Chapter-1
A REVIEW OF THE CRITICAL LITERATURE

Updike’s themes and his style of writing elicited a mixed response in the beginning of his literary career. His early works *The carpentered Hen, and Other Tame Creatures: Poems* (1958), *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959) and *The Same Door: Short Stories* (1959) were greeted with enthusiasm in the literary circles. His great clarity and precision of language were particularly emphasized. William Peden, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, welcomed Updike’s ability (reminiscent of both Chekhov and Joyce) to discern significance in the lives of ordinary people. Amidst this general praise, however, there were complaints of weakness which prefigured attacks on Updike that became commonplace later on. Richard Gilman wrote in an otherwise favourable review of *The Poorhouse Fair*: ‘occasionally, too, his book suffers from what Pascal described as the wearing effect of continuous eloquence. He would profit from knowing that it is in the spaces between images that their resonance is nurtured and maintained’; and the anonymous reviewer in *Time*


concluded: unfortunately, author Updike plays his talents cool; his passion for understatement seems to rule out all passion.'

The large majority of reviews of Updike's second novel *Rabbit, Run* were also favourable, although some reviewers puzzled about the writer's attitude towards the protagonist. But the charges of triviality kept on growing. Another review in *Time* said, 'This dedicated 29 year old man of letters says very little, and says it very well...The impressions left are of risks untaken, words too fondly tested, and of a security of skill that approaches smugness.' Although Updike's *The Centaur* won the National Book Award for fiction, it evoked a mixed critical response. Some reviewers objected to the mythic parallel of the story as irrelevant. Norman Podhoretz, one of the determined haters of Updike's work concluded that, in general, Updike has nothing to say, and that his emotional range is very limited, confining itself primarily to nostalgic recollections of youth.' Along with Podhoretz, John Aldridge and magazines like *Commentary*, kept up sustained attack on Updike for what they called lack of substance in his works.

Norman Podhoretz leads the group of critics who attack Updike for his indulgence in stylistic capers which fails to cover his lack of substance. Even sympathetic critics like Guerin La Course observed that ‘He fears to foray into the night world of feeling for the significances. The polarity of genius has a double edge.’ warning that ‘Updike cannot afford to sit on his hands’, he concluded, ‘he relies, apparently, on language rather than thought, sense rather than sensibility, wit rather than wisdom all of which afford only temporary harbor.’

Updike’s preoccupation with diverse concerns like sociological, metaphysical and Christian led to different interpretations of his texts. Among the very early critical articles, Dean Doner’s Rabbit Angstrom’s Unseen World takes into consideration short stories such as Ace in the Hole and Lifeguard and Updike’s novels The Poorhouse Fair and Rabbit, Run to conclude that humanists are consistently projected as antagonists in Updike’s works. For Doner, Rabbit becomes the hero victimized by the net of humanism. Eccles and Conner two humanists are the antagonists and Rabbit’s irresponsible behaviour


and selfish efforts for breaking free are in a sense redeemed by his belief in God. Arthur Mizener in the *American Hero as High School Boy: Peter Caldwell*\(^8\) relates Updike's nostalgia for his past with a religious feeling. Encounters with the past become the means of preserving his sense of some sublime quality in life, and of seeing how the transcendent value of the people he loved as a child inheres in them an intrinsic blessing.

This sense of the religious in Updike is dealt with directly in Michael Novak's essay *Updike's Search for Liturgy.*\(^9\) Novak attempts to show how the narrator in Updike's short stories searches for images of a deep and serene way of looking at life which is completely lost in contemporary secular world. He concludes that Updike is attempting to impose meaning on flux, that he is dealing with serious issues and is trying to reinforce the significance of religion in America. The idea of Updike as a religious writer is also explored in Robert Detweiler's *John Updike and the Indictment*

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of Culture-Protestantism. Focussing on *Rabbit, Run*, Detweiler sees Updike fighting in the novel the same kind of problems – false moralism, a belief in progress that ignores man’s sinful nature, corrupt institutions – that the neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Neibuhr had been fighting from the 1930’s. Rabbit lacks inner resources, but with proper support he could have overcome his crisis. His tragedy as a man without grace is that his crisis does not lead to redemption, yet the critic holds the failure of the community and the institutions responsible for Rabbit’s failure.

In yet another article by Thaddeus Muradian, memories of childhood, pain, loneliness and death are marked as Updike’s major themes. The critic asserts that Updike treats death in his works as a necessary end to life which ushers in something better than life i.e. life after death. Norris Yates also speaks of religious matters in *The Doubt and Faith of John Updike*. Beside these articles, two


pamphlets also take up the question of religion in Updike's works. The first published in 1967 was by Alice and Kenneth Hamilton and the other by Charles Samuels came out in 1969. The Hamiltons' *John Updike: A critical Essay* serves as a modest introduction to their more stridently christian interpretation of Updike published in 1970. According to Hamiltons 'Updike thinks of (his characters) as musical instruments which, even though untuned, can reverberate with the sounds of eternity'. On occasion, the two critics have oversimplified Updike in stressing his christian vision. Samuels in his pamphlet, has no real thesis about the writer other than that his work is important and worthwhile.

The first full length study of Updike's work is *The Elements of John Updike* by Alice and Kenneth Hamilton. They believe not only that Updike has everything to say but also that he says it with enormous precision and power—not through the medium of direct exposition but indirectly through

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the medium of imagery and parable. The Hamiltons, therefore, give only scant attention to the realistic content of Updike’s fiction and concentrate almost entirely on the patterns of meaning that are traceable beneath it. They find Updike demonstrating the abundance of God’s grace and the unwillingness of contemporary man to accept it. They find Christian orthodoxy to be Updike’s solution to the dilemmas of twentieth century life. But their position overlooks the sociological significance of Updike, as they do not want to treat literature primarily as a social document even though Updike so carefully details minutia of our ordinary experience. Their shortcoming is that their interpretation of Updike places all emphasis upon the individual’s relationship with God and that too of a Christian pursuasion. Through their work Updike emerges as a kind of monster symbolist and theological preacher, whose work is viewed not as literary but as a repository of religious and mythological imagery. The Hamiltons have argued aggressively that Updike has constantly dealt with the abundance of God’s saving grace for those who freely accept it. Their explication of Updike rather diminishes the complexity of his characters and makes Christianity sound like the only plausible theoretical understanding of human existence. It has to be acknowledged that the meaning of God has
always been a concern of Updike's works and there are also Biblical allusions but the Hamiltons' interpretation of these seems, at times, arbitrary and almost always too simple. They write, for example: 'snow from heaven, bringing to a halt earthly business, allows man to know that he is in the care of a providence ordering all things in a fashion beyond his comprehension'. But the study is not always this reductive, the Hamiltons are sensitive to Updike's allusiveness, not confined just to Bible or Karl Barth or Kierkegaard but also to sources as varied as Robert Herrick (about whom Updike wrote his Harvard thesis) or Pliny's *Natural History*. However, one is often compelled to object to the way in which they interpret the function of the allusions. Nevertheless, the Hamiltons hold a significant position in Updikean criticism for their pioneering work.

Like the Hamiltons, George Hunt too preoccupies himself with the religious overtones of Updike's work in *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion and Art*. His thesis is that these aspects characterize the predominant subject matter, thematic concerns and central questions found throughout Updike's fiction. The focus in the early fiction

is on religion, beginning with *The Music school* it is on sex, and with *A Month of Sundays*, art and the problems relating to fictional creation come to the fore. Hunt insists, 'like a musical composition . . . , these are his motives or tonic centers that, even when muted or wedded with subordinate themes, still resonate for the attentive listener'. He seeks to demonstrate that Updike has a most sophisticated religio-artistic vision, informed and often shaped by a very complex and subtle theology. Besides, Hunt shows how the ideas of such figures as Karl Barth, Soren Kierkegaard and Carl Jung can increase one's understanding of Updike's world. He shows Barth's attitude toward evil, and the relevance of this attitude to Updike's treatment of Rabbit Angstrom; Kierkegaard's ideas about dread, guilt and sin particularly as they relate to sexuality, which in Updike's estimate, according to Hunt, is not only psychologically complex but also morally and religiously ambivalent. Hunt also suggests the possible influence on Updike of the 'compellingly dramatic voices' of these theologians, as well as of their distinctive dialectical and ambiguous modes of argumentation.

In addition, Hunt seized upon his own knowledge of Carl Jung's theories about the anima and individuation to illuminate Updike's fiction, in particular
Of the Farm and A Month of Sundays. Marshfield's month records a man's psychic movement from his concern with his ego—the dwelling place of his conscious life, to his encounter with the unconscious symbol of the self. Besides, Hunt refers to Karl Barth, Kierkegaard, John Bunyan, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, Denis de Rougemont, Northrop Frye, Joseph Campbell and R.W.B. Lewis. In other words, he seizes upon whatever idea appeals to him to explain what he regards as the resonances of Updike's fiction.

Some critics, focussing on the religious implications of Updike's work, read his work and his concept of love and adultery in the light of Karl Barth's theology. Garry Waller's Updike's Couples: Barthian Parable forwards the thesis that it is Karl Barth's stance of compassionate neo-orthodoxy that provides the distinctive moral backbone for Couples. Waller points to the novel's end and asserts, Barth's theology accepts men as they are and the novel's happy end is in keeping with Barth's view that God wills everything to be ultimately well in the apparently worst of all possible worlds. Bernard Schopen in Faith, Morality and the

17. Waller, Gary, Updike's Couples: A Barthian Parable, Research Studies, 40: 8, 1972
Novels of John Updike\(^{18}\) says that Updike's faith is christian but the christian perspectives which link faith with an absolute and divinely ordered morality do not apply to it. Schopen analyses Barth's complex theology as reviewed by Updike in *Anselm: Fides Quarrens Intellectum*;\(^{19}\) since Updike believes in Barth's notion of God as 'wholly other' and determines his faith only with the profession of Apostle's Creed, it contains no inherent moral system. Therefore, he rejects the notion that literature should inculcate moral principles. This factor determines much of the ambiguous attitude of Updike's protagonists who are religious and adulterous at the same time.

In *Updike's idea of Reification*,\(^{20}\) Terence Doody posits the idea of reification based upon the idea of God's existence that Updike had been developing since his first novel. Doody argues that Updike believes that things are not 'nullity' but are suggestive of God, and that there is an 'immanence in things.' About the ethical questions he holds the belief that


morality is a relative matter compared to the absolutes of life which are death and the physical relations of bodies to each other.

The existentialist aspects of Updikes work have been explored by David Galloway.\textsuperscript{21} He explores the theme of the existence of an individual in a meaningless universe—a universe in which precepts of religious orthodoxy seem increasingly less relevant. Galloway views \textit{The Poorhouse Fair} as a novel of dismissal which suggests the failure of various traditional systems to fulfill contemporary man's spiritual needs. Galloway sees Updike attacking humanism as one of the life denying impulses of the age. He views Rabbit as a saint with a vision of the absurd and the need to find a world in which he can again experience the sacredness of achievement. Rabbit, he claims, wants to comfort and heal and is selfish only in the manner of the searcher after truth. Rabbit rebels against the wasteland into which he is born and is consistently opposing the reality which he encounters. Rabbit becomes an absurd hero, and because of the highly spiritual devotion to this gesture against the world, he becomes a saint. Galloway further stresses that Updike's own

\textsuperscript{21} Galloway, David \textit{The Absurd Hero in American Fiction}, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1966.
faith is 'capricious', and he continues to explore rituals which sustain men in a Godless universe. In *The Centaur* too, Updike describes a world devoid of meaning. George is not claimed as a true existentialist hero by Galloway as he lacks a vision of absurdity; Peter, however, provides this awareness.

A second existentialist interpretation of Updike published around the same time is Sidney Finkelstein's *Existentialism and American Literature.*[^22] In his analysis of *Rabbit, Run*, he identifies Rabbit as defeated by a life so antagonistic, so impossible to understand and therefore cope with, that his struggles are only pathetic, impotent gestures. He says that Rabbit's feeling of all encompassing alienation is not so much due to his complaints against family or conditions of life, as due to his own emptiness which conditions his alienated relations to others. According to Finkelstein, Updike sees contemporary America as a home of petrified humanity. America's bleakness is ascribed to the blind and meaningless movement of life itself. In *The Centaur*, the mythic parallels of the story are, in fact, an attempt to give the bleakness of small town America a philosophic

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universality, to intimate that the world has not progressed but according to Nietzchean view has merely decayed and hardened.

Howard Harper, too, reads Updike as an existential novelist and around this premise builds a series of useful readings of the novels upto Of the Farm. He argues that in the first novel The Poorhouse Fair the belief in God is shown to be a spiritual necessity stronger than humanitarian illusions of the welfare state. But in the later work, God becomes increasingly vestigial, a ceremonial ideal to be invoked against the world. Harper sees Chiron as the perfect symbol for existential man, at home in neither material nor spiritual realm.

In another study, Sukhbir Singh shows that Updike treats the question of man’s survival in a society where God has failed, leaving man in the void of nihilism. His protagonists are always curious to feel the presence of God in their universe.


Therefore, they make persistent efforts over the abyss of spiritual nothingness until they receive the intimation of the supernatural through the natural phenomena. He further asserts that Updike considers the impact of a man's disillusionment with life and disbelief in God on his domestic life and social existence. The characters strive for an indication of God's existence and persistently struggle for a divine morality to achieve stability and identity. While grappling with their spiritual doubts, existential anxieties and moral uncertainties, Updike's heroes initially develop the feelings of futility and meaninglessness which have disastrous effects on their lives in society.

During the late nineteen sixties and early seventies several book length studies appeared on Updike. Rachael Burchard's *John Updike: Yea Sayings* traces Updike's career up to *Couples* and also attempts to prove that he has 'something to say', in this instance a serious, honest and—despite ambiguity—yea saying to the goodness of life. According to Burchard, Updike's focus is on man's search for answers—much of what he says is in the form of questions. He asks questions about the meaning of

life in our time. He seeks answers to the age old questions about man's relationship to man, the existence of God, and the relation of the individual to Him, he asks about immortality. The influences of various religious and existentiatist philosophies are evident, but none is offered as a final interpretation of life.

Larry Taylor analyses Updike's central theme as pastoral and anti pastoral in our time. He focuses primarily on pastoral and anti pastoral conventions, mentioning that for the pastoral to exist, the sophisticated author's positive attitude toward the rural setting and unsophisticated characters is crucial. The study proceeds chronologically through Updike's fiction, arguing that early in his career he tends to view pastoralism positively, whereas later on he becomes progressively more satiric and ironic in his treatment of pastoral assumptions about life. He reads *Rabbit, Run* as 'a type of fable, with satiric overtones', *The Centaur* as a pastoral elegy on the analogy of 'Lycidas', *Couples* as an indictment of pastoralism and compares Updike with the Hawthorne of 'The Maypole of Merry Mount'—the antipastoralist who longs to be a pastoralist.

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Robert Detweiler attempts to show how Updike's novels' mythic patterns relate to the modern reality. Detweiler is not only sensitive to the complexities of theme but also to the manner in which technique may inform theme and help to create it. He calls Updike's technique in *The Poorhouse Fair* as 'non-protagonist strategy' as he believes that the protagonist Hook and his adversary Conner are accented enough to project negatively the ironic theme but not adequately emphasized to dominate the novel. He is helpful in his explanation of the 'cumulation epiphany' technique in *Pigeon Feathers*, and in his analysis of the surrealist (expansion of reality through distortion) and cubistic (simultaneous perception of many facets of personality and action) techniques in *The Centaur*, and the varieties of tone in the same novel. In his analysis of *Rabbit Redux* he says that the action is based on the imagery and is reinforced by the history. Detweiler views Updike as an experimenter in fiction, as a man who continually takes risks while writing 'secular baroques, which he defines as 'elaborate, texture conscious, structurally balanced, highly controlled, mythologically resonant fiction, yet a kind that does not celebrate such a

rich and ordered world but instead ironically marks its passing. Detweiler’s thesis is flexible enough to enable him to respond to Updike’s versatility, but sufficiently firm to provide a base for his discussions.

Edward Vargo’s *Rainstorms and Fire: Ritual in the Novels of John Updike* is much influenced by the Hamilton’s Christian reading of Updike. According to Vargo, Updike tries in his fiction to visualize the transcendent through his own and sometimes his characters’ sophisticated use of ritual—the various components of which are pattern, myth and celebration. In his book, he tries to place Updike in various literary traditions, employs literary analogues, and consistently and thoughtfully attempts to parallel Updike with other writers. In his opening chapter, he establishes analogues between Updike, J.D. Salinger and Flannery O’Connor in their shared hope for some kind of spiritual rebirth; contrasts Updike with Ken Kesey and Joseph Heller. His later pays attention to Updike and Trollope, to Updike and Andrew Wyeth and compares Updike and Hawthorne in their self-consciousness as stylists, as writers ‘who rely on ambivalent symbolism at key points in their narratives’ and are also concerned

with Puritanism in America, with the sin and guilt of their own age.

Vargo's thesis, however, adds little to what is already said about Updike; the notion of 'sacred time' in *The Poorhouse Fair*, the repetitive ritual and 'the need for celebration' in *Rabbit, Run*; the coalescing of 'pattern, myth and celebration in *The Centaur*; the notion of 'sacred place' in *Of The Farm*, and the final focus, in *Couples* and *Rabbit Redux* upon the desperate search for ceremonies to bring wholeness into a dehumanized world. Vargo insists that Updike is continually depicting man's craving 'for the divinely or humanly transcendent' and the thrust for the rituals of Updike characters stems from the desire for life, from their fear of death. His analysis of the novels reduces them to schema: the Updike of *The Poorhouse Fair* is thus said to be a prophet; Harry's limitation in *Rabbit Run* is said to be his failure to walk the straight line of the christian paradox instead of zigzagging across his life; *The Centaur* is said to declare the existence of God in our world of spirit and matter, a central question *Of the Farm* is posed as whether belief in heaven can persist at all once man has rejected the right order in creation, Freddy Thorne and Skeeter are both said to embody pseudo
religions and so on.

Joyce Markle's *Fighters and Lovers* despite the subtitle *Theme in the Novels of John Updike*,\(^{29}\) is a critical study in which form complements meaning in Updike's work, particularly in her analysis of Updike's complex imagery. The title points to her thesis that in almost all of Updike's novels there exists a protagonist with a 'vivid sense of human specialness' who fights against the pressure towards two types of death - physical and metaphorical (the death by dehumanization). Opposed to this protagonist is often a person who is well intentioned but a spiritually sterile man who fails to recognize peoples' sense of their specialness. In this study Updike is shown an dealing with essentially the same problems in each of the serious novels but as a group all demonstrate a progression of approach. The Conner-Hook conflict of the first novel is said to be taken up by the Rabbit-Eccles conflict in the second. Caldwell in *The Centaur* is said to embrace, to offer himself to that community of man that Rabbit had finally rejected. Joey is a special case who is trapped by Oedipal conflicts which restrict his own freedom.

to love others, and also reflects Rabbit's and Piet's ambivalent relationships to women. The original conflicts are said to be resolved in Couples in which Freddy serves the function of Conner and Eccles, and Piet is like Joey and Rabbit, but finally settles down for mediocrity in the form of accepting earthly Foxy and abandons the special and angelic Angela.

Markle sees other aspects of these patterns like Updike's use of increasing and decreasing 'yes, but' conflicts, which increases with each book and the force of the moral framework decrease until Bech: A Book. According to her, Updike sees Christianity as contributing to one's sense of worth, but the author's reservations about Christianity become increasingly obvious after The Poorhouse Fair. Markle also takes into account Updike's intricate imagery which she sees tied to his concerns as a graphic artist, as painter and cartoonist, to his vivid sense of colour, to his constant view of reality as many layered. She concludes that Updike is a self conscious artist who is tuned to the visions and neuroses of middle and upper middle class suburbanites, who brings to the fore, the responses of a generation to a Godless universe.
Suzanne Henning Uphaus in her book length study on John Updike identifies the common theme behind Updike's writing as the profound religious searching that grows from a sense of despair, a quest in which doubt figures desperately with faith. There is the physical natural world in his fiction apprehended by the body through its senses and appetites, and there is also a supernatural world apprehended by the soul, through faith. Thus, she sees Updike's characters as dichotomous creatures split between physical desires and spiritual yearning. Updike's protagonist in his desperate search for significances finds that his spirit is suffocated by the material world.

This theme of quest is taken up by Joseph Waldmeir in *Only An Occasional Rutabaga: American Fiction Since 1945*. For the critic, Updike resembles most of the best novelists since 1945 because he is a quest novelist, focussing on characters who search for value; unlike most of his contemporaries, however Updike does not give up his belief that there is something to find of essential, or even transcendent


value. This assumption obstructs any tendency to turn his naturalistic or existential frame of reference into doctrine. Sex, in the quest, becomes the substitute for God and laws; sin becomes 'The failure to love strongly enough to accept responsibility'. Joseph Waldmeir in 'It's The Going That's Important, Not The Getting There: Rabbit's Questing Non-Quest'\textsuperscript{32} concudes that Updike's real concern is a critical examinatin of the temptations, the problems, the questions and the answers as they conflict both inside and outside the protagonist, alternatingly promising and denying solutions to the quest. It is a question of emphasis: perception and examination rather than revelation are, in fact, the theme; the quest functions primarily as a structural motif. Waldmeir very effectively delineates the stages in Rabbit's quest and shows how Updike controls the reader's involvement at each stage.

Some critics have pointed out the presence of Oedipal conflict in Updike novels. The Politics of Reflexivity\textsuperscript{33} offers a psychological interpretation of


Rabbit, Run. The critic contends that Rabbit's psychology of early childhood affects all his relations. The critic further says that Rabbit cannot choose freely the shape of his relations to others because of oedipal entanglements in which he has always found himself. The critic establishes his point by interpreting various incidents and imagery of the novel in this light. Jack De Bellis in Oedipal Angstrom\textsuperscript{34} pursues the same theme in Rabbit, Run. Some other critics have also pointed out at the underlying Oedipal conflict in Updike's various novels, especially the Rabbit Quartet and Of the Farm.

Tony Tanner's essay A Compromised Environment\textsuperscript{35} centres on his observation of Updike's fear of entropy, the basic dread in Updike's work—the fear of death, the fact of decay and the inevitable collapse into nothingness. Although dealing with the social aspect of the suburban America, his work is edged with dread. Tanner links Updike's feeling to the Darwinian demonstration that 'the organic world, for all its seemingly engineered complexity, might be

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a self—winnowing chaos'. The critic asserts that the universal fact of continuous erosion is a haunting shadow in Updike's world and 'waste' is an obsession in his works and the horror of a wasting world brings him quiet close to writers like Pynchon. Tanner's most significant observation is about the conflict (which tears at many of Updike's characters) between the fear of loving their selfhood by becoming submerged in their environment and their intuition that life in that environment is the best antidote to that great cosmic dread and sense of universal waste that besets them.

Some critics have objected to the idea of interpreting Updike in allegorical terms. S.A. Zylstra's *John Updike And The Parabolic Nature Of The World*[^36] is a plea against overly allegorical readings of Updike's work and in favour of a respect for the writer's openness. Working from Auden's definition of Parables (secular stories with no overt religious overtones), Zylstra suggests that Updike's fiction is parabolic and Updike's imagination retains a character open to all readers irrespective of their belief, although Zylstra implies that Updike hopes that his

readers will respond to the spiritual implications of his parables.

Robert Regan in *Updike's Symbol Of The Center*\(^\text{37}\) notes the numerous circle images in Updike's work, and asserts that they are related to the writer's interest in the Jungian 'mandala'—the symbol of psychic integration—and Updike's Christian belief that mandala figures are gifts from God. Focussing primarily on *Midpoint*, *First Person Singular* in *Assorted Prose*, and *Pigeon Feathers*, Regan observes how the centers in Updike's work faithfully exemplify mysterious centres of life. Updike agrees with Karl Barth that there is no way for the individuals to reach God, but there is a way from God to us. His chosen form of communication is through mandala imagery. Updike's purpose as a writer is to make his readers see, if not necessarily understand, the principle of unity that exists in the universe. David Kern in *Pigeon Feathers* is transported into mystery through circles. According to Regan, the hypothesis of Updike's art is that rapture of the first creator should be emulated by all creators; thus he wrote circular stories.

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Mary Allen and some other critics have discussed the feminist as well as the gender studies of Updike's work. Allen in *John Updike's Love of Dull Bovine Beauty* discusses Updike's dependence in his fiction on the idea of the 'undeniably stupid women'. Referring to *Rabbit Redux*, she comments that Updike allows his bias for the stupid-sexual woman to intrude to the point of forcing a violent death upon an intelligent girl like Jill whom he dislikes and cannot deal with. She further states that Updike's horror of the powerful manipulative mother turns him, with an extra fondness, to the docile woman who can be dominated. The Oedipal problem for Updike seems to open the field to all others, a wide and delicious playground for his men. Hardly a woman here is without sexual appeal and everything can be forgiven except frigidity.

Josephine Hendin observes that, Updike's male chauvinists look at women as the solitary source of meaning in life. Hendin focusses on one force-the


Oedipal conflict using her analysis of it as the impetus for her comments: ‘Joey’s (Of The Farm) self hatred turns to hatred for his wife who is the living sign of his bad taste’. Hendin believes that Updike has in his novels explored male freedom as a myth, men are Adams who are beckoned by Eves to fall from the grace of maleness into a life of labour. God reveals destiny to man through marriage. Updike in fact, links the decline of society with the decline of masculinity. George Bodmer\(^{40}\) sees Updike’s males as confronting a bewildering change in the social order. Their wives and female counterparts demand an equality of experience which they are unable to understand. They retreat into an attitude of nostalgia for simpler times. For such heroes women are inspiration or even a romantic landscape on which their lives are played out. Although inspired by women, they are paralyzed by their commitment to traditions which tie them down to rigid and inoperable roles.

Donald Greiner in his book *Adultery in the American Novels*\(^1\) says that Updike has avoided the topics of apocalypse in his novels and concentrates on the mundane ordinariness of the daily routine. His domestic novels project adultery as the threat to the cohesiveness of family. Greiner links Updike to a tradition of adultery in the American novel, discussing Hawthorne, Henry James and Updike, Greiner discusses how these writers handle similar interests in realistic depiction of domestic detail, portrayal of character, and the role of adultery in the daily affairs that comprise the social contract. He thinks that these novelists, writing in different times and renowned in their eras for dissection of adultery, treat basically the same material. James responds to adultery from a social perspective, while Updike insists on an individual reaction that is denied the traditional sureties of social pressure and moral precept. The mundane particulars for Updike are an indication of spiritual belief, while James has no sense of religious belief. In this matter Greiner links Updike with Hawthorne, adultery for whom was closely linked with moral and spiritual

concerns. Greiner argues in his essay *Body And Soul: John Updike And The Scarlet Letter*\(^\text{42}\) that the primary area in which Updike and Hawthorne meet is the unity of religion, sexual transgression, and guilt. Erotic desire and religious sensibility shape the centers of their fiction. Hawthorne’s novel is characterized by a war between flesh and spirit, his characters have an overwhelming sense of guilt without any conviction of sin, whereas Updike characters slough off the guilt and emerge triumphantly confident.

The erotic behaviour of Updike’s male protagonists is also analyzed by Elizabeth Tallent in her book on Updike’s erotic heroes.\(^\text{43}\) She argues that the desire for retreat, and the equal and opposite yearning for erotic risk, provide the primary tensions for much of Updike’s fiction. Updikes heroes are conceited lovers, they turn their mistresses into wives and even displace the men to whom their mistresses are married. The single great domestic truth accessible to nearly all of Updike’s characters


is marriage. the single great uncertainty is posed by the possibility of adultery. The tension between the two polarities works to assure married men that they are alive. They are acquainted with the possibility of extinction and hence adultery becomes more than a way of proving they are alive, it becomes a way of proving they will never die.

A few sociological studies of Updike's works are worth mentioning. Donald Greiner in *John Updike's Novels* states that he has no definite thesis for Updike's novels and wants to discuss them at the thematic level. In his book he takes into account three novels of the Rabbit quartet and some other novels. With a close analysis of the text, in terms of the development of the character, his position in society, the changing trends of American politics, culture and society and their direct impact on an individual's responses, Greiner concludes that Updike is too prolific and unpredictable, and his work cannot be confined to a single thesis. Greiner gives brief overviews of the critical reception of the novels and sometimes points at the literary influences like Hawthorne and Karl Barth on Updike.

Matthew Wilson in his article *The Rabbit Tetralogy: From Solitude To Society To Solitude Again* makes a significant study of the Rabbit Quartet. He holds that Harry's desperate search for a valid identity in the chaotic society is also due to his sense of alienation as he is not able to merge with it. This theme of quest for identity is traced throughout the Quartet.

Many critics have drawn similarities between Updike's fiction and the writings of his contemporaries. George Searles in *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike* attempts to consider Roth and Updike together. Searles believes that since both Roth and Updike are contemporaries and write about the same locale, their fiction hints at interesting parallels. They address the same large social issues—ethnic identity, family relationships, individual moral responsibility and guilt, sexuality and romantic love, materialism and social mores in general.

Dilvo Ristoff is of the opinion that the fiction of John Updike has in it much of contemporary


history. In his book *The Presence Of Contemporary America In The Rabbit Trilogy*\(^{47}\), he observes that Updike’s fiction, the Rabbit Trilogy in particular, unfolds the rich details of the various political, economic events as well as the movements of the decade in each novel. He shows how Updike’s characters are an unconscious product of their times, how they are influenced by these social changes and how they react to them.

Thus, we can see that there has always been a great divergence of views about Updike’s works. Some of the critical work are just a repetition of the previous works.

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