

JOHN UPDIKE'S USE OF THE ABSURD HERO
IN HIS SHORT FICTION

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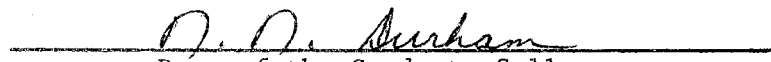
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PREFACE

Existentialism, born in Europe, has influenced many contemporary American writers. Some native short story writers and novelists have embraced existentialism completely, but in typical pragmatic fashion, most American writers have incorporated in their themes those facets of the philosophy which fit the American situation. John Updike's particular adaptation of existential thinking is most apparent in his use of the absurd hero. This thesis is an attempt to examine Updike's use of the absurd hero and how it relates to his theme in selected short stories.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

William Peden comments that increasingly the American short story is concerned with "the everyday, the non-spectacular, with the complexities underlying apparently 'normal' situations."¹ Perhaps more than any other contemporary American author, Peden's comment best describes the fiction of John Updike. Updike's five novels and three short story collections, The Same Door, Pigeon Feathers, and The Music School, comprise a detailed, almost microscopic study of the day-to-day events or non-events of typical suburban-class America. The characters in his stories generally lead a quiet existence. Jane Howard, in a Life article, remarks that Updike's people

are not much bothered about civil rights or Southeast Asia or the Peace Corps or mass murders. They don't experiment with LSD or have abortions or run for Congress; they aren't pederasts or lesbians; they don't even divorce each other-- though they think about it.²

The presentation of these ordinary people and ordinary events is done with obvious appreciation of life and the thousand tiny and fleeting moments that give it shape and texture and beauty. Granville Hicks calls Updike a "most redoubtable explorer of the mysteries of the commonplace."³ Stanley Kaufmann says Updike "likes the story of humdrum lives suddenly galvanized by a commonplace event that is nevertheless outside the humdrum and therefore

'real.'"⁴ Paul Doyle sees in Updike a concern with "precious moments of beauty, joy, and insight, and a sense of enchantment in life's commonplace events...."⁵

The "sense of enchantment" is conveyed by an imaginative style that is often blinding in its brilliance and freshness. Updike's figurative language at times almost transcends the written page and becomes tactile and three-dimensional. The influence of his study at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford can be seen in his pictorial technique and his artist's rendering of the world, whether he is describing a high school football game, his grandmother's thimble, or a crowded beach. Updike also seems to be appreciated as a literary craftsman of almost easy skill, always knowing, as Kaufmann points out, "where to begin and what to leave out."⁶

Yet, with the same critics who praise his style and technical virtuosity, Updike's reputation as a serious artist is surrounded by a wall of qualification that seems to grow thicker and higher at his every publication. This disaffection has grown since his first blossoms of enthusiastic critical acclaim. Even his most ardent ally, Granville Hicks, wishes he would do "something stronger and deeper and more challenging than he has thus far written, something that rose above the level of contemporary fiction...."⁷ Recently, analyses of Updike's work follow an almost predictable pattern. First, the critic praises his talent as a writer, then expresses deep doubts about his ability as philosopher and thinker, and finally, often finds the style anathema because he believes it is only a jeweled surface hiding a very empty

vacuum. Ironically, the core of this critical hesitation revolves around what Updike "leaves out." Not the leaving out of unnecessary, nonorganic, or superfluous material that prompted Kaufmann's praise, but the failure to include what most critics see as significant themes, a meaning beyond the action, a level that transcends the highly polished prose and provides insight and valuable comment on the human situation. The comment of Stanley Kaufmann is typical: "He seems content to paint his pictures in two dimensions. He does it skillfully, sometimes poignantly; but the impossible third dimension, which cannot be painted but which must be in the artist's intent as he paints, is often missing."⁸ D. J. Enright asserts that Updike's "corn fields and cars have much more presence than his people. Though long ago he found a way of writing, as yet he doesn't seem to have found something to write about."⁹ Florence Casey says as a short story writer Updike is marking time and believes he has what she calls "the dire ease of the totally competent, unthinking producer."¹⁰ Possibly the most severe criticism, and certainly the most succinct, is the statement by John Aldridge in his review of The Music School. He states, "Mr. Updike has nothing to say."¹¹

More specifically, Melvin Maddock echoes the tone of much criticism of Updike's writing when he says: "The best compliment one can pay Mr. Updike is to suggest how unsuitably impressive his talents seem to be for these often toying uses he puts it to."¹² What disturbs Mr. Maddock is that Updike seems to expend a gale wind to push a small sailboat across a puddle. John Updike writes about small occurrences in the lives of the quiet American and little seems

to happen. He has become the chronicler of the great American commonplace, and though J. Mitchell Morse admires his ability to write, he notes that Updike leaves this culture "unchipped, unchallenged, and unquestioned."¹³

It is this unquestioning approach that generates the opinion that Updike passes up the opportunity to say something significant about the lives of his characters and records only the trivia of seemingly trivial lives. Certainly, as has been indicated, the typical Updike hero would not be found taking STP in Haight-Ashbury or island hopping with the jet-set or leading a student revolt at Columbia or swilling cheap wine on skid row. If, as Kaufmann says, Updike is "a lesser, latter-day Emily Dickinson who reaches out the front door and grabs a couple of people and pulls them inside for inspection,"¹⁴ then the people he takes in come from "nice" neighborhoods in some small town or a New York apartment house where one might expect to find "young marrieds." Thus, to many critics, Updike's writing does not seem worth the trouble--if his heroes have problems they are small ones, so why worry. Anthony Burgess says in speaking of the stories in Pigeon Feathers, "Updike was guilty of a sort of democratic heresy in pouring the riches of language on characters and situations so trivial."¹⁵ Richard Gilman says in the treatment of his characters Updike avoids the "supreme task and burden of literature: the appropriation and transfiguration, in one way or another, of suffering, struggle, conflict, disaster and death."¹⁶ But if Updike's characters are not involved in epic struggles that thunder across the pages, they are men ensnared in the quiet desperation of day-to-day living and their story still deserves telling. It is an American notion,

a democratic belief of long standing, that in American literature any man's life is suitable material for great fiction. It is part of the American dream, however faded, that any man can become president, any man can be a hero, any man's life can be worthy of art. This concept found expression in the common-man heroes of our early literature, the Natty Bumppo and Huckleberry Finns, and though separated by time, affluence, and mass culture, Willie Loman, Nick Adams, and the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit are literary descendants. Updike has this to say on the subject of heroes: "The idea of a hero is aristocratic. As aristocracies have faded, so have heroes. You cared about Oedipus and Hamlet because they were noble and you were a groundling. Now either nobody is a hero or everyone is. I vote for everyone."¹⁷

Heroes indeed have faded. The possibility that no one is a hero, while not a new idea, has become the special passion of twentieth-century fiction. The no-hero or anti-hero is most definitely a groundling and often seems to have acquired more than one man's share of evil. He is unloving and unlovable, selfish, weak, cowardly, sadistic--in short no Frank Merriwell at Yale. More recently, especially since the appearance of the novels of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, still another hero occupies the attention of contemporary writers--the existential rebel-victim or absurd hero. Alienated in spirit if not in being from his society, he sees what he perceives as the colossal absurdity of man's existence in the face of a hostile, indifferent and Godless universe. American fiction since the Second World War bears the mark of existential thinking, though the absurd hero comes in many guises and devotion to existential philosophy varies greatly among American authors. But Salinger's *Caulfield*, Ellison's

Invisible Man, Bellow's Henderson, Purdy's Malcolm, Mailer's White Negro, Styron's Kinsolving, and Updike's Rabbit are all to some degree absurd heroes. There are no kings here--all are groundlings, all are products of a culture without kings, where everyone is a potentially absurd hero. He may reject this culture or embrace it and though he is often an outsider he is also a product of it. Richard Lehan says, "The modern hero stands at the crossroad--one path leads to the society, the other away from community."¹⁸ Because the absurd hero can be both outsider or member of society, bankrupt outcast or prosperous young married man, as many of Updike's heroes are, or both at once, perhaps his choice of a commonplace hero should not be taken so lightly. David Galloway says Updike "reveals the drama of the common man, a representative twentieth-century type who is often either dead beat or slob, but whose significance...must not be taken lightly."¹⁹

Galloway, in his book The Absurd Hero in Contemporary American Fiction, has treated Updike's use of the absurd hero in his novels. Galloway discusses what he calls Updike's use of the absurd hero as saint. However, no one has to my knowledge investigated Updike's use of the absurd hero in his shorter fiction. The purpose of this thesis is to explore Updike's use of the absurd hero in his short stories and to determine how it relates to theme. Perhaps this study will demonstrate Updike's particular modifications of the absurd hero and help determine whether John Updike does have a theme of significance to communicate to the reader. Hopefully, this study will also help delineate the figure of the absurd hero in current American fiction, in particular the hero who has taken, however uncertainly, the path toward community.

Since the terms "absurd hero," "existential hero," "rebel-victim," and even "anti-hero" are sometimes used interchangeably by critics and tend to be semantic entities rather than literary or philosophical ones, in Chapter II I shall attempt to define more clearly the nature of the absurd hero.

FOOTNOTES

¹William Peden, The American Short Story (Boston, 1964), p. 39.

²Jane Howard, "Can A Nice Novelist Finish First," Life, November 4, 1966, p. 74-75.

³Granville Hicks, "Mysteries of the Commonplace," The Saturday Review of Literature, March 17, 1962, p. 21.

⁴Stanley Kaufmann, "Onward with Updike," The New Republic, September 24, 1966, p. 15.

⁵Paul Doyle, "Updike's Fiction: Motifs and Techniques," Catholic World, CIC (September, 1964), p. 360.

⁶Kaufmann, p. 15.

⁷Granville Hicks, "Domestic Felicity," The Saturday Review of Literature, September 24, 1966, p. 31.

⁸Kaufmann, p. 16.

⁹D. J. Enright, "Updike's Ups and Downs," Holiday, XXXVIII (November, 1965), p. 166.

¹⁰Florence Casey, "Books," The Christian Science Monitor, September 22, 1966, p. 11.

¹¹John W. Aldridge, "Of the Farm," Book Week, November 21, 1965, p. 5.

¹²Melvin Maddocks, "Books," The Christian Science Monitor, March 22, 1962, p. 11.

¹³J. Mitchell Morse, "Fiction Chronicle," Hudson Review, XV (Summer, 1962), p. 302.

¹⁴Kaufmann, p. 15.

¹⁵Anthony Burgess, "Language, Myth, and Mr. Updike," Commonweal, February 11, 1966, p. 557.

¹⁶Richard Gilman, "The Youth of an Author," The New Republic, April 13, 1963, p. 25.

¹⁷Howard, p. 74.

¹⁸Richard Lehan, "Existentialism in Recent American Fiction: The Demonic Quest," Recent American Fiction, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston, 1963), p. 79.

¹⁹David Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (Austin, 1966), p. 48.

CHAPTER II

EXISTENTIALISM AND CONTEMPORARY

FICTION

The origins of what in mid-twentieth century literature is called the absurd hero can be traced to the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal. "Existentialism," Paul Tillich says, "starts with Pascal."¹ Ironically, it was a man of science who questioned the value of reason in an age where reason ruled supreme. "The heart," he says, "has its reasons, which reason does not know."² Contrary to the mood of his time, Pascal doubted the progress of man through the application of science and believed that thought led not to science-aided progress, but to contemplation of the inescapable horror of death which all men are condemned to face.

Modern man, perhaps in many ways, still resides in the same world as Pascal. Today's man still must die and science is still promising more progress. The sun still rises, fools still remain fools, and money yet talks. But to say that today's world is staggeringly different is to understate to the point of the ludicrous. Science has advanced to the state where even these eternal verities are threatened. Genetics and chemistry may soon make fools extinct, astronomers will predict the exact date of the last sunrise when the sun will burn out, and economists already talk about everything but money. To many men, as with Pascal, all this progress has not been particularly reassuring. While the surface of the world has altered, second-thoughts often

suggest that it is after all much the same and man himself has not progressed one thousandth as much as, for example, methods of transportation. Science and technology brought man out of the dark ages and now have left him dangling on empty promises. Utopia is forever just around the corner and the present that science has wrought fills man with apprehension for the future. Instead of freeing human beings, science in many ways seems to enslave them. Granville Hicks comments in the Saturday Review that, "As science has revealed more and more about the universe, from the infinitely small to the infinitely great, it has become increasingly hard to believe that the universe was designed for the benefit of the human species or in accordance with human values."³

The pace of life itself is often inhuman, spinning ahead at a frantic speed, changing too quickly to comprehend. Man finds himself in a perpetual state of adjusting to new conditions, new ideas, new opinions--a situation that makes the creation of stable values extremely difficult. Ihab Hassan says,

History in the West seems to be consumed before it is made. The modern age belongs already to the past, the contemporary period yields to the immediate present, and the present in America fades in pursuit of an uncreated future.⁴

Contemporary man finds himself alone, or as the existentialists would prefer, abandoned. All his icons are shattered, his old institutions dying, old ways of thinking without power to command his allegiance, and no new ones to replace the lost. Paul Galloway says,

The world ceases to be familiar when even the worst reasons fail to be of any help in explaining or ordering it. All of the old explanations--ethical and scientific--have failed where many modern thinkers are concerned, bringing them face to face with an alien universe in which orthodox "systems" can offer at best only a superficial reassurance.⁵

But it is not the philosopher or the theologian alone who has noted the demise of old idols. The popular folk-rock singers Simon and Garfunkel in their recording "Mrs. Robinson" capture the feeling of loss and alienation that accompanies the passing of a hero who symbolized the American dream. They sing: "Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?/A nation turns its lonely eyes to you." And the reply comes, "What's that you say, Mrs. Robinson?/'Joltin' Joe' has left and gone away."⁶

Yet it is more than the death of folk heroes or the passing of an era that causes the anxiety of modern man. It is his alienation. Pascal could at least in his despair turn to his faith. At present, man lives in a world where religion for many is at best only a therapeutic myth in a world controlled by power, economics, and technology. Man has been abandoned by God, or has abandoned God--whatever the case, he seems to stand in the center of a great spiritual void, playing God to himself. It is not a role to which man is accustomed and he is apprehensive about the outcome. "We have," says Archibald MacLeish, "played the hero's part, mastered the monsters, accomplished the labors, become gods--and we do not trust ourselves as gods. We know what we are."⁷

It is this perspective of our times, possibly overstated but in many ways painfully valid, that has made the existential philosophy and the absurd hero vital to those who ponder the human situation. Man does seem like a stranger in an alien world, abandoned to the caprice of chance, the victim of ponderous forces he cannot understand or control, surviving in an absurd world made more absurd by death. The modern hero of American fiction is product and personification of

these conditions, and many a hero of contemporary literature is presented in Edmund Fuller's words as an

ironic biological accident, inadequate, aimless, meaningless, isolated, inherently evil, thwarted, self-corrupting, morally answerable to no one, clasped in the vise of determinisms economic and biological. His uniqueness as person is denied or suppressed. He inhabits a hostile universe which is the creation of irrational and possibly malignant forces.⁸

To the existentialist, what all this reduces to is one concept-- absurdity. The dramatist Eugene Ionesco defines the absurd in this manner: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."⁹ Contemporary American literature of the absurd is based on the similar premise "that human experience is fragmented, irritating, apparently unredeemable."¹⁰ The literature of the absurd vision discussed in this paper differs, of course, in style from the Theatre of the Absurd and differs in approach from that comic twist to absurdity known as "Black Humor" which pervades Joseph Heller's Catch-22 and Terry Southern's Candy. John Updike and the other writers discussed in these pages are for the most part concerned with the more serious aspects of life--the anguish and horror of man's existence. If they find this condition unavoidable, they still find it reprehensible and cannot completely accept its permanence. On the other hand, "Black Humor," says Peyton Glass in his thesis The Perspective of Black Humor, "implicitly rules out any conclusion of morality by maintaining that any and all conditions are equally laughable under the conditions of absurdity."¹¹

In further definition of the absurd hero a discussion of terms may be helpful. As indicated in the introduction, the terms "absurd hero,"

"existential hero," and "rebel-victim" are often used rather loosely by critics. Essentially, the meaning of these terms is identical and they refer to the same phenomenon. All three of these terms are often interchanged, and since existentialism is not a rigidly defined philosophy, but subject to authors' and critics' interpretations, overlapping is inevitable. However, a possible distinction between the "anti-hero" and the "absurd hero" should be made. Ihab Hassan states:

The unnerving rubric "anti-hero" refers to a ragged assembly of victims: the fool, the clown, the hipster, the criminal, the poor sod, the freak, the outsider, the scapegoat, the scrubby opportunist, the rebel without a cause, the 'hero' in the ashcan and the 'hero' on the leash.¹²

Again, while the term anti-hero has often been substituted for absurd hero, it has fallen to catch-all status as Hassan indicates. The absurd hero, a man of many faces, is definitely a victim but more precisely and primarily he is "the outsider" and "the scapegoat"--the rebel-victim. As the name implies, he stands outside society and yet is enough a part of it to become victim or scapegoat. Hassan says,

The central and controlling image of recent fiction is that of the rebel-victim. He is an actor but also a sufferer. Almost always he is an outsider, an initiate never confirmed in his initiation, an anarchist and clown, a Faust and Christ compounded in grotesque or ironic measures.¹³

One other important distinction should be made between the characteristics of the absurd rebel-victim and the anti-hero. The absurd hero is not a "rebel without a cause." He has what he considers a sacred cause and that cause is himself. In a time when, according to Wylie Sypher, the romantic individualism of the nineteenth century has given way to "our hysteria to escape from the self by means of collectives" and the "era of total individualism yields to the era of total groupism,"¹⁴ the absurd hero clings to his self-identity. He

refuses to desert his personal integrity in spite of the pressure of society. He insists, often at the risk of his own destruction, that his personal identity is of utmost value and cannot be found in a society that, by its very nature, is destructive of the self. The question of identity is essential to existential thinking. Sidney Finklestein says,

The existentialist is the modern counterpart of the ancient rebel against a world he saw as corrupt, who withdrew to a cave or monastery....The existentialist announces that the one question primary to all others, is that of what is "existence" or "being." To this lone question he devotes himself....¹⁵

Modern fiction is rich with heroes who are in search of themselves in the quagmire of mass culture. Salinger's Holden Caulfield gropes for his identity in a world of phonies, Updike's Rabbit Angstrom runs scared through a world where he can find no promise of worthwhile commitment, Purdy's Malcolm looks for self in his father in a world that will not claim him, and Malamud's Frank Alpine, in the prison of a run-down grocery store, pursues the reason of his being. Richard Lehan comments that the absurd hero's concern with the self "leads to the desire to be so self-involved that the outside world is no longer a threat..." and also results in "the flight, the quest toward a new identity in which the hero is completely autonomous and creation is a mere extension of his will."¹⁶

In creating his own world absurd man rejects the world view upheld by nihilism and orthodox faith--that man is doomed to accept his fate. Camus asserts that "man, without the help of the Eternal or of rationalistic thought, can create, all by himself, his own values."¹⁷ Thus, the absurd man willingly becomes a god unto himself, a fact that

accounts for the demonic and antisocial behavior of the absurd hero in contemporary fiction. Germaine Brée says absurd man "is against the natural order of the universe in which the words life and death are meaningless."¹⁸ The absurd man feels it is necessary, however absurd, to reject death and all those philosophies that justify death against man. He ardently hugs life and denies death. Paul Galloway says,

The absurd becomes a new and extreme articulation of the necessity of man's appealing to himself as a source of values; its goal is to embrace life rather than reject it, with the belief that through this embrace man can arrive at the joy of truth.¹⁹

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* speaks out against man's acceptance of his fate. "Life is to be lived, not controlled, and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat."²⁰ This is the statement of the existential axiom of "live the conflict, for the conflict will set you free."²¹ Camus himself, in his book The Myth of Sisyphus, considers the picture of Sisyphus heaving the heavy stone up the hill and asserts, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."²² Victory is not the end, for victory is hardly possible--after all, who can escape death? But it is the ideal of the absurd man to live this absurdity passionately, for he feels that through it he finds what it means to be a man and discovers his real humanity. In this sense victory is possible. According to Leslie Feidler, the most honest and promising vision of man which serious literature in our time can present is "not, as so often in the past, a view of man struggling to fulfill some revealed or inherited view of himself and his destiny; but of man learning that it is the struggle itself which is his definition."²³ Thus, the absurd hero is far from being a "rebel without a cause." And while his

method may not be the final or even the best solution, it is, he believes, the path he must walk to find himself and his humanness.

The importance of the absurd hero's quest for self identity goes beyond the personal. The Invisible Man says, "Our task is making ourselves individuals. We create the race by creating ourselves."²⁴ Development of a compassionate and creative society depends on development of compassionate and creative individuals. Granville Hicks, in the book The Creative Present, observes the concern of contemporary writers for the individual and states that in his opinion today's writers are not working to "save" society. Hicks says,

We do not believe that society will be saved, and we doubt that the salvation of society would achieve the redemption of the individual. If the individual is to be redeemed, he must find the path.²⁵

It is a significant irony that the absurd hero, the rebel-victim who denies, even attacks society, should be its saviour. Nevertheless, it is no great leap of imagination to see such saviour-figures as Christ, or Martin Luther King or Gandhi clad in the mantle of the rebel-victim. Each of these men refused to acknowledge the sanctity of the status-quo and each was a victim of society. Hassan says the absurd hero offers "himself in passive or demonic fashion, as scape-goat. His function is to create those values whose absence from our society is the cause of his predicament and ours."²⁶ The absurd hero is often seemingly irreconcilably at odds with his community yet at the same time is pulled toward it by a sense of responsibility. Perhaps this is due to his devotion to a self and man-oriented code rather than some prescribed law. Sartre's heroes are often troubled by a sense of social commitment, a commitment that, of course, clashes with

their desire to be free and a law unto themselves. Camus, even more than Sartre, sees the need of the absurd man to do more than detract from society. Wylie Sypher says,

Camus has this abiding sense that the self must come into relation with the others. What is perhaps unique about Camus is that he plunged deeply into the destructive element without losing his sense that the self is, absurdly enough, anonymous but accountable.²⁷

That most anonymous of absurd heroes, Invisible Man, the Negro, concludes, "there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play."²⁸ Also, Malamud's Frank Alpine accepts responsibility by becoming, in effect, the father of the girl he loves.

The withdrawal of the absurd hero, as Sidney Finkelstein notes, often takes place only in the mind. Finkelstein says "he cannot cut his real ties to the society he renounces in theory" and can be described as one "who lives in society, but as an 'outsider.'"²⁹ Despite this alienation, Richard Lehan believes that the more recent absurd hero has taken a path more toward community as opposed to the strong anti-communal aspect of the absurd hero during the post-war years. "The existential struggle," he says, "is not quite so anti-heroic, so satanic in character."³⁰ He quotes as examples Bellow's heroes Leventhal and Wilhelm. In the novel The Victim, the hero Leventhal learns that "each man is responsible for his actions because he is accountable for their consequences."³¹ In Bellow's novella Seize the Day, Tommy Wilhelm, his own life destroyed, weeps at the funeral of a man he has never known and achieves at last the feeling of oneness with humanity.

This change in the presentation of the absurd hero indicates to some critics a new direction in contemporary fiction. Marcus Klein calls this trend "accommodation"--as opposed to alienation. "The goal," he explains, "is the elimination of the distance between self and society, the perfect union of self and society...."³² That the concept of alienation as the sole literary doctrine of America's best writers has been fading for a considerable time is supported by a symposium held in 1952. Sponsored by the Partisan Review and called "Our Country and Our Culture," it asked its participants questions derived from the statement, "For better or worse, most writers no longer accept alienation as the artist's fate in America."³³ The supposed passing of alienation, Klein believes, is due in part to its becoming fashionable. He says,

After a generation of propaganda almost everybody knew that the posture of rebellion was, in literature and intellectual matters, generally a healthy, cheerful thing. It was taught in midwestern colleges. And so the more wicked were Paul Bowles and Truman Capote, the more bracing and generally delightful they were.³⁴

The other reason for this change in approach stems from the very factors that created much of the feeling of alienation--society. Except that now society has become so amorphous, so nebulous, so mind-dazzling that one may not know from what or why he is alienated. In other words, the critic who accepts this idea probably agrees that America is still, as Van Wyck Brooks says, "like a vast Sargasso Sea."³⁵ Klein says,

The manner in which the individual--the intellectual, the writer, any man--might meet society was no longer so certain, when there was no politics to speak of and when there were no orthodoxies to speak of to restrict one's freedom, and when all theories of society had been shattered.³⁶

The result of this situation has been a hero who attempts to reconcile his alienation and estrangement from society with his impulse to unite with it. But the world still remains absurd and if the absurd hero pursues his values and personal identity within society he does so, as Waldmeir says, "armed and armored against society's pitfalls."³⁷ What the heroes in the fiction of Bellow, Ellison, Baldwin, Morris, and Malamud and others go through "is at best a lesson in the perpetual necessity of killing adjustments."³⁸ The social engagement of the absurd hero now becomes a precarious balancing act to avoid falling off one side into total alienation and plunging into the loss of freedom and identity, the potential dangers of accommodation on the other.

David Galloway believes there are two types of absurd literature--the optimistic and pessimistic. He indicates that

the fundamental and determining issue is whether, in the conflict between man and his environment, man or environment will emerge victorious...whether denied the conventional social, and religious consolation, man is capable of producing adequate spiritual antibodies to resist despair.³⁹

The fundamental issue then returns again to the role of the individual--whether he rejects society or responds to his feelings of responsibility toward and kinship with his community--the absurd hero must save himself.

Galloway says that Updike and Malamud and Styron and Salinger attempt to "find a path through the modern wasteland--through the meaninglessness."⁴⁰ If this be the case, then the heroes of their fiction are worthy of study, for in these heroes the reader may find the embodiment of the author's search.

FOOTNOTES

¹Paul Tillich, "Existentialism and Psychotherapy," Psychoanalysis and Existential Philosophy, ed. H. M. Ruitterbeck (New York, 1962), p. 5.

²Blaise Pascal, Pensées, trans. Martin Turnell (New York, 1962), p. 27.

³Granville Hicks, "The Search for the Ideal Absurdity," September 3, 1966, p. 21.

⁴Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (Princeton, 1961), p. 61.

⁵Galloway, p. 6.

⁶Paul Simon, Bookends (New York, 1968).

⁷Archibald MacLeish, "When We Are Gods," The Saturday Review of Literature, October 14, 1967, p. 22.

⁸Edmund Fuller, Man in Modern Fiction (New York, 1958), p. 12.

⁹Martin Esslin, The Theater of the Absurd (Garden City, 1961), p. xix.

¹⁰Galloway, p. vii.

¹¹Peyton Glass, The Perspective of Black Humor (Stillwater, 1968), p. 6.

¹²Hassan, Innocence, p. 21.

¹³Ihab Hassan, "The Character of Post-War Fiction in America," Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston, 1963), p. 30.

¹⁴Wylie Sypher, The Loss of Self (New York, 1962), p. 18.

¹⁵Sidney Finkelstein, Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature (New York, 1965), p. 293.

¹⁶Lehan, p. 78.

¹⁷Actuelles, Chroniques, trans. David Galloway, p. 111.

¹⁸Germaine Brée, Camus (New Brunswick, 1959), p. 199.

- ¹⁹Galloway, p. 15.
- ²⁰Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York, 1952), p. 435.
- ²¹Galloway, p. 15.
- ²²Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York, 1959), p. 91.
- ²³Leslie Fiedler, "No! In Thunder," Esquire, LIV (September, 1960), p. 79.
- ²⁴Ellison, p. 268.
- ²⁵Granville Hicks, "Generations of the Fifties: Malamud, Gold, and Updike," The Creative Present, ed. Nona Balakian and Charles Simmons (Garden City, 1963), p. 236.
- ²⁶Hassan, "Post-War Fiction," p. 30.
- ²⁷Sypher, p. 164.
- ²⁸Ellison, p. 434.
- ²⁹Finkelstein, p. 293.
- ³⁰Lehan, p. 79.
- ³¹Saul Bellow, The Victim (New York, 1956), p. 166.
- ³²Marcus Klein, After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century (Cleveland, 1965), p. 30.
- ³³Ibid., p. 24.
- ³⁴Ibid.
- ³⁵Van Wyck Brooks, America's Coming of Age (New York, 1958), p. 27.
- ³⁶Klein, p. 29.
- ³⁷Joseph J. Waldmeir, "Quest Without Faith," Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views (Boston, 1963), pp. 55-56.
- ³⁸Klein, p. 30.
- ³⁹Galloway, p. vii.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 18.

CHAPTER III

UPDIKE'S ABSURD YOUNG MEN

John Updike's conception of his absurd hero is directly related to the development and statement of the theme in his short stories. These themes usually involve the Updike hero's reaction, or lack of reaction, to the absurd moment, the embracing of absurdity, the past, and the confrontation with death and immortality. In discussing this relationship between hero and theme, representative stories will be included from Updike's three short story collections, The Same Door, published in 1959; Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories, published in 1962; and The Music School, published in 1966.

In studying the dimensions of the absurd hero in these three books, however, consideration should be given an important qualification. It is the lack of a precise definition of the absurd hero. Consequently, this study will rely on those characteristics mentioned in the preceding chapter for a definition, and will also compare certain facets of Updike's absurd hero with Camus' image of the absurd as set forth in The Myth of Sisyphus. It might be noted that there is no indication in his short stories that Updike has modeled his particular conception of the absurd solely on the ideas of any one philosopher. But if Updike has chosen an independent philosophical approach in his short fiction, the technique of his stories fits within Herbert Gold's observations on the modern short story.

The short story, says Gold, "as it developed since James Joyce,

seems to be concerned with scene and incident, striking hot, like the lyrical poem."¹ Certainly Updike's language approaches the lyrical, and his stories display a concern with scene and incident. Among these incidents Updike often includes that phenomenon known as the "absurd moment." This instant is the moment of revelation, the moment when the hero sees, with shocking clarity, his own or the world's absurdity. This moment may occur at any time. As Galloway indicates, "The absurd moment, which may occur in a telephone booth, or in a factory or on a battlefield--shows forth the heart of the world...."² What the observer sees is usually not very comforting. Updike, in the story "Sunday Teasing," shows his hero at just such a moment. The story takes place on a quiet Sunday at the apartment of a young couple. From the day's beginning the husband, Arthur, teases his wife Macy, who is sensitive and loving, but also not too bright and somewhat gullible. A family friend, Leonard, eats Sunday dinner with the couple and during the meal Arthur continues teasing, mocking not only his wife, but his friend as well. Arthur does this apparently for effect, enjoying his own cleverness, performing for the others, incautiously spouting nonsense that he embellishes and disguises with obscure language. The subject of discussion is the supposed lack of affection in Arthur's family. Ironically, in joking about the lack of feeling in his parents he manages to trifle with those of his wife and friend and upsets the congeniality of the meal. Growing reckless, he says, "I know when we have kids I'm not going to kiss Macy in front of them."³ Seeing he has gone too far, he admits his insincerity. Later, after Leonard has gone, Arthur's lack of sympathy for the heroine of a book Macy is reading upsets her and she cries. To

make amends he offers to clean up the apartment. Finally, his wife in bed, he stands at the sink washing the dishes.

As he stood at the sink, his hands in the water which, where the suds thinned and broke, showed a silvery grey, the Sunday's events repeated themselves in his mind, bending like nacreous flakes around a central infrangible irritant, becoming the perfect and luminous thought: "You don't know anything!" (SD, 86).

Thus Arthur suddenly becomes aware of his own absurdity.

Yet it is more than that. Arthur appears to represent the intellect, the mind of his family--he reads a Biblical passage that says "the head of the woman is the man" (SD, 80). In contrast, Macy is seen as basically emotional. She is shocked by Arthur's jibes at outward display of affections. She is a child of feeling, who reads novels, while Arthur, the thinker, reads philosophy. She responds to her story emotionally, while he analyzes it with a detached skill. These factors demonstrate to Macy how different she and her husband are and cause her fears. She identifies with the woman of her story, who is the victim of a "horrible man," cruel and selfish.

Arthur sees in one brief instant his own absurdity, his own irrational behavior. His "you don't know anything" becomes a statement of the feebleness of the intellect. It also indicates Arthur's own lack of self-understanding. Why must he torment his wife? Why must he be the center of attention? Why must he affect an attitude of superiority? Why the clever performance, seemingly played more to himself than the others? Arthur, like Macy's horrible man, has been cruel and selfish. He describes himself when he describes the hero of Macy's story as a "perceptive man caged in his own weak character" (SD, 85). On a more universal level the story can be seen as an illustration of the

paradox of mankind, a being divided by the warring factions of mind and emotion and the failure of either element to fully explain or control man's actions. The irony of the story lies in Arthur's being motivated by emotions as much as is his wife. Though Arthur may not fully understand or recognize his motivations, he does seem to recognize his own absurd nature and the irrationality of his acts. He seems to come to agree with the existential belief that man is not a rational creature. Thus Updike demonstrates the gap between dream and reality, intention and the real world, that is the heart of the absurd vision. Arthur symbolizes the discrepancy between self-image and the reality of self which is a tangled snarl of emotion, impulse, need and fantasy. Updike shows through Arthur that absurd moment when an unsuspecting man meets, as Camus says, "the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photograph...."⁴

Camus ties the absurd moment directly with the tedious, uneventful life of the middle class. He describes it as

...the collapse of the stage set. Dining, streetcar, four hours at the office or factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday according to the same rhythm--this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "Why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.⁵

Updike's use of the commonplace provides him with ample possibilities to deal with this moment in time. In the story "Intercession" the hero, Paul, is a young married man who has recently taken up that all-American time-killer--golf. While hacking his way around a local course he meets a boy, about fifteen, and they play together. The boy is brash and all-knowing in the way of young men who wish to hide their

uncertainty. He tries to give Paul advice on his game, criticizes his grip, asserts that he plays 54 holes a day, and shoots par golf doing it. Paul finds the picture of the boy playing golf all day by himself "like a retired banker" (SD, 146) a pathetic one. But the boy, he realizes, is unlikeable and comes from a home that "was prosperous and fond, the type whose chaste, conceited, unpopular children poke around libraries and luncheonettes and have hobbies intensely and never quite hear the drum" (SD, 146). Despite Paul's understanding the boy begins to irritate him. He plays several balls at each hole, totalling the best shots among the ten or twelve he takes as his score. Paul continues to blunder through the game and eventually, disgusted with the boy's superior attitude, shouts, "If you played according to any rules, a stinking baby could beat you; I could beat you." (SD, 152). He challenges the boy to play him for a dollar a hole but the boy, hurt, refuses and walks ahead. Paul, playing alone, hits his last ball deep into the center of the fairway. However, when he reaches the spot where the ball should be it has mysteriously disappeared, and Paul suddenly finds himself walking off the course without even looking for it. He goes toward his car and home and "in all the landscape no human being was visible, and a fatiguing curse seemed laid on everything" (SD, 153). Although Updike does not allow the reader to enter the protagonist's mind during this moment, it is not far-fetched to consider his reaction as recognition of his own and the world's absurdity. Paul, perhaps with more "weariness" than "amazement," realizes the futility of defeating the boy. It will accomplish nothing; it brings no reward. His earlier self-righteous conviction that he was destined to "give the kid a good trouncing"

(SD, 152) seems ridiculous now. He sees the absurdity and meaninglessness of his childish attempts to beat the boy.

Yet, Paul's quitting game cannot be solely attributed to his possible insight into absurdity. Paul's ego is genuinely damaged. He is overly concerned that he appear young, "at twenty six, he looked twenty three and wanted to look eighteen" (SD, 144). When he plays on the golf course, he does so, "trapped" between a skillful older golfer, toward whom he expresses scorn, and the young boy. Significantly, he chooses to tour the course with the young boy, but remains acutely aware of the difference in their ages. He fears that if the boy knows he is married it will alienate him, or more precisely, classify him as an "old man." To an extent he identifies with the boy, seeing himself at the boy's age, but Paul is rankled by his aggressive manner, his lack of respect, and he allows his vanity to draw him into senseless competition. Thus in this story, the last lines illuminate the feelings of the hero and the theme of the story--alienation from his fellow man and a sense of failure beyond the simple humiliation of a bad golf game. Yet, one wonders if the hero really sees into his own absurdity. Perhaps Paul's quitting the game becomes not an insight into the absurdity of his behavior or the absurdity of the world, but a sort of acquiescence, a resignation to defeat and a realization of his failure to recapture his youth. Paul seems to accept the idea that "he can't go home again" and that he is a victim of time. The absurd hero in his purest form does not bend before time and the threat of eventual death. Like Paul, he is a victim of a world made absurd by death, but he is also a rebel, acting in defiance of death and time. Perhaps because of his blinding vanity, Paul does not perceive his own absurd-

ity with the clarity of Arthur in "Sunday Teasing." Unlike Paul, Arthur is able, at least for a moment, to get outside himself. However, Updike has no existential ax to sharpen. He is first a writer and second a philosopher. If he thinks the world is absurd, he chooses to express this concept in a subtle manner, with no neon lights flashing "Theme, Theme, Theme!" In this approach, Updike follows a tradition in American writing that runs contrary to the methods of current European fiction. According to Nora Balakian, the European is inclined to use fiction to demonstrate a philosophy or ideology, in contrast to the American writer who, "far more pragmatic by tradition and bound to the literal fact, is more readily prepared to apply his philosophy to the particular human situation."⁶

The final "particular human situation" illustrating Updike's use of the absurd moment is a short piece called "The Crow in the Woods." It can hardly be called a short story, but seems more what Mary Rohrberger calls a "simple narrative."⁷ It appears to have little symbolic structure and little seems to happen in the story, although a meaning may expand beyond the surface events. Updike sketches a young couple at a party, their coming home that night, and in meticulous and loving detail, the activities of the young husband as he rises the next day and begins fumbling attempts to change and feed his infant daughter. During the night it has snowed and outside is a singularly beautiful scene.

The woods at their distance across the frosted lawn were a Chinese screen in which an immense alphabet of twigs lay hushed: a black robe crusted with white braid standing of its own stiffness. Nothing in it stirred. (PF, 154).

The hero looks upon the scene with fondness and moves as if under the

spell of some gentle magic, enamored with the tiny joys and small satisfactions of his activity. His wife appears and relieves him of his daughter and then, outside the window, he sees a large crow about to fly into the "inviolable surface" (PF, 155). He seems suddenly afraid and startled and calls his wife's name.

The woman's pragmatic blue eyes flicked from his face to the window where she saw only snow and rested on the forgotten food steaming between his hands. Her lips moved: "Eat your egg " (PF, 155).

Possibly here again we have Updike capturing that moment when the world seems shattered and the hero looks into the heart and horror of its reality. The young man creates a vision of beauty in the world outside, only to have it crumbled by the black crow of reality just as the aura he creates inside is dashed by his wife's matter-of-fact comment.

Again Updike in this story, as in many of his stories, contrasts the reality of the world with his hero's self-created reality. Updike gives this collision of worlds significance in "Sunday Teasing" and "Intercession." The clash of reality and intention in these two stories seems to reveal something about the hero, something more than his degree of awareness of the possible absurdity of the world. They illuminate the problems and character of their heroes and to a large degree the theme evolves from these problems. But J. A. Ward believes that the main character of "The Crow in the Woods" is indulging in nothing more than private fantasy and the story is a hymn of praise "for the inconsequential start of an inconsequential day."⁸ Indeed, the hero seems to be playing some sort of precious game. There is no indication that the man's fantasy is harmful, that it impairs his

function as father, husband, citizen or human being, that it causes friction between him and his wife, that it is a manifestation of an unbalanced mind, or that he even carries his vision-making to excess. It seems a harmless sort of daydreaming. The reader can only concur with his wife that his fears are essentially exaggerated and that he ought to eat his egg.

This tendency toward dramatics is characteristic of the Updike hero. All the central characters in the three stories discussed and in many other Updike stories, practice amateur theatrics. Arthur in "Sunday Teasing" is constantly posing, experimenting with new faces and phrases before the audience of his wife and friend. Paul in "Intercession" imagines a scene in which the boy asks about his job and Paul explains. And of course, the creation of the fantasy world by the hero of "The Crow in the Woods" is indicative of this trait. Ward comments that

most of the heroes are unconscious artists; they super-impose a glamorous order upon their lives, depending heavily upon the appropriate class symbols (like Proust, eight-dollar sherry, or--with the lesser breed--skill with cars.) Thus they are poseurs, trapped by self-deception.⁹

The Updike hero seems to have turned inward, sometimes playing a role for his own amusement rather than for its effect on others. William Peden characterizes the typical Updike hero as "a self-centered egotist with slightly paranoid tendencies, he patronizes everyone he comes in contact with...."¹⁰ In "Intercession," Paul's description of the boy seems to be equally appropriate for the heroes of these short stories. They seem by their actions to be only slightly older versions of those "chaste, conceited, unpopular children...who never

quite heard the drum" (SD, 146). Like these children, the Updike hero is indwelling--he seems trapped in himself. Ward says Updike sees the "human disease in the ego."¹¹ Camus' absurd hero is self-oriented also, but he becomes so only to achieve an end--hopefully the preservation of his own personal integrity and victory over an environment he recognizes as meaningless at the absurd moment.

The three characters of these stories may perceive the meaninglessness of the world, but often their so-called absurd moment is limited to perceptions directly related to themselves. They sometimes seem only dimly aware of the world outside their own egos. Characteristically Updike's heroes, inhabitants of the secure, middle-class, protestant, white world, seem naïve and ridiculously unprepared to handle problems outside this world. In the humorous story, "His Finest Hour," Updike describes the comic reaction of a supercilious, rather prigish young man and his wife to a violent domestic quarrel of the couple next door. This frontal assault of life is not what the young man is prepared to face. It seems exactly what he has sought to escape by studying Arabic and dreaming of moving to the Middle East. Updike points out in this story not only the "ingrown reaction" of the hero but the conditions in a large American city which make men faceless strangers, each leading a life in isolation from other men.

"A Gift from the City" repeats this desire to escape, to withdraw from life's problems. A couple living in New York give money and food to a supposedly destitute young Black man who claims he has recently arrived from the South with his wife and seven children. Though they are generous with the Negro, they fear being duped and fear the presence of the world the Black man represents. The husband of the couple

wishes to shield his wife and daughter from the outside world. "If only there were such a thing as enchantment, and he could draw, with a stick, a circle of safety around them that would hold...." (SD, 122). But it is more than the natural desire to protect his loved ones. He fears that the negro brings with him the threat of the real world that he has successfully walled out. The couple's happiness returns when they can decide the Negro really is dishonest. If he were not, if his plight and story were true, it would impose the reality of the sordid, cruel, and bitter world that they have managed to hold at bay with their money and isolation. This is one of the most socially significant of all Updike's stories. What he may be suggesting in this story is that one of the reasons for this withdrawal, this indwelling, this egotism, is the nature of the American society. This society forces Updike's hero to turn to himself and to his immediate family for the identity, the hope, the love, that society itself does not give. Updike's hero is an absurd hero in the sense that he withdraws to protect his own identity--yet sometimes he seems to have retreated so far into himself that he cannot see out. The retreat seems almost instinctive rather than conscious, and many of his heroes seem to lack the will to shed their egotism and acknowledge the possibility of absurdity.

In contrast, Galloway states that Camus perceives the recognition of absurdity as the first step in a deliberate and conscious development of the absurd. But it is only the first step. To Camus the absurd hero is not the individual who attempts to melt the entire ice cap with a blowtorch. Such an individual is absurd, to be sure, but lacks important qualities that Camus considers essential.

Galloway says,

Camus' ultimate concern is with the man sufficiently strong to sustain a disproportion on the level of values, a man who persists in his demands for truth in a universe that says truths are impossible.¹²

In other words, the absurd hero must live the absurdity. He must abandon all his old concepts of order, rationality, and system.

Few of Updike's heroes live the absurdity of their world. In the story "A & P" there is, however, the suggestion that the hero embraces his absurdity. The story is a simple one, told by Sammy, a 19 year old check boy in an A & P grocery. Three girls, clad in swim suits, one particularly attractive and poised, enter the store and purchase a jar of "Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream" (PF, 133). The manager, Lengel, chastizes the girls for being what he considers indecently dressed, and Sammy, in a melodramatic gesture typical of the Updike hero, quits in protest. Even though the boy knows his gesture is absurd, he goes through with it. Lengel invokes all the traditional gods to stop the boy. "You don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad," he tells the boy, and Sammy agrees but folds up his apron anyway. "You'll feel this for the rest of your life" (PF, 135), Lengel says, and Sammy knows this is true, but walks out the doors into the harsh sunlight of the parking lot, and "my stomach kind of fell and I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter" (PF, 136). Sammy, for all his posing, perceives the serious consequences and absurdity of his actions, but does not repudiate his decision. Updike suggests that he is committed to living the absurdity. Sammy seems to renounce the "quality of glide" (SD, 36), for which many young people strive, in order to walk, if apprehensively,

the path of the absurd hero.

Another Updike hero that has qualities that approximate those of Camus' absurd hero is Fred Platt of "Who Made Yellow Roses Yellow?" Fred has just returned from an aimless and unproductive year in France. His family is wealthy, and he could take a position in his father's firm. However, he seeks the help of an old college friend, one Clayton Thomas Clayton, to secure a job for him in advertising. Clayton Clayton is as absurd as his name. He is almost a living cliché--a caricature of the advertising executive--semi-creative, efficient, dull, and shallow. He is dedicated to getting ahead in an occupation where his first assignment consisted of spending vast sums of money to determine the color of a chewing gum wrapper--"the big question was whether chalk-white or mint-green suggested better a clean feeling in the mouth" (SD, 70). Fred and Clayton meet for lunch and throughout the meal Fred attempts to be witty and clever in the manner of the days when he and Clayton were on the staff of a college humor magazine. Most of Fred's esoteric humor, subtle satire, and coyness is lost on the guileless and serious-minded Clayton. As a responsible member of the "straight" world, Clayton is absurd. Yet Updike shows Fred, with his constant foppish prattling, is equally ridiculous. The lunch ends with Clayton helplessly telling Fred that he has no job to offer and Fred claiming he did not really want it anyway. Fred is humiliated by the proceedings, but can take neither himself nor Clayton seriously. As they part on the street, he tosses nonsensical French after his bewildered and uncomprehending friend. "Oui. Le roi est un bon homme. Le crayon de ma tante est sur la table de mon chat. Merci. Merci. Meaning thank you. Thanks again" (SD, 79).

In his parting words Fred seems to parody both Clayton and himself--such nonsense was, he says, the total accomplishment of his year in France. He lampoons his own behavior, his own nature, admitting that he is an absurd man. He knows he is an outsider and a freak in Clayton's world--perhaps in all worlds. Fred, the aristocrat, the sensitive, civilized, ascetic man--wears dark suits and is "half in love with the clergy" (SD, 71)--seems a child of an older, more genteel, gentle, even more spiritual world. Indicative of this is the tabouret in his father's living room, given to his grandmother by Henry James, who considered her the "only civilized woman in the United States" (SD, 67). Clayton is the new man whose only ethic is work and who believes competition is "the spine of the universe" (SD, 76). Fred has never abandoned the editorial attitude of the Quaff, the college humor magazine, an "ethic of ironic worthlessness" (SD, 76). Clayton, in contrast, is serious and earnest about life and his job. He asserts, typically in the cliché of mass opinion, that advertising is "a pretty damn essential thing in our economy" (SD, 75). Fred and Clayton are thus able to communicate little--speaking across the chasm of money and name, but primarily separated by the gap between Fred's old world and Clayton's new society.

Fred, as a member of the old order has a certain world weary, jaded quality about him. Although he actively lives his absurdity, one feels he would view devotion to existentialism, or any philosophy, with the same detached, amused irony that he has for himself. Updike's sympathy seems to lie with Fred, though the story has much of the quality of a clinical profile of two types of men. Fred, like other Updike heroes, is an egotist, but he does seem to be able to get

outside himself. Many of Updike's heroes, for all their self-centeredness, are pitiable men. Frequently Updike portrays them as one-time artists whose dreams have not materialized. They are creative men who have fallen prey to prostitution in a society that makes it temptingly easy to sell out. The once-creative hero of "A Gift from the City" constantly finds unasked-for bonuses and checks on his desk, left almost as bribes to hush his troubled conscience. Updike's fiction is filled with writers who do not write, like Fred Platt, or Alfred Schweigen of "The Music School" (MS, 138), and artists who do only chic magazine illustrations (MS, 55), or plot comic strips or design electric razors--men who "never quite hear the drum," But some hear enough of the distant beating to see the absurdity, and almost all feel the alienation and a vague sense of guilt, an anxiety for a failure they may not be able to name. Michael Novak says, "Updike is not after the Platonic distinction in types of men, the elite and the herd; he is after the incomprehension, the shallowness, the easy adjustment, the lack of life in our scientized environment..."¹³ Clayton Clayton seems to embody these qualities. He is an example of a man whose total devotion to the values of society has led to an ossification of his humanness. Finkelstein says, "Updike sees America today as the home of petrified humanity."¹⁴ Truly, many of Updike's heroes stand as if frozen, perceiving the absurdity of their situations, but unable to act. They seem, somehow, to lack the courage to face the meaninglessness of their society or their own existence and retreat within themselves--isolated, alienated.

Nevertheless, another character who seems, at least to a degree, to avoid petrification and to live the absurdity of his world is

Clyde Behn of "The Persistence of Desire." Ward calls this story a "comic nightmare."¹⁵ Certainly the mood of the story is close to that of Black Humor. Clyde, a vain, conceited, selfish, calculating young man, is visiting his home town. While in town he goes to see Dr. Pennypacker, an eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist, about a twitching of his eyelid. There he meets a high school girl friend, Janet, whom he had treated badly. They are both married now, but her presence inspires Clyde to attempt to renew their old relationship. He lies, manipulates, and cajoles, slipping out of his treatment room and into hers like a teenage Casanova. The absurdity of his desire for Janet is apparent in the story. He does not love her, nor particularly admire her--he has not seen her in seven years. Clyde, in fact, does not attempt to give any rational cause for his actions. In a comic scene, Clyde, in the process of having his eyes dilated, creeps into Janet's treatment room "grotesquely costumed in glasses like two chocolate coins...." (PF, 23). He kisses her, drops on his knees beside her chair and makes a clumsy attempt to look down her blouse. She asks if he loves his wife and he replies, "Incredibly much" (PF, 23). And in a crowning bit of dark humor he answers her question concerning his happiness by saying, "I am, I am; but...happiness isn't everything" (PF, 24). This insane motivation seems to characterize Clyde's person--he accepts his answer as reason for his behavior, mad though it may be. If Clyde accepts his absurdity and the absurdity of the world, he does so as a reflex, without thinking, mindlessly.

Yet the primary motivation for Clyde's behavior seems other than an attempt to live his absurdity. To Clyde, besides happiness there is an affair with Janet, and he seems impelled by the single thought of

getting her into bed. Partially his motivation for this can be seen in the nature of Janet herself. She is called capable in the "real" world but servile in the world of love. Her flesh, Clyde remembers, "used to goad him into being cruel" (PF, 18). In addition, she can still be hurt by Clyde--a fact that excites him. In short, he needs and enjoys playing the dominant role in their relationship--perhaps even the role of persecutor or torturer, and Janet responds to fill this need. But there is something more working here. Janet is a part of his past, his high school days, and Clyde, like Paul in "Intercession," is hypersensitive about his age. There is a speedometer clock in Pennypacker's waiting room, significantly the one new thing in the office since Clyde's last visit. Clyde notices the clock and then reads in a magazine, "Science reveals that the cells of the normal human body are replaced in toto every seven years" (PF, 17). When he first sees Janet, he thinks of this change in his cells. As he leaves the office, his eyes dilated, the clock's face is fuzzy--blank. Thus, the clock becomes more than the symbol of passing time. It becomes the symbol of his growing away from youth--"speeding" away from it. In arranging a meeting with Janet he has in effect stopped the clock and made time stand still, even turned it back--he has not changed in every cell; he is the same confident, flippant high school boy, baiting teachers he considers stupid or cruel. Clyde attempts to remove himself from the present, with its fears and ominous future. Clyde's eyes have been in a sense "blinded." He sees the world through new eyes. As he goes out into the street he tucks Janet's note in his pocket where it makes

a shield for his heart. The maples, macadam, shadows,

houses, cement, were to his violated eyes as brilliant as a scene remembered; he became a child again in this town, where life was a distant adventure, a rumor, an always imminent joy. (PF, 26).

Updike here creates the past as a rejuvenative, revitalizing force. Yet, the horror of the story is that Clyde's eyes are "violated." His own vanity has distorted his vision as much as Pennypacker's drops. He cannot really stop the speedometer clock--his cells have changed and he is caught in his self-deception. In fact, the actual need to dilate Clyde's eyes can be traced to his use of a stylish pair of hornrims that have impaired his vision. The doctor insists that he wear metal-rimmed glasses, and in characteristic concern for his appearance, Clyde complains because they make "ugly dents" (PF, 25) on the sides of his nose. Clyde, then, is a character who embodies two of Updike's major themes: the theme of the pervasive influence not only of the human ego, but of the past, its power over man, the haunting and yet impossible desire of man to return, for good or evil, to what he once was.

The influence of the past is a major theme in Updike's fiction. Ward says, "The sense of nostalgia, particularly for childhood and the scenes of one's youth, continue to fascinate Updike; it is an emotion he presents fondly and directly."¹⁶ Updike is fascinated with the past. Many of his stories, "Walter Briggs," "Home," and "Flight" from Pigeon Feathers, and "The Family Meadow," "Harv is Plowing Now," and "In Football Season" from The Music School are pervaded by a sense of things past. But Granville Hicks believes that "Updike's aim is to preserve certain of these moments from the past not out of nostalgia but because they give meaning to life."¹⁷ Hicks says Updike's eagerness to retain

the past is "heightened by his sense of impermanence."¹⁸ This impermanence is the fate man cannot escape--the final changing of the cells. Updike's heroes seem driven back into the past because the only certainty of the future is death. The symbol of the clock and the cells is repeated in the story "Lifeguard," in which the lifeguard says,

Each of our bodies is a clock that loses time. Young as I am, I hear in myself the protein acids /the composition of all cells/ ticking; I wake at odd hours and in the shuddering darkness and silence feel my death rushing toward me like an express train (PF, 148).

However, Kenneth Hamilton sees Updike's concern as more than just the fear of death.

The mechanical world shrinks us; the world of personal and family memory re-creates us. So it is to Olinger (i.e. Shillington, Updike's birthplace) that we are brought back again and again, to recapture the meaning of life.¹⁹

Updike's characters sometimes retreat into the past because the present is too unbearable. Such a character is Fred "Ace" Anderson from "Ace in the Hole." Ace, like Rabbit Angstrom in Rabbit, Run, is a former high school basketball star whose present prospects do not echo his illustrious days on the court. He has just been fired from his job at a used car lot, and Evey, his overworked, embittered wife, threatens to leave him. Life is closing in on Ace. The tight feeling he experienced before a game, a feeling which would leave when he entered the hot, noisy, security of the locker room, has become the "free-floating anxiety" so prevalent in American society. "Now there were whole days when it didn't leave" (SD, 23). About to become involved in another quarrel with Evey, afraid that she would say something "that couldn't be forgotten" (SD, 22), Ace directs her attention to his young daughter who has placed an ashtray on her head

like a hat. Evey is not impressed, but Ace persists. "Yeah, but watch watch," Ace says. "Watch her hands. They're really terrific hands!" (SD, 26). Ace is certain that his daughter is a "natural" and tries to melt Evey's anger with talk of the future "Fred Junior." He turns on the radio and persuades her to dance.

Her hair brushed his lips as she minced in, then swung away, to the end of his arm; he could feel her toes dig into the carpet. He flipped his own hair back from his eyes. The music ate through his skin and mixed with the nerves and small veins; he seemed to be great again, and all the other kids were around them, in a ring, clapping time (SD, 26).

The past becomes renewal for Ace. Yet it is also escape--escape from the dismal fact of the present. Ace seems a victim of a society that Updike sees as lacking the opportunity for heroic action, at least in the traditional sense. Galloway says,

In the world of such hyperbolic and self-defeating superlatives scant room exists for the hero except in the athletic events which seem increasingly to occupy contemporary America's minds.²⁰

Ace's world is a world without a hopeful future. But in the past, particularly in the years of childhood, the future is always full of hope and excitement, a pristine thing, free from the stain of disappointment. A sentiment similar to this is felt by a soon to be graduated high school boy in an Updike story entitled "A Sense of Shelter." Slamming his locker door vigorously, he thinks, "Between now and the happy future predicted for him he had nothing, almost literally nothing to do" (PF, 74). To Updike's heroes the past many times appears more important, more vital, more real than the future can ever be. They seem to feel as Arthur Mizener does, that "the past need not be happy; what matters is that it is made real by the

intensity of feeling that has accumulated around it, as nothing else is real."²¹

In an attempt to find a reality, avoid the present, or find new hope, Updike's heroes return to their youth. In the past they find security and order. As Hassan notes, "Childhood stands for truth and Edenic innocence--it lacks the ambiguities of initiation--for the unconditioned in society, for the vulnerable moment in which our future is betrayed."²² To the existentialist this moment--the betrayal of our future--would correspond to the critical moment when our very existence is seen as absurd. The Updike hero frequently avoids this confrontation and, if he cannot avoid it, sometimes refuses to recognize it. It should be noted that the ideal absurd hero, at least Camus' ideal, denies the past. History and the past are part of the world's all encompassing meaninglessness. Since he is so passionately caught up in life, he has no taste for the dead past. "L'homme absurde is a man without nostalgia."²³

While Updike's heroes may often stand on the other side of adulthood, fearing the trials of initiation, retreating to the protection of the past, some attempt to cope with the future. The Updike hero is often concerned with that future beyond the future, beyond his death. Updike's concern with life after death, with the presence or absence of God, with religion, is an active one. To Camus and the existential atheists, God has at best abandoned man, at worst, died or never was. Updike, however, is not so sure.

In the tital story of his first collection, "Pigeon Feathers," he explores the subject of man's confrontation with death and the possibility of an immortality. For this he chooses a boy, one of the

uninitiated, David Kern, almost fifteen. The shaking of David's faith begins when he reads from H. G. Wells, The Outline of History, an account of Jesus. David is appalled at Wells' attitude toward Christ--"an obscure political agitator, a kind of hobo" (PF, 85). But he feels his own religious experience can be explained away, and he can construct no rebuttal to Wells' "engines of knowledge! Indeed, it proved the enemy point: Hope bases vast premises on foolish accidents and reads a word where in fact only a scribble exists" (PF, 87). Troubled by a vision of his own death, his own burial deep in the ground, he prays to Christ to touch his upraised hands. He is never certain if his hands are touched but reassures himself, "For would not Christ's touch be infinitely gentle?" (PF, 92). In desperation he turns to his minister who can only reply that heaven is "the way the goodness Abraham Lincoln did lives after him" (PF, 95), an answer that leaves David dangling in a deepening sense of betrayal. His mother's simple, rather matter-of-fact approach to religion does not satisfy him either. "Mother, good grief. Don't you see;...if when we die there's nothing, all your sun and fields and what not are all, ah, horror. It's just an ocean of horror" (PF, 98). His questions are never answered to his satisfaction but he does decide that "we cannot, cannot submit to death" (PF, 99). Months later, burying pigeons he has shot in his barn he notices the intricate and beautiful designs of the bird's feathers and the knowledge he sought is revealed to him.

As he fitted the last two, still pliant, on the top, and stood up, crusty coverings were lifted from him, and with a feminine, slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robed in this certainty; that the God who had lavished such craft upon

these worthless birds would not destroy his whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever (PF, 105).

David sees into the absurdity of religion, of a world that would let him die, "never moving or seeing, or hearing anything ever again" (PF, 97). Like the traditional absurd hero he sees that death makes life a meaningless horror and resists this death, refuses to submit to its tyranny. And, like the absurd hero, he is forced to turn to himself for solutions to his problems. "Nowhere in the world of other people would he find the hint, the nod, he needed to begin to build his fortress against death" (PF, 99). Yet David cannot accept the meaninglessness he sees around him--he continues to seek evidence that he has a soul and an afterlife. His search is frustrated by his being caught between two philosophies, two views of life, personified in his mother and his father.

David's mother has an irrational, intuitive feeling for life. She is almost a nature-worshiper, believing that the land has a soul. In her arguments with her husband about how to treat the land she supports her illogical, handed-down theories of organic farming. She is connected with the pantheistic religion of ancient Greece, which she studied in college, and with the mysticism and the unquestioning faith of Medieval days.

David's father is a city-dweller and his farm is foreign ground to him. Nature seems to frighten and oppress him, and like the existentialist, he finds no comfort in nature. He believes that no one stays on the land of his own choice any longer. "In this day and age only the misfits stay on the farm. The lame, the halt, the blind" (PF, 93). The land and farmers connote death to him and he spends as much time away from the farm as possible. He is a scientific man--a

chemistry teacher who sees the land as soulless, a thing to be controlled, an enemy to attack and overcome, to be made to do man's bidding--with the proper addition of "nitrogen, phosphorous, potash" (PF, 90).

David is in many ways like his father. He is not happy on the farm and enjoys staying in town. He seems to connect the farm with his own vision of death. David fears the earth; he sees himself dead deep in its bowels. Yet his mother loves the land, and seeing death as a rest, does not fear the place where she will lie. David at one time almost experiences this union with nature--he sees the intricacies of his dog's copper colored fur and in the "smell of the dog's hair David seemed to descend through many finely differentiated layers of earth: mulch, soil, sand, clay, and the glittering mineral base" (PF, 101). But when he returns to the house the books on the shelves bring back his fears. He feels a closeness with nature and the land, but it does not last. In shooting the pigeons David plays the role of the "beautiful avenger," striking back at nature, or at the force he thinks directs it, for not providing a sign, for causing his fears, striking in frustration at his inability to understand nature or to escape it.

By killing the pigeons David, the avenger, feels he has power over nature. He comes out of the barn flushed with power and his mother tells him, "Don't smirk, you look like your father" (PF, 104). He has been engaging in the type of work he and his father did when they stayed on the farm--destruction: tearing down an old hen house, burning brush, chopping up something. Thus it seems that David never reaches any understanding or sympathy with nature. Updike shows that

David and his father are estranged from nature, which he suggests is to be alienated from God. David does see what Hamilton calls the "vast, complex, interlocking, glorious patterns...",²⁴ but they fill him not with wonder or awe but only with the false notion that he will live forever. This reasoning is inspired by ego, by the feeling that God surely would not let him die since he is so much more valuable than the "worthless birds." He overlooks or blocks out the greater truth, the harrowing discovery of modern science; that in nature's world man is neither more nor less valuable than a pigeon. Updike's theme appears to be that man is alienated from nature because of his egoism. Ward suggests that Updike views this egoism as an inevitable condition of mankind.²⁵ Yet David's mother seems to escape it. Updike may be saying, then, that egoism is a modern disease, a sickness of our desire to rule nature and our environment, a sickness that separates us from something essential in nature. Certainly this separation reiterates Updike's apparent concern with the alienation that results from man's withdrawal from the stifling modern world into himself.

If Updike is ambiguous as to the final theme of "Pigeon Feathers," if he seems to provide no definite answers, it is perhaps justly so. Perhaps like David, he cannot really understand such overpowering questions but can only record the experience of living them. Yet he does this well. Alfred M. Klausler says of Updike:

He is deeply sympathetic to the needs and problems of modern man trapped in a world he both made and didn't make. And he willingly attempts to dramatize the conflict which Unamuno portrays in The Tragic Sense of Life: the presence of religion, an objective impossibility, and the absence of religion, subjectively impossible.²⁶

Michael Novak says that Updike often writes about "man's search for personal immortality,"²⁷ as he does in this story. Even though Updike sees the alienation in our culture, his efforts at understanding the American small town and suburb prevent him from becoming a "preacher of meaninglessness."²⁸ And if, as Novak says, "he sometimes takes Protestant Christianity with ruthless seriousness,"²⁹ so do his heroes. Though they fill the mold of the absurd hero, like David Kern, they cannot easily accept a world that is destitute of a divine being.

The next time one encounters David Kern it is as the protagonist of Updike's four part story, "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car." He is a grown man now, father of three children, a writer and still troubled by unanswered questions. This quartet is a musing reminiscence of apparently widely divergent events in David's life. It begins with David's thoughts about the land and the earth and what meaning it has for America and for him. The second section starts, with little transition, a commentary of "churchgoing" in America. In the third he relates his discovery, while in England, of a dying cat, and his attempts to aid it. The last section takes place six years later and describes David's trip to Pennsylvania to visit his ill father and his feelings and thoughts during the trip. These four divisions are tied together, in some cases rather loosely, by certain symbols woven throughout the episodes. It should also be noted that Updike's love of details seems to have led him to include material that does not seem relevant to his theme.

In the first section, the narrator discusses the joy and pride he experiences at the sight of packed dirt--earth packed by human feet.

Those unnamed paths people make on the earth remind him of childhood, "The earth was our playmate then...." (PF, 168), and have about them, because they have been achieved accidentally, "that repose of grace that is beyond willing" (PF, 169). David expresses an idea that echoes the alienation theme of "Pigeon Feathers."

We in America have from the beginning been clearing and baring the earth, attacking, reforming the enormity of nature we were given, which we took to be hostile. We have explored, on behalf of all mankind, this paradox: the more matter is outwardly mastered, the more it overwhelms us in our hearts. Evidence--gaping right-of-ways, acres mercilessly scraped, bleeding mountains of muddy fill--surrounds us of a war that is incapable of ceasing.... (PF, 169).

In contrast David looks upon paths as acts of devotion, likening them to the "feet of statues of saints which have lost their toes to centuries of kisses" (PF, 169).

In the next section the wearing of paths, which becomes on one level evidence of the persistence of human kind, is woven into the study of churchgoing. David says the creeds and petitions of the church are like "paths worn smooth in the raw terrain of our hearts" (PF, 170). Again he equates the shelter of a church in the heart of a great city with "those spots worn bare by a softball game in a weed-filled vacant lot" (PF, 171). David notes that churches in today's America have a "second-century quality" (PF, 171) and the congregation is "a minority flock furtively gathered within the hostile enormity of a dying, sobbing empire" (PF, 170). In such a scene the religious man is almost afraid to admit he attends church. Yet belief persists, like the making of paths worn into the great hulk of the earth. Belief, like the making of paths, is essentially a creative act, unlike the gouging and raping of the land that we thought was our enemy. David

expresses the idea that belief is an instinctual thing and that "belief builds itself unconsciously and in consciousness is spent" (PF, 170). Thus like a path through the grass faith appears, unplanned. David seems to be repeating Kierkegaard's idea that the act of faith is "inaccessible to thought"³⁰ and cannot be verbally communicated because it is not a rational thing. But like paths, it continually appears.

The next section seems the least satisfactory of the four. This episode of the dying cat is somewhat foreign to the other sections and it is difficult to see its relationship to the others. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this section is David's comments about America. He is, of course, in England, and very conscious of his Americanness--he feels a stranger, and a bit like the barbarian that an American is supposed to be. He is afraid of "English taboos" and that he will be taken as a "poacher" (PF, 174). While he tends the dying cat, he thinks: "In my own brutal country it was a not uncommon insult to kill a cat and throw the body into an enemy yard, and I was afraid that this would be taken that way" (PF, 174). David also comments: "It is a strange thing about Americans, that we tend to receive our supernatural mail on foreign soil" (PF, 172). Thus this section contrasts England with the more barbarous new world, where one would not help a cat in its final moments, where conditions are such that experiencing the supernatural, the spiritual, is rare. This section also introduces a symbol that has been implied in the previous two--the car. It is the car that justifies the destruction of the land, and it is the car that kills the cat. Updike shows a vital concern with what we do in the name of our automobiles. It is in this

final division of the story that Updike develops the car as one of the major symbols of the work.

In the final section, "A Traded Car," David relates a variety of episodes leading to his traveling to Pennsylvania to visit his seriously ill father. It begins with David fondly reminiscing about his first car, a 1955 Ford. Americans love their cars, he believes, because of the experiences they attach to them.

Not only sand and candy wrappers accumulate in a car's interior, but heroism and instants of communion. We in America make love in our cars, and listen to ball games, and plot our wooing of the dollar: small wonder the landscape is sacrificed to these dreaming vehicles of our ideal and onrushing manhood (PF, 175).

Updike moves from cars to religion when again David is troubled by doubts of the existence of God and the fate of his soul. He desires another woman and the fact that he receives no punishment for it, that the universe is indifferent to what he does, convinces him that it is "a universe that would easily permit me to die" (PF, 177). He sees himself as the existential victim, abandoned by God and at the mercy of an uncaring world. "My brain in its calcium vault shouted about injustice, thundered accusations into the lustreless and tranquil homogeneity of the air" (PF, 177). The horror of the world convinces him of the absence of God. In the midst of his despair word comes of his father's illness and he decides to make the trip by car, driving his Ford one last time before he trades it in on another. So he drives south from his home in Massachusetts in his "churchgoing suit." And the journey to see his father, into scenes of his boyhood, is, as in other Updike stories, a rejuvenative one. His father reassures him, as churchgoing, as the worn paths on the earth do. His

father, even though David's mother asserts he has lost his faith, fills David with a "buoyant humor" (PF, 187). His father's goodness, his joy and wonder at life, transforms David, as it transforms the homely volunteer church worker who comes into his room. "As a star shines in our heaven though it has vanished from the universe, so my father continues to shed faith upon others" (PF, 187).

As David travels back, Updike begins to merge the symbols of the church, the earth, cars, paths, and his father's faith as a shining star. As he drives into the evening he feels again a union with the world. "It seems to me for this sunset hour that the world is our bride, given to us to love and the terror and joy of the marriage is that we bring to it a nature not our bride's" (PF, 188). David drives into the night and as he does he seems to journey through space and time itself.

And through those aeons my car, beginning as a mechanical spiral of molecules, evolved into something soft and organic and consciously brave. I lost, first, heart, then head, and finally any sense of my body. In the last hour of the trip I ceased to care or feel or in any real sense see, but the car, though its soul the driver had died, maintained steady forward motion, and completed the endless journey safely (PF, 188).

David seems to merge with his car, to lose any sense of self, and the car becomes an entity, as Novak says, becomes David's soul.³¹ Though David symbolically dies, his soul, symbolized in his car, the summation of all his memories, his loves, his essence, goes on.

But the car is to be traded away soon, and Updike suggests that in America we are constantly trading in souls for new ones. Souls, like cars, have been reduced to something of material value, something with a price. Updike indicates that we are pursuing some impossible dream,

a vision of our "ideal and onrushing manhood" to which we sacrifice our cars, our souls, our land, our humanity. Novak says, "In pragmatic, secular America, it is almost impossible for faith to take intelligent root, and men though having ears, cannot hear; for there is almost no correlation in our experience for what the word of God says."³²

Therefore an American trades his soul, like his car, "back into the mineral world from which it was conjured, dismissed without a blessing, a kiss, a testament or any ceremony of farewell" (PF, 188). The ceremonies David speaks of are not the pompous formalities of diplomats, but a kind of reverence. Ceremonies, like paths, are gentle marks upon the face of the world that signify not man's attempt to control and conquer matter, but his sympathy with, and reverence for it. A ceremony, like a path, Updike says, indicates a man has passed. Ceremonies are part of the imprint man makes on matter in a universe that seems indifferent to his passing. Belief is essentially another form of ceremony that asserts man's presence in the face of the universe. The problem, Updike illustrates, is that there is little opportunity for ceremonies in America and little opportunity for belief. Belief, Updike feels, is important. In his first novel, The Poorhouse Fair, the main character, John F. Hook states, "There is no goodness without belief. There is nothing but busyness."³³

David's father seems an example of a good man, though he trades his cars as mercilessly as the next American. It is ambiguous whether or not he has really lost his faith. Updike's fiction indicates, as Norris Yates says, that Updike, like David's father, is reluctant to

accept the absence of God, "although he resolutely faces the possibility."³⁴ Yates says that "unlike Norman Mailer, James Jones, and Joseph Heller, Updike refuses to admit that the search for God is hopeless or unnecessary."³⁵

FOOTNOTES

- 1 "Fiction of the Fifties," Recent American Fiction, p. 42.
- 2 Galloway, The Absurd Hero, p. 10.
- 3 John Updike, "Sunday Teasing," The Same Door, (New York, 1959), p. 83. (Subsequent references to Updike's stories will be given parenthetically in the text using the abbreviations PF-Pigeon Feathers; SD-The Same Door; MS- The Music School).
- 4 Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 11.
- 5 Ibid., p. 10.
- 6 The Creative Present, p. XII.
- 7 Hawthorne and the Modern Short Story (The Hague, 1966), p. 106.
- 8 "John Updike's Fiction," Critique, V (June, 1962), p. 37.
- 9 Ibid., p. 28.
- 10 The American Short Story, p. 71.
- 11 Ward, p. 29.
- 12 Galloway, The Absurd Hero, p. 12.
- 13 "Updike's Quest for Liturgy," Commonweal, LXXVIII, May 10, 1963, p. 195.
- 14 Finkelstein, p. 246.
- 15 Ward, p. 38.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 "Mysteries of the Commonplace," p. 21.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 "Chronicler of the Time of the Death of God," Christian Century, LXXXIV, June 7, 1967, p. 746.
- 20 Galloway, The Absurd Hero, p. 30.

- 21 The Sense of Life in the Modern Novel (Boston, 1964), p. 257.
- 22 Radical Innocence, p. 70.
- 23 Brée, Camus, p. 30.
- 24 Hamilton, p. 746.
- 25 Ward, p. 28.
- 26 "Steel Wilderness," The Christian Century, LXXVIII, February 22, 1961, pp. 246-247.
- 27 Novak, p. 192.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Murray Krieger, The Tragic Vision (New York, 1960), p. 8.
- 31 Novak, p. 195.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 John Updike, The Poorhouse Fair, (New York, 1962), p. 129.
- 34 "The Doubt and Faith of John Updike," College English, XXVI, (March, 1965), p. 474.
- 35 Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

As a writer John Updike cannot be fitted easily into any neat literary niche or school. He is no pundit of alienation, nor is he an advocate of a this-is-the-best-of-all-possible-worlds theory. He cannot rightly be classified as a writer of the New Yorker school, despite his many publications in that magazine. He is neither a beat writer, like Kerouac or John Chellon Holmes, nor a popular fictionist like Jacqueline Susann, nor a plunger into depravity like William Burroughs, nor a black humorist like Joseph Heller or Terry Southern.

His treatment of his protagonists is perhaps indicative of his position in the contemporary American literary scene. His heroes are alienated, yet part of the great mainstream. They are believers and yet doubters, afraid and yet sometimes courageous. They act, but sometimes stand as if frozen. They are other-directed and inner-directed. They hover somewhere in the limbo between the "ultra-straight" world and the radical other society of the social outcast. It is with this world of the American suburb and small town that Updike concerns himself. If one wishes to place him in a mold Updike might be dubbed a fictionist of the contemporary masses. While recent fiction has concerned itself more and more with the outcasts of society, with the grotesque, the sick, the mentally and morally twisted, Updike has chosen to tell the story of the man who goes to work at

eight, five days a week, and returns home faithfully at five, five days a week.

It is this concern with this type of character that has brought about, in part, criticism such as that of Anthony Burgess and Melvin Maddock who state that Updike is simply a clever recorder of the trivial. Though there is justification to the criticism that Updike writes only about small events in the lives of small people, he has never been accused of not being a serious artist with serious intentions. He attempts to peel away some of the layers that cover mass society and expose the fear, compromise, banality, cruelty, and egoism that are also a part of the "good life" and show the terror that lies hidden behind the impassive faces at every bus stop, laundromat or crowded cafeteria. Aldridge's remark that Updike has nothing to say seems unsupportable and Morse's comment that he leaves our culture "unchipped, unchallenged, and unquestioned" is more an exercise in aliteration than sound criticism.

Updike, as a product of this culture, has been affected by existential philosophy. His heroes show strong characteristics of the absurd hero. They demonstrate the estrangement and alienation that is indicative of the absurd and perceive what they believe to be the absurdity of a world void of meaning. They embrace and live their absurdity. Yet for all their kindred qualities, many of Updike's absurd heroes differ from what the French existentialists would consider the ideal. Frequently Updike's heroes are too indwelling to detach themselves and judge their culture's absurdity or lack of it. Others, if they recognize their own absurdity and the chaos of the world cannot bring themselves to admit that it is the true nature of

the universe and act on this knowledge. While some have the courage, others cannot embrace and live absurdity because of fear or indifference or egoism.

Perhaps the major difference between Updike's absurd hero and the hero of Camus or Sartre lies in the question of the causes for man's alienation. Both Updike and Camus see the cause of man's alienation in the natural world. However, Camus places all the blame on the nature of the universe, saying in effect that the primary evil "is natural rather than moral evil."¹ Camus views man as totally a victim of an absurd universe. Nature is a horror. Updike, though he shows great sympathy with mankind, proposes that at least part of the fault is with man himself. Through the actions of his absurd heroes he indicates that part of the failure is due to their egoism, their selfishness, their fear--that they are in part responsible for building the modern Babylon. Camus would ask man to pull himself up out of the pit with his own hands. Updike, as the nature of some of his heroes would indicate, believes that man cannot always do this alone. Man needs the supernatural, the divine. But how man is to reach or touch or be touched by belief in America, Updike is not sure. Yates says, "Being no optimist about this life and no dogmatist about the next, Updike has to be perpetually making the leap of faith."² Indeed, Updike's themes indicate that his existentialism is closer to that of Kierkegaard than Nietzsche.

Perhaps because he must make this leap of faith there is truth in the criticism that Updike presents only the problems and never the answers--that he is a highly skilled observer and is incapable of drawing conclusions from what he sees, that he fails to include

Kaufmann's "third dimension." Guerin La Course says of Updike, "Beyond the scalpel, the cool analytics and aloof understatement he stands paralyzed. No directive depth or height or propulsion moves him from the welter of experiences into the articulation of its mentality."³ His latest book, Couples, provides an ample welter of sexual experience, but again, has disappointed those such as Granville Hicks who anticipated something "stronger and deeper."⁴

Nevertheless, Updike has said he hopes that the experiences would speak for themselves and many do speak with great eloquence of the plight of modern man. He is yet one of America's outstanding literary talents. If he has not accomplished all the critics have demanded of him, he has still brought new insight to American fiction. And he is still a young man.

FOOTNOTES

¹Krieger, p. 153.

²Yates, p. 474.

³"The Innocence of John Updike," Commonweal, LXXVII, February 8, 1963, p. 513.

⁴Hicks, "Domestic Felicity," p. 31.

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VITA

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