Conclusion
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Real Retrieval

Non est ad astra mollis e terris via

There is no easy way from the earth to the stars

-Seneca

Updike looked upon his craft as a surrogate tool to find meaning for human existence. He assigned much seriousness to writing and declared that work was the only consolation for having been born. His vocation defined his very existence, according to his confession in Self-Consciousness: “My own chosen career… its daily excretion of yet more words, the eventual reifying of these words into books … is a kind of bicycle which, if I ever were to stop peddling, would dump me flat on my side” (228). This obsession translated into an enquiry of the moral, social fabric of America with the focus on the individual’s struggle for faith.

Gifted with a highly evocative style, Updike chronicles his times with a rare verisimilitude. James Wood points out his extra-ordinary talents, saying, “John Updike is a luxurious mystery. He writes prose of extraordinary sumptuousness and great flexibility, instantly capable, as the context demands, of lyrical float or steely capture” (282). Yet some critics like Ralph C. Wood indict that this gifted writer was partial to the depiction of sexual mores. His opinion is that, “Whenever one thinks of John Updike’s work, one thinks instinctively of its obsession with sex” (316).
James M. Wall in a critique of relationship between significant social, and cultural issues and Updike’s work observes: “Critics of Updike complain that he lacks a social conscience, that he focuses too much on his characters’ inner lives and not much on the social conflicts that raged through the nation during Rabbit’s lifetime” (304).

Mark Lotto bemoans: “In Villages, as in so much of his later work, there is altogether too much vehement poeticizing of the obvious” (336). These criticisms underline one facet of his writing, though Updike trained his focus on a larger vision that sought an answer to the enigma of human existence.

What were the concerns of Updike as a novelist? The four questions discussed in the preceding chapters fairly sum up the artist’s burden. If Rabbit, Run impliedly asks whether God would not intervene to mitigate man made disasters, Rabbit Redux questions the cause for man’s running. In Rabbit is Rich, the paradox of running despite the material opulence which gives life an apparent stability is addressed. Rabbit at Rest attempts to inquire the parameters of living by posing the question what is life supposed to be? All these questions revolve around the fundamental problems that have been the focus of great literature. The question raised in the last novel Rabbit at Rest is the fulcrum on which the social, and religious concerns of Updike rest. Pasewark, while examining the role of religion and culture in the works of Updike in his article “The Troubles with Harry” states that, “John Updike’s corpus is punctuated forcefully by his own magnum opus, the Rabbit series, a tetralogy that is simultaneously literature, cultural critique, and theology” (1). Updike keeps his
vista both on the spiritual and the material aspects of lived experience that lends
strong pragmatic dimension to the tetrology.

If consistency is the hallmark of a novelist’s vision, one can say without the
fear of contradiction that religion is one of the abiding focus of Updike’s career.
He examines the implications of religion on society in work after work. To name a
few: Roger’s Version which addresses the theological concerns of Hawthorne’s
The Scarlet Letter from a twentieth century perspective, Couples which considers the
effects of sexual passions unrestrained by religious precepts, The Afterlife, and
Other Stories that examines the religious beliefs in the context of mortality, and the
novel S where the female protagonist embarks on a spiritual quest experimenting with
cults of dubious nature. A teleological view of Updike’s oeuvre shows that from the
beginning of his literary career, Updike was keenly engaged with the spiritual
dimension of life in the twentieth century America that seared individual faith with a
hitherto unknown velocity.

Pigeon Feathers, a collection of short stories published in 1962, captures this
deep concern of Updike expressed through David, the child hero. One day David’s
grandmother suggests the boy to use his rifle to scare away the pigeons which had
fouled the furniture kept in the barn, by their droppings. The task ultimately ends in
shooting down a large number of birds. While burying the dead pigeons, David
examines them closely. Seeing the perfection of the wings and the beauty of the
colors, he reaches the conclusion that “the God who had lavished such craft upon
these worthless birds would not destroy His whole creation by refusing to let
David live forever” (Bailey 50). This affirmation of faith in the face of destruction resonates in Rabbit tetralogy.

The paradox of God’s love for the worthless birds and the fact that death is an integral part of creation sums up the underlying thematic thread that lies buried in the tetralogy. The presence of death impels young David to seek the fundamental reality about life and religion. As Thaddeus Muradian points out in “The World of Updike” the question of immortality which is connected with the existence of soul always fascinated Updike: “The question of Soul and Immortality and the Hope were real ones to David and to Updike” (584). He cites an incident in Pigeon Feathers where David turning the pages of the Webster Dictionary to know the entry under ‘Soul’ finds it defined as ‘usually held to be separable in existence’. Though Updike maintained indifference to the theological disputes concerning the nature of the soul, he amply demonstrates the belief in its immortality and in life afterwards. Victor Strandberg’s observation that to “deal with the threat of non-existence, Updike has resorted largely to the oldest modes of immortality known to man - God and sex” (177), stresses Updike’s concern as a social realist. Besides accounting for his obsessive engagement with sex, it implies that bereft of spiritual certitude, human existence by mere biological procreation provides no significance to life.

David’s question to Rev. Dobson whether in the time interval between Death and the Day of Judgment one possesses consciousness is one such unresolved theological problem. Similarly, Dobson’s likening Heaven to Abraham Lincoln’s goodness living after the dearly loved President’s death is another. The fact that the
Reverend chooses to describe the attributes of Heaven in terms of nebulous concept of goodness shows that the cultural milieu of that period has scorched the beliefs of even the devout practitioners of religion.

Religion and immortality are intrinsically linked. The theme of immortality in Rabbit tetrology is addressed subtly and though it does not occupy a central space, the topic is present throughout. Shorn of theological overtones, Updike presents the idea of immortality in the garb of hope. Hope is a correlative of faith or to express it differently, hope is faith in oneself. Rabbit displays abundance of this trait in Rabbit, Run. His soliloquies reflect the zig zag nature of his spiritual travails, marked by peaks of ecstasy and ebbs of despondency. Yet it always converges on hope in the future. His running away at the end of the first novel of the tetrology can be viewed from a higher perspective of his efforts to reach the unknown that would satisfy his hope.

Despite the ambiguous ending of Rabbit, Run which paints the protagonist as a fallen hero unable to come to terms with the harsh realities of life, it carries embedded within it a positive message of hope. Emphasizing the struggles of the protagonist, Muradian opines: “Throughout the novel he was struggling (through escape) for the meaning of his life and never pretended he had the answer for the rest of us” (583). Kierkegaard’s insistence that individual conviction should have pre-eminence over “the bloodless universals of collective thought” (Gardiner 41), is best captured by this conclusion. Despite the spiritual convolutions, Updike’s hero proclaims the message of triumph of human spirit.
Hope in Updike is not a platitude that lives in future but is grounded in reality. It is prefigured to a journey of past which haunts the present in the form of pain and loneliness and death. All his works are solidified by these recurrent motifs of pain, loneliness, and death. *Rabbit, Run* is a vital statement of this problem with the past. Even in *Rabbit, Run* as a young man of twenty six years, Rabbit ceases to be a prime player basketball and surrounds himself only with nostalgic recreations of his past glory. His inability to adjust to the mundane life with an alcoholic wife and the failure to make a mark in the competitive world of American business culture have a searing effect on his individuality.

By daydreaming a glorious past, Rabbit negotiates his present. As a school boy he was a hero known for his legendary skill in the basketball court, worshipped by his school mates and held as an example by his coach. He had a glorious past but the very same glory inhibits his present living. His case is a classic example of a juvenile who on steeping into adulthood is unable to bear the realities of the adult world. The result is that the present is filled with pain not only for him but for others too. He becomes a source of ire for his parents who feel that he had allowed himself to be trapped into marriage with Janice. Nor his relationship with his mother-in-law Mrs. Springer, his wife Janice, and Ruth show him in good light. No wonder Ruth calls him Mr. Death which in its topical signification reveals the truth that he is a destroyer and a pain giver. The negotiation with the present gets complicated as his personal inclination is only the satisfaction of his instincts. In stressing this aspect of Rabbit’s personality,
Updike brings in the importance of the cultural milieu that sears the faith of the individual. Commenting on Updike’s characters Muradian observes:

It is interesting to note that Updike’s present is not an enjoyable one. His characters usually are hard pressed in just living life. It is only when his characters revert to the past (childhood memories) or to the afterlife (the Hope) that some sort of salvation or redemption is found. (577)

Though the issue of afterlife in the tetralogy is obliquely discussed and is clothed in the garment of hope, yet at times the theological dimensions are not avoided as seen in the death of Baby Becky. It is a pivotal incident in the tetralogy that raises the question of forgiveness, apart from the question of intervention of God in human life. Eccles says, “We must work for forgiveness” (Run 241). This assertion runs counter to the Christian concept of forgiveness which emphasizes that it cannot be forced or obtained for a consideration. It is this same concept that propels Portia to plead with Shylock, pointing out that “Mercy is not strained” (MV.4.1.175), but when displayed confers dual blessings. Similarly, Andrew Elphinstone emphasizes in *Freedom, Suffering and Love*, the unilateral act of forgiveness which leads to extinguishment of evil in the abstract sense. He elaborates: “The original offender is not provoked to renewed offence and the evil is robbed of its power to do further damage” (137). It is through the affirmative message of forgiveness that Updike lifts the discourse of the tetralogy to a higher moral plane.
Updike's world is not a gloomy and hopeless place, lacking moral perspectives. Nor is it a world where the causal effects are disregarded. There is underlying moral value which when breached brings disaster both to the spirit as well as the body. Death of baby Becky with its attendant pain is a dramatic proof of this vital fact. Pain becomes an inescapable ingredient of human existence which tempers the mind, separating adult and infantile. The emotional and psychological responses determine the facticity of a person and mark out the spiritual dimension of life. As Tothero rightly observes, “Right and wrong aren’t dropped from the sky…We make them” (Run 240). Though the characters in the tetralogy are immersed in the cultural paradigms of the time, there is always a yearning to decipher the problems of life in terms of religious and moral perspectives.

If Updike desists from making overt religious pronouncement, the reason is attributable to the peculiar milieu of the twentieth century which is overshadowed by a highly volatile culture that shredded the traditional religion, mores, and hierarchy. The new strong currents, however could not root out the past but produced what Pasewark terms as ‘Rabbit’s American religion’ whose ingredients are, “The need for freedom, recognition, ecstatic experience, and limitless consumption” (2). The paradigms of Rabbit’s American religion show a vital lack of inner spirituality that makes life meaningful. Updike’s delineation of four decades of Rabbit’s life fits into this general contours of American religion. Yet it manifests in no uncertain terms, a strong inner struggle of the protagonist to know his self as he measures himself against spiritual values. In this aspect, Updike’s hero stands out distinctly from the crowd.
Updike presents Rabbit’s attempt to run away even in *Rabbit at Rest* as an indication of the crisis of individual perception of self. When emptiness of the soul is perceived one recognizes the hollowness of the solitary self. Though outwardly Rabbit is surrounded by people whom he regards as either friends or foes, and is in turn held as a hero or a despicable character, he is inwardly alone. The attempt to find a solution to this dichotomy between the external circumstances and the inward emptiness takes the form of physical removal of space. However, in this attempt he meets with failure in the same manner as St. Augustine. In this regard Pasewark comments: “‘Where could I go, yet leave myself behind?’ Augustine asks. Whereas Augustine answers with self-condemning irony, ‘So I went to Carthage’, Harry returns to confines that the pursuit of freedom abjures” (5). Freedom in the real sense can be experienced only if it stems out of internal happiness. Updike shows that Rabbit is assailed by spiritual doubts and the crisis of upholding a nascent faith in the surrounding milieu of skepticism precludes him from experiencing internal freedom and expectedly the attempt to run ends in failure to locate happiness.

Larry Taylor observes in “The Wide-Hipped Wife and the Painted Landscape”: “If ‘existence precedes essence,’ then attainment of self-freedom precedes the desire for the freedom of others” (146). Updike stresses the importance of self-freedom throughout the tetralogy, and to certain extent it explains the reason for the hedonistic life styles of the characters that populate the novels. Yet there is a caution in such pursuit which is aired by Kruppenbach who links self-freedom with spiritual awareness. The clergyman categorically states that “life has no terrors for those who are with
faith but for those without faith there can be no salvation and no peace” (Run 65).

Updike posits that mere running does not lead to salvation. Thirty years later after his first run, Rabbit gets the enlightenment while holidaying in Florida that memory cannot be erased and the conflict between inner convictions and external forces ever remain. He learns that “everything has been paved by solid by memory and in any direction you go you’ve already been there” (Rest 72). Since memory makes one a prisoner, is there no way out for a penitent soul to find peace? Rev. Kruppenbach’s religious convictions make peace depend on salvation.

Yet Rabbit, like his creator, has no regard for the visceral aspects of religion. Pasewark's summation that “A God who saves only the pure saves only what does not need redemption, not creatures” (8) holds a key to understand Updike’s view on the tenuous relationship between salvation and freewill. Man without freewill is a creature not requiring salvation and a sinless person stands in no need for salvation. It is here the theological conviction of the novelist finds an escape route for the lock jam. Man in Bartian theology cannot reach God but only God can reach man.

If redemption is confined only to the pure, then there is circumspection in God’s choice since salvation is not open to all. This goes against the canon of universal redemption. Therefore, Updike has portrayed Rabbit as an aesthete under the grip of sensuality. This explains his relationship with women which on some occasions is marked by perversity; yet Rabbit never loses his feelings for the knowledge of the transcendent. Rabbit’s faith is characterized more by feelings than intellectual conviction. Being a man of emotions, he declares, “All I know is what feels right”
(Run 262). It is because of this preponderant emphasis on feelings that Rabbit’s relationships with women are always marked by carnality.

Updike’s exploration of the feelings is one of the dimensions of the spiritual crisis which seeks to find an answer whether there is a God-substitute? The higher form of feelings is to experience ecstasy and it is this quest for ecstasy that Rabbit undertakes experimenting in drugs in *Rabbit Redux*. Instead of considering ecstasy as an antidote of true religious experience, Skeeter and Jill deem it as a synonymous experience. This exerts a corrosive influence on faith. No wonder, the cultural milieu of the sixties with its experimentation in drugs and free sex takes a toll on Rabbit’s faith. His life is therefore a zigzag of confusing moves. Being a product of the times, Rabbit’s faith is too feeble to anchor itself on strong intellectual convictions or traditional values. There is always an overwhelming surrender to the American myths of individuality, freedom and accent on material success. This accounts largely for the vacillating faith of the protagonist.

Despite the inherent contradiction, Updike portrays Rabbit as an individual encased in religious tradition. The strong bond of religion and culture evident in the pangs of guilt which Rabbit seems to suffer from. These pangs of guilt have both religious and cultural origin. In *Rabbit Run*, the novelist declares that Rabbit and his wife feel guilty when they hear the name of God. “God’s name makes them feel guilty” (Run 14). This guilt has its genesis in the inability to live up to the standards of material achievement set by the society. Though, there is no transgression or violation of moral code, the cultural ethos of the nation is so powerful that it instantly
provokes a guilt feeling in Rabbit as well as his wife when Jimmy the Mouseketeer pronounces on the TV programme that God has endowed each one with special talents. Lack of palpable gifts makes them ashamed like fallen Adam and Eve.

Rabbit’s failure to live up to the societal norms of values seers his conscience deeply. Even after taking a surrogate route to reach material security in *Rabbit is Rich*, he is haunted by past failures which hover guilt like hold on him. Though he does not claim to have committed “the greatest sin” (Rich 356), he continues to suffer from pangs of guilt. He himself is acutely aware of his spiritually emaciated status. It is the reason why he concedes that “without a little of religion mankind will sink” (Rich 184). By portraying a defiant Rabbit who refuses to sink in the quicksand of material narcosis, Updike holds an affirmative attitude towards faith as a redeeming factor.

Though there is much in Updike’s oeuvre that seems to question Rabbit’s commitment to the fundamental tenets of Christian religion, there is nothing to indicate that there is an abandonment of faith. In *Rabbit Redux*, the novelist examines the Emersonian view of man which believes that the biblical fall of man does not rule out a journey back to his pristine state. The party of Hope represented by Jill wants to dismantle the barriers of race, and class and to hark back to Edenic state of innocence. Updike’s appraisal of the counterpoint through Skeeter and the Angstroms may sound like the articulation of a skeptical voice, yet there is never an abandonment of hope.

Rabbit tetralogy, on the contrary, abounds in repetitive of motifs that accentuate the search for hope in existence. While in *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit is on a quest
that is inconclusive and characterized by disastrous married life, *Rabbit Redux* marks his return to his wife, followed by upswing in his fortunes in *Rabbit is Rich* mainly on account of his wife’s legacy inherited from her father. In *Rabbit at Rest*, again the protagonist strives to find meaning for existence within the familial relationship. His death witnessed by three generations attests the strong hold of marriage that runs throughout the tetrology. Aligned to this theme is the spiritual problem of preserving faith in God in a highly secularized society. Though the problems faced by Rabbit with God, marriage, fatherhood, and race repeat themselves indicating a sort of helplessness, there is an affirmation of life. But this affirmation comes only along with the affirmation of the Divine for Updike considers Man and the Divine as an integral whole. Neary’s final pronouncement that “Updike’s fictional world as an ontological solidity that reflects, I think, Updike’s dialectical affirmation of the substantiality of the human and of the divine” (90), is an accurate statement of the novelist’s personal conviction.

Updike’s fiction utilizes the idea of repetition-as-imitation to accentuate the affirmative message of hope. *Rabbit is Rich* is a reaffirmation of the inter-play of the past, present and future. Nelson relives the wild life of Rabbit and each of his moves though seem to negate the faith in God, ultimately in their engagement as father and son revolves around the affirmation of faith in God. Nelson’s faith oscillates from agnosticism to phenomenological acceptance of God after his rehabilitation at the drug centre in *Rabbit at Rest*. The same Nelson who ridiculed his father’s faith in God in *Rabbit is Rich* becomes the proponent of faith urging his father to trust in God.
Nevertheless, these repetitions are not in vain for they “turn out to be Rabbit’s real experiences of what Pascal, in passage that Updike used for his novel’s epigraph, calls ‘The motions of Grace’” (Neary 96). All his runs and counter runs are a part of the motion to find Grace which eludes him and Updike’s realistic accounting of the travails marks him a Promethean hero.

Updike believes in the inherent goodness of man and it is reflected in his a longing to go back to Edenic past. In the Rabbit, Run Rabbit longs to find his idyllic Eve and this explains his runs and counter runs with his wife and Ruth. This psychological longing for a pristine past is emblematic of conservative man’s inability to come to terms with the changing cultural milieu in which the feminist movement had displaced the accepted role of man in the married life. Though in Rabbit, Run geographically Rabbit runs away from Pennsylvania to the South in order to reach the Gulf of Mexico, his quest is aborted and he returns to his family ultimately.

Between Rabbit, Run and Rabbit is Rich, Rabbit makes several geographical moves, yet none of them seems to be spurred on by any known goal. In a repetition which happens in Rabbit at Rest, Rabbit reaches the Gulf of Mexico in the south, fleeing from his wife after committing fornication with his daughter-in-law only to die. But the death is not a physical extermination of Rabbit, but a fulfillment of spiritual experience in the form of forgiveness obtained by him from his wife, Janice. Viewed from this perspective, Updike has clearly erected the motions of the novel to accentuate a message of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. The very same Janice who had forgiven only half heartedly in Rabbit, Run following the death of her child
is presented as a different person in *Rabbit at Rest* where she pathetically implores her semi-conscious dying husband to forgive her for the indifferent role as a wife. The hardiness of heart on both sides gets mellowed and watered down in three decades and at the time of *Rabbit at Rest* assumes a delicate display of marital affection and love.

Therefore, it can be argued that there is a progressive maturity in the depiction of Rabbit as a man, as a husband and as a father. This change which is not overtly described by Updike is nonetheless real and genuine. In between, there are several incidents that appear to focus one’s attention on the nothingness and meaninglessness of life, the final message that is left is of optimism. Neary captures the affirmative faith of Updike: “Although nothingness may lurk as a dark possibility in Rabbit’s story, and throughout Updike’s fiction, Updike’s world is too substantial-and too filled with a sense of miracle-to be ultimately nihilistic” (109). Heidegger’s concept of Dasein, along with Kierkegaard’s celebration of individual choice which influenced Updike, banishes nihilism from his world.

If such a positive message of Individual’s choice lies at the core of the tetrology, the question that arises is, why is it not so obvious? A brief analysis of Updike’s techniques may reveal the cause. According to Freud, artistic activity is an expression of escape. This escapist theory of art propounds that reality is hard for every one to bear all of the time and one needs an escape to seek pleasure. Art, therefore, “as a source of pleasure and as a comfort in life, helps him who creates it and him who enjoys it” (Marcuse, 387). Seen in this background, Updike as a realist has portrayed the spiritual crisis of his protagonist in all its realistic manifestation. The spiritual crisis
has to necessarily confront the problems of the flesh. In the conflict between the spirit and the flesh, Rabbit, unlike the religious protagonists, has no qualms in surrendering his spiritual longings to physical instincts. It is this surrender to the flesh very often that masquerades the spiritual overtones of the tetrology.

Updike in realistically portraying the animal instincts of the flesh so apparent in Rabbit’s illicit relationship with his daughter-in-law provides ample evidence to the fact that reality is hard to bear for everyone. The pleasure that one gets out of this realistic portrayal is the recognition of the baser instincts of man that requires to be sublimated through higher spiritual aims. Seen from Kierkegardian universe, the moral dereliction of the persons occupying the aesthetic sphere causes concern but simultaneously accentuates the correctness of the faithful in taking a leap into the religious sphere. But the desire for it should come from the individual. As Sasikumar Ghose rightly captures, “An element of the unpredictable inheres in life itself. We must be prepared to take the leap, each according to his need and capacity” (296). Rabbit’s propensity to be under the spell of the aesthetic sphere is a reflection of the twentieth century man’s lack of strong will to take a leap of faith.

If the above discussions reveal a paradoxical pre-occupation of the novelist with sex and religion, it only reflects the cultural milieu of America faithfully. Jaques Choron’s insightful comment on contemporary America, “The spectacular scandals and crimes in certain sections of society did not nullify that compassion and that American idealism which owed so much to an ultimate Christian influence” (408), can be best understood in the life and times of Rabbit. American idealism was always
beset by the counter pulls of reason and religion and this is reflected in Deistic faith which Updike explores in the tetrology.

Deistic belief holds that by rational methods alone men can know the correct attributes of religion and its proposition rests on two main pillars. According to Roger L. Emerson, the first believes that “God’s active powers are displayed in the world, created, sustained, and ordered by means of divinely sanctioned natural laws, both moral and physical” (646). The second one rules out any divine intervention in human affairs. It states that “there is no special providence, no miracles or other divine interventions violate the lawful natural order” (646). Considered deeply, Rabbit’s spiritual crisis stems from these two tenets of Deism. Often he gives proof to belief in the existence of God, but he is unable to bring himself to accept divine intervention. The question that was raised in *Rabbit, Run*, on the death of his daughter Becky can be answered in two ways depending on the philosophical viewpoints one adopts. Kierkegarridian faith would expect the person to repose unassailable faith in God’s intervention while Deism would absolve God of any blame as He will not violate the natural laws for the sake of an individual.

Rabbit is caught between these two opposing faiths that account for the vacillation throughout the tetrology. On one hand, there is a realization that morality is essential for civilized living and in jettisoning morality along with religion, the contemporary society was embarking on a suicidal destruction. For the sake of order in life, Rabbit pines for sanctification of marriage as evident in his homily to his son in *Rabbit is Rich*, though his own marriage is not established on moral and religious
foundations. His criticism of contemporary infatuation with money is also moved by the same motive which focuses on the order and security that religion and morality bring in. Yet in his individual relationship, there is always a tendency to take recourse to the deistic and evolutionary ideas that God does not intervene in man’s universe and that moral culpability cannot be laid on the individual as man’s conduct is determined by genes.

Such a split in no way undermines faith. Siegel explains the validity of both the views referring to the society’s split reaction to the issue of abortion. He elaborates: “Society tacitly condones abortion for many of these reasons, but even under the most socially acceptable circumstances, the act shall excite unease because it entails fundamental breach of gender-role expectations” (2). This explains the dichotomy one finds in Rabbit’s attitude towards God, morality, and role of women in general. The expectations are culturally nurtured and even when Rabbit seeks to turn his back to the culture, he meets with disastrous consequences as exemplified in his misadventures in Rabbit Redux.

The power of the society over the individual is something that cannot be underestimated though attempts have been made by cultural theorists to dispute the idea that society is a distinct entity that has a “structure that impinges on or determines actions carried out within its sphere” (Borus 643). One finds that such attempts are flawed, for society in the first instance was inspired by the goal for “grasping the obstacles to and conditions for fulfilling collective life” (643). So long as collective life is a reality, the structural presence of the society is a concept that
cannot be ignored. Therefore, the changing attitudes of the society towards God and morality do impact the individual and Rabbit is no exception. The dichotomy of Rabbit’s religious views can also be attributed to the conflicting views on the perception of sin. As Kierkegaard notes in *The Concept of Anxiety* “sin is for the ethical consciousness what error is for the knowledge of it—the particular exception that proves nothing” (19). In the absence of strict ethical consciousness, the protagonist of the tetrology does not suffer from pangs of guilt as the exception does not prove anything.

Why does the interest or the curiosity for the divine still subsist when in the twentieth century the organized religion has been relegated to a nullity? The reason seems to lie in the very nature of human beings who being perplexed by the problems of life looks for a cause if not for a solution. Ernst Wolf postulates: “Man wants to hear, to understand, to know and that is why, knowing not what he does, he reaches out and seizes that unheard of possibility to pray, to open up his Bible, to speak, to listen, and to sing of God” (12). Rabbit may not sing paeans to God, yet being caught in the perplexing problems of life, be it in the form of familial troubles or in the fast changing cultural, political and economic dynamics, he looks up tenuously to God. If not to God, it is invariably to sex to find solace.

There are many instances in the tetrology that seem to indicate that Rabbit can be dismissed as a sexual pervert. But since the tetrology’s milieu pertains to a period of feminist movement and sexual liberation, some of his sexual preferences like his sodomy with Thelma should be taken as a reflection of the altered cultural mores.
Thomas Nagel posits on the plastic concept of sexual perversion: “Consider all the societies that frowned upon adultery and fornication. These have not been regarded as unnatural practices, but have been thought objectionable in other ways. What is regarded as unnatural admittedly varies from culture to culture, but the classification is not a pure expression of disapproval or distaste” (126). In the light of these observations, a sympathetic view of Rabbit’s sexual perfidy can be held, if not condoned.

An overview of Updike’s thematic concerns in the tetralogy shows that though some are topical, they have a longevity unaffected by the passage of time. Commenting on the issues in America that occupied the central space both in intellectual as well as cultural areas, Sydney E. Ahlstrom observes:

Like many of its elegant, gay, or roaring predecessors, the decades of the 1960’s will probably gain a name or two. Men will, of course, identify it with the ‘Great Society’ (though not without irony) and with the Vietnam war, but adjectives like ‘secular’ or ‘permissive’ will probably commemorate other aspects of these ten eventful years.

The decade may also be remembered for the ‘Death of God’ or the ‘Great Moral Revolution’. (445)

Updike has chosen to concentrate on the themes of Death of God and of the Great Moral Revolution in his tetralogy not just during one decade but over a period of thirty years.

In spite of lenient moral code that permitted unconventional relationships which resulted from the Sexual Revolution of sixties, the basic requirement of a set of
code to govern human behavior was never lost sight of. Barth believed that “ethics as a doctrine of God’s commands as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer” and that “man has inherently the character of responsibility before God; he is a being in encounter, free only when he confirms his decisions to the divine decision” (Douglas 64). This emphasis on obedience to ethics marks out the uniqueness of man’s existence.

Contrasting the uniqueness of human beings with animals, Anthony Kenny remarks that understanding alone is not the differentiating trait. He observes that understanding is common to both man and animal, for animals too perceive objects in space and time and sometimes the ability of animals exceed than that of men. By the virtue of reason, man is able to amalgamate his understanding and surpasses animals in power. Ironically, it adds to his sufferings which comes out of the recognition of the past and the future. He posits “they live in the present alone, man lives also in the future and the past” (293). Updike’s protagonist undergoes suffering because he is always haunted by the past which takes the form of his own son. His struggles with Nelson, however, end in a note of reconciliation at his death bed.

Daniel Pals quotes Ludwig Feurbach who in his book, The Essence of Christianity, claims that religion is a just a psychological device in which we saddle our hopes, virtues and ideal to an imaginary super being called “God”. Freud carried forward this idea of psychological concept of God to a higher forum. “He asserts that religion arises only in response to deep emotional conflict and weaknesses” (Pals 77). Yet to Carl Jung, the celebrated psychologist, the existence of God is a certainty that requires no proof, “when it is perfectly plain that He exists, as plain as a brick that
falls on your head” (*Dreams* 62). Rabbit’s personal convictions lie between the extremes of these beliefs.

It is because of this reason that Rabbit always returns to speculating on life and death. Though overtly he does not display much enthusiasm for belief in life after death, there is an unease to accept death as the end of his existence. Though the ending of the tetralogy is patently silent on this issue, the concourse to the past actions of the protagonist indicates a strong support to conclude that Rabbit looks forward to life after death. A painter aims to invest significance to a blank canvass with his brush strokes and a poet struggles to apply a new dimension to often used words. The reason for these efforts, according to David Adams Leeming stated in his Introduction to *A Dictionary of Creation Myths*, is because “it lies behind our attempts to ‘make something’ of our lives, that is, to make a difference in spite of the seemingly universal drive towards meaninglessness or a mere routine”. Similarly, Rabbit by constant musing of the death of baby Becky in the tetralogy, expresses sub-conscious longing for eternal life which is guaranteed by religious faith.

If Updike’s hero fails in the test of conventional morality but at the same time expresses the nostalgia for it, the reason has to be attributed not to Updike’s muddled thinking. The issue on hand is whether there is an irreconcilable dichotomy between morality and conscience. Rabbit’s conscience is not so ossified that he is immune to moral transgressions. Atleast, with regard to his sexual transgressions he does not seem to express any awareness of transgressing the limits. But he is keenly sensitive to morality in general and this is the reason for his bemoaning the decline of religious
practices. The same problem arises while analyzing the Joseph Conrad’s moral vision. Michael Lackey quotes, John G Peters’s *Conrad and Impressionism* “which articulates an impressionist epistemology and allows Conrad to maintain ‘moral values’ and thereby avoid the abyss of ethical anarchy and epistemological solipsism” (20).

Though Conrad rejected morality and believed only in the consciousness of self, he confessed, “I still have some pretensions to the possession of a conscience though my morality is gone to the dogs. I am like a man who has lost his gods.” (21). Rabbit’s espousal of morality despite not adhering to it in his personal life does not suffer from lack of authenticity.

However much one quells the conscience, it comes bobbing up like a float in water. According to Karl Barth, conscience speaks of the righteousness of God. He says, “since conscience is the perfect interpreter of life, what it tells us is no question, no riddle, no problem, but a fact—the deepest, innermost, surest fact of life: God is righteous. Our only question is what attitude toward the fact we ought to take” (9). Rabbit’s attitude inherently seems to believe that God is righteous. This affirmative faith is expressed in his nostalgic recollection of his dead daughter in *Rabbit at Rest* without recrimination about God’s apparent failure to rescue her.

The trajectory through which Rabbit passes is an indication of Updike’s attitude towards man’s place in the universe. Updike’s universe is not wholly controlled by reason and logic as Hegel believes. Suyash Saxena quotes from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* in the article “Those big questions of life and God” in *The Hindu* which shows the limits of Hegelian view: “If we admit that human life can
be ruled by reason, the possibility of life is destroyed”. If Hegel considered that the dialectical movements of history, expounded in the never ending collusion of impersonal elements of thesis and antithesis, made man an insignificant participant in the great drama of living enacted in the universe, Updike stressed the contrary that individual experience was not controlled by logic.

From *Rabbit, Run* to *Rabbit at Rest*, the protagonist displays ample evidence to steer clear of the impersonal forces that surround him. His running away from Janice and Ruth, Ruth’s refusal to abort his love child and keeping the fact close to her heart even to her death, Janice’s unmotherly act of abandoning Nelson in his infancy for her lover Stroves, and her later impulsive act of financially aiding Nelson in his drug addiction that ruins Springer Agency are a few of the decisive actions in the tetralogy where individual choice determines the life of others. An idealistic Jill and a maverick Skeeter are persons moved by impulse as much as the protagonist. These instances show that an individual as a Dasein makes his choice which may go against the grain of accepted wisdom and logic.

The actions of the protagonist as well as that of others preclude a deterministic universe and the individuals are held answerable for their actions. The death of baby Becky is as much a joint culpability of Rabbit and Janice as the impersonal force of water that drowned her. The death of Jill is attributable to the racial animosity of the whites, and the fire that killed her is only a symbolic transfiguration of that collective hatred. Nelson’s drug addiction which ultimately leads to the loss of Toyota Agency and sounds the death knell for Rabbit’s self-confidence, Pru’s illicit sexual
relationship with her own father-in-law which when discovered by Janice propels his
final flight to Florida are outcome of the choices made on individual volition.
Therefore, it can be concluded that Updike’s universe is not deterministic and the
individual is not denied the free will.

Such a conclusion poses certain amount of unease to account for the ideas of
evolutionary creation that occur often in the tetrolgy. Rabbit is always puzzled by
the very fact of living, which paradoxically combines the solemn and the mundane.
His random thoughts in the hospital at the time of cardiac surgery as he lies oscillating
between life and death, refuse to accept life as a product of chance. No doubt, there is
harmony in the body functions which do not consciously abide by human exertion.
The presence of impulses like anger, fear, and sexual desire presuppose the existence of a
pre-determined order. In the physical world also, there is a simultaneous presence of
regularity and chaos which the ancients found intriguing. “Diogenes was much
impressed by the regularity of the world and the need to account for it” (Ferre 671), which
ultimately lead to the erecting of physical laws. However, Updike does not curtail the
individual freedom of man. Though genes may mechanically control body functions,
they do not exercise final authority when it comes to making individual choice. The
preponderant impression one gets in the tetrolgy is that the scope for individual
freedom is never under duress from a pre-deterministic world.

In overcoming the pessimism of God is dead philosophy which erases moral
compunction as argued by Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, Updike comes strongly in
favour of anchoring one’s faith in God. Rabbit’s faith in God is never intellectual nor
does it stem out of Pascal’s wager which argues that, “either God exists or not. If God does not exist, all well and good. But if God does exist,… you are in for a lot of suffering in the afterlife” (Priest 94). Rabbit does not take a wager on belief in God based on sufferings in the next life. His question, “If God doesn’t exist, why does anything?” (Run 79), sums up his simple faith.

Though his faith is never strong and is prone to severe stress caused by factors too great, Rabbit’s final solace is obtained only by subscribing to the moralism of forgiveness advocated by religion. Religious beliefs cannot be wished away by powerful winds of materialism and reason. In this context Sunita Sinha’s verdict on Graham Green’s *The Heart of the Matter* is apt: “It [the novel] affirms a religion’s belief by negation, by showing the dreariness associated with it’s absence” (48). Updike links morality and religion to avoid the dreariness caused by the absence of religion, affirming the need for substantive faith which is not fettered by reason. The secular moralism of the existentialist is not favoured by Updike as it displays indifference to the basic requirements of forgiveness. The conviction that each one is right prevents opening the heart to accept one’s error. Janice’s plea for forgiveness for maltreating Rabbit despite her being the victim of his faithlessness shows that it is only by moral standards of religion that one can conquer baser instincts.

Though in the Updikean world, God does not intervene as a rescuer from the ills and problematic situations that individual choices land man in, the divine presence is never denied. This might appear contradictory, yet even an avowed Marxist like Stalin could not help invoking God. Churchill narrates an incident in *The Second*
World War II how when he apologized for his earlier anti-communist attitude, Stalin related forgiveness with God: “He smiled amicably, so I said, ‘Have you forgiven me?’ ‘Premier Stalin, he say’, said Interpreter Pavlov, ‘all that is in the past, and the past belongs to God’ ” (443). Despite all ideologies and training to the contrary, the idea of God and forgiveness, religion and morality can never be pried apart.

Updike makes religion an important facet of Rabbit’s personality. Joyce Markle says that Rabbit “seems to have a deep-rooted faith even though he neglects the externals of religion” (282). The result is spiritual poverty. One of the puzzling questions that arise in the tetralogy is, what is the cause for the weak and emasculated faith? There is an unceasing oscillation between faith and skepticism for which no particular reason can be attributed. In fictionalizing this aspect of Rabbit’s personality, Updike captures the mind of the majority of the twentieth century men who are condemned to face the consequences of losing absolute faith in the Divine. He finds that there are no easy answers to evil which is an unshakeable reality. Whether God exists or not, whether He intervenes or not, existence of evil is a problem man has to grapple with everyday.

The same predicament is narrated by Kuldip Nayar, the celebrated Indian journalist in his preface to Beyond the Lines. Seeing the less unfortunate, Nayar confesses:

I am shaken when I pass through a slum or when a poor helpless child spreads his hand before me for alms. ‘How do they live? Why do they live?’ I ask myself. I often imagine myself engaged in a slew of
activities to transform their destiny; a genie fighting against evil.

Wishful thinking perhaps, but the tedium and tension involved in the very process pushes aside such cogitations and I return to a self-centred life of good meals and an air-conditioned room. (x)

But being a sensitive person, Nayar cannot remain in the state of ease for long. He, therefore fantasies:

I believe that perhaps someday everything will miraculously right itself. Some magic wand will help wipe tears from every cheek and awaken the people to something deeper and nobler. How? When?

These questions gnaw at my conscience. I try to push them away but they keep reappearing, each time with greater force, like a refrain from a piece of forgotten music, leaving me feeling sad, shaken and helpless.

I wish I could find a peg to hand my worries and doubts on. If only I had faith. (xi)

St. Paul in Epistles to Hebrews proclaims that it is impossible to please God without faith. Nayar’s confessions affirm that without faith it is impossible to live in this world. Therefore, despite all the weak nature of faith, Rabbit lives a rounded life in which he does not suffer from guilt while engaging in sensual pleasures though his faith is seared often by events over which he has no control. His spiritual unrest that propelled him to run in Rabbit, Run, ultimately finds rest in Rabbit at Rest by negotiating peace and forgiveness which come from morality rooted in religion.
Updike’s emphasis is that faith in God is not a make believe substitute for confronting the evils of the world but an indispensable apparatus to cling to when swept by the torrents of unfathomable and undecipherable cross-currents unleashed in the world of competitive living. Dean Sherman makes a pointed observation on the need for a proper perspective: “No man can endure evil or suffering for long. The duration of life on Planet Earth is insignificant in light of eternity. Man’s suffering is equally insignificant in the light of eternal relationship with God” (132). It is the focus on eternity that lends meaning to life. Materialistic affluence focused on immediacy is no remedy to the ills of the world, as man is more than a bundle of bone and flesh. Corporeal existence alone does not determine reality and there is an imperceptible dimension to life that has to be satisfied.

Findings:

Updike affirms that life has no meaning unless it is lived in higher standards of morality envisioned in religion. It is this knowledge that Rabbit attains in the final moments of his life in the hospital. Speaking on the intricate relationship between morality and death, Bernard Schopen observes: “Humanly, morally, this world is ambiguous and static; but spiritually it is a world which witnesses the dramatic confrontation of life with death, of faith with the void” (205). In the confrontation with death, the spiritual fibers stuck deep within the psyche are exposed. Rabbit’s early fall from the pantheon of basketball heroes which in his juvenal ignorance symbolized the zenith of good living and the purpose in life is really retrieved by the spiritual knowledge which he achieves by serendipity. As Edward Vargo says, “All
that has been said about God, damnation, redemption, and the rest is merely a set of
signs. Emptiness, silence, the absence of God do the cosmic work of deconstructing
our flawed conceptualizations. By entering more trustfully into the ensuing darkness,
one might ultimately go through to gladness” (120). Updike emphasizes that it is by
undertaking a searing journey from darkness to faith that man can make his existence
meaningful.

This real retrieval of human values advocated by Updike impels man to hold
optimistic attitude towards life even in death. Death is not something to be dreaded as
an end to human existence, but must be considered as an opportunity. Its awareness
propels either enjoyment of sensuality or to the sensitization of God’s presence.
Depending on the choice one makes, one can be doomed to a life of animal existence
or enjoy the higher values of morality and purposeful existence. Timothy Gowers’
observation while speaking of talented persons that, “the most profound contributions
to mathematics are often made by tortoises rather hares” (128), may as well sum up
Rabbit’s spiritual journey. Updike has examined the whole gamut of the spiritual crisis of
the individual in the runs of Rabbit, Run, the counter runs in Rabbit Redux, the stasis of
Rabbit is Rich, and the self-realization of Rabbit at Rest. A slow but steady progress
towards spiritual realization marks the life of the protagonist and his final adieu to his
family without pangs of guilt and their acceptance sans recrimination is the proof that
the searing journey he began four decades earlier ends in ideal rest, signifying the
triump of human spirit.
Scope for Study

Both by sheer volume and depth, the writings of Updike offer a wide perspective on life. Hence, the avenues for further studies are wide open. Areas that call for deep analysis are realism and fantasy, ethnicity and racial tension, fear and faith, the sacred and the profane, the paradox of globalization and multiculturalism, individual liberty and familial conflicts, and the images of America. A postmodernist’s approach to his entire oeuvre will reveal new dimensions of his artistic techniques and absolve the charge of vagueness in his work and help appreciate the underlying message more concretely.

The organizing thematic principle that shapes the Rabbit novels reflects Updike’s views of his moral universe and the society. Updike’s emphasis is that self analysis is essential for man. When man lacks this realization he becomes a prey to anxiety, irrational anger, insecurity, resentment and victim of greater delusions. In the journey of self-realization he should move along with emotional and ethical maturity. This journey enables him to see truth and gain confidence in the affirmation of life. In the course of this journey he sheds pride and ego and adorns humility. This humility does not weaken his strength, instead fortifies him with love, understanding and forgiveness.

Like the musical composition with themes and variations, these are the motives and tonic centers that even when muted or wedded with subordinate themes still resonate in all his works. Updike’s vision of man is charged by this optimistic vibration that man through selfrealization can repair and polish his own life. It is this vision that enables Updike secure permanence as one of the major American Novelists.