

UNIT 8

JOHN UPDIKE (1932-)

PIGEON FEATHERS, THE HERMIT & THE MUSIC SCHOOL

I. INTRODUCTION: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

"To transcribe middleness with all its grits, bumps and anonymities, in its fullness of satisfaction and mystery: is it possible *** or worth

doing?"(from Updike's *The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood*)(=W.D. Howells)

Born 1932, Shillington (Pennsylvania) = suburb of Reading

Parents farm in Plowville (13) --> regionalist (people/landscape)

Harvard in 1954 (*summa cum laude*) --> Ruskin School of Drawing & Fine

Arts in Oxford (England) (<-- interested in drawing & painting)

innate talents as graphic artist ==> fiction with highly visual quality (color + texture + form + space + motion = cinematic character)

1955 --> staff of *New Yorker* (+ 2 years) --> sights/sounds of New York & polish/sophistication as writer --> first stories (still contributor)

1957 --> Ipswich (Mass.) --> began writing fiction full time --> ample production through dedicated, steady work (patience + leisure + craft)

1958 --> 1st *The Poorhouse Fair* -> novels/stories/poems/play/journalism

"Olinger" stories (imaginary Pennsylvania town = Shillington) --> heroes =

adolescents to escape cold environments --> affection + ironic humor & sense of place (Depression/World War II)

Howells's *A Boy's Town* = ancestor of Updike's *The Dogwood Tree* ==> how one's spirit takes on its coloration from material circumstances

Sense of place = sense of life in stories & novels (harder in longer tales) *The Centaur*, 1964 = 3 days of confusion & error in life of American high-school teacher (through his son's eyes) & mythical trappings

Couples, 1968 = chronicler of sexual relationships (marital & adulterous) ==> exercise in realism or creative fantasy ? (= *Marry Me*, 1976)

"Rabbit" novels == 1950s in *Rabbit, Run* & late sixties in *Rabbit Redux* Harry

"Rabbit" Angstrom = ex-high school basketball star (nostalgia) *Rabbit, Run* => try to escape from town/job/wife/child (irresponsible)

10 years later = fortyish + dispirited printer with wayward wife & country both landing on the moon and falling to pieces

Rabbit Redux => Pennsylvania small town away from past certainties & Vietnam war + black revolution (identity + divergence + confusion Rabbit's consciousness-its author ==> argue with & about)

Best work = stories: *Of the Farm* + *Separating* + poem *Dog's Death*

Boyish dream of becoming an artist = innocence (Christian faith)

Fine sense of fact --> not black humor + experimental narratives ==> satirist & celebrator of social + domestic conditions

II. THE SHORT STORIES

The Same Door (1959), *Pigeon Feathers* (1962), *Olinger Stories* (1964), and *The Music School* (1966) ==> highest range of accomplishment

(intensity/artistic discipline + poetry + religious *empressement*)

Individual in relation to his fellows in search for contemporary faith

Updike stereotype = young/sensitive/nature/curious/intelligent & often

lonely/awkward/misunderstood == "outsider" (no place in social coteries)

Either David, Alan, Bill, Mark, or, most often, John (Updike identifies)

Foreword to *Olinger Stories*: "Olinger is a state of mind, of my mind, and belongs entirely to me" ==> typical of "post modern" characters

Unlike James Baldwin's characters --> Updike's John is gentle, hopeful, loving & optimistic --> loves life & in thoughts often in the past but ready for future (examines experiences for positive good) --> searches for God Man's

bewilderment ("Dentistry and Doubt", Burton; "A Gift from the City", Jim)

==> complexity of life but goodness lives ("Still Life", "His Finest Hour") -->

Life is good in little things (short joy/beauty/insight) Critics --> Updike's tendency to commonplace events & small moments of life but fail to realize significance of this emphasis

Man = overlook the obvious ==> need to see little things (value) ("You'll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You", "A & P"; "In Football Season" of *The Music School* collection & "Archangel")

Man to accept life's little rewards & understand his role & relation to God John = seeker after Truth (his uniqueness + answers in scriptures & nature & mystical revelations) ("The Happiest I've Been", "Flight", "Lifeguard", "The Crow in the Woods" & "The Great Scarf of Birds")

Always searchers = mystery of life & God's existence (above ordinary) ("The Astronomer", "Dying Cat", "Churchgoing")

II.1. *PIGEON FEATHERS* (1962)

"Pigeon Feathers" = finest story in first 3 collections + character (14) lives on Pennsylvania farm + David + sensitive/serious/lonely/ introspective + uprooted from home & childhood --> searches for smt to do until Jesus's as a kind of hobo, in a minor colony of the Roman Empire

Fascinated + terrified --> thrown into adult world where all is a lie + confusion
 by vision of death --> fear of cosmos --> Lutheran Church --> no answer -->
 failure of Christianity --> not give up with search --> David's fear to anger
 (mother cannot answer) --> little everyday wonders may lead to some answers
 --> intricate & elaborate designs of pigeon's feathers --> young boy
 experiences knowledge & God exists & answers Life -his life- will go on
 forever: To question is to begin to know

II. READERSHIP, TOPICS & LITERARY TECHNIQUES

Leading literary figure in contemporary America = prolific writer + wide
 readership + criticized for being too melodramatic/too philosophical Balance
 romantic--reflective + popular novel--more esoteric fiction

Autobiographical writer + Christianity <--> existentialism (scientific modern
 era) --> religion assures humans place in creation & justifies refusal to accept
 death as final --> but remains unproven --> requires trusting society (not
 cynical) ==> Science thrives in cynical era (denies both hope & anguish & not
 deal with fact of mortality)

As sequence, Updike's fictions = gradually aging protagonists --> transition
 from older religion to atheistic humanism as its norm

Main characters = survivors from fading era (life-givers & unhappy)

<--> antagonist = modern man of science (unprepared to deal with world)

Slowly & visually = stops action to study setting/pauses to watch character's
 comings & goings, intimate moments of play/anger ==> together make up
 quality of one's life (deft economy of art) --> control & shape reader's
 perceptions ==> realism of documentary (scenes & people)

John Updike = superb literary artistry & something to say
 Followed closely by reading public --> searcher of integrity
 Virtue in man & goodness & individual is significant & life can be good
 Man needs concept of God --> search as philosophic goal of artist

III. THE COLLECTION *THE MUSIC SCHOOL* (1966)

The Music School (4th of short stories) few characters "begin to know" +
 suffering from life's complexity + searching one way or another (older)
 Young-to-middle-aged experienced in marriage & sex -> sex utopia
 Illicit love affairs, dissatisfaction with mate, divided loyalties wife/mistress
 Unwillingness/inability to relate over a long time to same sex partner Love has
 many facets --> sex drives <--> Society says, "select one"
 --> confusion --> searching for solution another sex experience ("My Lover
 Has Dirty Finger Nails", "The Music School")
 Few "victims" of life make effort to correct errors & understand --> searchers
 of integrity reappear ("Leaves" = near madness by young man --> "Nature may
 be defined as that which exists without guilt")
 Updike themes: human perplexity + beauty of little things + perpetual search +
 Nature as possible answer all emerge = theme of search

III.1. *THE HERMIT* (1966)

"The Hermit" = man tries to discover life in its most exquisite purity & reaches
 a threshold of understanding or fulfillment is so rare that society will destroy
 him ==> soul & summit of Updike's art

Updike themes carefully interlaced: a) *each man is alone*; b) *Man is forever perplexed*; c) *Nature can help solve our dilemmas*; d) *in our slenderest tenuity are we significant*; e) *All things have purpose*; f) *His search is intuitive, not intellectual*; g) *Something communicates with him*; h) *God exists* (Karl Barth's influence) ==> story's tragic conclusion = permits no final revelation --> returned to meanness of reasonable life
Yet message is hopeful = God exists (destiny & hope)

IV. THE SHORT STORY *THE MUSIC SCHOOL* (1966)

Alfred Schweigen = humanist <--> computer expert
Central characters seek meaning beyond the physical <--> Updike relies on physical details for meaning (imagery to control reader's response)
Talent & training in graphic arts + enthusiasm for motion pictures ==> highly cinematic quality of Updike's fiction
Alfred Schweigen tells his own story ("I exist in time") --> unaware of any direction in life --> life is a perplexity (no control)
"The Music School" = picture of a man's mind (internal scenery + dialogue = monologue + visual elements depict memories & meditations) "let me describe the music school" = impressionistic sense of experience
Schweigen's reflections around 2 metaphors: music (order & harmony) + food & religion + mathematics (order) --> computers produce "the music of truth" -> church kneeling = "there was a kind of accompanying music"
Computer expert = cool assurance of scientist (Also priest) ==> "They have solved or dismissed the paradox of being a thinking animal"

Yet translucent host discarded as inappropriate to reality which Christ saw -->
 Senses a tough/opaque/disordered world beyond the comprehension of men =
 computer expert to whom shame and guilt are also unknown
 Schweigen feels uncomfortable with systems envisioning orderly universe
 Schweigen admires to find them still efficacious (music & religion)
 Not a simple melody line (counterpoint of irony)
 Alfred Schweigen = artist cannot come to terms with concept of orderly
 universe --> how will he produce the patterned verbal music of literature?
 Even his confessional/meditative essay is strangely formal and distant
 His voice remains anemic/dry/tired/overly formal & tense
 Not religious but longs for the religion (harmony with universe/himself) -->
 Too old-fashioned to become a modern man
 "The Music School" = metaphor for Updike's view of his own art ==> Change
 host & death of computer expert = transubstantiation (world of ideas -> world
 of matter) -> Art also transubstantiation --> artist grasps tough/confusing
 world, searching for combinations that produce music