

## Portrayal of 1980's American Religion through John Updike's Rabbit at Rest

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**Abstract:** John Hoyer Updike was a great American novelist, poet, short story writer, memoirist and critic. His careful craftsmanship, unique prose style and prolific output made him one of the dominant American literary figures of the post-war era. Though Updike's oeuvre is large, his critical reputation rests largely upon his accomplishment as a novelist. His novels chronicle the drama of small town American life. The principal themes of his novels are religion, sex, death and America. Updike is best known for his Rabbit novels – Rabbit, Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich, Rabbit at Rest and a novella Rabbit Remembered. The protagonist of these novels is Harry Angstrom - a middle class American. Updike was a critic of America who saw the society entirely feeble. His novels give a detailed account of middle-class families, their religion and their social customs. This paper portrays Updike's critical view of 1980s American religion through his novel Rabbit At Rest.

**Key words:**

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### I. Introduction

Rabbit at Rest is the fourth novel in the Rabbit series which is on the adventures and fate of Harry Angstrom. The novel published in 1990, centres around Harry, the protagonist; Janice, Harry's wife; Nelson, Harry's son; Pru, Nelson wife; Judy, Nelson's daughter; Roy, Nelson's son; Mim, Harry's sister and Charlie Stavros – Harry's colleague. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in nineteen ninety-one. It is the second Rabbit novel to win the award. The novel begins with mortal intuitions as Harry waits at a Florida airport, and it ends in the intensive-care ward where Harry dies after the second massive heart attack.

In Rabbit at Rest, God seems hardly to exist at all. Certain Christian values such as pity, piety, love and selflessness etc., are considered as essential for the moral growth of an individual as well as the society. Their absence is severely criticized in the novel. Harry's religion has declined progressively since Rabbit, Run. In this novel, Harry himself affirms that God "is like a friend you've had so long, you've forgotten what you liked about Him. You'd think after that heart scare, but in a way the closer you get the less you think about it, like you're in His hand already"(Updike, Rabbit At Rest, 450).

In the near-fatal boat accident, Harry and his granddaughter sails desperately back to the shore. They comfort themselves not with the assurances of faith but with the triviality of television commercials: "Coke is it," Judy sings, "the most refreshing taste around, Coke is it, the one that never lets you down, Coke is it, the biggest taste you ever found!" (Updike, Rabbit At Rest 140). The above quote reveals the fact that the life of modern Americans depend totally on T.V. and not on God.

In the novel, Religious leaders play an active role in reminding people that the family that prays together always stays together and radio stations broadcast messages of prayer. While running away to Florida in order to evade domestic confrontation on his sexual conduct with Pru, Harry hopelessly searches for some entertainment on his car radio. Instead what he finds is a radio-broadcast of a prayer. The prayer urges upon Americans to, "Pray for Christian husbands under stress, for Christian wives worried about their men; pray for all hostages, for prisoners in prison, for victims of the ghetto, for all those with AIDS" (Updike, Rabbit at Rest 443). It is a clear example of the trivialization of religious rhetoric.

Harry thinks: "It becomes hard now to find stations on the radio that are not country music or religion" (Updike, Rabbit at Rest 443). On his way, more religious news greet Harry on the morning radio broadcast: "In Sylacauga, Alabama, local ministers rose in the bleachers and led the crowd of three thousand in the Lord's prayer. In Pensacola, Florida preachers equipped with bullhorns led spectators in prayer" (Updike, Rabbit at Rest 448-449).

Harry's relationship with God is really funny and can be viewed through the following lines: "When God hadn't a friend in the world, back there in the Sixties, he couldn't let go of Him, and now when the preachers are all praying through bullhorns he can't get it up for Him" (Updike, Rabbit at Rest 450).

In *Rabbit at Rest*, Harry, for the first time realizes that his life has been an erotic journey. "All his life seems to have been a journey into the bodies of women" (Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* 468). Deprived of athletic and spiritual agility, exhaustion overcomes him. His excitement about everything has deplorably lessened due to aging. The profound loss that time has brought on him and America is the loss of moral stability. Through Harry, Updike projects America as a spiritual wasteland inhabited by hollow men bereft of the truths of life and death; and the Christian values of selfless love, companionship and community. Before the heart operation, when Harry tells Charlie about his heart troubles, and particularly about his reluctance to undergo multiple bypass open-heart surgery Charlie makes fun of Harry,

What's wrong with running your blood through a machine? What else you think you are, champ? A God-made one of-a-kind with an immortal soul breathed in. A vehicle of grace. A battlefield of good and evil. An apprentice angel. All those things they tried to teach you in Sunday school, or really didn't try very hard to teach you, just let them drift in out of the pamphlets, back there in that church basement buried deeper in his mind than an air-raid shelter. "You're just a soft machine," . . . (Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* 237).

By being turned into a soft machine, Harry has been made to face up the possibility that he is not, in fact, God-made and one-of-a-kind. Similarly, as the tube rose higher and higher through his body, Harry begins to feel as if he is being raped into submission, into accepting Charlie's materialistic view of human life: "Godless technology is fucking the pulsing wet tubes we inherited from the squid, the boneless sea-cunts" (Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* 274). Harry at last realizes that something that wanted him to find it is death. He is almost obsessed with the sense of a vocation. While lying in the catholic hospital where he undergoes angioplasty, Harry notes that modern hospitals no longer employ nuns and rabbis and feels,

Vocations drying up, nobody wants to be selfless anymore, everybody wants their own fun. No more nuns, no more rabbis. No more good people, waiting to have their fun in the afterlife. The things about the afterlife, it kept this life within bounds somehow, like the Russians. Now there's just Japan, and technology, and the profit motive, and getting all you can while you can. (Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* 272)

Harry because of godlessness regards the procedure not as life-preserving but as death-dealing. Likewise, before his angioplasty operation, Harry tries to pray, but his attempts to pray are aborted by the matrix of an overcrowded world: "Jesus. He closes his eyes a few times to pray but it feels like a wrong occasion, there is too much crowding in, of the actual material world. No old wispy Biblical God would dare interfere" (Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* 272).

The novel portrays 1980s America as a world that banefully shuns the Christian notions of piety and selflessness associated with work and vocation. Harry's sin of sleeping with his daughter-in-law, prompts him to escape to Florida. There being no Christ to judge or forgive him, no community to sustain or check, no vocation to fulfill or frustrate, Harry faces death, due to heart attack. Harry has been a destroyer from the beginning. He has always followed his own impulse, letting neither God nor anyone else stop his carnal and spiritual promptings. In his old age, Harry has learnt a hard-bitten wisdom that everything is falling apart. Through Harry, the representative of his world, Updike has portrayed the grotesque trivialization of religion in a capitalistic society. He has also made the readers understand that Christianity is not simply a ritual in his fiction and that it is a matter of a qualified moral commitment.

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