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MIDLIFE CRISIS AND CONFLICT IN JOHN UPDIKE'S "SEPARATING"

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Abstract
This paper analyzes midlife crisis and conflict, and their impact on familial relationships in John Updike's short story "Separating". Updike portrays the disintegration of a marriage through the portrayal of Richard and Joan Maple, a middle-aged couple, as they confront the emotional complexities which their impending separation imposes on their family dynamics. By intertwining both internal and external conflicts, Updike addresses love's erosion, personal dissatisfaction, and societal transformation. Richard's inner conflicts—his struggle to accept the inevitability of the divorce, his emotional detachment, and his ambivalence toward his role as a father—reflect broader cultural and emotional shifts in mid-20th-century America, particularly the evolving perceptions of marriage and family structures. Employing a qualitative method, this research article examines how midlife crisis and conflict are represented in Updike's "Separating" within the sociocultural context of the time. This study, however, continues to make a significant contribution to world literature, offering future researchers valuable insights, ideas, and viewpoint on the writer and his works.

Keywords: acceptance, conflict, midlife crisis, separation, Updike

Introduction
"John Updike (1932-2009) was one of the most prolific, wide-ranging, and respected of the twentieth century American novelists, winner of every award available to an American writer" (Svoboda, 2018). Bellis (2000) spoke of him, "If there is any writer who needs no introduction, it is John Updike" (Yunus & Kumar, 2023). The short story "Separating" is written by this writer. It offers a variety of themes for discussions. The center of attention is psychological turmoil, strained marital relationship, parent-child relationships, mid-life crisis, and the ethical complexities of 1960s American marriages (Luo & Li, 2016; Wang & Huang, 2021). Set against the backdrop of a couple's imminent marital separation, the story focuses on the protagonist Richard, a middle-aged man, who is striving with the intricacies of his personal identity, familial obligations, and the fear of unfulfilled potential. Exploration of midlife crisis and conflict is embodied not only in Richard's emotional fragmentation but also in the subtle shifts within his familial relationships. The tension between the individual desires for freedom and

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the responsibilities of fatherhood creates an atmosphere of disillusionment and disintegration, characteristic of midlife crisis. It is remarkable that the characters in "Separating" reflect facets of Updike's own life, his personal experiences, particularly with regard to divorce and remarriage. In 1974, Updike underwent a divorce, a mere year before he wrote "Separating" in 1975. Subsequently, he remarried in 1977. This personal experience with divorce, coupled with the societal challenges of navigating such decisions in 1960s America, likely influenced Updike's perspective in crafting this narrative. Richard's struggle represents a broader existential crisis typical of middle age, where the stability and security of one's earlier years are disrupted by the pressures of change and self-reflection.

Updike's portrayal of emotional fragmentation and interpersonal disconnection is deeply tied to cultural shifts in post-war America. As Mambrol (2021) observes, "The story's drama centers on the Maples' revelation of their separation to their children, but it plumbs emotional depths and paradoxes far beyond the simple action it depicts," highlighting Updike's subtle critique of contemporary family life and masculine identity. Updike adeptly constructs a domestic space where unspoken expectations and deferred emotions converge, mirroring his own grappling with familial and personal transformation. Echoing this interpretation, literary critic Richard Detweiler (1984) considers the central theme of the story to be "the dissolution of a marriage and the varieties of attendant suffering" (p. 139), further emphasizing the emotional complexity and universality of the Maples' struggle. This paper, therefore, investigates the mid-life crisis and conflict, and the human experience in the context of 1960s America, with a particular focus on their acceptance of the notion of separation.

Method

The study was a qualitative investigation. Using the method, the researcher explored psychological challenges, depression, mental restlessness, indecisiveness, extreme sensitivity, irrationality, and alienation, all of which reflect the complexities of midlife crises. However, the method is based on textual analysis of Updike's "Separating".The researcher rigorously studied various literary journals, relevant scholarly articles, books, and discussions for updated information to meliorate the research. Furthermore, by comparing the interpretations of different scholars, the researcher sought to add a new dimension to the study.

Through a critical review of several research articles on Updike's "Separating" and different scholars' analyses of the story, the researcher figured out a gap in the existing research to carry on further study in this regard. Some researchers had already worked on literary works by Updike. A few of them had concentrated on the story "Separating". Most research works have highlighted shifts in American marital norms and the contradictions. However, themes of midlife crisis and conflict within the story have received insufficient attention. For example, in Min Wang's article, "A Mirror of the Alternation of Ethics - The Ethical Selection of The Maples in Updike's 'Separating' (Wang, 2021)," ethical choices and changes in marital perceptions are discussed. Similarly, Yeni Wulan Dari's "Psychological Analysis in John Updike's 'Separating' (Dari, 2020)" explores individual dissatisfaction and its potential to obscure real happiness.

Again, Dr. Charlotte Jacobson's literature review, "The Shifting Family Dynamic in John Updike's 'Separating' (Jacobson, 2018)," examines how the narrative challenges the notion that a traditional family structure is not always a happy one.

To sum up, different researchers had critically analyzed different aspects of Updike's "Separating". However, the midlife crisis and conflict in the story had not been discussed well by any researcher. The researcher of this paper had also viewed that no work had been done on the title "Midlife Crisis and Conflict in John Updike's "Separating"" in detail. Therefore, the selection of the title here seemed to be justified.

Findings and Discussion

The article on "Midlife Crisis and Conflict in John Updike's "Separating"" finds that Richard and Joan grapple with psychological challenges, depression, mental restlessness, indecisiveness, anguish, irrationality, and alienation, all of which mirror the complexities of midlife crises. The couple's unresolved inner turmoil and conflicting emotions lead them to consider a trial separation, symbolizing their pursuit of individual identity. The deliberate presentation of this experimental separation highlights Updike's keen insight of the intricate dynamics, which individuals face when they confront choices that challenged the established norms of 1960s American marital ethics. As Norton (2020) notes, ""Separating" feels as real and true as does, potentially, any Updike story," largely due to its autobiographical grounding and emotional depth. Thus, the narrative functions as a convincing evidence of Richard and Joan's mid-life crisis and their persistent struggle. "Ultimately, this study underscores midlife as both a challenging and enriching phase" (Balamurugan, Vijayarani, & Radhakrishnan, 2023).

However, Updike's "Separating" is a story about a middle-class couple in the suburban outskirts of Boston preparing to separate and divorce after years of marriage. The couple have four "children of varying ages of adolescence and young adulthood at disparate stages of development toward independence. John, Judith, Dickie, and Margaret are manifestly American in their attitudes of rebellion, sophistication, emotional effusiveness, and defensiveness" (Norton, 2022). The children are of 13 to 19 years of age. Richard and Joan, husband and wife, seem to be in their mid-40s to early 50s. The central conflict in the story revolves around Richard and Joan who are grappling with emotional upheaval of impending separation. As the story begins, the spouses are struggling to decide how to inform their children of their separation. Richard wants to make the announcement openly at the dinner table while Joan thinks it best to tell each child individually. Then they agree to tell each of their children the news of their separation "one by one" (Levine, 2017, p. 1453) in the summertime. The midlife crises and conflicts are investigated particularly through Richard's character. Richard "shows a selfish disregard for his family that causes him internal conflict and regret" (Perko, 2021). His intense inner conflict is driven by his decision to split from Joan, and how this decision will affect his role in the family. Contrasted with the fair weather of the story's opening on a radiant June day, the time of renewal in nature, the story captures the dissolution of a family structure that has long been the cornerstone of their lives. This moment in the life of the Maples family serves as a critical potential turning point filled with tension and introspection, reflecting the broader themes of love, responsibility, and the

complexities of marital relationships. However, while the story hints at Richard's extramarital affair, it becomes apparent that the plan of the disintegration of the Maples family appears not solely driven by infidelity but rather by deeper, more complex issues—perhaps what might be termed a 'midlife crisis', mostly from Richards's dealings with his crisis in particular or the erosion of love between Richard and Joan, two strong yet helpless figures in the story as noted in a psychological analysis of the story, "Richard in Separating by John Updike spends days with his family with unhappiness. This feeling of unhappiness drives the level of mental stress on Richard" (Dari, 2020).

A midlife crisis refers to the deep sense of restlessness that most adults experience in their middle age. This unease often arises from the uncertainty surrounding choices made earlier in life and the dawning realization that aging brings with it inevitable physical and emotional limitations. Richard, burdened by such feelings, seeks an escape from his reality, which, in turn, leads to the gradual, agonizing unravelling of a seemingly stable relationship. The theme of lost love rings throughout the text, particularly in the dialogues between Joan and Richard. Their conversations echo the fading affection that once bound them together, underscoring "the vulnerability of married love" (Heaman, 2017) and the fragility of their bond as reflected in the lines below:

> *We do get along, that's the trouble, so it doesn't show even to us –That we do not love each other was the rest of the sentence; he couldn't finish it. Joan finished for him, in her style. 'And we've always, especially, loved our children'* (Updike, 1975).

Joan and Richard both love their children but now they think the love for children is not enough for them to stay together. They have tried a lot to stay in the marital relationship but they have found out that it is not working anymore. As they have given effort to making a home for the children, now they are expecting their children to understand their decision and help them to execute the decision as Joan says:

> *Talked about it for years … our children must help us … Daddy and I both want ….* (Updike, 1975)

In the story, Richard's decision to separate from Joan, and from his children creates an atmosphere of tension and fragmentation, which epitomises the crisis that often arises in middle age. Inwardly Richard is tumultuous thinking how this decision will affect his role in his family. He is tangled up with guilt and confusion as seen in "He felt like a man who has been handed a key to a door he cannot find" (Jacobson, 2024). That sums up his lost feeling perfectly, juggling his need for freedom while being a dad. Richard struggles with the idea of losing his place as the head of the family, and the love and care he feels for his children exacerbate his emotional turmoil. As he contemplates sharing the news of the separation with his children, his internal conflict manifests visibly, leading him to break down at the dinner table. He uncontrollably cries. This scene shows the shattering emotional plight of Richard who feels that while he will remain their father, he will no longer be the authoritative figure he once was. Here, blending sadness and regret, Updike powerfully depicts this emotional upheaval,

particularly evident as Richard faces the unsettling realities of his life. His inner conflict contrasts sharply with the external conflict present among family members, in particular as they attempt to navigate the logistical and emotional fallout of the imminent separation. The following lines represent this blending of sadness and inner conflict:

> *They became, his tears, a shield for himself against these others – their faces, the fact of their assembly, a last time as innocents, at a table where he sat the last time as head* (Updike, 1975).

After announcing their separation, Richard feels relieved, but soon an overwhelming emptiness begins to settle in. He starts reflecting on the incompatibilities that led to their split. Embedded with symbolic imagery, the following lines capture the essence of his despair, the extent of his regret, and his longing for an alternative reality, a life free from the pain, burden, or mistakes that plague him:

> *The mountain before him moved closer, moved within him; he was huge, momentous. The ache at the back of his throat felt stale. His wife slept as if slain beside him. When exasperated by his hot lids, his crowded heart,he rose from bed and dressed, she awoke enough to turn over. He told her then, 'Joan, if I could undo it all, I would.' 'Where would you begin?' she asked* (Updike, 1975).

The lines articulate Richard's innermost feelings. Richard seems to be at a turning point of his life, burdened by the past and facing an uncertain future. The imagery of the "mountain" hints regret, challenges of human relationships, isolation, or the weight of the past that he feels acutely. When he states, "if I could undo it all, I would," it expresses a deep yearning for a different outcome, a powerful longing to change the past which was full of dissatisfaction with his life. His desire to undo "it all" signifies that he wishes he could undo his entire life, the accumulation of choices, events, and relationships that have brought him to this point. It also highlights his sense of being trapped by the past. This suggests intense unhappiness and a potential feeling that his life has gone terribly wrong. It is a moment of vulnerability and a shifting point in their relationship, as he reveals his innermost feelings. However, his wife's question "Where would you begin?" forces him to confront the difficult reality of his situation. It challenges him to consider not only which specific events he would change but also the complexity involved in altering the course of one's life. The dialogue encapsulates a moment of existential questioning. It raises issues about the nature of life, choices, and the regrets that often accompany them. This moment may lead the protagonist and the reader to ponder what it truly means to live with one's decisions and confront the weight of the past.

Amid existing dilemmas and confusion, Richard faces an additional inner conflict as he prepares to inform his eldest son, Dickie, about the impending separation. This struggle reflects the turbulent state of the human mind during the onset of the social revolutions of the era. Updike critiques the traditional family structure in America during the 1960s, illuminating the shifting dynamics that challenge established norms. As Updike introduces this revolution, his tone

expresses a sense of sadness because he reflects on past generations. Viewing "Separating" through a semi-autobiographical standpoint allows readers to grasp the emotional weight of Updike's voice, especially in Richard's expression of his feelings when he says: "My father would have died before doing it to me" (Updike, 1975).

Throughout the story, external conflicts emerge during conversations about the separation. Joan accuses Richard of being too emotional regarding the family, implying that the situation would not have escalated if Richard had not contributed to it. From her perspective, Richard is making an ideal exit by separating from her and the family. She also feels that the children perceive her as cold or emotionless because, unlike Richard, she is unable to cry in front of them. She explained, "I couldn't cry I guess because I cried so much all spring. It really wasn't fair. It's your idea, and you made it look as though I was kicking you out" (Updike, 1975). Alongside the conflict between Richard and Joan, the children also exhibit impatience, embodying the characteristics of American youth in the 1960s.

Everyone grapples with the couple's decision to separate and what they truly want from life now. Richard, in particular, is torn between his decision to separate and his desire to remain with his family. Joan is also "conflicted. The way she feels like she's living in 'a house of cards' paints a clear picture of her emotional state- everything feels fragile and ready to collapse" (Jacobson, 2024). Richard becomes emotional and distressed about delivering the news of separation to their children. His sadness is evident in the line:

> *In His sealed heart he hoped the day would never come* (Updike, 1975).

After giving the news to his family, Richard feels strongly connected with his children. At this time, he becomes more upset and cries in front of them. This moment reveals that Richard struggles with his decision and contemplates a future without his family. Richard and Joan's separation is not just the end of a marriage but a symbolic turning point in their lives, one that forces them to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves, their past, and their uncertain futures. The author reveals Richard's inner conflict through the lines:

> *Each moment was a partition, with the past on one side and the future on the other, a future containing this unthinkable now. Beyond four knifelike walls, a new life for him waited vaguely* (Updike, 1975).

These lines further stress the idea that each moment serves as a boundary, creating a clear distinction between the past and the future. The term "unthinkable now" points to a moment of crisis or realization that challenges prior assumptions, indicating a confrontation with harsh realities that can no longer be ignored. This could relate to loss or failure, or other adult concerns which disrupt the innocence often associated with childhood. This view on time emphasizes the brief and fleeting nature of time, and altogether the transitory nature of existence—how people are constantly moving from one moment to the next, each holding its own unique significance. "Widely praised for his facility with language, visual style" (Schiff, 2022), Updike was capable of extraordinarily generating scenes and

images which reveal a “symphonic richness and complexity” (Mambrol, 2018). The imagery of partitions can evoke a sense of isolation or disconnection, often associated with midlife crises, where individuals feel separated in their experiences. Each moment forces them to face the present while also grappling with the past and concerns about the future. Again, the term "knifelike" implies sharpness and pain. The "four knifelike walls" can symbolize confinement or a stark, alienating reality that they are trapped in, serving as a reminder of the harsh edges of life and the difficulties of the world outside their immediate experience. This idea of “a new life for him waited vaguely” suggests uncertainty about the future and the imminent changes, perhaps implying that while something new may be on the horizon, it is also fraught with anxiety and the unknown. Feelings of anxiety about the uncertain and potentially daunting future, the burden of certainty, and the quest for meaning amid life's complexities are reinforced here.

Richard finds himself once again in a "world of neglect," attempting to "fix" the lock of a door in his house. Internally, he grapples with the reality that he will no longer belong to this house once he and Joan separate. Updike deliberately uses words like "dull" and "pruning," which highlight the growing difficulty Richard faces in fixing things and subtly foreshadow the emotional pruning that will soon affect their relationship. As the story progresses, the reader observes Richard and Joan's struggle with their decision to separate, a struggle that inadvertently opens the door for their children to express their own challenges. For instance, John, one of their sons, discusses his difficulties in school. Richard in reply says that “Life is too short to be miserable” (Updike, 2014).

In response to John’s struggle, Richard introduces the reader to a world of gradual acceptance. Everyone begins to come to terms with the decision made by Joan and Richard, with no one opposing it. Richard acknowledges Joan’s role in reassuring their children about the choice they made. Although he feels guilty, he accepts that he has not emotionally separated from her. Then, Dickie, a moderate and reasonable boy, also takes the announcement calmly when Richard breaks the news to him during their drive home on their halfway between the church and the house where Richard’s mistress lives:

> *Your mother and I,” he said, “have decided to separate. For the summer. Nothing legal, no divorce yet. We want to see how it feels. For some years now, we haven’t been doing enough for each other, making each other as happy as we should be. Have you sensed that?* (Updike, 1975).

Dickie does not suspect that anything is wrong either. Only later in bed he whispers a crucial question ‘why?’. But, Richard is unable to respond to his son’s question.

As Richard and Joan accept the reality of their impending separation, their children also begin to understand it with increasing maturity. They witness the shifting marriage ethics in America during the 1960s, which contributes to their acceptance of the family’s changing dynamics as Cullen observes, “The extract in question (from “Separating”) concerns a husband's reflections, on waking, upon the slow destruction of his family's newly built tennis court, and upon his feelings of emotional detachment from his wife and family and his dread of the day to come” (para. 1). Ultimately, the narrative concludes with Richard’s realization

that he has forgotten the reasons for separating from Joan. This ambiguous acceptance may serve as Updike's invitation for readers to explore whether Richard's confusion stems from the complexities of his decision-making process or from a deepening family bond that has overshadowed the initial reasons for their separation.

Conclusion

Thus, the article "Midlife Crisis and Conflict in John Updike's "Separating"" shows how Updike intricately explores the emotional complexities of marital separation, particularly within the context of midlife crises. Through the internal and external conflicts of Richard within the Maple family, the writer captures the struggles between personal desire and familial obligation. Truly, this narrative is not solely about the dissolution of a marriage but also reflects the shifting social landscape of 1960s America, where traditional values regarding marriage and family were increasingly challenged. Updike skilfully illustrates how individuals, like Richard, grapple with the internal discord of pursuing personal fulfilment while mourning the inevitable loss of their established familial roles. In addition, the story transcends Richard's individual experience, using his midlife crisis as a vantage point to examine the broader dynamics of family life, the inevitability of change, and the emotional toll of separation on all parties involved. So, this research may be a supportive source for future researchers to study literature.

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