

# The Americanness in John Updike's Works

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## ABSTRACT

John Hoyer Updike (March 18, 1932 - January 27, 2009) is an American writer of novels, poetry, short-story known for his all-encompassing delineation of the American, protestant, small-town middle-class life that starts from the 1950s. He won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction twice in 1982 and 1991. His most outstanding works are *The Rabbit Saga* (1960, 1971, 1981, 1990), *The Centaur* (1963), *Couples* (1968), *Bech, A Book* (1970), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984), *A Month of Sundays* (1973), *Roger's Version* (1986), *S* (1988), *Towards the End of Time* (1997). He explored the American middle-class concerning marriage, marital infidelity, sex, religion, family obligations as the significant concerns in his works. Being raised as a protestant, Updike also featured religion and the conventional protestant faith in his works. John Updike is one of the greatest American writers of fiction of his generation being widely lauded as America's "last true man of letters".

## 1. Introduction

John Updike has been working as a writer since he graduated from Harvard in 1954. His substance was formed by the time he has spent in America. The majority of his works depict the lives of the average American people, especially the small middle-class and their hopes of moving to the big city, married couples and the separation of husband and wives, abandonment of children, remarriage. Most of the boys in the Updike's stories like Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom in *Rabbit Run* and *Rabbit Redux* are arranged in such a way that they seem to reflect Updike's own life of fiction.

He was a regular contributor to the *New Yorker*, was famously known for his work *The Centaur* that won the national book award for fiction and his novels *Rabbit Run* and *Couples* was widely famous among the public. *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959) was his first novel that presents the American life and its ongoing history. Eleven years later, the sequel to *Rabbit, Run* (1960) was written. His first nonfictional collection was *Assorted Prose* (1965) where a memoir *The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood* (1962) as preserved. He jolted down the first half of his life in the long poem, *Midpoint*. Updike's other important works were the *Olinger Stories* (1964) and *Too Far To Go: The Maple Stories* (1979).

The name "Olinger" is a fictional town that represents Updike's birthplace Shillington, Pennsylvania where he spent his boyhood in the 1930s and 40s. The society, demography, and whatever was reflected in Olinger had close conformity to Updike's own home satisfying the reader's demands of "reality" in his works. Also, in "*The Maples*", the fictional couple Richard and Joan was a reflection of the *Olinger Stories* and Updike's own married life. Updike's portrayal of American married life served as a major theme in many of his works like the *Maple Stories*, *Olinger Stories* and *Too Far to Go*.

One of the most important stories of John Updike "Pigeon Feathers" got first published in *The New Yorker* on

August 19, 1961, and was at the center of *Olinger Stories*. In "Pigeon Feather", Updike describes a 14-year-old character David Kern, who spends a boyhood similar to that of Updike's. Updike in his other works like *Couples* (1968), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), and *A Month of Sundays* (1975) talk mostly of marriage, divorce, sexual relations.

Updike's subject was always the American protestant small-town middle class. His debut novel *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959) gives a masterful insight into the struggle of values between a Christian inmate and a poorhouse master, who believed in the perfectibility of man. His *Rabbit* novels (*Rabbit, Run* followed by *Rabbit Redux*, *Rabbit is Rich*, *Rabbit at Rest*) gives a panoramic view of the many changes in the lives of an ordinary man and the small town of Pennsylvania, Brewer. The *Rabbit* novels were written American civilization describing the falling American civilization, the waning American men and women, infidelity, separation, divorce, abandoned child. The *RABBIT* novels won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction twice.

Updike's fifth novel *Couples*, published in 1968 was the bestseller with its small-town setting portraying the first post-Puritan American generation and the lives of ten couples. The couple's marriage is shown to be disintegrated and for them, adultery was more a matter of concern or an act of evil. He describes a suburban world with a sexual buzz. Updike mainly wrote about women, the degrading American morality, infidelity, and observed as a novelist should like Flaubert or Joyce. John Updike always depicted the deep truths of the American soul.

Updike was born in Shillington, Pennsylvania, and many of his early works were written from his experiences there. Many of his later works are set in New England during his stay in the 1960s. And there he tried to examine middle-class America and its fidelity, religion, and responsibilities. His works *Couples* (1968) and *Marry Me* exposes the prevailing gender politics during that time in east coast suburbia.

Updike also wrote several collections of short stories including *The Same Door* (1959), *Pigeon Feathers* (1962), *Museums and Women* (1972), *Problems* (1979), *Trust Me* (1987), and *My Father's Tears and Other Stories* (2009). He also wrote many essays featuring art and cultures like *Just Looking: Essays on Art* (2005) and *Always Looking: Essays on Art* (2012). His work *Due Consideration* explains art, sexuality, and literature.

In an interview in 1966 for life magazine, Updike tells Jane Howard "My subject is the American protestant small-town middle class". His work *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) was reviewed as a sex comedy and gives a satirical view of

women's liberation. The "Scarlet Letter" trilogy that began with *A Month of Sundays* (1975), continued with *Roger's Version* (1986) and *S* (1988) reflects Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. Updike has been many times accused of his portrayal of women. It has been also pointed by many critics that Updike's plots lacked violence.

Updike's novels give a wider view and realistic perception of the small-town American middle-class family. His plots cover more of the disintegrating American society and its dissatisfaction. He mostly talks about the different alterations in American society in his works.

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