

THE PROBLEM OF GRACE IN JOHN UPDIKE'S

RABBIT, RUN AND THE CENTAUR

A Thesis

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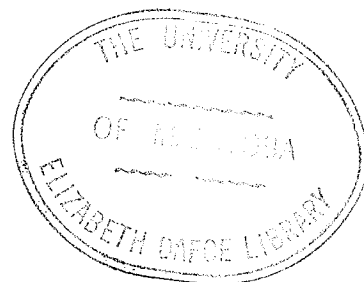
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AN ABSTRACT OF

THE PROBLEM OF GRACE IN JOHN UPDIKE'S
RABBIT, RUN AND THE CENTAUR

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that the major concerns in John Updike's writing are religious concerns, and that the novels Rabbit, Run and The Centaur are complementary novels, each dealing with a different aspect of man's search for grace. The thesis also seeks to demonstrate that Updike's religious thinking, in particular, his idea of grace, has been profoundly affected by the writings of the theologian Karl Barth.

Chapter I deals with Updike's early religious concerns, particularly, the problem of grace, and examines in detail the short story "Pigeon Feathers," and his first novel The Poorhouse Fair.

Chapter II examines Harry Angstrom's search for grace in Rabbit, Run, and seeks to demonstrate his failure to achieve grace.

Chapter III examines The Centaur in detail and tries to show that George Caldwell attains a state of grace through his self-sacrifice.

Chapter IV provides some conclusions and attempts to demonstrate how the concerns examined in this thesis are part of Updike's metaphysical and artistic vision, and to show how these concerns are the basis for much of his other work.

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CHAPTER I

EARLY RELIGIOUS CONCERNS

John Updike writes out of a Christian ethos. He is concerned with examining the major themes of human existence: love, death, and the search for a meaning in life; and in his works, these themes always operate in terms of a Christian metaphysics. More specifically, he is concerned with the American Protestant middle class. In an interview in Life magazine, Updike stated, "My subject is the American Protestant small town middle class. It is in the middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me without¹ doubt worthwhile to examine what it is." Updike reiterated this concern in an interview in Time magazine where he reported that he was "kind of elegiacally concerned with the Protestant middle class."²

Updike was raised as a Lutheran, but has since joined the Congregationalist church. He reports that he grew up in a family where it was the practice to "examine everything for God's fingerprints."³ Many of his short stories are frankly autobiographical attempts to grasp what is universal in his private experience.

¹
Jane Howard, "Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?" Life (November 4, 1966), p. 75.

²
"View from the Catacombs," Time, XCI (April 26, 1968), p. 67.

³
Jane Howard, "Nice Novelist," p. 76.

Updike's early short stories, and his first novel, The Poorhouse Fair, represent his first attempts to come to grips with the spiritual problems that he feels are at the core of man's existence. His early Lutheranism affected him profoundly, and this is obvious in all of his work. It was not until he was writing Rabbit, Run, however, that Updike found his spiritual mentor in Karl Barth. Barth confirmed Updike in much of what he felt about the human situation. In particular, Barth clarified for Updike an idea of grace. Grace is God's freely bestowed gift of salvation and eternal life. It is not something which can be earned through works, but is the result of a real and vital faith. On the one hand, man faces sin and eternal death. Through grace, man dies metaphorically, with Jesus Christ, and is reborn into a state where sin and eternal death are no longer possibilities. Barth says that when grace is achieved:

The totality of our human will and intelligence, future as well as past, has been superseded by the pre-eminent, ineffable, and invisible power of our eternal future existence. This is grace. 4

Grace then is the solution to sin and death which man must seek, but which paradoxically he cannot find through his own efforts, because grace belongs entirely to God, and He, in His infinite mercy, dispenses it in ways man cannot understand. It is an attempt to find grace, the only possible solution to death, which is Updike's primary theme.

One of Updike's earliest examinations of the problem of grace

4

Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, trans. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 19.

occurs in his simple and beautiful short story "Pigeon Feathers." The

hero of the story, a young boy named David, is undergoing his first

religious crisis. His awareness of the very real possibility of death

resolves itself into an intellectual search for grace. The young David

of "Pigeon Feathers" has spent the first fourteen years of his life in

the stable acceptance of a Christian upbringing. Everything in his life

has been solid and secure and he has not even considered the possibility

of disaster. The story begins with the family's movement from the town

to the farm. The concomitant sense of dislocation prepares David for

the crisis that results from his casual reading of H. G. Wells' "Outline

of History." Wells' casual, historical account of Christ appalls David.

His initial reaction is powerful:

This was the initial impact--that at a definite spot in
time and space a brain black with the denial of Christ's
divinity had been suffered to exist; that the universe had not
spit out this ball of tar but allowed it to continue in its
blasphemy, to grow old, win honors, wear a hat, write books
that, if true, collapsed everything into a jumble of horror. 5

At this point, the yawning gap, the abyss of doubt opens before
David, and he attempts desperately to close it and return to the surety
of older days. He first examines the objective facts he has. Churches
exist. His attempt to find a foundation for Christ on the base of the
churches whose basis is Christ is confounded by his lack of historical
knowledge. He calls on the known efficacy of prayer, but in light of
the cool assurance of Wells, becomes aware that all could be chance.

The external circumstances of his world fail to reassure him. Death stands before him, a palpable vision. "Without warning, David was visited by an exact vision of death: a long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you are drawn while the white faces above recede."⁶ This is unlike a private vision, and in many of his stories death appears in the image of a hole. The hole, of course, is the grave, but it is also something more, a kind of emptiness that continually threatens.

The failure of the external circumstances of his world to provide a foundation for faith leads David to his next attempt: an appeal to established orthodoxy. He begins by attempting to force the Lutheran minister who teaches his catechetical class to give him some solid proof; the statements he makes in church each Sunday, David feels, will be enough. The signs are not auspicious. The minister, Reverend Dobson, who David hopes will show him the way, is constantly lost when travelling around his own parish. He teaches the lesson by having his class fill in the blanks on a test paper. "I am the _____, and the _____, saith the Lord."⁷ He does not seem the man to help David fill in the enormous blank of his private doubt, and indeed, he is not. To David's question about the existence of the soul between the time of death and the day of judgment, he replies,

⁶ Ibid., p. 88.

⁷ Ibid., p. 94.

"David, you might think of Heaven this way: as the way the goodness
⁸
 Abraham Lincoln did lives after him." This answer is worse than no
 answer at all, since it confirms the nothingness of death, and so David
 rejects it.

David turns to the Bible, but his mother discovers him reading
 it, and so he turns to her, as the other form of established orthodoxy.
 She affirms her belief in God as the creator of all things, but when
 David confronts her with the childish paradox of who created God, she
⁹
 replies in radiant happiness, "Why Man, Man." A God created by man
 is not going to save David from death, however, and he rejects her
 answer, trying to point out to her that if she is correct, then
¹⁰
 everything is an "ocean of horror."

He soon realizes that he is alone ¹¹ "in that deep hole," and that
 no one can help him. The outward paraphernalia of organized religion
 makes him aware that somewhere, someone had once realized that sub-
 mission to death was untenable, and this helps him cling to the shreds
 of hope.

His solution to his problem comes when he is asked by his mother
 to kill some of the pigeons that infest the barn. David finds the

⁸
Ibid., p. 95.

⁹
Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁰
Ibid., p. 98.

¹¹
Ibid., p. 99.

experience exhilarating. He kills six and when he examines them before he buries them, he is convinced of God's existence by the infinitely complicated patterns of shape and colour of their feathers. He becomes "...robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy this whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever."¹² He has evolved for himself the classical argument from design, and, temporarily, it is enough. He fails to see the irony in the fact that he has found his solution in the senseless killing of God's creatures. The pigeon, of course, is a dove, and the traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit, and so David's victory is illusory. He has gained for himself an illusion of grace. The same theme, death, and its alternative, grace, was later to become the ground for the novels, Rabbit, Run and The Centaur.

The alternative to the religious pattern of doubt, fear and grace is a seductive offer of material plenty in the here and now, offered by humanism. Humanism denies the possibility of grace, and is, in the modern world, the chief enemy of God. The Poorhouse Fair, Updike's first novel, pits a godless humanism against irrational faith, and the failure of humanism to offer anything of real value is clearly demonstrated.

The action of the novel takes place in the near future at a poorhouse on its one day of celebration, the day of its fair. This

¹²

Ibid., p. 105.