower in 1620, the primary concern of the newly established society was to ensure survival; however, nowadays, Western consumer society has placed a significant emphasis on shallow ideals, particularly the worth of outward appearance. Over the past few centuries, society, particularly in the West, has transformed from being concerned with life preservation to being concerned with extraneous superficial values such as those that focus on material objects and physical appearance. Advertisements run rampant, indoctrinating girls into believing they need to use makeup to “ look pretty,” brainwashing boys into believing they need to “ bulk up” with muscle. Richard Yates’s novel *Revolutionary Road* tackles the existence of superficial values in society. Aesthetic appearance provides Frank Wheeler with a false sense of confidence exemplified by the contrasts between the states of clothed and bare, imagined and real, and practiced and natural.

The contrast between Frank Wheeler’s clothed and bare states illustrates the false sense of confidence physical appearance provides him. As Frank awakes early in the morning, undressed for the day, he considers:

He planned, as soon as he’d had some coffee, to get dressed and go out and take the lawnmower away from her [April], by force if necessary, in order to restore as much balance to the morning as possible. But he was still in his bathrobe, unshaven and fumbling at the knobs of electric... For a second he thought of hiding, but it was too late. She [Mrs. Givings] had already seen him through the screen door... He was caught. He had to open the door and stand there in an attitude of welcome. (Yates 41)

In Frank's unclothed state, he lacks confidence and power. In Western culture, mowing the lawn is typically a masculine responsibility that falls to a male figure in the house. However, while Frank is bare in his bathrobe, April, a woman, is mowing the lawn, taking over Frank's masculine duty as head of the house. Frank, in his unclothed state, does not have the authority to restore "balance to the morning" by taking the lawnmower from April and realizing his masculine obligation. In essence, Frank feels inadequate to exert power over even a female, those who are generally seen as submissive and weak, at least until he puts on clothes. Furthermore, Frank states the "balance to the morning" is disrupted, which illustrates the fact that he feels insufficient and insecure; in a conventional or "balanced" relationship, April would play the role of a submissive housewife. However, Frank is literally conceding that, in his bare state, April stands higher on the continuum of power, tipping that of an orthodox relationship, creating an unbalance or dilemma. Frank understands the solution to this problem is to confiscate the lawnmower and assume masculine responsibility, but he cannot derive the confidence to do so until he is clothed. Frank is awkward and clumsy in his bare state, "fumbling" around in a fit of incoordination, a description not indicative of a confident individual. Additionally, Frank displays shame and apprehension over his unclothed state; Frank feels he must resort to "hiding" from Mrs. Givings. He does not even have the conviction to stand and welcome a family friend. When Mrs. Givings sees Frank unchanged, he believes himself to be "caught," as if his true, unconfident nature has been exposed. Being found inadequately clothed serves as a metaphor for being found out. Frank feels that Mrs. Givings has discovered his 'dirty little secret'

that Frank is not truly a confident and powerful individual, but rather his frame of mind is dependent on his outward appearance. Furthermore, Frank is afraid that Mrs. Givings realizes that while Frank is in his 'bare' state April, who is still continuing to mow the lawn, wears the pants in the relationship, is more powerful than Frank. Frank holds a preconceived notion that clothing will give him confidence and authority. As soon as Frank is "dressed," he feels he will have the mental vigor to "take" back the lawnmower, painting a much more confident and strong personality. In fact, he is prepared to use "force if necessary." By putting on clothes, Frank will not only have the mental confidence to reinstate his masculinity, but also the physical strength to exercise it via force. Thus, in a broader sense, clothes act as a metaphor for fakeness or personal fabrication. Frank displays that putting on clothes, adding to his physical appearance, provides him with a false sense of confidence that is not present in his bare state.

The juxtaposition between Frank's imagined and realized self further demonstrates the superficial sense of arrogance physical aesthetics afford him. Frank reflects while staring into a mirror:

"He looked at himself in the mirror, tightening his jaw and turning his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look, the face he had given himself in mirrors since boyhood and which no photograph had ever quite achieved" (Yates 16).

A photograph is a snapshot image of a particular moment, one that captures an accurate and realized representation of a certain individual or scene. Frank feels that "no photograph had ever quite achieved" his mental

expectations and visualizations of self. Thus, Frank is unhappy and lacking confidence in his realized self, alluding to his true nature. The mirror also provides Frank with a realized duplicate of himself: a mirror is a reflective surface that spits back a clear illustration of an individual. Frank, however, is troubled with this portrait, evidenced by the fact that he feels the need to change the reflected image. By turning his face and tightening his jaw, Frank is turning to a favorable imagined depiction of his physical appearance. Frank visualizes himself as “leaner,” a condition with connotations of good health and good looks. Frank is simply not content with the way he looks naturally in the mirror, but rather feels the need to activate his imagination in order to feed into his narcissistic desires, to analyze his own ‘beauty.’ The process of distorting his face in the mirror to appear better looking provides Frank with false self-reassurance, illustrating the role physical appearance plays in altering his mental state. Furthermore, Frank’s imagined self is “more commanding.” One who is commanding is a masculine embodiment of strength and arrogance, ordering others to act in a certain manner. After Frank distorts the mirror picture, he considers himself “more commanding,” indicating a change of a personality, when in reality, the only change that occurred was an imagined one of physical appearance. This change in attitude shows that Frank’s traits are not genuine, but rather derived from the way that he looks and are flexible to change depending on how he imagines himself. Thus, the contrast between Frank’s realized unconfident self and his imagined, better looking, more powerful self reveals the phony sense of confidence physical appearance can provide.

Additionally, the contrast between Frank's practiced and natural versions of himself displays the artificial confidence external appearance offers the character. Frank falls deep into thought over a cigarette:

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 detail; keeping his voice low and resonant, keeping his hair brushed and his bitten nails out of sight; being always the first athletically up and out of bed in the morning, so that she might never see the face lying swollen and hopeless in sleep. (Yates 231)

The word "morning" has general connotations of birth and natural existence. Frank, in the morning, is described with a "swollen" face. Thus, in his natural form, Frank is beaten and his face disfigured, physical indications of a low natural self-confidence. While sleeping, one of the few times Frank is not able to overpower his natural self with his practiced version, Frank is described as "hopeless." Frank's natural self is one that is met with despair and shame, hopeless and powerless. Frank, however, enacts a practiced version of himself in order to mask his true insecurity. "Careful to arrange" his features, Frank is meticulous in keeping his practiced version aesthetically pleasant, paying constant "scrupulous attention" to little details in order to keep this façade of appearance together. This habit requires constant attention and energy at the cost of his sanity. Frank has "bitten nails," a common sign of stress relief, likely as a result from the strain

he feels from trying to constantly maintain a groomed appearance; it can be reasonably inferred that keeping up the charade of a perfect appearance is so mentally consuming that it drives him to bite his nails in order to relieve stress. In practice, Frank habitually keeps the one part of his body that accurately represents his natural self, his “ bitten nails,” out of sight. His groomed version is hiding his imperfect and tense natural self, represented by the hiding of the bitten nails. Frank’s attempts to hide his natural self-defects via his practiced appearance shows that he is truly insecure, and that any confidence he does hold comes from his outward appearance, not his true nature. The physical appearance of Frank’s practiced self provides him with an undeserved sense of confidence. Words such as “ cigarette,” “ frown,” “ striking” and “ flame” all have implications concerning a certain sense of masculine confidence. Furthermore, Frank is controlling his voice to keep it “ low and resonant,” like that of a booming and powerful man. In addition, Frank “ athletically” arises in the morning, excited and ready to put forth a coordinated effort to his practiced self into use. The excitement he feels to shed his natural being shows that he is ashamed of his unconfident side, and that the physical appearance of his practiced self provides him with synthetic confidence.

Richard Yates, in the writing of *Revolutionary Road*, astutely provides social commentary on the superficiality and focus on aesthetics in the 1950s, the so-called “ Golden Age of Capitalism.” The 1950s marked the extensive spread of capitalism, turning the West into the largest consumer civilization in the world. With consumer ideals came focus on superfluous and materialistic things that were once irrelevant to everyday life. Physical

appearance is one such example. In *Revolutionary Road* Richard Yates uses Frank as a vehicle to provide his opinion on the matter. Frank is a morally delicate character, whose choices are very questionable. He has no real reason to be a confident man, and, in fact, over the course of the story, he is established as a rather weak character. Yet, physical appearance and focus on the outward and tangible allow him to foster a sense of unwarranted confidence. Put simply, materialism and focus on appearance allow individuals to mask their lack of moral integrity and often-innate weakness with deceptive, skin-deep arrogance. The Mayflower Pilgrims would likely be shocked by the state of Western society, the transformation from values that once held significant meaning, to values with empty and superficial meaning.