Carnal Transgression and Spiritual Quest in John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex intersection of physical transgression and metaphysical longing in John Updike's *Rabbit* tetralogy *Rabbit Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich; Rabbit at Rest*. It argues that Harry Rabbit Angstrom's relentless, often destructive pursuit of carnal experience is not merely a symptom of moral failure or suburban boredom, but a misdirected spiritual quest for the numinous in a secularized post war America. Infused with Karl Barth's neo orthodox theology and Soren Kierkegaard's existential anxiety, Updike constructs Rabbit's insatiable physical appetite as a clumsy, tragic search for grace. By analyzing the structural parallels between Rabbit's sexual transgressions and his moments of existential crisis, this study demonstrates that the domestic and corporeal realities of the novels serve as the primary battlegrounds for spiritual survival. This present study contends that Updike uses the failing, aging body of his protagonist to illustrate the tragic paradox of the human condition the impossible desire to reconcile eternal spiritual longing with a finite, mortal anatomy.

Keywords: Carnal Transgression, Spiritual Quest, American Realism, Existential Angst.

John Updike is not one writer who has charted the fears of the post war middle class in American literature with the microscopic detail of the landscape of the mid century American literature. The *Rabbit* tetralogy *Rabbit, Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich*, and *Rabbit at Rest* at the core of this literary success; a titanic narrative work that extends over forty years of American social, political and economic change. The standard literary criticism often sets Updike master work on a dichotomous axis as either his thick, hyper realistic record of suburban domesticity or his outright, not always socially acceptable, illustrations of the human sexuality. Nevertheless, this vital distinction does not pay enough attention to the deeper metaphysical machine, of which Harry Rabbit Angstrom, the protagonist of the series, is a product. Here carnal transgression is not an abdication of the sacred, but the first, frantic means of a constant spiritual exploration. Caught in a secularized American terrain, which has been completely emptied of institutional religion, Rabbit time and again draws upon the finite, sensual container of the physical body to make inroads into the stifling confines of home security, trying to find in the carnal awakening of the flesh, a sort of momentary deity.

In order to understand comprehensively the erratic psychology of Rabbit, his actions need to be assessed using a unique theological and philosophical construct. The neo orthodox theology of Karl Barth and the existential philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard enhances Updike narrative universe in detail.

The radical assumption that Updike picks up on Barth is that of the existence of a wholly other God a divine being that is utterly outside the social constructs, the ethical structures, and the civic institutions of man.He takes the idea of Angst as was developed by Kierkegaard, as a result of human freedom and the trembling and frightening realization of mortality. The great Protestant churches of mainline America and the suburban social contracts of post war America have nothing to offer Harry Angstrom in the way of a real association with this far off, vertical divinity; they offer but a severed social gospel calculated to shoot off the soul. As a result, Rabbit finds himself in permanent existence vertigo. Since the spiritual structures of his world are dead he directs his eyes down to the flesh.

On the one hand, it would seem that when Rabbit abandons his pregnant fiancée, Janice, only to head off into an adulterous affair with Ruth Leonard, he has violated all the moral rules and failed to mature into a responsible adult citizen. Updike though presents the insatiable physical appetites of Rabbit as a fumbling, tragic, act of seeking the numinous in the strongly secularised, mid twentieth century American scenery. Being under the influence of the neo orthodox theology of Karl Barth and the existential philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, Updike fills his lead character with an inborn. aching sensibility to what Barth described as the wholly other a divine reality that is wholly outside the social institutions of humans. The conformity of the old institutions of society, symbolized by the stifling staleness of his job peddling the Magi Peeler and the religious emptiness of the mainline Protestant church, does not provide Rabbit with any real touch with this divine presence. In response, he resorts to the flesh where a carnal transgression is a transgressive sacrament that can cut through the synthetic nature of modern existence and reach a brash transcendent vitality.

This fusion of the carnal and the spiritual is best demonstrated by the stark contrast between the non effectual social gospel of the Episcopal minister, Jack Eccles, and the raw, life giving refuge that Rabbit seeks in the bedroom of Ruth.

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Eccles is a tamed form of Christianity which has swapped spiritual urgency with psychological counseling and community building. In his effort to guide Rabbit back to his marital responsibilities, Eccles is speaking the language of social responsibility, a paradigm which utterly fails to help resolve the burning, existential dread or Angst that propels the actions of Rabbit. To Rabbit the church is a corpse, and when he attends a service, the light streaming through the stained glass window merely illuminates an empty interior. On the other hand, his interactions with Ruth are stated in very religious and mystical language. The bedroom turns into an altar and the sexual activity is turned into a kind of simplistic worship. In the crude text of the novel, Updike says that "when Rabbit is with Ruth, he believes that he is touching the thing behind the appearances" (5), in a bid to get a temporal immersion and an instant injection of grace. His unfaithfulness is not fueled by mere need to have cheap sex pleasure, but by the genuine, though very devastating, need to get out of the spiritual death of complacency. The body is all that can be felt to speak of God in the world that is being strangled by the plastic consumerism and household monotony the body is the only instrument that is sensitive enough to notice the beating of the divine heart.

Updike does not set this carnal way to spiritual light as an innocent or heroic adventure he reveals the grotesque, disproportionate harm a purely vertical, self centred, quest of grace, in the horizontal plane of human associations. The tragedy of Rabbit is his radical individualism. He is completely, in his journey in search of an intensely subjective view of the sacred, unaware of the moral duties he must hold towards the people he lives with. This spiritual narcissism culminates in the most destructive way, by drowning his baby daughter, Rebecca. In his absence, Rabbit running away from the burden he is unable to shoulders, Janice, intoxicated by alcohol and hopelessness, drowning their newly born baby in a bathtub. The pure horror of this occurrence reveals the terrifying ethical emptiness in the very basis of Rabbit existential theology. Updike shows that once a person puts his or her own, personal, unconscious quest of spiritual ecstasy in the forefront of his or her life, the outcome is not salvation but a disastrous annihilation. During the funeral of the baby, rather than giving solace and even being among the mourners, Rabbit finds himself in this strange, perverse feeling of spiritual self righteousness, and as he looks at the mourners he experiences a burst of pure confidence that he alone of all people is cognisant to the tragic beauty of life and death, an explosion that leads him to accuse Janice in person of the tragedy, and to fly away into the woods once again.

The carnal transgression in Rabbit *Redux* is transformed into a volatile, highly political terrain in which the individual and suburbanized escape of the 1950s is changed to the spiritual journey that Harry Rabbit Angstrom continues to engage in as he is juxtaposed to the mass trauma of late 1960s America. The novel is placed in a historical background, the 1969 moon landing of the Apollo 11, and the torturous weight of the Vietnam War, Rabbit is stuck in a spiritual stagnation, having been abandoned by his wife, Janice, and feeling completely alienated by the fast evolving culture. Rabbit invents a purposeful community, and a crucible of transgressive experimentation with this vacuum of meaning when he welcomes Jill Pendleton, an eighteen year old runaway rich drop out, and later, Skeeter, a radical, fugitive Black Vietnam veteran, into his domestic space at 2612 Penn Park Boulevard. In stark contrast to the vitalistic, life affirming sexual refuge Rabbit had with Ruth in Rabbit, the carnal activities of Rabbit *Redux* are explicitly resified in power relations, racial guilt and generational trauma. Updike pushes these sins beyond the transgressions of a countercultural nihilism, and builds them, as panicked, devastating efforts to absorb the energy of the age and, through physical debasement, poke holes in the plastic complacency of the American lower middle class, to tap into the naked, apocalyptic presence of the divine.

The carnal and the spiritual come together in the most dramatic and disturbing way in the trio of Rabbit, Jill and Skeeter. Jill is a means of physical and spiritual trade; her service is a symbol of a youth culture that Rabbit not only is afraid of but also wants to know more and more but she yields her addiction to heroin and her nihilism to him. Instead of discovering some transcendent relationship to the object behind the appearances, the physical closeness of Rabbit and Jill tilts into a space of mutual fatigue, a reflexion of a nation destroying itself.

The spiritual search acquires a distinctly theological, though perverse, twist as Skeeter enters the house, as a dark prophetic figure. The radical, apocalyptic theology introduced by Skeeter is a product of the atrocities of the Vietnam War, and entrenched oppression, which recognizes himself as a black messiah that will lead to the destruction of the old world order. The carnal transgressions in the house are politicized under the influence of Skeeter; he drives Jill further to drug addiction and brings to life a series of sexualized, psychodramatic power games, which push Rabbit to a question of his own involvement in the violence of American imperialism. Updike does not treat these as mere exploitation, but as a Barthian descent into the emptiness, where Rabbit must come to understand that the whole other God is not to be found in suburban comfort, but must be found in the ruins of social breakdown and racial reckoning.

Updike emphasizes the horrific, leveling moral destruction that can take place when a hero leads a narrow, experimentative form of spiritual awakening at the cost of human duty. The passive interest of Rabbit in the apocalyptic visions of Skeeter and his subservience to the anarchy of the domestic life cultivate a deadly paralysis. This ethical myopia comes to its disastrous climax when local residents, enraged by the interracial, countercultural enclave of the Angstrom house, burn down the house in the absence of Rabbit. Jill is badly sedated and locked in and dies in the fire. It is the literal and figurative purgatorial fire, a bloodless burning down, or clearing, of the material and domestic edifices that characterized the secular world of Rabbit. The death of Jill is a dark restatement of the tragedy in Rabbit death of an

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the heavy, material-saturated terrain of the late 1970s. The novel was set in the 1979 energy crisis marked by skyrocketing gas prices, inflations, and an overall feeling of American devaluation as an unexpectedly billion-dollar-rich, comfortable, and settled forty six year old Harry Rabbit Angstrom appeared. As the chief salesman and part owner of Springer Motors, a profitable Toyota dealership in the decaying city of Brewer, Pennsylvania, Rabbit has seemingly achieved the ultimate American dream. He spends his afternoons playing golf at the exclusive Flying Eagle Country Club, tracking his Knugerands, and enjoying the fruits of late capitalist complacency. This newly found economic security, however, is no remedy to the underlying Kierkegaardian dread (Angst) that has plagued him all his life; rather it is merely a sublimation of it. Updike excellently illustrates how the material comforts of mid life are being the proxy gods supposed to alleviate the fear of death and old age that Rabbit has. Within such a context where materialism is the order of the day, the spiritual seeking of Rabbit is not a vertical leap towards the transcendent and Barthian God but a lateral, desperate urge to experience some vitality through domestic and extramarital carnal sins where the ageing, sated body becomes the achieved, ultimate means of accessing a temporary sense of grace.

The essence of the spiritual crisis experienced by Rabbit in the middle age is the terrible understanding that his physical body that had been his best tool to achieve attainments in the sports and sexual worlds is starting to rot like the American empire. Rabbit looks to the future generation to overcome this creeping darkness, and becomes passionately, nearly transgressively, adored with young women, and with young and beautiful Cindy Murkett, wife to a friend in the country club. To Rabbit, Cindy is not an object of coarse lust that she is a catholic shrine, an animated expression of the young, virgin beauty that he is watching slip out of his own hands. All his spiritual cravings are projected onto her bodily being turning his voyeuristic cravings into a religious perversion of religion. This stress leads to the breakthrough Caribbean holiday at the turn of the-decade Anguilla, wherein Rabbit and his social set partake in a negotiated round of spouse swapping. However, this carnal transgression, in contrast to the uncivilized, boundary overstepping infidelities of his youth, is well tamed, planned and even marketed by the middle classes couples. Rabbit eventually attains what Cindy only seeks to do physically with Thelma Harrison, the older, more adult transgression loses its wild, transgressive quality and is instead turned into a surprising locus of profound, spiritual connection. Thelma, who is a victim of systemic lupus, has a mature tragic view of the flesh, and she uses sexual act not to avoid mortality, but to deal with the the weight of human suffering.

Updike emphasizes that the fact that Rabbit remains preoccupied with basing his spiritual well being on his own physical needs still has a resounding horizontal moral blindness on his immediate family. This lapse of morality is best exemplified in his unhealthy and competitive relationship with his son, Nelson. Nelson comes back to Brewer devastated, lost, and burdened by his own domestic crises, in frantic need of his father to validate and lead him. Rather than give paternal grace or spiritual direction, Rabbit perceives his son as a structural danger a presence that reminds him of his own displacement and eventual death. Obsession with youthful, carnal supremacy makes Rabbit hate the presence of Nelson in the dealership as well as in the family home. Updike does an incredible job in demonstrating that the inner life of Rabbit is still so narcissistic; everyone is too focused on hoarding his material resources and soothing his existential fears as he fails to offer an emotional architecture that has been able to sustain his family. The domestic domain turns into a battle of insidious psychological vices, showing that even in a state of material and physical contentment, in the absence of a spiritual search that will not venture further into the self, those abandoned will inexorably end up deprived of nourishment.

In Rabbit at Rest, Updike brings the lifelong conflict between carnal transgression and spiritual inquiry to the final, tragic, conclusion of the American twilight of the late 1980s in the land of the rabbit. Against a backdrop of a deteriorating domestic empire with the Lockerbie bombing, savings and loans meltdown and the omnipresent aura of the AIDS epidemic the novel is a bloated and aging Harry Rabbit Angstrom looking forward to the expiration of his life in a sterile Florida condominium. No longer is Rabbit the fleet athlete of *Rabbit, Run* or the well to do of *Rabbit is Rich* but is called without doubt to be traitor by his own blood. His heart has become too heavy to support his troubled soul, his heart is completely blocked with frozen decades of fast food consumerism and existential hedonism, and his coronary arteries are full of solid fat and the crust of time. Updike makes it this failing anatomy, which is the major battleground of Rabbit in his final metaphysical struggle. Rabbit experiences an acute fear of nothingness that builds up to a terrifying horror in a hyper secularized world where aging is a medical failure, and not a spiritual passage. Constrained in a body that is a dying, his spiritual search takes a last, desperate twist back to the carnal, knowing the ultimate social and domestic taboos not as marks of moral base perversity, but as a last, desperate effort to steal a flake of vitalistic grace before passing the ultimate horizon.

The way Rabbit, who is her father in law, suddenly and opportunistically engages in sex with his daughter, Pru. These two marginalized characters get stuck together in a dark house amid a tropical storm when the rest of the family is away and find themselves in a kind of physical intimacy in which the delicately built, painstakingly designed walls of the Angstrom domestic model are torn asunder. Updike carefully contextualizes such incestual betrayal way beyond the melodrama as well as mere lust. In the case of Rabbit, Pru is the uncooked, fertile energy of the generation that is vigorously pushing him aside. Physically uniting with her, Rabbit is making a last, desperate, magical theft of life force a last, awkward sacrament aimed to keep back the approaching shadow of death, and to rekindle the horizontal spark of youth that his failing heart is no longer able to produce. It is a crisis point, a Barthian crisis, that is performed with the body. Rabbit is aware that the act is both socially catastrophic and morally inexcusable, but he cannot resist it because the biological and existential impulse to be alive is too powerful to withstand the death denying logic of suburban morality. Nonetheless, rather than a continuous infusion of grace, this last betrayal leads to destruction of the home

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Janice, and deprives Rabbit of his paternal influence and puts him completely out of the family system he had spent decades attempting to avoid and keep up.

Updike portrays the horrifying horizontal implications of Rabbit and his insulated, somatic quest to the meaning. The result is a total disregard of human solidarity as the lifetime pattern of his putting his own, impulsive and subjective needs before the moral obligations. Once his sin with Pru is revealed, rather than remaining there to take part in the strenuous process of family reconciliation or trying to face the profound emotional distress of his son, Rabbit turns to his most reflexive action: he flees. He leaves his family in Pennsylvania and drives back alone to the superficial neon lit exile of Florida. The spiritual narcissism of Rabbit is strip ped bare in this last of his flights: he prefers the purity of his solitude and the unbridled pursuit of his own expiring loves and appetites, to the complications and distractions of horizontal love and domestic care. Updike shows that a spiritual journey carried out purely on the conditions of the bodily satisfaction of the person ultimately scalds all the relational bridges and the seeker is left standing all alone on at the gates to eternity.

Rabbit tries to recollect the unique, transcendent sporting glory of his youth. He reaches release in the act of throwing up the basketball again, his purest prayer, his physical gesture in which the body becomes, just a bit, in the grace and cannot be held any longer by the pull of the earth and time. The worn, battered rattling of his heart is no longer able to support the weight of this last, joyous spring. The next tremendous heart attack is the very breaking of the vessel; the very flesh, the transgressive and disorderly laboratory of his whole spiritual life at last breaks beneath the stress of his metaphysical desire. “His parting words to Nelson as he lies dying in the hospital hooked up to the clinical apparatus of modern medicine all I can say to you is it isn’t so bad are profoundly, deeply ambiguous in their benediction” (56). In this last rest the running is at an end, and the long struggle between the finite, mortal body and the infinite, eternal soul is ended. Updike gives the reader a naked, unadulterated truth of human excrement, and it seems to him that, in the case of Harry Angstrom, the carnal descent was not an end in itself, but rather a misguided, beautiful, and ravaging pointer to his ultimate and inevitable submission at the hands of the ultimate wholly other.

The fact that Rabbit only starts to run with no destination highlights the utter suspension and unending paradox of his life. He is unable to either give himself up to the comfort of domestic conformity, or to make any permanent home in the world of the spirit. His body, which was the means of his transgressive searching of meaning, is exhausted, caught in the never ending flight. Updike reflects the Kierkegaardian leap of faith in Rabbit in his frantic motion, which is an act of hopeless desperation in the face of the absurd. Presenting the carnal transgression of Harry Angstrom as the stray spiritual investigation, Rabbit, *Run* condemns the post war American culture with deep and unsettling force, implying that in the kind of society where the human soul is thoroughly mechanized and sanitized, the quest towards the divine can only be expressed through a desperate and destructive violation of social and moral law.

The Rabbit Redux resolution does not have any joyous spiritual epiphany but a depressing, physical reunion with the realities of survival. After his house was ruined and Skeeter had fled, a worn out and spiritually drained Rabbit struggles to take shelter in a shabby motel room with Peggy Coughlin and later be reconciled to an equally degraded Janice. In the last scenes of the novel, the stakes of political and spiritual intensity of the commune are replaced with a physical exhaustion of silence. As Rabbit and Janice are “lying side by side in a nameless bed, she is saying to him Heh? and asking him Is it all right?” (67), Updike is reducing the spiritual search to the minimum level of human contact. The carnal ceases to be a rapturous, perverse means of accessing the divine or an apocalyptic means of annihilating the ego; instead, it is turned into a silent, mammalian solace a wobbly, incomplete barrier against the frightening emptiness of an empty universe and a fractured nation.

Rabbit is Rich does not end with a dramatic spiritual revelation or a disastrous fire, but with a quiet ironic acceptance of the biological saga of generation and downfall. Rabbit, with his newborn granddaughter Judy and sitting in his cozy home, around the material trappings of his success, Rabbit looks down at the infant and suddenly, with a jumble of feelings, he has a complex emotion. Updike describes that Rabbit thinks the child is a new model specimen of life, yet he is also aware that she is the being which has come to take his place on the earth, and in the starkest realism, he shows that another nail is pounded into his coffin. The sexual and the religious are thrust into a spiky, irreconcilable ceasefire. The body can no longer be seen as a vehicle of alleviating domesticity in a transgressive affair, nor as a device of apocalyptic transformation; it turns out to be a part of an irreversible continuum of mortality. Rabbit carries the child in his arms, his lífelong spiritual search is in the bitter fact of human continuity; so that the real grace of the middle age lies not in the blissful flight of the flesh but in the acceptance of the little, transient self in the vast, terrible structure of time.

The overall end of the tetralogy traces the inevitable, torturous defeat of the physical form as it becomes a massive burdensome prison of death. The body of Rabbit is his best equipment in the early novels; it is an efficient mobile machine that can produce a unique, transcendent beauty on the high school basketball field, or on the scandalous terrain of an adulterous bedroom. But the flesh has totally deceived the spirit. Rustling with tens of years of fast food consumerism, emotional stagnation and material opulence, the awkward cardiovascular system of Rabbit is literally somatically the triumphant result of his drained metaphysical travel. His coronary arteries, blocked by the rubbish of twentieth century American gluttony, makes his heart too thick to be pulled out of the clutches of earth and time. Through this biological degradation, Updike criticizes the great dream of the American dream, relating the physical deterioration of Rabbit with the larger scale disintegration of the post war American empire. When Rabbit makes his swan song transgression with Pru, or when he makes his dying, lethal plunge into segregated basketball court, he is no longer running toward an open landscape; he is in a desperate, frenzied attempt to beat the devil of a biological clock and is making a last, desperate effort to be animal.

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Updike employs to examine this somatic pilgrimage defines it. Although Rabbit considers carnal transgression a personal churching that avoids time and touches on the grace, his self concerned vertical quest brings about a devastating horizontal destruction to the plane of human relationship. The radical individualism and spiritual self centeredness blind him to the moral obligations of a horizontal love, and leave behind him a forty years trail of disintegrated families, children, and emotional devastation. Finally, this research paper will also look at how the Rabbit tetralogy has made use of the biological evolution and eventual breakdown of the anatomy of the protagonist to show the tragic paradox of the human condition in the 21st century the impossible, tormented attempt to match an infinite eternal spiritual longing with the constraints of a finite mortal flesh.

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