6-1-1969

The social quest in John Updike's major fiction.

Patricia E. Lucas

THE SOCIAL QUEST IN JOHN UPDIKE'S MAJOR FICTION

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Patricia E. Lucas

June 1969

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Accepted for the faculty of The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

Graduate Committee

Name	Department

Chairman

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

The choice of subject matter for this thesis has, in part at least, been prompted by the uproar caused by the publication of the Couples by John Updike in 1968. Reviewers could not make up their collective minds about the book--whether it was exceedingly filthy and obscene because of the inclusion of irrelevant explicitness in dealing with the sexual interrelations of the couples involved, the true story of Updike and his Ipswich, Massachusetts friends, or a comment on contemporary life which is indicative of the sociological directions of middle class man.

A minority of the reviewers, however, did appear to realize that perhaps Updike was feeling the national pulse in the same way as today's advertisers attempt to sell their products, while also indicating that Americans' excessive and almost masochistic interest in sex is related to other basic problems inherent in the society. Thus, it would seem that perhaps Updike is not entirely out of line when he includes sexual relationships within his novels. Of course, as will be pointed out later in this discussion, Updike's goal is not the same as that of the advertisers.

The "hero" in John Updike's five novels is typically the "common man"--the middle class individual who makes up the larger part of society. This choice of heroes is rather typical for twentieth century American novelists

because the great mass of readers are middle class and are rightfully concerned with its ills and achievements; also the middle class possesses the most power through public opinion.

Updike is particularly interested in the middle class for another reason. He seems to feel that the failures and successes, but most particularly the failures of our culture are clearly manifested in the middle class.

Gerry Brenner, in his article on Rabbit, Run, maintains that Updike's choice of heroes has also allowed him to reach his readers more directly.

> By adopting a sensitive but not too bright, middle-class hero, Updike avoids hectoring his readers with the heavy machinery of earlier tradition-lamenting authors: ponderous quest, archetypal figure, resounding symbol. Updike colloquialized the lament without losing any of its seriousness. His colloquialization derives from naturalizing the scene, a naturalization that tones down potential lugubriousness by placing the situation in the hum-drum world of insignificant jobs, marital spats, brazen whores, and ineffectual authority figures: father, coach, minister, and in-laws.[1]

In his five novels, John Updike has expressed essentially the same theme; the quest of the modern middle class man for a new and relevant meaning for his life. Increasingly, contemporary man has found that the traditional anchorage points, such as religion and work,

[1]Gerry Brenner, "John Updike's Criticism of the Return to Nature," Twentieth Century Literature, XII (April, 1966), 3.

no longer provide a meaning for the existence of the individual and that man has to find his own value and reason for living in a world that is hostile in ways that have never before been faced.

This kind of searching is existential in nature. Thus, Harry Angstrom in Rabbit, Run, the old people in Poorhouse Fair, Joey in Of the Farm, and Piet in Couples all try to break out of their powerlessness and isolation to find their own freedom and value.

The failure of religion, according to Updike, seems to be related to the idea that God is no longer regarded as being actually present on this earth. In addition, modern man can find no immediate evidence of God's presence or influence in his life. Nevertheless, God's existence is still accepted by a great majority of people. Even some believers, however, seem to regard God as being out of their immediate reach.

According to Franz Kafka, God and man no longer have any connection between them. Thus, God is no longer a cohesive force among men. This situation is quite contrary to that which existed in the medieval world where God was thought to be present in all things in this world and "Christ was the mediator, joining a fallen world and a distant God."[2]

[2]Joseph Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963), p. 3.

Since medieval man believed God to be present in everything and copied his poetry after scriptural writings, the poetry expressed God's presence in the same manner as did nature "by a communion of the verbal symbols with the reality they named."[3]

This communion does not exist in modern literature. Instead, man and God appear separated. This separation has seemed to follow the rise of the middle class, the industrialization of society and the subsequent establishment of large urban areas.

The concentration of industrialized man in urban areas has produced new conditions of existence, in which all things have been changed into practical devices for men who then find themselves unable to relate directly to nature. Everywhere man sees himself in the objects he has created. "The city is the literal representation of the progressive humanization of the world."[4]

Social and material changes, however, have not occurred alone. Parallel to them have been the changes in man's spiritual life. With the reformation, for example, came the change in the concept of communion. No longer is the communion regarded as an actual transubstantiation. Spiritually, this means that the communion ceremony is now

[3]Ibid., p. 3.

[4]Ibid., p. 5.

not an actual participation in Christ's presence, but, at best, a reminder of his presence ages ago, or a mere noting of his absence, and man's modern sense of isolation begins.

Joseph Hillis Miller contends that a similar transformation has also occurred in literature.

> The old symbolism of analogical participation is gradually replaced by the modern poetic symbolism of reference at a distance.... These symbols...designate an absence, not a presence.... In this evolution, words have been gradually hollowed out, and have lost their substantial participation in material or spiritual reality. Just as the modern city is the creation of a set of people living without God in the world, so modern literature betrays in its very form the absence of God.[5]

Out of the modern sense of isolation comes the continual inward-looking which seems to be the basis of contemporary philosophical ideas such as existentialism. This same isolation and self-examination tend to limit the range of man's experience to himself, and in literature he dwells upon his alienation and isolation from God, from his natural surroundings and from other human beings. Finally, man becomes isolated or alienated even from himself. "The result is a radical sense of inner nothingness."[6]

This sense of inner nothingness is the primary facet of the main characters of John Updike's novels and provides the stimulus for their individual searchings for meaning and happiness.

[5]Ibid., p. 6.

[6]Ibid., p. 6.

A second major concern of Updike's is the value of the past in contrast to the meaningless present. His characters use the past as an escape. Frequently, they use childhood memories. The memories don't even have to be real; products of the imagination are acceptable as long as they reflect memories of innocence and life untainted by civilized society.[7]

This particular interest in the past is rather typical of modern man and can again trace its origins to the growth of industrialization, the urbanization of man, and his alienation from God. That is to say, the middle class man of the late nineteenth, and particularly the twentieth century, is aware that his special mode of life is not the only one. He recognizes that there are other cultures with different methods for evaluation and different customs. He is further aware that a man's way of life is affected by his environment. The climate, the economic conditions, the terrain, and so forth, all influence the culture's ideas and beliefs, its language, system of evaluation, and traditions, as is clearly evidenced by such a people as the Basques.

Modern man, then, is at a loss. He does not know where he stands. He can not find a base on which to build a foundation that will support him and allow him to

[7]Thaddeus Muradian, "The World of Updike," English Journal, LIV (October, 1965), 577.

establish his own rightness. Instead, man finds himself standing uncertainly and alone, viewing the multitudinous possibilities open to him as represented by other societies, and he realizes that the number of different viewpoints is limited only by his imagination and ability to adopt them. Logically then, it follows that finding the right and true course of life, the right and true philosophy, or the right and true means of worshipping God, or even the right and true idea about the existence of God, is virtually impossible.

Individuals faced with the realization of the impossibility of finding the ideal way to live their lives frequently respond to it by feeling that their lives are based on nothing; that the rules set down by their society are founded on ridiculousness and falsity; that the systems are a sham and a facade which disguise the emptiness at the core. Modern man finds himself forced to follow rules and to accept methods of living which seem strangely out of focus and inappropriate to his actual existence. This, then re-enforces his notion that finding the right course to follow in his life is, at best, highly doubtful.

The involvement of the United States in World War I, World War II, the Korean "Police Action," the nuclear arms race and the Viet Nam "Conflict" provides additional evidence that our present civilization seems to be meant for destruction. If one accepts the eventual annihilation of

society as a fact, then one must also realize that the present offers no tangible or reliable base. This, of course, gives credence to the idea that our cultural attainments are founded on hypocrisy and illusion; it has the further effect of emphasizing the utter desolation which one must face in the absence of God, and in the presence of a highly developed subjectivism, a subjectivism which very nearly destroys Updike's characters because they do not want to face what is judged to be reality, for "Updike's present is not an enjoyable one. His characters usually are hard pressed in just living life [sic]. It is only when his characters revert to the past (childhood memories)...that some sort of salvation or redemption is found."[8]

John Updike's five novels, then, are essentially novels of man's alienation--his separation from God, from nature, from his fellow man, and from himself; his consequent struggle to find a meaningful existence in contemporary society or gaining his own freedom by breaking out of the tangle that society has placed around him. The separation and quest themes are evident in the five novels in varying degrees and are demonstrated in differing aspects of the individuals' lives involved.

One manifestation of the separation is evident in the

[8]Muradian, 577.

dehumanization which has taken place in society as a result of materialism and mass production. Man used to be able to take pride in his workmanship. He could view his finished product proudly and realize that he had made a contribution not only to his own livelihood, but also to his family and to society. With the advent of assembly line production, the age of machines and the standardization of designs, the individual's task may have become so minute--such as inserting one bolt in a car--that his relative importance seems to be negligible when viewed as a part of the whole task. Further, the worker is often not individually responsible for the finished product and therefore feels no need to perform to the best of his ability. Updike himself has commented: "...so many people these days have to sell things they don't believe in, and have jobs that defy describing. It's so different from the time when men took their names from the work they did---Carpenter, Farmer, Fisher. A man has to build his life outward from a job he can do."[9]

Updike also points out the irony which exists in industrialized society's highly developed mass media system which, one would think, should enable man to communicate his ideas, hopes and desires better than he has in

[9]Jane Howard, "Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?" Life, 61 (November 4, 1966), 82.

the past. While it is true that the United States' astronauts can be heard all the way from the moon, Harry Angstrom in Rabbit, Run can not be understood by his golf partner, and Piet Hanema of Couples can not talk to his own wife. Such situations indicate that while the culture has made tremendous technical advances in communications, it has not increased man's sense of human understanding.

The lack of communication and the inability to find meaningful work contribute to man's feelings of alienation and further stimulate his quest for a purpose and meaning. Since he can not communicate satisfactorily with other human beings through the usual methods, the individual may search for deeper relationships with others. At times this search becomes confused and the individual engages in a purely sexual union which leads nowhere.

The men and women, but especially the men, in John Updike's books who indulge in promiscuous and seemingly flippant affairs are obviously not conforming to the professed sexual mores of the society.

In my opinion, John Updike has good and sufficient reason for including his very frank descriptions of the sexual relationships among his characters. In the first place, as indicated previously, some individuals, tangled in an intricate web of isolation and alienation, start the search for something to make their lives more meaningful

and simply use sex in an attempt to achieve that end. In this respect, the novels merely present one particular method which people try. Secondly, detailed descriptions seem to be the trend in modern literature. So the novels follow the present pattern. But more importantly, Updike includes the detail to point out the depths to which people sink (as in Rabbit, Run where Rabbit forces Ruth to engage in conduct which they regard as debasing and thus reveals his own weakness) and to emphasize the purely mechanical nature of a sexual relationship by itself. Finally, none of the characters involved in illicit and immoral liaisons ever seem to gain what they are looking for. Updike shows that because the people themselves are incapable of loving each other, the physical union they do achieve means nothing to them either. If anything, the novels present a good case for not indulging in adultery (or marriage).

The intent, then, of the following chapters will be to show that John Updike's major theme is the modern middle class man's quest for a reason to live and to examine the methods which Updike seems to find important or relevant to the individual's quest. God and religion, the comparative importance of the past in contrast to the meaningless present, the importance of a man's job, the problems of communication between individuals, and sexual relationships are seemingly the five most important avenues that Updike

uses to express his ideas of the middle class man's position in society. Each novel will be discussed in relation to these terms, and finally an attempt will be made to determine whether or not the novels present an integrated vision.

Chapter I

The Poorhouse Fair

The Poorhouse Fair is an unusual first novel for a young writer in that it is concerned with the events of one day--the day of the annual fair at a county poorhouse for the aged. The principal individuals are an octogenarian, John Hook, Gregg and Lucas, all inmates of the poorhouse. These three and all the other old people are, in a sense, allied against the prefect of the poorhouse, Conner. On one level the book is a study of the status of the aged in our society at a point in the future; in a deeper sense, the book presents the conflict between Conner and the inmates particularly, not as just a conflict between generations, but as the failure of a highly developed technical society to provide for the most important element--the individual, in this case, the elderly individual--in a humane manner.

The elderly inhabitants of the poorhouse want only to be left alone to pass their last days in whatever way they desire. They do not want to be ordered, regimented or guided by the prefect at all. Conner does not realize this, as is obvious from the very first scene, where the old

people discover that he has labeled their chairs with nameplates that can be altered as needed.

Conner feels that the old people are not aware of how much better off they are now than under the former prefect, Mendelssohn, who had chosen a cupola four flights up for his office so that not many people would disturb him. Conner feels that "Mendelssohn had in part thought of himself as God."[1]

In contrast, Conner is completely the product of a scientifically and technically oriented society. He does not think of anyone as God. He believes only in himself and in the progress of the society. He feels that what he is doing for the old people is "to [help them] retain to the end the dignity that properly belongs to every member, big or little, of humanity."[2]

What Conner doesn't realize is that he does not know how to preserve dignity. His efforts are doomed to constant failure because he considers only the physical needs of the inmates. He feels that new tables for the cafeteria, a complete set of dishes instead of odds and ends, and clean grounds and free medical care are the only necessities. He ignores the spiritual needs since he can not understand

[1]John Updike, The Poorhouse Fair (New York, 1958), p. 12.

[2]Ibid., p. 16.

the concept of faith in something beyond oneself and the system.

The former prefect Mendelssohn, an alcoholic who apparently cared very little about administering the home properly, succeeded in the minds and hearts of the inmates, whereas Conner, the inhuman humanist, who is a careful and thorough administrator, fails. Updike is very explicit in pointing out the reasons for Conner's failure.

The old people live, as Hook puts it, "so close to the line...."[3] Mendelssohn realized that "here they lived with Death at their sides, the third participant in every conversation, the other guest at every meal...."[4] and gave them comfort by such small things as leading them in religious songs like "Onward Christian Soldiers" and "With Arms Wide Open He'll Pardon You." Because Mendelssohn seemed to care about them spiritually, the old people didn't even notice that they sat at old wooden tables and used odds and ends of dishes.

Conner, on the other hand, has supplied the home with square little white tables and a set of new dishes, but he is not aware of the spiritual needs. He is not concerned with anything but appearances. He cares only about the surface aspect of the old people's lives here in the poorhouse

[3]Ibid., p. 6.

[4]Ibid., p. 57.

and regards it as "their final reward."[5] Antiseptic is perhaps the word that best describes Conner. He is so engrossed in cleanliness that he cannot conceive of Godliness.

At one point, Conner, feeling guilty about the rain which seems to be spoiling the fair, tries to enter into a discussion with the old people. To his misfortune, the discussion turns to life after death and Heaven. A blind woman, Elizabeth Heinemann, asks if he thinks people are able to see after they are dead. Conner feels that "False solace must be destroyed before true solace can be offered."[6] So he says that all sight must end with the loss of the eyes. Quite obviously, this is not what the old people want to hear. Only Elizabeth, then, is ultimately able to define heaven. Conner can't because he doesn't believe in it. Hook won't try because Conner is present, and Amy Mortis is indignant about the whole discussion. The picture that Elizabeth presents is quite simply one of hope.

Pressed, Conner is finally forced to describe his idea of heaven, believing "that in their hearts no one believed, which accounted for the strained, or bluff, expressions on the faces of the few clergy he had met."[7] His vision is,

[5]Ibid., p. 56.

[6]Ibid., p. 68.

[7]Ibid., p. 75.

of course, limited to the earth and, particularly, to this one spot. His main idea is that everything will be clean and neat; all physical suffering will be removed. "Each man will know himself without delusions, without muddle, and within the limits of that self-knowledge will construct a sane and useful life....The factors which for ages have warped the mind and stunted his body will be destroyed;... there will be no waste. No pain and above all no waste."[8]

This heaven will be possible because "the administration of power will be in the hands of those who have no hunger for power, but who are, rather, dedicated to the cause of all humanity."[9] In other words, people like himself.

At this declaration, the old people laugh and Conner becomes angry. Hook tries to point out to Conner that the elimination of pain will not necessarily eliminate evil. Conner doesn't see this. He feels that all pain and evil are brought upon the individual by the poor administration of power. In contrast, Hook says that most suffering, even that of disease, is the result of "transgressing the commandments, notably those against gluttony and greed."[10] Furthermore, Hook continues with the idea that suffering

[8]Ibid., p. 75.

[9]Ibid., p. 75.

[10]Ibid., p. 78.

provides man with the opportunity to exercise virtue.

Still Conner does not give up. He prods Hook into defining virtue as "obedience to the commands of God." Conner counters that this is a ridiculous idea and that these "commands of God" are actually restrictions that society imposes on individuals by involving "the supernatural as a mother would an absentee father."[11]

This involvement of the supernatural leads them to a discussion of God and His presence or absence that sounds much like our society's recent discussion of the death of God.

Conner is a non-believer. He tries to destroy Hook's belief by explaining the purely accidental origins of life forms. He concludes his argument with the story of a young girl educated by Catholic nuns who was induced to have a vision of Christ as a result of electrical shocks. His final remark is that the vision is supposed to have told the girl not to be afraid.[12]

To Conner, this should absolutely prove to Hook that his faith is false. He can not even see that one could as easily interpret the girl's vision as an actual one and the admonition not to be afraid as the actual words of Christ;

[11]Ibid., p. 78.

[12]Ibid., p. 80.

for to a believer what better time could there be for Christ to appear to give strength to a suffering human being?

Hook may not realize the second possible interpretation of Conner's story, but he does not lose his faith. He concludes: "There is not goodness, without belief. There is nothing but busy-ness. And if you have not believed, at the end of your life you shall know you have buried your talent in the ground of this world and have nothing saved, to take into the next."[13]

It is actually rather ironic that Conner sees Hook as a danger to himself. Hook is the one man in the poorhouse who could be a true friend to Conner and could help him reach a better understanding with the other old people; for Hook is respected by the others, and he feels duty-bound to aid his fellow men, including Conner. In a sense, Hook is the real man in the novel and does attain a certain amount of wisdom through his deliberate manner even though his ideas are not original, but he is unable to communicate with Conner, much as current governmental or business leaders are incapable of communicating with the popular leaders of society's various groups.

In the first place, Conner misinterprets Hook's knowing all of the old people and circulating comfortably

[13]Ibid., p. 81.

among them. Conner stands in his cupola office observing Hook walking about among the old people preparing for the fair and is jealous of Hook's position. He feels that Hook is taking over "the domain." In fact, looking down, Conner views Hook as "compact, jaunty, busy, menacing...."[14]

In the discussion about God mentioned earlier, Conner had also misunderstood what Hook intended. Conner thought that Hook was making fun of him and had therefore overtly attacked Hook verbally, intending to show his own superority. Although he feels successful, Conner actually loses the battle because the other old people regard his attack on Hook as cruel and unwarranted.

Another incident illustrating the failure of these two men to communicate is the rock throwing which occurs when Conner orders some of the old people to pick up the loose stones and rocks from a part of the collasped wall. Hook is exempted from the order because of his age, but out of curorsity he accompanies the laborers. Conner and Gregg load a large rock into the wheelbarrow and immediately Hook observes that with two more rocks the wheelbarrow will be full. Conner resents Hook's comment right away, especially when he realizes that Hook is correct.

The other men then pick up the smaller stones and throw them into the wheelbarrow. Conner somewhat stupidly

[14]Ibid., p. 37.

stands between the handles and does not move the wheelbarrow as the men move away from it. Thus, the men are forced to throw the stones into the wheelbarrow. Gregg deliberately hits Conner with one of the rocks, and when he shows his fear, the old people pelt him with stones. Conner retreats but turns to see Hook "the tallest, standing there as if presiding."[15]

Actually, Hook had been studying the clouds and did not even become aware of what was really going on until the brief skirmish was over. Still, Conner is convinced that Hook started the entire thing. Hook tries to allay Conner's anger against Gregg--thinking that Conner knows Gregg threw the first stone--not realizing that Gregg is not suspected and that his attempts only strengthen Conner's belief that he is a "schemer." In retaliation, Conner forbids Hook to smoke his cigars, thus denying him the one pleasure he still has. But of course Conner can justify even this punishment in his own mind by reasoning that Hook might set himself or the wooden buildings afire.

Hook doesn't realize what has caused the trouble. Nevertheless, his last thought that night is that he must "set things right....He stood motionless, half in moonlight, groping after the fitful shadow of advice he must impart to Conner, as a bond between them and a testament to endure

[15]Ibid., p. 92.

his dying in the world. What was it?"[16]

As might be expected in an old people's home, the talk is many times about the past. This time, however, the past has an additional importance because the present is relatively meaningless, not only to the inmates but also to the townspeople who visit the fair. In many instances in this book, discussions of the past are also relative to the idea of the importance of work and workmanship.

The first comment is made by Hook in regard to the name tags on their chairs which Gregg says can be easily removed with the fingers. Hook states that modern workmen do not measure up to those of the past. Several pages later he again comments on the lack of good workers now as compared to his day when "The carpenters...could drive a stout nail as long as my finger in three strokes."[17] Now, as Lucas comments, everything is made of plastic and shows no imprint of the individual workman.

The main building of the poorhouse itself provides an interesting example of the past and its relative value. Conner's office has large windows, "sets of three with round-arched tops, the middle one taller than the two flanking. The metal supporting the Venetian blinds muddled the stately lines, and the semi-circles, each fitted of five

[16]Ibid., p. 127.

[17]Ibid., p. 10.

pieces of hand-worked wood, peeked above the manufactured horizontals like the upper margin of a fresco painted where now an exit has been broken through."[18]

In the past, care was taken to insure the beauty of the finished product as well as the usefulness. Hence, the Venetian blind presents a sharp contrast.

This contrast is further illustrated by the fact that Conner's office had once been a piano room, and the piano, a huge one, had been placed in the room while one wall was still to be completed. Now there is no way to remove it and so it must sit along with the high ceilings and exposed beams as a constant reminder of the past to Conner who "came from a world of low ceilings, onion-gray or egg-blue, made still lower by fluorescent structures."[19] Conner's world sounds like the standard office decor of today which is calculated to suppress the individual occupant's personality through the use of bland colors such as beige and gray.

Conner is not the only one who is bothered by the space of old-fashioned structures. The dentist son-in-law of Fred Kegerise, a former town official whose house was referred to as the Manse because of its size and stateliness, can only complain about the heat bills and install

[18]Ibid., p. 17.

[19]Ibid., p. 18.

two dentist's chairs behind separate partitions in the living room instead of admiring the beauty and openness of the house.

Again Hook, while helping Mrs. Jamiesson decorate her table, remarks that the sound of her hammering reminds him of the carpenters of his day who could "drive a coarse nail with three swift strokes."[20] The table itself is a remnant of the past. Before Conner replaced the wooden tables with synthetic marble ones, they had been the cafeteria tables.

The discussions which Hook has with other people all center on the past, too. At one point he discusses Abraham Lincoln and the slaves. At another time he discusses William McKinley with Amy Mortis, and during the fair itself he talks to one of the older inhabitants of the nearby town about the days of Grover Cleveland compared to the political scene of the present. Hook in fact claims that "This last decade has witnessed the end of the world, if the people would but wake to it."[21]

What Hook really means is that the people who are presently running the government and living the prime moments of their lives are all like Conner and Buddy, his assistant, and Fred Kegerise's son-in-law. They have dehumanized everything for the sake of progress and the belief that every

[20]Ibid., p. 19.

[21]Ibid., p. 105.

object must have its use so that people have nothing left that has any meaning to them. Thus, an antique dealer from Trenton rushes to the fair every year to buy Amy Mortis' quilts because he knows the value that is placed on objects from the past even though Conner and many of the local townspeople do not realize it.

Conner exemplifies the nature of the people of the society with his antiseptic, inhuman attempts to administer the poorhouse. The younger generation is represented by Ted, the teen-ager who drives a delivery truck and who becomes so upset at the sight of the old people that he knocks down a portion of the wall surrounding the farm with his truck. The one consoling thought he has is his girlfriend. But even his relationship with his girlfriend is essentially a sterile one because she belongs to a club whose rules stipulate that the members may show their bodies, but are not allowed to be touched. Consequently, Ted's thoughts are on the parts of his girlfriend's body that he has been allowed to see while holding his hands clasped in front of him, and his thoughts are limited strictly to the idea of observing.

The conversation of several teen-agers who are visiting the fair provides a similar view of the interrelationships between members of the opposite sex in Updike's future. These teen-agers do not touch one another, either.

They, too, have developed an ogling game. The boys sit in a car while the girls run naked through the headlight beams. Obviously, this kind of behavior is destructive in the same way that Conner's administration of the poorhouse is inhuman, for it does not contain even the semblance of a bond between the individuals involved. Furthermore, we already have examples of this kind of behavior in our society--the sky-rocketing sales of Playboy magazine, the popularity of clubs where one must never touch the girls, and the preponderance of dances which involve no bodily contact, or even more than one individual, are just three examples.

Another facet of this sterile type of relationship among the people is demonstrated by Buddy, the homosexual assistant to Conner. Conner does not reject Buddy, and only the old people really seem to notice that Buddy needs help.

Poorhouse Fair, then, although it describes old age with great insight and sensitivity, is really "less concerned with old age then with the clash between the bloodless ideal of social perfectibility and the pungent humanity of the old Adam."[22]

[22]"Do-Gooder Undone," Anon. rev., Time, LXXIII (January 19, 1959), 92.

Chapter II

Rabbit, Run

John Updike's second novel is about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, whose name means "trembling with fear" according to the etymological derivation. Rabbit is a twenty-six year old MagiPeeler salesman with a pregnant wife and a two year old son. He has no meaning in his life. His story opens with a significant scene: Returning home from work, Rabbit comes upon some boys playing basketball in an alley. The ball rolls over to him; he picks it up and immediately feels a surge of the power and glory he had experienced as a high school basketball star. Although his presence is obviously resented by the boys, Rabbit stops to play with them, trying to recapture all of the feelings of his days as a hero; for then he knew his place and recognized that his existence was significant, that he had a contribution to make to his team, his school, his family, and his town everytime he played ball. In fact, he had been a sort of town idol for a time, but now at the age of twenty-six he has found out that few people in town remember him for his superior ball playing; his records have been

smashed by younger and better players. He can not rely upon his skill as a basketball player to give meaning to his life as a man.

Rabbit leaves the game and goes home to find his drunken wife locked in their apartment watching the Mouseketeers on television. After fighting briefly with his wife, Rabbit goes to get his son. Instead, however, he suddenly obeys his impulse to run away from all of his nothingness. His flight does not succeed because he does not know where he's going and simply drives around, lost, until he finally decides to come back home. The next morning he seeks counsel from his old coach Tothero and is, instead, introduced to a prostitute, Ruth. Finally, Rabbit is reunited with his wife when she has their second child. Their reunion is short-lived, though, when Rabbit feels rebuked and leaves again. Janice, in a drunken stupor, accidentally drowns the baby.

This accident brings Rabbit back, but at the baby's funeral he is moved to face reality and to establish the guilt involved in the death. Everyone turns on him and Rabbit runs again.

A superficial reading of this story might well lead the reader to conclude as did Anthony Burgess that "Updike was guilty of a sort of democratic heresy in pouring the riches of language on characters and situations so trivial,"

and that the book is made up of "meticulous notations of male weakness."[1] Yet a sympathetic reader can not help but realize how Rabbit feels at the beginning of the story. As he says, once a person has been good at something, it's hard to accept second-rate as the best. Consequently, Rabbit has been living almost entirely in the past--remembering his basketball triumphs, his childhood, and his first days with his wife. He has no present or future. This is what he realizes and what frightens him.

Here Rabbit is, then, stuck in an insignificant job that he can not stand and that he feels is dishonest, as he says, "admitting it's all a fraud, but, what the hell, making it likeable. We're all in it together. Fraud makes the world go round."[2]

Rabbit feels that his job is beneath him as he tells his wife's minister, Eccles: "Do you know what I was doing to support that bunch? I was demonstrating a penny's worth of tin called a frigging MagiPeeler in five-and-dime stores!"[3]

Rabbit's main objection to the job, besides his feeling that it is somehow dishonest, is that it is a relatively useless task. He even expresses his own surprise that the utensil actually does what the manufacturer claims.

[1]Anthony Burgess, "Myth and Mr. Updike," Commonweal, LXXXVIII (February 11, 1966), 557.

[2]John Updike, Rabbit, Run (New York, 1961), p. 12.

[3]Ibid., p. 91.

Later Rabbit takes a used car salesman's job offered to him by his father-in-law, Mr. Springer--a job which "is easy enough, if it isn't any work for you to lie. He feels exhausted by midafternoon."[4]

Rabbit's exhaustion is quite clearly brought on by the dishonest, not by physical exertion, for the one job that he enjoys is his brief stint as a gardener. This job gives him a sense of accomplishment and enables him to feel honest with himself. The gardening, however, is only a temporary job and not one where he can earn enough money to support his family.

Part of the trapped feeling that Rabbit has is not caused by his job, but by his inability to communicate with his wife. "Well, I'm not going back to that little dope no matter how sorry you feel for her. I don't know what she feels. I never have. All I know is what's inside me. That's all I have."[5]

Since he isn't able to communicate with his wife, Rabbit feels no responsibility to her. Even after he returns to her he still can not communicate in any way except by his physical actions. His desire to express his love for his wife physically, though, is impossible because of Janice's condition and her refusal to understand his

[4]Ibid., p. 195.

[5]Ibid., p. 91.

feelings. Equally unfeeling, Rabbit says he doesn't care how she feels; "the thing is how I feel. And I feel like getting out."[6]

The culminating example of Rabbit's inability to express himself clearly comes at the graveside of his infant daughter. Although everyone is naturally upset by the baby's death, all appear to be adjusting fairly well until Rabbit hears Eccles' words at the graveside, "Casting every care on thee." Rabbit feels released and full of strength. He is moved to exclaim "Don't look at me....I didn't kill her....She's the one."[7]

The others are, of course, horrified by his words and do not understand that this is just Rabbit's own way of trying to set things straight, to see the "simplest factual truth." Seeing that everyone is stricken by his behavior, "A suffocating sense of injustice blinds him. He turns and runs."[8]

Searching through his memory for an element of strength to sustain him, Rabbit thinks of his coach and friend, Marty Tothero. Tothero had been ousted from the high school because of scandal, yet Rabbit had liked him because "Next to his mother Tothero had had the most force."[9] At first

[6]Ibid., p. 197.

[7]Ibid., p. 244.

[8]Ibid., p. 244.

[9]Ibid., p. 18.

it seems that Tothero may try to help Rabbit when he makes Rabbit promise to discuss the problem with Janice. Tothero is, however, not really capable of helping Rabbit. He only mouths platitudes about the coach developing a boy's intelligence, his physical endurance and his desire to play ball. He also feels that any boy who has had a truly "inspiring coach...can never become, in the deepest sense, a failure in the greater game of life."[10] This shows Rabbit that Tothero lacks the force Rabbit once admired. Obviously, what Tothero doesn't realize is that Rabbit feels he is a failure in the deepest sense. Outwardly he has probably seemed to be successful until this time, but he has felt himself to be a failure.

Not finding any authority left in Tothero, Rabbit turns to Ruth, the prostitute to whom Tothero introduces him, feeling that he can perhaps find meaning in a liaison with her. It is clear, though their friendship is, at first, based on physical sensation only, that Rabbit really desires more. "...it is her heart he wants to grind into his own, to comfort her completely."[11]

In spite of his using sexual intercourse to make himself feel successful as well as satisfying his physical desire, Rabbit demonstrates in his proclaiming his first

[10]Ibid., p. 55.

[11]Ibid., p. 65.

night with Ruth as their wedding night that he is not really interested in a temporary arrangement. He wants "not the machine, but her, her...."[12] Further, he "makes love to her as he would his wife"[13] and feels "impatience that through all their twists they remain separate flesh."[14] Ruth seems to realize that what Rabbit is seeking is impossible for him to find. "He looks in her face and seems to read in its shadows a sad expression of forgiveness as if she knows that at the moment of release, the root of love, he betrayed her by feeling despair."[15]

Rabbit has not been able to find what he wants in his marriage. He doesn't really love his wife and never did. Theirs is a relationship which, from the start, was based only on physical attraction. Consequently, now that the novelty has worn off, Rabbit finds his wife repulsive and even frightening.

Rabbit appears to Janice and Eccles as strictly a creature of sensation, only an animal aware of its skin. Ruth also thinks this about Rabbit. "That was the thing about him, he just lived in his skin and didn't give a

[12]Ibid., p. 68.

[13]Ibid., p. 71.

[14]Ibid., p. 72.

[15]Ibid., p. 73.

thought to the consequences of anything."[16] One explanation for this appearance may be that Rabbit, like many of today's people, examines every particle of his behavior. In a sense his introspection makes him appear to be extremely selfish.

Rabbit, though, is not defeated. He goes right on trying to find some bit of meaning. He perceives that his relationship to Ruth is more than his marriage was. Ruth is actually closer to Rabbit than Janice was. Early in their friendship she tells Rabbit that she likes him because he hasn't given up. "'Cause in your stupid way you're still fighting.'"[17] After two months, however, she begins to wonder why Rabbit is so likeable--what is so special about him? Harry explains that it's because he's a mystic and gives people faith.

Eventually Rabbit is completely isolated except for Ruth to whom he returns. She wants him to go away even though she is pregnant. Her pregnancy elates Rabbit and he wants to stay more than ever, but his presence sickens Ruth who tells him that she finally sees him clearly for the first time. "You're Mr. Death himself. You're not just nothing, you're worse than nothing. You're not a rat, you don't stink, you're not enough to stink."[18]

[16] Ibid., p. 125.

[17] Ibid., p. 79.

[18] Ibid., p. 251.

In spite of her hatred for Rabbit, Ruth tells him that unless he marries her he can consider her and his baby dead. Rabbit, lost as usual in his own indecision and isolation, can not make up his mind to divorce Janice--the enormity of arrangements that would have to be made terrifies him.

Perhaps Rabbit could bear his job and his wife if he had his faith to lean on, but he doesn't have even that. Religion had been a part of the Angstrom's early lives, but now even the mention of God on television by Jimmy the Mouseketeer has an adverse effect, for it makes Harry feel embarrassed and guilty.

At this point, Rabbit is ready for Reverend Eccles, the Episcopalian minister of Janice's church. (His name is derived from the Greek "Ekklasia" meaning "church.") In his first impression of Eccles, Rabbit notes the hypocrisy which Eccles betrays in parking his car on the wrong side of the street. "Funny how ministers ignore small laws."[19]

Rabbit is also "distracted by the man's suit; it only feigns black. It is really blue."[20] Everything in the minister's appearance and manner seems to rankle Rabbit's nerves. He even becomes "slightly annoyed at the way the minister isn't bawling him out or something; he doesn't

[19]Ibid., p. 86.

[20]Ibid., p. 86.

seem to know his job."[21]

Eccles is essentially a socializer. He is concerned with the social aspects of his congregation. "...it occurs to Rabbit that the minister is a connoisseur of affairs like this, broken homes, fleeing husbands...."[22]

Rabbit begins to like Eccles a little bit and starts talking to him. Without realizing it, Rabbit actually voices his plea for help when he tries to answer Eccles' question about why he thinks he and Janet are "exceptional."

Rabbit thinks about God at times other than when he's with Eccles. At one point, sensing his own despair, Rabbit watches a church congregation from Ruth's window. "The thought of these people having the bold idea of leaving their homes to come here and pray pleases and reassures Rabbit and moves him to close his own eyes and bow his head with a movement so tiny that Ruth won't notice."[23] And Rabbit prays.

In trying to discuss the congregation with Ruth, Harry discovers not only that she doesn't believe in God, but that he isn't quite sure himself. He answers her question about her belief with: "'Well, yeah. I think so....' he wonders if he's lying. If he is, he is hung in the middle

[21]Ibid., p. 87.

[22]Ibid., p. 88.

[23]Ibid., p. 77.

of nowhere, and the thought hollows him, makes his heart tremble. Across the street a few people in their best clothes walk on the pavement past the row of worn brick homes; are they walking on air: Their clothes, they put on their best clothes: he clings to the thought giddily; it seems a visual proof of the unseen world."[24]

Rabbit is, in fact, quite upset by everyone's seeming indifference to God. "His day has been bothered by God: Ruth mocking, Eccles blinking--why did they teach you such things if no one believed them?...What is he doing here, standing on air? Why isn't he home? He becomes frightened and begs Ruth, 'Put your arm around me.'"[25]

Rabbit's disillusionment is far from finished. His next meeting with Eccles at the manse reveals Eccles as an ineffective father and husband with an overbearing and non-believing wife. Again the discussion turns to religion. Rabbit feels that he must tell Eccles what he's trying to find. "'Well I don't know all this about theology, but I'll tell you. I <u>do</u> feel, I guess, that somewhere behind all this,' he gestures outward at the scenery;...the ungrandest landscape in the world...'there's something that wants me to find it.'"[26] Eccles rebukes him by telling him that all

[24]Ibid., p. 77.

[25]Ibid., p. 96.

[26]Ibid., p. 108.

vagrants think they are on a quest.

While discussing Janice and why he left her, Rabbit reiterates that something was missing and implies that it is in his relationship to religion and God. Eccles again says that Rabbit is wrong and begs him to describe what is missing. "It hits Rabbit depressingly that he really wants to be told. Underneath all this I-know-more-about-it-than-you-heresies-of-the-early-church business he really wants to be told that it is there, that he's not lying to all those people every Sunday."[27]

Now Eccles has really done about all he can. He never goes beyond being strictly a socializing meddler who is incapable of giving Rabbit any faith to hang onto in his struggle.

To Ruth Eccles is something even worse than Rabbit, because Eccles has convinced Rabbit that he is something special and that he can get away with whatever he cares to do. Rabbit himself confirms her belief when he says "If you have the guts to be yourself,...other people'll pay your price."[28]

Eccles is a failure to Janice's parents also. Mrs. Springer feels that he has failed because Rabbit has a job he enjoys and has not been shamed into returning to Janice.

[27]Ibid., p. 112.

[28]Ibid., p. 125.

She would have Rabbit thrown into jail to make him return. Her great concern is not for her daughter's well-being, but for the town gossips and what they are saying as she remarks to Eccles: "You don't hear the talk I do. You don't see the smiles."[29] This seems to put Mrs. Springer right in step with Eccles if they are judged by their hypocrisy.

While Eccles is a spiritual failure, the social failure of organized religion is presented in Rabbit's own minister, Kruppenbach, to whom Eccles turns in desperation. Kruppenbach feels that Rabbit's behavior is the concern of the police and that the role of the minister is only that of being an "exemplar of faith"[30] with prayer his only tool. Eccles retreats, defeated, to the drugstore where he feels at home.

In spite of everything, Rabbit is truly thankful for Reverend Eccles' efforts and even tries to thank him personally by attending the Episcopal Church services. Once again Eccles' brand of religion fails Rabbit. "He feels too much is made of collecting the money," and is deeply disturbed by Eccles' sermon on the necessity of suffering. "Harry has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity, the <u>going through</u> quality of it, the pass-<u>into</u> death and suffering that redeems and inverts these

[29]Ibid., p. 129.

[30]Ibid., p. 143.

things....He lacks the mindful will to walk the straight line of a paradox."[31]

Rabbit is as isolated as ever. He is still alienated from God, from his job, from his family and from himself. He is "really afraid, he remembers what once consoled him by seeming to make a hole where he looked through into underlying brightness, and lifts his eyes to the church window. It is, because of church poverty or the late summer nights or just carelessness, unlit, a dark circle in a stone facade."[32] In looking up, Rabbit observes the streetlights and follows the light made by them.

> He feels his inside as very real suddenly, a pure bland space in the middle of a dense net... he doesn't know, what to do, where to go, what will happen, the thought that he doesn't know seems to make him infinitely small and impossible to capture....It's like when they heard you were great and put two men on you and no matter which way you turned you bumped into one of them and the only thing to do was pass. So you passed and the ball belonged to the others...and the men on you looked foolish because in effect there was nobody there.[33]

At first glance it may seem that Rabbit has "passed the ball" and is now simply running because he is in just the unique position described in the introduction. He can not find anything to give him a firm grasp on life.

[31]Ibid., p. 197.

[32]Ibid., p. 254.

[33]Ibid., p. 254-255.

He feels trapped by his environment. He looks around and all he sees is hypocrisy and disbelief. Updike has, however, provided a measure of balance in Rabbit's life; enough to show that there is hope for Rabbit. Thus, Rabbit hates his jobs as a MagiPeeler salesman and a used car salesman, but finds satisfaction in his job as a gardener. His marriage is a complete flop, but his relationship with Ruth provides a new dimension for his life. And perhaps most importantly, Rabbit realizes that even though he may not be able to achieve what he desires, he has another chance through his children. Above all else he must work to protect Nelson from being a "Fosnacht" (etymologically meaning "pit of hell") just as his own grandfather tried to protect him. Rabbit feels lost, but he has not given up hope because in spite of his name, he is more than an animal and does not live only in his skin.

Chapter III

The Centaur

Written as a companion piece or a kind of commentary on Rabbit, Run, The Centaur presents an interesting challenge to the reader. It pictures the events of three winter days in 1947 in the life of a high school science teacher, George Caldwell, as related by his son Peter through a series of flashbacks. The challenge lies in the changing viewpoint created by the mythological framework of the novel; for Updike has given the elements of the Caldwells' lives a greater significance by providing them with two levels of existence--that as man and that as mythological character. In this respect, Caldwell is Chiron the Centaur who gave his life to expiate Prometheus-Peter's sin of the theft of fire.

Nearly all of the other characters in the novel have a mythological referent, too. Vera Hummel, the physical education teacher who suffers from nymphomania, is Venus; her husband, a garage mechanic, is Hephaestus; the lecherous high school principal, Zimmerman, is Zeus, and Peter's girlfriend, Penny, is Pandora, complete with box. The

reader's difficulty arises from the fact that part of the time these people actually become the gods, goddesses, or in Caldwell's case, the centaur. For example, in the first section Caldwell the Centaur is shot through the hind leg with an arrow while teaching his class and must go to the Hummel garage to have it removed. Walking down the corridor of the school building, he becomes upset by the clatter of his hooves on the floor.

Once the reader is able to place the mythological elements in their proper perspective--that of giving an added dimension to the importance of the activities of the individuals involved--it is possible to realize that Updike is again discussing his own particular philosophy of life and what a man needs to survive as a human being.

George Caldwell shares some of the same problems that Rabbit Angstrom has. Caldwell seems to regard his present life as only a transient thing. Peter points this out when he comments that things in their household had always been marked by "haste and improvidence....The reason, it came to me, was that our family's central member, my father, had never rid himself of the idea that he might soon be moving on."[1]

Caldwell is not happy in his present job. It causes him to worry, and the worry, in turn, causes him considerable

[1]John Updike, The Centaur (New York, 1962), p. 203.

physical distress. He feels unsuited for the job. He feels that he lacks the will to discipline people and is utterly dismayed by their failure to learn the material he presents. He keeps looking back to the time when he worked as a cable splicer for the telephone company. That was a job he enjoyed and which allowed him to have three things he does not have now: a solvency he finds impossible to reach on his teacher's salary, travel, and the freedom to live within a town, his own natural environment.

In this respect, the past had seemed to promise better things for George Caldwell than he now has, and the future appears to hold but one thing for him--death.

Death is as much Caldwell's companion in this novel as it was the old people's in Poorhouse Fair. Caldwell actually seems to want death until he realizes that he must face the challenge of his existence. He is really not ready to die. He must sacrifice himself to his job as a teacher. Death will come then, but only after he has provided for his son's future, which he can do only by living and working.

One point on which Caldwell and Rabbit Angstrom differ is their use of sex as an escape or as a means to a more satisfying relationship with another individual. Caldwell simply doesn't try it. He is a man of fifty; yet it is evident that he has had ample opportunity to select sex as a possible solution. Vera Hummel, the young and

attractive physical education teacher, offers herself to him, but he is simply not able to respond to her--his mind and conscience control his actions.

Hester Appleton, the French teacher, has loved Caldwell for years. She does not, however, indicate this to him in any overt way. Caldwell says he shouldn't have married his wife; that he was brought up to believe that he had to marry the first woman who was half-way attractive to him. In other words, he is saying to Hester: "I should have married a woman like you. You."[2] Even with this realization, Hester and George change the subject and discuss his son's education.

Caldwell's love is for all mankind, with a special portion reserved for his son. Hurrying to school one morning, Caldwell stops to pick up a hitchhiker. He can not stand the thought of the man standing in the cold. Even though Caldwell is late for work, he goes out of his way to take the man into Alton. When Peter objects, Caldwell quietly tells him that it's too cold--quietly so that the hitchhiker will not be embarrassed by their going out of their way for him.

This scene with the hitchhiker is quite humorous. Caldwell's great need to verbalize his concern and affection for the tramp makes him go on and on. He questions the

[2]Ibid., p. 146.

hitchhiker about traveling around the country, about his job as a cook, where he's going, etc. The tramp, in turn, tells Caldwell about killing a dog, reveals that he's a homosexual and generally runs down the whole world. But Caldwell remains untouched by the man's degeneracy. He proclaims the man an artist, relates his life story, and concludes by telling Peter that the man is a gentleman! Peter is incensed with his father's behavior although he realizes that "It's just his way, he loves strange people."[3]

A similar incident occurs on the downtown streets of Alton one night when Caldwell and Peter are trying to decide what to do about their broken car. A drunk approaches them and accuses Caldwell of an immoral relationship with Peter. Both Peter and his father try to explain they are father and son, but the drunk continues to harass them by saying he's going to go to the police unless Caldwell pays him off. None of this particularly disturbs Caldwell until the drunk asks him if he is ready to die. This starts Caldwell's mind on a new track so that he finally gives the drunk all of his money--thirty-five cents--shakes his hand, and exclaims, "You've clarified my thinking."[4]

This love of Caldwell's extends to his students, also. Perhaps it is because he cares so much about them, yet

[3]Ibid., p. 70.

[4]Ibid., p. 122.

feels so incompetent that he worries himself into a state of constant tension, and hence, destroys his health.

The main concentration of Caldwell's love, however, is reserved for his son. It is for Peter that he is ultimately concerned. In fact, his sacrifice of himself through remaining at his job as a teacher so that Peter is able to study art is done strictly out of love for his son, contrary to what he says about himself. "I never made a decision in my life that wasn't one hundred per cent selfish."[5] The opposite is the truth.

Caldwell's comment about his wife made earlier in his discussion with Hester Appleton seems to be more the result of a lack of communication than a lack of feeling on his part, for in talking to Hester he finds "He is reluctant to leave her and go down the stairs; his illness, his son, his debts, the painful burden of land his wife has saddled him with--all these problems itch in his brain for expression."[6]

The inability of Caldwell and his wife to communicate satisfactorily appears to stem from their differing backgrounds. Caldwell is a man of the town. He knows his way around in towns and feels at home in them. Prior to becoming a school teacher when he had been a cable splicer,

[5]Ibid., p. 217.

[6]Ibid., p. 146.

Caldwell had loved his job, at least partially because it allowed him to travel and to live in towns. He lost his job, however, at the beginning of the depression and was forced to move with his family into his father-in-law's house in Olinger. This had been a blow to his pride, but he had then gotten the job as a teacher and was able to keep his family fed and clothed.

Caldwell's wife, in contrast, had been brought up on a farm and looked to the land to supply her needs. Consequently, she persuaded her husband, against his better judgment, and wishes, to buy back the farm her father had sold and move the family to the old farm house. For Caldwell this is like living in never-never land because instead of enabling him to operate more freely, he feels weighed down by the land. Also, being so far from town makes him dependent on a car for transportation, a dependency that is an excruiating experience for Caldwell, since he knows nothing about cars and how they work, nor does he care. Therefore, he finds himself in a constant battle with an inanimate object. Furthermore, some element in Caldwell's being makes him feel less human because he must depend on a piece of machinery. This dependency gives him a feeling of alienation just as tangible as his separation from his wife and home when the car eventually proves to be inadequate transportation and he is forced to remain in town.

Toward the end of the novel, when it becomes apparent that Caldwell's nervous system really can not take the strain of teaching, his wife tries to convince him to quit and work on the farm with her, just as her parents did. Caldwell tells her: "I hate Nature. It reminds me of death. All Nature means to me is garbage and confusion and the stink of skunk--brroo!"[7] Surely Caldwell's wife knows how he feels, yet she will not relent. She can not seem to understand that life on the farm is completely unintelligible and repugnant to her husband.

A second area where Caldwell's wife doesn't seem able to understand him relates to his concern for his health. Caldwell claims that his family would be better off without him, but he realizes that this is not true. He is the sole wage earner for the entire family. Therefore, he is very concerned about his health because he knows that in order for his family to live and his son to go to college, he must work. His wife doesn't understand this. She thinks he is merely seeking sympathy as she indicates when his x-rays show that he does not have cancer. "Now he'll have to think up some new way of getting sympathy."[8]

Another parallel to Rabbit Angstrom is presented in George Caldwell's belief in the existence of a supreme

[7]Ibid., p. 216.

[8]Ibid., p. 215.

being while those around him, at best, have their doubts. Caldwell himself has doubts--his reason tells him that the purely scientific explanation of the creation of the universe, the earth, and man is the right one, but his heart or spirit believes in God's existence. In other words, he questions his own belief just as Rabbit did, but Rabbit's faith was not as clear to him as Caldwell's is. Caldwell seems to be more concerned with the form his faith takes and with the paradoxes of organized religion than Rabbit was.

The first questioning occurs when Caldwell tells his son to hurry so that they won't be late for school. "Time and tide for no man wait."[9] Caldwell says that people really don't know what they mean when they use this expression. His wife tries to explain that it means that some things are simply impossible for the individual to attain. Caldwell disagrees though: "I was a minister's son. I was brought up to believe, and I still believe it, that God made Man as the last best thing in His Creation. If that's the case, who are this time and tide that are so almighty to us?"[10]

Caldwell reaffirms his belief in the existence of God in a short discussion he has with the French teacher. She tells Caldwell that the phrase she has always lived by is

[9]Ibid., p. 51.

[10]Ibid., p. 52.

that "God is very fine." Caldwell agrees completely. "He certainly is. He's a wonderful old gentleman. I don't know where the hell we'd be without Him."[11]

Peter also realizes his father's faith and feels guilty when he proclaims himself an atheist in order to tease the owner of the cafe across the street from the high school. Peter answers his own question about who believes in God by saying that no one really does. "Yet in this boast, now it is issued, Peter perceives an abysmal betrayal of his father. In his mind he sees his father slip into a pit stunned."[12]

Nevertheless, George Caldwell does still have his doubts. Seeing the Reverend March at a high school basketball game, Caldwell decides to seek answers to his questions. Thus he chooses the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. March is the wrong man because his career is the product of two things--his mother's will and doubts of his own masculinity. Even after he was ordained, he was plagued by doubts that only deepened the more he studied theology. March was, however, called to war in 1941 and proved himself a hero in combat. In the process, he discovered that he did have the courage to live and preach because he thinks God allowed him to survive the war. He

[11]Ibid., p. 147.

[12]Ibid., p. 154-155.

also found out that he could retain the remnants of his war years--his mustache and sense of uniform--and use them successfully in his ministery. His faith is still intact and it can not be destroyed, but it is not a living faith. "Though he can go and pick it up and test its weight whenever he wishes, it has no arms with which to reach and restrain him. He mocks it."[13]

Caldwell chooses the wrong place to discuss religion with March because he picks the middle of the gymnasium in the middle of a basketball game. This is the wrong time because the minister resents Caldwell's intrusion into his private and engrossing discussion with Vera Hummel.

Caldwell is moved to ask March, as he says, about "Everything. The works. I can't make it add up and I'd be grateful for your viewpoint."[14] His biggest problem, though, seems to be the idea of predestination. He can not resolve in his own mind why God would have selected some people to succeed and others not to. "What I could never ram through my thick skull was why the men that don't have it were created in the first place. The only reason I could figure was that God had to have somebody to fry down in Hell."[15]

[13]Ibid., p. 178.

[14]Ibid., p. 188.

[15]Ibid., p. 189.

March, of course, replies that "The doctrine of predestination must be understood as counter-balanced by the doctrine of God's infinite mercy."[16] This idea of God's infinite mercy really baffles Caldwell. March flatly refuses to discuss it further with him now, and instead offers to lend him books on the subject if Caldwell will come to his study any morning except Wednesdays. (Caldwell's principal, Zimmerman, will be overjoyed, naturally, at having to hire a substitute to handle Caldwell's classes so that he can have a free morning to go borrow March's books to overcome his religious doubts, especially when these same books only deepened March's doubts.)

Along with being uncertain about the nature of his faith, Caldwell is a fumbler. He has, quite literally, a terrible time with the day-to-day intricacies of modern life. One night while trying to get himself and his son home during a snowstorm, he finds the car becomes stuck and he blames himself. Here his attitude about predestination is reflected in his son's attempt to comfort him with: "It's not your fault. It's nobody's fault; it's God's fault."[17]

Caldwell's doubts, however, are also evident in his son's thinking. While waiting for his father, Peter picks

[16]Ibid., p. 189.

[17]Ibid., p. 197.

up a Reader's Digest. Two articles immediately draw Peter's attention, one on a miracle cure for cancer and another purporting to offer "Ten Proofs That There is a God." After reading the articles Peter's fears are heightened rather than dulled because they only lead him to conclude that there isn't a cure for cancer and that there are no proofs of God's existence.

Peter's fear about cancer is finally resolved when his father's x-rays show that he does not have cancer. To Caldwell, this is just another proof of predestination. "I've always been lucky. God takes care of you if you let Him."[18] (This kind of thinking, by the way, fits exactly into the mythological idea of Atropos deciding not to cut the thread of Chiron's life with her shears.)

Caldwell does then retain his faith even though he has doubts about its validity and about the form it should take, and in spite of the failure of the church as an institution through allowing March and others like him (Eccles in Rabbit, Run) to represent it. Caldwell seems to recognize that the faith proclaimed by his father and his church needs some revitalizing and perhaps even some reshaping if it is to survive in the modern world and provide man with the direction he needs. He seems in a position similar to that faced by many protestants in the present society

[18]Ibid., p. 217.

who feel that there must be changes in organized religions in order for them to have their questions answered and their spiritual needs met.

In trying to sort out his own faith which he needs to sustain him, his love for his family and others, and his feelings toward his work, Caldwell makes an important discovery: "He discovered that in giving his life to others he entered a total freedom. Only goodness lives. But it does live."[19]

In other words, what Updike is trying to tell the reader through Caldwell is that in a world where the social institutions such as the church fail to give the individual's life direction, he must, nevertheless, keep searching just as Rabbit did and as Caldwell does. In a sense, Caldwell answers his own doubts because he has hope in an afterlife and because he realizes that his son is his immortality in this world. He succeeds by being good and trying to do good--for his son and for everyone whose life connects with his own. Goodness lives in <u>him</u>. Thus Christ-like, he sacrifices himself to his work.

[19]Ibid., p. 220.

Chapter IV

Of the Farm

Of the Farm is a short novel again spanning a three day period of time. These three days occur on the same type of farm mentioned in The Centaur and, although the names are changed, some of the characters involved are the same. The Caldwell family name has been changed to Robinson and a few minor incidents altered, but George Caldwell's fumbling, talking, lovable school teacher presence is still felt in the memories that Joey has of his dead father. Joey's mother is the same person as George Caldwell's wife, and Joey himself is a thirty-five year old Peter, minus the art school and artist's life of The Centaur.

Joey Robinson has come to spend the weekend with his mother with two purposes in mind. First, he is to mow the fields which his mother can no longer do. Joey has also brought his new second wife and his eleven year old stepson Richard to meet his mother. His apprehension about the meeting is evident even as they approach the farm. Joey is very uneasy about his second wife's tendency to correct faults or omissions that she perceives, for he knows from

an experience of his first wife's that this is an unforgivable trait in his mother's view.

Updike's epigraph from Sarte seems to insist upon the need to be free in the present, but the characters in this novel are afraid of the present with its responsibilities and are constantly looking to the past for explanation, revision and meaning. Hence Joey's remembering that he had once asked his mother the same question that Richard asks him about the value of a farm that no one farms establishes a pattern. For these three adults, at least, there is no simple answer in the present. Everything is tied to the past. The entire weekend seems to be haunted by the past--memories of Joey's father, the lovers of both of Joey's wives, his grandfather and his grandmother and his childhood.

Going into the house, Joey must pass a privet bush that has grown into two separate bushes. This reminds him immediately of the occasion which produced the mangled privet bush. The first summer his family lived on the farm, a stray bull attacked the little bush, and his grandmother protected it by flapping her apron in the bull's face and talking to him. Joey also recalls that his family had never had enough light in the house; they had never owned enough lamps or bought large enough bulbs to adequately light the house.

Inside the house Joey expects to find his own

unadorned self as he was in youth. Instead he sees the evidence of his own corruption in the gifts which he has sent his mother over the years--gifts which have remained unused. There are so many mementoes of himself, including pictures, that Joey feels a part of him must remain on the farm all of the time, and he resents it.

The absence of any pictures of his father makes Joey sense that his father will enter the room momentarily, but Mr. Robinson has been dead for a year. Even so, his presence is felt through the memories of Joey and his mother. Mrs. Robinson, for example, explains that since her husband's death she no longer sleeps upstairs.

Joey, his mother and his wife Peggy discuss the past closely. Relating the details of the purchase of the farm, Joey's mother says that there were only two things she wanted in her life--Joey and the farm--and that she had gotten both because she had taken a friend's advice to "Take what you want, and pay the price."[1] and because her husband had given them to her. Mrs. Robinson did pay the price, but she unwittingly calculates it only in dollars. Peggy, in her drive to uncover and correct mistakes, asks what Mrs. Robinson gave her husband. The answer is slow in coming: "Why, his freedom!"[2] This is an answer which does

[1]John Updike, Of the Farm (New York, 1965), p. 24.

[2]Ibid., p. 31.

not represent the facts of George Robinson's existence because it twists his "anguished restlessness" brought about in part at least by his hatred of the farm and its financial burden into a freedom which never existed. In this respect, Mrs. Robinson had been selfish and is now unable to face the reality of her husband's suffering. Therefore she twists her own inability to control her husband completely into a present to him.

Joey realizes that his mother is distorting the truth about the past, but he does not find the strength within himself to contradict her, for he still sees her from his vantage point as a child. Part of Joey's problem with his wives, both past and present, seems to be a result of this view of his mother. At one point he looks into the past and reveals to his mother that she destroyed his first marriage for him by constantly differing with his wife so that he was forced to acknowledge his lack of loyalty to his first wife until he was convinced himself that he did not care for her. This memory Joey confronts, but he is unable to perform any better in the present. When his mother begins criticizing his present wife, Joey simply agrees with her, saying Peggy is stupid and that he has made a mistake in divorcing Joan and marrying Peggy.

Further evidence of Joey's unwillingness to face the present is apparent in his thoughts while waiting for his mother and Richard at the grocery store. He feels that he

must rush back to the farm because he is afraid that by some trick of time he will "be left with nothing but this present...."[3]

Joey is not satisfied with his job, just as his father was not satisfied. He works in a New York City office as an advertising man--a job which does not give him a feeling of satisfaction, partially because it does not give him proof of work done as mowing the field does. His mother is not happy with his job because she had wanted him to become a poet and, for that reason, had insisted that he go to Harvard over his father's hopes for a college of engineering. Mrs. Robinson feels that he is wasting himself "on that prostitute's job."[4] If asked what she would like her son to do other than be a poet, she would undoubtedly have a difficult time answering, for she feels that there really are very few jobs "that seem to do anything."[5]

Joey's job dehumanizes him in another way, too. It has destroyed his original conception of truth. "Truth, my work had taught me, is not something static, a mountain-top that statements approximate like successive assualts of frost-bitten climbers. Rather, truth is constantly being formed from the solidification of illusions. In

[3]Ibid., p. 85.

[4]Ibid., p. 156.

[5]Ibid., p. 110.

New York I work among men whose fallacies are next year worn everywhere, like the new style of shoes."[6] This realization makes Joey afraid.

George Robinson's death seems to have brought a semblance of peace to the household in at least one area. There is not as much doubt, discussion and worry about God in this novel as there was in both Rabbit, Run and The Centaur, although Joey is a believer as his father was, and his wife's "unthinking non-Christianity sometimes worried him."[7]

Mrs. Robinson's belief, as she says, is rooted in her farm. She feels God's existence in nature, but tells Richard that she doubts that she would be able to retain her belief if she lived in New York. On this point she seems to be in complete agreement with J. Hillis Miller's thoughts on the difficulty of the individual in an urban society to maintain his faith in God.[8] In Mrs. Robinson's opinion part of Joey's problem is that he has become lost in the big city of New York. Hence when he says that he married his present wife because he "must have thought she made herself," his mother has her answer ready for him.

[6]Ibid., p. 135.

[7]Ibid., p. 129.

[8]Joseph Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963), p. 5.

"See, you forgot God."[9]

On Sunday morning Joey and his mother go to church--a church which must share its minister with another one miles away so that the services are at different times every other month--a practice which is in itself an interesting commentary on the place which organized religion holds in the present society. Joey goes not only to please his mother but also because he seems to need "to test my own existence against the fact of their faces and clean clothes and hushed shoulders, to regather myself in a vacant hour."[10]

The sermon is based on the verses of Genesis which explain the creation of Eve. The point of the sermon is based on the minister's idea of the relationship between man and woman; a relationship which to him has two areas of influence--that of kindness which needs no belief and that of righteousness which can not exist "without conscious confession of God."[11] On another level his sermom seems to be pointing out that a woman's place is inferior to that of a man's and that her task is to work with him.

This sermon appeals to Joey, but his mother considers it only as a rationalization on the minister's behalf. "Joey, it seems to me whenever a man begins to talk that

[9]Updike, p. 141.

[10]Ibid., p. 148.

[11]Ibid., p. 154.

way, he's trying to excuse himself from some woman's pain."[12]

Although Joey proclaims himself a believer, it is clear that it is the form that he has memorized. The faith and organized religion of his youth really do not offer him much strength or consolation.

During the three day period of time covered in this novel, there is very little action. The four individuals talk to each other almost incessantly. Talking has always been important in the Robinson household. "Talk--it seemed throughout my growing up that there was no end of talk. Talk was everything to us--food and love, money and mud, God and the Devil, confession, philosophy and exercise.... Talk in our house was a continuum sensitive at all points of past and present and tirelessly harking back and readjusting itself, as if seeking some state of equilibrium finally free of irritation."[13]The irony here is that with all their incessant talk, these four people and the others who are now dead or divorced really aren't able to communicate with one another satisfactorily.

Joey, for example, remarks to his mother that he should not have divorced his first wife--that he realizes he was wrong, but he didn't feel that he knew his wife. She always seemed remote to him, even though she was at his side.

[12]Ibid., p. 154.

[13]Ibid., pp. 28-29.

This absence that he felt in Joan was, to Joey, worse than any other kind of criticism or punishment that she could have inflicted on him. In fact, Joey admires his second wife's desire to correct him because "Joan had never criticized...at all, which itself seemed a deadly kind of criticism,"[14] as though she really didn't care for him.

Joan, Joey's first wife, was evidently not received with much warmth by his mother. Peggy doesn't seem to be accepted as well though she does have more courage and apparently makes a conscious attempt to understand and to make herself understood. Her efforts appear doomed from the very beginning as Mrs. Robinson misinterprets whatever she pleases so that it fits into her own particular pattern. As Peggy, in her nervousness, hurries down the sandstone walk to meet Joey's mother halfway, her anxiety and her agility are viewed as threats by Mrs. Robinson, who later tells her son that Peggy will destroy her within a year.

Another reason Joey's mother feels that Peggy wishes her dead is the fact that Peggy demonstrates some interest in areas of the farm that could be profitably sold for housing developments. She doesn't even consider that Peggy's interest is purely that of any window-shopper, but immediately assumes that Peggy wants her to die so that Joey can sell the farm and spend the money on his wife.

[14]Ibid., p. 3.

Peggy and Mrs. Robinson spend from eight-thirty to ten on Saturday night talking to each other, but really gain no further insight into one another's beliefs and ideas, for they each cling stubbornly to their own. Their basic views of life and a woman's place in it are quite different. Mrs. Robinson feels that there is absolutely no difference between men and women except for the physical ones which she can see, and that, therefore, there is an absolute equality in their beings. She explains this to Richard by citing Plato's statement that God originally made people round with double the number of legs, etc. and then became so jealous at the happiness and power which people displayed that he split them into two individuals exactly alike, except for their physical sexual differences. This is also Mrs. Robinson's explanation of love. She says that love is simply a looking for the other half.

Peggy's viewpoint is quite different and is closer to the ideas expressed in the minister's sermon than it is to those of Mrs. Robinson. Peggy's idea or "mythology" as Joey refers to it, is that women give themselves to men and men in return give women a reason to live.

In this morass of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, Joey tries to act as a mediator just as he did as a child between his parents, but he finds himself unable to take a firm stand. His method of communication with his

mother has always seemed to resolve itself into a kind of conspiracy where he ends up taking her viewpoint that his first wife was not suited to him, that he shouldn't have divorced his first wife, and that his second wife is stupid. He eventually finds himself wishing to escape back to New York City while his mother is trying to persuade him not to sell her farm. Joey realizes: "I must answer in our old language, allusive and teasing, that with conspiratorial tact declared nothing and left the past apparently unrevised."[15] Joey answers her by making no real commitment. "Your farm? I've always thought of it as our farm."[16]

The fact that this novel is related entirely through Joey in the first person makes it interesting to note that nearly every reference to his wife has to do with her physical qualities, particularly those having to do with her sex. His first description of Peggy is "from the rear, as a retreating white skirt whose glimmering breadth was the center, the seat, of my life."[17] His description continues, amplifying her physical importance to him.

Joey evidently expects his mother to realize Peggy's value to him and to approve. Thus, he looks at his wife asleep in a chair and feels proud of his acquisition.

[15]Ibid., p. 174.

[16]Ibid., p. 174.

[17]Ibid., p. 8.

He is surprised by his mother's attitude of being offended by his wife's presence and his feeling for her. Mrs. Robinson's thoughts are best revealed when she answers his statement that everything can't be reduced to money with a question of her own. "What would you reduce it to? Sex?"[18]

Perhaps this is what Joey has done with one element of his life, for he does indicate that his sexual relationship with his first wife had been unsatisfactory and that his sexual relationship with Peggy has given him a "freedom, once tasted, lightly, illicitly, became as indispensable as oxygen to me, the fuel of a pull more serious than that of gravity."[19]

Joey's love for his second wife seems to be based only on their sexual relationship at this point, but Peggy also appears to understand that a deeper relationship must be established. Hence, she tells Joey that he must love not only her physical being but herself as well.

In the background of this novel is the ever present threat of the great mass of people who are, like vultures, standing ready to sweep in and convert the farm into small lots and establish another urban development. This threat is discussed several times by the four people. That fact that such "progress" is inevitable creates tension among

[18]Ibid., p. 35.

[19]Ibid., p. 47.

them because with the urbanization will come even further dehumanization--man, including Joey, will witness the diminishing of his horizons.

This novel does not seem to present the element of hope as did The Centaur and Rabbit, Run. Joey Robinson hasn't stopped searching for the elements which could make his life more significant and bearable, but he does appear to be less able to accept himself. He does not make any progress in coming to terms either with himself or his environment, and, unlike Rabbit, he doesn't seem to have the intensity of inner drive which is apparently necessary to survive as a human being. In Joey, Updike has presented an individual who could easily act as a stand-in for one of A. C. Spectorsky's "Exurbanites"--a term used to refer to a group of people who have moved from the city to a point beyond the suburbs and who fit a sociological stereotype not unlike the "man in the grey-flannel suit" or the "organization man." A fate which is worse than death.

Chapter V

Couples

Paul Tillich's The Future of Religions, cited in the epigraph of Couples, states that "There is a tendency in the average citizen, even if he has a high standing in his profession, to consider the decisions relating to the life of the society to which he belongs as a matter of fate on which he has no influence--like the Roman subjects all over the world in the period of the Roman empire, a mood favorable for the resurgence of religion but unfavorable for the preservation of a living democracy." By using this as part of the epigraph, Updike establishes a comparison between the people of the United States and the citizens of the Roman empire. Through this comparison, he implies that as a people we are not fulfilling our duties as citizens. If we do not wish to see our society destroyed as that of the Romans was, then we must realize that through apathy or a lack of understanding we have arrived at a point where our society may not be able to survive in its intended democratic form.

There are ten couples involved in this novel, with the

action beginning in the spring of 1963 and ending in the spring of 1964. The main character of the novel is Piet Hanema. Piet and Matt Gallagher are partners in the local real estate and building company--a partnership which is not entirely satisfactory to Piet for several reasons. First of all, Piet is a builder "in love with snug right-angled things." He prefers to restore old houses because of the workmanship which is evident in "baseboards and chair rails molded by hand."[1] Whenever Piet restores a house, he does it with loving care. He is said to be one of the few builders who "puts up honest plaster walls,"[2] and who can be counted on to be fair in his charges.

Matt Gallagher, the other half of Gallagher and Hanema, does not feel that there is any money in restoring houses. His goal is to build tract houses as cheaply as possible and sell them for as much money as he can. This kind of practice is very repugnant to Piet. He hates the tract houses. Nevertheless, because he must supervise their building, Piet refuses to allow poor building practices, such as not waterproofing the foundation. Piet's foreman agrees with Matt and is willing to omit certain steps in the building process because he thinks no one will know. Piet's conscience won't let him cheat. He tells

[1]John Updike, Couples (New York, 1968), p.5.

[2]Ibid., p. 35.

Leon, the foreman, that he would know, "And in a few years... everybody would....Everything outs. Every cheat. Every short cut."[3]

Piet's interest in doing a good job is also evident in his other two permanent workmen, Adams and Comeau who are expert craftsmen. Inspecting a garage the two are building for a young widow, Piet examines a detail of the framing, a piece of rough work with a difficult angle, only to find that the stud has "been fitted as precisely as a piece of veneer."[4] Piet realizes that Matt and Leon would regard this as a waste, but he feels elated by the care involved.

As the novel progresses, the outlets for Piet's craftmanship decrease. Matt Gallagher becomes more and more greedy. He makes quick judgments involving acres of land--judgments which Piet views as a desecration of land rightfully belonging to children and wild animals. Piet also finds that the more greedy and ruthless Matt becomes, the more devout and moral he tries to appear. He separates his business life from his personal almost entirely and tries to envelope his wife and son in a cloak of Catholicism.

As Matt's desire for more tract houses and similar projects increases, his need for Piet decreases. He no longer finds the master builder necessary to produce shoddy

[3]Ibid., p. 85.

[4]Ibid., p. 87.

products. Thus, the gap between Piet and Matt gradually widens until Matt regards Piet as a burden and offers to buy his half of the partnership. Although the price agreed upon hardly seems fair, Piet feels so completely separated from the kind of work he likes to do and which gives him satisfaction, that he accepts the offer rather than participate further in what he regards as an inhuman and immoral occupation.

The other nine men involved in Couples hold jobs that are even less satisfying and more "depersonalized" than Piet's. Frank Appleby and Harold Smith are both stock manipulators; Eddy Constantine is a commercial jet plane pilot, and Ken Whitman is a biochemist. Most of the men in the novel appear to be bored with their occupations. None of them really has to worry about money as long as he is employed, but their jobs do not seem to provide them with a feeling of significance or security. This lack of significance is especially ironical when Ken Whitman's job is considered because he is experimenting with a process basic to life, photosynthesis; yet he is only interested in achieving fame and a position--not in what he can really achieve for mankind by making an important discovery in his field.

Partially because he does find his work unsatisfactory, Piet keeps looking back--re-evaluating the past, examining

it and trying to find the key which will make the present more meaningful and easier for him to accept. For example, after returning from a party Piet wishes to make love to his wife. When she refuses, Piet turns to his pleasant memories of his youth in an attempt to make himself relax so that he can sleep. He recalls his days as a child in the greenhouse with his parents. He had loved his parents and enjoyed being with them, watching his father and mother work. His thoughts wander to the party and he begins to think about the Whitmans. The Whitmans irritate him because they are newcomers. So his thoughts transfer easily from Ken's job as a biochemist to his memories of his father's distrust of inorganic fertilizer. Still unable to sleep, he recalls that as a child he had lulled himself to sleep by listening to the traffic passing in the night. He tries the game, but traffic on his remote road is infrequent at this time of night, so his childhood game won't work. Finally, Piet thinks again about his father and mother and the greenhouse, and falls asleep.

Piet's interest in the restoration of old houses is, in part, connected with his love for things of the past. He places great value on such things as the joinery of the pews in his church, for they remind him of the craftsmen who built the pews--craftsmen who are now dead and can not be replaced. He feels their loss as something personal to him, just as he becomes disturbed when he finds that the earth

mover which is preparing the basements for his new houses is uncovering bits of bone and other artifacts. To Piet this disturbance of the past is symbolic. It seems to represent other people's discarding of tradition and ceremony. Piet feels that he needs these things from the past to give his life continuity. He recognizes that he needs the past to keep him from becoming something less than human, to give his present a greater value.

In contrast, Leon and Matt do not care about the Indian burial ground they are uncovering. Leon, for instance, simply denies that the bones they uncover are human, thus trying to negate any claim the past has on him so that he may develop himself into an unthinking, unfeeling machine just like the bulldozer.

Piet, though, is not the only one who values the past. Roger Guerin, who seems to be a latent homosexual, is an avid collector of antiques. He appears to have transferred his conception of immortality in this world to antiques rather than the children he does not have.

The year from the spring of 1963 to the spring of 1964 produced several large scale tragedies. The submarine Thresher sank to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, killing all of her crew, and President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on the twenty-second of November. It is utterly amazing how little these two catastrophes affect the individuals in this book. Alone among the adults, Piet and Foxy

Whitman seem to be touched by Kennedy's death. The rest of them go right ahead with their party or sit and watch the continuing news coverage on television because they are bored. The sinking of the Thresher is an occasion for another party and a similar display of detachment from the tragedies of the world.

This failure to be touched by significant events is symbolic of these people's inability to communicate with one another. Although they see each other practically every day, talk to and about each other, and frequently make love, they still are capable of recognizing only the actual physical presence of another individual in their group. This is true not only among the couples, but also within each couple.

Piet Hanema is married to Angela whom everybody, including Piet, refers to as "Angel." Angela may truly be angelic, but it does not make her a suitable wife for a man. She makes almost no attempt to understand her husband. She does not try to identify or fulfill either his physical or his spiritual needs. The first scene in the book relates her refusal to allow her husband to make love to her--a refusal which is not important in itself, but rather gains its importance from the fact that it is a repetition of many refusals to allow Piet any kind of satisfaction. It is also important to Piet because he wants a son, but

Angela wants no more children. They have two daughters and, to Angela, two are enough, no matter what her husband wishes.

During the novel, Piet has affairs with three other women and is casually involved with at least one more. In the course of one year, all of these women keep Piet fairly busy, yet his philandering goes almost unnoticed by Angela, except for comments other people make, until she is confronted with specific evidence. This happens only because Angela refuses to become involved with her own husband. She simply shuts him out of her life except where his physical presence is necessary to provide food or shelter.

After Angela finds out about Piet's affairs, however, and she decides that they must be divorced, she suddenly realizes that she is going to be very alone. Piet asks her why she thinks so. Her reply is simply, "You were the only person who ever tried to batter their way in to me."[5]

This same kind of inability to communicate is apparent among the other couples, too. It is perhaps most evident in respect to the Whitmans. Piet and Foxy Whitman have an affair which lasts over a period of months. Nevertheless, Ken Whitman never suspects that his wife is involved with someone else until she confesses it to him.

[5]Ibid., p. 405.

This confession comes after she has become pregnant and then has an abortion to rid herself of Piet's child. Actually, Foxy seems to confess to Ken because she can not stand the fact that he seems to care so little for her that even though he has lived with her during all this time when she has suffered so much, he has not realized that their relationship was any different. Foxy seems to indicate her feelings about Ken in a thought she has at the very first of the novel, long before she has any connection with Piet. "How little does matter to you."[6]

It is interesting to note that of all of the individuals involved, Piet and Foxy are the only ones who really have any faith in God. None of the other people even go to church, except for the Gallaghers, who, at least in Piet's opinion, only use their Catholicism as a shield to hide their immorality. Foxy's belief seems to be an unquestioning faith from her childhood. She is rather surprised when she discovers that grace is simply ignored at a dinner party among the couples. She is even more amazed by her husband's seemingly constant desire to destroy her faith. After several years of marriage, Ken still tells her that people are only chemicals. She thinks to herself: "He knew she didn't believe that, why did he say it? When

[6]Ibid., p. 9.

would he let her out of school?"[7]

The Congregational Church in Tarbox is topped by a weathervane in the form of a golden rooster. "Children in the town grew up with the sense that the bird was God. That is, if God were physically present in Tarbox, it was in the form of this unreachable weathercock visible from everywhere."[8] This church is Piet's church. When he goes he takes his oldest child because he feels that she must be provided with his faith. In church, Piet always sits alone because none of his friends attends.

Just as Eccles, Kruppenbach and March were failures, the minister of Piet's church is also a failure. Reverend Pedrick is quite simply an ignorant man whose conception of Christianity involves only money. In his sermons he seeks "to transpose the desiccated forms of Christianity in financial terms."[9] Though the minister struggles and can not reconcile his chosen symbols with his faith, Piet somehow finds some encouragement in the minister's failure.

Angela does not share Piet's belief. When the children's pet hamster dies, Piet tries to ease their pain by talking to them about heaven and how God takes care of dead things. Angela feels that Piet is wrong--that he is

[7]Ibid., p. 39.

[8]Ibid., p. 17.

[9]Ibid., p. 21.

giving the children false beliefs that will only cause them more suffering when they find the beliefs are false. Piet feels that Angela is attempting "to uncover and unman him, to expose the shameful secret, the childish belief, from which he drew his manhood."[10]

Although Piet does not stop believing in God's existence, he does finally quit going to church. Sometime after this, the church is struck by lightning and burns. Subsequently, it is revealed that the church was structurally unsound and that rightfully it should have collasped by itself years before. (Undoubtedly this comment is to be construed to include the faith of the church, also.) As the church's remains are razed, the rooster weathervane is rescued from its perch while Piet watches. As the weathercock is carried to the minister, children dismissed from school for the occasion gather to see it. Significantly, "From Piet's distance their mingled cry seemed a jubilant jeering," and as the minister and two other men accept the weathercock amid the photographers, "The sky above was empty but for two parallel jet trails."[11]

The element of Couples which attracts the attention and comment of most readers is the use of very explicit descriptions of the sexual relationships among the couples.

[10]Ibid., p. 77.

[11]Ibid., p. 457.

Piet Hanema becomes sexually involved with four women besides his wife during the course of the novel, the Applebys and the Smiths trade wives. Updike has been criticized for including so much sex in his novel, but he does seem to have a purpose.

Piet Hanema, as discussed earlier, does not have a successful marriage. Angela is not a good wife, nor does she try to be. Piet begins to look beyond his marriage to satisfy both his sexual desire and his spiritual needs as a man. Piet seems to have no difficulty finding lonesome, bored and appealing women among his friends' wives. Piet's adventures with these various women are extremely easy--so easy in fact, that he might find them more interesting if his wife would be a bit suspicious, but she isn't. All of Piet's affairs are mechanically successful except for his relationship with Foxy who seems unable to overcome her inhibitions enough to achieve a climax. This seems important for two reasons. First of all, it would appear that if all Piet is looking for is a satisfying sexual relationship, then he would surely pick one of the other women with whom he has a more successful physical relationship. Secondly, Foxy does not love her husband and feels that he cares very little about her, yet she tells Piet that she always has been able to achieve a climax with her husband. So, the question remains, why does Piet continue with Foxy until it destroys his marriage, and then agree to marry her?

The answer seems obvious. Foxy offers Piet more than just a physical relationship. She offers him her whole being. She offers him love. Ironically, perhaps, Foxy can not overcome her sexual inhibitions with Piet just because she is offering him her inner self, whereas her husband has possessed only her outer self.

In contrast to Piet's affairs which culminate in his marriage to Foxy, the Applebys and the Smiths trade wives out of boredom and discontent, evidently in a manner similar to the so-called "Swingers" clubs that are prevalent in our society now. The Applebys and the Smiths are not, however, seeking anything more than a sexual relationship which will divert them for an afternoon at a time, or if they are searching for more than that, they don't find it and simply withdraw from their excesses. It is interesting to note, also, that the Applebys and the Smiths do not exist as individuals within the novel even though they are adequately described. Updike himself seems to recognize this in titling the chapter on them the "Applesmiths."

Another contrast to Piet's affairs is presented in Freddy Thorne, the local dentist and husband of one of Piet's lovers. Freddy is a failure. He is a dentist because he wasn't intelligent enough to be a doctor. In this novel, he acts as a sort of satanic priest to the others as he tries to draw out their secrets. He is not successful as a force of evil, either, for even though he engages in what might

be considered an evil act, the abortion of Foxy and Piet's baby in exchange for spending a night with Piet's wife, Angela, he proves to be impotent. As a direct opposite to Piet's manliness, Freddy is capable of participating in life only as an abstract voyeur.

One way in which Updike is able to indicate the differences in the affairs that Piet has with other women, compared to that with Foxy and that involving the Applesmiths, is to describe them in detail. For example, a careful reader will note that as Piet goes from one woman to another, his actions become more mechanical and even sadistic, except for his relationship with Foxy. The interactions of the Applesmiths, as they are described, are obviously only relationships based on physical attraction and the novelty of making love to someone other than one's own mate.

At the end of the novel, Piet and Foxy marry; Piet finds an acceptable job and "The Hanemas live in Lexington, where, gradually, among people like themselves, they have been accepted, as another couple."[12]

This ending seems to indicate that perhaps the cycle will now start all over again in a new town with a new set of players. This ending, however, may not be as pessimistic and depressing as it seems at first, because Updike

[12]Ibid., p. 458.

may only be trying to view modern life realistically and may, thereby, be suggesting that perhaps Piet, as a representative man, may be able to transcend himself through living--that there will always be other couples, but perhaps Piet and Foxy have gained a deeper personal relationship and have thus transcended their own existence.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

In the introduction it was stated that the intent of this thesis is to present a discussion of the major theme--the individual's quest for a meaningful existence in our society--which is apparent in five novels by John Updike. The main concentration has been on the five areas which Updike seems to regard as the most important in relation to the individual's quest.

First of all, it is interesting to note that Updike has presented the reader not only with a representative of the middle class, but so that the reader does not fail to identify himself, many characters from all age groups and assorted occupational levels--from youngsters in their teens who are still in school, untrained and lost young men like Rabbit, "successful" businessmen like Piet and Joey, to George Caldwell, the church deacon and teacher, and the old people in Poorhouse Fair. All of these people find themselves seemingly out of place in society. They find that they can not accept many of the set patterns of society without first examining them, and all too frequently, such an examination shows the individual that the society

is not able to provide answers about why the individual exists and what his particular purpose should be. Rabbit Angstrom, for example, runs not because he is trying to escape his problems, but to find the answer to his questions--basic questions involving his own identity, his relationship to God and other men, and the work he must do. Rabbit, though, finds that the social institutions, (such as the church) and their representatives (Eccles) do not have any answers that are acceptable. Nevertheless, Rabbit does not give up. He finds hope in being able to create a better world for his children. Updike indicates his own hope by not allowing Rabbit to give up; by leaving the reader with the impression that Rabbit must keep going back to Ruth and his family because he has to find answers he can live with; he is too neat and careful to leave his life in such a jumble.

The Centaur seems to offer the most hope for mankind with its presentation of George Caldwell's doubts, because he is able to find an answer which will work for him, in spite of the failure of the society to progress in the areas of religion and the understanding of human relationships and values.

Of the five novels, Poorhouse Fair and Of the Farm seem to be the most pessimistic: Poorhouse Fair because it does not picture any people (except possibly for the

antique dealer and his customers) outside of the inmates of the poorhouse who even have enough individuality and humanity left to question their existence. Conner doesn't have any doubts. He believes in the system of administration of which he is a part. Perhaps the one hope for Conner is that Hook can leave him some advice which will stimulate his mind and spirit enough so that he, too, can find a greater significance in his life.

Of the Farm seems pessimistic in its outlook because Joey appears to make almost no progress. At times he is almost a nonentity; he so closely fits the stereotype of the moderately successful man in the advertising or business fields who has given up all sense of self for the company he represents at the time, and has become an automaton. It is possible, however, to find a bit of hope in the fact that Joey had enough courage to divorce his first wife and marry Joan, thus establishing a new relationship which is more satisfactory to him now than his first marriage was, and which could develop into something more than just a physical relationship.

Of all the novels, Couples seems to present possibly the most realistic conclusion. In some ways it does not offer as much hope as Rabbit, Run and The Centaur, because Piet doesn't appear consciously to recognize that he is searching for answers to his doubts about his faith.

Secondly, Piet's approch to sex is definitely more mechanical, more sophisticated and more selfish except in his relationship with Foxy. As indicated at the end of Chapter Five, however, Updike may perhaps be saying that what is necessary is for the individual to continue living in the best way he can find, and that in so doing, it may be possible to transcend one's own individuality and thus gain salvation for mankind.

In these novels, then, John Updike has presented his view of the modern middle class man. He has shown that man is in a dangerous position because of the failure of social institutions to develop as rapidly as man's technological progress, as illustrated in Poorhouse Fair. Updike has demonstrated, through his characters such as Rabbit, Caldwell, and Piet that society is not providing the answers to man's questions about his existence, and, therefore, men are finding it increasingly difficult to function as human beings.

Updike evidently does not think man should give up. He seems also to say that in spite of the failure of society to provide adequate authority figures, a faith that answers the individual's needs, it is still possible that man can survive in this society by not giving up, by constantly striving to better his own condition and that of succeeding generations through good works (as Caldwell tries to do)

or by simply not giving up, but living each moment, participating in every aspect of society to the fullest possible extent and, above all, by maintaining a continuity with the past by retaining the ceremonies and the traditions which have separated man from beast.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

"As They Wait to Die," Anon. rev., Newsweek, LIII (January 12, 1959), 90.

Balakian, Nona, ed. The Creative Present. "Generation of the 50's: Malamud, Gold, Updike," Garden City, 1963.

Brenner, Gerry. "John Updike's Criticism of the Return to Nature," Twentieth Century Literature, XXII (April, 1966), 3-14.

Burgess, Anthony. "Language, Myth, and Mr. Updike," Commonweal, LXXXVIII (February 11, 1966), 557-559.

DeBellis, Jack. "The Group and John Updike," Sewanee Review, LXXII (Summer, 1964), 531-536.

"Desperate Weakling," Anon. rev., Time, LXXVI (November 7, 1960), 108.

Detweiler, Robert. Four Spiritual Crises in Mid-Century American Fiction. "John Updike and the Indictment of Culture-Protestants," Gainesville, 1963.

"Do-Gooder Undone," Anon. rev., Time, LXXIII (January 19, 1959), 92.

Duncan, Graham. "The Thing Itself in Rabbit, Run," English Record, XIII (April, 1963), 36-37.

Falke, W. C. The Novel of Disentanglement, Ann Arbor, 1966.

Finkelstein, Sidney. Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature. New York, 1965.

Galloway, David. The Absurd Hero in American Fiction. Austin, 1966.

Geller, Evelyn. "WLB Biography," Wilson Library Bulletin, XXXVI (September, 1961), 67.

Gilman, Richard. "A Last Assertion of Personal Being," Commonweal, LXIX (February 6, 1959), 499.

Hainsworth, J. D. "John Updike," Hibbert Journal, 65 (Spring, 1967), 115-116.

Hamilton, Kenneth. "John Updike: Chronicler of the Time of the 'Death of God,'" Christian Century, LXXXIV (June 7, 1967), 745-748.

Hicks, Granville, "Domestic Felicity," Saturday Review, 49 (September 24, 1966), 31.

Kaufman, Stanley. "Onward with Updike," New Republic, CLV (September 24, 1966), 245-246.

McElroy, Davis D. Existentialism and Modern Literature. New York, 1963.

Miller, Joseph Hillis. The Disappearance of God. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963.

_____. Poets of Reality. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965.

Moore, Harry T., ed. Contemporary American Novelists. Carbondale, 1964.

Muradian, Thaddeus. "The World of John Updike," English Journal, LIV (October, 1965), 577-584.

Noval, Michael. "Updike's Quest for Liturgy," Commonweal, LXXVII (May 10, 1963), 192-195.

Rupp, R. H. "John Updike: Style in Search of a Center," Sewanee Review, 75 (Autumn, 1967), 693-709.

Spectorsky, A. C. "Spirit Under Surgery," Saturday Review, 75 (Autumn, 1967), 693-709.

Spectorsky, A. C. The Exurbanites. New York, 1955.

Standley, Bryant. "Rabbit, Run: An Image of Life," Midwest Quarterly, 8 (July, 1967), 71-86.

Stubbs, J. C. "Search for Perfection in Rabbit, Run," Critique, 10 (1968), 94-101.

Tate, Sister M. Judith. "Of Rabbits and Centaurs," Critic, XXII (February-March, 1964), 44-47, 49-50.

Updike, John. Assorted Prose. New York, 1965.

_____. Couples. New York, 1969.

_____. Of the Farm. New York, 1965.

_____. Olinger Stories. New York, 1964.

_____. Pigeon Feathers. New York, 1962.

_____. The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures. New York, 1958.

_____. The Centaur. New York, 1962.

_____. The Music School. New York, 1966.

_____. The Poorhouse Fair. New York, 1958.

_____. The Same Door. New York, 1959.

"View from the Catacombs," Anon. rev., Time, LXXXIV (April 26, 1968), 66-75.

Ward, John A. "John Updike's Fiction," Critique, V (Spring-Summer, 1962), 27-41.

Winick, Charles. The New People: Desexualization in American Life. New York, 1968.

Yates, Norris. "The Doubt and Faith of John Updike," College English, XXVI (March, 1965), 469-474.