Chapter - III

THE LINGERING PLAINTIVE MELODY OF NOSTALGIA AND LOSS

Updike perceives in contemporary America a widespread loss of spiritual substance, a diminution that finds its outward manifestations in cultural vulgarity and an empty, materialistic value system. He repeatedly suggests that the breakdown of religious belief has occasioned a generalized malaise, and that the tacit acceptance of the “death of God” has caused many of the current problems. There has been a tendency in the twentieth century to gradually replace traditional religion with secular surrogates, and Updike’s short stories consistently portray confused, questing, unfulfilled characters bereft of the spiritual fortification that sustained earlier generations. This partly explains Updike’s professed and obvious tendency for juxtaposing images of the present with evocations of the American past. He has frequently drawn upon the experiences of his early childhood and adolescence, focusing on the fictional Olinger.

In the representative early short story “Toward Evening”, (S.D) there is a highly symbolic scene in which Rafe, the protagonist, whimsically associates skyscraper numbers on Broadway with calendar years. The implied comment on contemporary society and its future prospects is quite direct: “The clearly marked
numbers on the east side of the street ran: 1832, 1836, 1846, 1850 (Wordsworth
dies), 1880 (great Nihilist trial in Saint Peterburg), 1900 (Rafe’s father born in
Trenton), 1902 (Braque leaves Le Havre to study painting in Paris), 1914 (Joyce
begins Ulysses; war begins in Europe), 1926 (Rafe’s parents marry in Ithaca),
1936 (Rafe is four years old). Where the present should have stood, a block was
torn down, and the numbering began again with 2000, a boring progressive
edifice”(SD.65). Similarly, in the “The Blessed Man of Boston, My
Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island”, Updike reiterates the same view
and says of his grandmother that “the land which cast her up was harsher, more
sparsely exploited, more fertile than it is now. That she was unique; that she
came toward the end of the time when uniqueness was possible. (PF.242)

Tony Tanner has observed that in Updike’s work there is a sense of
“continuous erosion”, a pervasive apprehension of waste and disintegration that
provides an unlikely link with writers such as John Barth and William Burroughs.
This preoccupation with loss and social decay finds repeated expression
throughout Updike’s oeuvre – and is given metaphorical embodiment often in the
odd and unpleasant image of dental decay. “Dentistry and Doubt” (SD) whose
protagonist, a divinity student, suffers from problem with his eyeteeth is a typical
example. When the long - neglected dental problem is solved, his spiritual vision
is restored.
In Updike’s fiction, the traditional ideas of family solidarity and reinforcement of personal identity through strong familial bonds appear to have lost their viability. Updike seems to be suggesting that in the fragmented modern world we are left almost entirely to our own devices, cut off from even the most basic sources of communion. Many of the short stories mourn these lost wellsprings of security, solace, and strength. His protagonist’s confusions are rendered all the more vexing by the loss of vital personal ties and the concomitant sense of guilt and unworthiness that such a rupture engenders. Updike seems to point out that the problems his characters experience reflect a larger cultural phenomenon – the disintegration of America. Though the characters are plagued by many social lapses, they always seem to strive for self recognition.

But they seek it in a highly antinomian manner, often disregarding all but their own hearts’ needs. This characteristic feature seems to suggest two things: that such behavior reflects the communal loss of moral sensitivity and a devotion to individual survival at any price which may be an appropriate and fitting commitment. Updike himself has commented on the relationship between the individual and society in his fiction: “I do see each book as a picturing of actual tensions, conflicts, and awkward spots in our private and social lives. My books feed, I suppose, on some kind of perverse relish in the fact that there are insolvable problems .... There is no reconciliation between the inner, intimate,
appetites and the external conciliations of life…. There is no way to reconcile … individual wants to the very real need of any society to set strict limits and to confine its members”. The individuals are at odds with their society and they also lack strong familial bonds which make them very vulnerable and confused.

In Updike’s fictional world, maintaining family relationships is rendered as a challenging and enervating task by the fact that the persons involved exist in a period of shifting values and changing assumptions. The fictional Olinger itself becomes a metaphor for the lost past, a time when life was simpler, more easily decipherable, and governed by received systems of response. He has remarked that “as a child, I lived what was to become my material and message”, and it is in the works that center on Olinger and Rabbit’s Brewer that Updike most effectively explores his family-centered themes.

In many of the Olinger stories, a sensitive young protagonist is torn between the slowly dwindling, small-town world of his parents and the attractions of the larger realm of possibility that lies beyond and which his aspirations lead him toward. Whether he is a teenaged boy like Allen Dow of “Flight” or John Nordholm, the protagonist of “The Happiest I’ve Been” or a young adult like David Kern of “Packed Dirt, Church Going, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car”, his dealings with his parents are characterized by mixed emotions and a concomitant sense of strain. Although in every case the protagonist’s
parents entertain high hopes for his future, and although the son shares these visions of grandeur, there are almost always guilt feelings experienced by the son for wishing to transcend his parents’ stations, and at times there is a sort of unwilled jealously or resentment evinced by the mother toward the son.

The opening pages of “Flight” (PF) are representative: as they survey the town of Olinger from a nearby hilltop, Allen Dow’s mother tells him, “There we all are, and there we’ll all be forever…. Except you, Allen. You’re going to fly” (PF. 50). But on another occasion the mother admonishes him, “You’ll never learn, you’ll stick and die in the dirt just like I’m doing. Why should you be better than your mother?” (PF.51) Most of the families tend to live in an extremely high emotional tension, lacking the peace and harmony of yester years. The protagonist’s mother is always a formidable figure, melodramatic and strong-willed, at once supportive and emasculating, showing strange “mixture of impulsive and romantic and inconsistent” (PF.51) tendencies. As a foil the father is typically a long-suffering, self-deprecating altruist whose quirky behavior is as much a product of willed, defensive idiosyncrasy as of genuine eccentricity. The Olinger parents seem to have embraced self-parody as a stay against the vicissitudes of existence. In an age of technology and mass society, they are conscious that their small-town context is fast becoming obsolete so, they take refuge in extremes of theatricality that are designed both to mask their insecurities and to provide an arena in which to grope toward workable
philosophies of life. Allen Dow describes himself as a “child who had been surrounded all his life by adults ransacking each other for the truth” (pp.68-69), and this significant line is applicable to the other Olinger protagonists as well.

The modern tumultuous home-life is invariably presented by Updike as stimulating, nourishing, and fortifying, and is described in terms of fondly wistful recollection. One Olinger protagonist says, for example, that he “always awoke to the sound of my parents talking, voices which even in agreement were contentious and full of life”, while another remarks that “talk in our house was a continuum sensitive at all points of past and present and tirelessly harking back and readjusting itself, as if seeking some state of equilibrium finally free of irritation”. But the home-life portrayed in the stories can be viewed only as highly erratic and disorienting, especially for sensitive adolescents attempting to develop mature emotional and psychological responses. George Searles reasons that “the tumult and uproar experienced in their formative years contribute heavily to the problems encountered by the Olinger protagonists in later life, especially with regard to their attitudes toward male-female relationships.”

Updike’s attitudes towards the institution of family reflect his religious conservation. Kathleen Verduin finds “in Updike, as has often been said of his predecessor Nathaniel Hawthorne, religion is as much a matter of temperament as of doctrine; its consequences are psychological and sociological, it is a way of
life as well as a matter of faith. His religious conservatism is therefore often inseparable from attitudes toward the family and most prominently towards the institution of fatherhood”:

Even in obsessively adulterous and divorce bound male characters there is a substantial evidence of familial patterns that were established in the Protestantism of the seventeenth century. In its repudiation of celibacy and affirmation of marriage, seventeenth-century Protestantism transferred at least a degree of priestly authority to the father of the family, implying that if the household were to be “a little Church,” he should be its minister.

Presiding at family prayers, conducting catechetical instruction, Protestant Paternal figures clearly achieved something like ministerial authority: and like the minister, the father too was obligated to act as moral exemplar and guardian of his family’s piety. It was incumbent upon a father to create for his children a microcosm in which all things were either permitted or forbidden, where the child’s sense of security was dependent on these norms, and whose order and purity were assured by a concerned and vigilant father. Since religious orthodoxy in such households was necessarily contingent on filial reverence, the child who resisted his father’s authority might be likely to resist God as well.

But a father who was soberly and humbly mindful of his proper role might act almost as type, a tangible and personal representation of benevolent authority
and finally of God himself. The parallel between divine and human fatherhood becomes particularly meaningful for the conservative Protestant tradition, even though it is evident in all generations of the human race. The well-ordered family is thus easily enlarged into an emblem of the well-ordered universe, where God’s fatherly control is manifest in just and unquestioned punishments, but also in blessing and benevolence. Updike’s inheritance of such patterns is evident in many of his central characters: often lapsed, hardly beyond moral reproach, they nevertheless tend to be nostalgic for a time when Protestant Christianity was still a shaping power in American life.

“In Flight”, the protagonist Allen Dow’s portrayal of his mother’s grand father reflects the same reverential view: “her grand father to her was a saintly slander giant, over six feet tall when this was prodigy, who knew the names of everything like Adam in Eden.” Allen Dow too holds his own grand father in high esteem. So he says: “his drinking is impossible for me to picture; for I never knew him except as an enduring, didactic, almost Biblical old man”. (PF.51)

Important too is the child’s awareness of the permitted and the forbidden as clearly opposed alternatives. In the story “In Football Season,” (TMS) the narrator recalls nights in his adolescence when his father and two other men, sitting around a kitchen table, would count the proceeds from a high school
football game. The simple scene, hazily nostalgic and still as a genre painting, radiates a peace that is nearly holy in its silence and pictorial order.

“They were still counting; the silver stacks slipped and glinted among their fingers and the gold of beer stood in cylinders beside their hairy wrists. Their sleeves were rolled up and smoke like a fourth presence, wings spread, hung over their heads. They were still counting, so it was all right, I was not late, but I was not blamed; it was cylindrical wrappers of colored paper, men ordered and consecrated this realm of night into which my days had never extended before. The hour or more behind me, which I had spent so wastefully, in walking when a trolley, would have been swifter and so wickedly in blasphemy and lust, was past and forgiven me; it has been necessary; it was permitted”. (TMS .8)

“Now,” the narrator adds regretfully, “I peek into windows and open doors and do not find that air of permission” (TMS.9). Fatherly figures in Updike seem to stand for: “a realm above this plane of silent compromise” (Mid Point. 56). Such fathers are models and exemplars, usually, of something religious, of a definition of man not merely as a creature comfortably natural, but as a theological being whose true home is in heaven, with God.
Given his reverence for paternal figures and his attraction for the patriarchal saintliness of Karl Barth, Updike has devoted a good deal of his fiction to the depicting of a recurrent father figure, called by various names but always recognizable, a comic, self mocking, in a sense defeated, but highly compassionate and human individual. This father appears in various short stories. He is persecuted and indulgent, self punishing rather than vindictive. The following vignette from “Flight” is typical: “He kept a confiscated cap pistol in his desk, and upon getting an especially stupid answer, he would take it out and, wearing a preoccupied, regretful expression, shoot himself in the head” (PF.57). The father’s figure is a kind of saint whose existence affirms the paradoxes of Christianity. “It does not seem to me contradictory to posit a father who appears as both God and a victim of God,” Updike has written in his essay on Kierkegaard. ‘Such a paradox, after all, is fundamental to Christian theology” (“The Fork” Picked-Up Pieces, p.116).

In many stories the young fathers are conscious of their own pretended fulfillment of the same venerable role to be fraudulent. In “Packed Dirt, Church Going, A Dying Cat, And A Traded Car” David Kern confesses: “My children, wounded and appalled in their competition, came to me to be comforted and I was dismayed to see myself, a gutted shell, appearing to them as the embodiment and pledge of a safe universe”. In contrast he talks of his father as being superior to him and says “I did not wish to take my father’s place behind the wheel of his
car. My father’s place was between me and Heaven; I was afraid of being placed adjacent to that far sky” (PF.262). Such instances in Updike’s fiction make one aware of a theme of patriarchal decline.

The temptations, adultery and divorce, pervasive in the modern world and offering an exciting alternative to the respectable lives of many of Updike’s male characters, make the Updikean father’s role as an admonitory model and internalized restraining presence all the more significant. In the story, “solitaire,” the narrator confronts the same temptation and desperately invokes the protection of his father’s example. “He was the son of parents who had stayed together for his sake. That straight line, once snapped, could not be set straight again” (MW. pp.182-3). “My father would have died before doing it to me,” Richard Maple, in “separating,” confesses to the son he is about to leave (Problems.129). Never, in Updike’s fiction, does a divorced central character have a living father, and the distance between Updike’s contemporary male protagonists and their remembered fathers is usually a significant gulf.

Adultery and divorce are further complicated in Updike not only in so far as they subvert responsible paternity and the social order, but because they often appear to threaten the cosmic order of which such paternity is the emblem: for in Updike, the order and goodness of the universe often seem to be symbolized as
they had been for the seventeenth century, by the stability of a family life built
around the father’s fidelity and proof against corrosive promiscuity.

For many of Updike’s self-doubting, younger fathers, adultery and divorce
are therefore perceived as potential eruptions in the universe itself. Beset by an
unexpected temptation, the young husband in “Packed Dirt, Church Going, A
Dying Cat, A Traded Car” dips quickly into an overwhelming fear of personal
extinction. “The universe that so easily permitted me to commit adultery became
a universe that would easily permit me to die” (PF.260). In “The Music School,”
Albert Schweigen, the protagonist who is “Unmusical” is also an “Unfaithful”,
husband and a writer. He considers a fictional hero who would “die of adultery.
Die, I mean, of knowing it was possible: the possibility crushed him” (TMS.
187).

With the recession of fatherhood, the sign becomes crucial, not only as a
source of guidance, but more significantly as a testimony that the universe is
indeed meaningful, orderly, communicative, and protective. Like their more
orthodox forefathers, then, Updike’s characters tend to look anxiously at nature
and experience not as a blank and neutral surface, but as a fabric through which
the divine imperative may at any moment be made manifest. Updike’s characters
long for a physical and tangible manifestation of the divine. Updike’s work is
therefore predictably emblematic. His own family, the author says, was “inclined
to examine everything for God’s fingerprints.” In Updike, what is ordinary may quickly turn into an epiphany and no phenomenon is therefore too small to merit attention. For the young minister in “Dentistry and Doubt,” even his toothbrush “on good days presented itself as an acolyte of matinal devotion” (SD. pp. 43-4). In “Pigeon Feather,” David’s quest for faith is at least momentarily resolved by the intricacy of the bird’s feathers: “God who had lavished such craft on these worthless birds would not destroy His whole creation by refusing to let David live forever” (PF.150).

In this sacramental view, the outward and sensible sign acts as a manifestation of the divine if properly understood: “Just as a piece of turf torn from a meadow becomes a Gloria when drawn by Durer” (“The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island” (PF.245). Kathleen Verduin points out that Updike’s characters are accordingly sensitive to the appearances of things and the possible meaning of those appearances; and their eagerness for symbol and emblem is, directly related to problems more central in their lives.

As has been charged against Hawthorne’s male characters, Updike’s protagonists too seem passive and indecisive, as though waiting to be told what to do as Allen Dow says: when he hears his mother’s comment which was inspired by seeing flying birds -- “you’re going to fly” -- “A few birds were
hung far out over the valley, at the level of our eyes, and in her impulsive way she had just plucked the image from them, but it felt like the clue I had been waiting all my childhood for” (PF.50). Updike’s men, rarely make decision rationally; instead, their choices often are made as a result of some event, some fleeting impression which may be taken as a sign. Yet signs may deceive, or at best be disturbingly ambiguous; aware of the modern habits of doubt, Updike will sometimes subvert the images his characters take as messages from God by recalling the mind’s will to foolish accidents, and “reads a word where in fact only a scribble exists” (PF.120). The father’s voice inaudible, civil and religious hope for guidance has been lost. The characters suffer the double loss of faith and familial comfort.

The nothingness effected by death constantly return as a major anxiety of Updike’s protagonists. For an individual, the death of near and dear ones or one’s own mortality is a grievous loss which causes terrible fear. This fear of death is one of the persistent themes in Updike’s stories. The five most philosophical stories in *Pigeon Feather* are all concerned with death. In “Pigeon Feather” the boy, David Kern, has been reading H. G. Well’s account of Christ and, David was visited by an exact vision of death…” This “revelation of extinction” initiates David’s first serious doubts about the existence of the soul and the certainty of eternal life.
In “The Astronomer” the scientist Bela inadvertently confesses that he has seen in the vast emptiness of the New Mexico desert a vision of his own mortality and a prophecy of his extinction. In “Lifeguard” the divinity student often has felt “death rushing toward me like an express train,” and he sees theology as a frightened attempt to bridge the abyss of man’s knowledge of his mortality.

In “The Blessed Man of Boston My Grand Mother’s Thimble, And Fanning Island” the death of the narrator’s grandmother has made him conscious of the perishability of the richest part of human experience, and the story is an attempt to invest her with immortality. And in “Packed Dirt, Churching Going, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car” David Kern, like Peter Caldwell of The Centaur, is terror stricken at the realization that his father may die. The narrator wakes up in the night with an overwhelming fear of being forgotten. It is so intense that he wakes up his wife too and tries to seek consolation from her to dissuade his fears.

Similarly The Museum and Women collection is also burdened with the gnawing fear of death. Many stories like “I am Dying, Egypt Dying”, “The Day of the Dying Rabbit”, “Carol Sing”, and “Solitaire” portray a protagonist who suffers the terrible tremors of death. In the case of Clem, the bland American protagonist of the story “I am Dying, Egypt Dying” it is not physical death but the emotional death which plagues him.
In *The Music School and The Same Door* the horror of death torments the characters. In the story “His Finest Hour” (SD) George and Rosalind Chandler timidly anticipate on a gloomy night the murder of Mrs. Irva Karl by her husband in their bloody marital quarrel. James in “The Gift of the City” (SD) while walking home from his office daydreams of the cruel murder of his family by the outraged Negro. In the story “The Music School” the fear of death is vividly felt by Albert Schweigen. His neighbor, a computer programmer, was shot in his head while he was having dinner. It disturbs him and he ruminates about it while waiting for his daughter to come back from her music class.

The story with a metaphorical title “The Dark” deals with the narrators encounter with death and delineates the long waiting of the protagonist who had nothing left but “the hope that the impenetrability of walls was in some sense an illusion. His nightly vigil investigated this possibility. His discoveries, of the varied texture of the dark, its relenting phosphorescence, above all its hospitality to vivid and benign incursions of light, seemed at moments to confirm his hope. At other moments, by other lights, his vigil seemed an absured toy supplied by cowardice to entertain his last months. He had months and not years to live. This was the fact” (TMS.206).

He wondered why the difference between months and years should be qualitative when mere quantities were concerned, and “his struggle to make
‘month’ a variant of ‘year’ reminded him of, from his deepest past, his efforts to remove a shoehorn from between his heel and shoe, where with childish clumsiness he had wedged it. How impossibly tight the fit had seemed! How feeble and small he must have been!” (TMS.206) This recollection endows him with clarity to see the visit of the “Invador” (death) and strength for acceptance that “he felt in this arrival, relief from his vigil and knew, his chest loosening rapidly, that in a finite time he would trickle through the fingers of the hand; would slip, blissfully, into oblivion, as a fold is smoothed from a width of black silk.” (TMS.210)

This deep fear of death and the anxiety about the imminence of death bring an awareness of the onslaught of time. The Characters are painfully conscious of time running on. Clyde Behn, the protagonist of “The Persistence of Desire” (PF) is a representative of such characters. Clyde is waiting for the doctor, Penny packer, thinking of his past. At the Penny packer’s the one new thing, that was “set squarely on an orange end table was a compact black clock constructed like a speedometer; it showed in Arabic numerals the present minute 1:28 and coiled invisibly in its works the two infinities of past and future. Clyed was early; the waiting room was empty He sat down on a chair opposite the clock already it was 1:29 and while he watched, the digits slipped again”. Clyde becomes painfully conscious of the running time.
As he stares at the checkered floor in the doctor’s familiar office, he becomes “crisscrossed by a double sense of himself”. Finally he realises his persistent imaginative yearnings to turn back the clock. While restlessly waiting, he reads the reassuring fact that the body’s cells replace themselves every seven years, but the two clocks in the lobby stand as ominous reminders of time’s passage. On the face of the new digital clock, time literally slips away as each number becomes “another drop into the brimming void”; the grandfather clock from which he seeks the comfort of the familiar has stopped, suggesting that the arrested past may not remain viable in the present. Still, he tries to recapture his youth by entering into an affair with Janet his old sweetheart and tries to seek his “simple perishable self”. The electric clock arouses a dormant terror in him, and his clumsy advances toward Janet are an attempt to escape into the past, from which vantage point life would always seem “a distant adventure, a rumor, and an always imminent joy”. (PF.26)

Regarding this consciousness of the erosion of time and the constant terror of the characters Tony Tanner has observed:

“He … is convincing about the continual presence of fear, that fear engendered by the realization that everything decays, erodes, deteriorates and dies, which has been in his work from the start. In “Museum and Women” one story is simply about “Plumbing,” the
commonplace need for some expensive new pipes. But Updike’s plumber is a “poet musing upon the eternal presences of corrosion and flow.” Updike, too, is just such a poet, carefully inspecting the strained and faulty substructures that maintain family suburban life, admiring the machinery that holds and works, but noting the gathering rust, the spreading cracks. And, like the narrator of this particular story, he comes up to the surface and looks up into the sky and, with a shiver of mortality, recognizes our ephemerality “All around us, we are outlasted”. (MW.155)

The theme of death in Updike is studied comprehensively by Joyce Markle and she has observed that in Updike’s fiction death is manifested in two analogous forms; it appears in its physical form as a threatened or actual death, and it appears in a non-physical form as the potential destruction of people’s sense of their own insignificance.

Bech, the protagonist of “The Bulgarian Poetess” is unique among Updike’s heroes as he is endowed with his comic vision. It shields him from all serious harm. As has been pointed out he is not easily hurt by others; moreover his own failings do not deeply upset him. He is annoyed and frustrated that his artistic energies seem to be running out but he can survive it. Bech is safe, but he is also unproductive artistically; his comic vision may be unable to coexist with the
structured, representative, symbolic, coherent, and sincere vision necessary to produce a work of art. Without the upward momentum, denied by comic vision, without human stature and the hope of success, both art and the artist become inappropriate contradictions within a system which offers them no materials and no motivation. Bech is a representative of the many other creative artists who people Updike’s world of fiction. Their sterility reflects the shallowness and hollowness of the contemporary American society. The sterile American society has lead the individuals to suffer loss at the personal, social and spiritual level.

Howard Harper identifies a “re-orientation in Updike’s fiction as it has moved from a rather facile social criticism toward a more fully existential point of view.” In a regrettably brief statement of English literature, Updike has outlined his own interests in the English novel and then identified what he considered to be its major shortcoming: “… no literature is as non-existential as the English. That is, the Englishman does not really seem to be aware of any intrinsic problem in human existence. It can all be patched up and muddled through” (p.473). Updike’s protagonists muddle through too, but not without awareness of this intrinsic problem. The best of Updike’s stories are those that reveal a philosophical depth. They are remarkable achievements in form and in their richness of meaning these stories echo those of the novels. The imminence of death and the threat of oblivion, yet the infinity of meaning which radiates
from every human experience, and the richness of our human legacy are poignantly dealt in them.

Along with many current writers, John Updike sees in contemporary America a widespread loss of moral fortitude, a pervasive spiritual laxity that finds expression in a clutchingly materialistic value system. His works consistently portray muddled characters bereft of the emotional, psychological resources that sustained earlier generations; repeatedly, he juxtaposes unsettling images of the present with lyrical evocations of the American past. In “The Happiest I’ve Been,” the young protagonist remarks that the principal tie between him and his best friend is that they both “lived with grandparents,” and goes on to comment on the importance of this shared experience; “This improved both our backward and forward vistas: we had a sense of childhood before 1900, when the farmer ruled the land and America faced west. We had gained a humane dimension that made us gentle and humorous.” (SD.229)

This observation stands as proof that the protagonists long for the ideal American past.

As Gerry Brenner points out, though Updike’s fiction aligns itself with the twentieth century lament for the loss of traditional values, it expresses it in a unique way. Updike examines the loss from a re-fresheningly muted perspective. Much of the freshness comes from his use of a limited focus for probing the
conflicts in his protagonist by adopting a sensitive but not-too-bright, middle class hero.

Updike colloquializes the lament without losing any of its seriousness. His colloquialization derives from naturalizing the scene, a naturalization that tones down potential lugubriousness by placing the situation in the hum-drum world of insignificant jobs, marital spats and ineffectual authority figures; father, coach, minister, and in-laws. Like all the values whose worth has depreciated in the twentieth century, the value of returning to nature, for example, has been immersed in the world of daily action, a colloquialization of the ideal. And made accessible, it is adulterated and abused until it is converted into a distorted way of life. The ideas of the past, which have value precisely because they spur effort for unattainable goals, have become misinterpreted (like the “be yourself” interpretation of “Know Thyself”), debased (like the anarchy of authority), and pursued unconsciously without understanding. Against this strong current of depreciation and diminution many of the Stories in the collections portray the struggle to keep alive a past tradition. But the struggle fails to bring in success. In The Music School collection the stories “The Family Meadow” and “The Hermit” illustrate such struggle.

The “The Family Meadow”, sketches a still life of an epoch that will soon fall prey to progress and give way to a less desirable one. Its tone is distinctly
elegiac, yet for the present, the family keeps in the person of “Uncle Jessy” its tenuous hold on the meadow that embodies continuity with its rural history. This family, poised on the edge of dissolution, is caught between “the music of reminiscence” and the changes wrought by time and the encroaching transformation of rural country into suburban neighborhoods.

“The Hermit” concludes “The Music School” by reconsidering the feasibility of a Thoreauvian retreat into nature. Stanley, a part-time janitor and construction worker, leaves a life of quiet desperation and moves to a decaying cabin on unused land belonging to a steel company. The fact that he is interested in carpentry alludes to the vocation of Jesus Christ. After partially renovating the cabin he discovers that being a hermit is the most suitable vocation for a misfit such as himself – a “non-native” of the “heavy damp climate” of humanity. The forces of convention and authority in search of Stanley, abruptly shatter the peace of his sojourn in nature just as the gap between himself and the spiritual essence behind nature appears to be closing.

“The Hermit”, is an ironic observation on the failures of both extremes. The Modern age appears to be too fragile to sustain an enduring retreat, and like the past which the narrator of “In Football Season” seeks, perpetually beyond reach.

A tentative approach to the inevitable sorrows and losses of daily life is expressed in an image from the title story of the collection, “The Music School”,

in which the hero sees and hears “hints of another world, a world where angels fumble, pause, and begin again”. Updike’s people are not angels, and the ideal that the concept of angels elicits is lost in the pedestrian detail of pragmatic striving and petty strife. Thus the “music school”, where the young innocents play groping tunes on instruments they cannot handle, is not an image of divine harmony but a pathos-ridden paradigm of the exercises their elders practice in learning life’s notes. A magnificent scene in the final section returns the reader to the guiding quotation and clarifies the overriding intention of the story.

As the narrator sat, the previous night, with the priest and other friends, “a woman entered without knocking; she had come from the lawyers, and her eyes and hair were flung wide with suffering, as if she had come in out of a high wind. She saw our black-garbed guest, was amazed, ashamed perhaps, and took two backward steps. But then, in the hush, she regained her composure and sat down among us” (TMS.190). She is like the music school angels who “fumble, Pause, and begin again”, - and that describes also how Updike’s painfully married people carry on in their dislocated society.

They agonize, they are without direction, but they do not give up. They experiment and practice with the few given entities of their being, like the composer of music and like the “author” of the story himself; for they have, often, only the memory of grace (the recollection of the traditional Communion
service), a precarious truce with the impersonal computer-culture about them, and the doubtful comfort of their continuing erotic vitality. But they maintain their courage and their wit; and, if they do not have the promise any longer of achieving finesse on life’s instrument, they at least create a personal meaning in the act of trying.

*Museum and Women* presents a tamed reaction to the irreparable losses heaped on the individuals. As Prescott has observed, the volume is marked by “a winding down of human aspiration”. An air of eroded hopes, the anticipation of perpetual disenchantment, and a melancholy awareness that one may have to settle for less are pervasive. Epiphanic moments are less prevalent, as the imaginations of these characters seem less potent; still, these dormant, often bewildered spirits never succumb totally to resignation. Like the narrator of “The Day of the Dying Rabbit”, one of the few artist figures in the volume, most attempt to capture as much of the past as they can, however underexposed it may turn out to be. Fear of continued loss and gratitude for past satisfactions blend with their growing sense of limitation. Persistence becomes essential as fatigue encroaches; though spiritually enervated and conscious of further diminishment, they refuse to accept loss passively.

The title story of *Museum and Women* opens the volume with a recapitulation of the course from adolescence to maturity, marital discontent, and
beyond, into the phase where Updike’s protagonists acquiesce more readily to the contraction of possibility. Museum and Women” is narrated by William Young, the protagonist of “A Sense of Shelter” (PF) who now seeks “radiance, antiquity, mystery and duty” in Museums and Women instead of Olinger High’s provisional shelter. The contradictory pull of these four qualities generates the story’s conflict; radiance and mystery hold strong allure but duty finally exerts the strongest influence, as William becomes unable to continue the affair that brings him to “the limits of Unsearchability”. In his backward glance, William fashions a comprehensive artistic record of his past reminiscent of the “fictive music” of the *Music School*, but his tone at the story’s conclusion is that of an outsider facing a future of quickened disenchantment. The story “I’ll Not Let Thee Go Unless Thou Blessed Me” (MW) typifies the general mood of the couples and their tireless spirit of endeavour. Toward its conclusion the story leaves the Genesis model and takes an instructive turn. On the way home Lou reports that Maggie has kissed her “warmly” as she left while she has been aloof to Tom. The story ends with:

He must not appear too interested, or seem to gloat. “Well” Tom said, “she may have been drunk”.

“Or else very tired”, said Lou, “like the rest of us”. (MW.58)
What Tom takes as evidence of Maggie’s continued affection for him, bestowed on his wife as surrogate, could just as well be a kiss of good riddance or an impulse gesture of sympathy for his wife. Weariness at the end of this tale is female exasperation at the male’s persistent obliviousness to the emotional distress he causes, a masculine failing that attends many of the dissolving relationships in-habiting Updike’s fiction. The same deploring condition is reflected in the story “The Orphaned swimming pool”. The following concluding comment of the story is significant. “Linda saw that the pool in truth had no bottom, it held bottomless loss, and it was one huge blue tear” (MW.90). This could be the tear of weeping or the tear of rending; both ways it signifies the grief over the end of love. Further, the ex-wife’s vision of the pool as bottomless likens it to the classical abyss, symbol of humankind’s worst fears. This may seem too much for such an innocuous object as a suburban swimming pool, but it is apt as it conveys the sense of disproportion and unreality that accompanies the breakdown of deep attachments. As Richard Todd has commented about Museum and Women the characters of Updike suffer “Loss upon Loss and Loss itself becomes a diminution”.

Edward Vargo points out that as a religious writer, Updike’s investigation of the “intrinsic problem in human existence” centers chiefly upon the alienation, uprootedness, and disharmony of modern man’s situation in the world, and upon man’s struggle for personal freedom in the context. One cause for man’s
disjointedness, as the author has viewed it in “The Sea’s Green Sameness”, is that the world is naturally split into two halves: “the ego and the external object”. The incarnation of this ego – “that omnivorous and somehow pre-existent ‘I’ – in a speck so specifically situated amid the billions of history” – has always been a source of wonderment for him. “Why was I, “I?” (p.10) The arbitrariness of it astounded me; in comparison nothing was too marvelous”. This attitude explains the nostalgic element in Updike’s Fiction.

John Updike’s article “The cultural situation of the American writer” reveals his regard for the past and his reason for it. America “is the mighty subject” (p.21) for John Updike. But he is not satisfied with the cultural situation of an American writer. He ruefully says, “We read to confront reality as mediated to us by another human mind. Though Melville spoke of American writers as ‘ironic points of light’ our literature contains oddly little light of the sort that intelligently and compassionately illumines the mundane world. The American writer surprising to say is rather typically baffled and disgusted by what would seem his prime subject, the daily life of his society… … when I sit down to draw a character or set a scene or device a plot in the manner of my mighty predecessors strange forces drag at my pen” (pp.27-28). The writers are caught in a culture that distrust and often rejects the frame works of belief upon which literature has been traditionally based. The writers are provided with a cultural past that lacks meaning in the present and with traditional fictional modes that he
may find are no longer adequate. Updike in an essay collected in *picked up pieces* has said, “The writer now makes his mark on paper blanker than it has ever been. Our common store of assumptions has dwindled, and with it the stock of viable artistic conventions” (p.17).

John Updike misses the ideal past when a writer could depend upon a “common store of assumption”, when the paper he wrote on was far from blank. The past is idealized as a time when man was wholly integrated, when the spiritual and carnal were not mutually exclusive. The natural world was linked by mythical meaning to the supernatural then. But now the modern world is enigmatic.

A writer is faced with a world in torment, with a set of values not quite so permanent and certain, though they seemed to be so valuable once, with the realization that the forces and forms which so far have served to identify them are no longer viable. Hence the writer digs the past or begins the quest within the self believing that it is necessary to rediscover who and what one is and where one is going before one can recognize the enigma or judge the universe. Consequently John Updike feels that past is all we have, as the present is very thin and that soul supreme becomes the sole referent.

These assumptions and tendencies attribute the qualities of a romantic to John Updike and Arthur Mizener calls him an “American romantic” (p.47)
Corroborating Mizener’s claim Charles Thomas Samuels has stated that “Updike’s nostalgia for such a past is a constant theme in his fiction” (p.132). This deep concern for the past is sometimes criticized by critics like Richard Gilman. He sees Updike’s use of the past as a weakness and complains:

We find an obsessive fixation upon the past, a compulsive rehearsal of the state of adolescence and young manhood a cult of the family and of victimized sensibility, a spinning out of a legend of quest and initiation in which rococo states of consciousness and refined conditions of memory come more and more to replace imaginative event or action. (p.578)

Answering this charge Thaddeus Muradian observes that this “Fixation upon the past” is structurally important for Updike as he moved his characters from present to past to future and show the effect of these dissimilar areas on their thought and action. Their present is not an enjoyable one. They are hard pressed in just living their life. Hence they necessarily go back in memory to their past. The characters must seek the meaning of the present in these shining past moment as they are innocent days of the childhood or the untainted primeval days which have the power of illumination. The tensions of the characters are resolved by the action of memory. In the stories of John Updike the constant return to the events of childhood or the past in general is not a mere escape. It
dramatizes the disharmonies or the neurotic disturbances of the present and enables his characters to regain a balance that will buoy them up to face their turbulent present.

In almost all the stories even the trivial and insignificant objects and events are rendered with loving care and attention lavished by the author. It is mainly because details to Updike, affirm goodness, and stabilize his world. The elaborate concern that he devotes to the details of his stories flows more as appreciative awareness of their deeper significance than from a shallow preoccupation with style. He reveals a special feeling for the physical objects around him which may be a result of having been raised in Pennsylvania Dutch country: “Shillington bred a receptivity to the supernatural unrelated to orthodox religion. This is the land of the hex signs, and in the neighboring town of Grille a ‘witch doctor’ hung out shingle with a qualified M.D. I was struck recently, on reading Frazer’s contemptuous list of superstitions in *The Golden Bough*, but how many of them seemed good sense”. This same aura of the nostalgic and the supernatural is brought out in the “Foreword” to Olinger Stories: “The surrounding land is loamy, and Olinger is haunted – hexed, perhaps – by rural memories, accents, and superstitions”.

The theme of memory, introduced in the epigraphs of *The Same Door and Pigeon Feathers*, pulls together the short stories in these two collections. Its
significance is suggested by the question which Walter asks at the end of “The Astronomer” (PF). “What is the past, after all but a vast sheet of darkness in which a few moments, pricked apparently at random, shine” (PF.186). It is in these shining past moments that we must seek the meaning of our present condition for as Edward Vargo points out “memory does more than recall: it becomes so impressive by creating a presence. It has a sacramental power. Memory, working with open honesty and at points of beauty resurrects” (p.10). Hence in story after story a tension between two worlds is resolved by the action of memory. In “Walter Briggs” (PF.) for example, Jack finally remembers a name out of the past that has been eluding him all day, and he achieves a renewed communion with his wife, a sense of wholeness, a link between the past and the present, the visible and the unseen. Edward Vargo is of the view that the “deliberate recapturing of something no longer possessed is a distinctive mark of human ritual”. The constant use of memory and past in the short stories of Updike points to his attitude to life which is akin to Wordsworth

I am lost, but see

In simple childhood something of the base

On which thy greatness stands…..

.........I would give,

While yet we may, as far as words can give,

Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining,
Such is my hope, the spirit of the Past

For future restoration. (The Prelude)

This is a classic statement of the romantic attitude by Wordsworth. Arthur Mizener observes that: “it is also a precise description of Mr. Updike’s almost irresistible impulse to go home again in memory to find himself.” (p.178) Most of his stories are about the same town. The rest of his stories are memories, too, but of the more recent past. Not that the past need be happy; what matters is that it is made real by the intensity of feeling that has accumulated around it, as nothing else is real. The glow of joy and pain, of intensely felt experience, together with all its transcendent implications, gather around the particulars of the past for Updike, whether he is writing about his childhood and parents or about his wife and their children, or about both.

It always seems to Updike, as he says of his grand mother whom he recalls again and again “necessary, and holy, to tell how once there had been a woman who now was no more”, to tell everything, “all set sequentially down with the bald simplicity of intrinsic blessing, thousands upon thousands of pages; ecstatically uneventful; divinely and defiantly dull” (p.181). He feels this way because, in memory, the transcendental value of the people he loved as a child inheres in them, an intrinsic blessing. This motive comes out very clearly in many of his stories especially in “Packed Dirt, Church Going, A Dying Cat, A
Traded Car”. The epigraphs of his first two collections reflect the significance of past and memory to the character as well as the author.

The epigraphs of his very first collection of stories, *The Same Door*, are a quotation from Bergson that discusses the importance of memory to desire (“What would there be left of many of our emotions, were we to reduce them to the exact quantum of pure feeling they contain by subtracting from them all that is merely reminiscence”). And a Passage from T.S. Eliot about family love, “Within the light of which / all else is seen”. Precise recollection that of family love is vital to him: it is the actual experience in which the saving truth is incarnate, and it worries him to lose the least fragment of it. As he seems to feel he is gradually losing his understanding of the past; the epigraph of *Pigeon Feathers*: “A Report to an Academy” begins: “In revenge, however, my memory of the past has closed the door against me more and more”. Kafka’s narrator characterizes the problems of the past’s closing door, which is not a cosmic trick but rather the result of the individual assuming a comfortable niche in the world. Though unable to derive enough momentum from the slackened winds of youth, the characters discover that its elusive breezes can contain essences which provide intangible resources for survival in the present.

Luscher remarks that yet reentering the past is a painful process, because the opening that allows access “has grown so small that, even if my strength and
willpower sufficed to get me back to it, I should have to scrape the very skin from my body to crawl through. The painful cost of forcefully retrieving something enduring from the flux, however, is suffered willingly by many of Updike’s characters in their retrospective flights.” (p.23)

Thus Allen Dow in “Flight” remembering Molly and his mother’s jealously of her, reconstructs a glowing world of details about his grandfather and grandmother of school and classmates, of dances and debates. It is a meticulous, loving and beautiful re-creation, and Updike’s mind probes it with the delicacy of a surgeon, seeking what makes it in memory seem “an always imminent joy”. Even the knowledge that it was not the shelter from nothingness that it now seems comes to him as a memory of how he got up his nerve to tell Mary Lands, the most mature and mysterious of his classmates, that he loved her, only to discover that she was having a bitterly unhappy love affair with an older man. “You never loved anybody,’ she said, “You don’t know” what he thought then with a schoolboy’s uncertain insight “after all. It was just a disposition of his heart, nothing permanent or expensive; perhaps it was just his mother’s idea anyway” as true in a way he had not then been able to imagine.

Yet Olinger Short Stories Luscher asserts; “are by no means isolated nostalgic excursions disjunct from the rest of his short story collection.” The volume’s second and third stories concerning post adolescent characters (Ace
Anderson and Mark Prosser, respectively) links the two groups. Furthermore, the character of John Nordholm appears in the first and last stories. He has gained four more years and is poised on the threshold of maturity at the volume’s end. Memory thus becomes the route by which the reader enters and exits the collection, suggesting that some inadequacy of their present existence sends the characters continually questing into the past. Nordholm interrupts the narration, momentarily breaking the illusion by adding some detail learned later or making a comparison to the present: “Girls hate boys’ doubts; they amount to insults. Gentleness is for married women to appreciate. (This is my thinking then.)” (SD.223), he remarks at one point. Thus the reader is subtly reminded of John’s changed perspective: he now has greater insight into both himself and the events, but as the parenthetical present tense indicates, the narrative generally attempts to ignore that temporal distance and keeps the past alive in the present.

Luscher opines that through his narration, John attempts to counteract the process sketched in the Bergson epigraph: ‘fleshing out, not reducing, past pleasures as he revives memories in his artistic re-creation of the happiness he feels while poised on the threshold between youth and maturity. The Lyric story allows Updike to dramatize the mind’s search through the darkening past for some vital spark that might illuminate the present and guide his characters onward through the increasing complexities of mature life” (p.22).
In the story “Giving Blood” (TMS) The Maple Couples are on their way to Boston to donate blood at a hospital for Joan’s ailing aunt; and they fill the thirty-mile drive with accusations against each other. But, once in the hospital, the shared experience of giving blood draws them together and repairs the breach. Afterwards they eat lunch together like a pair of lovers at a roadside restaurant, but that mood is broken when Richard discovers he hasn’t enough money to pay for the meal. The animosity returns, and they are estranged once more.

The return into the past in the story is not just the nostalgic attempt to capture a childhood security. Instead, the relative vulnerability and innocence of the couple as they face a harmless but elemental operation reduces them to a momentary childhood that helps them see afresh themselves and their marriage. Updike emphasizes the childhood images: Richard sees the two of them as Hansel and Gretel; he fights the impulse to giggle; they recount their adolescent diseases; Joan’s hair seems to Richard as if combed by her mother; Joan thinks the plastic sacks filled with their blood look like doll pillows.

These thoughts constitute not only personal memory but a measure of collective memory also. “Mr. and Mrs. Maple were newly defined to themselves”, Updike writes. The unique act of being bled, bringing them close to the mystery of their own bodies, renews the freshness and clarity and yet the mystery of all childhoods, of the pre-initiation period of life. This return to the
past is moral in that it gives the worldly wise Maples a sudden chance to see their contentious and bored adulthood through naïve eyes and effects their own condemnation of their present selves by their past ones.

Regarding the use of past and memory Updike has remarked that writing “The Happiest I’ve Been”, a story set in Olinger – the fictionalized version of his hometown, Shillington, Pennsylvania – elicited a “simultaneous sense of loss and recapture” as he entered the past to create a tribute memorializing its loss. Although he admits to adapting his own experiences freely, Updike does not intend his fiction to be “thinly disguised memoir”.

Edward Vargo points that in his search for the elusive identity, Updike is moving more and more from pointillism as technique to pointillism as philosophy. In “Mid-point”, the long poem which epitomizes his attitude toward his art in the first half of his life, Updike insists that a pattern of dots cannot be seen for an ordered picture until we discover the right distance from which to view it. Particles in nature, like pointillist images in time, are not always what they seem to be. Any particular point in time, especially if sharply conceived, is a position from which other points in past or future can be recognized more clearly.

Accordingly a vast majority of the stories have myth as their structural principle. This should be evident in his constant return to events of childhood or
of the past in general. When the re-enactment of the mythic childhood
dramatizes the disharmonies or the neurotic disturbances that the character feels
in his present life, or when the myth aids the character in reconciling the clash of
inward and outward forces of his present life. George W. Hunt illustrates how
memory of mythic childhood functioned as a structural principle in the story
“Leaves”.

The opening paragraph of the story is reminiscent of the epigraph, - Stevens
poem “To the one of Fictive Music,” - for in it the narrator realizes that his
previous self–absorption has blinded him from the paradoxical discovery that,
on the one hand although he and Nature are independent, his “curiosity” or
attention now unites them and on the other hand, although physically a part of
Nature, his spiritual consciousness – now ironically the source of his guilt – also
separates him from it.

The narrator, at the end of the story is at a point of apparent impasse,
suddenly he notices the vital green amid the shades of brown and that beyond the
evergreens “there is a low, blue hill…. I see it, for the first time in months I see it.
I see it as a child, fingers gripping and neck straining, glimpses the roof of a
house over a cruelly high wall” (TMS.56). His child – like vision alters
everything. This experience triggers a recent memory of his sleeping while
reading Whitman’s leaves of grass. His sleep “was a loop so that in awaking I
seemed still in the book, and the light-struck sky quivering through the stripped branches of the young elm seemed another page of Whitman, and I was entirely open, and lost, like a woman in passion, and free, and in love, without a shadow in any corner of my being. It was a beautiful awakening, but by the next night I had returned to my house. (TMS.47)

The memory of this all—too—brief but “beautiful awakening”—its significant associations, the unexpected short lived union of both Nature and Art in his imagination wherein the branches of the elm and the page—leaves of Whitman unite to make him feel “Free and in love”- all these not only once brought him awake but do so again in recollection. The story ends with appropriate images of illumination, for no longer is Nature Wholly “barbaric” and alien; the remembered union of art and nature alters everything and just as the “flat leaves” transmuted the sunlight, imagination can so transmute guilt—less Nature that “sunlight falls flat at my feet like a penitent,” (211-15). The story ends with this closing comment. Just as in the story “Leaves”, memory of the past or childhood is employed as a unifying structural principle in many other stories.