

**Collapse of Values as Picturised in John Updike's Novels -  
*Rabbit, Run and Rabbit Redux***

**R. Aarthy, M.A., M.Phil.**



John Updike (1932-2009)

Courtesy: <http://www.clivejames.com/updikeslast>

**Abstract**

The paper entitled Collapse of Values as Picturised in John Updike's Novels, *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux* attempts to picturise how values collapse in American culture and society. John Updike is one of the most prolific and important American Novelists. The Former Novel **Rabbit, Run** is unified around Rabbit's impulse for the natural and the consequences of this impulse. Rabbit, as a "Noble" urban savage, images modern man's traditionless character and portends his concomitant problems. The latter novel **Rabbit Redux** deals with the Collapse of values as depicted in itself. It is an attempt to depict the tumult of the era as it happens in contemporary American culture. The apocalyptic interpretation of twentieth century life is presented in **Rabbit Redux** through the annihilation resulting from the loss human values. Updike devised for himself a style of narration, an

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intense, present tense and free indirect style. The Rabbit novels were written by Updike in the present tense. Updike vividly portrays the collapse of values in American culture and society through his novels **Rabbit, Run** and **Rabbit Redux**.

### **Keywords**

**Racism, American pragmatism, Hippies and Colloquialism.**

### **John Updike – Love of Words and Ideas**

John Updike is considered one of the greatest American fiction writers of twentieth century. He is a prodigy. His natural talent is so great that for some time it has been a positive handicap to him, in a small way by exposing him from an early age to a great deal of head-turning praise and in a large way by continually getting out of hand. His love of words and ideas for their own sake is almost Joycean. Updike's style is as winning and as polished as the people from whose voice it derives.

### **Careful Craftsmanship and Unique Prose Style**

Updike was well recognized for his careful craftsmanship, his unique prose style, and his prolificness. Updike populated his fiction with characters that “frequently experience personal turmoil and must respond to crises relating to religion, family, obligations, and marital infidelity. His fiction is distinguished by its attention to the concerns, passions, and suffering of average Americans. His work has attracted a significant amount of critical attention and praise.

### **Principal Themes**

The principal themes in Updike's work are religion, sex and American as well as death. Updike wrote about America with a certain nostalgia, reverence, and recognition and celebration of America's broad diversity. Updike's fiction always shows the dramatic moods of characters. His heroes have heroic tendencies but they seem to be heading to an absurd

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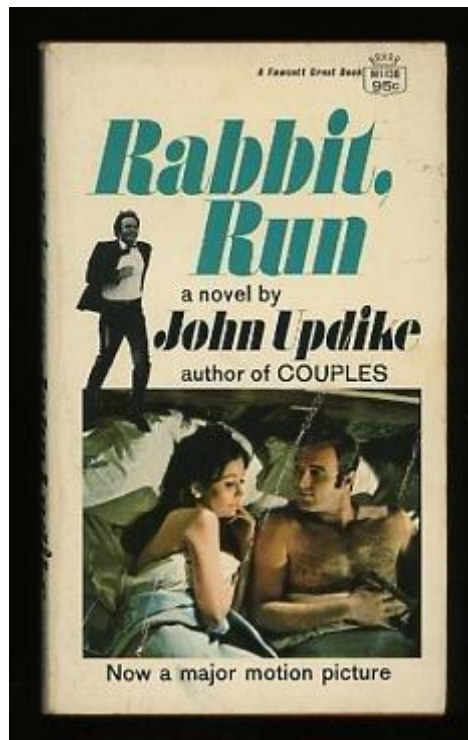
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ending-probably less tragic in a sense. Updike's hero often finds himself in a cell made of women-his mother, his mistress and his wife. He has a feeling that life is pinned between anarchic and holistic impulses continually expressed in sexual ambivalences. The hero is often bewitched between his mistress and wife finding his destiny in sexual calamity. The various themes that Updike hastened to explore in his fiction take the shapes of dualisms: life vs death, the individual vs society, and love vs hate, matter vs spirit and intuition vs Christian institution. Updike looks very much concerned with the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself.

### **Focus of This Study**

Among the novels of John Updike *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit, Redux* are chosen for this paper with the title "Collapse of Values as Picturised in John Updike's Novels: *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux*." Through these novels, Updike attempts to picturise how values collapse in American culture and society. The Rabbit novels serve as a fictionalized time-line of the post-war American experience.

### ***Rabbit, Run***



*Rabbit, Run* is Updike's first full-length consideration of the way sexual dissatisfaction and marital tension mask religious questing. The protagonist Harry Angstrom is meant to be a type of American "everyman". He is convinced that life has something better in store for him. As an athlete, he was able to separate himself from the masses. Now that his golden days are over, he has lost his ability to feel special. Rabbit cannot break free from his fate as an average citizen, and this is at the heart of his frustration. It is important to remember that Harry is only twenty-six years old. He has the problems of an adult without the maturity to deal with them. Rabbit simply needs to escape in order to turn out all right. His troubles are too complicated and ruin any hope of a simple escape plan. He realizes that his flight is no solution and retreats. His problems are rooted in the constraints of ordinary American life. It will follow him wherever he goes, which makes his attempted escape a failure. Television is a quintessential American institution as well. One of the sources of Rabbit's frustration with his married life is the fact that Janice is addicted to it. It perhaps makes her even more "dumb".

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## **Caught between Society's Markers of Success**

Harry Rabbit Angstrom is caught between society's markers of success as money, happy family, respectable jobs and his own individual measures. He is fed up with his mediocre existence, so he decides not to play by the rules any longer. He leaves his wife and takes up with Ruth. He is an ambivalent individual who lacks drive and direction. Rabbit whole persona was problematic considering the conservative times of the 1950's. The fact that Rabbit leaves his son and pregnant wife to take up with a prostitute was certainly enough to elicit negative reactions in the American fifties.

## **Sex Becomes Lust**

Sex becomes more than simply an act of lust, though it is never quite associated with love. When Rabbit was making love to Ruth for the first time and later, his failed attempt to do the same to Janice. On both occasions, the prime motif is that of a need to connect on both the physical and spiritual level. Instead, it emerges as an almost religious process, through which two humans strive to seek or create an invisible bond. Updike has tried to sources, to polarize it in its inner world (anima) against the family (res), that visible evidence of a character's past efforts to create a reality both embodying and transcending passion. The family is not merely a source of security and mutual affection, but also a prison. Likewise, adultery is a multifarious set of experiences ranging from boredom and disgust to beauty and tenderness.

## **Dialectic of Images**

Updike has carefully tended a dialectic of images and "all the little congruences and arabesques" within and throughout the novel as Rabbit turns alternatively toward the matrix of family, responsibility, agape, sacrifice and then to the seemingly opposite values of

independence, freedom, eros and selfishness. Rabbit is a family man who breaks one family to begin another, breaks that to reunite the first, and breaks that to run. Rabbit's young age is not to be forgotten. It is quite clear that a heavy burden has been placed on his shoulders at a time when he is obviously not mature enough to handle it. It is evident that Rabbit is ill-prepared for the strains of adult life. Rabbit is a man of faith, due to the ease in which he drops everything, his wife, his job, his standing in society.

### **Role of the Church**

The church is generally regarded as an element of society with a moral authority over its members. It is easy to imagine Reverend Eccles as a kind of adversary to Rabbit, the force for “good” countering Rabbit’s misdeeds. The irony is that although Rabbit is far from a typical God-fearing man, he possesses a strong faith, though at times it would appear that he only believes in himself. Jack Eccles, the episcopal minister, demonstrates the extreme example of ineffectual authority. He differs from Rabbit’s father and Tothero in that he attempts to provide Rabbit with guidance. Part of his ineffectuality stems from his family’s background of religious division. As a spiritual authority, Eccle’s background lays out an inversion of Rabbit’s problem. Eccles is swamped by a surplus of traditions which leaves him in the same predicament as having none.

### **Cultural Experience in All Its Complexity**

Updike records the cultural experience in all its complexity and shows how the individual’s attitudes, beliefs, and his very life are vulnerable to the pressures of external reality in times of cultural transition. The vital suburban cultural references were central to Rabbit’s quest for something beyond, have been shattered. It spiritually meaningful quest in

*Rabbit, Run* derives its richness and force from a highly subjective experience of patterned cultural activities.

### **Adamic Figure**

In the solid American tradition of the anti-intellectual hero, Rabbit becomes another Adamic figure who ignores prescribed laws. He interestingly lacks even the mental ability to rebel against prescription. He is hardly aware of it. Rabbit's natural impulses only lead him into greater difficulties. But Updike breaks away from a heavy American tradition; he doesn't insist upon cataclysmic difficulties to a dynamic hero. He images the loss of traditional values and the encroachment of destroying nature in Rabbit's initial walk to get his car and son at the opening of the novel.

### **Lament for the Loss of Traditional Values: Muted Perspective**

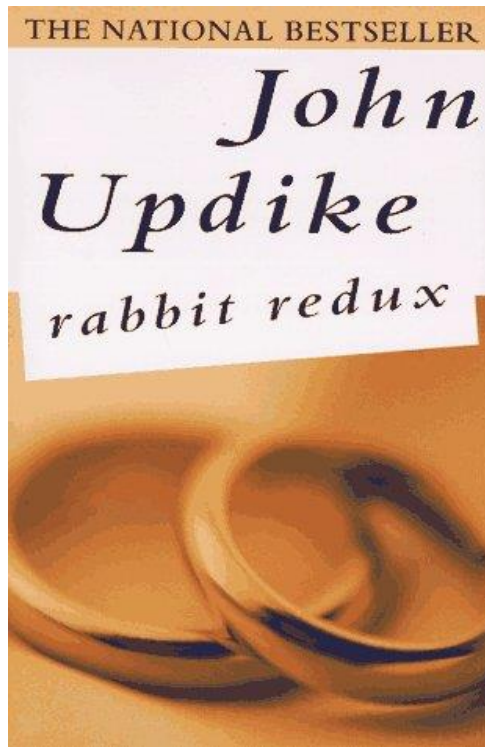
Although *Rabbit, Run* aligns itself with the twentieth century lament for the loss of traditional values, John Updike examines the loss from a refreshingly muted perspective. Updike colloquializes the lament without losing any of its seriousness. And more than simply examining and describing the problems of the traditions hero, Updike predicts effects. Rabbit is belabored by a permissive society. He not only lacks guidelines for action, but also he reverts to animalistic responses both in crises and in normal situations. The novel *Rabbit, Run* is unified around Rabbit's impulse for the natural and the consequences of this impulse. Since abstracted values promulgated by sublimating prescriptions have eroded, Rabbit must root his values out of the modern man's impulse for the natural; his instinct, is urged upon him by the breakdown of the prescriptive world.

### ***Rabbit Redux* – Depiction of the Tumult of the Era**

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*Rabbit Redux*, the second novel in the Rabbit saga, is a great achievement of John Updike and it stands almost alone as the sole attempt to depict the tumult of the era as it happened in contemporary American culture. *Rabbit Redux* (1971), takes up the story of Harry Angstrom ten years later at the age of thirty-six. Updike continues Rabbit's story against a background of current events. The apocalyptic interpretation of twentieth century life is presented in *Rabbit Redux* through the annihilation resulting from the loss of human values. The moon shot is a splendid display of American technology, but symbolizes nothingness. The war in Vietnam is seen as merely a way of diverting attention from problems at home. Finally sexual freedom is nothing more than another form of exploitation that harms and enslaves.

### **Harry – A Representative of the Times**

Harry defends conventional values like family loyalty, hard work and sexual compromise. But in 1960s such values are obsolete and they put him in conflict with

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everyone around him. His life has become sexless and joyless and he represents the silent majority of the decade. His nationalism is largely directed by the three forces of the sixties: hippies, blacks and foreigners. His research for something beyond is replaced by a vague hope generated by American pragmatism. Despite the horrors of Vietnam War, Rabbit gullibly lays faith in the material prosperity of America. The superficial faiths, the sham attitudes and the plastic culture of the sixties which lacked depth and conviction are all heightened so as to bring to the limelight the spiritual poverty and pangs of insecurity in the American conscience. Updike weaves the novel *Rabbit Redux* through the counterculture of the sixties that razed to the grounds the former assumptions of the Americans. Closer to their hearts in the sixties lay the gloomy halo of the Vietnam War and its resultant indignities which entirely transformed their perception. Skeeter, a Black revolutionary, with a rigid value system in his racial memory sees the war and its significance in thematic opposition to Rabbit's attitude of supporting the war. According to Skeeter, Vietnam was the culmination of all the past wars that America had fought so far and it was the most conspicuous product of the capitalist, racist tendencies of America.

### **Concern about America's Wrong-Doing Abroad**

In *Rabbit Redux* Updike not only brings out his deep concern of America's wrong-doing abroad in its unwarranted, unleashing of violence in Vietnam but also at home in its hard-handed treatment of their Black brethren. Centuries of deprivation and ruthlessly indiscriminate exploitation have strengthened the pent-up energies of the blacks and this gains force and momentum in the strife-torn sixties. Through this novel, Updike projects the blacks as still holding their purity, not having been entirely emasculated by the technology boom. They are seen as virile men vehemently opposed to sterile technology.

### **Widespread Loss of Spiritual Substance**

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Updike perceives in contemporary America, a widespread loss of spiritual substance that results in various embodiments of the Antichrist, a god of chaos, destruction and despair. Traditional religion is slowly by secular surrogates. In 1960s, the rise of technology has resulted in the questioning of the presence of God and Christian belief. People are in the dilemma of whether the religion can solve the problems of racial and religious hatred, and loss of human values. Updike believes that modern America fails to achieve joy, love, warm family ties and social injustice not because of loss of faith in god but because of technology. Harry has become a confused and a baffled soul and gained a comprehensive knowledge that man cannot be the spiritual source for his own well-being. His prayers have been irregular. Janice discards the Christianity and the traditional value assigned to her. Jill has dismissed the old god and substitutes a vague new god perceived through the illumination of drugs.

### **Futility of Methods of Transcendence**

Harry realizes the futility of the methods of transcendence that are available through sex and decides not to try these ever again. While the Christ of light is the messiah of order, the Christ of darkness Skeeter is the messiah of chaos and the Christ of the new religion. He is the forerunner of God's hardness of heart and of God's fault in the manufacture of death. Besides being black Jesus, Skeeter is a literal one as well. He is the incarnation of the shallow cast by God's light. His teachings have both a historical and a theological component. Harry's sister, Mim believes in the religion of her own body and struggles for its preservation. She represents the generation that is stripped of religious values. Her cardinal rule is never to have intercourse with any man more than three times. None of the characters in *Rabbit Redux* confess or practice the Christ centric value system.

### **Substitute Families**

*Rabbit Redux* clearly shows Updike's awareness of the energy in patterns of disintegrating and substitute families. The substitute family Rabbit soon finds gathered at his home consists entirely of persons floating free because of family and social breakups. Sex without commitment is available to some people in this world. Rabbit has a casual attitude toward sexual intercourse as a recreational activity. Rabbit is presented with the dream of many a bored middle-aged married man: a young healthy pretty new source of sex. As the novel opens, Rabbit and Janice have virtually exchanged roles. He has become passive. His desire to flee all but bled out of him by ten years of 9 to 5 work, and his passivity is connected to the failure of sex as a mode of escape. After giving up running in order to return, he finds himself increasingly incapable of having sex with his wife and he refuses to let her conceive again. Sex has become the memory of death, the death of their baby girl. Because he associates sex with Janice to death and he is quick to try to reestablish the ecstatic in his life.

Although in *Rabbit, Run* Harry was the complete outsider, he is still in *Rabbit Redux* an outsider but one who defends conventional values and enjoys confronting and testing those values. Through *Rabbit Redux*, Updike contrasts old values and he sets up Rabbit to shoulder the burden of the change. And thus he is always reminded how the traditional values of family and country are slipping away.

### **Narrative in the Present Tense and Other Techniques**

The Rabbit novels were written by Updike in the present tense. This stylistic selection cast the novels as reportage of current personal relationships within social events. Each novel represents a decade of American culture from the 1950s through the 1980s. Another technique Updike used was to present fictional characters. The Rabbit novels exist in the human realm of family rather than the intellectual realm of family rather than the intellectual

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realm of cold doctrine. It reveals the full complexity of Updike's views and images- making skills. Updike vividly portrays the collapse of values in American culture and society through his novels *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux*.

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R. Aarthy, M.A., M.Phil.  
Assistant Professor in English  
Sri Vidya college of Engineering & Technology  
Virudhunagar- 626005  
Tamilnadu, India [arthysrnm@gmail.com](mailto:arthysrnm@gmail.com)

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