



## **An Evaluation of John Updike's contribution to the thematic sphere of American fiction**

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**Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol. 14 (5)**

<https://jett.labosfor.com/>

Date of reception: 10 May 2023

Date of revision: 25 June 2023

Date of acceptance: 27 July 2023

**Dr. Mehrunnisa M. Yunus, Dr. Tribhuwan Kumar (2023). An Evaluation of John Updike's contribution to the thematic sphere of American fiction *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, Vol. 14(5). 567-577**

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### **ABSTRACT**

John Hoyer Updike was an American novelist, poet, short-story writer, art critic, and literary critic. He has been recognized as a novelist of middle-class American people. He speaks of common life spent and shared by an average American. He has so effectively and successfully dealt with the themes of domestic fierceness within his middle-class people, their social existence that it is obvious to be considered one of the major contributions to the thematic sphere of fiction writing. Moreover, he contributed immensely so far as the exploration of the marital relationship, the ups, and downs in the married life but ultimately admitting it as a sacrament. But the lion's share of his contribution in the thematic sphere of the American fiction genre goes to the probing of the goading aspect of man's life i.e. Sex which appeals to be the be-all and end-all of human life. His contribution to the treatment of religion is equally remarkable and noteworthy. Another significant contribution in the thematic field is popularizing writing about games and sports. Still another contribution is displayed by his deep concern for the inevitable end of men's life which, I never forget to speak of, in almost all of his novels and makes his remarkable contribution in the sphere of the description of mortality. Though most of these things were already treated by his predecessors, Updike, handled them better and more competently than anyone else and thus, treasured the wealth of themes of American fiction in a great measure.

**Keywords:** Social life, middle class, marriage, sex, religion, mortality, suburbia, games and sports.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Generally the theme of a story is a broad message about life. The theme of a story is important because a story's theme is part of the reason why the author wrote the story. The author has a message he wants to share with readers, and he uses his story as a way to get that message across. The theme is the ideological facet of the text. According to Prince's (1990) definition, "there is a general thought or idea of which a set of (sub-) propositions (or a set of themes) is taken to be an illusion. It is the conceptual world of narrative and consists of a single dominant perspective. In her 2000 "Writers on Writing" article in the New York Times, Pulitzer-Prize nominated novelist Diane Johnson says the term "theme" "Seems like a holdover term from high school English class, useful for discussing novels, but not very relevant to the process of writing them. There's something too close to 'thesis' about it; the idea of imposing a preconception is anathema to a novelist who likes to imagine she is observing life and manners without any didactic intention and without forcing her characters to follow a plan."

John Hoyer Updike was an American novelist, poet, short-story writer, art critic, and literary critic. He is so renowned and revered a novelist of America today that his claim to greatness and place of eminence has been acknowledged and secured by almost all of his contemporary critics and men of letters. Jack De Bellis (2000) spoke of him, "If there is any writer who needs no introduction, it is John Updike. He has been foremost among American writers" (p. 404). Arthur Mizner (1962) praised him highly, "John Updike is the most talented write of his age in American...and perhaps the most serious...the most gifted writer of his generation..." (p.p.1, 29). It is mainly due to his great contribution that he has made to American fiction in the thematic sphere. By taking up the different aspects, from the daily struggle to the last breath of the life of middle-class American people, he has contributed a good deal to the portrayal of the life of his compatriots in all its aspects. His major contribution to the thematic sphere is observed and evaluated from the principal themes dealt with by him. The major themes in Updike's works are religion, sex, and America (The Economist, 2009) as well as death. Mark, the following comment of Tony Tanner (1970) in this regard, "Updike's principal themes are marriage, children,

the relationship between generations, and the difficulties... of family continuity” (p.247). Repeatedly he would integrate and incorporate them, frequently in his favored terrain of "the American small town, Protestant middle class", of which he once said, "I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules." (Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, January 28) Granville Hicks' remarks in Saturday Review are noteworthy in this connection: "...he often chooses to work with materials that seem slight and commonplace...he is a most redoubtable explorer of the mysterious, of the commonplace...his Jamesian eagerness to let no experience be wasted, is heightened by his sense of impermanence”(2).

This proposed study will present an evaluation of the themes dealt with by John Updike and his contribution to American fiction in the thematic sphere.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Over his decades-spanning career, John Updike has written an astounding 24 novels, short stories, poetry collections, essays and criticism, children's books, and plays and memoirs. From the beginning of his career as a writer, he (March 18, 1932 – January 27, 2009) showed his power as a brilliant stylist and a master reader of the psychology of the common man in the twentieth century. His treatment of some of the central themes of modern times— social issues, marriage, and married life, sex, religion, games and sports, and death, the nature of intimate relationships, the collapse of traditional values, the uncertainty of the human condition as the twentieth century drew to a close—is as revealing and compelling as that of any of his contemporaries. He is regarded as a true novelist with his ability to generate intensity and to offer succinct insight into life. It is no wonder to say that John Updike contributed a lot to the thematic sphere in American fiction. This work interrogates the results of the thematic contributions made by him to American fiction. Our objective here is to narrow the focus and to address questions related to what he wrote about and how it contributed.

### 1.2 Research Questions

The paper tries to answer the following research questions:

- What are the themes dealt with by John Updike?
- To what extent did John Updike contribute to the thematic sphere of American fiction?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writers provide us with compass points that help us understand how to handle life's turbulence. Without literature, our quest for self-fulfillment or the American Dream not only is lonelier but also contains greater ambiguity. Like no other writer before him or since Updike provides signs for interpreting the world we inhabit. It is a very commonly accepted point that novels contain themes. It is further considered that the cultural/historical environment of the author plays a role in determining the choice and relative use of different themes. Themes are expressed and emphasized by the way the author makes us feel. By sharing the feelings of the characters we also share the ideas that go through his mind. Updike's contribution to the thematic sphere of American fiction was that he set it off, or, better, helped to set it off, on a new course. In an era still to a certain extent dominated stylistically by the 19th century he was — his style and his treatment of his subject matter were — wholly, utterly different so much that had gone before. The study revolves around the contribution made by John Updike to the thematic sphere of American fiction. In this, section, the works produced about these relevant issues will be critically reviewed.

Zaloom (2018) and Jabeen et al. (2022) point out that “Being middle class means striving for the stability and respectability that older generations achieved by holding down steady jobs, owning a home, and raising upright kids who could take their place. These benchmarks are no longer simple to attain. Instead, middle-class desires are marred by an insecurity historically associated with the American working class.” In White Collar, the sociologist C. Wright Mills (1951), “offered a way to study the middle class that remains useful today, despite vastly changed circumstances. He did not seek merely to delineate the middle class, but to explain what it is like—socially and psychologically—to live in the middle of the class structure. The challenges met by clerks and small-scale entrepreneurs where they spent their days bent over account books in offices while their wives stayed behind to make sure that the home was clean and the children tended to were portrayed by the authors of America.” Living, getting brought up, and experiencing the same, many American authors expressed these middle-class situations and colored the pages of their books with them.

Among the objects of ‘middleness’ family is the foremost thing to write about. The depiction of the life of these middle-class people has always been a challenging task before the authors. Shulman, Robert (2013) suggests, “Ideally, families provide a sense of belonging, of cohesiveness, and they encourage the individual to develop his unique potentialities as part of the family and society” (35). Broder, Sherri Maxine (2013), highlights the gradual disintegration of the relationships of family members as their traditional or expected roles and responsibilities became blurred. When the men of working-class families discovered that it was often easier and more lucrative to desert their families and wander as a tramp or beggar, they contributed to a growing number of

fatherless families in which the “women and children [were forced] either to assume the man’s role of breadwinning or to turn to the charities for the economic support they should have found at home” (Broder 17). Marriage as a social form is ingrained in the fabric of American culture. Over 2,320,000,000 responses appear when the word marriage is put into a Google search. Flanagan (2009), describes marriage as “the one reliable shelter in an uncaring world—or it can be a matchless tool for the infliction of suffering on the people you supposedly love above all others . . .” (p. 47).

As Norman Mailer, the prophet of hipsters declared in an interview in “The Realist”: “After all, if my generation of writers represents anything, if there’s anything we’ve fought for, it’s a sexual revolution” (p.15). Enthusiastically was the way novelists took to writing about sex once the obscenity laws that had obstructed *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *The Ginger Man*, and *Lolita* were smashed. The sexual revolution that Norman Mailer says his generation fought for and won had its antecedents in the contribution made by such iconoclastic figures as Sherwood Anderson, Dreiser, and Eugene O’Neill, all of whom warred against the repression imposed by the Puritanic ideal.

Myers Ben in Faith and Theology observed (2009), “Updike was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard and Karl Barth; he is the most theological novelist you’ll ever come across.” Updike once offered this account of his affection for Karl Barth: “Really, Barth’s mind, so invariably earnest, always penetrates to some depth tonic for me; he makes me feel that rare thing, with authors, called love – one loves a man for thinking and writing so well.” Karl Barth, (1886-1968), A Swiss Protestant theologian who taught “dialectical theology” at the University of Basel; became a major influence on Updike. Barth popularized the idea of *Deus Obsconditus* (absent God) who communicates with the man only through prayer, and His chief proof of His existence is through the desire to know Him.

Games and Sports in America are most certainly an industry. Graham et al. (2016), discovers that many youth sports leagues train parents to be better coaches, but rarely do they focus on improving parental skills. Parenting through sport can be an effective tool; a comfort zone would have to be established between no involvement and over-involvement. One of the ways men show their masculine abilities is through sport (Mahmood et al., 2022, Shirani 2013, ). Men feel free to express masculine ideals while coaching sport, though they must decide whether these ideals are important compared to their own son’s enjoyment (Graham et al. 2016; Kumar, 2023).

Take the word ‘death’ out of your vocabulary and the great works of literature become meaningless; take that awareness away and the cathedrals collapse, the pyramids vanish into the sand, the great organs become silent (Kumar, 2020, 2021; Pourshahian & Kumar, 2022). Yet death remains a “fearful, frightening happening” in the words of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. “The fear of death is a universal fear even if we think we have mastered it on many levels”. In his article, “Textual Analysis: Poe’s *Valdemar*” Roland Barthes (1988) rightly observes, “who could avoid being touched by a text whose declared ‘subject’ is death?” (p.153) In the works of both Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson, the constant presence of death and the popularity of both poets is a simple proof in favor of Barthes. Suburbia has been celebrated in literature as a refuge from the horrors of the world. Because of its focus on nostalgia, tradition, and comfort, suburbia is often stereotyped as Modernism’s antithesis. Entrikin, J. Nicholas (1991) terms, “We live our lives in a place and have a sense of being part of the place, but we also view the place as something separate, something external...This place is both a center of meaning and the external context of our actions.”

In “The Lion and the Unicorn” (1941), Orwell explored the idea that suburbia can be a revolutionary force, “The place to look for the germs of the future England is in the light-industry areas and along the arterial roads. In Slough, Dagenham, Barnet, Letchworth, Hayes – everywhere, indeed, on the outskirts of great towns – the old pattern is gradually changing into something new. In those vast new wildernesses of glass and brick the sharp distinctions of the older kind of town, with its slums and mansions, or of the country, with its manor-houses and squalid cottages, no longer exist” (408).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is qualitative in its nature. To achieve the aims of the study, this paper needs a descriptive approach as the main tool of analysis. The following points are relevant to meet the aims such as the social life of the middle-class Americans, the notion of married life, sex, religion, games and sports, and death, and suburbia in American fiction. This scrutinizes the contents of John Updike’s novels from the perspective of his contribution to the thematic sphere. The theoretical framework of the themes in American fiction is used for the analysis of the novels of John Updike. The researcher will be focused on the themes dealt with by him in his works and also on the other critics to show their opinions about his actual contribution done to American fiction and how Updike’s contemporary reviewers and interviewers evaluate his worth and importance as a major American novelist.

### 4. DISCUSSION

Jack De Bellis (2000) points out on John Updike, “If there is any writer who needs no introduction, It is John Updike” (p.404). That was supported by Tucker Vorhees (2005) who upholds, “John Updike is delightfully



memorable probably the most respected and quotable literary figure we have had in the last half-century or more. How fortunate we are to have him..."Updike speaks of a common life spent and shared by an average American. He elaborates and elucidates it to the full. He deals with the life of his people so effectively and successfully that he has been recognized as a novelist of the middle class. Domestic fierceness within the middle class, social existence, description of married life, sex, and death as riddles for the serious thinkers, but unexpected pleasures and rewards are the important subjects taken up by him in his novels.

The themes of middle-class social life have been dealt with by Updike very truthfully and marvelously. Detweiler (1984) views him, "... he is a millionaire who earns his wealth by writing on the middle-class virtues of industry and discipline to his profession" (6). He was very much interested in the lives of his common men that almost all his works are colored with them. He narrates the dissatisfaction of a man with his jobs, family relations, particularly of a father with his children, performing various rituals and sudden excitements along with the serious crises taking place in life in a very truthful way. This attachment to the description of ordinary people is noted by Keith Mano in his "Doughy Middleness" article in *National Review* (1974), as 'the middle ground and labels him as a middle-class realist' (p.987). Updike very closely observes the conditions and circumstances under which they are leading their life. He chooses very ordinary people, from middle-class societies who live hand to mouth. They spend their life under various types of hardships and misfortunes. Yet their goodness and warm feeling for one another have always been emphasized by the novelist so as to strengthen the bonds of brotherhood among them. Updike has illuminated their life corner to the deepest core with his psychological insights. In the words of Richard Kluger,

"Updike's focus is not on individual psychodrama; his is primarily on the aggregate portrayal of the human condition" (pp.693-709). In an interview Updike comments, "Well, in a democracy in the twentieth and twenty-first century, if you can't base your fiction upon an ordinary people and the issues that engage them, then you are reduced to writing about spectacle unreal people. You know, James Bond or something, and you cook-up adventures. The trick about fiction, as I see it, is to make an unadventurous circumstance seem adventurous, it excites the reader, either with its truth or with the fact that there is always a little more that goes on and there are multiple levels of reality. As we walk through even a boring day, we see an awful lot and feel an awful lot. To try to say some of that seems more worthy than cooking up thrills. (Interview with John Updike)" Richard Kluger views, "Updike is writing about something rather more pertinent-how most of us really live in this depressing sort of world... the people Updike has written about ... are enmeshed in the desperate facts of their condition... (His) achievement ... is the quantity of and dignity he is able to detect in these drab existences without denying that very drabness" (p. 8).

The themes of love and marriage are equally striking and appealing in American fiction. They have been treated by novelist after novelist. However, Updike is at the forefront of their description in his works. Hence, his next great contribution which is quite noticeable even to a beginner lies in his handling of marriage and the married life of his people. Tony Tanner (1970) points out in this regard, "Updike's principal themes are marriage, children, the relationship between generations, and the difficulties... of family continuity" (p.247). The novelist explores this lifelong relationship that exists between the spouses with a keen eye and painstakingly depicts every kind of marital frustration as well as its causes. He has also very minutely noticed and brought it before his readers that the greatest reason for marital tension is perhaps sexual dissatisfaction between the spouses. He goes further to probe the minds of his people why they feel this dissatisfaction with each other. He also draws the moments of heightened awareness of pain and toil in their married life. In *Rabbit Redux* (1991) the couple feels, "They had become locked rooms, to each other, they could hear to each other cry but could not get in" (p.54). But most of the problems occurring in their married life are due to maladjustment between passion and its outlet. That he says a lot on this one, becomes evident from his novels, such as *Rabbit Run*, *Rabbit Redux*, *Couples* and *Marry Me*, etc. However, he never wants marriage to be split up. He tries his most to save it from dissolution. He regarded it as a sacrament. He believes if marriage is broken, the grace of God ceases upon the partners. They not only lose happiness but also suffer eternal damnation. In *Marry Me* (1976) Updike asserts,

"I don't want you as a mistress. Our lives aren't just built for it.... Here there is no institution except marriage... You can't take this fidelity you think you can, but I know you can't".... To live without you is death to me. On the other hand, to abandon my family is a sin, to do it I'd have to deny God, and by denying God I'd give up all claim to immortality" (p.49-50).

He, that is why, makes his people, despite tension and disturbances try to adjust themselves to each other to save their marriage. Novelists speak of breakup but of saving the marriage, it is only Updike who does so and this is his unique contribution. Oppenheimer observes, "Updike's fiction appealed, I believe to those who responded to the specific theme of entrapment. If you have been trapped in a marriage... then Updike is the poet of your condition."

However, Updike's most important and most valuable contribution in the thematic sphere is perhaps his handling of sex. His novels speak volumes for this. It tempts the readers of every age – adolescent, young, adult, and even old. The novelist deals with this essential urge of human beings quite frequently and frankly, as

enthusiastically and excitedly as if he were a pornographer. George Steiner (1960) views *In a Rut*, “No other male writer has probed so single-mindedly a person’s need for sex as Updike. He sees in sexual life the only compensation, the only open terrain left to human beings concerned in the soul-detergent inferno of American middle-class existence”(p.18). Updike himself remarked in “Talk with John Updike”, *The New York Times Book Review*, April 7 (1968),

“After Christianity what? Sex, in its many permutations, is surely the ambience and motive force of the new humanism” (p.34).

Robert, Mary (2005) puts it in a review, “John Updike writes about sex-passionately, eloquently, and to the delight of his fans graphically...Updike’s writing captures that sweet substance in the mad acts of man and spreads it like a balm upon our mortality” (27, February). Sex is a pivotal and fictional biochemist approaching humanity with a tray of hypersensitive gadgets. He reveals this natural Instinct with all its physical and psychological aspects. Every emotion of love-making- physical as well as oral, sex is exhaustively described by the novelist. His reader sits still and with raft attention until they finish the novel. Updike has brought sex outside from bedrooms to parlors and made people talk about what they only could feel and not discuss openly. He also divulges that it is only and only proper sexual relation that imparts marriage longevity, and if the lust remains, unquenched between the partners it may lead them outside. Breaking off most of the marriages in contemporary American society is largely due to the lack of proper sexual relations. The novelist has also focused on the sin related to sex called adultery. Adultery has been very deeply explored by him in contemporary society. Donald J.Greiner in *Adultery in the American novel: Updike, James and Hawthorne* (1989) states, “Where Hawthorne’s probing of sexual desire and adultery is framed by religious and psychological concerns, James’ is intertwined with social considerations. Updike unifies both the religious and the social in his novels of adultery” (p.4) MattSchudel asserts in *The Washington Post* (2009), “Updike was often labeled the bard of suburban adultery — “a subject which, if I have not exhausted, has exhausted me,” he once said — and many of his early works of fiction were considered scandalously explicit. Updike’s reputation as a novelist and a sexual provocateur in print was secured with his novel “*Couples*,” which became a No. 1 best-seller in 1968. The book, which tells the intertwined stories of the longings of five New England couples, landed Updike on the cover of *Time* magazine under the heading “The Adulterous Society.”Updike unifies both the religious and the social in his novels of adultery” (p.4).Though the idea of monogamous marriage is disliked by his people, however, marriage and infidelity go together in their lives. That’s why adultery for his men and women is not always full of guilt and remorseful activity, but a form of adventure and fantasy which by adding charm to their boring lives gives them a new lifestyle and identification. As Updike speaks through one of his characters in the novel *A Month of Sundays*(1975),

“ Adultery, my friends, is our inherent condition: “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her in his heart”... Was not the first Divine Commandment received by Human ears, “Be fruitful, and multiply”? Adultery is not a choice to be avoided; it is a circumstance to be embraced” (pp. 44-45).

Tony Tanner (1979) comments about the handling of adultery in *Couples* by Updike,

“If marriage at the center and the center cannot hold, what then? ... For nineteenth-century bourgeois society one might almost say that marriage sanctioned religion, and if it is in any way called into question or it disintegrates, then for those implicated and involved in its unstabilizing, the problem does indeed arise- is there another form by which they may exist in the world at all? That is the social problem that the novel (*Couples*) concerned with adultery finally must confront” (p. 61)

Tanner has presented his ideas about family and adultery in his book *Adultery in the Novel* that “In the Rabbit novels it comes to us not in the free-agent fantasy tradition but instead in the complicated context of the family with adultery attached. There are risks, of course, Tonny Tanner has pointed out, regarding *Couples*, that frequent adulteries “lose contact with the sense of intense passion,” and that “adultery . . . no longer signifies” such passion because society no longer maintains strong “institutional obstructions” against adulterers. [. . .]” (p. 47). It makes the point clear that adultery in his novels is not indulged just for fun but that it is a bypass in the pilgrimage of life. The transgressor reaches out towards adultery to re-ignite the liveliness one has lost.

Literature, “if it is genuine, is the religious melody that has been lost to us. Literature gathers within it all the elements of faith: the seriousness, the internality, the melody, and the connection with the hidden aspects of the soul” (Appelfeld 115). Hence, religion is the next throbbing topic in American fiction taken up repeatedly by the writers. Laura Levitt summarizes in her 2010 essay “What is Religion, Anyway?”: “In literary studies, there is a great deal of suspicion surrounding engagement with any expression of religion whatsoever. Religion continues to carry the taint of abjection. It is primitive, outmoded, and dangerous” (p.110-111). Beliso-De Jesús affirms that “The study and theology of religion is a useful site to disrupt broader trends of understanding and constructing humanity,” and therefore it deserves serious consideration when critics are presented with a text that employs religious themes” (p.313). Updike’s contribution to making Christianity one of the greatest and most important religions of the world is equally remarkable and unique. He, that is why deals with the subject in his novels. His handling of this theme is so striking and appealing that it caught the attention of many critics.

Rollyson, Carol (2000) says, "Religious and theological concerns pervade Updike's fiction that in a real sense... like Nathaniel Hawthorne's writing more than one hundred years earlier, Updike's fiction explores for his time the great issues of sin, guilt, and grace-of spiritual yearnings amid the entanglements of the flesh." Keith Manointerprets him in "Doughy Middleness" National Review (1974) in these words, "The sweet lonesome singer of Protestant mediocrity, middle-class realist .... He plumps for no ideology that would be an abuse of the author's position. In fact, John Updike, out of the kindness of acedia, has very little to say. And no one writing in American says it better" (988). Religion is always a subject of scrutiny for him. He's less bothered by the corrupting potential of fame than by the symptoms of a religious-philosophical crisis in his life. In Assorted Prose Updike remarks that, at one time, Barth's theology was the only thing supporting his life; he used to keep Barth's Romans commentary beside his bed, to read a few pages at a time. Much of his fiction could be read as an extended reflection on Barth's dictum: "There is no way from us to God.... The god who stood at the end of some human way would not be God." This is the only reason why he is seriously involved in the work of lashing that belief which underlies the life of an ever-increasing number of Americans. His genius is reflected in his outstanding attempts to construct religious meaning out of secular materialism with astonishing variety and richness. Besides, his novels constitute a serious exploration and probing of the spiritual conditions of American culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. They show how American is in a state of ill health and people inhabiting it are overpowered by doubts. The loss of faith in God has brought in the Americans a total loss of moral values. The protagonists facing existential and moral problems try to face the crises with anxiety and resort to religion as the only source of consolation. Updike himself asserts in *Rabbit is Rich* (1981),

"I believe that all problems are basically insoluble and that faith is a leap out of total despair" (p. 43).

They also try to search how man is related to God. He conveys a mysterious and redeeming truth that God does allow us to perceive His common grace as the patterns of life are suffused with divine radiance. Updike repeatedly creates confused characters unable to reconcile the opposite demands of the self and the society. The resulting dilemma is played out against a depressing background of vulgar materialism. Removing his own doubts and fears he affirms to the Christians that religion has still solutions to their problems. He also avers that with sincerity and faith even difficult works can be accomplished. He purposely does so to turn their thoughts to goodness and nobility. He also announces in his writings that God is omnipresent and that all creatures are related to Him but cannot reach Him. However, the thing that pains him much is the distortion or violation of Christianity's tenets. He makes a thorough discussion on them in his novels (like *The Centaur*, *A Month of Sundays*, *Couples*, and *Marry Me*) to reveal their values to his men. As a true Christian, he treats quite explicitly theological themes, where he clearly instructs them to avoid the shabbiness of modern life. He has also dealt with the spiritual condition of the American culture in the late twentieth century with all its variety and richness even in the manner of a moralist. His investigation of America's Puritan heritage that is why enables him to explore the powers and weaknesses of modern religious impulses. Lutheran pastor Fritz Kruppenbach speaks in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), a deeply Barthian minister who utters this thunderous denouncement of pastoral work – in conversation with another minister, he asks:

"Do you think this is your job, to meddle in these people's lives? I know what they teach you at seminary now: this psychology and that. But I don't agree with it. You think now your job is to be an unpaid doctor, to run around and plug up holes and make everything smooth. I don't think that. I don't think that's your job.... I say you don't know what your role is or you'd be home locked in prayer.... In running back and forth you run away from the duty given you by God, to make your faith powerful.... When on Sunday morning, then, when you go out before their faces, we must walk up not worn out with misery but full of Christ, hot with Christ, on fire: burn them with the force of our belief. This is why they come; why else would they pay us? Anything else we can do and say anyone can do and say. They have doctors and lawyers for that.... Make no mistake. Now I'm serious. Make no mistake. There is nothing but Christ for us. All the rest, all this decency and busyness, is nothing. It is Devil's work."

Leonard Quart (2009) confirms in the *The Berkshire Eagle*, "A major literary critic, James Wood, credited Updike's "lyric capacities" to his acceptance of theologian Karl Barth's belief that God grants grace through the gift of creation. Consequently, in Updike's work one feels that every object and place he so sumptuously depicts, is in some way an affirmation of faith." Updike was a consciously religious writer, whose beliefs were strongly influenced by Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard and Swiss theologian Karl Barth. He was one of the few serious writers who managed to gain popular success as well as the academic claim. No matter how much contemporary his works are, he was in the words of Lauter, Paul (1994), "in many respects a throwback to the nineteenth-century novelists of manners".

Further, still, Updike has popularized an extremely new and vital matter and that is games and sports. Though novelists like Hemingway wrote about hunting and fishing, which we are already favorite of people, nor about former games sports the way Updike has written. Updike once said, "I am curiously, disproportionately, undeservedly happy on a golf course . . ." In an interview with Randy Harry to *The Los Angeles Times* (1996), Updike said,

"I watch a lot of golf on TV and one thing you learn from the professionals is about character. All of them have good swings. They wouldn't be there if they didn't. But there's something else that the Nicklauses, Palmers, and Trevinos have, an extra something from inside. Maybe Tiger Woods has it. He certainly seems to be taking the game to another level, if that can be done."

Sport is a significant theme throughout Updike's novels. Sport sponsors characterization, plot motives, and setting. Therefore, the sports world assumes major importance in Updike's style of describing life through illusions of reality. He has assigned an important place to them in his writings. They have been properly dealt with. Games and sports, according to Updike are conducted not only for pastimes but also for creating feelings of brotherhood, among his people. They have also been employed metaphorically in other texts. Through them, light is thrown on the inner workings of his character. In the words of Markle Joyce B. "Fighters and Lovers: Theme in the novels of John Updike" (1973) pointed out that the basketball imagery is a part of an intricate pattern, "The basic image in *Rabbit, Run* combines basketball, sex, and religion, into a solid geometry of ups and downs, circles and straight lines, nets, and games spaces" (p., 43). Updike depicts the same in the protagonist of the novel *Rabbit, Run* (1960),

"Harry's style of play-needless, self-centered, is consistent with his mode of living. In his exaggerated but futile efforts to avoid entanglement and breakthrough to a solitary realm of independent fulfillment, he exercises the self-same tendencies that marked his performances in basketball. His self-deluded remarks concerning his fans are, "the crowd ... seemed right inside you... There was one fat guy used to come who would get on the floor of Rabbit's stomach and really make it shake. Hey, Gunner! Hey, showboat, shoot! Shoot! Rabbit remembers him fondly now; to that guy, he had been a hero sports" (p. 37).

Sportswriting doesn't come more gorgeous or more perceptive anywhere except in other pages written by Updike.

". . . The ball, rocketing off the crotch of the rim, leaps over the heads of the six and lands at the feet of the one. He catches it on the short bounce with a quickness that startles them. As they stare hushed he sights squinting through blue clouds of weed smoke a suddenly dark silhouette like a smokestack against the afternoon spring sky, setting his feet with care, wiggling the ball with nervousness in front of his chest, one widespread white hand on top of the ball and the other underneath, jiggling it patiently to get some adjustment in the air itself. The cuticle moons on his fingernails are big. Then the ball seems to ride up the right lapel of his coat and comes off his shoulder as his knees dip down, and it appears the ball will miss because though he shot from an angle the ball is not going toward the backboard. It was not aimed there. It drops into the circle of the rim, whipping the net with a ladylike whisper. 'Hey!' he shouts in pride. 'Luck,' one of the kids says." (*Rabbit, Run*, 1960),

Besides, Updike has rightly reflected that games are helpful for a modern man to get rid of the strains and pressures of present-day life. His people, that is why, frequently engage themselves in them as they create nostalgia of their childhood and youth, a time when life was less complex and complicated. Games and sports inculcate in them rules and regulations which make moral order and social relationships lasting. Likewise, Robert and Issacs (1977) comment on Updike's treatment of athletics, "in his fiction has largely influenced the American ethos and outlook, especially in recent years as- "Sports in American fiction have served as a focal point for the examination of social and personal values" (p. 3). His books are, thus, the best examples in this direction as well. Leonard Quart (2009) writes in *The Berkshire Eagle*, "In the novel's opening scene, Rabbit, a former high school basketball star who feels painfully trapped by his dead-end salesman job and sour marriage, plays a pickup game with a group of resentful boys, and for the moment feels "liberated from long gloom." Updike captures the poetry of the game, strikingly describing a shot of Rabbit's dropping "into the circle of the rim, whipping the net with a ladylike whisper."

Still, another contribution that he makes in the thematic sphere is enriching the fiction dealing with death and mortality or the dread of extinction. It occupies a good number of pages in almost all of his novels. As Joyce Carol Oates (1990) writes in her review of *Rabbit at Rest*, "Updike's courageous theme [is] the blossoming fruition of the seed of death we all carry inside us." As William Pritchard (2000) fittingly writes, "I don't know of any single story in Updike's work, or another writer's, that more unflinchingly, and with something like human dignity, confronts us with our lot. It may be thought of as a sad postscript to the boy's final conviction when he buries the pigeons in 'Pigeon Feathers'" (325-26). Fear of death haunts the novelist in the same degree as it haunts anyone else. He has very minutely observed that how a man at every phase of his life fears death. For him, it seems to reign everywhere. It reminds him of his own end, that unpredicted but predestined hour of his life's last journey. It also dreads his people round the clock. His men feel fear of death lurking in all things. Being quite a religious person the novelist reveals another universal fact that nothing, no amount of wealth, health or physical equipment, enjoyment, or prosperity can rescue a man from death's invincible clutches. He is quite helpless when every felicity and facility that he enjoys in his life is brought to an end with the sudden stroke of mortality. It makes life pathetic and painful. For Updike, mortality is more than the cessation of physical existence; it is the devastation of grace, beauty, and talent as well. But this is inevitable for the novelist, his people as for others. Michiko, a reviewer (1981) observes, "Updike's characters are all afflicted by existential intimations of their own mortality. That fear is at once terrifying... It threatens to make everything



they do meaningless and futile... This theme, like so many others in his work, is rooted in Updike's own life" (p.14-15, 20). Ben Turnbull, the narrator of Mr. Updike's *Toward the End of Time* novel, is 66 years old and heading for just such a death, and he's shitlessly scared.

"I would die, but also the little girl I was making this for would die ... There was no God, each detail of the rusting, moldering cellar made clear, just Nature, which would consume my life as carelessly and relentlessly as it would a dung-beetle corpse in a compost pile"

Like so many of the novelist's protagonists, though, Turnbull seems to be scared of all the wrong things. The novelist's original trauma about the "protein acids ticking and death coming on like an express train." This universal human deadliness could in some ways be said to have been Updike's reason for being a writer. His career-long, lifelong preoccupation with mortality, which wormed its way into his writing from his earliest publications until his last, appeared to unite him with humanity in ways he found sustaining. Thus, records his great contribution to this theme of mortality and death.

Updike's next contribution is the depiction of suburban life based largely on his experience and observation. Suburbia has been celebrated in literature as a refuge from the horrors of the world. Because of its focus on nostalgia, tradition, and comfort, suburbia is often stereotyped as Modernism's antithesis. Perhaps no novelist before Updike paid heed to the life of the people living in the suburbs of America. He in an interview with Charles Thomas in *The Art of Fiction XLIII* (1968) says,

"I am drawn to Southeastern Pennsylvania because I know how things happen there, or at least how they used to happen. Once you have in your bones the fundamental feasibilities of a place, you can imagine there freely" (p.117).

Laurie Allison points out,

"at his best (Updike) is, more truly than John Cheever, (1912-1982, an American fictionist, contemporary of Updike, is praised for his skill as a realist depicter of suburban manners and morals), the Chekhov (18860-1904, a Russian dramatist and short story writer. His plays combine naturalism and symbolism. He is also known for the tranquil setting for his writings of American suburbia" (p. 3).

He, thus, prompts the readers to re-evaluate life and connect again with what is truly important. He mastered the art of capturing the ordinary moments that govern our lives. His chronicle of daily life, that is why, speaks of the joys, sorrows, humdrum, and transition in human existence. J. Yerkes comments in this respect, "Man, wife, home, children, and work: for almost half a century, Updike has exploded the daily concerns of our national psyche using his own life as a guide..." He takes the goal of his work as the creation of a "sacred book", which he offers to the world through his novels, and in his celebration of the American life, he seems a modern "Walt Whitman" illuminating its life to the full. Life in the suburbs reflected the desire of families to get out of crowded urban areas and enjoy a more relaxed pace as well as to own at least a small piece of land. Many residents of suburbs, however, felt pressed to conform to an idealized concept of suburban life. The media often portrayed life in the suburbs as a near-utopian existence in which everyone was friendly, social life was vibrant, and people were carefree. The reality, however, rarely met those expectations because John Updike sought to reveal the emptiness that many suburbanites felt.

Updike, thus, is more appreciated as a writer who highlights the culture in which he has lived and worked as a craftsman. He presents a new galaxy of the theme to write about the common man and in this way renders shades to the life of each one of his countrymen and it is one of the greatest contributions to the genre of fiction.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This analysis proved that Updike was keenly aware of his contemporary culture and used literary means to explore it and comment on it. The society that surrounded both him and his characters comes alive in his novels. The Rabbit saga is as much cultural commentary as it is literary fiction; the scenic structures Updike creates and the cultural artifacts he includes shed light on these fascinating decades of the twentieth century. The portrayal of marriage in his novels has at least as many shadows as warm light although that is ultimately what makes them seem more honest than not. Consequently, it serves a dual purpose: to give an account of the difficulties of marriage in American, but also to register the social-cultural changes in post-war life that contribute to those difficulties. Updike's handling of married life and his novels, thus, opens new vistas to be explored by the prosperity. He has brought before his readers quite a realistic picture of what happens in the married life of middle-class people and how it is saved. His handling of this theme is so brilliant that bestows a unique caliber of matchmaker on him and testifies to his real contribution in dealing with this important subject. An anonymous critic extolling his valuable presentation of married life comments, "Probably it will be John Updike's domestic fiction for which he will be best remembered and perhaps on the basis of which he will be judged as a writer." Furthermore, he succeeded in pointing out that sex is the most important subject to write about. It gives life purpose and continuity. It is a great human Instinct, the force of which human beings are part and parcel and thus, sex cannot easily be omitted from an honest account of human activity. Updike that is why very candidly writes on the subject. He has contributed a large part of his writing into this matter and gained for himself the reputation of Americans, "most eloquent and most gynecological through the dirty mind. In early

and middle Updike, every set of human genitals had its own distinctive physically, often presented with clinical precision, as well as a soulful individuality. What Henry James did with clothing and furniture- turned them into characters- Updike did with the reproductive organs and with their behavior when aroused.” (Kirn 2004). Updike’s contribution to American fiction in the thematic sphere is quite obvious from the above discussion is absolutely great and superb.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

“This project is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University project number (PSAU/2023/R/1444)”

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