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QUEST, MORALITY, AND SOCIAL CRITICISM---

A THEMATIC STUDY ON JOHN UPDIKE'S *RABBIT, RUN*

追求, 道德及社会批判---关于约翰·厄普代克

《兔子, 跑吧》的主题探索

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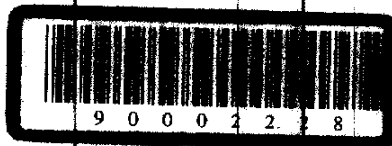
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SYNOPSIS

The attempt of this M. A. Thesis is to offer a thematic study on John Updike's most widely-accepted novel Rabbit, Run. The paper is divided into seven parts: Introduction, Chapter 1 — Chapter 5, and Conclusion. The primary concern of Introduction and Chapter 1 is with Updike as the writer, his life and literary creation. From chapter 2 to chapter 5 the devotion is given to the present author's thematic study on Rabbit, Run, which falls into three layers: the multiplicity of the nature of Rabbit's running, the moral question engendered by this running, and Updike's criticism of modern American society. The Conclusion part is intended as an examination of Updike's artistic style as shown in Rabbit, Run.

John Updike is one of the most important figures on contemporary American literary stage. Since the publication of his first novel in 1959, The Poorhouse Fair, he has occupied a place at the stage's center for over thirty years. As early as in 1965 when he was just over thirty, he was picked as one of America's eight most distinguished novelists in a poll. In the late 1980s, The Norton Anthology of American Literature praises Updike as one of America's three most significant novelists, the other two being Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. In addition to such accolades bestowed upon him, Updike has also received many literary awards and honours: the Pulitzer Prize, the American Book Award, and the National Book Award; election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.



Updike was born on March 18, 1932 in Shillington, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Reading, in Berks county. Under the influence of his mother, an aspiring writer, and with his own growing —up experience, Updike's artistic interest was early aroused and artistic talent early awakened, as was shown in a gift subscription to The New Yorker in his eleventh year. From his school years on he has been an engaging "writer"; at Shillington High School he was the editor of the school newspaper, at Harvard (1950—1954) he had been the leading wit of the university's famous magazine Lampoon for four years. In 1954, Updike sold his first story "Friends from Philadelphia" to The New Yorker, and he has since become a constant contributor of stories, poems and criticisms to the magazine. After he left New York and its literary circles for Ipswich, Massachusetts, to write full time, he has been pouring out writings ranging from novels to short stories, poems, criticisms, readings for children and a drama. Of all his writings, the novels are the best known, and in his novels it is the four Rabbit novels that Updike "finds his most congenial and engaging subject for longer fiction." Since he began the story of Harry Angstrom, "Rabbit" by nickname, in 1960, at about every ten years Updike writes a sequel to it. Through the eyes of Rabbit, in each book Updike renders the sense of an era — — — the late 1950s in Rabbit, Run, the late 1960s in Rabbit Redux, the late 1970s in Rabbit Is Rich and the late 1980s in Rabbit At Rest. In the four Rabbit novels it is only in Rabbit, Run that Rabbit actively, though blindly and selfishly to a considerable degree, ^{breaks away} from a suffocating life for something else. And for this consideration, Rabbit, Run is singled out for separate treatment in this paper.

Rabbit, Run is the running story of the novel's protagonist Harry Angstrom, who has got his nickname "Rabbit" since boyhood. Like a rabbit, Rabbit is always ready for flight whenever he feels that

something is threatening his life. Firstly, Rabbit's running is a kind of coward action, reflecting his inability to handle the little complexities of his family life: a dingy apartment and a dull, alcoholic and TV — addicted wife, Janice. And when Rabbit is running from his family and society, he is also running away from the duties placed upon him. What's more, Rabbit has developed a kind of selfishness, "the hardness of the heart"; he makes people around him greatly worried, he deeply hurts his his wife and mistress, he is partly responsible for the drowning of his baby Rebecca by his wife. Irresponsible, weak — willed, undependable and gutless, Rabbit has not got the stature of heroism; he is, as Robert Detweiler asserts, "the quintessence of the non — hero."

Though a non — hero, Rabbit should not be denied the spirituality in his running. After a kind of spiritual awakening, he runs away from the increasing ugliness and dullness of his family life, which is an epitome of the social lives of the late 1950s in America. In his running, Rabbit is seeking for something else. The irony is that he does not know what he is after, he can only give a metaphoric vision of the goal of his quest through physical avenues. His confusion dooms him to a futile researcher in the novel; at the end of the novel, Rabbit is running in the sheer physicality, without knowing where he is going.

As it is noted earlier, Updike, unlike Kerouac in On the Road, also opens his eyes at what has been left behind by the wanderings of Rabbit's quest. In so doing, Updike invites the readers to engage in a debate about morality. Morality has two dimensions in that it, on the one hand, deals with man's intercourse with his fellow man, and on the other hand, concerns the relationship of man to his society. When Rabbit resists various social forces to meet his own spiritual needs, he wrecks the life of others and causes society to callape^S to some extent.

The phenomenon of Rabbit engenders a moral question; which party is in the right, and who should surrender to whom? In answering this question, traditionally, novelists have tried to resolve it, at least tentatively. While Updike believes that there are basically no solutions, in his own words, "There is no way to reconcile. . . . individual wants to the very need of any society to set strict limits to confine its members." Updike's refusal to take sides is manifested by the ending of the novel; Rabbit does not come back to his society, he is still running.

Though Updike does not take sides with any party, it might not be considered that he is a mindless, unconcerned writer, a mere recorder of social phenomena like a camera. At heart, Updike is ^a satirical critic. Updike's criticism of the disintegration of contemporary society is mainly through two aspects: the impotence of social institutions to exert positive influence on Rabbit's personality development and to save him; the "degenerating" work and Rabbit's fall into sensuality.

Rabbit's confusion about his life and quest not only indicates his own lack of inner resources, but also provides a sobering point of view "on a civilization whose institutions and values are apparently disintegrating, a civilization losing the power to civilize." Central to ^{this} thematic conveyance is the epigraph Updike chooses from Pascal; "The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances." According to Clinton Burhans's interpretation of the epigraph, whether a person responds to "the motions of Grace" or to "the hardness of the heart" depends on the nature of the milieu in which he lives. Rabbit is both inner and outer directed; in other words, there exist divergent tendencies in Rabbit: his potentialities for being good or bad. These divergent tendencies must work themselves out and be shaped by his milieu, but nowhere in his milieu is there anything to help Rabbit find

positive goals or clear directions. The traditional basic institutions of the family, the school, and the church still function, but they have become either empty or meaningless or corrupt. The loss of vital personal ties in his family and inadequacy of school education have bent Rabbit toward immaturity, self — centeredness, and self — indulgence. And more tragically, nor does the church (Christian religion) do better in encouraging Rabbit's development towards maturity and in saving him. The two ministers in the novel, the rigid Lutheran Kruppenbach and the Episcopalian minister Eccles, fail in their attempts to solve Rabbit's problem either because of "myopic conservatism" or due to lack of faith about Christianity.

Through the failure of the family, the school, and the church, Updike brings out his criticism of the disintegration of American society, and through the fields of work and sensuality, he furthers his indictment of the disintegration. A part of Rabbit's dissatisfaction with his present life largely comes from lack of useful work. Whether when he sells MagiPeelers or used cars, he could not find any sense of achievement or value. Rabbit's problem is not only his own, but the whole society's, reflecting an industrialized society in which work is degenerating and has become alienated from the working man. According to Updike, when people "have jobs that defy description," one "has to built his life outward from a job he can do." In Freud's theory, there is a fundamental opposition between work and (sexual) instincts. When Rabbit flees from his job, his energy long repressed by his discouraging work soon and naturally goes to the opposite sex, a quasi — prostitute, Ruth. Though his relationship with Ruth begins with tenderness and love, it has become empty self — gratification without concern for her in the end. Rabbit's case shows that "the escape from the tension of life. . . . through sensuality will not work." Updike also

implies that Rabbit's degeneration is inseparable from the society; the individual degenerates because he lives in a permissive society whose prescribed values have broken or are on the break. In the world of Rabbit, Run, moral degeneration has become a common sight, though not as common as that of Couples. By presenting a society full of discouraging work and moral degeneration, Updike seems to be implying that on all fronts contemporary American society and culture are suffering a steady, inexorable erosion.

Rabbit, Run seems to offer nothing unusual to modern readers; it is all about an average young husband's irresponsible, confused, and futile running and the daily happenings around him. Yet, it is precisely this seemingly commonplace novel that is widely read by the reading public, earnestly discussed in college classrooms, and warmly praised by many reviewers. Updike's success as a novelist in Rabbit, Run comes mainly from two features dominating his literary career; his adherence to the tradition of novels and his distinguished style.

Updike is essentially a realist, a novelist of the tradition. As a realist, Updike has warmly embraced "the novelist's customary role of social historian and social commentator." In Rabbit, Run, Updike shows his great concern for the influence of a given historical period on the shaping of people's thoughts and behaviour — — — Rabbit can only be the product of the placid, hermetic Eisenhower years, a kind of historical artifact. Besides, Updike almost bears an old — fashioned novelist's instinct for details; the Micky House TV show; the crowded apartments of small town sweethearts who married too young; chairs, desks, toys, TV set, kitchen utensils in Rabbit's apartment. . . . all come to readers' eyes with striking fidelity. The presentation of everyday life details may easily become commonplace and dull, but

Updike's detailed descriptions are rendered the most powerful by his stylistic brilliance. And as a rule, Updike's ornate, elegant style is well suited to his purposes and fitting to the conveyance of ideas in Rabbit, Run, enabling him to invest his rather commonplace subject — matter with fresh vitality. Though on occasions Updike may become out of control in detail description and stylistic brilliance, his Rabbit, Run, like his other major works, proves its author's talent and great achievements as an outstanding contemporary American novelist and artist.

Key words: thematic study, Rabbit, Run, John Updike.

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M.A. THESIS

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A THEMATIC STUDY ON JOHN UPDIKE'S
RABBIT, RUN

BY

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Introduction

As one of the most important figures on contemporary American literary stage, John Updike has occupied a place at the stage's center for over thirty years since the publication of his first novel in 1959, *The Poorhouse Fair*. As early as in 1965 when his literary reputation was almost entirely built on his *Rabbit, Run* and *The Centaur*, Updike was picked as one of America's eight most distinguished novelists in a Book Week poll of about 200 novelists and editors.⁽¹⁾ In 1972, Samules I. Bellman contended that "he [Updike] added more to our literature in the last two decades than any other American writer besides Saul Bellow."⁽²⁾ In 1987, Raymond Mazurek made a survey of post-1945 American fiction and novelists, ranking Updike fifth among the most significant novelists and third among the most taught, placing his Rabbit saga (mainly and often his *Rabbit, Run*) fourth among the most significant novels and second among the most taught.⁽³⁾ *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* suggests that the most important post-1945 American novelists are Bellow, Updike, and Philip Roth because they have kept "their eyes directed at the novelist's truest subject: matters of love and death, race and sex, culture and anarchy---especially as such matters have played them out in the late-twentieth-century America."⁽⁴⁾

Updike is an extremely prolific writer with astonishingly varied canon, ranging from novels to short stories, poems, essays, criticisms, readings for children and a drama. The major subject dominating most of his works is the domestic lives of

contemporary American middle classes and their struggle with moral questions in the face of a constantly changing world and rapidly shifting values. His most significant contribution to American literature is that through his extraordinary stylistic power he has created very vivid impressions of contemporary American middle classes and society at large. And for this Updike has been called "the most significant transcriber, or creator... of 'middleness' in American writing since William Dean Howells."⁽⁵⁾ Because of the familiarity of his subject matter and the high quality of his writings, in America Updike has enjoyed both popular and critical acclaim in the course of his prolific career, attracting an enormous reading public and a lot of scholarly commentators. Some of his major books are bestsellers, such as *The Centaur* (1963), *Couples* (1968) and *S* (1988); some of his works have won him the most important literary awards in America: the National Book Award for *The Centaur*, three awards for *Rabbit Is Rich*---the Pulitzer Prize, the American Book Award and the National Book Award, to name only the most influential. For his out-standing literary achievements, Updike was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1964 and the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1977.

In Updike's huge and varied canon, it is in the four "Rabbit" novels that Updike finds "his most congenial and engaging subject for longer fiction;"⁽⁶⁾ it is the character of Rabbit that "brings out the best in Updike, tests him, making him use that peerless style and that phenomenal intelligence to triumphant effect. The world comes alive as Updike takes Harry's life apart and puts it down on paper."⁽⁷⁾ Through the eyes of the protagonist Harry Angstrom, in each book Updike renders the sense of an era---the late 1950s in *Rabbit, Run*; the late 1960s in *Rabbit Redux*; the late 1970s in *Rabbit Is Rich*; the late 1980s

in *Rabbit At Rest*. In this M.A. thesis, the present author tends to give a brief introduction to Updike's life and career and offer a thematic study on his most widely-accepted novel *Rabbit, Run*. Before the introduction and thematic study, I would like to introduce Updike's Rabbit saga, of which *Rabbit, Run* is the first installment.

Rabbit, Run is the running story of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, the 26-year-old protagonist, an ex-high-school basketball hero in the eastern Pennsylvania town of Mt. Judge. The early part of the novel is concerned with Rabbit's escape from Janice, his alcoholic, pregnant and TV-addicted wife, and from Nelson, his little son. One evening, on impulse, he heads in his car for the south. He gets lost in Maryland and returns to Brewer the next morning, not to Janice but to Tothero, his old coach, through whom he meets Ruth, a quasi-prostitute. In the following few weeks, Rabbit concerns himself with living with Ruth and parrying the attempts of Eccles, Janice's Episcopalian minister, to get him home. There is a short period of reconciliation when Janice gives birth to a daughter. But after a few days there is another fight and Rabbit leaves home once more. Deeply hurt by her husband's second leaving, Janice turns to alcohol and in a drunken stupor she drowns the baby. Rabbit is called back to attend the baby's funeral, during which Rabbit horrifies all the mourners by saying that the baby's death is not his fault but his wife's. Feeling isolated from his community, Rabbit runs again and goes to Ruth, who rejects him when he says that he will not promise to divorce his wife and marry her. At the end of the novel, Rabbit is running in the night, not going anywhere, just running.

Whatever may be said of Rabbit in *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit's running, as the thematic study of this paper will show, is a

spiritual quest for something, about which he has no clear idea at all and which is harmful. In *Rabbit Redux*, Harry has become "lethargic to the point of uncaring"⁽⁸⁾ and spiritual stasis--he seems to move only when he takes the bus or drives in to Brewer for a tasteless dinner with Janice and Nelson. The man who once had the gift of life and faith now simply ignores every hint that his wife is having an affair with another man. When Janice confesses to the point of bragging that she does "things" for Stavros that she never does for him, Harry is not even aroused. Though adultery may gall, Harry does not respond--he has become dumb and insensitive. Another striking feature of the novel is that it is crucially aligned to historical world events. More than any other novel, *Rabbit Redux* shows the author's concern with social disturbance and its influence upon Harry's mental status. Updike uses specific historical facts --the moon shots, the sexual revolution, the drug explosion, black militancy, the emergence of women's self-determination---both to comment on the state of the nation and to provide a context for Harry's spiritual status. Harry is too bewildered by changes that loom far beyond his control: the moon shot alters his universe, the blacks alter his society, the adultery alters his family. The little man's bewilderment and sense of total confusion render him unable to think individually, transforming him into "a pale reflection of his former self" and "a bland and spiritless" "cliche-mouthing drome."⁽⁹⁾ Throughout the nation, conventional religion and moral code have been abandoned. The whole America has paid no attention to traditional Christian value, therefore it has brought about many problems such^{as} social injustice, inequality, and the violation of the tenets of Christian brotherhood, "people have fallen prey to various embodiments of the Antichrist, the counter-culture, a god of chaos, destruction, despair."⁽¹⁰⁾

In *Rabbit Is Rich* and *Rabbit At Rest*, Rabbit has become rich and is getting old with fears. But Rabbit's new prosperity leaves him less fulfilled and what his mind is obsessed with is the mundane and concrete things in the third novel: money, house, golf, and tour. Rabbit is really poorer, metaphorically, than in the past when he was not wealthy. As the first sentence of *Rabbit Is Rich* reads, Rabbit "is running out of gas"⁽¹⁾ ---he has lost his former vigor. In *Rabbit At Rest*, Rabbit fears the coming age and death, which is also suggested by the opening paragraph of the novel. On the way to airport in his car, Rabbit feels very strange that the image of death frequently occur to him. When Rabbit becomes rich, his mental activity and individuality are losing, and when he is around the corner of old age, his instinctive surge for meaning has been replaced by his fear for death.

From the above introduction to the four "Rabbit" novels, we know that a striking and significant feature sets *Rabbit, Run* part from the other three "Rabbit" novels: it is only in this first novel that Rabbit actively breaks away from his suffocating life for something else---though this running is irresponsible and is very vague in its purpose. For this consideration, *Rabbit Run* is singled out from the four novels for separate treatment in this paper.

NOTES

1. William Macnaughton, ed., *Critical Essays On John Updike* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), p.8.
2. Samuel J. Bellman, quoted from *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1975), vol.3, p.7.

3. Mazurek, Raymond. "Courses and Canons: The Post-1945 U.S. Novel," *Critique*, Vol.XXXI, No.3, Spring, 1990, p.45-46.
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5. *Ibid.*, p.2180
6. *Ibid.*
7. The Boston Globe, quoted from John Updike's *Rabbit At Rest* (Fawcett Crest,New York:Ballantine Books, 1991), the foregoing pages.
8. Donald J. Greiner, *John Updike's Novels* (Ohio:Ohio University Press, 1984), p.65.
9. George J. Searles, *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike* (Carbondale:Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p.23.
10. *Ibid.*, p.25.
11. John Updike, *Rabbit Is Rich* (Fawcett Crest, New York, Ballantine Books, 1960; forty-eighth printing, October, 1990), p.1.

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