THE RABBIT QUARTET IN RELATION TO
UPDIKE'S OTHER NOVELS AND STORIES

Structurally, each of Updike’s novels marks a departure from its predecessor. But his motifs have not substantially changed. Updike essentially deals with middle class American characters and milieu as he believes that ‘It is in the middle that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes and it seems to me without doubt worthwhile to examine.’

Updike’s characters live in the same society, face the same kind of problems and try to face their predicament in their own way, however, their instincts and responses are not distinctly individualized. This factor leads some critics to conclude that one stereotyped character appears again and again in his fiction.

Updike’s early novels and short stories have striking parallels. A few short stories provide clues which are later on elaborately developed in the framework of a novel. The stories and novels together reveal one distinct phase of Updike’s involvement

with themes of family life. It is a phase which began with the *Olinger Stories* and which follows a single narrator in slightly different guises through his adolescence, marriage and divorce.

Starting from his second novel *Rabbit, Run*, we find one familiar Updikean figure in various short stories and novels. He is an outsider in the sense that as a unique individual he cannot find his place in established social coteries. A character with whom Updike identifies and for whom he says in the foreword to *Olinger Stories*, 'He wears different names and his circumstances vary, but he is at bottom the same boy, a local boy.... The locality is that of Olinger, Pennsylvania... audibly a shadow of Shillington.' In many ways this character is typical of the characters created by contemporary American novelists like James Baldwin and J.D. Salinger whose true subject is the recurrent search for personal identity and freedom in the complex society of Post World War II.

The tension in Updike's early fiction derives from the conflict between the illusions of the past


3. Foreword, Ibid.
and the demand made on the protagonist as a parent and husband in the present. His childhood hopes, desires and dreams are frustrated by family life and he is always turning back to rediscover his childhood's glory. Many autobiographical strands in Updike's fiction are quite obvious. In the early Olinger stories, during narrator's boyhood, he is subject to the expectations of disappointed, hardworking adults. He is a sensitive and gifted child and is particularly sensitive to the small conflicts of the adults. From the start, the boy is conscious of his mother's urging him to take advantage of his gifts, to break free and to escape the fate she has suffered. In *Flight* the mother urges her high school son to flee the constraints of a small town, so that he could forge ahead. The son's affair with local girl is seen as detrimental to his progress.

The dominating mother figure recurs throughout Updike's fiction. In *Of the Farm*, the mother is instrumental in spoiling Joey Robinson's first marriage. She considers her son gifted and never forgives him to choose a career contrary to her wishes. When he

4. Ibid.
visits his mother after his wedding, he is so much under her influence that he sees his new wife through his mother’s eyes. Similarly, Rabbit’s mother in the first novel pampers and nurtures his ego. She could never approve of Janice and even holds her responsible for her son’s anti-climatic life. Despite her being ill and bed ridden in *Rabbit Redux*, she consistently urges her son to free himself from his constricting marriage. Similarly the narrator of the short stories attaches himself to the mother’s unconscious demands. In *Museums and Women* he says that ‘the motion that brought us again and again to the museum was an agitated one, that she was pointing me through these corridors toward a radiant place she had despaired of reaching’.

The mother aims for a destination that she vaguely senses can be reached through art. The younger characters too have a feeling that they are ordained with extraordinary power and hence destined for something vaguely special. But for them job is not of prime importance; the primary task is self awareness. They utilise their special gift to know the meaning of life.

Once the protagonist becomes a father, his interest in his own father begins to increase, if not actually to shift from his mother. In other words, the closer he comes to his father, the more he is conscious of his responsibility - the more trapped he feels. Rabbit sees his father as an ordinary man trudging to make the two ends meet. One of the reasons for his running away was that he feared growing up like his father. The father figure who represents virtue and hard work recurs in *Of the Farm* where Joey is conscious of his father being dominated by his mother. *The Centaur* reveals a father who plods away his life in a profession he hates and sacrifices his life for his son.

Updike's later fiction deals with the male protagonist's family life and domestic troubles. For the protagonist, women are the carriers of the mystery within which meaning may lie. After being trapped, he is faced with a moral dilemma. In order to ease personal troubles, he begins to be unfaithful, though at first this does not involve him in any real conflict. Real trouble, however, begins, when he falls in love. He is torn between wife and mistress

best illustrated by the behaviour of Jerry Conant and Piet Hanema. His mistress and the love they share offer him the chance to become the author of his own happiness. For a long time he remains indecisive. Slowly he pulls away from his marriage. The overpowering magical fulfilment his mother urged him toward, becomes sexual contentment. He chooses the path his mother wanted for him, the road to a happier life, at the same time he goes against the example set for him by his father.

The prime occupation of Updike's characters is a search for identity in an oppressing milieu. There is a preoccupation with the gropings of the sensitive individual engaged in a struggle to penetrate and impose meaning upon the flux of his experience. The theme of identity is projected in the very first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*. There is a deep rooted antagonism in the inmates for the new prefect Conner. A humanist, Conner seeks to make their life better and comfortable, whereas what they seek is spiritual solace. The efforts made by Conner are viewed as a threat to their identity by the old people. In the course of the novel, a central character

Gregg, is enraged by the prefect's use of name tags to assign the inmates' chairs which they had not customarily used and this protest permeates the book as it is evidenced most pointedly by the old inmates' constant attempt to retain their individual identities in the face of senility, total dependency and imminent death.

The theme is given an elaborate treatment in the second novel Rabbit, Run. A 26 year old youth, for whom life had hitherto been an ascension to star status, faces a downward plunge after highschool, when he discovers to his dismay that the society refuses to accord him special status. The constraints of society are stronger once he is married and becomes a father. The secondratedness of his existence is not acceptable to him as he is conscious of his uniqueness and hence sets out to discover his identity. The Rabbit quartet is in fact a record of his frantic attempts to relocate his own identity. Rabbit Redux reveals him somewhat settled in his mediocre existence, but the search of a valid identity in the tumultuous times has not pacified. His own powers having been elapsed and enfeebled, he now views America as powerful and invincible and attaches himself to the system that he had earlier despised.
The identity of the nation becomes his own as it, in a way, nurtures his ego. By the time of *Rabbit is Rich* he is no more in revolt against society as he has merged with the complacent upper middle class America. However, he realises that his social position as the manager of Toyota Motors, is dependent upon Janice, and he confesses at one point that without his wife he is a nobody. The comfort, and the rich status are not of his own making. In *Rabbit at Rest*, he is almost reduced to the position from where he started. His job is now held by his son; he leads a retired existence. Having been disassociated with his working and social circle, he leads a marginalised life. He is an alien in his own home, the fact which constantly nags him.

*The Centaur* was originally conceived as a companion piece to *Rabbit, Run*. Its hero George Caldwell, is in some respects merely an older and slightly more conventional Harry Angstrom, both men had once excelled as athletes, and both are enmeshed in a narrowly circumscribed world which repeatedly diverges from the principles they value. Updike has chosen to represent this stultifying middle class world by a small, mid state Pennsylvania town. While Rabbit defends his values by running, George
Caldwell maintains his intentions in the face of a hostile reality by retreating into a mythological kingdom in which Olinger, Pennsylvania, becomes Olympus. George’s experiences are almost wholly psychological, but like Rabbit’s they constitute a significant rebellion against the meaninglessness of life. George is deeply disturbed by the conventional problems of security and middle age, money, parental responsibility, time and death. He has a philosopher’s questing mind and confronts strangers with questions about the meaning of life and death and man’s role in all. Peter, Caldwell’s son has a passion for Vermeer and grows up to become a painter.

Updike has drawn upon a Greek myth to mould Caldwell’s story. George is modelled after Chiron who commits suicide for his son Peter, who represents Prometheus. The story is set fifteen years back — Peter recalls the period involving the major action of the book, the time embracing his father’s death during the son’s adolescence. Peter’s reminiscence is, in fact, an attempt to account for the effect of the past on his present identity. The story is concerned with Peter’s quest for identity and individuality - a quest enforced by Caldwell’s sacrifice.
In *Of the Farm*, the focus is on the spiritual quest of the character for self identity. The farm around which the story moves is associated with the figure of the mother. Mrs. Robinson cannot bear to give up the farm because it has been in her family for several generations and has its rich legacy of human associations. To lose it would be for her to lose her identity. Similarly Joey Robinson is striving to glean identity and self perspective in his frequent nostalgic recollections of the past and his present vocation.

Updike's heroes often express a nostalgia for the past. The modern world as Updike sees is a world of the superlative and the superfluous but not a world of fulfillment. The stories and novels are, in a way, mere delicate restatements of the great current theme of isolation, millions of throbbing souls seeking fulfillment, identity and happiness. In his short story *Toward Evening*, Rafe, another of the Updike's unfulfilled young moderns, is described as riding the bus up Broadway. Outside the windows numbers on the buildings begin to assume historical significance. The present is a blank and the future.

holds forth only 'a boring progressive edifice' like the poorhouse. In such a world scant room exists for the hero. In The Astronomers\textsuperscript{10}, the unnamed protagonist states 'what is past, after all, but a vast sheet of darkness in which a few moments pricked apparently at random shine'. And Updike continues to revert to the past as if some innocence or something untainted by civilization somehow shone in those primeval years.

In The Persistence of Desire\textsuperscript{11}, a young man quite like Peter Caldwell, returns to Olinger to see his eye doctor, and finds himself in the doctor's waiting room with his high school girl friend. They are both now married, but he cannot resist the desire that comes flooding back with memory and he begins to woo her again. "Aren't you happy"? the girl asks and the young man replies :"I am, I am, but' -- the rest was so purely inspired, its utterance only grazed his lips -- "happiness isn't everything". When he comes out of the doctor's office, his eyes dilated and unfocussed from the drops the doctor has used in checking his vision, the girl is waiting

\textsuperscript{10} Updike John, Pigeon Feathers And Other Stories, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1962.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
for him. She slips a note into the pocket of his shirt. He cannot focus his eyes to read it, but in his shirt pocket it 'made a shield for his heart. In this armor he stepped into the familiar street. The maples, macadam, houses, cement, were to his violated eyes as brilliant as a scene remembered; he becomes a child again in this town, where life was a distant adventure, a rumour, an always imminent joy'.

The hero of *Flight* remembers with minute psychological realism a high school love affair with a very similar girl and builds up around their story a world of remembered details of his grandmother and grandfather, his mother's shocking jealousy of the girl, the high school debates and dances of his country. It is a loving and meticulous recreation of the past, Updike's mind probes it deeply. Even the knowledge that the past is not a shelter from lifelessness, as it now seems to be, comes to him in a story called *A Sense of Shelter*\(^12\) as a memory. What he remembers is how he achieved the courage to tell the most mature and mysterious of his high school classmates that he loved her, only to discover that she was having a bitterly unhappy affair with

an older man. "You never loved anybody", she said, "You don’t know what it is". He knows now that she was right -- after all, it was just a disposition of his heart, nothing permanent or expensive, as true in a sense more terrible he could have imagined'.

Again in Archangel there are 'certain moments, remembered or imagined, of childhood'. The entire story is a hymn to God, an apotheosis of worship; but inserted within the hymn the one sentence fragment seemingly out of place. The escape to the past is paramount. Updike's present is not an enjoyable one. His characters usually are hard pressed in just living life. It is only when his characters revert to the past or to the after life that some sort of salvation or redemption is found. Part of Harry's problem was his preoccupation with what he has been. His difficulty in adjusting to the present is because the present is not the road to fame and prominence. He finds marriage and reality of the present crushing. Richard Gilman in The Youth of an Author sees Updike's use of the past as a weakness. '... we find an obsessive fixation upon the past, a compulsive rehearsal of the data 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 and action*. But Updike moves his characters from present to past to future to show the effect of these dissimilar areas on their thought and action.

The novels too, like the short stories, portray young as well as old protagonists showing a nostalgic affinity with the past. The Poorhouse Fair at first glance seems different as the young hero has been replaced by a group of old people unified in their hostility toward the scientific minded director of their poorhouse. The identity which the younger generation seeks from the fulfillment of a public role, the poor effortlessly attain through their recollections of the past. Their indiscriminated memories, bitter as well as fond, not only arm them against the intrusions of the harsh outsiders but also define them. Nostalgia here provides a reality beyond the moment. Time is often a terror to those who must look to the future, but it is a comfort to those

who have no future, it ties them to something larger than themselves -- their past. In *Of the Farm* Joey’s visit to the farm makes him nostalgic about his ex-wife and children, and the memories of his boyhood and his father make him conscious of his family identity and his roots. Similarly in *The Centaur*, Peter, the narrator of the story, recalls his past life with a view to seek fulfillment and self identity and reconstruct his present life which was in a disappointing state.

Along with the identity crisis, the characters in Updike’s fiction find their jobs to be terribly tiring and enervating, and work, whether it is teaching or selling or carpentry, provides no positive source for the characters in their efforts to establish themselves before some threat or to formulate an answer to some problem. Even the pastors in his novels and short stories do not seem confident about what their jobs ask them to do. From the inmates of the poorhouse, who have no place of their own and no work, to Rabbit Angstrom both in *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux*, Joey Robinson, Piet Hanema in *Couples*[^15], we find characters who must do work they

dislike and work that humiliates them, or who can no longer do the kind of work they once did and enjoyed, or who run away from their work. Work suggests more than a person's job; it suggests the whole range of responsibilities which a person feels are pressed upon him, including his relation to his family and friends. It raises the question of personal integrity, of unity between what a person is and what he does.

The problem of vocation arises from the relation of the personal to the public, the internal to the external, or the psychological to the sociological. The problem is acute in Updike's fiction because his narrators and characters are very sensitive, often almost delicate, as they have a strong sense of their individuality or uniqueness and as they find the world outside of themselves dull, confused and threatening. They share with Updike his own strong sense of individual importance, the mystery of the self; as he puts it in an autobiographical essay, 'why was I I?' The arbitrariness of it astounded me, in comparison, nothing was too marvelous'. But they find that the world in which they live do not support, do not feed, the 'I'.

At first glance the old people of The Poorhouse Fair seem not to share the problem, since they are rejects from the society. But the fact of rejection points to the tension between them and the surrounding society, a society which invades them even in their exile chiefly represented by Conner. The problem of vocation illustrated by the difference in spiritual, psychological life and sociological life is also illustrated by the spiritual and humanistic approach to life. Conner's humanism as opposed to the inmates' spiritual beliefs accounts for their main problem.

Like Ace Anderson in Ace in the Hole, Rabbit in the first novel cannot overcome the burdens of his offices as husband, father and kitchen gadget demonstrator. Unnerved by his confining situation, he runs to break loose, as he once did on the basketball court. But the basketball model is inadequate. His opponents on the basketball court were identifiable, but in real life the enemy is poverty, boredom and a series of meaningless jobs. Eccles, too, in the novel faces the same problem. According to his wife Lucy, he is an inadequate father to his children, and according to Kruppenbach,
no pastor to his flock. In his office as priest, he lays less emphasis on the faith in God than on the humanitarian aspects of work. He is more interested in the social service of reconciling Rabbit back to his family.

In the short stories of *The Same Door* the problem of vocation occurs in the form of relation of a sensitive boy to the hostile world around him, as in *Friends from Philadelphia, The Alligators* and *The Happiest I've been*. The problem of the taxing nature of the offices of young husband and father is portrayed in *Toward Evening, Sunday Teasing,* and *Incest*. Some specific jobs reflect the problem like teaching in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and So Forth* and the artist's life in *A Gift From the City*.

*The Centaur* discloses the frustration and plight that arises out of George's dislike of his occupation. His predicament is that he is compelled to teach which is the only way of supporting his family. His son Peter grows up to become an expressionist painter, which he has always dreamt of becoming, but lacks a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. Joey Robinson, an advertising specialist, realises on visiting his farm that how much that was of value has slipped
away from his life when it is juxtaposed to its origins. He encounters the integrity and trustfulness of his mother and his own poetic youth. *Rabbit Redux* opens with Rabbit engaged, though more responsibly, in yet another demeaning and draining job. Piet Hanema in *Couples* is a man of artistic imagination, who feels trapped by his work.

Updike's later fiction in the nineteen sixties and seventies reveals a shift in his focus. Search for identity, nostalgia for the past and other motifs have been replaced by a more consistent motif of marriage and adultery. This was the period when his own marriage was disintegrating and moving towards divorce. In his fiction the problem of individuality and freedom, personal identity and social constraints are considered through the motif of marriage. In the next two books *The Music School* and *Couples* we find Updike in transition. Although a few of the stories collected in *The Music School* go back to youth and the early years of marriage, Updike spends most of his time in both books with the bitter dregs of marriage on the rocks.

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The characters in the short stories are open, lonely and at odds with their world, as in *The Dark*, *The Morning*, *The Hermit*, *At a Bar in Charlotte Amalie*, *The Family Meadow* and *The Bulgarian Poetess*. Loneliness is mixed with marital troubles in *Leaves*, *The Stare*, *Avec la Bebe-Sitter*, *Twin Beds in Rome*, *My Lover Has Dirty Nails*, *The Rescue*, and *The Music School*. Loneliness and marital difficulties seem to be related to the move Updike's fiction makes from eastern Pennsylvania and youth to New England and Midpoint in life.

*Too Far To Go*¹⁹ another short story collection deals specifically with the married life and disintegration of Joan and Richard Maple. If *Olinger Stories* projected much of what happens in Updike's early novels, *Too Far To Go* helps one understand his major works that followed. The fate of married men and women in America is central to his novel *Couples*, but even *Rabbit Redux* and *A Month of Sundays*²⁰ are more heavily dependent upon the subject of sexual relations than the earlier books.

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With *Marry me: A Romance*\(^{21}\), Updike begins what may be the next saga in his fiction — remarriage. Yet the seeds of his full grown interest in marriage and divorce predate even the first Olinger novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*. The earliest of the Maples story *Snowing in Greenwich Village* appeared in *The New Yorker* on 21 January 1956. The Maples are not yet two years married, but already out of interest, as figured by the attractively threatening character, Rebecca. By the fourth story *Twin Beds in Rome* 8 February 1964, Richard and Joan are already discussing separation and even in the two stories in between, Updike's narrator is regretting 'once my ornate words wooed you'.\(^{22}\)

The attitude of a married man in an early short story *The Persistence of Desire* (reference to which has already been made), when he meets his ex girl friend in a doctor's clinic, he has an onrush of past memories, and tries to woo her. The girl asks him whether he is not happy: "I am, I am, but happiness isn't everything", the statement crystallizes the discontent that perplexes and ambiguously nourishes

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all the groping adulteries in Updike's fiction. Most of Updike's characters are incapable of decisive altering acts of choice or will. But they are troubled or distracted by a recurring intuition of incompleteness. The chief outward sign of this disease is sexual unrest, but Updike has consistently associated the marital transgression of his characters with metaphysical or religious longings as if to suggest that adulterous cravings in the present rootless era are the confused expression of an instinct for freedom itself, a rebellion against the confines of age and circumstance.

Since the first Rabbit book, Updike has recorded the filial and sexual entanglements of his characters. One of Rabbit's problems in the first novel is sexual incompatibility with his wife. Although it was not the sole reason for his deserting his family, once he meets Ruth, he achieves a sense of gratification and fulfillment which comes because his relationship with Ruth has a sense of freedom, it is free from the sense of constriction which comes from marriage. Ruth acknowledges his need of a quest for self identity. This theme of adultery as a means of seeking identity and conforming spirituality in a
sterile society, gradually gained momentum in Updike's writings with the publication of Couples. Updike observes that in his first novel The Poorhouse Fair and in Couples he was posing the question, "After Christianity what?" The answer as explored in 'its many permutations' in Couples was sex as 'the glue ambience, and motive force of the new humanism', replacing Christianity.

The conflict between marriage and love in Updike's fiction can be explained in the manner of Denis de Rougemont's work Love in the Western World in which he explains the romantic behaviour of the West through the myths of Tristan and Isuelt and Don Juan. In the manner of Rougemont's work, Rabbit doubts his own existence and can reaffirm it only in love. However, the very imperfections of the world which have caused his uneasiness refuse to give him an object worthy either of eros or agape. In his review of Love Declared, Updike analyzes what is Rabbit's ideal, the love myth whose 'essence is passion itself; 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. Iseult is the mythical prototype of the unattainable lady to whom the love-myth directs our adoration diverting it from the attainable lady (in legal terms, the "wife") who is at our side'. Love provides courage to man to face the terror of death: 'a man in love, confronting his beloved, seems to be in the presence of his own spirit, his self translated into another mode of being, a form of light greeting him at the gate of salvation. A man in love ceases to fear death'. Updike further states that 'our fundamental anxiety is that we do not exist. Only in being loved do we find external corroboration of the supremely high valuation each ego secretly assigns itself. This exalted arena, then, is above all others the one where men and women will insist upon their freedom to choose — to choose that other being in whose existence their own existence is confirmed and amplified. Against the claims of this mighty self-assertion, the arguments embodied in law and stricture

25. Ibid., 286.
for self preservation appear trivial and base. The virtue of the choice is diminished if others would also have chosen it for us. The heart prefers to move against the grain of circumstance; perversity is the soul's very life. Therefore, the enforced and approved bonds of marriage, restricting freedom, weaken love'.

The essay is a remarkable introduction to the mystery of Eros that is dramatized in Couples. Piet Hanema is the pivotal character, who is at times Tristan and Don Juan, who represent attitudes toward passion and marriage that abound today. Piet in his Tristan capacity searches for the ideal women who will allay his fear of death and his longing for the infinite, as Don Juan he seeks to conquer many women and thus violate the secret of the infinite hidden in Eros. Promiscuity is a means for Piet to seek meaning in his existence. Piet Hanema is an artist who feels trapped by his work as a carpenter, his marriage to an aloof and angelic woman, the secular town of Tarbox, and despite his despair and promiscuity he is a religious man, quite like Rabbit Angstrom. He too is conscious of a spiritual power in life which had been eluding him and he seeks to

26. Ibid., p. 299.
redefine grace and spirituality through his various adulterous relationships.

In Updike's fiction, wife is often portrayed as the elusive woman and it is she, not the mistress, who is difficult to win. Angela Hanema, Janice Angstrom, Ruth Conant, Mrs. Marshfield are such wives. Like most of Updike's male heroes, Piet suffers the agony of religious doubt and thus turns to the emergent religion to confirm his sense of self. Guilt, he learns, both lacerates and soothes, and he finds himself balanced between an angelic wife who accepts death as part of the natural cycle and who refuses to have more children and an earthly mistress who is a regular churchgoer and who aborts her pregnancy. Piet's relationship with Georgene early in the novel is tinged with the sense of self identity and with Foxy he experiences a feeling that gives him confidence in himself, yet when their affair is discovered he confesses to his wife "Being with you is Heaven" and later begs "Don't make me leave you -- You're what guards my soul. I'll be damned eternally". Piet Hanema finds it difficult to make a choice between the two. The tension between the two polarities i.e. marriage and adultery works to

assure Updike’s protagonists that they are alive, that existence is variable. Renunciation of a mistress can seal this sense of being divided, mending the breach between body and soul, but it will extinguish hope in salvation in the process. Wholeness of being and equilibrium are not things that Updike values highly. He said that 'a person who has what he wants, a satisfied person, ceases to be a person. Unfallen Adam is an ape.... I feel that to be a person is to be in a situation of tension, to be in a dialectical situation. A truly adjusted person is not a person at all -- just an animal with clothes on'.

This dilemma is best illustrated by the attitude of Jerry Conant in *Marry Me*. *Marry Me* which, in fact, precedes the graver documentation of *Couples*. The vague apprehensions and uneasy nights of Jerry Conant evolve into the mortal fears and morally choreographed nightmares of Piet Hanema in *Couples*. One has a Tom Sawyerish bad conscience, the other Kierkegaardian fear and trembling. *Marry Me* tells the story of a baffled husband's rebounding between wife and mistress, responsibility and romance. In this particular case, it reworks the main plot of *Couples*,

passing over the incidental affairs and surrounding characters so as to focus more purely on the two marriages. The novel emphasizes the destructiveness - especially in its effect on the children -- of Jerry's indecisiveness. Jerry's intermittent guilt, makes things more piquant. For without a sense of danger and the illicit (as Marshfield learns in *A Month of Sunday*) desire wanes. The suffering of the lovers Jerry and Sally provokes their fervour, makes possible the vibrant, almost numinous belief in which their love is founded.

Jerry has to choose between a good woman and woman child, between fatherhood and chivalry. Ruth is cool and unsentimental and seems remote, whereas Sally is near. Ruth is nobody's woman, though she listens where Sally is often heedless. For Ruth, the man and woman go side by side, while with Sally, Jerry feels on top, he shares with Ruth whom he met when they were fellow art students, a mutual admiration, and that is their strength and weakness. Despite her depth of patient mothering sympathy, Ruth has no understanding for Jerry's idea of freedom. A man's responsibility she maintains is to his family. Ruth inherits from her father an impatience with superstition and after her children
are born, she puts religion behind her. Her pragmaticism and domesticity are one with that of Angela Hanema, Joan Maple, Jane Marshfield, Janice Angstrom and others. She is the classic Updikean wife, above all in her humanism--that is, her reduction of theology to morality, her indifference to ritual, her implicit assumption that man, human society is the measure.

Jerry's dilemma is his difficulty in leaving any of the women "I can't give any of you up". At the end of the novel, Jerry is still uneasily with Ruth, dreaming of the beautiful Sally. By being indecisive, Jerry is being torn between individual and spiritual commitments. He searches for a promise that he will never die. Jerry courts passion and guilt, only by suffering in bed with his mistress does he overcome fear of death with his wife. If he gives up adultery, he faces the stasis of routine boredom, if he abandons his family, he denies the sacrament of marriage, of God.

Beneath Jerry's boyish arrogance beats the heart of Updike's Rabbit Angstrom of Rabbit, Run which Marry Me foreshadows. Oscillating between his mistress Ruth and wife Janice, he faces Jerry's

29. Marry Me, p. 120.
dilemma of choosing one of the two. Janice embodies mediocrity and dullness and staying on with Janice provided no space for his yearning for upward spaces, grace and personal identity. Ruth makes Rabbit feel as alive and competitive as he did on the basketball court. In Janice he faces the death of his freedom, individuality, his sense of uniqueness, quite like Jerry's belief that he is married to his death. Relationship with Ruth is an escape from death and a justification of his own spiritual self. Rabbit faces a similar dilemma in *Rabbit Redux*, where he takes in Jill, a teenage girl in Janice's absence. Despite Janice's disapproval he does not leave her.

Updike's protagonists turn to find faith and a validity of their existence in adulterous sex because the traditional Christianity seems impotent. In *Rabbit, Run* the stained glass window in the church across the street is symbolically darkened. In the end of the novel when amidst present chaos, he looks for help towards the church, he could only see a dark circle in a stone facade. In *Couples* the church burns, and the old spire has to be torn down. The new church building, however, is not to be 'a restoration but a
modern edifice, a parabolic poured concrete tent shape peaked like a breaking wave'.

In an early short story *Churchgoing*, the protagonist attends a church service on Caribbean Island, but he finds the service dull and meaningless, it's the windows of the building which become figuratively meaningful. Similarly, in *A Month of Sundays*, the Reverend Marshfield writes in his diary that churches 'bore for (him) the same relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola: they promoted thirst without quenching it'.

In the wake of loss of traditional Christianity, Upkide's protagonists find their individual ways of investing their otherwise meaningless existence with meaning, and adultery assumes new significance. The question in his marriage centred novels is whether passion can survive marriage. There is no conflict between individual morality and social sanction. Marriage may have the sanction of ceremony, but adultery promises the freedom of desire. For Updike, love is more than a command to procreate the race.

A fundamental anxiety in his marriage novels is not

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destruction of the race or dismantling of the social harmony but recognition that the individual will die. Love, even adultery saves an individual from existential despair: ‘only in being loved do we find external corroboration of the supremely high valuation each ego secretly assigns itself’.\(^{33}\) Choosing a lover outside the ceremony is more than insisting on the freedom to choose, it is selecting a partner who through sexual consummation validates the existence of the self. Against the claim of confirming one’s life in the face of death, the counter claims of extending the race and protecting social propriety seem petty. Since ‘perversity is the soul’s very life, the approved bonds of marriage, restricting freedom, weaken love’.\(^ {34}\)

There exists a negative equation between sexual intensity and social approval. Marriage is enforced by the ceremonial side, but confirmation of one’s existence requires passion, and passion demands freedom. Love in marriage for Updike promises physical life to the race and spiritual death to the progenitors. Rabbit Angstrom ‘feels the truth: the thing that has left his life has left irrevocably, no


\(^{34}\) Op. cit.
search would recover it. No flight would reach it. It was here, beneath the town, in these smells and these voices, forever behind him. The fullness ends when we give nature her ransom, when we make children for her. Then she is through with us, and we become, first inside, and then outside, junk'.

Marriage is shaky but adultery promising when Updike’s characters acknowledge Rabbit’s dilemma. *Too Far To Go* traces the decline of marriage through transgression toward divorce. The husband and wife resist the final parting, but when it comes, their no fault divorce case resembles their wedding ceremony many years ago. Updike’s foreword insists that all things, including marriage, terminate: ‘That a marriage ends is less than ideal, but all things end under heaven, and if temporality is held to be invalidating, then nothing real succeeds. The moral of these stories is that all blessings are mixed’.  

Updike’s marriage novels usually focus on a male narrator who suffers the tension generated by the conflicts between the illusions that caress him from the past and the demands that lacerate him in the present. Love and hope nourished in his youth become memory and desire pounding in his maturity.

35. Updike, J., Foreword, *Too Far To Go.*
The teenage flight degenerates to the adult run and the male narrator resorts to adultery and divorce for signs that he still lives. The idea of keeping an individual integrity leads to adultery in Updike. One of the central ironies in Updike's fiction is that promising to love and cherish his wife, the Updike male learns that he does so at risk to the self. Marriage encourages the religious pitfall of despair. Caught between the religiously blessed marriage ceremony and the sin of despair, the transgressor reaches out toward adultery in an effort to rekindle the liveliness he has lost. Rabbit, Piet, Jerry try to create a new life for themselves. Love is always the key to the recreation of the self, but love often conflicts with sacrament. If the protagonist loves the mistress, yet, cannot leave the wife, he turns the imperative to act into the trap of stasis. If he remains with the wife, he hurts both himself and her, if he transgresses with the mistress, he also hurts both, but at least he creates a new promise of happiness. Transgression means both joy and guilt; fidelity means both absolution and death.

The desires of the individual clash with the demands of the society. The adulterer wants both morality and transgression, wife and mistress. In
taking two steps toward divorce and one step back toward marriage, the transgressor exhausts himself as well as his family. Realizing that transgression is action, but fearing for the stainlessness of his soul, Updike's adulterer finds himself vacillating even as he moves to act. But when he realizes that commitment to mistress too can face him with death, he understands that to be totally satisfied is also to be dead. Sexual longing is painful, but pain is a sign that he lives.

Updike has said, "my books are all meant to be moral debates with the reader, and if they seem pointless -- I'm speaking hopefully -- it's because the reader has not been engaged in the debate. The question is usually, "what is a good man?" or "what is goodness"? and in all the books an issue is examined".36 Confronting his characters with the shadow of cosmic blankness, Updike describes Piet Hanema as a moral man who "can't act for himself because he is overwhelmed by the moral implications of any act leaving his wife, staying with her".37 Updike's idea of morality is closely related to his religious faith, which is totally different from an idea

37. Ibid., p. 503.
of absolute and divinely ordered morality. The religious sensibility Updike and his protagonists follow is the conservative theology of Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. Barth views humanism as the enemy of faith, and rejects the modern tendency to domesticate God by interpreting God's tenets in terms of bourgeois ethics. He attacks the self righteousness of humanistic morality and the assumption that a rigorous adherence to moral principles will solve human problems. This is what Reverend Tom Marshfield has in mind when he criticizes his wife's liberalism in A Month of Sundays. She is a good person but a slack believer, ethical and soft where Marshfield is Barthian and hard. Such a staunchly conservative theology elevates belief over ethics, revelation over rationalism. Some of these views are echoed by Reverend Kruppenbach in Rabbit, Run when he preaches to Reverend Eccles: "... you think your job is to be an unpaid doctor, to run around and plug up holes and make everything smooth.... If Gott wants to end misery He'll declare the kingdom now.... I say you don't know what your role is or you'd be home locked in prayer. There is your role: to make yourself an exemplar of faith.... There is nothing but Christ for us. All the rest, all this decency and busyness, is
nothing. It is Devil’s work”.38

For both Updike and Barth the distinction between the human and the divine is absolute. God is wholly other, unreachable, only God can touch man, but his existence cannot be proved. Thus the religious question involves the question of belief. A true Christian has an absolute faith in the Apostle’s Creed. Since Updike’s Christianity is determined only by his profession of Apostle’s creed, it contains no inherent moral system. Armed with belief, confident that grace can be earned, Updike’s male adulterers cause pain but hope to avoid damnation. Although they grieve for the hurt they cause to their families, they nevertheless continue to pursue the unity of flesh and spirit. Marshfield believes not only in God but also in the spiritual worth of the flesh.

The world Updike creates in his fiction seems morally ambiguous as Updike believes in two kinds of morality. One is external, abstract, made up of social and cultural mores and all the percepts our civilization has established to enable men to live together in harmony. But another kind of morality is a response to an inner imperative. This subjective

morality is less a system than a sense of the propriety of an act. In Updike’s novels, the dilemma created by this dual morality is often embodied in the women between whom the protagonist must choose. In *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit oscillates between Ruth and Janice. The external and codified morality, of which Jack Eccles is the chief instrument demands that Rabbit return to Janice, but Rabbit’s inner apprehension of what is right for him directs him to Ruth. Similarly, Joey Robinson’s dilemma is represented by his two wives, and also by Peggy and his mother. Piet Hanema must choose between Angela and Foxy and Rabbit in *Rabbit Redux* between Jill and Janice. For Tom Marshfield the choice is between wife Jane and first Alicia Crick, then Frankie Harlowe. But Updike believes that "all problems are basically insoluble and that faith is a leap out of total despair". 39 Hence the dilemmas his characters face are insoluble. They reject what is considered ‘right’ by the society to follow what is ‘good’ for them.

The question of faith and morality is projected by Updike from his first novel *The Poorhouse Fair*. For John Hook, virtue is contingent upon faith.

Without faith there can be no virtue, for there are no invisible goals to be pursued and served, there is nothing beyond man himself to structure his existence and order his values. Faith alone makes man responsible for his actions, and makes him accountable not to himself or to other men but to God. Thus, as Hook tells Conner at the conclusion of their debate on the existence of God, "There is no goodness without belief. There is only busyness".  

In *The Centaur* Updike dramatizes the experience of his 'father's immersion in the world of Christian morality, in trying to do the right thing and constantly sacrificing himself....' In *The Centaur* there is no real moral dilemma. Caldwell believes that to the problems of human existence 'Jesus Christ is the only answer'. But Caldwell's is basically inclined toward that part of Christianity which is ethical and he is immersed in the world of morality. His faith is troubled as he is obsessed with death and fears that it will bring with it a loss of faith as had happened with his priest father.

*Rabbit, Run* clearly manifests the division between

the ethical and the religious. Rabbit is the only character whose religious sense is in fact spiritual and not simply a part of his existence in a nominally Christian society, yet he is in a sense more moral than other characters. His faith in God is only that it concerns no one other than himself and God, and has no influence on his human relationships. The distinction between the religious and the moral mystifies other characters. At one point Eccles is angry about Rabbit's apparent insensitivity to moral problems: "you don't care about right and wrong; you worship but your own worse instincts". But this is true only in terms of Eccles' ethical humanism. Rabbit is concerned with the morality but he has realized that much of what people and Eccles think right is in fact wrong. Confrontation with this religiously and morally sterile world forces Rabbit to turn inward for guidance. Still he continues to live in the external world, so he is caught between the demand of two moralities -- social and personal. Conforming to the first, he violates the integrity of his subjective existence, but following the second, he creates social havoc and brings suffering to those around him.

42. Rabbit, Run, p. 134.
Updike writes about this moral dilemma, "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 consolations of life. There is no way to reconcile these individual wants to the very need of any society to set strict limits and to confine its members. Rabbit, Run.... I wrote just to say there is no solution. It is a novel about the bouncing, the oscillating back and forth between these two kinds of urgencies until, eventually, one just gets tired and wears out and dies, and that's the end of the problem".43

Updike's later novels dramatize man's moral dilemma through the complexities of sexual love. The ethics of love are determined by subjective morality which Updike defends as valid form of morality. As such they are in opposition to those ethical dicta by which the society regulates the sexual impulse. While Rabbit oscillates between wife and mistress, other protagonists try to make a compromise with each and the inevitable result is a constant sense of guilt and indecisiveness. They are

faced with so many conflicting demands that they retreat into passivity. Joey Robinson silently watches when his mother and wife fight over him. In the same way Piet is reduced to passivity by the conflicting demands of love and responsibility. In *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit helplessly stands by as Jill proceeds to her inevitable destruction. Jerry in *Marry Me* fails to take any decision and wants God to show a way out or Ruth to take a decision.

In *A Month of Sundays* the conflict of faith and morality which has been implicit in earlier books is vociferously expressed by Reverened Marshfield. His daily pages written for therapy comprise a meditation on life and love, on sex and morality and faith. A true Barthian figure, he seeks to reconcile body and soul: ‘we and our bodies are one... (and) we should not heretically... castigate the body and its dark promptings’.\(^{44}\) To him ‘Ethics is plumbing, necessary but dingy. Ethical passion the hobgoblin of trivial minds. What interest us is not the good but the godly, not living well but living forever’.\(^{45}\)

Updike’s transgressors, therefore, long for grace even while they commit adultery. The natural human

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44. *A Month of Sundays*, p. 135.

45. Ibid., p. 228.
condition is to rebel against the order, to insist on individuality by contrary act, for writes Updike, 'our precious creaturely freedom .... finds self assertion in defiance and existence in sin'. This is the freedom that his protagonists run toward when they abandon their wife for mistress.

In A Month of Sundays, Roger's Version and S. Updike reworks on Howthorne's The Scarlet Letter. In these novels he has explored the consequences of adultery in the modern American context. Roger's Version refers to Roger Chillingworth's version of events. He is a recurring Barthian figure who envisions God as 'wholly other'. He finds Dale's project of finding God through his knowledge of science and computers repulsive, as it describes a God who lets Himself be intellectually trapped, and ethically immoral because it eliminates faith from religion. Roger's Version addresses many of the themes and concerns of A Month of Sundays -- reparation of the split between body and soul, adultery as a transfiguring experience. Roger had to leave ministry because of an affair with Esther, his present wife (suggesting Tom Marshfield ten years

later). Now they have a workable and stagnant marriage. She enters into an extra marital affair with Dale and Lambert acts as an ominiscient narrator.

*S.* is written from Hester’s stance. Sarah deserts her husband to join an ashram in order to search for an enlightenment beyond the privileged but suffocating life she had led in the American upper middle class. She is a pilgrim on a quest to change herself and the world and as such her quest is similar to Rabbit’s in the first novel. The novel also exposes the duplicity, hypocrisy of the spiritual community at the ashram and futility of her quest. Her quest fails as she discovers that her old self cannot be fully shed. The focus of the trilogy is the American experiment of dissent, separation and heroic struggle to rebuild, and in each novel, individual selves attempt to shed old skins in an effort toward self transformation.