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Ain Shams University
Faculty of Arts
Department of English

**John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy
As a Slice of the Contemporary American Scene**

Presented By
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Under the Supervision of
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Preface

John Updike (1932-) is a writer of great literary talent. It is said that he has filled the gap created in the 60s after such great writers as Hemingway and Faulkner. Many of his books have received considerable acclaim. Rabbit is Rich alone won three distinguished prizes: the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award and an American Book Award. Some of his novels have been and are still subject of controversy because of the sensitive issues they tackle, but much criticism makes them long living because of the attention they gain from critics' opinions. In his books, Updike mainly tackles social realism. He is primarily concerned with the human condition and the conflict within man; between his personal needs and social requirements.

Updike's "Rabbit" tetralogy is a genuine reflection of a slice of the contemporary American scene; the middle class. Each novel ends a decade and witnesses the rule of a different U. S. president. Rabbit, Run is a product of the fifties. The events happen during the administration of Dwight David Eisenhower (1953- 1961) and tells about a flourishing and stable America. Rabbit Redux takes place in the sixties during the presidency of Richard Milhous Nixon (1969- 1974) and presents an America of internal unrest. Rabbit is Rich takes place in the seventies during the term of James Earl Carter (1976- 1980) and portrays a rich America- where people can achieve the American dream- on the verge of falling. Rabbit at Rest reflects the eighties during the rule of George Bush (1988- 1992) and heralds the death of the American dream.

Chapter one: "Rabbit, Run: John Updike as a social chronicler" examines the social conditions that affect the fifties through two concentric spheres; a macro social sphere and a micro social one. The former portrays the socio- political, socio- economic and socio- cultural structures of the contemporary American society at large within its existing relevant social institutions: political, economic and cultural. The latter sphere is concerned with the great attention given to the religious atmosphere of the fifties.

The influence of Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth on Updike is felt through his treatment of two dialectical issues: the theme of goodness as well as the ontological question of Something versus Nothingness in Rabbit, Run. These two issues develop immensely throughout the novel revealing in the process the conflict within the characters and dully lull America's consciousness back to the religious values she has been rapidly losing. All the events that take place in the fifties as well as the religious

discussions that concern many people are referred to in the novel. They are Updike's means to reflect the different attitudes characterizing the American scene in the fifties. Updike's extremely attentive reflection of the American reality in all fields; socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural establish him as America's most powerful social chronicler.

Chapter two: "Rabbit Redux: Politics, Sexuality and Religion; a three-fold characteristic in John Updike" is an intensive study of the effect of the great upheavals of the sixties on the American society. These upheavals are best seen in three contexts; those of politics, sexuality and religion respectively. The period witnesses the first American moon landing and all the aspirations soar upwards while conflicts are increasing downwards at the base of the American middle class society. The Vietnam war proves to be an unforgettable issue in the minds of the Americans for its lack of legitimacy. Anti-Communism is still at the heart of every American. Drug traffic has been an emergent aspect of the society. The Hippie movement rises in vogue with the drug culture. Polarization of segments has become a material reality of America's deterioration. Updike presents the interior American conflict through four main points of view: the loyalists' like Rabbit, the foreigners' like the Greek Charlie Stavros, the hippies' like Jill Pendleton and the blacks' like Skeeter.

This chapter also discusses the interest in sexuality as Updike's most desirable trait in almost all his fiction. The sexual activities in the novel develop with respect to three women characters; Janice, Jill and Mim. Each has her own philosophy towards sexuality and owns the tools to defend it thanks to the rising movement of Feminism. Black militancy is one of the crucial topics discussed in this chapter. The old maltreatment of the blacks at the hand of the whites will ever be a sin which follows the all-Americans to the grave. The blacks' turmoil, represented by Skeeter, will never be quenched unless a radical transformation in the country's system occurs. The mass suffering of the blacks is great, yet, their violation of law and their chaotic reactions are unjustified.

Chapter Three: "Rabbit is Rich: The Stereotype- All-American" shows how the novel at study reflects the American scene of the seventies with its promising potentials and its threatening fears, all at the same time. The period witnesses a transformation in world politics and a change in the international market dynamics owing to the 1979 oil crisis which threatens the American welfare. Other events are significant in the political arena such as the Iranian hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of

Afghanistan, the Carter- era inflation, the consequent rise in gold and others which show the increasing powerlessness of America.

In Rabbit is Rich, Rabbit becomes rich. He finally achieves the American dream owing to the appropriate world events. The energy crisis makes his Toyotas sell themselves as he once says. However, to be rich in one domain is to be poor in another. Rabbit, like America, is running out of gas. He fears death as well as the next generation, both of which hinder his chance of enjoying his wealth. Thus, he is frequently indulged into moments of nostalgia; a desire for the past, for an illegitimate daughter and for a day- dream lover. It is ironical that Rabbit is rich because of the Arabs and the Japanese. The oil crisis and the best mileage, low cost Toyotas are the cause of his wealth. Towards the end of the novel, Rabbit seems to suffer a bitter sense of betrayal towards the country he loves so much. It remains questionable, then, if Rabbit will continue enjoying his American dream.

Chapter Four: "Rabbit at Rest: The American Dream at Rest" portrays the American scene in the eighties. In it, Rabbit is contemplating his own death and is really dying of miocardial infarction. The diseased heart in the average Rabbit's body is a symbol of the decay in middle American life. With this novel, the tetralogy has come to a closure. Rabbit is now a fifty- six, fat, ill and semi- retired person, who is not interested in the Lockerbie crash, or the falling of some jet at thirty- one thousand feet, or terrorists actions, or Aids, or the contemporary mass culture. He reflects on page 6 his belief that "Every thing falling apart, airplanes, bridges, eight years under Reagan of no body minding the store, making money out of nothing, running up debt, trusting in God." All what he does is devouring high- calories junk food and brooding. As almost everything goes in circles, the prosperity that America enjoys in the fifties is bound to come to an end. In Rabbit at Rest, there is the anticipation of the American dream becoming also at rest.

The conclusion is a sum up of the whole thesis. It assures that Updike's main target is the modern American man with his problems and concerns. His criticism of American values hovers over almost all his books. Thus, this thesis is an attempt to establish Updike's "Rabbit" tetralogy as a reflection of his contemporary American scene.

