Religion and Spiritual Identity in the Work of John Updike

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study how **Updike** has repeatedly expressed his views on **religious** and spiritual questions, that lend a framework to interpret his **work**. A writer with John Updike's versatility and range, whose fiction reveals a virtual symphonic richness and complexity, offers readers a variety of keys or themes with which to explore his work. The growing and already substantial body of criticism Updike's work has engendered, therefore, reflects a variety of approaches. Alice and Kenneth Hamilton were among the first critics to give extensive treatment to the religious and theological elements in Updike's fiction. Rachel Burchard explores Updike's fiction in terms of its presentations of authentic quests for meaning in modern times, for answers to age-old questions about humanity and God, and of its affirmation of human worth and hope despite the social and natural forces threatening defeat of the human enterprise. Considering technique as well as theme, Larry Taylor treats the function of the pastoral and antipastoral in Updike's fiction and places that treatment within a long tradition in American literature. British critic Tony Tanner discusses Updike's fiction as depicting the "compromised environment" of New England suburbia—the fear and dread of decay, of death and nothingness, and the dream of escaping from the complications of such a world. Edward Vargo focuses upon the recurrence of ritualistic patterns in Updike's fiction, the struggle to wrest something social from an increasingly secularized culture. Joyce Markle's thematic study of Updike's fiction sees a conflict between "Lovers," or Life-givers, and the embodied forces of convention, dehumanizing belief, and death.

In a 1962 memoir titled "The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood," Updike discusses his boyhood fascination with what he called the "Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art." Critic George W. Hunt contends that "these three secret things also characterize the predominant subject matter, thematic concerns, and central questions found throughout his adult fiction." Detailing Updike's reliance upon the ideas of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. The principal themes in Updike's work are religion, sex, and America as well as death. Often he would combine them, frequently in his favored terrain of "the American small town, Protestant middle class", of which he once said, "I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules."

Key words: Racism, American pragmatism, Colloquialism. John Updike, Religion

Introduction

John Hoyer Updike (March 18, 1932 – January 27, 2009) was an American novelist, poet, short-story writer, art critic, and literary critic. One of only four writers to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction more than once (the others being Booth Tarkington, William Faulkner, and Colson Whitehead), Updike published more than twenty novels, more than a dozen short-story collections, as well as poetry, art and literary criticism and children's books during his career.

Hundreds of his stories, reviews, and poems appeared in The New Yorker starting in 1954. He also wrote regularly for The New York Review of Books. His most famous work is his "Rabbit" series (the novels Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit Is Rich; Rabbit at Rest; and the novella Rabbit Remembered), which chronicles the life of the middle-class everyman Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom over the course of several decades, from young adulthood to death. Both Rabbit Is Rich (1982) and Rabbit at Rest (1990) were recognized with the Pulitzer Prize.

Describing his subject as "the American small town, Protestant middle class", Updike was recognized for his careful craftsmanship, his unique prose style, and his prolific output – he wrote on average a book a year. Updike populated his fiction with characters who "frequently experience personal turmoil and must respond to crises relating to religion, family obligations, and marital infidelity".

His fiction is distinguished by its attention to the concerns, passions, and suffering of average Americans, its emphasis on Christian theology, and its preoccupation with sexuality and sensual detail. His work has attracted significant critical attention and praise, and he is widely considered one of the great American writers of his time. Updike's highly distinctive prose style features a rich, unusual, sometimes arcane vocabulary as conveyed through the eyes of "a wry, intelligent authorial voice that describes the physical world extravagantly while remaining squarely in the realist tradition". He described his style as an attempt "to give the mundane its beautiful due". Updike's fiction is founded on a vision of a compromised, tentative, teetering American, living in suburban New England or in rural Pennsylvania; an American who has broken with his more disciplined forebears and drifted free, seeking selffulfillment but uncertain what it is and how to obtain it.

Although this rather global description fairly represents the recurring condition in most of Updike's novels, it does not do justice to the complex particularities of each work. Nevertheless, it does point to the basic predicament of nearly all of Updike's protagonists—that sense of doubleness, of the ironic discrepancy of the fallen creature who yet senses, or yearns for, something transcendent. Updike's people are spiritual amphibians—creatures in concert with two realms, yet not fully at home in either. Updike employs an analogous image in his novel The Centaur—here is a creature that embodies the godly with the bestial, a fitting image of the human predicament in Updike's fiction. His fiction depicts the ambiguity of the "yes-but" stance toward the world, similar to the paradox of the "already and the not-yet." In his fine story "The Bulgarian Poetess" (1966), Updike writes: "Actuality is a running impoverishment of possibility." Again there is a sense of duplicity, of incompleteness. In such a world,

problems are not always solved; they are more often endured, if not fully understood. However, even the curtains of actuality occasionally part, unexpectedly, to offer gifts, as Updike avers in his preface to Olinger Stories: A Selection (1964)— such gifts as keep alive a vision of wholeness in an often lost and fragmented world.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze presence of **religious** concerns in Updike's **works** with mere private notions that exude social and **religious** certitudes as influences on the novel.

World of John Updike

John Updike contributed fiction, poetry, essays, and criticism to The New Yorker for a half century. He is the author of twenty-two novels, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Rabbit Is Rich" and "Rabbit at Rest," fifteen books of short stories, seven collections of poetry, five children's books, a memoir, and a play. His sixth collection of nonfiction, "Due Considerations," contains more than seventy book reviews and essays that first appeared in the magazine.

The Poorhouse Fair

Updike's first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, may seem anomalous in comparison with the rest of his work. In fact, the novel depicts a collision of values that runs throughout Updike's work. As in so much of Updike's fiction, the novel is concerned with decay, disintegration, a loss or abandonment of vital traditions, of values, of connection to a nurturing past. This opposition is embodied in the two principal characters: ninety-four-year-old John Hook, former teacher and resident of the poorhouse, and Stephen Conner, the poorhouse's prefect. The novel is set in the future, sometime during the late 1970's, when want and misery have virtually been eliminated by a kind of humanistic socialism. Such progress has been made at a price: sterility, dehumanization, spiritual emptiness, and regimentation. In a world totally run by the head, the heart dies. Hook tells Conner, in response to the prefect's avowed atheism: "There is no goodness, without belief." Conner's earthly paradise is a false one, destroying what it would save. The former prefect, Mendelssohn, sought, as his name would suggest, to fulfill the old people's spiritual needs in rituals and hymn singing.

Out of frustration with Conner's soulless administration, the old people break into a spontaneous "stoning" of Conner in the novel's climax. In effect, Conner is a corrupt or perverted martyr to the new "religion" of godless rationalism. The incident symbolizes the inherent desire and need for self-assertion and individualism. Conner's rationalized system is ultimately entropic. The annual fair is symbolic of an antientropic spirit in its celebration of the fruits of individual self-expression— patchwork quilts and peach-pit sculptures. In its depiction of an older America—its values of individuality, personal dignity, and pride—being swallowed up by material progress and bureaucratic efficiency, the novel is an "old" and somber book for a young author to write. In effect, Updike depicts an America become a spiritual "poorhouse," though materially rich. It is Hook, one of the last links to that

lost America, who struggles at the end for some word to leave with Conner as a kind of testament, but he cannot find it.

The Centaur

In a number of stories and the novels *The Centaur* and *Of the Farm*, Updike draws heavily upon his experiences growing up in Shillington, Pennsylvania. Both novels—though very different from each other—concern the reckoning of a son with a parent, in the case of *The Centaur* with his father and in *Of the Farm* with his mother, before he can proceed with his life. This is emotional and spiritual "homework" necessary for the son's passage to maturity, to freedom from the past, yet also to a new sense of responsibility. As in all Updike's fiction, this passage is difficult, complex, and ambiguous in its resolution.

The Centaur is arguably Updike's most complex novel, involving as it does the complicated interweaving of the myth of Chiron the centaur with the story of an adolescent boy and his father one winter in 1947. Although the novel won the National Book Award, its reception was quite mixed. A number of reviewers thought the use of myth to be pretentious and not fully realized, while others praised the author's achievement. The novel is part *Bildungsroman*, a novel of moral education, and part *Künstlerroman*, a novel of an artist seeking his identity in conflict with society or his past. Operating on different levels, temporally and spatially, the nine chapters of the novel are a virtual collage, quite appropriate for the painter-narrator, nearly thirty, self-described as a "second-rate abstract expressionist," who is trying to recover from his past some understanding that might clarify and motivate his artistic vocation. Peter Caldwell, the narrator, reminisces to his black mistress in a Manhattan loft about a three-day period in the winter of 1947, fourteen years earlier. On the realistic level, Peter tells the story of his self-conscious adolescence growing up an only child, living on a farm with his parents and Pop Kramer, his grandfather. His father is the high school biology teacher and swim coach, whose acts of compassion and charity embarrass the boy. On the mythic level, the father is depicted as Chiron the centaur, part man and part stallion, who serves as mentor to the youthful Greek heroes. As such, he suffers for his charges. By moving back and forth between the mythic and the realistic levels, Peter is able to move to an understanding of his father's life and death and to a clarification of his own vocation.

Just as Chiron sacrifices his immortality—he accepts death—so that Prometheus may be free to live, so too does George give his life for his son. Although George is obsessed with death, it is doubtful that his sacrifice takes the form of death. Rather, his sacrifice is his willingness to go on fulfilling his obligations to his family. In reflecting upon this sacrifice by his father, Peter, feeling a failure in his art, asks: *"Was it for this that my father gave up his life?"* In the harsh reappraisal his memory provides, Peter is learning what he could not know as an adolescent. Love, guilt, and sacrifice are somehow inherent in the very structure of life. It is this that his mythicized father reveals to him in the very act of his narrating the story. For many critics, George Caldwell's sacrificial act frees the son to resume his artistic vocation with courage. For others, the novel is a mock epic showing in Peter the artist, the son of a scientist father and the grandson of a preacher, a loss of the metaphoric realm that makes great art possible and that leaves Peter diminished by his confinement to the earth alone. However the end is taken, the

mythic element of the narrative richly captures the doubleness of human existence so pervasive in Updike's fictions.

Of the Farm

A short novel, *Of the Farm* is another tale of the intricacy of love, guilt, sacrifice, and betrayal. In *The Centaur*, Peter Caldwell, stalled and failing in his artistic vocation, goes home through a creative act of the memory and imagination to recover his lost vision, a basis to continue his work. Peter can fulfill his Promethean charge because his father was Chiron. In contrast, *Of the Farm*'s Joey Robinson goes home to get his mother's blessing on his recent remarriage. Joey seeks forgiveness of the guilt he bears for the acts of betrayal that have constituted his life. He betrays his poetic aspirations by becoming an advertising executive and betrays his marriage to Joan and his three children through adultery and divorce. Bringing home for his domineering mother's approval his sensuous new wife, Peggy, sets the stage for more betrayals and recriminations. As the weekend progresses, Peggy and Joey's mother vie for Joey's soul. Joey cannot please both women or heal the wounds of his past betrayals. For Joey, Peggy is the "farm" he wishes to husband. At the end, failing to win his mother's blessing, Joey and Peggy return to their lives in the city, leaving Joey's mother to die amid the memorials of her own unrealized dreams. If the novel is an exploration of human freedom, as the epigraph from Jean-Paul Sartre would suggest, the reader sees that freedom escapes all the characters, bound as they are by conflicting desires, guilt, and obligation

Updike is considered one of the greatest American fiction writers of his generation. He was widely praised as America's "last true man of letters", with an immense and far-reaching influence on many writers. The excellence of his prose style is acknowledged even by critics skeptical of other aspects of Updike's work.

Several scholars have called attention to the importance of place, and especially of southeast Pennsylvania, in Updike's life and work. Bob Batchelor has described "Updike's Pennsylvania sensibility" as one with profound reaches that transcend time and place, such that in his writing, he used "Pennsylvania as a character" that went beyond geographic or political boundaries. SA Zylstra has compared Updike's Pennsylvania to Faulkner's Mississippi: "As with the Mississippi of Faulkner's novels, the world of Updike's novels is fictional (as are such towns as Olinger and Brewer), while at the same time it is recognizable as a particular American region." Sanford Pinsker observes that "Updike always felt a bit out of place" in places like "Ipswich, Massachusetts, where he lived for most of his life. In his heart—and, more important, in his imagination—Updike remained a staunchly Pennsylvania boy." Similarly, Sylvie Mathé maintains that "Updike's most memorable legacy appears to be his homage to Pennsylvania."

Critical reputation and style

Critics emphasize his "inimitable prose style" and "rich description and language", often favorably compared to Proust and Nabokov. Some critics consider the fluency of his prose to be a fault, questioning the intellectual depth and thematic seriousness of his work given the polish of his language and the perceived lightness of his themes, while others criticized Updike for misogynistic depictions of women and sexual relationships. Other critics argue that Updike's "dense vocabulary and syntax functions as a distancing technique to mediate the intellectual and emotional involvement of the reader". On the whole, however, Updike is extremely well regarded as a writer who mastered many genres, wrote with intellectual vigor and a powerful prose style, with "shrewd insight into the sorrows, frustrations, and banality of American life". Updike's character Rabbit Angstrom, the protagonist of the series of novels widely considered his magnum opus, has been said to have "entered the pantheon of signal American literary figures", along with Huckleberry Finn, Jay Gatsby, Holden Caulfield and others. A 2002 list by Book magazine of the 100 Best Fictional Characters Since 1900 listed Rabbit in the top five. The Rabbit novels, the Henry Bech stories, and the Maples stories have been canonized by Everyman's Library.

After Updike's death, Harvard's Houghton Library acquired his papers, manuscripts, and letters, naming the collection the John Updike Archive. 2009 also saw the founding of the John Updike Society, a group of scholars dedicated to "awakening and sustaining reader interest in the literature and life of John Updike, promoting literature written by Updike, and fostering and encouraging critical responses to Updike's literary works". The Society will begin publishing The John Updike Review, a journal of critical scholarship in the field of Updike studies. The John Updike Society First Biennial Conference took place in 2010 at Alvernia University. Eulogizing Updike in January 2009, the British novelist Ian McEwan wrote that Updike's "literary schemes and pretty conceits touched at points on the Shakespearean", and that Updike's death marked "the end of the golden age of the American novel in the 20th century's second half".

McEwan said the Rabbit series is Updike's "masterpiece and will surely be his monument", and concluded: Updike is a master of effortless motion—between third and first person, from the metaphorical density of literary prose to the demotic, from specific detail to wide generalisation, from the actual to the numinous, from the scary to the comic. For his own particular purposes, Updike devised for himself a style of narration, an intense, present tense, free indirect style, that can leap up, whenever it wants, to a God's-eye view of Harry, or the view of his put-upon wife, Janice, or victimised son, Nelson. This carefully crafted artifice permits here assumptions about evolutionary theory, which are more Updike than Harry, and comically sweeping notions of Jewry, which are more Harry than Updike. This is at the heart of the tetralogy's achievement. Updike once said of the Rabbit books that they were an exercise in point of view. This was typically self-deprecating, but contains an important grain

of truth. Harry's education extends no further than high school, and his view is further limited by a range of prejudices and a stubborn, combative spirit, yet he is the vehicle for a half-million-word meditation on postwar American anxiety, failure and prosperity. A mode had to be devised to make this possible, and that involved pushing beyond the bounds of realism. In a novel like this, Updike insisted, you have to be generous and allow your characters eloquence, "and not chop them down to what you think is the right size."

Jonathan Raban, highlighting many of the virtues that have been ascribed to Updike's prose, called Rabbit at Rest "one of the very few modern novels in English ... that one can set beside the work of Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Joyce, and not feel the draft ... It is a book that works by a steady accumulation of a mass of brilliant details, of shades and nuances, of the byplay between one sentence and the next, and no short review can properly honor its intricacy and richness."

The novelist Philip Roth, considered one of Updike's chief literary rivals, wrote, "John Updike is our time's greatest man of letters, as brilliant a literary critic and essayist as he was a novelist and short story writer. He is and always will be no less a national treasure than his 19th-century precursor, Nathaniel Hawthorne."

The noted critic James Wood called Updike "a prose writer of great beauty, but that prose confronts one with the question of whether beauty is enough, and whether beauty always conveys all that a novelist must convey". In a review of Licks of Love (2001), Wood concluded that Updike's "prose trusses things in very pretty ribbons" but that there often exists in his work a "hard, coarse, primitive, misogynistic worldview". Wood both praised and criticized Updike's language for having "an essayistic saunter; the language lifts itself up on pretty hydraulics, and hovers slightly above its subjects, generally a little too accomplished and a little too abstract". According to Wood, Updike is capable of writing "the perfect sentence" and his style is characterized by a "delicate deferral" of the sentence. Of the beauty of Updike's language and his faith in the power of language that floats above reality, Wood wrote:

For some time now Updike's language has seemed to encode an almost theological optimism about its capacity to refer. Updike is notably unmodern in his impermeability to silence and the interruptions of the abyss. For all his fabled Protestantism, both American Puritan and Lutheran-Barthian, with its cold glitter, its insistence on the aching gap between God and His creatures, Updike seems less like Hawthorne than Balzac, in his unstopping and limitless energy, and his cheerfully professional belief that stories can be continued; the very form of the Rabbit books—here extended a further instance—suggests continuance. Updike does not appear to believe that words ever fail us—'life's gallant, battered ongoingness ', indeed—and part of the difficulty he has run into, late in his

career, is that he shows no willingness, verbally, to acknowledge silence, failure, interruption, loss of faith, despair and so on. Supremely, better than almost any other contemporary writer, he can always describe these feelings and states; but they are not inscribed in the language itself. Updike's language, for all that it gestures towards the usual range of human disappointment and collapse, testifies instead to its own uncanny success: to a belief that the world can always be brought out of its cloudiness and made clear in a fair season.

In direct contrast to Wood's evaluation, the Oxford critic Thomas Karshan asserted that Updike is "intensely intellectual", with a style that constitutes his "manner of thought" not merely "a set of dainty curlicues". Karshan calls Updike an inheritor of the "traditional role of the epic writer". According to Karshan, "Updike's writing picks up one voice, joins its cadence, and moves on to another, like Rabbit himself, driving south through radio zones on his flight away from his wife and child."

Conclusion

With the astonishing variety and richness of his narratives, John Updike's fiction constitutes a serious exploration and probing of the spiritual conditions of American culture in the late twentieth century. The fate of American civilization is seen in the condition of love—its risks and dangers as well as its possibility for gracious transformation. For example, the decline of religion in America is chronicled in In the Beauty of the Lilies (1996) alongside the history of cinema, and Rabbit Angstrom contemplates the merits of sex with the wife of his friend Reverend Jack Eccles while the latter is giving his sermon in Rabbit, Run (1960).

Critics have often noted that Updike imbued language itself with a kind of faith in its efficacy, and that his tendency to construct narratives spanning many years and books—the Rabbit series, the Henry Bech series, Eastwick, the Maples stories—demonstrates a similar faith in the transcendent power of fiction and language. Updike's novels often act as dialectical theological debates between the book itself and the reader, the novel endowed with theological beliefs meant to challenge the reader as the plot runs its course. Rabbit Angstrom himself acts as a Kierkegaardian Knight of Faith.

Describing his purpose in writing prose, Updike himself, in the introduction to his Early Stories: 1953–1975 (2004), wrote that his aim was always "to give the mundane its beautiful due". Elsewhere he famously said, "When I write, I aim my mind not towards New York City but towards a vague spot east of Kansas." Some have suggested that the "best statement of Updike's aesthetic comes in his early memoir 'The Dogwood Tree'" (1962): "Blankness is not emptiness; we may skate upon an intense radiance we do not see because we see nothing else.

And in fact there is a color, a quiet but tireless goodness that things at rest, like a brick wall or a small stone, seem to affirm."

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