The Concept of Black Humor in John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest*

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Abstract:
Most modernist works of art present the modern world as a bleak, barren abyss where human civilization faces its decline. To diminish the disgust of the nihilistic outlooks of the spiritual void in modern life, Updike employs black humor. Humor that Updike uses involves certain elements of American black humor, such as absurdity and anxiety. In *Rabbit at Rest* which is a grotesque allegory of mythical happiness and success in America, Updike's humor questions and undermines many values at the heart of American culture. In this novel certain destructive elements of modern civilization are caricatured, and many characters are made grotesque, specially, by their exaggerated inefficiencies. These techniques make many facets of modern life absurd and laughable. By applying this humor, Updike overcomes the inadequacy of conventional realism in expressing the reality of the contemporary world; therefore, he can be reckoned a modernist writer who challenges and diminishes the loathing of modern desolation through his art.

Key Words: Absurdity, Anxiety, Black Humor, *Rabbit at Rest*, Updike.

Introduction

When John Updike died in 2009, he was one of the most prominent American writers of his generation. As an artist he feels a kind of commitment for himself for depicting human problems. He is highly concerned with the way of life in a materialistic society and in a mass-productive age, where human values and moralities seem to be fading in many respects. But to reduce the disgust of the contemporary realities, and to help his readers cope with the gloomy outlook of modern life, Updike applies black humor.

Being an artist, Updike intelligently recognizes the decline of the contemporary life, and meticulously reflects its realities in his novels. Since Updike's United States is a culture of middle class, each episode of *Rabbit at Rest* presents a new joke at this social class's culture. Through the use of humor, Updike depicts how American middle-class's quest for happiness in the United States in 1980s is problematical and absurd. Updike's humor continually attacks technology and the profit motives in the United States that make modern citizens spiritually collapsed. God seems hardly to exist in *Rabbit at Rest*. In this novel, Updike artistically portrays

the late-eighties world of yuppies, greed, and conspicuous consumption, and criticizes the unchecked freedom in the United States. But humor that Updike uses in his novels often goes far away from that which is simply comical and into the realm of black humor.

The Notion of Black Humor

Black humor, as Seed argues in his *Companion to Twentieth Century United States Fiction*, "is a label applied to a certain kinds of American literature from the late 1950s onward" (159). The label, as he explains, "derives from the classical notion of elemental humors"(159). According to Seed, "Black humor being melancholy, and was used to identify a provocative comedy which was deployed to convey a sense of the absurdity and disorder of contemporary world" (159). O'Neill states that the increasing appearance of black humor becomes most apparent in the twentieth century. As the Theatre of the Absurd of the fifties appears on the formal resources of Surrealism, it causes in turn the major emergence of black humor fiction in the sixties—though the way had already been paved as early as the thirties by Beckett and Raymond Queneau, Flann O'Brien and Alfred Doblin (98).

Typical subjects of black humor narrative, according to Seed, were war, disease, and above all death, but these subjects were treated in styles that thwarted the reader's expectations of seriousness (159). Max Schulz lists the features of black humor as follow: "comic and grotesque treatment of intrinsically tragic material, one-dimensional characters, wasteland settings, disjunctive and atemporal narrative structures, and mocking irreverent tone" (272). Black humor according to Seed, "possesses a transgressive energy which shows itself in violating literary and legal norms of decorum, reflecting writers' sense of the inadequacy of conventional realism to express the contemporary world" (160).

Black humorists often portray the problems and the absurdities of modern world without attempting to offer any solution. Lisa Colletta, in her *Black Humor and the Social Satire in the Modern British Novel*, notes that black humor has "an emphatic lack of belief in its own efficacy as an agent of moral education" (4). According to Coletta, black humor is impressive as "it celebrates the protective capacity of the individual by its insistence on making comic sense out of massive none-sense" (7). It takes on our great fears and makes a joke out of powerlessness, loneliness, ignorance, authority, chaos, nihilism, and death, allowing them to be conquered for a moment. All the forces that would reduce the individual to nothingness are transformed into a source of pleasure (Colletta7).

In black humor style rendering of the central ideas moves from predominantly thematic to predominantly formal. As O'Neill argues, "black humor of varying degrees of intensity may arise from the employment of the grotesque as a stylistic device or of taboo material as subject matter" (92). The basic stylistic devices of black humor, as O'Neill argues, are five in number, and we may call them the satiric, the ironic, the grotesque, the absurd, and the parodic, that each of these devices may be chosen by black humorists in accordance with the degree of intensity of their humor. In thematic realm there are two elements that are found in most of the black humor novels of 1960s America: absurdities and anxiety. These two elements, which make up the black humor that became popular in the 1960s, are mainly used by authors to communicate important ideas during a time of great tension in the United States (Staaby 5).

Absurdity is the first important elements of black humor. At first absurdity appears to be nonsense, but actually reveals some sort of truth upon further consideration. According to Staaby, black humor often uses the absurd mode, which is appropriate given the fact that both tend to deal with serious issues in bizarre ways. The absurd is defined as that which calls into question the

rationality of human beings. Literature is an outlet through which people can express social discontent in an interesting way, often using absurdities as a way to get the reader's attention and to emphasize a point (Staaby 14). But, as Rod Martin in *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrated Approach* states, humor is also an effective way of dealing with anxiety, which is the other key element in the black humor of the 1960s. Humor helps unpleasant or stressful situations seem less awesome by "making light of them and turning them into something to be laughed at" (19). In this way, humor diminishes the threatening appearance of those events that seem to harm one's well-being.

In *Rabbit at Rest,* Updike depicts the absurdity of modern life to express the problems that are imposed on Americans by materialism, technology, and popular media culture in the United States. Besides applying absurdity and anxiety, as two dominant themes of black humor, in *Rabbit at Rest* Updike employs devices such as, irony, satire, and absurd mood to fully depict the futility of modern life, and to communicate important matters.

The Elements of Black Humor in *Rabbit at Rest*

Rabbit at Rest is the fourth and concluding novel of Rabbit series which chronicles the life of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom from his retirement to his death. The comic world of *Rabbit at Rest* continuously rolls on frustrating, absurd, confusing, and uncertain. These anxieties, absurdities, confusions, and uncertainties are the most associated themes of black humor. Updike's black humor in *Rabbit at Rest* mocks many aspects of American life in 1980s including the profligate expenditure of the Ronald Reagan era, the unchecked freedom in the United States in 1980s, technology, media, and materialism which bring about these absurdities and confusions.

Updike's satirical tone mocks the tendency and absurdity of the self-absurd Americans, and their profligate expenditure. Rabbit, who serves as a metaphor of American culture, eats junk food gluttonously, and dies as a consequence of his own appetites, symbolic of a society sinking in its own vulgar excesses. But ironically Rabbit feels morally superior to the larger community, and in this irony the extent of society's disintegration is evident: "He resents the fact that the world is full of debts and nobody has to pay—not Mexico or Brazil, not the sleazy S and L banks, not Nelson ... Rabbit never had much use for old-fashioned ethics but their dissolution eats at his bones" (Updike 400). Rabbit's son, Nelson, is also stuck in a predicament. As Boswell argues, Nelson has expensive taste in clothes, and that he still holds to the view that money is "shit," and easy to come by (214), and that "People don't make money an hour at a time anymore; you just get yourself in the right position and it *comes"* (Updike 23). By caricaturing Nelson, and resembling his appearance to a rat, with a stringy tail along the back of his neck, which is immediately termed a "rat's tail" (Updike 33), and a matching "mouse-colored" mustache, Updike presents a symbolic clue to his predicament,

The hollowness of the concept of "freedom" in the United States is another target which is ridiculed in the novel. Updike satirically expresses American's mindless love of "freedom" in an episode in which Harry hears about Chinese students, in the nightly news, who want freedom. Harry ponders that "They want to be like Americans," but "Meanwhile in America itself the news is that not only President George Bush but Mrs. Bush the First Lady takes showers with their dog Milie." Harry reflects "if that's all the Chinese want we should be able to give it to them" (Updike 191). Through the words of the Japanese expert, Mr. Shimada, Updike further suggests that this unchecked freedom leads inevitably to disorder. Mr. Shimada declares:

> In the United States, is fascinating for me, struggle between order and freedom. Everybody mention freedom, all papers terevision anchor people everybody. Much rove

> and talk of freedom. Skateboarders want freedom to use beach boardwalks and knock down poor old people. Brack men with radios want freedom to selfexpress with super jumbo noise. Men want freedom to have guns and shoot others on freeways in random sport. In California, dog shit much surprise me. Everywhere, dog shit, dogs must have important freedom to shit everywhere. Dog freedom more important than crean grass and cement pavement. (Updike 398)

To explain what he means, he cites the Japanese terms "*giri* and *ninjo*," which refer to the competing needs of the outer world and inner being respectively. He means, America has failed to keep "*giri* and *ninjo*," in proper balance, the result of which have been too much disorder.

Updike also shows how the rise of technology and great emphasis on efficiency neglect the needs of the individuals, and raise a sense of anxiety in the individuals by making them less and less important. Updike depicts this anxiety by ridiculing the society which reduces the importance of the individuals by mindless relying on technology. For Rabbit's surgeon, during his angioplasty, the images provided on the video screen—the "Rabbit Angstrom Show"—represent all of Rabbit that there is to know. The doctors treat Harry's condition like a television program. Dr. Raymond, for instance, speaks of Harry's operative progress as if he was advertising a product on television: "'Whaddya mean? Dr. Raymond response—'looking *great*,' like does voices on television that argue about the virtues of Miller Lite'" (Updike 289).

Dr. Breit, also, treats his patients as if they are nothing more than machines. In the hospital they show him a video, in which "the heart sits in a protective sac, the pericardium, which has to be cut open, *snipped* the video said cheerfully like it was giving a sewing lesson" (*Rabbit* 243). Updike portrays ridiculousness of Dr. Breit by burlesquing his appearance and manner: "Youngish-old Dr. Breit with his painfully fair skin and his plastic-rimmed glasses too big for his button nose, explained the operation in the lulling voice of a nightclub singer who has done the same lyrics so often her mind is free to wander as she sings" (*Rabbit* 176).

The characters themselves accept the image of being a soft machine, which is imposed on them by a mass productive age. Rabbit's friend, Charlie, absurdly believes that human being is nothing more than a "soft machine." While Harry expresses his frustration of the open-heart-surgery during which doctors run the blood through a machine, Charlie states: "What else you think you are champ? You, are just a soft machine" (276). This materialistic view is in contrast to Harry's religious assumptions that man is "A God-made one-of-a-kind with an immortal soul breathed in. A vehicle of grace…. An apprentice angel. All those things they tried to teach you in Sunday school" (*Rabbit* 275).

Rabbit at Rest not only criticizes technology, but the intrusion of the popular media culture. Black humor strategies, which, according to David Seed, are frequently used to burlesque the ubiquitous intrusion of the mass media in everyday life (165), are evident in many scenes in *Rabbit at Rest*. As Hicks argues, recorded throughout the novels are the thoughtless diversions of mass culture and commercials from each specific time period with their awful jollities and accepted vulgarities (1). Since Updike provides an exacting portrait of the middle class and popular culture, according to De Bellis, television is omnipresent in his work. His general view of television is negative both for what it reports, and for what it does to the viewers. For Updike's characters, television is more real than life (432).

Janice, as a representative of American middle-class's culture, is one of the characters in the novel who strives to identify herself with a code of behavior derived from movies. She follows the showy personal lives of movie stars, and sitcom. According to Boswell, what chiefly

bothers Harry is Janice's phony, staged projection, her sense of herself as one more actor in a showy drama: "Janice didn't use to dramatize herself. Ever since her mother died and they bought this condo, she has been building up an irritating confidence, an assumption that the world is her stage and her performance is going pretty well" (Boswell 210). When she and Harry take the grandchildren to go see Melanie Griffith in *Working Girls,* Janice finds a model she all at once wants to imitate. "I want to get a job, too," she tells Harry. "The movie we saw this afternoon, all these women working in New York skyscrapers, made me so jealous" (*Rabbit* 205). As De Bellis notes, after seeing *Working Girls,* Janice becomes convinced that she can become a real-state seller; she does and this leads her to neglect his husband Rabbit, while it proves to her that "she has an objective worth never before tapped" (De Bellis 174).

Updike presents Judy as another character in the novel similarly suffers from inability in differentiating between the reality of their lives and the lives of television characters. She is what Boswell calls "a chronic channel surfer," a typical American child of the day who, like others of generation, is unable to keep her attention focused on anything for longer than ten minutes. Her inner life is deprived of anything more reliable than commercial and sitcoms, as is evidenced by the touching scene out on the Sunfish in which she soothes Rabbit's aching heart by singing to him snatches of commercial jingles, the only songs other than nursery rhymes that she knows by heart (Boswell 211):

> "Splash, splash, I was takin' a bath," Judy's faint voice sings, little feathers of music that fly away, "along about Saturday night…" she has moved from nursery rhymes to television commercials, the first few lines of them until she forgets. "The good times, great taste, of McDonald's…. Toy-o-to…Who could ask for anything more?" It is like switching channels back and forth… "Coke is it," Judy sings, "the most refreshing taste around, Coke is it, the one that never let you down, Coke is it, the biggest taste you ever found!" (*Rabbit* 256)

Updike satirizes a world in *Rabbit at Rest* in which God is strangely absent. He continually shows how modern citizens like the inhabitant of the waste land become spiritually collapsed. Rabbit notes the absence of nuns at the Catholic hospital where he undergoes angioplasty, during which he tries to pray but cannot. During Harry's angioplasty, he reflects on the changes in the atmosphere of the hospital:

> In those years nuns run the place, with their black and white and cupcake frills around their pasty faces, but now nuns have blended into everybody else, or else faded away. Vocations drying up, nobody wants to be selfless anymore, everybody wants their fun. No more nuns, no more rabbis. No more good people, waiting to have their fun in the afterlife…. Now there's Japan, and technology, and the profit motive, and getting all you can while you can. (*Rabbit* 293)

The materialistic atmosphere of this era is further demonstrated in Rabbit's description of his history with Kroll's. As Keener explains, in Rabbit's childish imagination the store with its magical Christmas displays represented the harmonious workings of God and man that created a stable meaningful universe; as a young man employed there, he recognized the store as a human enterprise subject to economic forces, but nevertheless he retained an overall trust "in the place as a whole, its power, its good faith" (Keener 111); ultimately, as a mature adult, when "the system" abruptly closes Kroll's, Harry uses a satirical tone, and criticizes the system in which nothing is sacred: "When the money stopped, they could close down God Himself" (Updike 461).

Anxiety, that is one of the important elements of black humor, pervades the atmosphere of the novel. As Schulz notes, in twentieth century, since group values–beliefs, manners, economic, political, and social ideals–rarely originate naturally, and are beset by the society's fashion and abstraction, this sense of anxiety rises in the individuals (231). As De Bellis explains, "Angstrom," Harry's family name is composed of *angst,* a German word for anxiety, and *strom* a word for stream; therefore Angstrom means "stream of anxiety." It is also a unit of length equal to one ten-billionth of a meter (19). As a way of dealing with anxiety of being so small and insignificance in a twentieth-century mass society, Rabbit Angstrom consoles himself with food. According to Pasewark, Rabbit eats to become larger than an angstrom, and more important in God's eyes than an ant (14). This consumption plots against him, and ironically results in his death. The entire Angstrom family expresses anxiety: Rabbit's son, Nelson, is so unstable that needs cocaine to relax ("I love coke, Mom. And it loves me" [154]); his sister Miriam Angstrom is so anxious over sexual relationships; and even those marrying into the Angstrom family experience high level of anxiety in their lives. Nelson's wife, Teresa "Pru" Lubell Angstrom, out of anxiety and despair sleeps with her father-in-law (De Bellis 19).

Conclusion

Anxiety and bewilderment in Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* are communicated through the use of absurdity and humor. By applying black humor, Updike renders a portrait of America busy losing its faith while embracing pop culture, and creates a fictional world that illustrates the sentiments of the culture in which he lived; therefore, while cynicism is still present in Updike's novels, it is masked by a comic façade. Through using satire and irony, Updike burlesques many middle-class characters, who are intensely under the influence of popular culture, and caricatures destructive elements of modern civilization. But Updike's humor is devoid of any reformative concerns that are aimed at in other types of comedy. It only portrays the problems and the absurdities of modern world without offering any solution. By employing black humor's themes, techniques, and devices, Updike diminishes the disgust of the negative criticism of society, and overcomes the inadequacy of conventional realism in expressing the realities of contemporary world; therefore, he can be reckoned a modernist writer who conquers the loathing of modern malaise through his art.

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