

Family ultimately lead  
to missed  
opportunities. the  
author



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Family is the love, support, and belief that a person has.

For many, the relationship of a family cannot be broken; instead, each member cares for and genuinely loves the other. In the short story "The Writer in the Family," E. L. Doctorow creates a tale that examines the consequences of conflict between family members. The story is told from a first person point of view, where the readers are able to feel the internal and external conflicts that the narrator, Jonathan, faces throughout the story. Jonathan starts to see the root of the problems between his family and the effect it has on his father's life.

Family tensions result from an inability to understand a point of view; it can ultimately lead to missed opportunities. The author strengthens his theme in various ways as the story progresses. The conflicts between Jack's side of the family and Ruth are evident throughout the story. These family tensions arise from the distinctive points of view that both sides of the family share. "The great debate" (pg.

608) was between Ruth, and Essie. They blame each other for being responsible for Jack's failure to "live up to anyone's expectations" (pg. 608). Aunt Frances blames Ruth for Jack's failure to reach success as a business owner.

She claims that Ruth wanted material things like "a mink jacket" (pg. 613) that Jack could not afford for her. "He had debts to pay but she wanted a mink" (pg. 613).

It was this selfishness and desire of Ruth's that led to Aunt France's resentment towards her; Aunt Frances believes that " Jack should have accomplished something special" but his love and devotion towards Ruth kept him from doing so. In contrast, this point of view belies that of Ruth, who claims " Jack's family has never accepted her" (pg. 604). " Jack was tied to his mama's apron strings" (pg. 609). Ruth despises Essie for having a considerable amount of influence over Jack.

Harold, Jonathan's older brother, claims that Jack was just a service to them all. He secures them deals on items, runs errands for them, and is inevitably there to help. " He was always on the hook for something" (pg. 612). The favors that Jack pays are favors that are never thought to be returned. Jack's love is taken for granted and his time is not of importance.

Ultimately, it may be these differences in points of view on both sides of the great debate, that leads to further unresolved conflict and misunderstanding. While writing the letters, Jonathan begins to gain an understanding for his family members including his father, Jack. He composes his first letter by trying to " imagine his father's response to his new life" (pg. 604).

His letters are governed by the understanding of his father, the father he knew. Even when he faces the dishonesty in the deed of writing the letters, Jonathan continues to write them, not because he wants to, but because he feels compelled to. " I had agreed once again to write a letter from the desert" (pg. 612). It is when his older brother, Harold, explains to him " the idea of service" (pg.

612), that Jonathan realizes he was repeating his father's mistake. Jonathan realizes that he doesn't have to do things for others if it means sacrificing his morality. "It dawned on me that I was being implicated" (pg. 612). While battling with his moral judgement, Jonathan also feels caught between the two sides of his family, with each "defending its position with rhetoric"(pg. 608). However, he desires peace and chooses to "take no stands, like his father himself" (pg.

608). However, in the car, Aunt Frances accuses Ruth for "having very bitter feelings" (pg. 613) and "poisoning Jonathan with them" (pg. 613). She claims that Ruth, in fact, is a "very strong-willed, selfish person" (pg.

613). Inclined by his aunt's words, Jonathan's view of his mother lessens as he realizes that "she wasn't as pretty as his Aunt Frances" (pg. 614).

Furthermore, Jonathan concludes his letters with the last one being truest to Jack's perspective. Jonathan comes to understand "what his father's dream for his life had been" (pg. 616). It is at the very end of the letter that he does justice for his father. He allows Jack to ask that his "ashes be scattered in the ocean" (pg. 616). It is this inner conflict of morality that can be the cause of tensions within a family. Missed opportunities can affect the success that a family member acquires.

In the story, Jack's true passion lies in being in the navy, but he gives it up for what he perceives as a greater reward: family. In the last letter, Jonathan writes that Jack is "simply dying of the wrong life" (pg. 616). Jack gives up his greater passion to be in service of his family and ultimately leads a

different life. "It was a matter of pride to him to be able to do things for his  
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siblings" (pg. 612), but in doing so he misses the opportunities to better his life. While Jack doesn't meet his family member's expectations in the business world, he was never meant to. Essie is elated to hear that Jack moves to Arizona and " was bragging to her cronies about her son's new life" (pg.

603). However, Jonathan writes that the " desert wasn't the place for Jack" (pg. 616) because of its arid air and land; the desert contradicts the attributes of the sea where Jack's true dream lies. Aunt Frances considers this letter to be " cruel and perverse" (pg. 613), but does not comprehend Jack's dream to be at sea nor does she see it. The real cruelty in the story is wanting someone to achieve something that they have no ardor or appreciation for; it is the inability to honor or realize one's desire.

Throughout the short story " The Writer in the Family", the author develops many different ideas that all center around family tension.

Family tension can be governed by different points of view, can lead to questioning of morality, and can neglect a person's desire. As Jonathan illustrates his story, he begins to understand the consequences that family can have on a person. Comprehending the differences in points of view between family members can further reduce tension.