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JOHN UPDIKE'S ACHIEVEMENT AS A NOVELIST

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ABSTRACT



John Updike originally conceived his novel *The Centaur* as a companion piece to *Rabbit, Run*, published two years before. If the earlier novel was about a life-embracing man constitutionally unable to sacrifice himself for any person or idea, the later one is its opposite: a novel about a man obsessed with his own death who is nevertheless able to sacrifice himself for the betterment of his family. He thus exchanges his literal, physical death for a series of smaller, spiritual, daily deaths—the deaths of his dreams, his ambitions, everything but his love for his wife and son. What Updike is attempting in this novel, I will argue, is a 20th-century *Ars Moriendi*—an art of holy dying wherein George Caldwell will model a Christian attitude towards death and sacrifice. But Updike's faith is always mixed with doubt, and thus, his updated *Ars Moriendi* belongs firmly to the existentialist tradition wherein the black hole of death creates an inescapable anxiety. Updike implicitly adopts Martin Heidegger's notion of *Sein-Zum-Tode* (being-towards-death); to live authentically is to remember at all times that death is awaiting you. But, typically for Updike's fiction, *The Centaur* charts a middle way: If Updike cannot resign himself to death with the calmness suggested by medieval Christianity, neither can he subscribe to Heidegger's atheism. Caldwell's daily sacrifices become a Christian response to this anxiety; by sacrificing himself every day, he prepares himself for the physical death that awaits him.

**Keywords:** Rabbit Is Rich, The Centaur, American Literature, American modernism.

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INTRODUCTION

John Updike started his career as a staff member of a journal called *The New Yorker*. But his sheer brilliance has carried him beyond the confines of journalism. Today he is one of the leading literary figures of America, enjoying a worldwide fame with numerous prizes and awards to his name. During a span of over forty years he has distinguished himself as a writer of profundity, polish and sophistication, displaying tremendous energy and exceptional talent, producing book after book, over forty in number- sixteen novels, several collections of short stories and poems, plays, innumerable critical and prose essays, and children's books. His

growth as a writer of high stature, honor, and admiration is an obvious testimony to the fulfillment of great promises he showed when he set out to make his incredible mark in the world:

The little tyrant's delight in wielding a pencil always carried with it an empathy into the condition of being a pencil; more and more a writer think of himself as an instrument, a means whereby a time and place make their mark. To become less and transmit more, to replenish energy with wisdom—some such hope... is the reason why I write (PUP 39).

What makes John Updike an immortal writer is his ability to share another person's feelings and emotions as if they were his own. He sees our sadness, our empathy with the pain we are surely suffering in this horrible, crass world. He has real sensitivity, real empathy. Gradually Updike the man grows smaller and smaller and Updike the artist grows bigger and bigger. To replenish energy with wisdom is the crux of his art. No wonder he has grown in critical acclaim and will continue to grow.

However, it must be pointed out that Updike has not always received his commendation. He has been subject to low denunciation as well. But what is remarkable is that he never went out of shape and continued to move from strength to strength. Thus full credit goes to Updike for growing out of the disparaging criticism equanimity to achieve.

His wide readership includes not only professional critics and students of literature but also a reading public large enough to keep each novel on the best-seller list for months. Criticized by some readers for being too melodramatic and by others for being too philosophical, Updike has apparently managed to maintain a delicate balance between the romantic and the reflective, between the appeal of the popular novel and the critical esteem of more esoteric fiction (ASS 389).

The difficulty in understanding John Updike's fiction is that the complexity arises out of the suggestive nature of his art. In his case, the implication is art. He works with such literary techniques that exploit the devices like dialectical method, irony, parody, fantasy, myth, nostalgia, dreams, allegory, fable, and the symbolic motif. The detailed imagery intensifies the impact of the artistic vision in its wholeness. The wealth of minutest details with which he describes the scene, setting the atmosphere, milieu, characters, and the vast range of his vocabulary do also contribute to the obscurity of his fiction. His unique style, though it has increased the resources of the English language, also creates problems of comprehension as it carries layers of meaning. If one is not clear enough to pick up to the tropes of art is bound to falter and fail. That's why Updike's fiction has been termed esoteric.

Obviously, ambiguity, one of the hallmarks of great art, rules Updike's fiction which raises many vital issues but does not answer directly. Updike's sharp apprehension of the human condition and of reality defies a categorical yes or no, both existing as the two divergent planes of a paradox. Updike quotes Melville to substantiate his firm belief that the puzzle is insoluble, indicating his own middlemness between the contrasting point of view: "Yea and Nay- Each hath his way/ But God He Keeps the middle way." Thus, a life, which is actually a paradox, cannot be reduced to a clear-cut division between yes and no, and if such attempt is made, it would be a great injustice to Updike's rich wholesome art.

It is clear that Updike's achievement of equilibrium between differing viewpoints emphasizes his non-committal stance, enabling him to dramatize, in all his novels and short stories, the eccentric particularities of American life in motion. For Updike, life is like a coin with two sides, both being of equal importance and value, and without either of them, the coin is not complete but lopsided or incomplete. The fullness of life demands acceptance of juxtapositions and contrasts. Variegation is the life of which Updike's fiction is a perfect emblem.

Updike's determined intent to remain as "a secretor of images" reminds one of Lord Buddha who maintained a "noble silence" on many of the vital issues with which religion and philosophy have concerned themselves, and when questioned, answered them in paradoxes. Updike, too, is like Buddha in this respect. God, religion, death, dread, guilt, sex, immortality, divorce, marriage, morality- Updike has much to say about these age-old cherished topics fundamental to human existence but he deliberately masks them with a veil of silence to evoke richness of meaning in order to attain the immortal resonance of Don Quixote's Windmills, of

Proust's Madeleine, of Huck Finn's raft. However, the mystery of silence leaves the read, uncertain, gaping and fuming. But John Updike comes to the defense of a writer who is a secretor at heart: "it is not the duty of a fiction writer to decide; this stress should not be laid upon him, "the interestingness and the fertility of the puzzle derives from its insolvability; our pain deserves dramatization only when it is paradoxical" (10).

Updike's novels are like the deep oceans. To find the pearl one must dive into their depths; the survivors are the victors. Thus, Updike's novels are meant for exploration. Then their serious and interesting aspects will become obvious. The reader has to think about carefully before he can fully understand them as they contain richness, strength and the great amount of knowledge along with the depths of situation and emotion. Updike deals with human life thoroughly and considers all the aspects of it. Besides, opacity may be the high point of the imperfection of Updike's novels but they wear it proudly, as an honorable scar, much in the same way as the oceans wears their depth. Updike is not concerned with bringing work to perfection but with the creation of work. This creation is an imitation of reality. Thus, Updike is concerned with the representation of reality, not in the manner of Naturalist's but in his own unique, individual way. This is something new in the annals of literary fiction, making Updike interesting and exciting to study and explore.

The high water mark of John Updike is that he does write "gushers." He writes, "Books that are hard and curvy, like keys, and that unlock the traffic jam in everybody's head". Something like Emc, only in words one after the other. Updike exemplifies Dr. Johnson's famous remark: "Where there is a difficulty, there is a reward."

The obscurity in Updike's fiction is further complicated by his conception of morality, which is not traditional but non-institutional. His protagonists are men of staunch religious faith. But except John Hood, they do not conform to the established social and moral codes. Driven by intense, uncontrollable, obsessive prompting of sex, they are often led to adultery and incest, breaking all the limits of moral law and rectitude, not caring for the consequences of their actions that may be detrimental to the moral health of the society they inhabit. They can be described as "Christian Existentialists" with a firm belief only in God but not in the ordained religious and moral order. Thus, Updike's Un-orthodox sense of morality can be best understood in terms of Existentialism as espoused by Kirkegaard and Barth. Harold H. Watts calls Updike "a moralist out of season" (HHW 687-79) and elucidates the complexity involved in comprehending his fiction on account of his unconventional view of morality.

Updike's novels hinge on matter-spirit conflict, and recurrently dramatize this basic dichotomy in their agitated activeness through such protagonists who are torn apart by the polar promptings of body and soul, one pulling the other in the opposite direction. Feeling threatened, alienated, isolated, lonely, guilt-stricken, the protagonists try to counter the menacing, corrupt world, and in the very process oscillate between faith and sex, between faith and morality, between time and space, between guilt and redemption, between heaven and earth, between this world and the next and between mortality and immortality. Some of the protagonists resolve the tormenting crisis by going for either of the two. George Caldwell chooses divinity in *The Centaur* but his artist son, Peter, Rabbit, Joey Pie, Ellellou, Jerry Conant and Henry Bech yield to the natural. The minister Marshfield of *A Month of Sundays* and Roger Lawbert of *Roger's Version* unite the two- the former by sleeping in bed with an imaginary beloved and the latter by committing incest with his step-niece. Only John Hook is free from this conflict.

The characters who embrace the physical suggest that the world is doomed and are its citizens, helplessly caught in the intricate web of disruptive forces unable to consecrate the desecrated world. Though they are the followers of Jesus Chris, yet they do not hesitate to flaunt his instructions, which he gave them in one of his sermons.

Most of Updike's protagonists fall in their spiritual quest and they finally give it up. They go for the world based on socially, morally and religiously unsanctioned sex. They do so because they find the world hollow and purposeless, not catering to their spiritual longings. They build on sand. No wonder their house collapses. This collapse is reflective of the world's collapse. For them, the old conventional morality has become worn out and no longer fits the modern man's requirements. The hero of *Marry Me*, Jerry Conant who

remarks, best sums up this situation: "Maybe our trouble is that we are living in the twilight of an old morality, and there's just enough to torment us, and not enough to hold us in." As Updike's characters are impractical, unable to cope with the pragmatism of daily life, they naturally end in failure. In the modern world, success comes from being practical. This is well demonstrated by Rabbit Angstrom who at last becomes rich in *Rabbit is Rich*, the third novel of Rabbit tetra logy.

Most of Updike's novels are a clever narrative that moves from narrative to meditation. At first encounter, Updike's work seems to be devoted to the reproduction of textures that are self-evident: textures of the inconclusive, textures composed by the crass indifference of most men to each other. All this is done with brilliance and is right (HHW 680).

Updike's selection of his protagonists as well as his antagonists stresses his underlying conviction of insurability of the present human condition. Also stressed is the fact that the primal sense of heroism, order, fulfillment, and hope has yielded to the powerful impulse of frustration, anarchy, and despair. This is expressed in the main characters realization of their family life as empty, suffocating, burdensome, edging on to clutter and senselessness. Their fascination with immortality, death, and the light-in-being is certainly not meaningless but undoubtedly ironical and not coming to any purpose in this insensitive frittering away world. In *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit's disturbed, painful relationship with his repulsive looking wife Janice, a symbol of disorder, denying him his hope of a better, unseen world, leads him to Ruth, a whore with whom he experiences through adultery, such sublime love, he had not experience before that transcends the vestiges of time and give such ecstasy to his soul that it takes flight and soars towards the unknown. He swings between the calls of society and soul, between Janice and Ruth. When he glimpses the horrible reflection of his wife in his mistress, he runs away from her. He turns his back to the world disappears into oblivion. After a decade, Rabbit reappears in *Rabbit Redux* as a passive man having crumbled under the weight of cultural, social and moral disintegration. Now he accepts life as it is. Without any qualms, he accepts his sloppy wife when she returns to him after her sojourn with Charlie Stavros. However, Rabbit's sexual fantasies do not fade away. He has sex with her surrogate daughter.

Updike's novels, as a whole, envision an entropic or apocalyptic world where supernaturalism is even a spent force. The grim awareness of disorder all around and of the futility of human existence reduces the sensitive modern man to imbecility, gloom and cynicism. At the end of the very first novel of John Updike "The Poorhouse Fair" the ninety-four year old John Hook finds it useless to impart a word of wisdom to the young director of the poor house, Stephen Corner who professes humanism but denies it to the old inmates about to die: "When would they all die and let the human day dana?" the completeive Rabbit, growing huge in self-awareness, ultimately comes to realize that his life has at last come to no purpose, like the grass which shines to die. The murder of the Black Jesus puts an end to last hope of revolution and redemption. The light goes out. The world is left with darkness all around. The only sensible, soothing and passionate thing is despair. According to Harold H. Watts, Updike's fiction expresses a well-bred skepticism as to what is possible for human sensibility in our time. (HHW680). Joyce Carol Oates, while concluding her comment on *The Coup*, asks the question: "Is such cynicism soluble in art?" Her answer is: indeed yes."

This means that Updike's refined sensibility, as it filters through his novels, is not that of a writer who has fully acquiesced in the general decay and uncertainty of an era. Rather Updike takes the shape as a writer who keeps circling around the modern detritus with a sharp eye for some fragmented persistence of meaning and order (JAC 1378). Thus, Updike's novel reveals his active, sensitive and complex response to, and an earnest desire to come to terms with the grim, almost holocaustic situation that has obtained in the world since World War II.

In Updike's fiction, religion is the reassurance of a meaningful, substantial existence, as John Hook affirms in the *Poorhouse Fair* "There is no goodness without belief." The very talent of Rabbit Angstrom is that he gives people hope. To Updike's heroes adversity has its uses; more than it crushes. Obviously, in the religious world, suffering or pain is the most valuable and sacred human possession. Piet Hanema, the

Calvinistic hero of *Couples* believes that suffering in any form is good for the character as it gives solidity and solace.

On the other hand, in Updike's fiction, science negates what religion affirms. Thus, religion is of no use to science which, according to Joyce B. Make, "thrives in a cynical era, where it can demonstrate the workability of its propositions, and fits man nonchalantly into the physical universe of matter and motion, chemicals and processes, but it is cold to sterile denies both hope and anguish, and gives man no reassuring way to deal with the fact of his own morality". In the world of science, pain means the elimination of evils. Stephen Corner relieves the diseased cat of its lingering pain by putting to death. He intends to do the same with the old dying inmates of the poorhouse who resemble the diseased cat. Corner gives hatred instead of love, torture instead of sympathy, death instead of life.

Thus, we can say that Updike's outstanding experimental ability leads a certain precocious power to his evocative art which goes beneath the surface of things, not a layer or two, but very deep where he is able to locate his own unique vision of reality.

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