

# The shifting family dynamic in John Updike's "Separating"



The family has long been the most basic unit of human society. In a traditional sense, it typically functions as a support system, often both financially and emotionally, with each spouse supporting the other and together the parents supporting their children during their ascent into adulthood where they are expected to continue the trend. In more recent generations, however, this traditional model for the familial entity in America has experienced significant change due to evolving social norms and with increasing secularism, more specifically, the more common occurrence of divorce. While the separation of a married couple is often a necessary and beneficial development for the mental health and happiness of one or both members of the union, the effects on the other half of the kin equation, the children of the couple, tend to be mixed and many. John Updike, a prominent realist writer during the 1970s, was witness and participant in the start of this shift in the family dynamic that came along with the spread of progressivism and a vast number of social revolutions associated with this era. From his saga of the suburban middle-class Maple family titled *Too Far To Go*, one story in particular, "Separating", written in 1974, chronicles in semi-autobiographical realism the process one broken couple commences to inform their four very different children of their marital separation. While a great many stories tell of families torn apart and scattered by divorce, this short story about a pivotal moment of truth-telling in the Maple family provides a more complex and even contrasting perspective on the ordeal. In John Updike's "Separating", intricate character development achieved in such a short span of writing allows a unique perspective on divorce - a family made more caring, more attentive, and ultimately brought closer together by

impending separation, which in turn highlights a deviation from the conventional family dynamic.

In his disclosure of his separation from his wife Joan, the protagonist Richard Maple somehow finds himself more connected to his family in the process, but before his catharsis, the author uses symbols of obstruction to signify Richard's initial disconnect from his family, especially his children. Richard and Joan come to an agreement to tell each of their children individually of their decision to split up once all four are settled at home for the summer months. Immediately, the reader recognizes the recurrent motif of partitions and walls described in Richard's narration in relation to his family. For example, when wife insists on telling the children one by one of their separation, Richard visualizes himself facing "four knife-sharp walls, each with a sheer blind drop on the other side" (195). The secrets and unhappiness that Richard has held back during the disintegration of his and Joan's marriage make him feel as though he is navigating "through a world of insides and outsides, of barriers and partitions" (195). In the beginning, he perceives his children as walls because his own self-involvement in his implied extramarital affair and the end of his role as a husband blockade him from his other familial responsibility - his role as a father. Before he comes to terms with his separation from the family, he objectifies his children as a sharp opposition in order to cope with the reality of the situation. Richard has been imprisoned by compartmentalization for so long, he even imagines that "his skull cupped a secret, a white face, a face both frightened and soothing, both strange and known, that he wanted to shield from tears" (195-6) when reflecting on his mistress. She too is contained and shielded inside Richard's

subconscious, which demonstrates how the figurative walls symbolize that the whole ordeal has him closing up to protect those that he loves from himself and the consequences of his decisions.

Another important visual of the family before the separation is disclosed to all is that of a traditional, conventional dynamic in which each character fulfills their expected roles. Prior to the truth being revealed, the Maple household appears outwardly standard and “normal” because the turmoil is still being hidden below the surface, which begins to challenge the idea that this acceptable image is always ideal. For instance, Richard continues to fulfill the typical masculine father and husband role of repairman and head of the household as he sets about “replacing screens and sash cords, hinges and latches” (196) and goes to the “table where he sat the last time as head” (198). His youngest son John, “now at fifteen suddenly” even helps him with the chore of fixing the screen door lock, aligning to the expectations of a young boy to help his father in order to practice for his responsibilities later as adult in the same position his father now occupies (197). Joan, the matronly figure, is in and out of the scene preparing dinner and “praising his struggles with the lock” (197). However, soon it is time for this postcard-like image to be deconstructed and for the truth involving Richard and Joan’s separation to be revealed, and it is then that distinct changes in the family dynamic become noticeable. Reflecting sentimentally on the one child, the eldest daughter Judith, that he and Joan had raised to adulthood together as a couple, “the partition between his face and the tears broke” (198). Atypical of the usual American gender roles, Richard sits crying in earnest over his dinner while Joan is simply “calmer than she

should have been" (197). The carefully planned explanation of their separation became inexecutable with Richard's unexpected and unexplained overflow of emotion, and so the three children present at the dinner table are told the truth. Joan and Judith react "sensibly" and "factually", and Judith even declares that her parents should act more decisively by either staying together or getting divorced (200). Similarly, when John becomes hysterical and starts to throw a tantrum, the youngest daughter Margaret reflects similar sensibility, telling her brother, "Oh stop showing off" (202). The women in the Maple family take the upper hand after the façade of a happy marriage has been lifted, and now there are "the three females, gossiping...where Joan sat had become the head" (204). Roles reversed, Richard, John and the other son Dickie are more emotive and more vulnerable. The oldest son Dickie receives the news later upon his return from a rock concert, and even he, "moderate by nature, so reasonable" (207) finds himself thrown off-kilter by his parent's separation. He cries in front of his father, and "with wet cheeks embraced him and gave him a kiss, on the lips, passionate as a woman's" (211). This feminine action is significant because it defies the norm of a display of physical affection between father and son evoked by the admission of Richard's separation from Joan. The separation finally comes to light, the concept of a "normal" family is tossed aside, and new gender roles vastly alter the dynamic that the Maples had become accustomed to.

Ultimately, this divergence from traditional family norms, though radical and in light of unfortunate news, proves to be a positive change as the story develops. Upon revealing the truth to his children with whom he had become

so distant, the walls Richard had imagined have been broken down, “ a window thrown open” (211). Pretending that everything was okay had created a subtle rift between Richard and his children, and disclosing the separation brings him closer to them once again. For example, his impending separation makes Richard a better caretaker; he works hard to repair his home that has apparently fallen into disarray as “ the sun poured down, beyond the porch, on a world of neglect” (196). When he realizes he is losing his family, he wants desperately to assure they will be comfortable in his absence, and by doing all of these chores around his house he demonstrates some amount of selflessness. Most importantly, after John throws his fit at the dinner table, Richard takes him outside and tries to talk to his son, and in this scene Richard acknowledges how self-indulgent his antics have been while he ignored his children’s needs. John tells him about his challenges throughout the school year completely independent of the separation, and concerning Richard’s revelation the author provides the following:

“ Richard tried to focus on the child’s sad year – the weekdays long with homework, the weekends spent in his room with model airplanes, while his parents murmured down below, nursing their separation. How selfish, how blind, Richard thought; his eyes felt scoured. He told his son, “ We’ll think about getting you transferred. Life’s too short to be miserable.” (203)

His family enlightened of his failed marriage, Richard can finally empathize with his son and become a better father. Similarly, when he confronts Dickie later that night, Richard has a chance to express himself to his child that he never had before, and he tells him, “ Dickie, listen. I love you so much, I never knew how much until now. No matter how this works out, I’ll always be

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with you" (211). The separation brings Richard closer with his sons in particular because it breaks down the typical restrictions of masculine gender norms and allows him to show his affection for his boys for the first time in a long time. Strikingly, the separation also helps Richard to find peace with Joan. After the dinner scene, the two find the forgiveness to embrace and assure each other that they did well in explaining the change in their family structure to the children; they have learned to accept one another, and in this closeness not of romantic love, but of a shared love of their family, Richard "realized he did not feel separated" (205). Once the separation has been divulged once and for all, the Richard has room in his heart to connect with his family and be a more caring father to his children.

The short story "Separating" plays with the idea that a traditional family dynamic is not always a happy one, and revealing his and Joan's failed marriage gives Richard a second chance to redeem himself in the eyes of his children. Although physically leaving his family, he gains the maturity and circumstance to pull himself closer to the people he loves most and better connect to his children. John Updike wrote "Separating" in a realistic voice with a plot that mirrored his own divorce from his first wife, but rather than create a story that tells of a tragic end to something that was meant to last forever, he crafts a tale of an unprecedented beginning. This story breaks down the assumption that a happy marriage is the basis for an effective family dynamic, and by ignoring conventionalities the characters are unexpectedly united.

## **Works Cited**

Updike, John. "Separating". 1974. Too Far To Go. The Lifelong Learning Academy. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.