

# “A Mirror” of the Alternation of Ethics

## --- The Ethical Selection of The Maples in Updike’s *Separating*

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### **Abstract**

*Separating*, by John Updike, tells a story that happened in a middle-class family, where the protagonists the Maples decide to separate from each other, and they announce their decision to four children, thus resulting in a family conflict. This essay intends to analyze the choice made by the Maples and the reasons behind them, hence revealing the changes in American marriage thoughts and the contradictions that exist in American marriage life in the 1960s.

**Keywords:** John Updike, *Separating*, Ethical selection

### **1. Introduction**

John Updike (1932-2009) is a famous contemporary American novelist and poet. In 1932, he was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, USA. He was fond of reading mysteries when he was a child, so he tried to write novels with the encouragement of his mother. John Updike is a prolific writer. In his writing career for more than 50 years, he has written many popular novels, of which the "Rabbit" series is well-known to the world. "Rabbit Is Rich" and "Rabbit at Rest" won Pulitzer Prizes in 1982 and 1991 respectively. The American writer Philip Rose even commented on him as "the greatest writer of our time." Influenced by Karl Barth, John Updike's novels are often full of contradictions between religion and ethics. Updike once said, "The theme of my novels focuses on 'ethical dilemmas'." (Bernard, A. S. 1978, p. 527) He is good at exploring family ethics with the help of the ethical environment and ethical identity formed by family relationships. (Wang Yufeng. & Huang Shihai. 2021, p. 100) "Separation" mainly tells the family emotions aroused by the decision of separation between Richard and Joan. The plot of the whole novel progresses in the ups and downs of the character's psychology and family conflicts. Richard left home resolutely from the beginning to hesitate

in the end; Joan hesitated between family and marriage. The Maples have their own ethical choices. Behind the ethical choices, they also reflect the changes in marriage thoughts and culture in America.

## **2. The Evader of Family Responsibility-- Richard**

Unlike men before the 1960s, who regarded marriage as a lifetime contract, Richard lacked the frankness of marriage. Richard confesses to Joan the fact that he has decided to separate and insists on telling the children about it before they return home. Due to Joan's strong request, Richard finally agreed to announce the matter at a family gathering. Imagining the children's reaction to this, he was full of guilt. During the days waiting for the children to go home, he was at a loss and absent-mindedly repaired the lawn, but he never told his wife the reason for the separation. However, at the family gathering, facing the doubts raised by his eldest daughter Judith, Richard was full of feelings of guilt and self-blame. He couldn't help crying, praying for the children's forgiveness, and defending, "We liked each other but did not make each other happy enough, somehow." (Luo Lianggong, & Li Rucheng, 2016, p. 250), but we don't love each other anymore. Richard ignores the emotions of his wife and children to justify himself, pretending to be vulnerable and blaming himself in front of his family. However, in the repeated communication with Joan, he complained from the beginning to the end about his wife's ruthlessness and indifference. He blamed his wife for hurting his relationship with his children and ruining his image as a "good father", but he was unwilling to treat Joan frankly.

In addition, the father is absent during the growth of his children. "Home" is a closely connected group formed by two people who are not related by blood. Parents and children influence each other and grow together. The youngest son John has always been well-behaved in front of his parents. But when he heard that his parents were about to separate, he was hysterical, vented, and even ranted, "What do you care about us, we are just little things you had." (Luo Lianggong, & Li Rucheng, 2016, p. 251). The two daughters were also drunk and giggled with John. To get Richard's attention, John stuffed a cigarette into his mouth and chewed it unscrupulously. At this moment, the parents began to notice John's change. In school, John couldn't make a friend, and the teachers at the school were unsatisfactory. These bad experiences made John depressed, but his parents didn't know anything about it. When his parents were talking about freedom excitedly downstairs, John sat alone in the room to the surging pain. Children spent the annual family dinner in the announcement of the separation of their parents. For John, it got undoubtedly worse.

In addition to the lack of emotion for the children, Richard evaded his due responsibilities as a husband and father. Faced with the doubts of the four children, Richard was speechless, and when his wife tried to excuse him, he blindly blamed his wife, thinking that his wife pretended to be considerate and provoked his relationship with the children. On the day he took his eldest son Dicky home, Richard decided to discuss his decision with him. He tried to get his son to accept the fact that his parents were determined to separate and said, "My father would have died before doing it to me." (Luo Lianggong, & Li Rucheng, 2016, p. 256), He tried to show Dicky that he had to do it and forced him to accept his decision. In the process

of talking with the eldest son, it can be seen that his mind did not stop on his son. Instead, he began to fantasize about his future, tried to end it all in a scribbled way. Along the way, the atmosphere was very depressing. It wasn't until he closed the door gently that Richard realized the eldest son's emotions were not right. Richard transferred the responsibility he should have assumed to the minor eldest son. In Richard's view, separation is responsible for the children. When the father cries hysterically in front of the children and vents his emotions, he has already transferred the psychological burden to his children invisibly. What the four children can do is to go against their own inner thoughts and accept their father's decision frankly.

In marriage and family life, Richard's behaviors are enough to show that as Joan's husband and father of four children, he lacks responsibility. To a certain extent, deeply influenced by hedonism in the 1960s, he firmly believed that marriage is a kind of partnership based on love, but ignored the dominant position of the four children in family life.

### **3. The Defender of Harmonious Family**

Traditionally, Joan is a good wife. She considers her husband's guilt and panic when Richard made the decision and maintains Richard's image as a "good father" in front of her children. Richard said that he would leave on Easter and inform the children of the parents' separation decision by phone. Joan insisted on waiting for the four children before they have their exams over and attend the ceremonies. When children's back home, he must talk to them one by one. In Joan's view, the easy summer life after the exam can soothe the children's hurt feelings. While Richard was in a state of confusion. He didn't know how to tell the children the decision of their parents, but Joan considered it all for him. After discussing the separation with his wife, Richard was depressed. He vaguely felt that "his family he was about to lose, filtered through the edges of his awareness." (Luo Lianggong, & Li Rucheng, 2016, p. 248), Joan was uneasy because of the separation, but She would still praise Richard for his good job of repairing the locks as usual to alleviate Richard's guilt and anxiety. At the family gathering, Richard bluntly told the children that the parents made the decision to separate because they could not love each other anymore. After Richard said this, Joan immediately realized that the children would not be able to accept his excuses, so Joan immediately added to the children, "But we've always, especially loved our children." (Luo Lianggong, & Li Rucheng, 2016, p. 251). It can be seen that even if Richard is leaving this warm family, Joan still hopes that he would still be a good father in the children's impression, and the father's love for the children would remain the same. The eldest son Dicky arrived at the train station in the early hours of the morning. Joan suggested that Richard pick him up in person because he and his son are closely related and they can talk closely with each other on the way home so that Dicky can accept his father's decision and the father could listen to his son's thoughts. Although Joan cannot face the fact of separation, she tries to separate the misfortune of marriage from the happiness of the family. Although parents no longer love each other, it will not affect their parents' love for their children.

In addition, Joan sets an example for the children with her calm and independent image. The intervention of "the invisible woman" prevented Richard from living with Joan, but Joan did

not lose control or blame her husband. On the contrary, she suppressed his fragility and anxiety, agreed to Richard's proposal to separate, and tried to comfort her four children. Compared with Richard, who was out of control and howled for he was unable to justify himself in front of the children, Joan's calmness and rationality are more admirable. Richard is not good at expressing his ideas. Instead, he always expresses his emotions on his face. When he is full of guilt, he chooses to vent his emotions with tears, as if he had to declare his decision to his children as a last resort. The thirteen-year-old Margaret had never seen her father so embarrassed, so she asked her mother "Why is Daddy crying?" (Luo Lianggong, & Li Rucheng, 2016, p. 250), Joan, who has always been calm and rational, told Margaret the facts so that she could accept the reality of the father's departure as soon as possible. The young and ignorant Margaret became more emotional when she heard the news. Joan calmly soothed her little daughter's emotions, and patiently explained all this to her. In Joan's eyes, Margaret has the right to know the decision of her parents because she is a member of the family. Telling each child the truth and ensuring that the future family life will not be different is crucial because they may lack father's love. Joan worked hard to get the children to accept this fact and let them go through this difficult period smoothly. From this point of view, Joan has set an example for the children with her own strength, and also made them understand the decision by their father, and taught them to calm down when things happen. For the two daughters, what Joan can do is to lead by example, make her daughter as strong as herself, and not tie themselves to the subordinate position in the marriage.

Therefore, Joan subverted the traditional image of women. When faced with her husband's decision to separate, she listened to her husband's thoughts with an unusually calm and rational attitude. In addition, she changed the passive position of traditional females in family life. In the process of discussing how to announce the separation with her husband, she grasped the right to speak for her four children.

#### **4. The Change of Marriage Ethics**

American individualism and hedonism prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s. The American youths born in the 1940s and 1950s have not experienced the economic crisis that swept across the American continent, let alone the Second World War that rendered them homeless. They grew up in a high degree of material civilization. With the continuous accumulation of wealth, material wealth and spiritual life resisted each other, hedonism prevailed, and family life gradually broke down. The older generation who experienced the economic crisis and World War II encountered the ups and downs. "The prosperity they saw after 1945 was a material return to years of struggle, and they hoped that their children would not repeat those struggles they had experienced." (Dick, M. 1997) Therefore, they no longer discipline the new generation of people who grew up in the 1960s with a strict attitude. Instead, they allow their children to consume arbitrarily, squander freely, and indulge in social material wealth, which gave birth to hedonism. "The revival of individualism and the prosperous hedonism exercised them to pursue the realization of personal value and the enjoyment of business society as the purpose of life, and personal satisfaction and life enjoyment became the values of their generation." (Chen Hongfei, 2010, p. 20) Before the 1960s, Americans emphasized the "family-oriented", they focused on the family, and believed that "marriage and family are the

driving force of struggle." (Chen Hongfei, 2010, p. 20) Under the guidance of this kind of thinking, men strive to earn money to support their families, and women regard "Home" as the battlefield to support their husbands and children. They believe that marriage is a lifetime contract. Under the social and cultural environment at that time, they are willing to be bound by marriage and give everything for the family. However, after the 1960s, the wealth brought by World War II was like a snowball, which gradually intensified the degree of capitalization in the United States. "Social changes are accelerating, and employment competition is fierce. Young people face many difficulties in starting a family and earning a living." (Chen Hongfei, 2010, p. 21) So, They no longer consider the responsibilities of marriage and family. Instead, they emphasize personal freedom and enjoyment. The prosperity and development of the economy laid the foundation for individualistic consumption. People began to evade the responsibilities of marriage and family, indulge in enjoyment, and pursue material wealth. "This hedonistic outlook on life corrupts the soul of people and the entire society." (Wang Jintang. 1996, p. 1) Marriage has long been thrown away by Americans. What followed was a sharp rise in the divorce rate in the United States. Meanwhile, individualism and hedonism became the chief culprits for the breakdown of marriages.

Under the influence of individualism and hedonism, Richard escaped the responsibilities of marriage and family under the disguise of seeking love and happiness. What Richard presents to us is an image of escaping from marriage and family responsibilities and pursuing personal freedom and value realization. He once said that his wife always controls the overall situation and plans everything for the future in an orderly manner, and her plan "turned one hurdle for him into four-four knife-sharp walls, each with a sheer blind drop on the other side." (Luo Lianggong, & Li Rucheng, 2016, p. 247), the "woman" who has not shown up seems to attract him deeply as a wall covered with a thin curtain. However, while waiting for the return of the four children after proposing to separate, he did not consider the future life with the "woman". Instead, he has been thinking about whether he should be separated, and the serious consequences after the separation. He proposed to his wife the decision to separate means that he was about to leave the house. To avoid the burden of the family, even if he was afraid of his family leaving him when faced with doubts from his eldest daughter Judith, Richard still said, I and Joan get along very well, but he can't bring happiness to each other. He even insisted on leaving despite the children's objections. For Richard, personal freedom and enjoyment far exceed marriage and family. For him, the current marriage is like a wall full of blades, which means Richard is deeply poisoned by hedonism. He mistakenly believes that his behavior is a manifestation of his yearning for love. This is the result of the imperceptible atmosphere of the 1960s. His fear of the uncertainty of the future and the worry that his relatives will eventually leave are all manifested in his repeated hesitation about the separation decision. His wife's rationality and independence deepened his fear, but the influence of hedonism and individualism has been imprinted in his thoughts.

With the prevalence of hedonism, "American families are full of serious dysfunction and suffocating unhappiness." (Gu Yue, 2019, p. 120) The divorce rate has been rising all the way, "Women began to come out of the traditional role of housewives, and they have to pursue the realization of woman's social value, relief their dependence on husbands and families, and

strive for equality of woman's social rights and status." (Chen Hongfei, 2010, p. 26) Before the 1960s, the American family lifestyle was equivalent to "a man in charge of the outside and a woman in charge of the inside." the marriage life endows a lot of restraint to couples. For women, "Their role is to be the husband's wife and the child's mother, satisfying the various natural needs of the husband, child, and family." (Luo Huilan, 2006, p. 47) The role that women play among members of society makes them lose their self and individuality and restricts their development. So after the 1960s, a wave of woman's Liberation Movement started. Women got rid of the status of "housewife" and walked out of the house one after another to work. They are eager to realize their social value and pursue equality of woman's social status. Women in the 1950s experienced long-term economic problems and suffered from wars, so they yearned for a stable life which suppressed their desire for independence and equal rights. In the 1960s, the American economy gradually prospered, and people enjoyed an abundance of material wealth. So women in the 1960s had their own ideas, and they were on their own. Woman's family status has moved from subordination to relative equality.

Joan is no exception. What she presents to readers is an image of a new-age woman with independent thinking and a strong right to speak. When her husband proposes to separate, she can face it calmly and do her best to protect her children. At the same time, she also took the initiative to discuss with her husband how to announce this decision to the children with the attitude of the client, instead of allowing Richard to destroy the harmonious atmosphere of the family in his own way. Regardless of Richard's decision to separate immediately, she proposed as a wife with an equal family status that he must settle everything after his children return home before leaving. At the same time, she is spiritually independent. After having been with her husband for nearly two decades, she is still an independent individual in spirit. She accepts her husband's decision calmly and peacefully discusses the details of separation with her husband, as always with gentleness instead of being dependent on or subordinate to the husband. Under the suppression of male rights, she went against tradition, which is the perfect embodiment of women in the new era after experiencing the woman's Liberation Movement in the 1960s.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the 1960s and 1970s, there were profound social reasons for the changes in the development of marriage and family in the United States. First, social values changed, and individualism and hedonism were widely accepted. Secondly, women began to struggle for social status and rights. The changes in the development of marriage and family in the United States have had an important impact on the development of society. Among the changes in marriage and family, women's family status and social status have significantly improved, and marital happiness has become a measure of family harmony, all of which reflect the progressive nature of the times in the development of marriage and family. However, the changes in marriage and family also brought many difficult social problems to the United States, such as the healthy growth of adolescents was affected, the burden of single mothers increased, etc.,

The 1960s was an era in which new ideas in the United States blossomed everywhere, and it was also a watershed between old and new ideas and culture. The Americans before the 1950s focused on family responsibilities, and the youth in the 1960s focused on personal pursuits and they tend to subvert traditional family concepts. The ethical choices of the Maples are a true portrayal of countless family lives in the United States. Through the analysis of the main characters in *Separation*, this paper reveals the contradictory state of American marital and family life in the 1960s and 1970s. However, these problems continue to the present day, and therefore it is a serious issue that needs to be considered and faced in today's society.

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