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The basic objective of my proposed thesis is to make an intertextual study between Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and John Updike’s “The Scarlet Letter Trilogy” or “Hawthorne Novels”. In an interview with Prof. Sukhbir Singh (Osmania University, Hyderabad) Updike clarifies what he terms his “Hawthorne novels”. Updike’s three later novels – *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger’s Version* (1986) and *S* (1988) – comprise his “Hawthorne novels”. Each of these novels exhibits explicit intertextual resonances with Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, and these three novels are therefore known as “The Scarlet Letter Trilogy” of John Updike. Ian Ousby in his *Cambridge Guide to Fiction in English* (1998) observes that John Updike’s *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger’s Version* (1986) and *S* (1988) comprise “The Scarlet Letter Trilogy”. Robert M. Luscher endorses almost the same opinion when he calls these three novels “the trilogy of modern offshoots of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*”.

These three novels engage themselves in an intertextual dialogue with Hawthorne’s masterpiece and are an intertextual rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter* from the viewpoint of the three major characters involved in the
mythical adulterous triangle: Hester Prynne, Roger Chillingworth and Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale. *A Month of Sundays* (1975) which, in Updike’s own words, “was the first of these Hawthorne novels” ⁴, is an intertextual rewriting of Hawthorne’s book from the viewpoint of Arthur Dimmesdale, the adulterous clergyman. *Roger’s Version* (1986) retells Hawthorne’s book from the viewpoint of Roger Chillingworth and *S* (1988), the final instalment in Updike’s Trilogy, is a reorientation of Hawthorne’s classic from the viewpoint of the heroine, Hester Prynne.

“I think Hawthorne remains a very interesting writer and has a lot to say to modern writers” ⁵, observes Updike who was haunted by a sense of what we may call his “Hawthorne obsession”. Updike’s “Hawthorne novels” reexamine *The Scarlet Letter* from a strictly twentieth-century background.

Hawthorne was primarily concerned with the moral and psychological issues that racked the human heart. The staple of Hawthorne’s novels comprise passionate love, puritanical severity, adultery, the question of morality and finally, the human obsession with sin and guilt. After more than a century, Updike amazingly reflects almost the same thematic concerns as Hawthorne, albeit in a completely different milieu befitting his
twentieth-century middle-class suburban background. Updike’s “Hawthorne novels” can thus be said to be a reincarnation of the Hawthornesque spirit with the body of a strictly twentieth-century middle-class society.

Born on 18 March 1932, John Hoyer Updike was the son of Wesley Russell Updike who taught Mathematics at Shillington High School and Linda Grace Hoyer Updike. Updike happens to be one of the most prolific writers of the world today. His literary output is simply both outstanding and astounding: twenty-one novels, a host of short fiction, volumes of short stories, seven collections of poems, one play, seven volumes of critical writings, articles and critical essays, plenty of uncollected scattered articles and lectures, five books for children, one book on painting and art, one memoir, plenty of interviews and what not! But such plenitude does not necessarily attest an artist’s aesthetic merit. If Updike’s literary output is quantitatively high, it is qualitatively well-acknowledged. A host of his short stories have been included in O. Henry Prize Stories and in The Best American Short Stories. Updike’s Rabbit Is Rich (1981), his third instalment in his famous “Rabbit Tetralogy”, clinched the most coveted Pulitzer Prize in 1981 and bagged the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1982. Rightly has John Cheever observed, “How inestimable is the contribution he
(Updike) makes to western civilization”. In 1990 Rabbit at Rest, his fourth and final issue in the Rabbit Tetralogy, received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction as well as the Critics Circle Award. Updike was the recipient of the Conch Republic Prize for Literature and the Common Wealth Award in 1993. Besides, he received a host of other prestigious awards. Suffice it to say, these awards and honours speak volumes for the qualitative mettle of John Updike. The most recent feather added to Updike’s cap was his winning the Rea Award in 2006, a $30,000 honour for making a “significant contribution to the discipline of the short story as an art form”.

Modern Fiction Studies has brought out two especial issues – 1974 Spring and 1991 Spring – exclusively devoted to Updike, a rare honour conferred on no other living author at present and on only six other writers in the journal’s history: James Joyce, Conrad, Faulkner, Hemingway, Henry James and Virginia Woolf. Harold Bloom has brought out one especial issue (1987) on Updike in his Modern Critical Views Series published from Chelsea House Publishers, New York. Michiko Kakutani rightly describes Updike as “this country’s one all-around man of letters”, and James Wolcott endorses the same opinion saying, “Clearly, no living American
novelist can match Updike in the range and responsiveness of his reading”. 9

As Frederick Crews has so rightly observed:

With the possible exception of [...] Norman Mailer, no living American writer has been more closely watched. 10

As Alison Lurie, one reviewer of Updike, has commented, “At his best [Updike] is, more truly than John Cheever, the Chekhov of American suburbia” 11.

And yet the critics of Updike have not always been lenient to him. Updikean criticism is broadly divided into two distinct camps: anti-Updikean critics and pro-Updikean critics. The first group, i.e., the detractors of Updike, are represented by John Aldridge, Norman Podhoretz, Norman Mailer, Harold Bloom, D. J. Enright, Mary Allen, etc. John Aldridge skeptically observes that John Updike with his “charming but limited gifts might expect to make his way in time to a position of some security in the second or just possibly the third rank of serious American novelists” 12. Aldridge even impugns the success and celebrity of Updike as undeserving:
John Updike is one of those writers whom we have generated a flamboyance of celebrity quite out of keeping with the value of anything they have so far written.

In his caustic criticism of Updike, Aldridge consigns him to a marginal authorial status and relegates him to insignificance through a series of forthright negations:

Mr. Updike has none of the attributes we conventionally associate with major literary talent. He does not have an interesting mind. He does not possess remarkable narrative gifts or a distinguished style. He does not create dynamic or colorful or deeply meaningful characters. He does not confront the reader with dramatic situations that bear the mark of an original or unique manner of seeing and responding to experience. He does not challenge the imagination, or stimulate, shock, or educate it.

But one should note that when Aldridge censured Updike as a minor writer in 1966, the latter was an immature artist and that most of Updike’s best mature works were yet to be written.
Commenting on the ceremonial style of John Updike, Richard H. Rupp contends that "Updike's style circles relentlessly on the circumference of experience, seeking entry into its center". Comparing the ceremonial style of Updike with Cheever, Rupp argues that Updike "simply has no starting point for natural ceremonies", and that his "style bears the double burden of making a world and making it festive". No less a writer than Norman Mailer receives Updike rather skeptically:

Updike could become the best of our literary novelists if he could forget about style and go deeper into the literature of sex.

Norman Podhoretz feels amazed at Updike's success and reputation as a literary artist. Condemning Updike's style as "overly lyrical, bloated like a child who has eaten too much candy", Podhoretz censures Updike as someone who "had no mind at all". D. J. Enright, in spite of acknowledging the gifted style of Updike, refuses to recognize him as a gifted author:
John Updike is a remarkably skilled writer, but to me he seems hardly an author at all. He is less a maker than a dismantler, [...].

[Emphasis added]

Harold Bloom preserves his sugar-coated criticism for John Updike in his ‘Introduction’ to Modern Critical Views series on John Updike (1987). Bloom contends that Updike’s potentiality as a stylist is lost in the maze of his religious obscurity:

John Updike, perhaps the most considerable stylist among the writers of fiction in his American generation, is one of a group of contemporary novelists who are somewhat victimized aesthetically by their conventional religious yearning. Commenting on Updike’s three Rabbit novels, Bloom feels that “they scarcely sustain rereading, at least in my experience” (1). It is rather difficult to situate Updike in the American literary tradition and Bloom argues that “Updike comes a little short of his own literary tradition, the line that goes from Hawthorne through James and Conrad on to Fitzgerald and Hemingway” (6).
Mary Allen takes a strong feminist stance and inveighs against Updike for his so-called or alleged hyper-obsession in the female anatomy and for sex:

And for the woman who would be anything more than a vegetable-wife, this writer (Updike) is the cunning enemy who would affectionately lull all womankind away from anything that has to do with life of the mind [...]. Hardly a woman here is without sexual appeal. 18

Allen, in a sardonic tone castigates Updike for parrying the basic problems and needs of women and highlighting their bodies:

Updike’s most tender reverence is reserved for women’s bodies. The elegant style with which he describes female anatomy often becomes overwrought, [...]. Even in the explicit accounts of sexual activity, some of them ludicrous and even perhaps pornographic, there is an awe for the physical aspect of women. This form of adoration is far from a true consideration of women’s needs, not taking into account their feelings and the consequences to them of sexual relations, [...] (74).

[Emphasis added]
While Guerin La Course feels that Updike “relies, apparently, on language than thought, sense rather than sensibility, wit rather than wisdom”, Robert S. Gingher observes that “many of the elements of Updike have been stripped and squeezed through the eye of a theological needle”, and feels that it is because of his forte as a stylist that Updike has virtually overlooked greater and more important aspects of life as love and death.

This adverse criticism notwithstanding, Updike happens to be still very much popular among his readers. In an interview with Charles Samuels, Updike remarked that he has not ceased from writing because the “rhythm of my life and oeuvre demanded it, not to placate hallucinatory critical voices”.

To come to pro-Updikean criticism. Alice Hamilton and Kenneth Hamilton in The Elements of John Updike try to establish Updike as a serious writer who deserves especial attention. A painstakingly thoroughgoing criticism, it deals with the basic thematic
preoccupations of John Updike, namely, sex, religion, nostalgia, death, marriage, etc. As the Hamiltons so aptly observe:

This study has been undertaken because of our conviction that John Updike is one of the most elegant and most serious authors of our age. The artistry of his style is widely recognized, but the seriousness of what he has to say is not so generally admitted (7).

George Hunt makes an illuminating study of Updike’s thematic preoccupations with sex, religion and art. Hunt argues that sex, religion and art “characterize the predominant subject matter, thematic concerns, and central questions found throughout his [Updike’s] adult fiction […] Like a musical composition with themes and variations, these are his motives or tonic centers that, even when muted or wedded with subordinate themes, still resonate for the attentive listener” (2). Hunt, however, feels that “the sexual scenes in his novels often constitute those novels’ weakest sections, that is, the least artistically integrated, the most dramatically unrealized, the least likely to be tempered by wit” (7). Updike has often been the subject of
comparative study. John Neary makes a comparative study between what he calls "Fowles's self-canceling fiction of nothingness and Updike's substance-affirming fiction of somethingness" (176). Neary brings into focus the modes of experimentations like multiple-endings and self-reflexive narratives in both the writers. Similarly, George J. Searles offers us an assiduous comparative study of the novels of Updike and Philp Roth.

Perhaps the most prominent pro-Updikean critic is Donald J. Greiner who has already published three books on Updike, apart from a host of scattered essays on him. Greiner has made an assiduous effort to make a detailed thematic study of Updike’s novels in John Updike’s Novels (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1984). “My primary goal is”, says Greiner, “not to urge a thesis on the canon (of Updike) but to offer an informed and careful reading of the novels in order to isolate and discuss the qualities that make Updike a great writer” (‘Preface’, ix). Greiner may be called a complete Updike critic in that he has cast his net wide also to make a comprehensive study of Updike’s short stories, poems, prose and play (Buchanan Dying) in The Other John Updike: Poems, Short Stories, Prose, Play (Athens: Ohio University
Press, 1981). In yet another interesting study, Greiner compares the treatment of adultery by Hawthorne, James and Updike. Greiner feels that Updike's treatment of adultery "unites both James and Hawthorne in applying a religious sensibility to a social dilemma" and argues that "Updike is the contemporary inheritor of the Hawthorne-James literary continuum".


According to Updike sex is the closest to a religious experience that the physical world provides, so the protagonist often searches for spiritual satisfaction in sexual encounters. He seeks
the ideal lover who will provide for him the transcendent experience.

Elizabeth Tallent's *Married Men and Magic Tricks: John Updike's Erotic Heroes* (Berkeley: creative Arts, 1982) dwells on aspects of marriage, adultery and permissiveness in Updike's *The Poorhouse Fair, Of the Farm, Marry Me, Couples, Bech is Back* and *Rabbit, Run*.

Larry E. Taylor makes a unique study of Updike's fiction in *Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971). A new angle of Updikean criticism, Taylor takes up aspects of pastoralism and argues that "the pastoral and anti-pastoral modes will always deal with myth and metaphor" (10). Taylor deals with what he calls "pastoral myth" in Updike. What Taylor wants to pinpoint in his thesis is "not merely that the pattern [pastoral and anti-pastoral patterns], but also that the pattern exists as a strong, historically traceable current in the American literary tradition [...] For Updike, the past intrudes into the present with a power more like a reincarnation than an apparition; [...]" (22).
Following Taylor, Robert Detweiler in his *John Updike* 27, most cogently argues that Updike’s oeuvre is “an elaborate, texture conscious, structurally balanced, highly controlled, mythically resonant fiction” and that “their mythic (and post-mythic patterns relate to a disjunctive modern reality, causing an ironic awareness to emerge”. Updike’s penchant for nostalgia, according to Detweiler harks back to “a tradition as old as Hawthorne”.


Updike has consistently associated the marital transgression of his characters with metaphysical or religious longings, as if to suggest that adulterous carvings in our affluent rootless era are the confused expression of an instinct for freedom itself, a rebellion against the confinements of age and circumstance (3). In a brilliant essay entitled “Post-Pill Paradise Lost: John Updike’s Couples” published in Harold Bloom’s *Modern Critical Views* Series on John Updike
(New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987) a critic of the stature of David Lodge sees Updike as Hawthorne's literary descendant:

Indeed, the more one dwells on the comparison, the more plausible it becomes to see Hawthorne as Updike's literary ancestor among the classic American novelists (34).

James A. Schiff, one of the leading pro-Updikean critics, has focussed on the unexplored and unnoticed avenue of Updike's criticism in his article "Updike Ignored: The Contemporary Independent Critic". As Schiff has so keenly observed:

Except for reviews, Updike's critical work - Assorted Prose (1965), Picked-up Pieces (1975), Hugging the Shore (1983), Just Looking (1989) and Odd Jobs (1991) - has received little consideration. 28


As Luscher has so keenly observed that in his short fiction Updike wanted to "obtain insight by discovering meaningful artifacts that deserve
Luscher has struck the right note for Updike’s short fiction and pithily sums up the preponderant spirit of it:

Taken as a whole, Updike’s canon of short fiction presents a composite portrait of a specimen middle-American life, traced through its varying phases: from the sketches of an “innocuous boyhood” filled with dreams of flight; to the subsequent nostalgic excursion into memories of seemingly halcyon days; to the entry into an era of domestic strife exacerbated by changing personal needs and social mores; to separation from past sources of ambivalent bliss and a series of fatiguing reassessments; to a renewed dedication to redeeming a provisional trust with a full consciousness of human failings\(^{(155)}\).

Updike is distinct from his contemporary writers in his strong allegiance to theosophy and religion. Consequently his fiction is steeped in rituals, epiphanies, visitation of the numen, etc. In an interesting study Edward P. Vargo\(^{29}\) explores this aspect in Updike’s fiction. Almost in the angle provided by Vargo, recently James Yerkes
has made an excellent study of Updike’s penchant for religious aspects.


In addition to the amplitude of books on Updike, there are plenty of stimulating articles and essays which deserve especial mention. George Hunt makes a profound comparative study of Updike and Cheever in “Religious Themes in the Fiction of John Updike and John Cheever” 31. Raymond Wilson’s “Roger’s Version: Updike’s Negative Solid Model of The Scarlet Letter”, published in *Modern Fiction*...
Studies (35, Summer 1989), is yet another excellent study of Updike’s application of “reversal strategy”.

Tony Tanner in his article “A compromised Environment” reprinted in Harold Bloom’s Modern Critical Views conceives of New England suburbia as the “compromised environment”, and argues that Updike faithfully captures the American middle-class experiences with all their intricacies:

Just how people live with and within that compromise, and how they die of it, is Updike’s avowed subject; and where many contemporary American novelists tend to see the social environment as a generalized panorama of threatening impositions and falsifying shapes, Updike accepts it as the given world for his characters, the one and only locate in which they will learn what they learn and lose what they lose.

Robert Alton Regan’s “Updike’s Symbol of the Center” examines Updike’s art from a neo-Kantian point of view. Regan argues, “Updike’s art has stridently joined the neo-Kantian refrain that
structure does not incarcerate but liberates the spirit. Order is liberation from chaos and anarchy”.

While Matthew Wilson traces out the evolution of Harry Rabbit Angstrom in Updike’s “Rabbit Tetralogy” in his article “The Rabbit Tetralogy: From Solitude to Society to Solitude Again” 34, Derek Wright 35 examines the quest of Harry Angstrom in Rabbit, Run in terms of space and form, and argues, “only novelistic form is able to accommodate the kind of space and spacious freedom – the uninhibited, uncultured movement and entropic flight from form – which Rabbit Angstrom yearns for. This mapless motion exists only in purely imaginative, verbal space”.

In an excellent essay “The Pleasure of Textual/Sexual Wrestling: Pornography and Heresy in Roger’s Version” John N. Duvall 36 brings out the “erotics of reading and writing” in Roger’s Version in terms of Roland Barthes’s concept of pleasure in The Pleasure of the Text.

Roger Sharrock offers an interesting comparative study of Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms and Updike’s Couples in his article “Singles and Couples:
Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and Updike’s *Couples*” (1973). Sharrock rightly points out the stark difference in style between Hemingway and Updike, and refers to “the classical spareness of Hemingway’s prose” and contrasts it with “the mandarin lushness and literaryness which occasionally become oppressive in Updike” (42).

In yet another interesting comparative study, Gilbert M. Porter compares and contrasts the materialistic George Folansbee Babbitt (in Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*) with Rabbit Angstrom’s soul-searching evolution in his article “From Babbitt to Rabbit: The American Materialist in Search of a Soul”. Similarly we get a comparative study of Updike’s style with that of Thomas Pynchon in P. Balbert’s article “Exuberances of style in Pynchon and Updike: A Panoply of Metaphor”.

Kathleen Verduin tries to locate Updike within the protestant tradition and refers to the patriarchal structures in “Fatherly Presences in a Protestant Tradition”.

While Darwell Jodock examines the Lutheran influence on Updike in “What Is Goodness? The Influence of Updike’s Lutheran Roots”, the Barthian influence on Updike is examined by Stephen H.
Webb’s article “Writing as a Reader of Karl Barth: What Kind of Religious Writer Is John Updike Not?”

Although Donald J. Greiner in his article “Body and Soul: John Updike and *The Scarlet Letter*” comments that “Updike’s transformation of *The Scarlet Letter* is both an homage to a masterpiece and a radical feat of intertextuality”, Greiner does not explore the intertextual resonances with Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. What Greiner pinpoints in this essay is that while Hawthorne strictly maintained a disparity between the body and the soul, in Updike the body and the soul are uniformly reconciled to each other. Greiner repeatedly points out “Updike’s rejection of Hawthorne’s separation of body and soul”(475).

Although much attention has been paid to Updike’s earlier works in general and to his Rabbit novels in particular, “The Scarlet Letter Trilogy” has remained relatively less explored. Sporadic efforts have been made by critics and reviewers for a comprehensive study of Updike’s “Hawthorne novels”. For example, the leading Updike critic, James A. Schiff has attempted a study of Updike’s “Hawthorne novels” in his article “Updike’s Scarlet Letter Trilogy: Recasting an American Myth”, published in *Studies in American
Fiction 20.1 (Spring 1992). Schiff has tried to present *The Scarlet Letter* as an American myth and attempted to show Updike's variations on it. But so far as intertextuality is concerned, Schiff or any other critic has shown no interest or has kept mum. Since the inception of literary theory, literature began to be increasingly interpreted (if not influenced) by different literary theories. Today any criticism sans theory would appear to be as vapid as a dish sans salt. Not that theory should be forced upon a literary text, because texts abhors straitjackets, but that a text itself becomes amenable to the theoretical hermeneutic. And John Updike is no exception to it. Mary O'Connell's makes a fine feminist study of Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy in her *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996). Similarly, Dilvo Ristoff has made an interesting application of New Historicism to Updike's Rabbit novels in his two unique books: *Updike's America: The Presence of Contemporary American History in John Updike's Rabbit Trilogy* and *John Updike's "Rabbit at Rest": Appropriating History*.

Since no critic till date has explored intertextual spaces between Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Updike's "Hawthorne novels", my thesis proposes to explore the intertextual interrelations and
interstices between Hawthorne's masterpiece and Updike's The Scarlet Letter Trilogy. This thesis purports to bring out in details Updike's points of resemblances with Hawthorne and those of his departure from his nineteenth century predecessor.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


33. Robert Alton Regan, “Updike’s Symbol of the Center”. Modern Fiction Studies Vol. 20, Number 1, (Spring 1974): 77-78.


35. Derek Wright, “Mapless Motion: Form and Space in Updike’s Rabbit, Run”. Modern Fiction Studies. 37, Number 1, (Spring 1991): 43-44.


