CHAPTER II

THE CEASELESS QUEST FOR THE THREE GREAT SECRETS

The characters in Updike’s fiction are animated by both sexual and spiritual yearnings leading to an explicit treatment of sex in his fiction. It has evoked mixed response from the critics. In this regard David Thurborne has observed that for more than two decades years John Updike has chronicled American life in novel and short stories. Their formal mystery, psychological insight and sheer descriptive brilliance have secured his place as one of the dominant figures in contemporary American letters. “At once innovative and unfashionably conservative Updike has extended the modernist project of psychological investigation and sexual candor, but he has done so in fiction that remains resolutely accessible, committed to the classical virtues of shapeliness and lucidity” (p. 14). As George Searless has pointed out, Updike’s work reflects Conventional concern with human interrelationship including an explicit concern for human sexuality and its attendant complexities, specifically as manifested in romantic relationships. Regarding the role and importance of sexual love Updike has observed: More Love in the Western World (AP.2)

Might it not simply be that sex has become involved in the promethean protest forced upon man by his paradoxical position in the universe as a self-conscious animal? Our fundamental anxiety is that we do not exist – or will cease
to exist. Only in being loved do we find external corroboration of the supremely high valuation each ego secretly assigns itself. This exalted arena, then, is above all others the one where men and women will insist upon their freedom to choose – to choose that other being in whose existence their own existence is confirmed and amplified”. (p.287) (More Love in the Western World, Assorted Prose). Echoing his view, Updike’s protagonists strive always for self-realization, through sexual encounters.

George Searles claims that Updike affirms the spiritual through the physical, in an ironic inversion of the traditional Christian conception of a body-soul dichotomy. Updike writes of relationships and describes connections between individuals and natural and social institutions as symptomatic of the individual and societal search for God. Rachael Burchard too confirms the same view and states that to Updike, “sex is the closest to a religious experience that the physical world provides” (p.6), so his protagonist often searches for spiritual satisfaction in sexual encounters. Updike’s protagonist seeks the ideal lover who will provide for him the transcendent experience. As sex is, finally, natural rather than a supernatural experience, the protagonist’s search for spiritual satisfaction becomes futile and promiscuous. Updike’s lovers seem always to be stymied by a fundamental conflict involving the demands of the self versus one’s obligations to others, and are frequently beset by feelings of inadequacy and guilt because of their failure to understand or balance this basic opposition.
The same issue is analyzed by George W. Hunt and he opines: At its best and least explicit, “Updike’s treatment of sex participates in the same dialectical vision of man’s mixed human conditions a vision tempered by wit and resonant with metaphor, that his other themes will reflect. The mystery of sexuality is ever that, a mystery; and yet that the sexual encounter not only involves the mysterious “other” but is revelatory of the mystery of the self as well” (p.8). Hunt has pointed our that In his extensive review of De Rougemont’s study of the Tristan and Iseult myth in Love in the Western World and Love Declared, Updike has summarized one aspect of this mystery as follows:

….a phrase identifies a man’s Iseult as “the woman …of his most intimate nostalgia.” This hint is provocative. While nostalgia does not create women, perhaps it does create Iseults. What is it that shines at us from Iseult’s face but our own past, with its strange innocence and its strange need to be redeemed? What is nostalgia but love for that part of ourselves which is in Heaven, forever removed from change and corruption? A woman, loved, momentarily eases the pain of time by localizing nostalgia; the vague and irrecoverable objects of nostalgic longing are assimilated, under the pressure of libidinous desire, into the details of her person.
The images we hoard in wait for the woman who will seem to body them forth include the inhuman – a certain slant of sunshine, a delicate flavor of dust, a kind of rasping tune that is reborn in her voice; they are nameless, these elusive glints of original goodness that a man’s memory stores toward an erotic commitment.(p.8)

Updike seems to subscribe to this above insight. This theme of the male’s search for his self and his discovery of it in his simultaneous quest and discovery of the mysterious “other” characterize the dialectical nature of sexuality throughout Updike’s fiction.

Two stories selected from *The Same Door* show that man - woman relationship can teach one to grow up and behave better to the benefit of oneself. In the story “Tomorrow and Tomorrow and So Forth” the school teacher Mark Prosser is duped by a provocative student Gloria Angstrom. She has used her budding sexuality to play an irritating trick on her instructor. But she is also responsive to the kind and firm lecture of Mark about using the word “love” carefully and “economically”. This experience holds a gift for the pupil and the teacher “This Petty pace from day to day” is quickened and made worthwhile by the occasional spontaneous meeting of two momentarily unmasked selves.

The couples Richard and Joan Maple are introduced in the story “Snowing in Greenwich Village”. Richard and Joan have just moved to West Thirteenth
Street in the Village and have invited an old acquaintance over for the evening, Rebecca Cune, a girl with “a gift for odd things”. The three drink sherry and converse, but the talk is dominated by Rebecca’s wry recollections of the strange people she has known. The story goes on to depict the events of the evening.

An undertone of sexual competition pervades the tale. Joan and Rebecca are at cautious odds from the start. Beneath the purposefully casual conversation, one is made to feel the unnamed struggle. Richard is the prize, Joan the defender of her property, and Rebecca the predator. Joan’s weapon is her defenselessness. The cool and cryptic reserve that promises a hidden excitement is Rebecca’s attraction. Richard is caught between loyalty toward his wife, and Rebecca’s attractiveness. The chatting remains discreet, but the adultery motif accompanies it through the repeated references to beds: in the first paragraph. Richard lays Rebecca’s coat and scarf on their marriage bed; Rebecca relaxes on the floor in the living room with her arm on the Hids-a-Bed (while Joan sits straight-backed on a chair); Rebecca tells about the bedroom troubles she had in sharing her apartment with a pair of lovers; and, when Richard at the end of the story visits her apartment with a pair of lovers; he is surprised to see the double bed that dominates the room. The subtlety of the imagery matches the subtlety of the invitation to extra-marital adventure.
The crucial moment, exquisitely described, occurs at the door when Richard acts to leave; and the result could go either way. Rebecca, very close to him in the shadows, is waiting for him to make the move. If he does, he betrays his wife; if he doesn’t, he becomes the ridiculous male. He tries a joke and stutters; the timing and the situation are ruined. He is free but at the expense of his pride.

The story ends with an unexpected gift he receives. It may be, in part, the thrill of the just-missed extra-marital adventure; but, more likely, it is that he does not become intimately involved. He has had the quick glance into the tantalizing maze of illicit romance but also the luck, or the grace, to avoid its penalties – emotional, social, and moral. Detweiler Robert observes regarding Richard’s experience: “The revelation of mutual attraction between a man and a woman is a joy not only because it reassures one of his desirability but also because it indicates an elementary kind of human communication. A fine line may exist between lust and love, but the libido need not always incite to sexual consummation; it can produce other kinds of knowledge as well. Lust can teach”. (p.14)

In the story “Wife Wooing” (PF)A young couple sitting before their fireplace with their two small children, eating hamburgers and French fries purchased from a nearby drive-in, become the post types of primitive humans who hunted and killed their sustenance and devoured it around the fire in the
cave dwelling. Out of this parallel the speaker fashions the avatar of the elemental woman whom his wife represents. Whether she is in prehistory or sitting bare-thighed before a suburban hearth, she is fertility, domesticity, and security. In the woman the man has his fulfillment, and to “woo” her is to court the elusive components of his own identity.

The Medieval image of the rose window very accurately and minutely described by the author is a symbol of both purity and defloration. It supports the religious nature of the man’s total commitment to the marriage event. Through the physical union, through the rose window, the male sees into the design of himself and his world in a new sense. This Gothic pattern helps define also the male relationship to contemporary woman and clarifies the conclusion of the story. The wife, like the elemental woman and the Holy Virgin, has an earnest of grace for the man that she depends upon. The story seems to show that a man has his fulfillment in a woman and can hope for providential grace through her.

The story “Flight” (PF) portrays a love-hate relationship between an introspective teenage boy and his histrionic mother, the title connotes the painful ambivalence of the boy’s position. His life seems poised for “flight” in the sense of a brilliant career awaiting him, and his mother uses the metaphor of flying to encourage him. But the disappointment of her own failed vocational dreams
causes her to place a pressure on her son that is often quite intolerable; as a result, the possibility of flight means also an escape from her neurotic presence.

Detweiler Robert is of the opinion that the double use of the term “Flight” could have been modeled after Joyce’s bird imagery in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; and, like Stephen Dedalus, Updike’s Allen Dow turns to sexuality for inspiration and relief. He acquires a girlfriend while on a trip with the school debating team; Molly Bingaman is pretty but dull, she becomes a weapon for Allen to wield against his mother. She is also a source of security against his late-adolescent estrangement from himself. Molly is ultimately unattainable for Allen; her earthiness and her higher social status in Olinger put her out of reach. She is part of the normal small-town milieu that Updike’s semiautobiographical heroes can never quite inhabit.

Updike himself, in the foreword to *Olinger Stories*, remarks that Molly represents an enchantment of distance that plagues his sensitive young men. Allen gives up Molly at last to please his mother, but the price she pays is her son’s liberation from her domination. He tells her, at least, that this battle is the last between them that she will win. Allen is liberated from the neurotic dominance of his mother because of his relationship with Molly.

In this instance sexual relationship offers not only relief but also inspiration to tackle the present. It can also serves as “an armour” against unhappiness for a
man as depicted in the following story “The Persistence of Desire”. The narrator Clyde Behn views himself in a context of strange double identity – his past and present “I” – stimulated by the return to the childhood haunts and especially by the fateful meeting with his old love. He is able to gain a certain objectification of himself against the locale and desire of his past and thus truly to “see himself” briefly for perhaps the first time in his life. The symbolic quality of the action is important.

Updike’s portrayal of Clyde’s final vision of renewal is tinged with irony. At one point, Clyde, his eyes blurred by eye drops, is unable to see his fingerprint whorls, suggesting that his current hold on his identity is slipping. While Clyde receives an unexpected gift in the form of note from Janet, his old love, – presumably containing permission to contact her-filled him with happiness and engendered clarity of vision which helped him to step into the “familiar street. The maples, shadows, macadam, houses, cement, were to his violated eyes as brilliant as a scene remembered”. With the note in his pocket like “an armor” against unhappiness, Clyde “became a child again in this town, where life was a distant adventure, a rumor, an always imminent joy”. (p.26)

Updike is an articulate spokesman for De Rougemont’s ideals on love. Updike in his reading of Denis de Rougemont’s works, especially “Love in the Western World” has observed that in De Rougemont’s analysis of the chivalric
influence on western tradition,” Eros is allied with Thanatos rather than Agape; love becomes not a way of accepting and entering the world but a way of defying and escaping it…..Love as we experience it is love for the Unattainable Lady, the Iseult who is ‘ever a stranger, the very essence of what is strange in woman and all that is eternally fugitive, vanishing, and almost hostile in a fellow- being…. She is the woman –from –whom-one-is-parted; to posses her is to lose her”. (AP. 285-86).

In “Four Sides of One Story” (TMS) Tristan is depicted as a coward, retreating from emotional turmoil as he travels “away, away from the realms of compromise and muddle” (TMS.89) that plague ongoing relationships. Tristan in his letter to Iseult takes pains to establish that his writing wavers because the boat rocks, not because he trembles, and that the blotches on the paper are salt spray, not tears; however, he is not immune to emotion, as the mere unfolding of a napkin can revive memories of love’s inception. Still, he attempts to make the past into a parcel of “landlocked days”, and sustain an idealized love, one remove from that “paradoxical ethical situation” of being “repeatedly wounded by someone because he or she is beloved”. (TMS.92)

Although he feels diminished by her absence, their love derives greater purity from being objectified, flourishing more in his mind than it did in experience. It is preserved through renunciation. Iseult too vows to dig up
sapling of narcissi he planted. Her action emphasizes the strength of her desire to eradicate memory of her self-centered lover, who searches for a reflection of himself in her. The story through Tristan demonstrates De Rougemont’s thesis of idealized love, its purity and its magical power to invest the lover with self identity. At the end of the story the tense strains of an emotionally unresolved situation lingers, highlighting the point that ideal love is an elusive mystery.

In the story “I Will Not Let Thee Go, Except Thou Bless Me”, (MW) Tom Brideson, a computer software expert who has been transferred to Houston after ten years in New England seeks the blessing of his former mistress, Maggie, before he moves and relinquishes her forever. Unlike Tristan and the other separated lovers in *The Music School*, who drift “away, away from the realm of compromise and muddle”, Tom has continued to live in the same suburb as Maggie and move in the same social circles. Despite such proximity and his reconciliation with his wife, Lou, Tom has maintained an idealized vision of Maggie, whose wide-sleeved white dress at the farewell party reinforces her angelic image reflecting the notion of idealized love.

Similarly, he has difficulty parting with his accumulated possessions, “each one a moment, a memory, impossible to keep, impossible to discard”. For Tom, “departure rehearses death”, his confusing and tantalizing situation points to the necessary consequences of an unavailing quest.
Like Jacob, to whom the story’s title alludes, Tom contends with his angel, refusing to release Maggie after they dance until she grants him some sign of an amicable parting. While Jacob is rechristened after his struggle with Yahweh’s angel, Tom merely seeks “something inoffensive” that might somehow right the “nagging misalignment” he perceives between them. Jacob receives his new identity after his thigh is disjointed; Tom only becomes further disjointed after Maggie’s response. Instead of Maggie’s blessing, he receives a blunt confirmation of his worst fears of fading identity when she spurns him and proclaims that he is “nothing” to her. Tom nonetheless chooses to interpret Maggie’s warm farewell kiss to Lou as an oblique blessing.

The title “Museums and Women” is significant. It is a modified version of the section “Museum and Library” featured in the columns of “Goings on About Town” in *The New Yorker* as the collection “Museums and Women” chronicles the goings on in the lives of middle-aged suburbanites. Women rather than libraries are paired with museums since both embody the receding mysteries for which the characters search as they pass through a “muddled transitional condition” – a phrase used to describe the Dark ages in the story “The Invention of the Horse Collar”. (MW)

As Rosemary Dinnage points out museums and women both touch impermanence with order and survival (of past objects, future beings): both
oppose death, arrest time, and crystallize a longing for its debris. A woman is a symbol of immortality as she possesses the “elusive glints of original goodness”. Hence many of Updike’s characters “insatiably pursue the elusive glints of original goodness”. William, the narrator of the title story “Museum and Women” states, “and it appeared to me that now I was condemned, in my search for the radiance that had faded behind me, to enter more and more museums, and to be a little less exalted by each new entrance, and a little more quickly disenchanted” (MW.17). In the story’s final paragraph William leaving the museum and his abandoned lover there, looks back at the building and feels the loss of innocent wonder and the first hints of jadedness from a surfeit of experiencing.

Many of Updike’s protagonist’s fail to find the “limits of unsearchability” as women’s sexuality is a mystery. This mainly leads to “a central hollowness, an emotional aridity, an inner vacuity” as detected by Tony Tanner.

Updike, defending his explicit treatment of sex has stated that it was “Not about sex as such; it’s about sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left”. In the modern secular American context Updike must of necessity concentrate on the great secret of sex. The obvious reason is that it is the one secret of which all his readers are aware, and so it becomes the most intelligible vehicle for his further exploration of those other two secrets - religion and art- to which readers are less sensitive. Updike’s treatment of sex in the short stories may be gainfully
viewed in the light of the following comment by Gary Waller. Quoting Iser, Waller observes: “The didactic text, anticipates the norms of its intended public” and “adapts itself to its readers in order to adapt the readers to its own purpose”. To achieve his end, Updike is prepared to involve the reader as a participant in solving typographical puzzles, deciphering puns and word-play. [and explicit sex]” (P.277)

Hunt has cited Flannery O’Connor’s observation in *Mystery and Manners* to emphasize the impact of an author’s world view on his works:

It makes a great difference to the look of a novel whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continue to come by a creative act of god, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are a product of a cosmic accident. It makes a great difference to his novel or whether he believes that we are created in god’s images or whether he believes that we create god in our own. It makes a great difference whether he believes that our wills are free or bound like those of the animals. (p.5)

Following O’ Conner’s suggestions the different nature of Updike’s short stories may be understood by considering his religious views as stated in his *self Consciousness* - Memoirs. In this Updike states:
During … adolescence, I reluctantly perceived of the Christian religious I had been born into that almost no one believed it, believed it really – not its ministers, nor its pillars like my father and his father before him. Though signs of belief (churches, public prayers, mottos on coins) existed everywhere, when you moved toward Christianity it disappeared, as fog solidly opaque in the distance thins to transparency when you walk into it. I decided I nevertheless would believe. I found a few authors, a very few – Chesterton, Eliot, Unamuno, Kierkegaard, Karl Barth – who helped me believe. Under the shelter (like the wicker chairs on the side porch) that I improvised from their pages, I have lived my life. What I felt, in that basement Sunday school of Grace Lutheran Church in Shillington, was a clumsy attempt to extend a Yes, a blessing, and I accepted that blessing, offering in return only a nickel a week and my art, my poor little art. — — — — — Religion tries to put us at ease in this world. Being human cannot be borne alone. We need other presences. We need soft night noises – a mother speaking downstairs, a grandfather rumbling in response, cars swishing past on Philadelphia Avenue and their headlights wheeling about the room. We need the little clicks and sighs of a sustaining otherness. We need the gods. — — — — One believes not only to comfort one’s self but for empirical and compositional reasons – the ornate proposed supernatural completes the picture and, like the
ingredient that tops up and rounds out the recipe, gives reality its true flavor. - - - - - Of my own case, looked at coldly, it might be said that, having been given a Protestant, Lutheran, rather antinomian Christianity as part of my sociological make-up, I was too timid to discard it. My era was too ideologically feeble to wrest it from me, and Christianity gave me something to write about, and a semblance of a backbone. What small faith I have has given me what artistic courage I have”. (P.232)

It can be deduced from the above observations that religion (Christianity) is the backbone of John Updike’s World vision which is reflected in his artistic vision. George W.Hunt has claimed that Updike’s religious convictions are explicitly offered in his light verse. The conclusion of Midpoint, which Updike has asserted as summarizing his philosophy of life, begins as follows:

An easy Humanism plagues the land;
I choose to take an otherworldly stand,
The Archimedean point, however small,
Will serve to lift th’entire terrestrial Ball,
Reality transcends itself within;
Atomically, all writers must begin,
The Truth arrives as if by telegraph;
One dot; two dots; a silence; then a laugh,
The rules inhere, and will not be imposed
Abs alto, as most Liberals have supposed.
Praise Kierkegaard, who splintered Hegel’s creed
Upon the rock of Existential need;
Praise Barth, who told how saving Faith can flow
From Terror’s oscillating Yes and No… (P.38)

The following lines are in many ways a summary of the central theological emphases found in Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth.

Each passing moment masks a tender face;
Nothing has had to be, but is by Grace.
Our Guilt inheres in sheer Existing, so
Forgive yourself your death, and freely flow,
Transcendent Goodness makes elastic claims;
The merciful Creator hid His Aims. (p.40)

The poem collection also has the following resolution of John Updike:

Born laughing, I’ve believed in the Absurd,
Which brought me this far; henceforth, if I can
I must impersonate a serious man. (44)
Updike’s interest in Kierkegaard and Barth is not just restricted to their therapeutic value during his occasional lapses of spirit. The appeal of these two theologians is quite clearly an intellectual one, embracing yet also transcending the pious. One of the attractive features of both Kierkegaard and Barth is the use of dramatic techniques such as irony, hyperbole, repetition of phrase, and the allusive aside.

Hunt feels that Updike, as a writer himself, was drawn initially to the sound of their compelling voice. What he had said of Kierkegaard is appropriate to Barth as well: “perhaps it is his voice – that extraordinary insinuant voice, imperious and tender, rabid and witty – that excites our devotion”. (p.18) Updike’s own mind delights in ambiguity; he has said that “everything unambiguously expressed seems somehow crass to me”, and that “I like middles it is in the middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules”. In The Paris Review Interview he has stated that “unfallen Adam is an ape. Yes, I guess I do feel that, I feel to be a person is to be in a situation of tension, is to be in a dialectical situation” (p.101). Ripeness is all, and it is the ambiguous and the dialectical that engender ripeness.

In the history of modern theology Kierkegaard and Barth are credited with founding the school of theology called “Dialectical Theology”. The young Karl Barth found Kierkegaard’s dialectical method most congenial and saw in it, the
method of St. Paul and the theologians of the Reformation. He, like Kierkegaard before him, well exploited this method in order to elucidate the profoundly paradoxical nature of the “truth” of the Christian message and also to remind the Christians that not only his rational intelligence but his very existence is plunged into what Updike refers to as “a dialectical situation”.

Hunt explicates that the dialectical method used by Kierkegaard and the early Barth, is quite different in intent from that of Hegelian or Marxist dialectics in that “synthesis” or “resolution” is not the goal. Quite otherwise. Kierkegaard believed that “truth” is not found in the smooth Hegelian rationalist transition from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, from Yes to No to their union. Rather, he emphasized that truth must ever be existential, that is it must engage one’s most profoundly personal human concerns, concerns that affect not only man’s intelligence but also his affections and decision making powers. (p.19)

Kierkegaard was suspicious of rationalism and its non-existential, reductive notion of truth; instead, he stressed that the acquisition of truth is a dynamic, dramatic process. One never enjoys an intellectual purchase on the truth; one can only become the truth, that is appropriate it in one’s mode of living. He believed in the “Truth of Christian Revelation” (at the center of which is the God-Man), but he stressed that this is a revelatory truth and thus is the result of the union of time and eternity, the natural and the supernatural. And this truth is of such a
paradoxical nature, that man has no adequate language to express it. Being paradoxical, the truth of Christianity frustrates his reason and his intellectual efforts at synthesis; the dialectical character of Kierkegaard’s thought makes his work at once stirring and perplexing, gripping and ever elusive; and the same is true of Karl Barth. These same characteristics, Hunt points out, are reflected in Updike’s fiction.

Many stories reflect both a conscious and unconscious effort to develop “Kierkegaardian sensations” into real fiction. The stories “Dentistry and Doubt”, “Toward Evening”, “Sunday Teasing”, “Intercession”, “Wife Wooing”, “Pigeon Feathers”, “The Astronomer”, “Lifeguard”, “The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island”, “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cart, A Traded Car” all betray to a greater or lesser degree an appropriation of or a grappling with a theme proper to Kierkegaard.

The story “The Astronomer” has as its protagonist the young man Walter who, in a condition of cosmic anxiety or of ontological angst, reads Kierkegaard as an antidote. He and his wife are visited in their Riverside Drive apartment by a Hungarian astronomer, Bela--an old friend from college days. The narrator fears the conversation, for the brilliant astronomer’s cold acceptance of the Einsteinian universe and his familiarity with a mathematically plumbed infinity threaten the precarious scaffoldry of religious faith that Walter has erected. But
later in the evening the guest confesses to a moment of terror in his life when he had been frightened by the American landscape while traveling through a barren stretch of New Mexico. Detweiler comments: That revelation heartens the young host; his friend also knows fear so he is vulnerable and fallible; and therefore, Walter’s edifice of belief can logically stand” (p.54).

The same story is seen as Updike’s successful attempt “to develop Kierkegaardian sensations into real fiction” by George W. Hunt. The dramatic action, the characters, the imagery and even some apparently insignificant details can be understood and appreciated only in terms of these “sensations”. Here Kierkegaardian scholarship provides invaluable assistance in perceiving these “sensations”. The story begins:

I feared his visit. I was twenty-four, and the religious revival within myself was at its height. Earlier that summer, I had discovered Kierkegaard, and each week I brought back to the apartment one more of the Princeton University Press’s elegant and expensive editions of his works. They were beautiful books, sometimes very thick, sometimes very thin… and Kierkegaard’s own endless footnotes, blanketing pages at a time as, crippled, agonized by distinctions, he scribbled on and on, heaping irony on irony, curse on curse, gnashing, sneering, praising Jehovah in the privacy of his empty home in
Copenhagen. The demons with which he wrestled – Hegel and his avatars – were unknown to me, so Kierkegaard at his desk seemed to me to be writhing in the clutch of phantoms, slapping at silent mosquitoes, twisting furiously to confront presences that were not there. It was a spectacle unlike any I had ever seen in print before, and it brought me much comfort during those August and September evenings… (PF.180)

The story starts with an anticipatory fear, a fear which is unexplained because of the digression about Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard brings the narrator “comfort” although his “demons” were unknown to him. Like “phantoms”, “silent mosquitoes”, “presences that were not there”. The narrator describes the setting: the sixth floor of an apartment overlooking the Hudson where “the river would become black before the sky, and the little Jersey towns on the far bank would be pinched between two massive tongs of darkness until only a tow of sparks remained”. The reflections of these sparks, after a boat passed by would “tremble, double, fragment, and not until long after the shadow of the boat passed reconstruct themselves”.(PF.180)

At the story’s end, this scenic perception with its imagery will reappear; there it will suggest an emotional “pincher” movement between earth and sky
and a quite distinctive “reconstruction” of sparks will take place. The story itself is like the ship’s passing through river.

The Kierkegaardian sensation set within the following passage is brought to light by Hunt and there by he proves that a knowledge of the religious philosophy of Kierkegaard is necessary to interpret Updike’s stories. The astronomer arrives and

… he spotted the paperback Meno that I had been reading back and forth, on the subway, two pages per stop. It is the dialogue in which Socrates, to demonstrate the existence of indwelling knowledge, elicits some-geometrical truths from a small boy. “My Lord, Walter”, Bela said, “Why are you reading this? Is this the one where he proves that two and two equals four?” And thus quickly, at a mere wink from this atheist, Platonism and all its attendant cathedrals came tumbling down. (PF.182)

At first glance Wallter’s shaken reaction to Bela’s airy dismissal of Plato’s Meno seems unfounded – unless we detect “kierkegaardian sensations”. Socrates in the Meno had argued that man actually possessed the truth but had forgotten it; hence, the function of the teacher was to stimulate another’s recollection, of the truth. Kierkegaard argued the contrary, that unlike Socratic recollection the truth of Christianity must be brought to the learner, one of the essential truth being that
the learner is in sin or “untruth”. The learner cannot discover this truth by himself, therefore; at best he can become aware that he lacks the truth. Since they must be brought, the one who brings these truths – the teacher (Christ) – is of utmost importance, when He brings them – the “Moment” – designates a crucial transition for the learner between untruth and truth. In “Philosophical Fragments” Kierkegaard called this Christian “Moment” the “Fullness of Time”, for it describes the Eternal (Teacher-Christ) entering Time and addressing believers.

Consequently, Walter’s upset at Bela’s remark is double-rooted. First, it unsettles the religious “comfort” Kierkegaard had brought; secondly, it unearths and exposes a lingering Idealism within him, the hope that perhaps memory/recollection might bring truth. “Kierkegaardian sensations” have thrown light on the tribulations of Walter and have helped the reader to understand Walter’s conditions fully well. Without such knowledge the situation would have been understood but only partially. Many such instances can be cited in Updike’s densely packed short stories.

In Karl Barth’s phrase “Man is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth” Alice and Kenneth Hamilton feels that the constant theme of Updike is this dialectical nature of human condition. So Updike often deals with the relation between the physical and spiritual experience. Updike’s fiction
employs metaphor significantly to delineate this relationship. Metaphorical language is an assertion that a reality exists beyond the literal. With the use of metaphor all writers affirm that physical experience has a connection with mental experience. To some writers like John Updike it implies a spiritual experience too. A metaphor to them is not merely literal it becomes theological. Updike’s use of metaphor often reflects a religious analogue, reinforcing his view of the world “as layered, and as there being something up there”.

Updike’s constant use of metaphorical language voices his hope that the relationship between the physical and the spiritual world can be made. A writer becomes a creator. Updike himself has said, in his article in the Paris Review, “Indeed in combinative richness the written word rivals, almost blasphemously creation itself” (p.96).

Updike’s observation on ideal love as “love for that part of ourselves which is in heaven for ever removed from change and corruption“ reflects the Kierkagaardian precept of existence preceding essence. Kierkegaard and Karl Barth believed in the resurrective nature of truth. Truth is dynamic and it has to be realized not through rationalistic rumination but through dramatic revelations and epiphanies. Hence in Updike’s world of fiction resurrection and epiphanies abound. His characters recover their peace or balance of life in a miraculous flash or a mysterious moment of child like innocence. In the select collections,
Updike’s religious philosophy informed and influenced by his religious mentors Kierkegaard, Karl Barth is reflected in his themes, action, characters, setting, and techniques. Besides, the stories in the collection echo Biblical allusions, religious myth, concepts, symbols, and special terms.

Commenting on *The Same Door* collection Detweiler Robert has observed: Certain aspects of casual unity are created by a consistent authorial attitude toward life and by a recurrent structural technique. Updike himself articulates the attitude in the foreword to a later collection called *Olinger Stories*. Answering the complaint that one of those stories seems to have no point, he has commented, “The point, to me is plain, and is the point, more or less, of all these Olinger stories. We are rewarded unexpectedly. The muddled and inconsequent surface of things now and then parts to yield us a gift”. (p.8) Updike is a Christian, if not a “religious” writer in the accepted sense, and the centrality of grace in the Protestant experience finds its way into his art through the expression of the gift or the reward.

The story “Friends from Philadelphia” seems a simple narrative. The protagonist, Fifteen-year-old John Nordholm, who lives a mile outside Olinger, hikes into town to buy the wine that his parents need to entertain expected guests from Philadelphia. Since he is too young to buy alcohol, he stops by the Lutz home and asks if the father will buy it for him. Mr. Lutz himself arrives home
later slightly drunk and agrees to drive John and the teenage Lutz daughter to the liquor store. He allows John (underage) to drive the new family car to the store, takes John’s two dollars, and soon reappears with the wine. When they arrive at the Nordholm house, John asks hesitantly for his change and receives it along with the bottle. As Lutz and his daughter drive away, young John Nordholm discovers that the wine is Chateau Mouton-Rothschild 1937, which is rather expensive.

The charm of the story, along with the semi-sophisticated banter between the teenagers and the description of the television –addicted Mrs. Lutz in her darkened room, is in the ambivalent kindness of Mr. Lutz. His is an unexpected gracious act, for the wine obviously cost much more than the innocent boy anticipated; and the man does not humiliate him in front of the snide daughter by refusing to give change or by divulging the quality and price of the wine. The revelation of the story, therefore, is that kindness has its price, perhaps, and that receiving grace demands its own kind of maturity. The unexpected gift offered to the protagonist is through the grace of god.

“The Happiest I’ve Been”, the final story of the collection, returns with considerable nostalgia to the context of a fading moral innocence. John Nordholm (as Updike states it in the Foreword to Olinger Stories), having taken his turn as protagonist in “Friends from Philadelphia”, narrates the story in the
first person as a nineteen-year-old college student who goes home in Olinger for the Christmas vacation. The story evokes a mood that marks a transitional stage in one’s maturing rather than a specific history and geography. It is the period of the end of youthful innocence, when one practices the rites of adulthood half-willingly to demonstrate sophistication, yet lingers with the more familiar and less complicated habits of late adolescence.

John is picked up in the evening by Neil, a friend of his, to drive to a girlfriend’s New Year’s party in Chicago, seventeen hours distant; but, once beyond parental ken, they decide to attend first in Olinger a party given by former high school classmates. They stay at the party until three in the morning and then take two girls home to nearby Riverside. Margaret, one of the girls, invites the others into her parents’ home for early coffee; while Neil and the other girl pet in the darkened house, John and Margaret sit and talk until she falls asleep in his arm. As dawn breaks, the two boys finally leave for Chicago. Neil has John drive the car and sleeps beside him as the trip begins.

The events appropriately begin at John’s house and conclude on the expressway, leaving Olinger and heading into “tunnel country.” As in some of Updike’s latter short fiction, however, mood becomes more important than events: the concrete particulars evoke a transitional milieu that exists almost suspended in time. In the annual party, in contrast to Neil, John soberly drifts
from room to room, seemingly immune to extremes of feeling. Indeed, throughout the entire story, he feels “this sensation of my being picked up and carried” (SD.235). Though John seems a passive observer, his receptivity to and mental engagement in the events signal a maturing consciousness confronting reality in another fashion.

The revelation of beginning maturity that promises goodness for the future and that makes him the happiest he’s been comes through the double incident of demonstrated faith that others have in him: “There was knowing that twice since midnight a person had trusted me enough to fall asleep beside me” (SD.241). The nostalgia for an irretrievable carefree past is balanced by a pride in the assumed responsibility of adult relationships. One trusts one’s sexual being, one’s safety, with the other person; and there is joy in accepting the burden of that faith.

Here again in this story is the theme of the unexpected gift that runs through all the stories. To be treated as an adult, and the ability to respond as one, are two of life’s subtle presents; to be introduced to the challenges of manhood through the expressed new trust of old friends is a surprising graciousness of nature, or of fate. Indeed, Updike might interpret it as an extension of God’s blessing into one’s deepening self-conscious existence.
In *The Pigeon Feathers* individual’s spiritual isolation is focused as in the instance of “Life Guard”. In the story “The Pigeon Feathers”, its hero, fourteen-year-old David Kern, suffers through a terrifying religious crisis; the force of the tale is in rendering credible the experience of faith and doubt that takes place in an adolescent mind. The sense of existing in two places, as he has moved from Olinger to the rural Fire town precipitates for the hero of the story an alienation that finds expression in a religious dilemma. The move from town to country makes David a self-styled geographical refugee. In the town, one is sufficiently occupied to avoid a contemplation of death; but, in the country, close to what should be the healing power of nature, one is drawn by the proximity of the soil to darker thoughts of death and decay. The arguments between David’s parents about natural and organic farming amplify, for his distressed ears, his anxiety; for the strife about what kills the soil leads him to additional visions of the grave. In his hyper tense condition, even the outhouse, resting above the pit of decomposing feces, triggers a horrid nightmare glimpse of a dying universe.

Obeying his mother’s order David shoots the pigeon in their barn. The personal participation in death restores – or first creates – David’s faith. The killing of the pigeons is a catharsis, a cleansing involvement in violence and destruction that is a microform of the Classical tragic mode. But David, who feels like an avenger in the excitement of the shooting, also attains a measure of understanding about the meaning of death and of divinity in the scheme of being:
“He had the sensation of a creator; … out of each of them he was making a full
bird” (PF.150). The analogy, of course, is that man likewise is somehow fulfilled
through death and that God in allowing death is not permitting a catastrophic
absurdity but a good and necessary consummation. The horror of infinity
changes to a trust in its intelligent perfection, unarticulated as its form may be.

In the final words of the story, David is “robed in certainty: 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” (PF.150). The narrative is
Detweiler Robert observes:

“a concentrated history of modern man’s struggle to assert himself in a
lonely universe. The bleak generalities of an H.G. Wells, the neuroses
of despairing late Victorians, the conspiracy of silence among
twentieth century Christians forced to compromise their dogmas – all
these stagger the innocent generation and demand that it fashion its
own unique bondage or freedom. The answers that its representatives
find, those who are healthy enough, are molded from the stuff of daily
trivia. If the path from six dead pigeons to a God who cares seems
absurd, it is no more so than the tortuous directions mapped by wise
men of the past few centuries”. (p.51)
Young David finds solace and hope for immortality in a classic theological manner, by extending the evidence of design in nature to the universal design of the divinity. About the story the “packed dirt, Church going, A dying Cat, A Traded Car” Michael Novak has commented that: “Out of flux, Updike fashions a symbol of permanence, of spirit, in which we might at last be able even to understand immortality” (p.193). But the very car which furnishes him this symbol, that six-year-old Ford, is soon to be traded in for a new one: ‘when he returned the car would be new, and the old one was gone, gone, utterly dissolved back into the mineral world from which it was conjured, dismissed without a blessing, a kiss, a testament, or any ceremony of farewell”. (p.278)

In the pragmatic, secular America, it is almost impossible for faith to take intelligent root, and men, though having ears, cannot hear; for there are almost no correlates in our experience for what the word of God says feels Michael Novak. He states: “even though he is so far limiting himself to his own experience, John Updike is beginning to make religion intelligible in America, and to fashion symbols whereby it can be understood. It is not surprising if the critics see only the dazzling words, and do not grasp what they mean. “We in America need ceremonies”, is, I suppose, the point of a great many of the words he has written”. (p.195)
The packed dirt, the dying cat, the churchgoing, the car have become, each in its different way, a part of some heroism or some moment of communion; they have been mastered; they are intrinsically blessed. That is all that ever matters for Updike about any object or event. “The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island” is a similar collection of moments of intrinsic blessing, images that, if he could properly evoke them would be full of joy, “just as a piece of turf torn from a meadow becomes a Gloria when drawn by Durer”. (PF.245) But he despairs of ever realizing life that fully. “As it is”, he says to his reader, “you, like me, must take it on faith”. (PF.245)

In the story there is a feeling for the sacredness of life itself, and it is accompanied by a real horror of death. The narrator of “Packed Dirt” has to wake his wife up in the middle of the night, so great is his horror of dying, and Updike deals with this horror at length in the symbolic story called “lifeguard”. The lifeguard is real enough, in his way; a divinity student during the winter, “in the summer”, as he says, “I disguise myself in my skin and become a lifeguard”. It is disguise, the skin – real enough as far as it goes, but not the important reality. Walking around in their skins they were to the lifeguard dying animals with the capacity to love. “Young as I am”, the lifeguard remarks, “I can hear in myself the protein acids ticking; I wake at odd hours and in the shuddering dark and silence feel my death rushing toward me like an express train”. (PF.214)
One has to tackle the fears of death to maintain psychological balance. The psychological process is like swimming: “We struggle and thrash, and drown; we succumb, even in despair, and float, and are saved” (PF.214) by human love man, walks around dressed in flesh and blood, or, as the lifeguard puts it, “our chivalric impulses go clanking in encumbering biological armor” (PF.217). It may be an awkward kind of equipment for a chivalric knight to wear while he is saving the princess, but we have to use it if we are going to guard life: “every seduction is a conversion”. The story ends with an image of great ingenuity that catches up the whole significance of Updike’s humanist parable. This lifeguard has never been called on to save a life, but “someday”, he thinks, “my alertness will bear fruit; from near the horizon there will arise, delicious, translucent, like a green bell above the water, the call for help, the call, a call, it saddens me to confess, and that I have yet to hear” (PF.220). The Music School deals with the tension between the spiritual yearnings and their physical realizations.

In the story “Harv is Plowing” (TMS) the epiphany which occurs at the conclusion belies the feeling of impermanence that arises from the disconcerting image of the ocean washing away his footprints in the sand. In order to rise out of the depression and paralysis which plague other characters suffering from lost love, the narrator has undergone a painful excavation that places him once again in touch with the fundamental layers of experience and makes renewal possible. “What is bread in the oven becomes Christ in the mouth”, (TMS.176) he states
early in the story, preparing the reader for the transformation of memory into a moment of beauty that can only be a prelude, he believes, to some sort of resurrection.

In his final vision of wholeness, stars, sand, and sea coalesce in the recognition of human insignificance that nonetheless grants us a place in the cosmos. The narrator’s comparison of his mind’s liberation to insanity should not, be taken literally; at this transcendent moment of cosmic freedom, he understands that redemption must begin in the elemental world: the earth, one’s past. Harv’s Plowing thus becomes a metaphor for preparing the soil of one’s soul, tilling all the layers to ready the ground for new growth, of which the narrator’s intricate metaphors may be the first yield.

The story “The Music School”, sings of divinity through its metaphors concerning sustenance which run through like a rhythmic sequence: the spiritual nourishment of the host (however it is consumed), the “last supper” of the computer programmer (who is shot at the table), his daughter’s “filling” music lesson, memories of the refreshment of communion in his youth, and finally the reference to the world as a host that must be chewed.

The story “The Christian Roommates dramatizes the relationship between Orsen Zeigler and Henry Palamountain. Friendship between the two becomes complicated not only by Orson’s circumscribed worldview and rigidly defined
goals but also by the degree to which Hub differs. Orson already has his future mapped out as the husband of his high school sweetheart and the successor of his father’s medical practice.

Hub, an older, non-materialistic, vegetarian pacifist who weaves and practices Yoga, presents an enigma that threatens his new roommate’s security: he not only tears up draft notices but also scoffs at the sciences as a “demonic illusion of human hubris. To Orson, whose viewpoint the narrator enters freely, Hub seemed “hermetically sealed inside one of the gluing machines that had incubated his garbled philosophy”;(TMS.135) the reader’s viewpoint is similarly limited to what Hub states and does. Hub’s knowledge of Greek, his experience as a plywood gluer, and his interest in philosophical inquiry all disturb Orson, whose initial reaction is to feel “cramped in his mind, able neither to stand erect in wholehearted contempt nor lie down in honest admiration” (TMS.135-36).

Unaccustomed to the ambivalence that has become a staple of the adult lives of Updike’s older characters, Orson tries to remain “morbidly clean” and let nothing from Hub stick to him. Ironically, when Orson immerses himself in his studies and becomes Hub’s most vigorous opponent, he loses the opportunity for a wider education that Hub embodies.

In the absence of any other commonalities such as those which bond other pairs of roommates, Orson and Hub, as the title announces, are joined by their
Christianity – a fact which perhaps neither ever understands fully. Orson continues to focus more on their differences, recognizing that while the other pairs in their dormitory are united by “geography, race, ambition, [or] physical size”, he and Hub – a self-proclaimed “Anglican Christian Platonist strongly influenced by Gandhi” (TMS.133) – share only this fundamental quality. The nicknames their peers assign them also signal this affinity: Hub is “the saint” because of his ascetic lifestyle, while Orson becomes “the Parson” for his self-righteous criticism of Hub’s praying.

Yet the shallowness of Orson’s faith becomes evident in his final unexpected loss: after religiously pursuing high grades and premed training, Orson has become the person he always expected to be except in one important respect: “a kind of a scar he carries without pain and without any clear memory of amputation … He never prays” (TMS.163). His neglect of prayer may reveal the lack of spiritual turmoil that creates a need to pray; whether he realizes that his spirituality is superficial compared to Hub’s or whether Hub has somehow tainted religion forever for him, Orson suffers an unplanned diminishment.

Orson makes many attempts to distance himself from Hub and become one of the group, but he finds himself unable to adopt a simplistic antipathy: “He resented being associated with Hub, and yet felt attacked when Hub was attacked” (TMS,145). Plagued by ambivalence, Orson tries to avoid Hub until
the tension reaches a breaking point, when, in a cathartic physical scuffle, they battle about the stolen parking meter. At this point, the roommates are, like Updike’s married characters, “pilgrims, faltering toward divorce”. Like an incompatible couple, they separate after the second semester, despite Hub’s mild attempt to compromise. The story depicts the spiritual shallowness of the American youth.

In the story “The Day of the Dying Rabbit” (MW) a photographer is the protagonist. His children provide him glimpses of the eternal in everyday life. Especially when the dawning understanding in their faces reveals “passageways for angels, sometimes whole clouds of them” (MW.27-28). His son Jimmy’s sudden comprehension of the word “casket” in a humorous context provides one such redeeming moment, spurring his father’s pride that he declares: “got the picture”. The rabbit’s last flickers of life suggest to him a picture of “Eternal solicitude brooding above us, holding a match, and burning its fingers” (p.31). Diana Culbertson argues that the conclusion depicts the discovery of ‘a present and future salvation in the face of the world’s contradictory evidence”. (p.98)

As Luscher M Robert has pointed out the “other modes” stories in Museum and Women are clever and whimsical, allowing Updike to emerge as a social commentator and fabulist. His quirky experiment concerning altering one’s angle of vision does yield a revelation: lying prone, with chin in the sand and one eye
closed, he perceives the sea one-dimensionally, as an impenetrable wall. In
temporarily de-familiarizing the surrounding environment, he thus grasps its
essential quality. He does not accept this wall as absolute, however, but rather
maintains a faith that something exists on the other side.

In the select collections, Updike’s religious philosophy informed and
influenced by his religious mentors Kierkegaard, Karl Barth is reflected in his
themes, action, characters, setting, and techniques. Besides, the stories in the
collections echo Biblical allusions, religious myth, concepts, symbols and even
special terms, and are heavily colored by Updike’s religious views rendering
them with the deeper layer of religious and metaphysical significance. Many
critics including Michael Novak, George Searles, Alice and Kenneth Hamilton,
George W.Hunt and Rachael Burchard have identified his serious and solemn
concerns of life. Their observations stand as proof that Updike’s artistic vision is
controlled by his religious world view.

Michael Novak in his article “Updike’s Quest for Liturgy” has observed:

“John Updike has already awakened themes dormant in American
letters since Hawthorne and Melville. Surely many religious people
feel their own childhood, their hopes and terrors, to the tips of their
toes when they read him. Yet the established critics seem to miss what
he is saying. Updike is often writing about man’s search for personal
immortality. He sometimes takes Protestant Christianity with ruthless seriousness. He is willing to try to understand life in American small towns and suburbs as it is now lived; he is not a prophet of dangerous living, nor a preacher of meaninglessness. He regularly refuses the values, the starting-points, of the secular reformer. He does not take the lead in the causes the critics like to support; he sometimes takes a direction they fail to see”. (p.192)

Burchard too affirms the same view and asserts that, John Updike is without question, one of North America’s premier men of letters. In his short stories he presents all of his themes, with intensity and artistic discipline which is more refined than that of his novels, with poetry more eloquent than that in ’The Great Scarf of Birds’, and with religious emprésement to compare with that of the Psalms”. (p.133)

Updike has taken New England suburbia for his subject matter, at a time when most American novelists seem to regard middle-class life as a desert of unreality, Updike has maintained, and demonstrated, that middle-class existence is more complex than American literature usually has allowed.
Tonny Tanner states that:

Suburbia is the ‘compromised environment’ in which his characters live and to which, like the majority of the American population, they have committed their lives. Just how a person lives with and within that compromise, and how they die of it, is Updike’s avowed subject; and where many contemporary American novelists tend to see the social environment as a generalized panorama of threatening impositions and falsifying shapes, Updike accepts it as the given world for his characters, the one and only locale in which they will learn what they learn and lose what they lose. (p.273)

Updike’s short fiction, with the quality of a collective elegy for the Protestant middle class, captures the changing historical background, the shifting social mores, and the personal responses to the altered sociocultural circumstances that have heightened spiritual uncertainty, social unrest, sexual freedom, and domestic tension. Together, the stories chronicle the metamorphosis of middle-class domesticity from the security of the post-World War II era through the subsequent skepticism and moral upheaval of the sixties and seventies to the contemporary apprehension of the need for renewed trust. Illustrating the same proclivity for realistic texture that animates his fiction, Updike’s comments on his aesthetic interests also explain his departure from the
literary center: “My success was based … on my cultivated fondness for exploring corners – the space beneath the Shillington dining table, where the nap of the rug was still thick; the back stairs, where the rubber galoshes lived; the cave the wicker armchairs made when turned upside down against the rain on the porch. I had left heavily trafficked literary turfs to others and stayed in my corner of New England to give its domestic news”. (p.XI)

With an unwavering commitment to realism, Updike has remained determined to illuminate life’s corners and reveal the inherent mystery of the ordinary. Updike embeds selective detail not only for historical backdrop but out of a deep-seated belief that quotidian life teems with objects and experiences that have the potential to evoke wider perception.

In one of his interviews Updike has told Jane Howard:

My subject is the American protestant small – town middle class. I like middles. It is in middles that the extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me without doubt worth while to examine what it is… There is a great deal to be said about almost anything. Everything can be as interesting as every other thing .An old milk carton is worth a rose; a trolley car has as much right to be there, in terms of aesthetics, as a tree. The idea of a hero is aristocratic. As aristocracies have faded
so have heroes. You cared about Oedipus and Hamlet because they were noble you were a groundling. Now either nobody is a hero or everyone is. I vote for everyone (p.36).

Hence Updike’s manicurists are as carefully drawn as his graduate students, and his secondhand cars are described no less poetically than his rhododendron borders. He lavishes extravagant detail on accounts of the way janitor sweeps up debris from a school corridor, how a man reaches for a paper napkin at a luncheonette counter, and the reflections caste on ceilings by night time traffic to bemuse an insomniac. Updike’s perspectives of his stories are all from the suburban American society and he gives a detail account of the experiences felt by the middle class people. He seems to be to well adjusted to the suburban world and minds he writes about. His work might seem too much at home in suburbia. But they do reveal deeper preoccupation and patterns of feeling about contemporary life.

Updike sometimes seems to write in support of compromised environment, though not without recognizing the ambiguity of what it offers. It is this qualified support for the suburban environment, which has provoked the criticism of writers and critics. They feel that Updike’s repudiation of the American society should be more total. Updike’s prose take on a slick sheen while describing the suburban world though his power to create suburban world vividly is not
doubted, his smilies seem too decorative and cultivated. Regarding this Tony Tanner remarks: “Updike has said that he writes fairly, rapidly without much revision. He describes the author’s deepest pride as he has experienced it ‘Not in his incidental wisdom but in his ability to keep an organized mass of images moving forward to feel life engendering itself under his hands’. This delight maintaining momentum seems a good excuse for the preciousness of his language”. (p.293)

Though his stories contain a strong regional slant, with the most of the stories firmly placed in the north east – either the rural Pennsylvania milieu of his youth or suburban New England communities, Updike deals with human universals. Whatever the setting, Updike’s main concern is with “charting the emotional geography of middle class American domestic life”. (p.X)

In *Assorted Prose* Updike regarding his boyhood notions of art has stated:

he saw art - between drawing and writing he ignorantly made no distinction-as a method of riding a thin pencil line out of Shillington, out of time altogether, into an infinity of unseen and even unborn hearts. He pictured this infinity as gradient. How innocent! But his assumption here, like his assumptions on religion and politics, is one for which I have found no certain substitute. To transcribe middleness with all its grids, bumps, and anonymities, its fullness of satisfaction
and mystery: is it possible or, in view of the suffering that violently colors the periphery and that at all moments threatens to move into the center, worth doing? Possibly not: but the horse-chestnut trees, the telephone poles, the porches, the green hedges recede to a calm point that in my subjective geography is still the center of the world. (p.185-186)

These remarks on the artistic vocation and on the magic of artistic creation, explains why the existence of middle class people in the New England Suburbia is an omnipresent theme in Updike’s short stories.

In *The Same Door* collection almost all the stories have an artistically evolved revelatory moment. The revelatory moment does not result from any sensational conflicts or climactic scenes, for these are not stories of deep passion, or violence. They occur in the midst of daily life, mixing with the stuff of the mundane; and the insight slowly marerializes through a fine fusion of memories, reflexes, and some subtle catalyst of the unexpected. Against the wonted beat of familial or vocational being a counterpoint insinuates itself in these stories that at last upsets the rhythm and forces the characters and reader to pause and then to reconsider the whole composition.

In the story, “Ace in the Hole”, (S.D) Fred Anderson is the protagonist. Fred “Ace” is a twenty-six-year-old ex-high school basketball star, married, father of a
small child, and the sad product of maternal domination. On the particular day of the story, he has been fired from his job – not for the first time – as a used – car salesman; and he returns home to await the arrival of his working wife and to appease somehow her anticipated anger at his latest failure.

The story is packed with the complications and baggage of young American marriage. Evey, the wife is Roman Catholic; and Ace is Protestant – a sore point between them. Their life is saturated with TV, pop music, beer, and the omnipresent cigarettes. They appear to have married directly out of high school when they were too young and when they had developed no skills; and they survive in a precarious financial state. Evey has matured, but Ace has not. He lives in the illusion of his teenage glory and is a childish egotist. Updike describes in detail how Ace lovingly combs his long, sleek hair in front of the mirror; and he stresses that, while Ace has just lost his job – a reason for actual concern – he is really bothered because a mention of his high-scoring record in the local sports news that day has employed his name of Fred instead of Ace.

That evening Evey takes rather stoically the news of the firing (Ace’s mother has already told her), but the irresponsible young husband soon irritates her into bitter recriminations. Then Ace turns on his charm. He distracts her by applauding their baby daughter’s antics, and then persuades her to dance with him to the sound of dinner music on the radio. The tale ends with the two of
them, everything unresolved, dancing a quickening swing step in the isolation of the drab apartment, trying pathetically to relive the popularity of their carefree high school days.

According to Robert Detweiler, Updike has already found his métier in “Ace in the Hole”. The story offers less in terms of plot and action than “Friends from Philadelphia” (S.D) but much more in terms of pure mood created out of sheer verbal craftsmanship. It is, much like Rabbit, Run, a sustained metaphor of nervous movement and a tension of opposites. Ace is always in motion: driving the car, smoking hastily, tapping a foot in rhythm, running home from his mother’s house with the small daughter in his arms – still shifting restlessly on life’s basketball court, trying to score and to be the hero again with the effortlessness of the natural. But has cheap early fame have spoiled him, and he is already a clearcut failure at the approaching prime of life. The antagonistic characters, his opposites, make his plight the more obvious. The prowling high school youths who insult him at the traffic light only show him the reckless innocence that he has lost, His weary and dispirited wife, with her dogged common sense, makes him seem more of a loser.

The title has a double sense. The protagonist is Ace “in the hole”: jobless, unprepared to be a man, and threatened with a spouse nearly ready to leave him. But he also has his ace in the hole: his animal charm and his instincts that will
help him to survive even if he ruins other in the process. The story is an inversion of the maturation pattern, for the events that should jolt the initiate into growing up at last only cause him to fight reality with a wasteful nervous energy. “Ace in the Hole” seems authentic because it fashions a modern American type, the teenage hero seduced by quick success into thinking that the adult world is easy to conquer but who soon suffers disillusion and the gradual degeneration into bumhood. Olinger can be too kind, the family, community can be too generous, when it offers its sons what they should strive a lifetime to deserve – and then permits grace to turn quickly into judgment. Detweiler opines that Updike has forced more news about one dead end along the American way of life into one brief story than many writers manage to report in a whole novel. It is no wonder that he returned to the theme and the place and expanded the microform into Rabbit, Run.

The stories in the collection *The Pigeon Feathers* deal with protagonists who are older than those of *The Same Door*. They lack the protection and the air of permission that was granted to them in Olinger which is blessed with “Fields steeped in grace”. The stories portray a widening gulf between them and their past and also within their marriage.

In the story “Walter Briggs” (PF) the couple Jack and Clare play memory game on the way home from a cocktail party. Their position in the car indicates
the current state of their marriage and one potential source of dissatisfaction: Jack drives and Clare sits in the back, separated by their two children while they converse across the seat to occupy this “enforced time together”. In addition, he is disturbed because his competitive nature will not allow him to be content with his wife Clare’s superior performance in the memory game they play. Both of them fail to recall a fat man’s name “Jack tries hard to recall his name while lying in bed he unexpectedly found what he wanted; he lifted himself on his elbow and called ‘Clare’ softly, knowing he wouldn’t wake her, and said ‘Briggs’. “Walter Brigg’s” (PF.11)

Updike’s ending is not without numerous ironies that undercut Jack’s achievement in retrieving this now seemingly insignificant detail. What motivates Jack’s chain of memories is his revived jealously of a young German boy whom Clare recalled fondly. Furthermore, in whispering the remembered name to his sleeping wife, Jack is savoring victory, not simply sharing success; subconsciously, his reach into the past resembles that of the white pines he personifies as “stretched to a cruel height by long competition”, an unpromising image of the course their marriage could take if Jack’s competitive ethic overshadows the cooperative one. Undeniably, his recall of the name represents a victory overtime and loss, but more important for Jack is his triumph over Clare. At best, the concluding epiphany is an ambiguous achievement, positive in its recall of their honeymoon days and Don Quixote’s idealism, but negative in
the insecurity Jack exhibits and in the forebodings of a future dominated not by
the spirit of shared happiness but by the persistence of competitive desire.

Clyde Behn’s declaration that “Happiness isn’t everything”, in “The
Persistence of Desire”(P.F) invites comparison with the story, “The Happiest I’ve
Been”. If John Nordholm’s prolonged farewell to Olinger at the end of The
Same Door represents a high point in happiness for Updike’s sensitive young
protagonist, Clyde’s remark rationalizes the inability to reaffirm that happiness.
Outwardly possessing all the trappings of happiness – a stable marriage, children,
and a career – Clyde is still bothered by a persistent desire for a more passionate
life.

The stories in The Music School collection concentrate on older characters,
take place in other locales, and portray a widening gulf from the past and within
marriage. In the move from Olinger to Tarbox, the characters have entered a
realm whose history is not intimately connected with their past. No longer
sustained merely by memory, they struggle to accommodate themselves to the
ever-increasing losses that accompany life beyond Olinger. The atmosphere of
Tarbox, filled with decline and unrealized possibilities, threatens to diffuse
through the lives of its inhabitants and make memory the most vital part of their
existences. Their goal is to find a satisfactory equilibrium by accepting loss
without total resignation and by continually striving to discover possible
compensations.

The title story presents a middle-class married couple’s suffering and
ceaseless effort to save their marriage. It is so demanding and challenging that
visits to a psychiatrist by both marital partners are necessary to help sort out the
confusion. On the written page, Schweigen can silently forge continuity between
the day’s disparate events even though he is unable to make sense of his own
disintegrating marriage. The programmer and the priest seem as disjunct a pair
as one could imagine, yet each is, to Alfred Schweigen, adapting in his own way
to the sweeping changes of the social and intellectual landscape. The two
disparate characters represent polarities that draw him in different directions, yet
he is uncomfortable with both the programmer’s cold unbelief and the guitar-
playing priest’s secularized religion. In the end, his daughter’s hopeful
refreshment and innocence pierces him like the bullet that killed his
acquaintance. Through his daughter, he has laboriously achieved that euphony
that seems to elude him, as well as the insight that “we are all pilgrims, faltering
toward divorce”. In addition, he realizes that “the world is the host, it must be
chewed”. (TMS.190)

The story ‘Rescue’ dramatizes the suspicions of a young wife and her
subsequent suffering which were transformed into joyful trust in her husband
through a chanced accident involving a divorce. Carolin, her husband Norman, her children along with her divorce neighbor Alice are on a skiing trip. Suspecting that her husband Norman is having an affair with Alice, Caroline begins to read intimations of his infidelity in “every tilt of circumstance, every smothered swell and deliberate contraindication” (TMS.195). The only novice skier in the group, she approaches the slopes with trepidation augmented by her sense that this trip will force her to confront their marital problems.

The ski life, like her suspicions, pulls her in a “dangerous direction” to the “bare altitude” of the mountain peak, where she simultaneously resolves to follow who challenging courses: skiing “Greased Lightning”, the expert run, and leaving Norman, whose infidelity seems confirmed by the suspect pair’s words and actions. Since Norman and her son have gone ahead, Caroline descends the slope with Alice, suddenly infused with a new poise: “swooping in complementary zigzags, the two women descended a long white waterfall linked as if by love” (TMS.196). Updike’s image metaphorically captures the pattern of the women’s enforced pairing; linked by love of the same man, they may be destined to crisscross on their descent as long as both the Harrises’ marriage and the suspected affair continue. Their pursuit of the men is halted by an accident that unexpectedly presents Caroline with an emblem of her own inner wounds and swings the pendulum of trust in the opposite direction. The woman they encounter, suffering from a broken leg and a broken marriage, elicits Caroline’s
compassion and foreshadows her own potential “crack-up” and the dangers of divorce, the course she has chosen out of anger and jealousy.

Yet focusing on another woman’s “universe of misfortune” begins to heal the breach of marital faith that has led her to detect clues of infidelity beneath the surface of everyday events. The same compassion and patience she extends to the injured woman, Caroline realizes, will be successful weapons if she chooses to battle Alice, whose “finicking” behavior finally convinces her that Norman would never be attracted to their neighbor. Although the story’s title ostensibly refers to the slightly bungled rescue of the injured skier, it is mainly the rescue of Caroline’s marriage as she has regained her confidence in her husband through the skiing experience.

The head note of *The Museums and Women* collection the triple refrain—the sickening sensation of love - points to the protagonist’s sickening condition at physical, emotional and moral level. It is an evidence of Updike’s deepening concern, with deteriorating marital, domestic, and broader social – erotic affections. “The Day of the Dying Rabbit” (MW) depicts discord within a family on holiday, with marriage problems threatening in the background. In the story “Solitaire” (MW) the husband plays the card game alone while his guilty imagination pits wife against mistress. The protagonist has confessed about an affair to his wife. To overcome the consequences of the turmoil caused by the
confession he turns to the game as it represents a “final resort” Early in their marriage in order to overcome his lingering uncertainties about parenthood and the direction his life will take, he resolved to follow a “straight line . . . to the night of his death” (MW.79) although setting out not to make the same mistakes as his parents, he too ends up preserving his marriage for the sake of convention. The obstacles encountered in the game metaphorically begin to reflect the predicament that has developed “A King uncovered, but nowhere to put him,” (MW.82) he muses when he recalls that revealing his affairs to his wife and her knowledge of his mistress only compounds the problem. This leads to his essential solitariness.

In the story “The Witnesses”(MW) The narrator, whose marriage appears secure, recalls Fred Prouty, who suffered through two divorces before dying of cancer. Fred’s death spurs the memory of their last two visits: Fred’s apparently “tactless” exhibition of his mistress before his first divorce was settled and a chance encounter in an airport after Fred’s second divorce, which prompts reassessment of Fred’s social ostracism. The vestiges of connection are severed when Fred commits a social faux pas in using his “respectable friends” to validate his relationship, although the narrator later realizes that they have been called upon to witness the ephemeral happiness of a life “cracked and mended”.
In the story “Carol Sing”, unlike the more successful and ambitious music of The Music School, the music here is less inspired, and more habitual: “If you listened to the words”, the narrator reflects, the carols “would break your heart. Silence, darkness, Jesus, angels. Better, I suppose, to sing than to listen”. (MW.147) While schweigen is pierced by the music at his daughter’s school, the narrator here sings submissively, numbing himself to the carol’s emotional highs and lows.

Joan and Richard Maple, Updike’s preferred representatives of wedded tribulations, reemerge in these following five stories, “Marching through Boston”, “The Taste of Metal”, “Your Lover Just Called”, Eros Rampant”, “Sublimating”. The sway of Eros increasingly strains their relationship, but does not break the bonds that keep them trapped in the circularity of an enduring marriage. Their marriage has become the “paradoxical ethical situation” of being “repeatedly wounded by someone because he or she is beloved". (TMS.92) Locked in a dance of mutual need and wounding, they seem to drag on.

Tony Tanner in his review of Museums and Women compliments that Updike has incomparably conveyed the familial experience in suburban America: the abrasiveness of children quarreling; the insecurities and anxieties involved in moving house or changing district; the trivial tumescence’s of the cocktail party; the irresolvable misery of
participating in an affair that lacks the stability of marriage and in a marriage that cannot recapture the passion of an affair; the modest pleasures of the kitchen, the garden, a picnic, a day out with the children; the exhaustions of middle age; the drifting apart of friends; the tensions between different generations; the sudden waves of dread in which the reassuring forms of suburbia dissolve in cosmic panic. And perhaps above all the growing fears at the inexorable approach of death and the ungraspable notion of personal annihilation. (p.9)

The characters are shown as adjusting themself to their environment. It may be felt that allowing oneself to be absorbed into the compromised environment is tantamount to losing one’s selfhood. But at the same time life in that environment with a well loved wife and a well built house is the best antidote to the dread of death and boredom. The inevitable dialectical situation prevails among them. As a high priest of middle class morality Updike offers his readers a peace that passeth understanding. In his fictive universe, moral values are suspended we are not allowed to judge.

As Charles Thomas Samuels points out in his article, Updike’s range of experience is both common and confined; he avoids such upheavals in which many of us like to think we find our true reflection. Some readers will persist in finding Updike trivial; as they miss separable and obtrusive “ideas”; even fervent
admiring Updike must admit that his situations are often too slight. “But within the ordinary moments he selects, his precisely expressive language always embeds an insight authenticated by gesture, a truth extensively portrayed. No one has ever denied his skill. But we ought to remember that in art skill is not a dispensable adjunct to seriousness: it is seriousness: proof that the artist esteems his craft, his subject, and his readers” (p.192).

*The Music School* collection holds a distinctive place in the Updike corpus because it contains several stories that, in addition to more familiar Updike themes, specifically engage the issues of artistic self-consciousness and the act of composition itself. In the story, “The Bulgarian Poetess,” published in March 1965, Updike created a spokesman who would explicitly engage the issues. Henry Bech, In 1970 he told an audience why he felt compelled to invent Henry Bech:

Now, as for the Bech stories…. For a writer, life becomes over much a writer’s life. Things happen to you that wouldn’t happen to anybody else, and a way of using this to good advantage, of course, is to invent another writer. At first, he is very much an alter ego, but then, in the end, not so. At any rate I have used the writer in Bech as a subject in order to confess sterility in a truthful way…. In my book, I tried to –
and I believe I did –package and dispose of a certain set of tensions and anxieties which I have as a practicing writer. (p.183)

But Bech’s character is only the most obvious alter ego in *The Music School* collection. Most of the remaining stories reveal a narrator or character wrestling with similar “Writerly” problems of sterility and creativity and the tensions that result. A cursory reading, though, might miss this artistic aspect.

The primary and ostensible theme of almost every story is that of the mystery of sexuality and sexual relationship examined in the light of their sterility or vitality, subordinate, but concomitant with it, is the secondary theme of the mysterious relationship between the imagined and the real, between artistic recreation and creation, between the sterile and vitalizing processes of the mind. According to George W. Hunter, the most obvious clue, that Updike is addressing these twin themes is found in the epigraph chosen for *The Music School* a quotation from Wallace Stevens’s poem ‘To the one of Fictive Music’:

Now, of the music summoned by the birth
That separates us from the wind and the sea,
Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,
By being so much of the things we are,
Gross effigy and simulacrum, none
Gives motion to perfection more serene
Than yours, out of our imperfections wrought,
Most rare or ever of more kindred air
In the laborious weaving that you wear.

George W. Hunt paraphrases the poem as follows and remarks:

These lines represent well Stevens’ continuing poetic theme: that the apparent dichotomy that exists between the realm of reality, disorder, the actual (earth) and the realm of the imagination, order and the ideal (music) is bridged only through Art. The “One” addressed in the poem is the Muse of poetry who personifies man’s power of imagination and memory. The “birth” referred to in the first line is that of human consciousness which separates us from nature (wind and sea) “yet so leaves us” in it that we see in nature a “gross effigy” of ourselves. But “the music summoned by the birth” of consciousness is Art which tries to unite man and nature, and none is more perfect and “rare” than poetry. Yet poetry is of a “kindred air” since as the bridge between, the more the poem retains of ourselves, the closer it brings us to nature. (p.209)

The epigraph, Hunt comments, is most apt since most of the stories deal with the Stevenian theme of re-creating reality and the past via imagination and memory. The story “The Music School” seems expected until we note that the
adulterous narrator, now “unfaithful” to his wife and “faltering toward divorce,” has been “unfaithful” to the novel he once planned to write and so now, “though unmusical,” he waits in a music school attempting to sort out answers to both infidelities. In this story as in the collection, composition and theme, frame and form are one in that each story’s inner dynamic is heuristic in a composite way. we find the narrator explicitly or covertly seeking “connections” amid remembered or imagined events so that the resulting structure (the story) both shapes and is shaped by this movement. Throughout, there is three fold pursuit taking place as there is continually throughout the poetry of Wallace Stevens: (1) pursuit of the elusive, disordered reality (Nature and Women); (2) the conscious effort to draw upon the resources of the imagination through the medium of metaphor; and finally (3) this heuristic movement outward becomes simultaneously a search for the self, the symbolic center of the pursuit. But the goal and instrument of the three quest become the same: recovery and re-creation. (p.208-211)

In The Music School collection Updike, in Stevens-like fashion, had sought out metaphors as the mode for exploring the mystery of sexuality. Sex “as the only thing left” becomes the only viable metaphor for man’s search for personal and communal meaning. Adultery in such circumstances thus becomes the only modern equivalent for romantic adventure and spiritual aspiration, and it will
further take on the qualities of an imaginative quest and become, in its way, a
quasi–artistic pursuit.

In the selected collections all three secrets – Sex, Religion, Art engage the
mysteries of Time and Creativity from different perspectives, for all three address
man’s elemental impulse for immortality and his desire somehow to conquer
personal death.