Imagery in John Updike’s *Rabbit Quartet*

**ABSTRACT**

John Updike’s *Rabbit* series mirror the moral, theological and dialectical conflicts in the society. They are all beautifully handled stressing both continuity and change. Many structural techniques are used to convey the novel's inner meaning. The historical event is the most powerful imagery in *Redux*, *Nature in Run*, money in *Rich* and the event merges and are brought into gentle focus with Rabbit's growing age in *Rabbit at Rest*. Updike's extreme liking for metaphors give his writing a lyrical flourish. The metaphoric structure and metaphoric probing within them allow these novels to transcend the limits of realism and unite the keenly observed realistic details with the symbolic. Metaphorical language affirms that physical experience has links with mental, spiritual and the theological. The metaphors often hint at a religious parallel and stress the view of the world as many-layered and omniscient.

Thus, the various images and motifs that are studded in Rabbit Series reflect on the thoughts, characterizes impressions, perceptions and actions of its God-searching protagonist, Rabbit. They coalesce to project a central debate. The historical event merges and are brought into gentle focus with Rabbit's growing age in *Rabbit at Rest*. Updike's extreme liking for metaphors give his writing a lyrical flourish.

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Features of self-reflexivity and metafictionality are presented and problematized with the help of narratology and deconstruction. Various instances of resistance, ranging from the ideological to the textual, are introduced and criticized. The term 'resisting narratee' is tentatively introduced to account for both ideological criticism and narratology. To prepare the way from theory to application, such key presuppositions of narratology as communication, voice, and the narratee's gender and 'race' are reread from the viewpoints of resistance and deconstruction (Keskinen 532).

The images of history shape the narrative of the *Rabbit* quartet. There is a tremendous sense of loss as the traditional values are slipping from their domestic and national character. In *Redux*, spatial and technological images hold the narrative. The epigraph to each chapter suggests further change. "I'm heading straight for the socket/Easy, not so rough" (R,Re:2) - the epigraph to the first chapter hints at Janice's freedom and the astronaut Neil Armstrong, Collins and Aldrin's movement. The second epigraph is attributed to Jill and Neil Armstrong's landing and read: "It's different but its very pretty out here" (R,Re:101). Jill's newly discovered freedom from her parent's house is pleasant, ironically as her presence brings a radical change to Rabbit's domestic lifestyle. The epigraph to Skeeter's chapter forewarns the total chaos about to hit Rabbit's family structure. Quoting a background voice from Soviet spacecraft, it says "We've been raped, we have been raped" (R,Re:205). The rape is just the forcible invasion of Skeeter on the family. There is an authorial voice which intrudes *Redux* the narrative and gives strong philosophic doses time and again. The final section "Mim" in *Redux* has again a sexual and...

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spatial epigraph and as astronaut Aldrin guides Neil Armstrong towards the dock, Rabbit's sister, Mim helps the Angstrom couple to reunite.

Historical consciousness pulls Rabbit back from the centrality of his position and reminds him that he is no longer in the present but rather suggests that he is the past, irrelevant, and something to be dismissed. The occasional shift to the past tense in the last pages of *Redux* once again reveals Harry's sense of loss and of monotony. Reunited with Janice, he resolves finally to improve his renewed marital relationship. Suddenly, "The space they are in, the motel room long and secret as burrow, becomes all interior space" (R,Re:406) with Janice and Harry in the center and their final "O.K." becomes a nod of gradual acceptance. In *Rabbit is Rich*, Nelson's child again bewilders Harry "Fortune's hostage, heart's desire, a grand daughter. His Another nail in his coffin" (RIR:467). The tone now starts shifting to next generation and from Rabbit moves to his son, Nelson. *Rich* is also concerned with time, a network of reminiscences on his deaf dead ones, his lively past, his present action, images of running are developed. Harry finds fluidity only in sex and basketball and he metaphorically attempts to escape the net of *Redux*. Hunt observes "that the intricate interplay of the space illusions combine to reinforce the complete absence of the supernatural in Rabbit Redux" (Hunt 80).

In *Rabbit is Rich*, the imagery of falling expresses both, Rabbit's family fortunes and country's economy, not only is the President falling and struggling but there is pregnant Pru falling: "She topples then twisting sideways head first, the metal-edged treads ripping at her belly"(RAR:338) while Nelson recalls the song of the falling horseback rider.

Besides history, the game of basketball and golf also provide the geometry for a spatial pattern of circles and holes, ups and downs, horizontals, nets and spaces. Rabbit finds fluidity only in sex and basketball and he metaphorically attempts to escape the net of responsibilities by compressing his problems into a ball.

The stability of the past and nature suggested by trees and stones are the main concerns of Updike. The vigor of television set the warm bulbs burning in the kitchens, like fires at the backs of caves. He walks downhill. The day is gathering itself in.

The space images in *Redux* are reinforced by history. The space age terminology, modern television and other technology creep into the everyday life of the characters. The emptiness of outer space reflects their inner lives. The novel ends with Janice and Rabbit together "adjusting in space, slowly twirl...drift along sideways"(R,Re:405) and as Janice "rotates her body" (R,Re:406) in bed, Rabbit drifts into sleep. Television also effectively dominates technological imagery in *Redux* and *Rest*. Ironically Harry "lives by television". The external reality of television in *Redux* is accepted in *Rest*. Earlier the moon landing is questioned "At last it happens. The real event or is it? A Television camera on the leg of the module comes on; our abstraction appears on the screen (R,Re:99). In *Rest*, Harry and his grand children literally cannot live without television. It's just that the black and white world of Rabbit merges in his last novels into the colorful artificial world of Sony television. Rabbit interacts with the faces of recognizable strangers on the screen, they are no longer impersonal for Judy. Television and space-age technology project the theme into a physical dimension. The spectral figures of the astronauts on the moon set the tone for strong ghostal imagery. Janice sees Rabbit as "ghost, white, soft" (R,Re:57), Jill is "transparent", old Mrs.Angstrom is a "shade" and "apparition", Skeeter is "spook" in *Redux*. Hunt observes that "the intricate interplay of the space illusions combine to reinforce the complete absence of the supernatural in Rabbit Redux" (Hunt 80).

Outdoors it is growing dark and cool. The Norwegian maples exhale the smell of their sticky new buds and broad living room windows along Wilbur street show beyond the silver patch of television set the warm bulbs burning in the kitchens, like fires at the backs of caves. He walks downhill. The day is gathering itself in. He now and then touches with his hand the rough bark of a tree or the dry twigs of a hedge, to give himself the small answer of a texture. At the corner, where Wilbur Street meets Potter Avenue, a mailbox stands leaning in twilight on its concrete post. Tall two-petaled street sign, the cleatgouged trunk of the telephone pole holding its insulators against the sky, fire hydrant like a golden bush: a grove (R, R:14).

The *Rabbit* Series contain many birth and death images. The tragic death of Rabbit's daughter is followed by Jill's in *Redux* and gradually the natural deaths of Ma Springer...
and the Senior Angstroms. *Rabbit at Rest* is full of details of Deleon Community general hospital, organ transplants, life extension technology, intensive care units, and pulmonary diseases, vitro-insemination and open heart surgery. Thelma's numerous dialysis and final death through kidney failure and Rabbit's angioplasty all build a network of hospital images. "Harry wakes from these delicious dreams reluctantly, as if their miniaturized visions are a substance essential to his nutrition, a polychrome finely fitted machine he needs to reinsert himself into, like poor Thelma and her dialysis machine" (RAR:473). The novel climaxes with Rabbit Angstrom's own death for "Harry lying in one of (the beds) as white as his sheets with all these tubes and wires going in and out of him and finally "He is nicely tired. He closes his eyes" (RAR:510) and finally "He is nicely tired. He closes his eyes" (RAR:511) and with this ends the long and continuous run of Rabbit. The last moments of Harry are brilliantly captured by the writer reinforcing the idea of human finiteness.

In the *Rabbit* tetralogy, Updike truthfully creates the action of freedom and return. The characters move out from familial structures to explore the upward sweep of the inner world. Rabbit's miserable domestic situation, boring drunkard wife, second rate job creates a situation in which Harry is left with no other option but to flee. When he enters into an extra-marital affair with Ruth, his wife Janice gives birth to his child whom he is compelled to support. Similarly, Janice enjoys sexual adventure with Charlie Stravros, the Greek salesman in her father's company. Jill searches for love and affection outside the family, Skeeter's need to define himself, Nelson's guilt and conditioned returns that control Rabbit with the mundane cycles of existential escapes and conditioned returns that control Rabbit Angstrom's [own and his known one's] life and it is also suited to the environment that has raised and grazed him (Ra'ad 30).

The last of the *Rabbit* volumes ends with Harry in the hospital floating between tubes and needles. Between the temporary spells of consciousness, Rabbit knows he is forgiven and accepted by family members. Nelson’s eyes seem to beg him to pull through "The kid looks wildly expectant and so from his apparatus he mutters "all I can tell you is, it isn't so bad but enough. Maybe Enough" (RAR:512). Harry returns and reconciles himself to his family, his instinctive surge for life now burnt out.

An inductive method is justified in the *Rabbit* novels. This method reveals major motifs that emerge from complex patterns of figurative language. Images cluster around six major lodestars: rabbits, gardens, ghosts, eating, playing and working. Throughout the *Rabbit* Series, “rabbit” images cohere in a pointillistic picture that establishes the protagonist as a necessarily solipsistic individual, Updike's Everyman through which the novelist explores the subjective aspects in all creative and analytical endeavor. Clusters of “garden” images encompass both ideality and the actuality of American middle-class life, providing the environment for the rabbit protagonist. The pattern of “ghost” images establishes the tetralogy's dominant mood of nostalgia resulting from the conflict between ideality and reality. The motifs that emerge from the interdependent patterns encompass both physical and spiritual dimensions of human being; the “eating/consuming” motif emphasizes the physical and is characteristic of classic American naturalism but also moves toward the spiritual. The “play” motif fundamentally functions to express the spiritual dimension of human existence even though generated by the physical. The “work” motif, with its element of transaction, the give and take of bargaining, forms a pattern that parallels the dialectical quality encompassing the necessary ambiguity in the fiction.

Thus, the various images and motifs that are studded in *Rabbit* Series reflect on the thoughts, characterizes impressions, perceptions and actions of its God-searching protagonist, Rabbit. They coalesce to project a central debate that continues throughout the narrative, exploring the resulting moral dilemma when the needs and desires of the individual conflict with those of society. The question of human limitations, both physical and spiritual, that frustrate the individual's aspirations for a Godlike existence; a concern with blood relations, privileged over all others; and the perplexing uncertainties produced by a mutable world – all contribute to the debate. The complexity of the patterns of imagery that produce the motifs in the tetralogy reflects the protagonist's contemplation of the mysteries of human existence as he struggles within the confining context of his own, ordinary, and finite life.

**WORKS CITED**


