Chapter 5
RABBIT AT REST

Updike once remarked about *Rabbit at Rest* "it's a depressed book about a depressed man written by a depressed man."1 After a rather cheerful book *Rabbit Is Rich*, which Updike himself says is an 'upbeat book' despite the gas crunch and other problems, *Rabbit at Rest* portrays the dull life of a retired Harry, a chronicle of his steady disempowerment. The novel records the slow downward plunge of Harry's life. *Rabbit at Rest* opens with Harry at 55, physically deteriorated, a junk food addict and seriously overweight; and in the course of the novel he suffers two heart attacks, the second one killing him.

Now that he is superannuated, he increasingly becomes aware of his mortality. Harry had already become rich in the preceding novel, now we find him and Janice owners of an apartment in a Florida condominium where they spend half the year. In the intervening years, Nelson has taken over the responsibility of the Toyota lot, relieving Harry of almost all family responsibilities. Harry is not altogether happy with this development, although Janice is doing well. Tennis and swimming have kept her relatively

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young and active while Harry has slowed down and is aware of unusual moments inside his chest, although he continues to ignore this warning.

Harry right from his first flight in *Rabbit, Run* had wanted to escape to Florida and as the novel opens, Harry seems at last to have escaped Mt Judge. But Harry cannot really escape as the problems created by Nelson demand his return to Brewer. Nervous and twitchy, the Nelson of *Rabbit Is Rich* has taken an addiction to drugs and to feed his requirement, he has been stealing from the agency, taking it almost to the brink of bankruptcy. Harry has to temporarily return to the lot for a few months while Nelson is away at a rehabilitation center. Apart from the domestic crisis the plot is dominated by the death motif.

Right from the beginning of the sequels, the end of the Rabbit saga, with the death of Rabbit seems inevitable. The novel opens with Harry suffering from angina pains and closes with him lying minutes away from death after his second massive heart attack. In the stretch between these situations, Updike gradually reveals the direction that the saga of Harry, chronicled in three novels composed over a period of thirty years, has headed for. In the fourth novel, an overriding
preoccupation with mortality provides the text with an extra dimension that the previous books, though they too were not strangers to death, lacked. In the shadow of death, Harry's life resolves itself as a subtle tragedy.

The novel has a courageous theme—the blossoming and fruition of the seed of death we all carry inside us. This theme is struck in the first sentence itself. As Harry waits for the plane bringing Nelson and his family to Florida, 'Rabbit Angstrom has a funny sudden feeling that what he has come to meet is not his son Nelson and daughter-in-law Pru and their two children but something more ominous and intricately his: his own death, shaped vaguely like an aeroplane.' This early note reverberates throughout the novel and invests its domestic crisis story with pathos. The novel is a departure from the previous novels in which Updike explored the human body as eros, especially in Couples, he now explores the body as thanatos. Doomed Harry Angstrom has a panicky sense of the body's finitude and of its place in a world of other competing bodies, 'you fill a slot for a time and than move out; that's the decent thing to do: make room.'


3. Rabbit at Rest, p. 371.
Death as a recurring motif had started appearing in *Rabbit Is Rich*, but Harry was only conscious of the simultaneous presence of the dead with the living, together with a consciousness of everything from grass under his feet to a tree having life. Harry hardly ever thinks of his own death and if he ever does, he perceives it only in a vague sense. In *Rabbit at Rest* we discover him with an acute sense of his own limits as a human being. The metaphors of the novel—chief being an airplane with bomb in it, represent Harry with an unwell heart inside him—convey from the beginning of the novel a connection not only of Harry's impending doom but of its inevitability. Throughout the novel, Harry is obsessed with the Lockerbie air disaster, with the declining powers of baseball players and the deaths of TV personalities. In Florida, he notes that 'palms grow by the lower branches dying and dropping off'⁴; that 'friendship has a thin provisional quality, since people might at any minute buy another condominium and move to it, or else up and die,'⁵ The music at the airport where he goes to receive Nelson and his family is 'a kind of carpet in the air, to cover up a silence that might remind you of death'⁶ Even before he suffers his first

⁴. Ibid., p. 59.
⁵. Ibid., p. 73
⁶. Ibid., p. 4.
heart attack, Harry has nothing to live for except food and sexual fantasy, and after the attack he ceases to believe in his own future and even of its desirability. He refuses bypass surgery and loses himself in reveries and self pity and becomes more passive than ever. Half consciously he is preparing himself for death.

*Rabbit at Rest* gives the vision of a man who looks out at the world in which he soon will not exist. Step by step, Harry's family, unconsciously perhaps, prepares itself to survive him, his wife and son making decisions about the family business that leave him out. Janice leaves her two decades' country club indolence and emerges energized and business like. Harry cannot help noting that 'there is this subtle past tense that keeps creeping in her remarks about him.' Janice looks forward to become a career woman and takes up a course in real estate, makes plans to sell the condo and their house in Penn Park and to move into her parent's house with Nelson's family. Harry admires her new found competence but senses in it a preparation for widowhood.

Harry suffers his first attack while rescuing his grand daughter Judy from drowning. After he undergoes angioplasty, he is least careful of his eating habits and other precautions. Towards the end of the novel he

7. Ibid., p.363.
drives away from his home to Florida as in the first novel. He meets his end in a basketball match played with a few kids leading to the second massive attack.

Mathew Wilson observes that 'Harry's physical degeneration, however, is only a sign among many of how he has been thrown back, almost without his understanding how it has happened into a solitude even more isolating than that he experienced as a young man in *Rabbit, Run.* Along with his physical degeneration, diminishing sexual energy and his retirement contribute to his sense of alienation. He is deprived of the milieu of work and a social circle. Since Nelson has been managing the lot, he has been rendered jobless and left with an even more constricting identity. Earlier on, he had a feeling of being a man of some importance, a 'man up front' at the lot. Charlie Stavros, his co-worker was a confidant and friend with whom he had a kind of sustaining male social interaction. Now because of his shifting to Florida, they rarely see each other. He meets his group from Flying Eagle country club even more infrequently. The group has also dispersed. Webb


Murkett and Cindy took divorce, Thalma's lupus got more serious mounting up their medical expenses, consequently the Harrisons had to withdraw their membership, and Buddy Inglefinger got married and moved to some other place. Moreover, Harry dislikes the young lot that has taken the place of the old at the club.

His social world being dissolved, he feebly attempts to reconstruct it in Florida by playing golf with other semi-retired people staying in the condominium; but he feels himself as an outsider. Harry notices that everyone in Florida is 'cautious, as if on two beers they might fall down and break a hip' a caution due to old age, but also a caution among his golf partners due to cultural difference. Harry's three other partners are Jews, and he feels the same uneasiness in their company as he felt with blacks in Rabbit Redux before meeting Skeeter.

Harry's marginalisation comes at the family front as well. While Nelson and Janice take important family and business decisions, he is kept unaware of the dealings. In the end, Harry flees away from his home like his first flight in Rabbit, Run. While thirty years back, his world was shattered by his running,

10. Rabbit at Rest, p. 70
this time nothing happens. The family continues functioning in his absence even Janice doesn't bother to call him for weeks, and Harry painfully discovers that the prelude to death is inconsequentiality. This sense of isolation is accompanied by a problem of identity. For more than ten years Rabbit's social status and identity have been appended to Janice's family name and wealth. The people of Brewer now remember him not because of his high school stardom but because he is the son-in-law of Fred Springer, manager of Toyata agency. As he converses to Thelma with whom he has carried on a ten years affair, "The reason I never left Janice and never can is, without her, I'm shit. I'm unemployable I'm too old. All I can be from here on is her husband."¹¹

Harry's feeling of loss is also contributed by his failure to find the possibility of escape in sex. Now that his powers have collapsed he can only see its sad futility. Having diminished expectations in general, his relationship with Janice is reduced almost to the level of negligibility. He even breaks his ten year old affair with Thelma after his first heart attack; in part because he is feeling physically fragile.

¹¹. Ibid., p. 207.
As Brooke Horvath\textsuperscript{12} has argued about the first three Rabbit novels, \textit{Rabbit at Rest} enacts the consequences of Harry's failure as an erotic quester, as he is now disgusted by the wonders he expected throughout his life. In one of his reviews, Updike discusses the western love myth, 'her concern is not with the possession, through love, of another person but with the prolongation of the lover's state of mind. 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'.\textsuperscript{13} For Harry eros has always been allied to Thanatos, as in \textit{Rabbit, Run} Ruth calls him 'Mr. Death'. Eros has always been a way of escaping the world; whether it was in the pursuit of transcendence manifested in the perfect tee shot, or for escaping a world that has deteriorated into materialism, constrictions and insignificance. The only incidence of the novel that doesn't fall in the same perspective is when Harry makes love to his daughter-in-law Pru. Pru seems to him 'a piece of paradise blundered upon, incredible.'\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Horvath Brooke, \textbf{The Failure of Erotic Questing in John Updike's Rabbit Novels}, \textit{Denver Quarterly} Vol. 23, no.2, 1988. p.70.89.


\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Rabbit at Rest} p. 346.
For Harry, adultery with daughter-in-law does not amount to transgressing the social code. In fact, this is the only adultery where eros is not a mode of escape for him rather 'accepting and entering' the world, as Harry compares Pru to pear trees in blossom, that he notices while driving through Brewer.

Ralph Wood says that if we take into account Harry's journey from *Rabbit, Run*, he can hardly be said to have made progress. He says, 'Rabbit at Rest is riveting. It lets us roam backward into the fields of Harry's youth even as it drags us inexorably to his death'\(^\text{15}\) Rabbit at Rest is marked by Harry's strong nostalgia for the past. Harry recalls the myriad events, people and places that shaped his life. In fact the novel is as much about the past as it is about present. Everything current is connected to something distant. Hence Rabbit constantly remembers his past: his fading stardom as a highschool basket ball hero, his marriage to Janice, the deaths that each of them brought about in their own house, their friends, Harry's job as a typesetter and car dealer.

There is an air of acceptance in the novel as Janice says of Harry, "He had a hard time when

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we were younger giving up his dreams and his freedom but he seems at peace now. Harry is not only at peace but he also tries to make up for his past mistakes. He saves his grand daughter Judy from drowning when they go sunfishing perhaps reminded of the death of his own daughter in *Rabbit, Run* for which he still feels guilty. And in the process of saving her, suffers his first heart attack.

His present feelings sometimes surprise him. Early in the novel he envies the wives of his Jewish golf partners, but later on in the novel when he visits Florida alone, an elder woman is friendly to him. He feels that she has been 'invading him (so) he takes two nitrostats to quell his heart' This fear of invasion typifies Harry's social relations and even he realises that his present feelings are almost a complete contradiction of what he has desired through most of his life; 'there was a time, when he was younger, when the thought of any change, even a disaster gladdened his heart with the possibility of a shake up, of his world made new. But at present he is aware mostly of a fluttering, binding physical resistance within him to the idea of being uprooted' Harry is,

17. Ibid., p. 489.
18. Ibid., p. 429.
in fact, bewildered by the changes in American society all around him. Janice has suitably adapted herself to the changing set up leaving Harry out of step. She is more at home in America than Harry.

Harry, however, still retains some of his primary urges and impulses of his youth. Although he nostalgically reminiscences about his past, he has a determination to live for the present. He realises that he is a man in rapid demise, but he tries to face his death with this determination. We still find him moving forward in present tense narration that Updike pioneered in *Rabbit, Run*. Also at the start of the first novel, he is running toward what he perceives to be life, at the conclusion of the last one he is running again, this time toward his burrow in Florida, in which instinct tells him he is to find death. But in *Rabbit at Rest*, he not only runs but also reflects and judges.

He still runs a fear of being tied down. Nelson rightly judges him when he says, "I keep trying to love you, but you don't really want it. You have been scared all your life of being tied down." He himself realises the contrast between his spirit, his self and his visible personality. 'Though his inner sense of himself is of an innocuous passive spirit, a steady

19. Ibid., p. 418.
small voice, that doesn't want to do any harm, get trapped anywhere, or even die, there is this another self seen from outside, a six foot three athlete ... a shameless consumer of gasoline, electricity, newspapers, hydrocarbons, carbohydrates.\textsuperscript{20}

Harry's first encounter with death brings unexpected changes in his character. After having 'the actual taste of it (death) in (his) mouth'\textsuperscript{21} he becomes more reflective and sees the world in a new light as if an additional dimension has been added to it. Driving around Brewer, he is struck by the beauty of the spring and also observes the streets and society as a whole have undergone a remarkable change. It is as if till now he was in a stupor and is now awake with a new consciousness. Janice rightly says 'You see differently now'.\textsuperscript{22} His new angle of vision and his new receptivity allow him to enter and accept. Harry also becomes a kind of historian, replete with a historical consciousness of personal, regional and national past.

Toward the end, when Harry plays basketball with boys, one of them calls 'Hey man, you're history'\textsuperscript{23}.

\begin{itemize}
\item 20. Ibid., p. 247.
\item 21. Ibid., p. 218.
\item 22. Ibid., p. 183.
\item 23. Ibid., p. 491.
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In the sense of that taunt, Harry is superannuated, past, irrelevant and to be dismissed contemptuously. On the other hand, he is not without value, as is revealed in the Mt judge fourth of July parade. Harry dresses up as Uncle Sam in the parade, a figurative embodiment of America. As people in the crowd recognize him calling him as 'hotshot,' as former basketball hero, even calling his nickname, Harry recalls a part of himself he had thought to be irrecoverable — his public identity. At a time when his personal identity has got hazy, this is a great boost to his self esteem.

At the end of the parade his personal and mythical identities merge 'Harry's eyes burn and the impression giddily as if he had been lifted up to survey all human history grows upon him, that all in all this is the happiest country the world has ever seen.'²⁴ Although this development of a historical consciousness might seem to be at odds with his social isolation, may he finds a consolation for his isolation and approaching death in the contemplation of history. He sees himself as an object of history. Admittedly he is as isolated and as much an outsider in *Rabbit at Rest* as he was in *Rabbit, Run*, but he is aware of having a role in history, a standing in his times.

²⁴. Ibid., p. 371.
and culture. Dilvo Ristoff argues that the emphasis in Rabbit novels on social entrapment makes him 'a creature of his time and place, a representative man rather than an eccentric freak'. In the course of the novel, he is often reminded of his status of being retired, of belonging to past, and thus of his marginalisation in the present society. When he comes to manage Springer Motors in Nelson's absence, he realizes that in 'terms of Springer Motors he has become a historian'. He is also conscious of the history of the region where he grew up, regretting all the current changes. But the most surprising sign of Harry's historical consciousness is his reading of history. In the previous novel he only read Consumer Reports, but now he reads history which has 'always interested him, that sinister mulch of facts our little lives grow out of before joining the mulch themselves, the fragile brown rotting layer of previous deaths'. Updike himself has pointed out that his awareness of history makes him even more aware of his marginalization. The author has also drawn attention to a close connection between Rabbit and the historical

26. Rabbit at Rest, p. 213
27. Ibid., p. 44.
situation that in a way shaped him: 'His sense of being useless, of being pushed to one side by his wife and son, has this political dimension, then. Like me, he has lived his adult life in the context of the cold war. He was in the army, ready to go to Korea, hawkish on Vietnam, proud of the moonshot, and in some sense always justified, at the back of his mind, by a concept of freedom, of America, that took sharpness from contrast with communism. If that contrast is gone, then that's another reason to put him, regretfully to rest in 1990.' This underlines how the author felt the Rabbit quartered to be rooted in the American history of thirty years preceding 1990. Rabbit although unaware of contemporary history in the first novel was a product of that historical moment.

Along with Harry's reconciliation of his position within his milieu, the main plot involves a domestic crisis; the problem of Harry's difficulty to handle son Nelson. We meet him as a young man in Rabbit Is Rich as selfish and irresponsible, an embodiment of the 'me generation' kids. In Rabbit at Rest he is a full fledged cocaine addict, selling used cars at a cash discount in order to finance his addiction. If he

28. Updike John, Why Rabbit Had To Go, p. 27.
goes down, Springer Motors goes down with him posing a question of loyalty for Janice between her son and father who set up the business. Harry is little concerned with the fate of either, as nursing his dying heart and still eating forbidden foods, he is willing to see everything go so long as he remains. Harry dislikes Nelson, and in his accusations remembers that he himself has hardly ever been a moral exemplar. Nelson is like his father—repeats the same mistakes—vagrancy and irresponsibility and also egomamia. But Nelson’s problem is satisfactorily sorted out as he is sent to a rehabilitation center for curing his drug addiction. Three months later Nelson comes out as entirely different person much calm and balanced, ready even to talk through his father’s fling with Pru. He now speaks in a forebearing and holy voice of ‘processing’ and ‘talking through’. When Toyota withdraws its dealership license to Springer Motors, he even plans to open a rehabilitation center at the lot and become a social worker. The changes that come in Nelson and Janice leave Harry completely out of tune.

Ralph Wood, however, holds that ‘the generations do not progress so much as stay in the same place. We do not see further than our forebears because we are not mounted on their shoulders. All the forward
fury is, in fact, a way of standing still". The case might hold some truth for Harry as his life indeed goes around in a circle. He has his fatal heart attack at the same place where we meet him three decades ago; trying one final time to win on the basketball court. But Nelson indeed moves on especially after his coming back from Rehabilitation center. He begins a new family life with Pru, which is further consolidated by their planning to have another child.

Harry, however, does not outgrow his rabbity attitude of responding to a crisis. After Pru reveals their encounter to Nelson and Janice, Janice lists his latest infidelity as unforgivable. She labels Harry's behaviour as perverted and monstrous. His wife's vehement reaction of moral outrage and the fact that he was required to talk about it to the family drives him back to his elementary, intuitive response—he runs. Instead of joining the family at Nelson's house, he leaves for Florida and finishes his journey that he began thirty years before. Ending his life in almost complete social isolation in their condominium in Florida, he takes solitary walks around Deleon and plays basketball twice. The game is an echo of his basketball games in *Rabbit, Run* and it is here on the

basketball court that he collapses in a major heart attack. Later in the hospital Dr Olman says that even if he survives "he would never be alive the way he was."³⁰ The fact is that Harry has not been alive the way he was since he passed out of the high school. As Janice reflects he was already drifting downhill when she got to know him in Kroll's store.

Harry's decline in the novel symbolically stands for the decline of American power as well. The novel is set in the final year of Regan's anesthetized rule 'everything falling apart, airplanes, bridges, eight years . . . of nobody minding the store, making money out of nothing, running up debt, trusting in God'. George Searles in his review says that 'Harry's thwarted strivings are on one level simply metaphors for the larger social problems of his era,'³² and Rabbit at Rest 'is a documentary of a society sinking in its own vulgar excesses, just as Harry himself nearly drowns early in the book.'³³

Harry symbolically stands for the American society as a whole as he is every man. Although some critics

³⁰. Rabbit at Rest. p. 510.
³¹. Ibid., p. 38.
³³. Ibid., p. 34.
like Gary Wills criticize Harry for being an extremely shallow character, Harry retains his identity of the common man. Ralph Wood places him in the right context as "the average shallow man, the American Adam, the carnally minded creature whom our moralistic religion and politics cannot encompass". Harry is like all of us who feel hemmed in sometimes, vaguely threatened, subject to whims of the fortune. We all yearn for certain cherished people, and places of our past like Harry. But what sets him apart is his refusal to accept the heaviness of ordinary day to day existence. Throughout the tetralogy, we find him against social contract, now he is tilting against mortality itself. Although he fails in the end, what remains important is that he does not give up gently.

Updike is sometimes called the chronicler of American culture as the quartet covers the social history of America through thirty years. As Ralph Wood says, 'In letting us join Rabbit's scurrying life, Updike enables us to absorb the ethos of our time, to breathe the air of our distinctively American culture'. Updike himself gives an epitaph for Rabbit, "Here lies an American man".

34. Wood. Ralph, p. 1099.
35. Ibid.
Narrative in *Rabbit at Rest* is mostly interior monologue. The narrative voice is in fact a mix of Harry’s and Updike’s, speaking always in the present. Although the story is told from the authors all knowing point of view, whole passages can be read as Harry’s monologues. Thus Updike is able to maintain the character’s autonomy of revelation without sacrificing the advantages of authorial omniscience. As Anita Brookner sums up the novel, ‘The Rabbit novels, all four of them impress with the fullness of the life they contain, none of it distinguished or exemplary, but in fact memorable and astonishingly complete’.36 There is a satisfying sense of Harry’s life coming to full circle. Updike does not impose any values or moral sense of his novel and characters. Has Harry’s life been worthless as he thinks? The question remains unanswered. Harry is faced inescapably by the fact of ‘life’s constant depreciation’ But there’s nobody there in the novel to confirm or deny such axioms. The questions remain as a ‘moral debate’ with the readers, who can only answer them.