CHAPTER - V

CONCLUSION

Updike has enjoyed both popular and critical acclaim, attracting an enormous general readership and generating an abundance of scholarly commentary. Apart from this, he has a considerable impact on American culture, not only through his own books, but also by his influence on other writers. George Searles observes that like Hemingway and Fitzgerald before him, “he has influenced the ways in which we name and envision experience, becoming perhaps the most subtly influential writer of his generation. He not only pictures the quaint-essential antihero for our time but also comments trenchantly on the diminished condition of contemporary America; and a wealth of short stories that are admirable examples of that genre”(p.167). His short stories demonstrate his deep understanding of the broad range of human emotion.

Updike’s place in American literary history seems to be assured. When the period from 1950-2000 is assessed, his books such as The Centaur, the “Rabbit” novels, and certain of his short story collections will be taken into account. Updike has been more active in the non-fiction vein, contributing regularly to The New Yorker, first as “The Talk of the Town” staff reporter, and as a book reviewer. In addition, Updike has also published ten volumes of poetry, a play,
Updike is a major literary figure whose work is rather diverse and continues to be read, studied, and discussed, both within and outside of academy. Updike is one of the most important writers, having captured with considerable expertise the spirit and the spiritlessness of the times. George Steiner has described Updike’s fiction as being “penetrative into the fabric of American discourse and gesture to a degree that future historians and sociologists will exult in”\(\text{(p.116)}\).

Though the author’s “technical virtuosity” and skill to achieve “verbally elegant surface” are not doubted, a few critics have serious complaints against him. Podhoretz asserts: in general, Updike has nothing to say, and that his emotional range is very limited, confining itself primarily to “a rather timid nostalgia for the confusions of youth”\(\text{(p.50)}\). Guerin La Course, for example, in his “The Innocence of John Updike”, after praising Updike for his “fresh perception of the appearing world”, suggests that “he fears to foray into the night world of feelings for the significances. The polarity of genius has a double edge”. Warning that “Updike cannot afford to sit on his hands”, he has concluded: “He relies, apparently, on language rather than thought, sense rather than sensibility, wit rather than wisdom – all of which afford only temporary harbor”\(\text{(p.513)}\).
These adverse comments become invalidated when Updike’s stories are analyzed in the light of the insight offered by Henry James. Tony Tanner has quoted James’s preface to “The Awkward Age”. James has observed:

“It comes back to me, the whole ‘job’ as wonderfully amusing and delightfully difficult from the first: since amusement deeply abides, I think, in any artistic attempt the basis and ground work of which are conscious of a particular firmness. On that hard fine floor the elements of execution feels it may more or less confidently dance; in which case puzzling questions, sharp obstacles, dangers of details, may come up for it by the dozen without breaking its heart or shaking its nerve”(pp.439-440).

There is a salutary emphasis here on the root necessity of a firm subject which will serve as ‘that hard fine floor’ on which the inventive and playing powers of the writer may confidently amuse themselves and dance. James is pointing out here that there are subject’s loose foundations or vague schemes which sheer brilliance of treatment are helpless to save, inadequate floors on which the imagination will only dance into disarray. Just as James has insisted Updike’s work is found to have that “hard fine floor”.

Testifying to that fact, David Halloway observes that one element of Updike’s fiction remain constant: “his command of the individuals image and
phrase, his ability to probe language to reveal an emotional truth in the most homely situations and objects. Recurrently, and often at the most unexpected moments, he prods us into a shock of recognition” (p. 79).

In “Transaction,” when a nervous married man brings a woman into his stylish hotel, the wait before the elevators deftly reveals his unease and embarrassment, without ever violating the object-centeredness of television commercials. If, at moments, Updike’s own verbal elaborations seem to exist for their own sake, their exuberance can be taken as part of the author’s general celebration of life, his exaltation of the quotidian and the fallible. With an increasingly meticulous, increasingly subtle, increasingly variable technique, he probes the great traditional themes of art, sex, morality, and the nature of freedom. In his own words, “Domestic fierceness within the middle class, sex and death as riddles for the thinking animal, social existence as sacrifice, unexpected pleasures and rewards, corruption as a kind of evolution these are some of the themes”. Such claims could scarcely be described as modest. The expanding fictional universe in which they are embodied is really great. George W. Hunt struck by the awesome reality and sincerity of the author has commented “It is indeed remarkable that Updike has successfully managed to create his own credible world, a narrow world perhaps but one pulsating with James’ “felt life,” a world enlivened by the ambiguity and tensions so
emblematic of the similarly narrow worlds in which all of us necessarily live” (p.9).

His stories generally follow a realistic pattern that finds touches of tragedy and even signs of heroism under commonplace surfaces. They are dependent on observation rather than direct statement, revelation rather than narrative summary. They display an immense virtuosity in using details using brand names, gestures, and turns of phrase, patterns of taste, and all pregnant trivialities to make the surface commonplace.

According to Edward Vargo, the performance of this challenge assimilates his role to that of primitive magicians and priests: Updike in “The Sea’s Green Sameness” (MW) has stated: “I have reverted, in my art, which I gaily admit I have not mastered, to the first enchanter, who expected their nets of words to imprison the weather, to induce the trees to bear and the clouds to weep, and to drag down advice from the stars” (MW.164). He is to be a mythmaker, a poet who brings inanimate things of nature to participation in the life of men, one who realizes the interconnection of all things in this world.

One of the elements common to all of Updike’s writing is his remarkable mastery of language. Updike’s descriptive power is based on a skillful use of particular details and an unerring sense of rhythm. He often uses these talents to recapture a mood from the past, evoking in the reader a sense of wistful nostalgia.
or a sustained lyrical intensity. Often Updike seems to be stretching the possibilities of the written word as far as they can go. Sometimes the experimentation will take the form of steadily accelerating, extraordinarily long sentences, in which detail is piled on detail, leading the reader, breathless, to a delightfully comic denouement or an exciting illumination. There is always something deeper than a rare verbal talent.

John Barth once described Updike as the Andrew Wyeth of contemporary American writers, adding that he arouses the same admiration and reservations. Tony Tanner feels that the comparison is apt as in Updike’s books there is that same accumulation and momentary arrest of things, that same effect of lacquered stillness in some of the descriptions, and that heightened sense of topographical detail that one associates with Wyeth. “Overhead, held motionless against the breeze, its feet tucked up like parallel stapes, a gull hung outlined by a black that thickened at the wingtips. Each pebble, tuft, heelmark, and erosion gully in the mud by the church porch had been assigned its precise noon shadow” (p.274).

That could be a description of a painting by Wyeth. In both men one finds that same wholesale immersion in the details of a well-known locale which sometimes produces a sense of the wonder and strangeness of a world of objects distributed in space, and at other times gives the impression of a brilliantly
tessellated surface over a void. And both men have aroused suspicions of meretriciousness through the amazing facility of their technique.

Updike’s work contains more than the recognition that most Americans live and die in suburbia and experience all their joys and fears within its ailing routines and often numbing geometries. Behind the attention lavished on, as Norman Mailer has put it, the ‘soft machinery of the world’, there is another dimension of feeling in Updike’s work. He might seem too much at home in suburbia but, after a little reading, his books start to reveal preoccupations and patterns of feeling and apprehension very similar to those of his more obviously worried and experimental contemporaries.

Updike’s prose does give the impression of being a rococo version of fairly conventional naturalism, but at its best it is edged with dread. This dread stems in which the world tumbles, ‘the organic world, for all its seemingly engineered complexity, might be a self-winnowing chaos’,(p.274) as Darwin has suggested. This feeling of cosmic vertigo seems to feed the basic dread in Updike’s work. Most of his works deal with the fear of death, the fact of decay and the inevitable collapse into nothingness. This produces what he once called ‘a panicked hunger for things’ which will stabilize him as it balances his characters. A disturbed urgency is characteristic of his best writing. Added to Updike’s apparently suave dealings with things, like an undertow, there is a continuous awareness, ‘that
things do, if not die, certainly change, wiggle, slide, retreat, and shuffle out of all identity’ (p.275).

Updike too shares that nightmare of formlessness, of the progressive fading of all identities, which grips so many other contemporary American writers. And it is not only the loss of human identity that produces the moments of metaphysical dread; there is a more embracing sense of the world slowly submerging suburbia. ‘Waste’ is a crucial word and obsession in his work and his sense of the pathos and horror of a wasting world brings him into unexpected relationship with writers like Pynchon. Updike has also had his vision of an entropic world and in his best work it is what prevents both his prose and his characters from feeling too much at home among the soft machinery of the world.

The common theme behind Updike’s writing is the profound religious searching that grows from this despair, a quest in which doubt fights desperately with faith. “Without the supernatural,” Updike has said, “the natural is a pit of horror.” These two worlds, the natural and the supernatural, are present explicitly or implicitly in all of Updike’s work, and they are basic to an understanding of it. In his writing there is always the physical, natural world, apprehended by the body through its senses and appetites. Sex, religion and art are the three mysteries with which every human being must come to terms. To
deny their full seriousness is to deny life. Hence, Sex and religion are omnipresent in Updike’s writings. Updike’s stories of Olinger High School are studies, in one way or another, of confrontation with the mystery of sexuality.

But also, he has been concerned to focus upon one of the leading problems of our generation, namely the nature of marriage, where the social, ethical, and religious dimensions of sex demand to be (and mostly are not) faced with honesty and realism. Religion poses the question of how the ultimates of life are to be understood at every moment of our existence. The result of his confrontation with this mystery is described all through his work. Hence Christian imagery permeates his fiction.

Religion seems a mystery to Updike. He has wondered “How did the patently vapid and drearily businesslike teachings to which I was lightly exposed succeed in branding me with a Cross?” (AP.181) and he is filled with uncertainty and he asks: “Is the true marvel of Sunday skaters the pattern of their pirouettes or the fact that they are silently upheld?” (AP.185). And then he goes on to assert that there is in fact a quiet but tireless goodness affirmed by things at rest, by a brick wall or a small stone. The conviction permitting him to make such an assertion is because he holds a particular conviction about the ground of all things, he sees in brick walls and small stones confirmation of the fact of their
being silently upheld. Simply by being themselves, tiny phenomena display the “color” of goodness permeating the entire creation.

Believing that all earthly things are small, he can also believe that nothing on earth is inconsiderable. Since the true marvel is not the pattern made by the Sunday skaters but their skating “upon an intense radiance we do not see because we see nothing else”, the pattern of the skaters’ pirouettes is worth recording and carries its own proper delight into our consciousness – the delight of a reflected radiance. But to see this radiance it requires a “Christian awareness”. An awareness which was fashioned by Soren Kikegaard and karl Barth.

Like Karl Barth, Updike viewed man as a creature on the boundary between heaven and earth. Hamiltons point out that Updike’s writings are continually concerned with “the truth which edifies”. Writing of the ambiguities of flesh, with all its ironical, funny, and tragic involvements, he sees human life in the light of the infinite. And like Kierkegaard he seems to think that the infinite first reveals itself to us in the absolute demands of the moral. Even if man is called a naked ape, he still cannot avoid the challenge of moral imperatives:

*Noble animal:*

*To try to lead on this terrestrial ball
With grasping hand and saucy wife
The upright life.* (Telephone Poles p.25)
To be human, then, is to know that uprightness is not just a physical state but primarily a moral one. Man must seek Truth and the truth is that the tides of time have treacherous undercurrents and that man cannot like the Sunday bathers of the ‘Life Guard’ (PF) bask forever in the miracle of the sun’s moment, or bathe childishly in protected shallows. Yet man must be aware that in the terrifying flux that surrounds him there are things that testify to “something steady”. Even where death faces him, deep and opaque and alien, there is a goodness by which man is silently upheld.

Like religion, Art had been a challenging mystery to Updike. Being a writer, Updike is concerned with the individual vision, the uniquely personal report about the world which the artist, as distinct from the theoretician feels impelled to provide. This is the root of his preoccupation with his own childhood and adolescence. He has pointed to this aspect of his writing most plainly in “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood”, an essay first published in Five Boyhoods and reprinted in Assorted Prose. There he writes, “the difference between a childhood and a boyhood must be this: our childhood is what we alone have had; our boyhood is what any boy in our environment would have had”. (AP.165)

Updike as a representative writer of America which has lost its myth and religion has of necessity turned to the memory of the past and mythic boyhood to enrich his fictional world and to employ them as a framework of reference to his
readers. In this regard Luscher has cited Lurie’s appropriate remark: “At his best [Updike] is, more truly than John Cheever, the Chekhov of American suburbia” (p.154).

Updike is a realistic writer, not a philosopher, psychologist, theologian or fabricator of metaphysical systems. He has drawn ideas from many quarters: Aristotle, Dante, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Freud, Kafka, De Rougemont, and Karl Barth besides being inspired by such writers like James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Henry Green, Vladimir Nabokov, J.D.Salinger and Donald Barthelme.

Updike in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1964, has praised Marcel Proust and has acknowledged his influence. His stories with its “emphasis on nostalgia, on the recovery of apparently meaningless sensations – not so different from Proust’s recollection of the taste of a Madeleine dipped into tea, of a metallic sound, of the feel of uneven steps –manifests a Proustian passion for accuracy of remembered detail” (p.208) according to Hunt.

Updike emulating Henry Green, invests his stories with mimetic honesty which is similar and yet different from Proust’s. Hunt opines that Updikes eloquent tribute summarizes, in almost ironic fashion, precisely those specific virtues one so often finds in Updike’s own fiction. Updike says: “Green’s human qualities – his love of work and laughter; his absolute empathy; his sense of
splendor amid loss, of vitality within weakness – make him a precious witness to any age”. (p.208)

Nabokov’s influence becomes a pronounced replacement for Proust’s in the diaries of the distracted Marshfield and the memoir of the mad Ellellou. Proust was a nostalgist; Nabokov, as he expressed it in *Pale Fire*, is more a “preterist”, that is, an artist who commands the past as past but never confuses it with the present, even though his characters often do so. The preterist, unlike the nostalgist, therefore has access to richer and more wide-ranging material, tapping but transcending the necessarily finite resource of memory. Such a transition from nostalgist to preterist appears to characterize Updike’s present stage in his writerly pilgrim’s progress. Further as Hunt observes Nobokov’s influence is evidenced in Updike’s delight in parodying what was once considered his baroque style.

The impact of James Joyce is conspicuous in Updike’s works. Joyce’s style rich in techniques has greatly influenced Updike. Many of the stories with their epiphanic closure, mythic reverberations and pure love for words point to the author’s admirations and simulation of James Joyce. A more contemporary influence than Joyce is J.D.Salinger, whose stories, many which were also published in *New Yorker*, depict similar open-ended moments that involve significant bits of dialogue, revealing gestures or actions, and muted moments of
illumination. Updike’s early efforts at developing the understated conclusion exhibit an instinctive understanding that a story’s ending is its most crucial feature.

Updike has stated in his interview to Frank Gado: “[I] learned quite a lot from [Donald] Barthelme’s short stories without getting or liking everyone. I do think he catches a rhythm, a kind of hollowness, and a fitful energy that is part of our contemporary experience” (p.7). A few of his stories even contain Barthelme-like illustrations, as claimed by Luscher in his preface. (p.XII)

Updike has greatly influenced other contemporary writers and he is an inspiration to many young writers. Erica Jung confesses: “John Updike is the most skillful writer currently using the American language seems clear to me. He is the writer I read when I want to be reminded of the possibilities of language, a writer of prose who uses the language as carefully as any poet. The claim of some of his detractors – that he has too much technique – seems transparently envious to me. They know they will never write as well as he does, so they are saying, in effect, that he is too skilled and that this somehow stands in the way of “greatness”… (p.210)

In Story Matters, Dybek a younger generation short story writer has said that his story “Pet Milk” surprised him. Regarding the compelling influence of Updike on this story he has remarked: “The whole intention of that story was to
create the simple circular story”. … “It was supposed to come back with him sitting at the window. But again, by accident, I reached the last line of the story. When I was a kid in college, I read Rabbit Run, and I loved the ending that shoots out over the frame of the story. So … when I hit that el train …, it reminded me of he ‘runs, runs, runs’. And I said, ‘no, I’ll let it go there’.(p.38)

Taken as a whole, Updike’s canon of short fiction presents a composite portrait of a specimen middle-American life, traced through its varying phases: from the sketches of an “innocuous boyhood” filled with dreams of flight; to the subsequent nostalgic excursion into memories of seemingly halcyon days; to the entry into an era of domestic strife exacerbated by changing personal needs and social mores; to separation from past sources of ambivalent bliss and a series of fatiguing reassessments; to a renewed dedication to redeeming a provisional trust with a full consciousness of human failings. He continues to be persistently dissatisfied and perpetually deciphering new lessons in flight.

Yet in a recent story “A Sandstone Farmhouse”, published in New Yorker the protagonist, sorting through the memorabilia his mother has clung to until her death, reflects: “He felt guilty, anxious, displaced. He had always wanted to be where the action was, and what action there was, it turned out, had been back there” (p.48). More than simple nostalgia, these reflections on the past reveal a renewed sense of perishability and fragility that has never been absent from
Updike’s fiction but which his characters more successfully countered in earlier works.

The backward glance and retrospective illumination are trademarks of Updike’s short fiction. “At all times an old world is collapsing and a new world arising”, he states. “We have better eyes for the collapse than the rise, for the old one is the world we know” (HS,xix). Yet while his stories consistently possess an elegiac quality, they never succumb to the tone of a lament. His characters’ epiphanies, even when tinged with irony, are finally redemptive moments of perception presented with authorial sympathy.

Beyond the manners, morals, dress, and cadences of his middle-class suburbanites, Updike captures those more universal dilemmas of loss, separation, and yearning that humanity never resolves. The title of his memoirs – *Self-Consciousness* – highlights his ongoing concern with one of the fundamental questions of existence: “the precious, inexplicable burden of selfhood” (SC.257). His characters are painfully self-conscious human beings, perpetually aware of being cast out of the past into a realm in which time’s erosion works at a pace faster than human strategies can unearth and attempt to recover lost territory. The archaeological metaphors which Updike occasionally favors may capture the crucial endeavor of much of his short fiction: to obtain insight by digging down
through the layers of the past or of quotidian life and discovering meaningful artifacts that deserve rescue from time’s flux.

Still, this image of excavation takes place in a particular social and spiritual context, and Updike’s fiction is pervaded not only by a consciousness of the last few decades’ effect on marriage and the family but also by a religiously informed vision of the gap between the actual state of affairs and the desired sense of connection that characters often seek in the realms of eros or memory.

Although Updike keenly captures contemporary fashions, his achievement transcends much of the other contemporary fiction published. His stories differ from other New Yorker stories because of his delicate compassion for his characters and the studied portraits of the ambiguity of their conditions. What Updike has extracted from the New Yorker is a commitment to realism and to the search for significance in daily events; his stories rise above urbane social satire to sympathetic insights into the compromises and regrets of the modern world. Updike shows himself to be an adept craftsman of the short story, carrying forward the Joycean tradition but beginning to refine the form. Luscher in his preface states that Updike’s distinctive formal contributions to the genre of short story have been “sustained lyric pieces and his montage stories, related vignettes driven less by plot than by a coalescing network of incidents and images”(P.XII).
Updike has with an unwavering commitment to realism, remained determined to illuminate life’s corners and reveal the inherent mystery of the ordinary. His “work has remained at the center of the post-Joycean evolution of the short story, so much so that his trademark internal dramas, with their terminal epiphanies and de-emphasis on plot, are nowadays taken for granted as one paradigm of the short story,” (p.XII) as claimed by Robert M. Luscher. He has amalgamated the recent trends of experimentation in form with the moral profundity of the masters of the past. Hence Updike’s craftsmanship is comparable with great masters of yore like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe. The seriousness and the sincerity of his art is another reason for his enviable attainments. He strived to “transcribe” reality by mixing with the stuff of the mundane, a fine fusion of memory, reflexes and subtle implications of ontological issues. He is a writer whose imagination can be trusted and followed in its explorations of the problematic living in our contemporary world.

In the Paris Review interview Updike has commented upon his art. It seems to sum up his manner of writing:

Basically, though, I describe things not because their muteness mocks our subjectivity but because they seem to be masks for God. And I should add that there is, in fiction, an image-making function, above
image-retailing. To create a coarse universal figure like Tarzan is in some ways more of an accomplishment than the novels of Henry James. ... [I am] as unconventional as I need to be. An absolute freedom exists on the blank page, so let’s use it. I have from the start been wary of the fake, the automatic. I tried not to force my sense of life as many-layered and ambiguous, while keeping in mind some sense of transaction, of a bargain struck, between me and the ideal reader. (p.110)

Regarding his themes and vocation he has stated in the same Paris Review interview:

Domestic fierceness within the middle class, sex and death as riddles for the thinking animal, social existence as sacrifice, unexpected pleasures and rewards, corruption as a kind of evolution – these are some of the themes I have tried to objectify in the form of narrative… I think of my books not as sermons or directives in a war of ideas but as objects, with different shapes and textures and the mysteriousness of anything that exists. My first thought about art, as a child, was that the artist brings something into the world that didn’t exist before, and that he does it without destroying something else. A kind of refutation of the conservation of matter. That seems to me its central magic, its core of joy. (p.112)