Introduction: John Updike and His Fiction

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"Our humanity were a poor thing but for the divinity that stirs within us"

Bacon.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

John Updike and His Fiction

John Updike is among the most prolific of contemporary American writers, who has to his credit, seventeen novels, eleven collections of short stories, eighteen volumes of verse, six anthologies of non-fictional prose including an autobiographical work, two plays, children’s books, book reviews and articles. In the world of fiction Updike’s voice is as recognizable as that of Saul Bellow. By the versatility of his multifaceted literary genius as novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist, art-critic and dramatist his place among his contemporaries is unparalleled. He has taken his vocation as writer with all solemnity and expresses himself with rare sensibility, sensitivity and humanity. He has occupied his place in the front ranks of fictionists ever since the publication in 1959, of his maiden novel The Poorhouse Fair. His recent novels of the nineties—Rabbit at Rest (1990), Memories of Ford Administration (1992), Brazil (1994) and In the Beauty of the Lilies (1996)—show his powers still on the ascendancy. Indeed his readers detect promise of master works yet to proceed from this great genius which is a rare combination of ideas and technique, intellect and imagination.

None the less, it was a polarized response that greeted each work of his from the first novel onwards. While critics like Paul Doyle praised Updike’s dazzling prose style and brilliant ideas, others like Richard Gilman persistently...
blamed him for his narrow outlook and limited range. In 1964, Norman Podhoretz had described Updike as “a writer who has very little to say” (257). Howard Harper affirmed in 1967 that Updike’s work, “has a depth, an integrity, and an ultimate concern” (190). John W. Aldridge is a leading spokesman for the group of critics who insist that Updike is a mere verbal artificer who has nothing to communicate. Aldridge pointed out in 1972 that Updike is addicted to, “obliqueness and stylistic preciosity” (201). Robert Detweiler in 1972 applauded him for attempting, “to extend the capacities of fiction through many devices at a time when others are pronouncing the death of the novel,” and affirmed that his, “accomplishment is in dramatizing eternal human problems in terms of arresting contemporary techniques” (167). Joyce B. Markle in 1973 affirmed that Updike’s works, “establish with clarity and unqualified definition the dynamics of his vision of man” (2). In 1986, when Roger’s version was published, critical opinion varied in response to it. While critics like Aldridge reacted vehemently against it, others like David Lehman applauded it for the variety of subjects it dealt with. George Hunt interprets Updike with the aid of Jungean psychology while Jeff H. Campbell takes an interdisciplinary approach finding in Updike’s fiction a search for a myth to replace Christianity. Judie Newman’s method is also interdisciplinary; she stated in 1988 that, “Updike’s works may be considered as broadly separable into realistic social novels or flights into fantasy and aesthetic allegory” (114).

With the publication of the fourth volume of the Rabbit Tetralogy Rabbit at Rest, in 1990 which brought him Pulitzer Prize in 1991, praises became louder and attacks milder. Critics noted that the protagonist’s pointed
comments on and instinctive reactions to such issues as the AIDS epidemic, the terrorist attack on Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie and America's trade war with Japan made *Rabbit at Rest* an inclusive and insightful satire of American society during the 1980s. Many have also suggested that Harry's moral and physical decay symbolizes the spiritual lethargy of contemporary America. Joyce Carol Oates compared him with Flaubert and observed: "the being that most illuminates the *Rabbit* quartet is not finally Harry Angstrom himself but the world through which he moves in his slow downward slide, meticulously recorded by one of our most gifted American realists" (Contemporary Literary Criticism 253). Jonathan Raban asserts that *Rabbit at Rest*, like Bellow's *Herzog* is one of the very few modern novels that one can set beside the work of Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot and James Joyce. In 1992, Professor Antony Fernandez in his thesis, "The American Family Through Four Decades," attempted a sociological interpretation of Updike's *Rabbit* Tetralogy. He insists that, "Updike whose fiction has been a bit elusive and ambiguous has boldly come out in his *Rabbit* Tetralogy as an indefatigable champion of domestic values" (8-9). He proceeds to state that Updike has presented the protagonist, Harry, as one who was "done in" by his addiction "to junk food and mindless adultery" and basketball (9). Far from it; Updike has bestowed on Harry heroic dimensions, for the novel identifies him with the myth of America. He is the historian who has been turned into an object of history. He is the living, breathing symbol of America while Uncle Sam whose role he assumes on the Fourth-of-July parade at Mt. Judge remains an abstraction. He had prided himself in being a "star" at basketball and even to the last, he plays the game in superb form and his is a life of fulfilment. He is the man who had
been tested and purified by the fire and had undergone a spiritual renewal. Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom as his nick name “Rabbit” suggests is, “the frisky international mischief maker,” that America represents. Updike himself argues in favour of Harry in a recent interview granted to Professor Sukhbir Singh:

Harry is just as I am. On the one hand, he has many good instincts. . . On the other hand, he can’t really resist the invitation to live. Pru offers herself to him when she’s in a desperate mood . . . and he’s just come out of the hospital. In a way it’s their way of saying yes to life. . . . It’s breaking of the social order. But always in the Rabbit novels, there is a tension between doing what feels right and feels vital and staying within the social bounds. This is the basic human conflict that I tried to dramatize in all these books. (“The Novel According to John Updike.” 37)

Wherever occurs a conflict between individual instinct and social norms, Updike’s sympathies are always seen to remain with the individual. He is a true Emersonian in this respect.

Despite recurring adverse criticisms attempting to limit his genius to mere technical virtuosity, Updike has continued to pursue his own artistic vision, producing a steady stream of works which have earned for him honours such as the National Book Critics Award and the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. His works are extensively read and reviewed and widely translated into other languages. His more recent works, Brazil (1994) and In the Beauty of the Lilies (1996) appear as answers to his critics who have blamed him for limiting his canvas to small town American middle class. With every new
novel, he is seen to be cutting fresh ground proving himself to be a man of ideas as well as an adept practitioner of modern and post-modern techniques.

The work of the writers of Updike's generation is bound to reflect some of the aspects of the artificial culture into which they were born--rootlessness, technological mobility and standardization. The modern novel that recognized disintegration and disillusionment had faded out of the scene by the end of the Second World War. But the sense of insecurity and terror became accentuated further though the strategies of survival assumed a more sophisticated and complex form. Ihab Hassan gives a vivid picture of this post-modern predicament that forms the background for the literary efforts of the writers of Updike's generation, in *Contemporary American Literature, 1945-1972*. He remarks:

Survival appears indeed both the secret and paramount obsession of contemporary man. . . . Memories of holocausts from Auschwitz to Hiroshima, a succession of wars from Korea to Vietnam, the earth exploding in numbers, ravages to natural environment, renewed awareness of poverty in America, the discriminations of race and sex, political protests of every kind--all these perpetuate a mood of crisis that no writer can entirely ignore. Science can capture the moon or alter the genes of mankind, but none knows how the ultimate moral and historical decisions can be made. . . . A massive invasion of human privacy takes place as the media of control and of communication exchange their functions as computers at once ease and complicate the patterns of social existence. Increasingly the public realm seems ruled
by a variety of fantasies, instantaneous, comical, dreadful. For the individual, violence, nihilism... offer no genuine alternatives to the surrealism of mass society and the superstate. This experience shared abroad, deepens the affinities between American and European literature, between nations witnessing the strange paradox of a world extensively homogenized yet intensely fragmented. (2-3)

Apart from his anxiety about survival, the writer of this period was also concerned about his identity. The literary artist found it difficult to give an authentic voice to the unreality that he found around him. To cope with the existing situation the contemporary novelist turns “experimental” and “self-conscious” at times, and creates “metafiction” and “surfiction” that examine the very role and character of the novel. Sometimes he indulges in forging myths out of the fantasy which characterizes the post-modern habit of mind. However, unlike the modernists of the 1920s who mourned over the decline of Western civilization, Updike’s post-war generation of writers tried to come to terms with their predicament accepting dislocation as part of life. Naturally the themes centred around the fragmentariness, meaninglessness and combativeness arising out of the fear of survival. Fiction of this period was also concerned about the mechanism and conduct of the individual’s mind and life, with functioning and behaviour, with an attempt to adapt to the changing circumstances of life. Updike’s fictional world reflects the influences of his times; yet he stands apart, maintaining his individual distinction as a writer who is in possession of a humane and humanistic vision of life and the predicament of the human being in it.
Several salient points regarding his work emerge from Updike’s biography, for he is a writer who has drawn from autobiography, material for his fiction, to a large extent. He was born on March 18, 1932 in Reading, Pennsylvania as the only son of Wesley Russell and Linda Grace Hoyer. During the Depression the family shifted to the farm of his maternal grandparents, near Shillington, Pennsylvania. His boyhood spent in the agricultural environment of Shillington has provided him with a mythic setting for the major part of his fictional work, for his fictional Olinger is the actual town of Shillington. His parents were Lutherans in faith and democrats in politics. His parents had felt the stress of the Depression; his father who worked as a cable splicer lost the job and had to accept the more strenuous and less lucrative work of the school teacher. The Centaur his third novel is an exact translation of these circumstances into fiction. Even grandfather Hoyer had to find work during these hard times of the Depression. He joined a road-repairing crowd. Updike’s mother was literary in her turn of mind. She was an aspiring writer.

He went to Harvard on a scholarship and studied English, graduating in 1954. In 1953 while yet a student, he had married a class-mate, Mary Entwistle Pennington. After graduation he joined the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine arts at Oxford on a Knox fellowship and spent one year studying graphic arts. His daughter Elizabeth was born during this period. Upon his return to America in 1955, he joined the staff of the New Yorker as a reporter for “The Talk of the Town” column. He also contributed to the magazine, parodies, humorous essays and light verse. Later these New Yorker poems have been
collected in *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures* (1958) and *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (1963). The year 1957 brought changes in Updike's life; his son David was born; he resigned from *New Yorker* in order to devote himself to serious writing and moved with family to Ipswich, Massachusetts. While living in Ipswich, so as to keep regular working hours Updike occupied an office in the centre of the town. Work was sacred for him, as he explains in his autobiographical work *Self-Consciousness*. This autobiography reveals another reason for Updike's shifting to suburban seclusion in Ipswich. He had been suffering from psoriasis, a hereditary skin decease that could be alleviated only by exposure to the sunlight, of which Ipswich abounded. After his sunless year in England, this skin condition was aggravated. Even his marriage to Mary Penninghton at the age of twenty-one was partly out of a sense of gratitude to the girl who was willing to forgive him his miserable skin. These circumstances get detailed treatment in *The Centaur* in the portrayal of the romance between young Peter Caldwell and Penny. Ipswich had a beach where one could sunbathe in perfect privacy. From Spring to Autumn he resided in Ipswich and in Winter, he would migrate to the Caribbean for more sunlight. This went on for years, until recently; when the discovery of a new treatment had temporarily released Updike of this urgent need of exposure to sunlight. In 1959 his son Michael was born and in 1962 he had a second daughter, Miranda and by this time he had become a popular writer.

In 1964 on a cultural exchange programme he had visited Russia and Eastern Europe which had inspired the writing of *Bech: A Book* (1970) and
Bech is Back (1982). He made a tour of Africa in 1973 which resulted in the writing of The Coup (1978), a novel about an African dictator. The same year he left Ipswich and in 1974 he left his first wife Mary. The divorce materialized later; and in 1977 he married Martha Bernhard a psychiatric-social worker. Troubles had started in his married life early in the sixties, of which he had written indirectly in Of the Farm (1965) and more directly in Marry Me (1976) and later in Memories of Ford Administration (1992). Updike at present lives the comfortable life of an affluent man in a big mansion in Beverly Farms, outside Cambridge and close to the Massachusetts Bay.

Updike in his autobiographical Self-Consciousness (1989) has acknowledged the influences of Karl Barth and Soren Kierkegaard on his mind. His works show the influences of Edmund Husserl, Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre also. In religion, Updike favours Karl Barth’s theology and believes with him that God is Wholly Other, unreachable and unknowable, a belief he has put into the minds of many characters he has created. Barth’s position on the moral and ethical questions of life is stated clearly in his theological work, The Word of God and the Word of Man. He has stated in this book: “Man cannot begin to answer the ethical questions in actual life. He can only recognize that he is wholly incapable of commanding an answer” (166). In the interview granted to Charles T. Samuels Updike has spoken at length on Karl Barth’s theology:

His theology has two faces--the No and the Yes. The No which first resounded in 1919 when the original edition of Barth’s impassioned commentary on Romans was published, is addressed to all that is
naturalistic, humanistic, de-mythologized and merely ethical in the Christianity that German Protestantism had inherited from the nineteenth century. The liberal churches, as Barth saw them, were dedicated to the god to whom in our pride and despair we have erected the tower of Babel; to the great personal and the impersonal, mystical, philosophical or naive Background and Patron Saint of our human righteousness.... This god is really an unrighteous god, and it is high time for us to declare ourselves thorough-going doubters, skeptics, scoffers and atheists in regard to him." The real God, the God men do not invent is, totaliter aliter--Wholly Other. We cannot reach Him; only He can reach us. This He has done as the Christ of Biblical revelation, and the Yes of Barth's theology is the re-affirmation... of the traditional Christian message." (Samuels 97)

For Updike, religious questions are those arising from the relationship between man and God, while moral questions are those which concern man's intercourse with his fellowmen. The problems of human morality are subordinate to that of faith.

In the radio talk, "Self Comments on His work and the Role of the Novelist Today," Updike has said that the central theme of each of his novels is "meant to be a moral dilemma" and his books are intended as "moral debates with the readers." Traditionally novelists who dealt with moral issues have tried to view human problems from a moral perspective which indicates both their causes and possible solutions. Updike believes that these problems are insoluble basically. He rejects the notion that literature should inculcate moral
precepts. His theme is a moral dilemma and he constantly concentrates on the complex implications of his characters, moral decisions, so that the issues are always clear and the consequences of each decision fully developed. While his characters choose from among the given options, the author remains neutral; he does not indicate any preferences. He leaves the decision to the individual and is sympathetic even when the character chooses against the norms of morality. Updike is more humanistic in this respect; he upholds the individual in the true spirit of an American.

Yet Updike has portrayed the human conscience as suffering pangs of guilt for transgressing the laws of established morality. For instance his novel Roger’s Version in which all the major characters are shown to be suffering from pangs of guilt. He has also hinted at another morality which is a sort of response to an inner voice; most of his characters follow this subjective morality. Harry Angstrom of the Rabbit novels and Piet Hanema of Couples are examples. He has also created a few characters in the earlier novels, representing the established conventional morality, especially in the novels of his romantic naturalistic phase; that is, the work of his early youth produced in that decade that extends up to 1965. Hook of The Poorhouse Fair, George Caldwell of The Centaur, Harry’s parents in the Rabbit novels and Mrs. Robinson in Of the Farm exemplify this type of character. But these character types fade out as one approaches the second phase characterized by realistic and existentialistic modes of representation. The old world is shown as fading out giving way to the new. George Caldwell dies so that his son Peter may be free to pursue his ambition of becoming an artist. Joey’s mother Mrs. Robinson is
also on the point of death and she too releases her son Joey from his sense of obligation to the old world represented by his mother’s farm. Rabbit’s parents also are on the verge of death in Rabbit Redux. This phase begins with Of the Farm which is the transitional novel, followed by Couples, Rabbit Redux and ends with A Month of Sundays (1975) which marks again, transition to a third phase in Updike’s artistic evolution.

The protagonists of the third phase of his career are marked by a humanistic existentialistic vision. They also represent, like the protagonists of the second phase, the subjective morality to an extent. Some of them care less for their consciences, and play a game of chess with life moulding other people's lives to serve their convenience. Roger in Roger’s Version, the protagonists of the short stories in the collection Trust Me, Sarah Worth and Arhat in S. are all examples of this type of character that tends to victimize others and who also are turned into victims. Yet Updike’s treatment is humanistic and they are given opportunities for spiritual growth and renewal. Being led by instinct, or subjective morality they also are seen to be engaged in a search for some kind of salvation or meaning. Sometimes they seek meaning through sexuality, some times through endurance and also through orderliness and integrity in a small job well done.

Among his works of fiction Bech: A Book (1970) and Bech is Back (1982) are two books that defy classification. Updike himself has given the subtitle “A Book” to the first collection of Bech stories, which is significant, for the structure of the short story that he has made use of, in the execution of these two works makes it impossible to view them as novels.
However these books mark a different phase in the development of Updike’s view of life. Here, from an existentialist world he has moved on to the realm of the comic and the absurd. The other works related to this comic phase of Updike’s vision are *A Month of Sundays*, *The Witches of Eastwick* and *S.*

Henry Bech is portrayed as a distracted Jewish writer who, during a protracted bout with the writer’s block gets into greater entanglements with distraction by accepting invitations to lecture at colleges and to represent American culture abroad. In the second volume he is found to sink deeper: being wed and put in bed with toddlers from his wife’s early marriage, and having to put up with the cold war fought by his wife’s sister Norma, whom he had jilted by marrying her younger sister. He is completely undone, the remaining wits take leave of him. Bech is in shambles; he is rendered impotent in more ways than one. When it was required of him to autograph copies of his own earlier books, he could not even write his name.

Just as characters like Sarah Worth in *S.* and the three witches, Alexandra, Jane and Sukie in *The Witches of Eastwick* had provided him with an opportunity to air his views on feminism and American Protestantism, Henry Bech too presents Updike with a vehicle for talking about the current literary scene from a safe distance. In the guise of Bech Updike ventures to reveal and comment on the racket that literary scene has been reduced to.

The nineties have witnessed Updike developing into a tragic philosophic phase of vision even while making a return journey towards his old modes of narration. *Rabbit at Rest*, published in 1990 is indeed a coming back to the realistic documentary novel he had experimented in *Rabbit, Run* of the earlier
techniques he had earlier used in *A Month of Sundays*, *The Coup* and *Roger's
Version*, yet it reminds one of the reminiscent tone of his earlier romantic
phase. *Brazil* (1994) is a definite return to the world of romance. For as in
*Marry me* (1976), it retells, through the modern love story of Isabel and
Trisato, set against the idyllic background of the wilderness of the unexplored
regions of Brazil, the ancient love myth of Tristram and Iseult. With *In the
Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) Updike's vision returns to the grand conception of
mega fiction as in the *Rabbit* novels. But here in one single volume he tracks
the fortunes and fall of an American family through four generations and eight
decades. He has hit the heights of mature philosophic wisdom in the novels of
this period, particularly in *Rabbit at Rest*, *Brazil* and *In the Beauty of the
Lilies*.

The distinctive characteristic that makes Updike's fiction stay apart from
the loud and aggressive voices around him in the world of fiction, is the
"humane dimension," the presence of a compassionate vision of men and
matters which proceeds from an instinctive understanding of the two worlds,
the Old and the New: a rare insight Updike had gained through co-habitation
with grandparents and which had improved his 'backward and forward visions'
as he had explained at length in the short story "The Happiest I've Been." In
this exquisite story, through the character of John Nordholm he relates how he
"knew about the bedside commodes and midnight coughing fits that awaited
most men" and had "gained a humane dimension" that had made him gentle
and humorous with peers, but diffident with girls and how girls had felt it as an
insult and turned unresponsive. According to Updike, “A girl who has received out of nowhere a gift worth all Asia’s gold wants more than just humanity to bestow it on” (The Same Door 223). This vision of humanity has become Updike’s greatest attribute as a writer. His vision of humanity renders the most negative situation affirmative by a sympathetic study of even the most unlovable character. Some of his characters are made to undergo a total transformation, a spiritual renewal. Harry Angstrom after the traumatic experiences culminating in the burning down of his house in Rabbit Redux, Piet and Foxy in Couples, Roger, Dale, Esther and Verna in Roger’s Version and Sarah Worth in S, testify to this spiritual re-orientation.

Thus, out of contradictory forces that has drained the vitality out of other writers or led them to wrangle with each other, Updike has fashioned a body of writing, that is rich, mysterious and so full of life that it could be a substitute for nature itself.

The present investigation aims at an interpretation of Updike’s fiction foregrounding his work against socio-cultural milieu so as to illumine the author’s meaning and intention. This study focusses on the way Updike visualizes his subjects and characters, thus bringing to light his compassionate and sensible vision of “humanity”—the “humane dimension”—that accompanies his fiction all the way, from the short stories of the earlier phases to the megafiction In the Beauty of the Lilies, which is the latest among his novels.

The method applied here is interdisciplinary: sociology, psychology, phenomenology, history and other disciplines have been made use of. The introduction places the author in the relevant perspective. The Second Chapter
gives an overview of Updike's short fiction. An attempt is made here to highlight his compassionate and humane vision of men and matters. The Third Chapter adopts a sociological approach to his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair* which is set against the background of the conformist fifties. The Fourth Chapter analyzes the *Rabbit* tetralogy in which the protagonist, Harry Angstrom, gets identified with the myth of America. From his role of historian turned into history, he is seen to attempt a new synthesis of the diverse elements of race, colour and region, so that America would yet achieve a tradition, historical significance, mythic character and a spiritual renewal. The Fifth Chapter concentrates on three novels that redefine and reconstruct Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and are together grouped as the "The Scarlet Letter Trilogy. The novels thus grouped are *A Month of Sundays*, *Roger's Version* and *S.* The Sixth Chapter analyzes nine novels--*The Centaur*, *Of the Farm*, *Couples*, *Marry Me*, *The Coup*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Memories of Ford Administration*, *Brazil* and *In the Beauty of the Lilies*--bringing this study upto date. The concluding chapter summarizes the findings and evaluates Updike's vision of humanity and his unique place in the ranks of the fictionists of the twentieth century. Direct quotations from the novels, short stories and other works of Updike are included, as they serve as rules laid down for review purposes by Updike himself. For example, in *Picked-Up Pieces* (1975) Updike makes his statement on the practical value of fiction to its readers: "Fiction is also a mode of spying, we read it as we look in windows or listen to gossip, to learn what other people do" (518).
The grace of a compassionate vision proceeding from a sympathetic understanding of humanity, the depth of ideas, the variety of subjects, the narrative confidence and the perfection of technique displayed in his novels to date make Updike's readers sigh with a sweet anticipation for more of his instructive "gossip" and wish for him laurels, more and more, including the highest—the Nobel Prize.