

# The power in "the rumor" by john updike essay sample

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## **The Power in “ The Rumor” by John Updike Essay Sample**

John Updike’s story “ The Rumor” is about the struggle of a married couple to maintain their normal (and rather boring) existence amid rumors that Frank Whittier, the husband in this modern couple, is having a homosexual affair with a young man. The rumor that begins the story brings a sense of tension between Frank and his wife, Sharon. This tension is heightened by the way that Frank at once denies the rumor and yet keeps his wife nervous by flirting with men throughout the story. Eventually, Frank finds a new power through his experience with this rumor. Frank Whittier is an interesting and memorable character, then, because of the way he took a negative situation and flipped it into a positive, found the boldness to challenge his wife as she challenged him, and eventually found a new power within himself.

First of all, it is interesting to note that Frank Whittier seems to be caught in a compromising situation early in the story. There is a rumor that he has a gay lover; a rumor he denies. Yet he can not prove his innocence to his wife. He is already under her suspicion because of an affair he had years earlier. So he is therefore trapped, having this rumor constantly held over him by his wife. The text states that, “ now that she was alert to the rumor’s vaporous presence, she imagined it everywhere” (Updike ##). Frank’s situation, therefore can be seen as rather sticky and uncomfortable. But Frank was able to find a way to flip the situation around. Near the end of the story, Frank comes to realize that because his wife actually believed the rumor up to a point, she had subconsciously let her fear for Frank’s sexuality control her. As Frank comes to see what the rumor actually had meant to him and to

his wife, he realizes that he has been empowered somewhat by this rumor. Therefore Frank is able to take a seemingly negative situation and find something positive about it.

Another interesting characteristic Frank displays in the story is that he meets the challenge posed to him by his wife. The challenge that Sharon puts him to is simple; he must prove somehow that he is still heterosexual and that he still loves her. This challenge proved harder than it sounds, because every move that Frank made to prove that he was straight and that he loved his wife was looked on as just a cover for his true feelings. At one point the text states that to Sharon it seemed "as if heterosexual performance were a duty he checked off" (Updike ##). Instead of struggling against his wife in this game he obviously could not win, Frank took an opposite route. Instead of trying to prove his sexuality to her, he instead flirted with the idea of being gay. Frank felt justified in tormenting her because of her unsubstantiated suspicions, going as far as "glancing over at her, say, when an especially magnetic young waiter served them" (Updike ##). In this way, Frank was able to meet the challenge his wife posed to him by not being defensive but instead by being offensive.

The power Frank found within himself by the end of the story actually had little to do with his sexual preference. Although it is true that the last lines of the story imply that Frank is actually considering a same-sex relationship, the effects of the rumor reach much farther than his love life. Frank has found the secret of holding power over others. This applies not only to his wife, but to anyone from now on who thinks of him as a simple person. Frank

summed up this internal change when he tells his wife that she can be fooled, and that, " people aren't that simple" (Updike ##). This newfound power makes Frank a much more interesting and dangerous character.

In John Updike's story " The Rumor", Frank Whittier undergoes a serious change of character because of a rumor that he has become a homosexual. This transformation leaves Frank a different and more powerful person. Although some readers might disagree with the way Frank handled the situation and the way he treated his wife, both past and present, the fact remains that Frank has a decent head on his shoulders. Because of the way in which he flipped a bad situation into a positive one, the way he met his wife's challenge, and the power he found within himself, Frank Whittier becomes an interesting character.