

Revolutionary Road (2008)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 1; L- 3; S/N-6 . Running time: 1 hour 59 min.

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 1:2-3

'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!' Matthew 7:24-27

And they married and lived happily ever after." Or so their disillusionment with fairy tales and most Hollywood romantic comedies would have it. Not according to director Sam Mendes, as two of his important films American Beauty and now Revolutionary Road amply demonstrate. He brings together again the stars of Titanic, but they are not the fervent lovers of their last film. They do fall in love when they first meet at a party in Manhattan, but the main story begins seven years (it is the mid-Fifties) and two

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children later, and the curve of their lives soon bends downward.

Frank and April Wheeler (Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet) have bought a white suburban house in Connecticut. They settle into the typical lifestyle of the time, Frank dressed in the customary hat and grey flannel suit commuting to the cubicle job that he hates, and returning at the end of the day to the meal prepared by the dutiful April. They even retain a relationship with the loquacious realtor who sold them the house Helen Givings (Kathy Bates). And then one day after Frank shares with April his frustration over his life and work (but not his quickie affair with a too-willing office secretary), his wife makes a surprise proposal to him, one that challenges his proclamation of dissatisfaction.

Remembering his desire to go back to Paris, where, during his service in the War, he had felt so alive, April proposes that they do just that. Sell their home, quit his job, move to Paris, and she would find a clerical position at the office of an international business or agency such as NATO. Frank is rocked back on his heels by this, his innate conservative traits coming to the fore as he raises various objections. April refutes these, her enthusiasm carrying Frank along. Soon they are sharing their dream with the incredulous neighbor couple (whose husband lusts after April). When Helen Givings, her husband, and their mentally ill son John (Michael Shannon) come for dinner, the Wheelers tell them of their intentions. True to Hollywood form, it is the mentally unbalanced son who sees through the pair, sensing the deep malaise that has given rise to their desperate plan.

If *American Beauty* is a tragi-comedy in which the conformist husband finds a kind of Flannery O'Connor redemption at the end of the film, Sam Mendes' newest film (written by Justin Haythe, based on the novel by Richard Yates) is an unrelieved tragedy, exposing, like Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the hollowness of so much of modern life. From a Christian

perspective, neither husband or wife seem to have any kind of spiritual life: we never see them attend church, pray at meal-time, or mention God, other than in swearing. And yet they are deeply aware that what they have settled into is unfulfilling and thus unable to make their lives meaningful. April at least is able to reach out to Frank in her offer of uprooting their family and going to work so that he can have the time to “find” himself. Frank, however, is so wrapped up in himself that when, near the beginning of the film he tries to comfort his disappointed wife because the community theater play in which she starred turns out to be a flop, his words refer more to himself and his feelings than to his wife’s need.

The film will provide plenty of food for thought and discussion, but it will not uplift the spirit or provide any basis for hope, as did *American Beauty*. Probably most of the members of our white Protestant churches (and as their middle class expands, African American also) live in situations similar to the Wheelers, so there is much in this film that is challenging. And now when our nation faces such dire economic problems that threaten the security of so many of us, the time might be ripe for examining more deeply our life styles and our values. What are the lasting elements of the American Dream, and what aspects are like the “house built upon the sand” ?

For Reflection/Discussion

Spoilers abound in the following.

1. What do you think of Frank and April when you met them in what amounts to a prologue, as compared to what they have become seven years later? Who seems to be the more other-centered, and who the self-centered?
2. Does his yearning for “something else,” to “want to feel something,” cause you to wonder about your own life? Have you

wished you could change jobs or move to a more exotic location? How is this film similar to the plays and films of the Sixties that called into question prevailing values and dreams—such as *A Thousand Clowns*, *The Graduate*, *Easy Rider*, or *Network*—and, of course, the earlier classic drama *A Death in the Family*?

3. How would going off to Paris be more of an escape than facing up to the cause of their malaise—like the prophet Jonah's running away from God? Does Frank seem to have any actual talent waiting to be developed? How does each of them use sex for escape rather than fulfillment? How do they vent their frustration on each other?

4. How does John Givens serve as the stereotypical "mad man" of Hollywood films? What do you think of his remark in response to Frank's confession of his feelings of emptiness, "Hopeless emptiness. Now you've said it. Plenty of people are onto the emptiness, but it takes real guts to see the hopelessness" ? Do you think that his status as an outsider helps him to "see" Frank and April better?

5. Compare the above to April's remark, "Tell me the truth, Frank, remember that? We used to live by it. And you know what's so good about the truth? Everyone knows what it is however long they've lived without it. No one forgets the truth, Frank, they just get better at lying." How close do you think she is to John 8:32?

6. What do you think of Frank's backing out of their plan? What is it that weakens his resolve? The promotion and higher salary? Or the realization that he is not as special as he had thought?

7. Think about April's remark, "I wanted IN. I just wanted us to live again. For years I thought we've shared this secret that we would be wonderful in the world. I don't know exactly how, but just the possibility kept me hoping. How pathetic is

that? So stupid. To put all your hopes in a promise that was never made. Frank knows what he wants, he found his place, he's just fine. Married, two kids, it should be enough. It is for him. And he's right; we were never special or destined for anything at all." What might you have said to her, based on your Christian understanding of baptism? How might this have made a difference for her, had she acquired even an iota of faith?

8. How did you feel at the end of the film? What irony is there in the film's title? What does the very last scene in the Givens home add? Do you think that Mr. Givens has gone through any of the questioning experiences of Frank, and if so, what does his last act indicate as to how he has dealt with them?