Chapter-2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
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Updike is considered as one of the greatest American fiction writers of his generation. Besides Tony Morrison, Updike was the most written about living writer of his time. He was widely praised as America’s ‘last true man of letters’. The excellence of his prose is near-universally acknowledged, even by those critics who are sceptical of his significance as a novelist and of his larger artistic vision. Updike’s themes and his style of writing elicited a mixed response in the beginning of his literary career. His early works *TheCarpenteredHen* (1958), *The Poor House Fair* (1959) and *The Same Door: Short Stories* (1959) were greeted with enthusiasm in the literary circle. ‘New York Times Book Review’, welcomed Updike’s ability (reminiscent of both Chekhov and Joyce) to discern significance in the lives of ordinary people. Ultimately, Updike remains as the foremost man of letters whose prodigious intelligence, verbal powers, shrewd insight into the sorrows, frustrations and banality of American life separates him from the ranks of his contemporaries. Amidst this general craze, there were complaints of weakness which prefigured attacks on Updike that became commonplace later on. Richard Gillman wrote in an otherwise favourable review of *The Poor House Fair*: ‘Occasionally, too his book suffers from what Pascal described as ‘The wearing effect of continuous eloquence’.

(Gillman, 1959)

The novelist, Philip Roth, considered as one of Updike’s chief literary rivals, wrote – ‘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 hero of Updike’s most acclaimed series of novels, *The Rabbit* series, is considered Updike’s American Everyman. The large majority of review of Updike’s second novel *Rabbit, Run*, were also favourable although some reviewers puzzled about
the writer’s attitude towards the protagonist. But the charges of triviality kept on growing. Another review in ‘Times’ said, ‘This dedicated 29 years old man of letters, says very little and says it very well. . .The impressions left are of risks untaken, words too fondly tested and of a security of skill that approaches smugness’.

(Put and Take, Time, 1962)

Other critics are of the view that his prose is superficial and overly descriptive to hide the fact that his work is about nothing. Even sympathetic critics like Guerin La Course observed that ‘He fears to foray into the night world of feeling for the significances. The polarity of genius has a double edge’; warning that Updike can’t afford to sit on his hands; he concluded, ‘He relies apparently on language rather than thought, sense rather that sensibility, wit rather than wisdom, all of which afford only temporary harbour’.

(Commonweal, 1963)

According to Amitabh Ghosh, ‘The end-result is that Updike is unable to cut his brown characters loose from the texts, scriptures and ideologies. As for his belief, that elaborate descriptions of skin colour are a form of insight, it is not wholly without merit, for it does serve to occasionally enliven the prose’. Updike’s preoccupations with diverse concerns like sociological, metaphysical and Christian led to different interpretations of his texts. His highly distinctive prose style features a rich, unusual, sometimes inscrutable vocabulary as conveyed through the eyes of ‘a wry, intelligent authorial voice’ that extravagantly describes the physical world, while remaining squarely in the realist tradition. Updike famously described his own style as an attempt to ‘give the mundane its beautiful due’. Updike’s early works featured the influence of JD Salinger, John Cheever and the Modernists – Marcel Proust, Henry Greene, James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov. Among the very early critical articles, Dean Doner’s Rabbit Angstrom’s Unseen World takes into considerations the short stories such as Ace in the Hole and Lifeguard and
Updike’s novels *The Poor House Fair* and *Rabbit Run* and concludes that humanists are consistently projected as antagonists in Updike’s works. For Doner, Rabbit becomes the hero, victimized by the net of humanism. Eccles and Conner, two humanists are the antagonists and Rabbit’s irresponsible behaviour and self efforts for breaking free are as in a sense redeemed by this belief in God.

Arthur Mizener, in *The American Hero as High School Boy: Peter Caldwell* related Updike’s nostalgia for his past with a religious feeling. And this may be true because Updike wrote about America with certain nostalgia, reverence, recognitions and celebration of America’s broad diversity. (Arthur Mizener, 1964)

The sense of religious in Updike is dealt with directly in Michael Novak’s essay – *Updike’s Search for Liturgy*. (Michael Novak, 1963) Novak attempts to show how the narrator in Updike’s short stories searches for images of a deep and serene way of looking at life which is completely lost in contemporary secular world. He concludes that Updike is attempting to impose meaning on flux that he is dealing with serious issues and is trying to reinforce the significance of religion in America. The idea of Updike as a religious writer is also explored in Robert Detweiler’s, *John Updike and the Indictment of Cultural Protestantism*. (University of Florida Monographs, No. 14) Focussing on *Rabbit, Run*, Detweiler sees Updike fighting in the novel the same kind of problems – false moralism, a belief in progress that ignores man’s sinful nature, corrupt institutions – that the neo-orthodox theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, had been fighting from the 1930’s. Rabbit lacks inner resources, but with proper support he could have overcome his crisis. His tragedy as a man without grace is that his crisis doesn’t lead to redemption, yet the critic holds the failure of the community and the institutions responsible for Rabbit’s failure.
In another article by ThaddensMuradian, (Muradian1965) memories of childhood, pain, loneliness and death are marked as Updike’s major themes. The critic asserts that Updike treats death in his works as a necessary end to life, which ushers in something better than life, i.e. life after death. Norris Yates also speaks of religious matters in *The Doubt and Faith of John Updike*. (Norris, 1965) Besides these articles, two pamphlets also take up the question of religion in Updike’s works. The first published in 1967 was by Alice and Kenneth Hamilton and the others by Charles Samuels, came out in 1969. The Hamiltons’ *John Updike: A Critical Essay* serves as a modest introduction to their more stridently Christian interpretation of Updike, published in 1970. According to Hamiltons, ‘Updike thinks of his characters as musical instruments which, even though untuned, can reverberate with the sounds of eternity’.

(Hamilton, Alice and Kenneth1970)

The first full length study of Updike’s work is *The Elements of John Updike* by Alice and Kenneth Hamilton. (Hamilton Alice and Kenneth, 1967) They believe not only that Updike has everything to say but also that he says it with enormous precision and power, not through the medium of direct exposition but indirectly through the medium of imagery and parable. The Hamiltons, therefore, give only scant attention to the realistic content of Updike’s fiction and concentrate almost entirely on the patterns of meaning that are traceable beneath it. They find Updike demonstrating the abundance of God’s grace and the unwillingness of contemporary man to accept it. They find Christian orthodoxy to be Updike’s solution to the dilemmas of 20th century life. But their position overlooks the sociological significance of Updike, as they do not want to treat literature primarily as a soft document even though Updike so carefully details minutia of our ordinary experience. Their shortcoming is that their interpretation of Updike, places all emphasis upon individual’s relationships with God and that too of a Christian persuasion.
Through their work, Updike emerges as a kind of monster-symbolist and theological preacher, whose work is viewed not as literary but as a repository, of religious and mythological imagery. The Hamiltons argued aggressively that Updike has constantly dealt with the abundance of God’s saving grace for those who freely accept it. Their explication of Updike rather diminishes the complexity of his characters and makes Christianity sound like the only plausible theoretical understanding of human existence. It has to be acknowledged that the meaning of God has always been a concern of Updike’s works and there are also Biblical allusions but the Hamiltons’ interpretation of these seems, at times, arbitrary and almost always too simple. They write, for e.g: ‘Snow from heaven, bringing to a halt earthly business, allows man to know that he is in the care of a providence ordering all things in a fashion beyond his comprehension’. But the study is not always this reductive; Hamiltons are sensitive to Updike’s allusiveness, not confined to Bible or Karl Barth or Kierkegaard but also to such sources as varied as Robert Herrick (about whom Updike wrote his Harvard thesis) or Pliny’s Natural History. However, one is often compelled to object the way in which they interpret the function of the allusions. Nevertheless, the Hamiltons hold a significant position in Updikean criticism for their pioneering work.

Like the Hamiltons, George Hunt too preoccupies himself with the religious overtones of Updike’s work in John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion and Art. (Hunt, 1980) His thesis is that these aspects characterize the predominant subject matter, the thematic concern and the central questions that sound throughout Updike’s fiction. The focus in the early fiction is on religion; beginning with TheMusicSchool, it is on Sex and with A Month of Sundays, art and the problems relating to fictional creation come to the fore. Hunt insists, ‘like a musical composition. . .these are his motives or tonic centres that, even when muted or wedded with subordinate
themes, still resonate for the attentive listener’. He seeks to demonstrate that Updike has a most sophisticated religio-artistic vision, informed and often shaped by a very complex and subtle theology. Besides, Hunt shows how the ideas of such figures as Karl Barth, Soren Kierkegaard and Carl Jung can increase one’s understanding of Updike’s world. He shows Barth’s attitude towards evil and the relevance of this attitude to Updike’s treatment of Rabbit Angstrom; Kierkegaard’s ideas about dread, guilt and sin particularly, as they relate to sexuality, which in Updike’s estimates, according to Hunt, is not only psychologically complex, but also morally and religiously ambivalent. Hunt also suggests the possible influence on Updike of the compellingly dramatic voice of these theologians, as well as of their distinctive, dialectical and ambiguous modes of argumentation.

In addition Hunt seizes upon his own knowledge of Carl Jung’s theories about the anima and individuation to illuminate Updike’s fiction, in particular Of the Farm and A Month of Sundays. Marshfield’s month records on man’s psychic movement from his concern with his ego – the dwelling place of his conscious life to his encounter with the unconscious symbol of the self. Besides, Hunt refers to Carl Barth, Kierkegaard, John Bunyan, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, Denis de Rougement, Northrop Frye, Joseph Campbell and R.W.B. Lewis. In other words, he seizes upon whatever idea appeals to him to explain what he regards as the resonance of Updike’s fiction.

In his late books, Updike shows no willingness, verbally, to acknowledge silence, failure, interruption, loss of faith, despair etc. Supremely, he can describe these feelings and tastes but they are not inscribed in the language itself. He uses 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.
The detail of Updike’s writing was so rich that it inspired two schools of thought on his fiction – those who responded to his descriptive prose as to a kind of poetry, a sensuous engagement with the world, and those who argued that it was more style than context.

The latter position was defined by James Wood in the 1999 essay ‘John Updike’s complacent God’ in *The Broken Estate*, which was actually a review of Updike’s 1996 novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. In that review, if we substitute the name of Wood with Updike and the word critic with the writer, it’s all the same. Wood is far too light weight to be a tragic critic and he is very much a theological writer. He retains all the categories of a bland, back-ward looking Christian humanism in a nominally secular form. Wood and Updike are ‘linguistic positivists’ for whom the word is a window even though he is canny enough to realize that he should hedge his bets now and then. Inspite of being the opposition critic, he said, ‘Updike, unlike Beckett or Bernard, never appears to doubt that words can be made to signify, to refer, to mean’. For Wood it must have been a breath taking hypocrisy or a jaw-dropping lack of self-knowledge. He has never demonstrated the least capacity to appreciate or understand Beckett or Bernhard. What Wood said above for Updike, also applies for himself. (Wood, 1999)

Some critics, focussing on the religious implication of Updike’s work, read his work and his concept of love and adultery in the light of Karl Barth’s theology. Gray Waller’s *Updike’s Couples: Barthian Parable* forwards the thesis that it is Karl Barth’s compassionate neo-orthodoxy that provides the distinctive moral backbone for *Couples*. Waller points to the end of the novel and asserts that Barth’s theology accepts men as they are and the novel’s happy end is in keeping with Barth’s view that God wills everything to be ultimately well in the apparently worst of all possible worlds.

(Waller, 1972)
Bernard Scophen in *Faith, Morality and the Novel’s of John Updike* (Scophen, 1978) says that Updike’s faith is Christian but the Christian perspectives which link faith with an absolute and divinely ordered morality do not apply to it. Schopen analyses Barth’s complex theology as reviewed by Updike in *Anselm: Fides Quarren’s Intellectum* (Updike, 1965) since Updike believes in Barth’s notion of God as ‘wholly other’ and determines his faith only with the profession of Apostle’s creed. It contains no inherent moral system, therefore, he rejects the notion that literature should inculcate moral principles. This factor determines much of the ambiguous attitude of Updike’s protagonists who are religious and adulterous at the same time. That may be the reason why we find many of his books centred on middle class domestic life – marriage, adultery and divorce. He often peppered the novels with descriptions of sexual intercourse to the point of gratuitousness, some critics said. He never spares the chance of presenting a religious person or a knowledgeable theologian, community adultery, sometimes even with younger relations. *(Roger’s Version/wiki)*

In *Updike’s Idea of Reification*, Terence Doody posits the idea of reification based upon the idea of God’s existence that Updike had been developing since his first novel. Doody argues that Updike believes that things are not “nullity” but are suggestive of God and that there is ‘immanence in things’. About the ethical question he holds the belief that morality is a relative matter compared to the absolutes of life which are death and the physical relations of bodies together. *(Doody, 1979)*

Sex in Updike’s work is noted for its ubiquity and the reverence with which it is described. His contemporaries then, invaded the ground with wild Dionysian yelps, mocking both the taboos that would make it forbidden and the lust that drove men to it. Updike must have been honest about it and his descriptions of the sight, taste and texture of women’s bodies could be perfect little madrigals. In ‘Champions’ interview with
Updike on ‘The Bat Segundo Show’, Updike replied that he perhaps favoured such imagery to concretize and make sex ‘real in his prose’.

The existentialist aspects of Updike’s work have been explored by David Galloway. He explores the theme of existence of an individual in a meaningless universe – a universe in which precepts of religious orthodoxy seems increasingly less relevant. Galloway views *The Poor House Fair* as a novel of dismissal which suggests the failure of various traditional systems to fulfil contemporary man’s spiritual needs. Galloway sees Updike attacking humanism as one of the life denying impulses of the age. He views *Rabbit* as a saint with a vision of the absurd and the need to find a world in which he can again experience – the sacredness of achievement. Rabbit, he claims, wants to comfort and heal and is selfish only in the manner of the searcher after truth. Rabbit rebels against the wasteland into which he is born and consistently opposing the reality which he encounters. Rabbit becomes an absurd hero and because of the highly spiritual devotion to this gesture against the world, he becomes a saint. Galloway further stresses that Updike’s own faith is ‘capricious’ and he continues to explore rituals which sustain men in a Godless universe. In *The Centaur*, too, Updike describes a world devoid of meaning. George is not claimed as a true existentialist hero by Galloway as he lacks a vision of absurdity. (Galloway, 1966)

A second existentialist interpretation of Updike published around the same time, is Sidney Finkelstein’s *Existentialism and American Literature*. In his analysis of *Rabbit Run*, he identifies Rabbit as defeated by a life so antagonistic, so impossible to understand and therefore to cope with, that his struggles are only pathetic, impotent gestures. He says that Rabbit’s feelings of all encompassing alienation is not so much due to his complaints against family or condition of life, as due to his own emptiness which conditions his alienated relations to others. According to Finkelstein Updike sees
contemporary America as a home of petrified humanity. (Finkelstein, 1965) America’s bleakness is ascribed to the blind and meaning movement of life itself. In *The Centaur*, the mythic parallels of the story are, in fact, an attempt to give the bleakness of small town America a philosophic universality, to intimate that the world has not progressed but according to Nietzschean’s view, has merely decayed and hardened. Howard Harper, too, reads Updike as existentialist novelist and around this premise Harper builds series of useful readings of the novels up to *Of the Farm*. (Harper, 1964) He argues that in the first novel *The Poor House Fair*, the belief in God is shown to be a spiritual necessity stronger than humanitarian illusions of the welfare state. But in the later work, God becomes increasingly vestigial, a ceremonial ideal to be invoked against the world. Harper sees Chiron as perfect symbol for existential man at home in neither material nor spiritual realm.

In another study, Sukhbir Singh shows that Updike treats the question of man’s survival in a society where God has failed, leaving man in the void of nihilism. (Sukhbir Singh, 1991) His protagonists are always curious to feel the presence of God in their Universe. Sukhbir’s study finds illustrations in Updike’s novels such as *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, in which reverend Wilmot lives in the chaos of Godlessness and tries in vain to feel God’s presence even in the household furniture. Ultimately God causes his presence to be felt through the innocent and blessed form of his creation – The children – The ‘Innocent, Angelic Children’.

In terms of expressing ideas and lively presentation through language, Updike ranks with highly criticized personalities of American fiction writers. He and Tony Morrison were the most written about living American novelists of their time. Updike was widely praised as ‘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 the
critics who are sceptical of other aspects of Updike’s work. Critics emphasize his ‘inimitable prose style’ and ‘rich description and language’ often favourably compared to Proust and Nabokov. Some critics consider the fluency of his prose to be a fault, question the intellectual depth and thematic seriousness of his work, while others criticize Updike for misogynistic depiction of women and sexual relationships. Other critics argue that ‘Updike’s dense vocabulary and syntax function as a distancing technique to mediate the intellectual and emotional involvement of the reader’. On the whole, Updike is extremely well regarded as a writer who mastered many genres, wrote with intellectual vigour and a powerful prose style, with ‘shrewd insight into the sorrows, frustrations and banality of American life’.

In direct contrast to James 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’. Disagreeing with Wood’s critique of Updike’s alleged over-stylization, Karshan evaluates Updike’s language as convincingly naturalistic. (Karshan, 2005)

Harold Bloom once called Updike ‘a minor novelist with a major style. A quite beautiful as well as a considerable stylist. He specializes in the easier pleasures’. Bloom also edited a collection of critical essays in 1987, in which he concluded that ‘Updike was capable of writing beautiful sentences which are beyond praise’; nevertheless, Bloom went on, ‘the American sublime will never touch his pages’. (Bloom, 1987)

‘The Fiction Circus’, an online and multimedia literary magazine, called Updike one of the ‘four Great American Novelists’ of his time along with Philip Roth, Cormac,
McCarthy and Don DeLillo each jokingly represented as a sign of the Zodiac. Updike was seen as the best prose writer in the world like Nabokov, before him. But in contrast to many literati and establishment obituaries, ‘The Circus’ asserted that nobody ‘thought of Updike as a vital writer’.

(Fiction Circus, 2009)

The critic James Wolcott, in a review of Updike’s novel, *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), notes that Updike’s penchant for observing America’s decline is coupled with an affirmation of America’s ultimate merits: ‘Updike elegises entropy American style with a resigned, paternal, disappointed affection that distinguishes his fiction from that of grimmer declinists such as Don DeLillo, Gore Vidal and Philip Roth. America may have lost its looks and stature, but it was a beauty once, and worth every golden dab of sperm’.

(Wolcott, 2009)

Gore Vidal, in a controversial essay in the *Times Literary Supplement*, professed to have ‘never taken Updike seriously as a writer’. He criticizes his political and aesthetic world view for its ‘blandness and acceptance of authority in any form’. He concluded that Updike ‘describes to no purpose’. Vidal mockingly refers to Updike as ‘our good child’, in reference to his wide establishment acclaim, and excoriates his alleged political conservatism. Vidal’s ultimate conclusion is that ‘Updike’s work is more and more representative of that polarizing within a state where Authority grows ever more brutal and malign while its hired hands in the media grow ever more excited as the holy war of the few against the many heat ups.’

(Vidal, 2009)

As the researcher is concerned only with select novels of Updike, so, works will be considered from various aspects, to finally frame out an ‘idea of America’ as sketched by other authors and writers. Before going for particular texts, some reviews and opinions of critics on these works are skimmed. It will be more interesting to go through the views taking Updike’s select work in a chronological order of their year of publication.
As Updike published his unconventional novel *Roger’s Version* in 1986, the book managed to enter the finalists for the 1986 National Book Critics Circle award in fiction. In ‘Critical Mass’ ongoing blog ‘In Retrospect’, contemporary critics revisit former winners and finalists National Book Critics Awards. Critics almost universally praised John Updike’s *Roger’s Version* when it was published. What they could not agree on, was, what exactly they admired in it.

Writing in ‘Newsweek’, David Lehman praised Updike’s command of the language of the two esoteric disciplines that Lambert and Kohler represent: ‘It’s rather thrilling to watch Updike assimilate the new vocabularies of particle physics and computer technology and then fuse them with the ancient vocabulary of religious belief’, he writes. In the ‘Washington Post’, John Calvin Batchelor appreciated the novel’s reworking of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, placing Lambert in the role of Roger Chillingworth. . .‘a perfect 20th century beast’ boastfully wicked in all directions.’

In ‘The New York Times’ Michiko Kakutani praised it as ‘one of Updike’s finest domestic portraits’, writing that as the novel “unfolds, adultery...as well as the attendant emotion of jealousy, guilt and resentment. . .begin to push the question of religion off the centre stage, giving Mr. Updike plenty of room to examine, with his usual skill, the pattering and shadows of domestic life in the middle class.’ (Kakutani, 1986)

The most perspective contemporary review of *Roger’s Version* was written by the novelist David Lodge, who seemed slightly aghast at what Updike was up to the point where he dedicated some space in his review attempt to deny it. Writing in the ‘New York Times Book Review’ he noticed the games Updike played in the novel, but was so thrown by them that he doubted Updike’s intentions: ‘If Mr. Updike were a novelist given to meet fictional tricks, we might suspect him of holding up a mirror to the reader’s credulity, by making his character claim the same freedom to invent that we grant the
novelist. But everything we know about Mr. Updike suggests that he shares the modern sense of factuality and believes that fiction should create the illusion of it. Otherwise, why take all that trouble to get the scientific discourse right?’

David also writes that there are five distinct discursive strands interwoven in the texture in John Updike’s Roger’s Version – Theology, Pornography, Domesticy, Physical description and Computational Science. These are fascinating and important issues and it is heartening to see a literary novelist taking them on board.(Lodge, 1986)

Updike published his four generation saga In the Beauty of the Lilies in 1996 which takes its title from a line of the abolitionist song ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’. His 17th novel, Inthe Beauty of the Lilies, beginning in 1910 and ending in 1990, covers four generations of the Wilmot family, tying its fortunes to both the decline of the Christian faith and the rise of Hollywood in 20th Century America. In appraisal of Updike’s work, ‘New York Times’ critic, Michiko Kakutani wrote: ‘Mr. Updike’s stunning and much underestimated 1996 epic, In the Beauty of the Lilies, tackled an ever wider swath of history than Rabbitertralogy. In charting the fortunes of an American family through some eighty years, the author showed how dreams, habits and predilection are handed down from generation to generation, parents to child, even as he created a kaleidoscope portrait of this century from its nervous entry into the 20th century to its stumbling approach to the millennium. (Beauty of the Lilies, Wikipedia)

In a review posted by Scott Douglas, edited on July 28, 2008, In the Beauty of the Lilies is approached from three different angles. According to Scott, the most interesting character in John Updike’s In the Beauty of the Lilies, is Clarence. Clarence’s view of God is outrightly shocking. His mind is like the mind of many during this time-period; why believe when science seems to be offering more solutions? Historically however, Clearance’s mind seems more post-modern than it does modern, but this makes him all
...the more intriguing. The mental upheavals of Clarence’s mind take Scott to approach the novel from a psychological angle. Clarence’s granddaughter, Essie/Alma, parallels Updike’s own life and upbringing. While she never abandons God completely, as her dad and grand-dad before, Essie is, in a sense polluted by the world. Updike creates a sense of Concordia discord as he responds to the world. It is like he has taken a step backward and examining how ‘imperfectly perfect’ the world is. There is corruption but with Essie, Updike shows how life goes on in a post-religious world. This girl represents several changes that makes Scott approach the novel from the angle of ‘Traditional approach.’

 Basically the novel is a cycle. A minister who abandons God; a postman that never had God; a godly girl turned evil; a new age nut. In this way, it is a novel in the tradition of family sagas like Steinbeck’s East of Eden. It begins with a man who becomes an apostate and ends with a man who becomes an apostate. Due to this cycle of life, Scott takes a formalist approach to the novel. (Review by Scott Douglas, 2008)

 A publisher, Miami Herald, wrote that Updike not only tracks the fortunes and falls of an American family through four generations and eight decades but also creates a shimmering, celluloid portrait of the whole century as viewed through the metaphor of movies. The ‘New York Times’wrote that it is ‘an important and impressive novel: a novel that not only shows how we live today but also how we got there. . .A book that forces us to reassess the American values and the crucial role that faith (The Longing for faith) has played in shaping the national soul.’The Boston Globe wrote in a review that the novel is ‘stirring and captivating and beautifully written. . .This new novel displays a depth and a narrative confidence that make one sigh with sweet anticipation. This is the Updike of Rabbit books, who can take you uphill and down with his grace of vision, his gossamer language and his merciful, ironic glance at the misery of the human condition.’
Towards the End of Time (1997) bagged lot of praise from Margaret Atwood who wrote a very positive review of the novel for ‘The New York Times’, ‘Memento Mori. .But first, CarpeDiem.’ She praised Updike’s brilliant metaphors and describes the central character, Ben Turnbull, in his semi-idyllic, upper class rural home as ‘a Thoreau run through the meat grinder of 20th century.’ She not only notes his frequent brutality (both towards himself and others), but also notes his rueful even handed powers of observation that ‘fall’ alike on everything – on flowers, animals, grand children, corpses, copulations; on ancient Egypt and plastic peanuts; on memory, disgust, dread, lust and spiritual rapture.’ She ends with the claim that ‘As memento mori and its obverse, carpediem, Towards the End of Time could scarcely be bettered. (End of Time, Wikipedia)

In an article by David Leigh on ‘Ironic Apocalypse in John Updike’s Towards the End of Time’ he wrote that Updike’s major attempt to publish a novel in 1997 about the ‘end of time’ caught his critics off guard. Some considered it a failure of genre, awkwardly mixing realism with science fiction, others found it fascinating in parts but full of undigested excursions into alternate universe and loath some anatomical descriptions of old age, some still others attacked its narrator as a repulsive, inconsistent and socially blind misogynist or found the novel superficial, secular and pessimistic. David Malone is one of the few who discovered beneath its realistic surface several patterns that bring out a deeper and even transcendent dimension, namely the novel’s use of mythic parallels as a sort of fantasy world behind the realistic framework. Taking a clue from Updike’s The centaur, Malone provides an insight into the meanings of deeper episodes by finding parallels with the Acteon, Io, and Inanna stories from Greek and Sumerian myths; he sheds light on the role of Gloria, the narrator’s second wife, by bringing in parallels with the white Goddess; he even stretches to find similarities between the quest in the latter half of the novel and the Gilgamesh epic. But
Malone also admits that the narrator is ‘enormously self-involved, charmless and resentful of women’.

Ian Hamilton in his essay *Redeemable Bad Guys* says that Updike, it has often been proclaimed, knows what it is like to be day to day common place American, and knows it with good humour. Others weigh it with ‘wither America’ but Updike gets to parts of his country’s psyche that most high brow novelists can’t, or can’t be bothered to tune into. But then, Updike, it is also said, is not quite a highbrow novelist, not in the sense that, say Saul Bellow might believe himself to be, or even Gore Vidal. Vidal sneers at Updike as a middle brow provincial, by which he seems to mean that Updike timorously fails to stride forward as a ‘global sage’, or as a ‘Custodian’ of threatened high brow values. On few occasions, Updike has pronounced on public issues that he has tended to adopt a ruefully conservative position, and Vidal has poured scorn on the ruefulness. On the whole and unashamedly, Updike quite likes being an American, and likes it not because America ‘the global power’ is to be proud of but because America’s vast census of small, pitiable greed and woes is what he happens to woken up to, every morning. Geopolitics aside, if you want to know how most Americans think and talk and know it without condemnation, there is in fiction no stenographer more wittily alert than he was.

(Hamilton: *Redeemable Bad Guy*, 1998)

‘Book Marks’ magazine wrote that Updike treads over familiar territory with *Villages*, his 21st novel. For those who crave more of his famed in visitations into suburban sex and the male mind, this novel can prove a welcome addition to the canon. To some critics, however, *Villages* seemed a rehash of old material, with little to recommend to modern audience. Detractors found Owen’s sexual antics empty, his life devoid of emotional growth. Still, Updike remains one of the premier stylists of the
English language, and he handles his subject with the assurance that comes from a lifetime of practice.  

Kris in his review writes some Updike’s lines about Villages. Updike wrote: ‘It was a celibate villager who wrote, we know not where we are, besides, we are sound asleep nearly half our time. Yet we esteem ourselves wise, and have an established order on the surface.’ Such a surface order makes possible human combinations and moments of tender regards. It is a mad thing, to be alive. Villages exist to moderate this madness, to hide it from children, to better it for private use, to smooth its imperatives into habits, to protect us from imperatives into habits, to protect us from the darkness without and the darkness within.’

For Owen, life can be seen through a series of sexual escapades from boyhood to old age. And even in the quieter moments, he’s not sure it amounted to more than that. Affair after affair, Owen chased his most base instinct in hope that he could find answers to life’s more pressing questions in the comfort of a soft, wonderful bosom. Owen lives in the moment never stopping to think about the why or how, understanding only on the surface what responsibility means.

According To Blake Morrison, both books, Couples and Villages describe ordinary middle class lives in small East Coast Communities (Villages or towns in British English), with special attention paid to ‘Post Pill Paradise‘ in which, as Larkin puts it, ‘everyone young is going down the long slide to happiness endlessly’. But whereas Couples is a report from the frontline, Villages is entirely retrospective and (another aspect of its riskiness) quietly frustrates the narrative expectation it invites.

Lee Siegel, in a review for Updike’s Villages in ‘New York Books’, says that Updike in his early seventies writes about sex as avidly and microscopically as he was in his early twenties. But the younger Updike lustrously evoked mortal coils coiling as
though he were an awe-filled acolyte administering the mysteries at Mass. In Villages, mystery often devolves into professional turf. That’s what happens when a transcendent obsession threatens to become a patented and in the slapdash final pages, Owen is compared to America and America is ‘haunted’ by the ghost of ‘President Reagan. . .this handsome snake oil salesman.’ The entire country becomes a ‘national village’ shrouded in ‘evil’, in the way that Owen’s nurturing, protective villages also nurtured and protected his lies and betrayals. (Siegel, 2005:nymag.com)

Acting as a narrator to Villages, Edward Herman says in a review that ‘Villages. . .recaptures and concentrates the erotic’s essence of the earlier books (Couples and others) but adds a mellow, retrospective tone. . .In its period, setting and cast of characters, the story also overlaps consistently with Updike’s own biography, tempting one to read it as a confession. In the end, the book gratifies in every way as an exhibition of educated prurience, an elegy for an era and an inquiry into the morals of a striving upper middleclass white male. . .Though Updike dabbled in experimental fiction in much the same way that his frisky New England husbands do in adultery, he’s at heart a solid artistic conformist who succeeds by embracing conventions, not spurning them and embracing them so avidly and strenuously that they yield surprising new juice.’

(Edward Herman, 2004)

Most of the time, during his writing career, Updike examined America in his fiction and essays, reflecting upon its art and history, documenting its volatile progressions. In their longings, in their occasional self-discoveries and more usually in their self-deceptions the characters in his novels and stories have demonstrated the desperation with which people in America have sought to find some equilibrium against the background of headlong change. To ponder Updike’s work in now old fashioned socio-political terms it might be said that he examines our struggle to maintain a viable
centre for our inner life while enduring the most revolutionary force in history – American capitalism. The civil war and its consequences forced America to undergo the processes which were later given the name ‘Americanization’. The term invokes the transformation of the landscape into unnatural mechanical shapes, of night into day, of speed for its own sake, an irrational passion for novelty at the expense of quality, a worship of gimmickry. ‘Americanization’ also meant a setting aside of the social order in ruthless pursuit of profit, a jury-rigged class-system based on money, a rootless and dislocated population, a random disordering of priorities.’

This pondering of truisms is more germane to an appreciation of Updike’s new novel, *Terrorist*, than one might first think. One of the most interesting things about this is its convergence of imagined views about the way this country is and the way it appears. The setting on which this parable (*Terrorist*, 2006) of 21st century condition unfolds, is Northern New Jersey, that familiar landscape of marshland and industrial slough supporting the decaying remnants of once prospering immigrant-energized towns. 9/11 was the day when all eyes turned heavenward there and hundreds of sons and daughters of New Jersey died. The invisible but somehow immanent presence of 9/11’s inferno over New Jersey serves to remind us that Updike, whose work has never departed too far from his religious concerns, has written about apocalypse before. In his haunting but unresolved novel *Towards the End of Time* (1997), he presents a war-and-crime ravaged terminal, America, its sky blighted by a meritorious second moon, he calls it a ‘torus’ that looms over the land as a mockery, as a grace. The America in which this new story unfolds is not freakish or surreal, but its moral exhaustion and reprobation are nearly intense. Come to preside in judgement are not metaphysical forces but an assembly of religiously driven immigrants, certain in their own convictions, which they are convinced would equip them to see through the pretensions of their adopted country
and set it to rights by slaughter. *Terrorist* is not mixed with symbolist surrealism as *Towards the End of Time* was. Its characters inhabit a real New Jersey, for the most part and they are credible individuals. Protagonist’s religious instruction provides the opportunity for some long discourses on Islam in the modern world – one of the didactic areas of the novel. But these dialogues, along with the reflections they provoke in Ahmad, the protagonist, serve Updike’s intentions – the examination of contemporary America exposed to the passions in the non-American world. Updike can clearly imagine his way into the moralizing resentments that this country brings forth in the hearts of those who are at once under-privileged and confidently traditional. On the other hand, this story is no supine catalogue of self-recremation. Its tensions are well calibrated and the points of view, clearly and at times ironically presented.

(Review by Robert Stone, 2006)

Updike’s *Terrorist* puts us in the head of a man with 72 virgins on his mind. A New Jersey High School goer, a ‘radical loser’ right out of Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s much discussed essay in Der Spiegel, agrees to a suicide bombing mission on behalf of radical Islam, may not be first rate Updike. His *Brazil* (1994) was one example, a magic realist comic opera in which romantic egoism fared no better among Shaman and Jaguars gods than it had in the French Revolution. *The Coup* (1978) was more to the immediate point, since it is the only other Updike’s novel that quotes *The Quran* and was written from the African-Muslim point of view. Colonel Hakim Felix Ellello, a student in the US before he became President of Sub Saharan Kush, articulated Leonard’s favourite sentences in all of Updike: ‘I perceived that a man in America is a failed boy.’ Ahmad Mulloy, the 18-year old terrorist himself is the latest in a long line of Updike’s boys failing their way to manhood. Ahmad’s destiny is made plain by the title of the book. In the first chapter he tells Jack Levy, the non-practicing Jew who is his high school
guidance counsellor, that Shaikh Rashid has advised him against going to college and set him on the ‘voke’ track so that he can learn to be a truck driver. (Jonathan Raban, 2006)

However, unlike every other novelist looking over his shoulder at 9/11 – an Ian McEwen, a Reynolds Price, a Jerry McInerney, a Jonathan SafranFoer – Updike isn’t writing from the victim’s point of view. He guesses instead, at unhinging excruciation. *Terrorist* has to be read as part of an accumulating literature in which serious novelists have tried to grope their way into the mind of the ultra, a literature that began with Dostoyevsky, Conrad and Andre Malraux and continues with Don DeLillo, Richard Powers and Salman Rushdie, trying to explain the phenomenon of what Victor Serge called ‘the lunatic of one idea’ as he shape shifts from Belfast to Beirut to Jakarta to lower Manhattan, from skyjacking jumbo jets to bombing abortion clinics, from Pol Pot to Shining Path. Terrorists and torturers tend to be more interesting in novels, where they have complicated rationales, than they are in banal person. To think about horrific behaviour, novelists need to imagine minds as nuanced as their own.

(New York Books review)

But horrific behaviour is perfectly capable of writing its own novel, of spinning its own excuses for abduction, torture, rape and murder out of a spidery bowel and a smoked brain. Its purpose is to dominate and humiliate so as to create a total immersion maze, where private American histories, personal belief and multiple motives are beside the brutal point. What we really need Updike and his likes for, is, to remind us, over and over again, that each fragile human being, every Rabbit or Ahmad is an end, not a means.

(John May, 2006)

Updike’s *Terrorist* is one of the recent literary marvels from one of the masters of creative literary power. *Terrorist* fulfils so many tasks of fiction, so rich and awarding. It is absorbing as it is thick in its description of place and character and these story elements
are woven at times lyrically. Updike instructs and entertains in the same sentences. Character portraits, it feels, at par with Mailer’s Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner’s Song*, HandKe’s Joseph Block in *Goalie’s Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, Jim Harrison’s Farmer and Updike’s own Rabbit Angstrom and his son Nelson in *Rabbit is Rich*. The young protagonist, Ahmad, is actually a product of adults who surround and claim responsibility for him. His idealism and needs are in direct proportion with Updike to the neglect, self-indulgence, and mystication of his teachers, counsellors and single mother. He is abandoned; and proves not all that diverse and complicated than his peers in the end, in fact, even out distancing them because his zeal has given Ahmad a perceptive and intellectual clarity far surpassing others of his generation.
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