



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

A Critical Study of Updike's Portrayal of the Maples

Dr. K. Lakshmi Devi

Lecturer, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, JNTUA College of Engineering, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Abstract

John Updike is widely regarded as one of the dominant American literary figures of the Post-War era. His major characters include women as well as men who are remarkable in American fiction. Updike's prose springs not from self-indulgence but from self-discipline. It proves his fidelity to the sources of his passion. He has created the couples of Tarbox, Massachusetts affectionately and respectfully. Each is treated with dignity, the struggles of each call forth reader's sympathy. Updike is best remembered for his domestic fiction and it is on this basis, he is judged as a great writer. No Updike's character has a greater flair for the dramatic than Joan and Richard Maple, whose troubled marriage sprawls across eighteen Updike stories, written over four decades. They are the best he created. The present paper critically analyses the portrayal of the Maples by Updike.

Keywords

John Updike; The Maples; Tarbox.

John Updike is widely regarded as one of the dominant American literary figures of the Post-War era. His major characters include women as well as men who are remarkable in American fiction. Updike's prose springs not from self-indulgence but from self-discipline. It proves his fidelity to the sources of his passion. He has created the couples of Tarbox, Massachusetts affectionately and respectfully. Each is treated with dignity, the struggles of each call forth reader's sympathy.

Updike is best remembered for his domestic fiction and it is on this basis, he is judged as a great writer. No Updike's character has a greater flair for the dramatic than Joan and Richard Maple, whose troubled marriage sprawls across eighteen Updike stories, written over four decades. They are the best he created. "The moral of these stories" Updike once wrote, "is that all blessings are mixed". The Maple stories are symmetrical, tightly crafted, contain recurrent motifs and an ironic conclusion. Mostly they focus on moments of present tension with a shared past. The Maple stories embody a poignant study of the cycles of attachment and detachment that occur with the stresses of contemporary marriage. Updike once told in his foreword that the reason behind the Maples success is that "they talk, more easily than any other characters the author has acted as agent for".

Critics complain that Updike's married, separated and divorced protagonists seem mere masks for the same educated, chafed middle class sensibility, but when he began to employ Joan and Richard Maple as repeated characters in the mid 1960's, he did not mind his critics, but converge and cluster a particular set of experiences concerning the inherent fault lines of marriage. Updike was in the process of devising a strategy for overcoming the intrinsic difficulties of treating the marriage within the short story's confines:

As a 'thing' to be reported, married love does not fit easily into short story form. Each marriage after all, is a developing experience in the context of a particular society caught up in the stream of history. Updike has attempted to provide historical perspective by making his married couples age along with their creator. However he has also found a strategy for making the short story record marriage history. (Hamilton and Kenneth 46)

Despite bitter quarrels, numerous affairs, physical violence, radically different personalities, their ability to communicate holds the Maples together long after they should have been separated. The story "Giving Blood" marks the marriage of Maples which has degenerated after nine years into stagnant routine with bitter quarrels. "The Maples had married now nine years, which is almost too long" (Giving Blood 18).

The Maples, Richard and Joan leave New York City and live in England, thirty miles away from Boston. The story starts with Richard's irritation over driving unwillingly to Boston on a Saturday morning to donate blood to a cousin of Joan, who is lying dangerously ill in a large Boston hospital. He irritates that he is exhausted emotionally, physically and mentally not only because of continuous driving but also of the patient who is not very closely related to them.

During the drive, the Maples argue each other about their behaviour at a night party. Joan blames Richard, who stays till two O' clock doing the twist with a lady. Richard covers that they are not flirting but gliding around very chastely to 'The hits of the Forties.' Richard remarks that Joan is smug, stupid and sexless. He also blames that he saw Joan with a man behind the piano and says if he attracts her, she can marry him.

"If you're so attracted, he said, to little fat men like Harry Saxon, why didn't you marry one?"

"You're too absurd", she said

“You’re not subtle. You think you can match me up with another man so you can swirl off with Marlene with a free conscience”.
(Giving Blood 19)

Richard’s anguish is reliable as he is basically frightened to donate blood because he has never given blood before and he is an asthmatic and underweight man. While on the bed in Boston hospital, the intern, who performs the phlebotomy seems clumsy and rough to him. Richard feels that the extraction of the blood sample from his middle finger seems the nastiest and most needlessly prolonged physical involvement with the intern. Richard feels jealous of Joan’s rapport with the intern who shows much concern towards her. For Richard, a first time blood donor, giving blood is a chore and finally a test of his man hood.

When Richard and Joan start to donate blood, they lay on the two beds at right angles to one another along two walls. Richard sees Joan’s combed crown of hair which is so poignant and her bared silver arm as long as if he has never seen her before quiet this way. While he watches the flow of blood from his wife’s arm, Richard experiences deep tenderness for her and his love for Joan renews. “His blood and Joan’s blood merged on the floor, and together their spirits glided from crack to crack, from star to star on the ceiling” (Giving Blood 27).

When the Maples decide to quit the hospital, Richard wants to see the woman to whom they donate the blood and requests Joan to come along with him. While leaving the hospital Richard hugs his wife’s padded shoulders and walk along leaning on each other and express their love in a whispering voice. “Hey, I love you. Love love love you”. Romance is, simply, the strange, the untried” (Giving Blood 31).

Richard feels assured of his manhood when Joan praises him that he is brave. On the way they stop for coffee and pancakes. While paying the bill, Richard discovers that he does not have enough money to pay. Joan comes to

his rescue by saying that 'We'll both pay'. Joan's perception is more accurate while saying "We'll both pay". Their previously established communication (while giving blood) destroys by Richard's self-pity over sharing the bill.

The way they paid bill, symbolically shows both partners pay the intangible costs of married life and also as long as they remain married, they will pay price for their egocentric, insensitive behaviour. Richard fails to understand that giving blood is a metaphor of giving love. (Luscher M 56)

The experience of giving blood temporarily restores peace between them and holds out the promise of invigorating their marriage, but the story ends as it begins, with Richard cursing his fate. As a result of Richard's immaturity and lack of perspective on married life, the Maples travel a circular route rather than achieve the rejuvenation in their union.

Another story on Maples "Twin Beds In Rome" begins with the lines "The Maples had talked and thought about separation so long it seemed it would never come" (Twin Beds In Rome 76). Veterans of marital strife, the Maples continue their battle of marriage with the intimacy of their physical bodies. Unable to end the conflict with a decisive reconciliation or separation, they travel to Rome in the hope of escaping their normal routine life.

When the Maples arrive in Rome, it is already night. The plane is late and the nimble Italians separate them deftly from their baggage and reserve a hotel room for them and usher them into a bus. When Joan enjoys nature, Richard feels pain by remembering their shared past. Throughout their marital life, Joan never hides anything from Richard but Richard stores all the things in his mind and recollects frequently. Joan's confession over a sexual stir with a young man in the past reveals her candid attitude. Despite the negative storage of feelings towards Joan, Richard pleases to make her happy and this is his weakness.

When Joan forgets herself in enjoying nature, Richard reminds her that nothing is permanent. While staring through the window Joan suddenly turns to Richard and says that it doesn't feel as if they are going to Rome at all. Richard honestly wants to know where they are going and expects an answer from her. Richard's intentional response to Joan's question about their marital life (as that they come very far in their marriage and a little way more to go) reveals his deadly wish to separate.

“Back to the way things were”?

“No. I don't want to go back to that”. I feel we've come very far and have only a little way more to go.” (Twin Beds in Rome 77)

Richard realizes that Joan is crying and tries to comfort her. Inside his heart he wants to shout at her, but outwardly keeps his hand on her and comforts her. When they reach the hotel, Richard finds the twin beds, which pleasantly surprises them.

“Twin beds”, he said. They had always had a double bed.

Joan asked, “Do you want to call him back?”

“How important is it to you “?

“I don't think it matters. Can you sleep alone?”

“I guess, but- it was delicate”. (Twin Beds in Rome 79)

Although Richard has a preconceived deadly wish for their relationship, the unexpected twin beds in the room stand as an embarrassing symbol of a separation already decided by the circumstances. Richard feels that they have been insulted and until they separate it seems impertinent to have even a gap of space to come between them. According to Richard, even if this trip is to kill or cure their relationship, the attempt to cure should have certain purity, but the twin beds force them to sacrifice their relationship temporarily. At night Richard feels that it is difficult to sleep without Joan, on his bed. When Richard feels sad over twin beds, Joan reminds him that they did not come for

a honeymoon. Richard praises Joan as a nice woman and admits that he can't understand why he behaves miserably with her.

On Joan's suggestion, they walk into the city, though it is 10 O' clock in the night. During their walk, Richard's feet which have never given him any trouble, begin to hurt. Even at the soft, damp air of the Roman winter, his shoes develop hot inward convexities and gnash his flesh at every stride. To get a relief from pain, they find American bar and order hamburgers. After the Maples return to the hotel, they sleep side by side on their twin beds and fall easily into a solid sleep. Ironically, Richard sleeps well without Joan on his bed, and becomes hostile in his sub consciousness towards her. During night time whenever Joan reaches him to give a little pat, he says 'Go away' and shakes her off. When Joan explains about his strange behaviour in the morning, Richard laughs in delight.

"You were terribly funny last night. I couldn't go to sleep, and every time I reached over to give you a pat, to make you think you were in a double bed, you'd say "Go away, and shake me off". He laughed in delight. "Did I really? In my sleep?"

"It must have been. Once you shouted "Leave me alone! So loud I thought you must be awake, but when I tried to talk to you, you were snoring". (81)

The next day they walk into Rome and again Richard's shoes resume their inexplicable torture. To cure this pain they buy a pair of alligator loafers. They visit some of the historical monuments of Rome. When Joan takes Richard's arm for shelter in rain, suddenly his stomach begins to hurt and slowly the ache in the stomach intensifies. With the help of the guard, they come out of the gate to a nearby wire fence. Richard walks to a little distance and leans on a low wall.

Joan tries to get a taxi, but Richard stops her and says that the taxi drivers may cheat him and that he can walk to the hotel. When they walk

through the streets, Richard walks stiffly as if the pain is precious and fragile to him. After some time the pain which expands into every corner of the chamber beneath his ribs, begins to slash the walls in a hope of escape. When he wakes up after one hour, everything seems different and he feels no pain. At one point Joan says to him that the reason behind their incompatibility is that she is classic and Richard is baroque.

Later in a restaurant Richard finds Joan happy, and her face looks relieved from the tension and becomes smooth. Richard feels jealous of her happiness and feels reluctant to leave her. Instead of romance, the eternal city presents them with the heaviness of the past and emblems of ruin: The Colosseum is shaped like a shattered wedding cake and the forum, full of broken columns, and looks ransacked for building material by a later age. The church of Santa Maria contains life-size tomb-reliefs worn out nearly featureless by footsteps. While the Maples marriage previously entombed a dozen times and stubbornly refuses to die, these tombs symbolize their individual personalities. Richard and Joan try to seek the lost glory of their marriage amidst the ruins of past civilization.

Like in “Twin Beds in Rome”, the tables in “Giving Blood” envisage a symbolic separation, where the Maples lie at right angles, with the possibility of intersection rather than in parallel beds. The twin beds force the Maples to sacrifice the significant feature of their relationship. When Joan enjoys the beauty of Rome, Richard refuses to relax and insists on maintaining the oppressive ‘tension of hope’.

Although the Maples marriage “let go like an overgrown vine whose half-hidden stem has been slashed in the dawn by an ancient gardener”. Joan’s ensuing happiness arouses Richard’s possessiveness. His pleasure in her happiness makes him jealous of her renews his desire to cling to the rootless vine of their marriage, rather than let it die. Updike is an astute

observer of the ambiguities of married life. He shows guilt-free partings laced with ironies. (McNaughton R 136)

Richard's pain in his abdomen symbolises his discontent with his relationship. The only reason Richard stays in this situation for a long time is, because of Joan's happiness. He feels physical pain which seems to come about when he is around with his wife. But when they separate, his pains vanish. The physical pain Richard bears while walking symbolizes his state of being within the marriage. He sustains it, yet wishes it would be fixed. When he starts experiencing pain in his stomach, he is undergoing a metaphorical death regarding his relationship. When he sleeps separately from Joan, the pain recedes and he is finally able to move on from the relationship and continue his life even if it may make Joan unhappy. However the ending of the story reminds the readers that even though Richard realizes the truth behind the matter, he decides to stay because of his own jealousy of Joan.

The moral of the story is that all blessings are mixed and also people are incorrigibly themselves. One can say that no one really belongs to anyone else and that marriage is an institution in which the exits are clearly marked. Updike is one of the few people around, who has given subtle expression to what others have dismissed and cheapened by assuming it is a nightmare. (McNaughton R 154)

Updike in the story "Here Come the Maples" presents the divorce of Richard and Joan Maple after being married for twenty years. The story is told in the point of view of Richard. They are being divorced in the same city hall building in which they had been married.

Updike wrote a series of stories about Richard and Joan Maple, beginning with their marriage through their eventual separation and divorce. He visits them quite often depicting rifts in their relationship as children arrive, focus in all, their sex life fails and the world around them changes.

The series of Maple stories end with “Grand Parenting” with the greying Maples, both remarried, awaiting the birth of their daughter’s first child, still tied together by old, familiar threads, as they have lived as wife and husband for a long time but now no longer together. The prospect of infidelity and the shadow cast by other lovers, real and imagined, looms large in many of the stories like “Your Lovers Just Called”. They feed each other’s jealousies, pitching and probing. Updike draws a sensitive line between love and hate, the things people do to hurt one another, with or without meaning it, and the many tiny intimacies and outrages that make a marriage.

Works Cited

Hamilton, Alice and Kenneth. *The Elements of John Updike*. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1970. Print.

Luscher M, Robert. *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993. Print.

McNaughton R, William. Ed. *Critical Essays on John Updike*. Boston: GK Hall, 1982. Print.

Updike, John. *Problems and other Stories*: New York: Knopf Company, 1979. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Devi, Lakshmi K. “A Critical Study of Updike’s Portrayal of the Maples.” *Literary Quest* 1.10 (2015): 1-10. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.