

## **Wes Anderson - dismantling the family unit to make a new social dynamic**

Wes Anderson's films have taught us that the Texan director is preoccupied with dysfunctional families. He is the middle of three brothers and his parents divorced when he was eight. While none of his films are overtly biographical (only his first two films are set in Anderson's home state), every feature deals with failed marriages, strained sibling relationships, and the damage parents do to children. Joseph Massaro, writing for *Medium*, corroborates this latter point, saying that Anderson's films often claim that "even parents who have caused their children pain have healing to do."

### **Destruction and rebirth as a creative process**

Anderson's journey to a better family necessitates destroying old relationships, often aided by a creative outlet, to remake them. There's no reward without sacrifice, and it can't be a gradual process. The change has to be dramatic and sometimes violent, even under Anderson's trademark layers of whimsy. Artistic pursuits often help Anderson's protagonists explore what's broken in their family lives to make things better. His characters are writers, artists, filmmakers; the biographical links are clear, but this choice is more about symbolising the power of creativity to remake something broken. The director's characters are committed to fully eliminating negative family connections. From the fires of these arguments and fights, comes shoots of new life and a chance for family peace.

### **Breaking and remaking the family in Anderson's films**

Families in strife are common in Anderson's work; however, four of his films best illustrate his characters' drive to create a new family dynamic from an old one. They are:

1. *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001).
2. *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004).
3. *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007).
4. *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012).

Anderson's characters are bound by a shared desire to remake old family dynamics. This is typically led or supported by

creative people, who are pivotal in how Anderson explores family trauma and healing. Steven Rybin, in his essay for *The Films of Wes Anderson*, claims that ``making art in Anderson's films... is an attempt to form alternative unities that depart from the normative definitions of family that cause angst.'' However this art is realised, it helps Anderson's characters see their family connections through new eyes. Ultimately, his characters can then destroy the old to make something new.

### **The Royal Tenenbaums**

*The Royal Tenenbaums* is Anderson's clearest attempt to demonstrate the impact of negative family dynamics. The Tenenbaums, child prodigies who haven't fulfilled their potential, are thrown into chaos by the return of their estranged patriarch, Royal. His indifference to his children in their youth has scarred their adult lives, and throughout Royal is incapable of building bridges. However, his death at the film's climax unites the Tenenbaum siblings in celebrating his memory, flaws and all. As Massaro puts it, ``The epitaph on Royal's grave reads, 'Died rescuing his family from the wreckage of a sinking battleship.' Metaphorically, Royal did save his family because they were in decline.'' By facing their father as adults, Royal's children can destroy their historic parent-child dynamic of expectation and failure, and move out of his shadow.

### **The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou**

*The Life Aquatic...* is a celebration of filmmaking as therapy. Protagonist Steve Zissou is a washed-up documentary filmmaker surrounded by failed family relationships. His best friend was eaten by a shark, Steve's estranged wife is his financial backer, and his crew see him as a father figure despite his distaste for fathers. When his illegitimate son and self-proclaimed fan, Ned, joins the crew, Steve couldn't be worse off emotionally. However, as he sets out determined to make a documentary about the shark who killed his friend, he finds filmmaking helps him to build a connection with Ned. Rybin points to a scene in which Ned helps Steve during filming as a perfect example, ``Ned's improvisation with [asking Steve a compelling] question and Zissou's response show their desire to create alternative formations... that heal past pain.''

### **The Darjeeling Limited**

In *The Darjeeling Limited*, the Whitman brothers are reunited in India by the eldest, Francis, to reconnect after their father's funeral a year earlier. The siblings are uneasy from the start, in their surroundings and one another's company.

Francis controls his brothers like a parent. The middle sibling, Peter, has left his pregnant wife. The youngest, Jack, has been dumped by his lover. All three are dealing with abandonment issues, stemming from their mother leaving in their youth, and so can't empathise with anyone. However, the death of a young boy catalyses the brothers to unite and face their mother (which was Francis' real reason for reuniting the brothers in the first place). This death is symbolic for the brothers, showing them the childhood trauma they suffered by their mother leaving. Although they don't succeed in convincing her to return to their family, the confrontation does encourage the Whitmans to face their individual problems and reunite with a new understanding of one another. José Duarte summates this as such; ``by travelling in an alien culture, the brothers are confronted with their own selves... making them embrace the differences embodied by themselves.''

### **Moonrise Kingdom**

Vreeland says that, ``*Moonrise Kingdom* centres on lost youth... the 'kingdom' in question is the refuge the adolescent Sam and Suzy are looking for.''' The film's title speaks to a youthful desire for a fantastical place which its inhabitants' control. Protagonists Sam and Suzy come from home situations they have no influence over; Sam is an orphan in the Scouts and Suzy is at odds with her aloof family. Eschewing these damaged bonds, the adolescent lovers run away together. Interestingly, the main characters searching for the pair are alone too. Police Captain Sharp is a bachelor having an affair with Suzy's mother, Mrs. Bishop, leaving Mr. Bishop cuckolded. Ultimately Sam and Suzy's love enables them to mend the bonds with their former families, and by the end of *Moonrise Kingdom*, we see a cast of lonely characters united as a big blended family.

Family bonds are a clear thematic preoccupation for Anderson. These connections are often inherently defective from the beginning of the narrative. As such, his protagonists' journey towards an improved family life often means destroying broken bonds to make new ones. As Vreeland puts it, his films are often about ``broken families that sew themselves back up.''' Whether sibling links in *The Darjeeling Limited*, parent-child relationships in *Moonrise Kingdom*, father-son connections in *The Life Aquatic*... or myriad family bonds in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, achieving a stable unit requires dismantling and reassembling. Like breaking a bone to reset it, Anderson's work isn't pessimistic about family; it demonstrates that happy families aren't born, they are created and worked on.

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