



## From Opposition to Unity: An Analysis of Artistic Technique in *The Centaur*

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### Abstract

*The Centaur* applies unique artistic expression technique with complex and changeable perspectives, different styles in different chapters. The novel intertwined the myth and the reality, the God and the people, achieving the perfect unity of theme and expression form, so revealing that the modern American is full of contradictions in a complex survival dilemma.

**Key words:** Narrative structure; Myth; Reality; Unity of opposites

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Centaur* is the third novel of Updike and won the National Book Award in 1964, but in the domestic academic circle the scholars seldom discuss it. Updike himself was very pleased with his work on *The Centaur*, saying that it was “his most comforting and the most vivid work”. In this book by which he won the National Book Award in the United States, Updike ambitious exhibits superb writing skills. Many scholars have paid attention to the artistic elements (such as structure, characters and theme) of it, which have obvious dual nature. George W. Hunt says that “Nothing in it is just one thing: each event, each personality, each image or symbol takes on multiple referents. What the philosophers call the

‘coincidence of opposites’ is ever at work here.” (Hunt, 1980, p.50) The dual nature opposition is the core of the inner construction of the Centaur, in which the narrative structure, theme, characters, and so on, display dual nature, and eventually intertwine. Author freely and appropriately made Chiron who is the centaur (a creature half like man half like horse) in the myth and legend of ancient Greece and Caldwell who is an ordinary man, into one person, giving the mediocre life of ordinary people with the mysterious shine, let readers feel that there is no absolutely boundaries between god in myth and ordinary people, and even those who are humble can also have divinity. Chiron in *the Centaur* is not only an image with far-reaching implications, but also the character involved and penetrated into the whole story.

### 1. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

*The Centaur* has nine chapters, in which Updike writes different heroes and different narrative angles in every chapter of the story. The narrative structure of the novel is based on the three perspectives of “father”, “son” and “myth”, and there is a chapter taking “son” as the observer between every two chapters. This structure clearly highlights the position of the observer, which gives the writer himself more words. The first chapter is written from the perspective of the omniscient third person narration, about the injury of Caldwell, interspersed with a fragmented image Chiron. Readers can easily grasp the image Chiron shortly, even vaguely, as in “He tried to keep that leg from touching the floor, but the jagged clatter of the three remaining hooves sounded so loud.” In the second chapter, Peter is the narrator of the story from his perspective to observe his father Caldwell. The third chapter is the rural myth, very short, and full of the mythical story implying Caldwell’s ideal education mode. The fourth chapter takes the reader back to the real world by saying that “AFTER SCHOOL I went up

to my father's room", and again takes his son Peter as the narrator, recalling the winter afternoon 14 years before. And the fifth chapter is of the newspaper obituary type. The sixth chapter takes Peter as first person narrator about his surreal dreams. The seventh chapter uses the third person narration. Then the eighth chapter turns back to Peter's narrative. In the last chapter, Chapter 9, takes the third person, placing the myth as the core, and for the first time "he" is used in the third person narrative, which undoubtedly is Peter's point of view, but at this time Peter represents the writer's voice more than before. In short, the narrative angle of view and the sound of the story are changing, while the wandering is not fixed. The meaning of the construction of the author is attempting to convey the world that the author constructs is a world full of contradictions, complicated and confusing. In this contradictory world or life, everyone is struggling to find and display the value and significance of the individual. Updike's construction of the text in *The Centaur* better reflects the theme of the novel.

In *The Centaur*, the writer combines Chiron who is a god in Greek myth and Caldwell who is an ordinary person together. The coincidence of these two images shows the human soul with the coexistence of human nature and divinity. And the concrete manifestation technique is stylistic transformation. *The Centaur* in the stylistic transformation is the main technique used by Updike to hybridize myth and reality. What's more, its writing styles include realistic narrative, myths and legends, obituary and hymns, songs and so on, with stylistic transformation blending the boundaries between myth and reality, so that the atmosphere of the novel keeps floating between reality and super reality. Although the time span is small and the story is simple, the author has used a surreal narrative style and made the myth, reality, dreams and memories, interspersed with crosses easily, let the story develop in the interweaving. In the novel, a few days in the ordinary life is extended to three generations of people's life trajectory, drawing three generations of Caldwell to fight, showing a strong emotional tension and tragic depth, the characters of which seem in a prosaic life situation, which contains profound meaning. This kind of style is a bit similar to the way of the sticking, not only enriching and strengthening the novel's magic color, but also giving meaning with more complete expression through the crossed and extended narrative about past and future, reality and dream, and other dimensions. The narrative transformation strategy used in *The Centaur* makes the comparison between the human and the divinity more vivid.

Specifically, the most important is that the writer narrates by syncretizing Chiron's image and the protagonist Caldwell's real life. In the novel, the crossover of Caldwell, Centaur (as a half man, half horse creature), Chiron (as the god of Olympus) makes the story full of surreal colors. In the first chapter, the narration mixes

reality and myth. The third chapter of the novel, the style switched from the narrative style to a pure legend style, lifting the surreal atmosphere of the novel to the top. This style of writing has strengthened the atmosphere of the novel, and has highlighted that the soul of Caldwell is equal to Chiron. This narrative method becomes of decisive significance to the work. The writer uses the myth to symbolize and metaphorize the reality, so as to extend the dimension of thinking, making ordinary stories into a deep sense of tragedy. The fifth chapter's style conversion is obituary, the narrator of which may be the president Zimmerman. The ninth chapter is the same as the first chapter, in which the description of reality is mixed with myth.

The centaur Chiron is a character in Greek myth while a big feature of the Greek myth is god's human nature. Chiron is a semi god in the classification, so his body's human nature is very strong. In *The Centaur*, the writer chose this image to be the representative of divinity in the human soul, which is of certain difficulties in the performance. Updike maybe wants to make up for the lack of Chiron body and highlight the entire work of the ultra realistic color, so he chose stylistic transformation narrative strategy which can strongly highlight the myth.

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## 2. INTEGRATION OF REALITY AND MYTH

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### 2.1 Form of Integration

The unique feature of *The Centaur* is its integration of reality and myth as a whole, showing in parallel the world of god and the world of human, making the characters of the reality correspond to the heroes in Greek myth, such as Caldwell and Chiron, Peter and Prometheus, Zimmerman and Zeus, Vera and Venus, and so on. Schiff A. James says that "Of Updike's many and varied attempts to go beyond the limitations and predictability of plain realism in his novels, *The Centaur* remains one of his finest works." (Schiff, 1998, p.20) In this novel, Updike practices the creative way of writing, blending the myth into the realistic scene of the story, with the use of multi angle narrative approach. In some chapters, the reality of the Caldwell and the myth of the Chiron overlap. Through the integration of fairy tales and reality, Updike sketched out the real life of people in the contemporary society, and it has been reproduced in a creative way. The structure and theme of the novel are in a perfect integration. As Updike himself says that "the book as well as the hero is a centaur." (Greiner, 1984, p.105)

The novel's name comes from the image Chiron whose body is half like human and half like a horse in the Greek myth. In the novel, Updike borrows the myth of Chiron, which has a strong symbolic significance. In the opening chapter and the ending chapter of the novel, two images Chiron and Caldwell appear alternately, integrated into

one. Chiron is an image of his body's upper part like human and the lower part like a horse in the Greek myth, who is knowledgeable and wise and is a mentor of the young Greek heroes. Depending on the myth, Chiron is poisoned by an arrow in a melee of a group of Centaur, which made him with unbearable pain, living death. But because he is a god, he cannot die, so he asked the chief god Zeus, allowing him to die to exchange for the liberation of Prometheus bound. Zeus finally agreed to his request to release Prometheus, and Chiron became a star.

In the novel *The Centaur*, Updike used the fairy tale about Chiron, and mixed it into the narration of the actual life. In the first chapter of the novel, the author uses the unique method to write the real and unreal life of Chiron and Caldwell. At the beginning of the novel, the ankle of the protagonist Caldwell was shot and hurt by a student's prank with a steel arrow in biology class, while in the midst of pain and confusion, he had to leave the classroom for treatment. Regardless of the fact that the scene is described in realism, but the plot itself essentially is a replica of the story of Chiron, he is a teacher in real life, but was shot by an arrow, the same like the story of the myth of Chiron. Therefore, the novel immediately turns an ordinary teacher into Chiron. The metaphor that Chiron was poisoned by an arrow actually refers to the pain and suffering he endured in the real life. Author describes Caldwell's pain with animal vocabulary rather than as human words: The pain extended a feeler into his head and unfolded its wet wings along the walls of his thorax, so that he felt, in his sudden scarlet blindness, to be himself a large bird waking from sleep. (Updike) On Caldwell's way to the garage, he is transformed into the centaur Chiron, "he tries to make his legs not to touch the floor, but the remaining three hooves clattered loudly". (Updike) When he arrived at the garage, upon arrow being pulled out, he has turned into a teacher in reality again: He put his injured foot up on a severed fender and lifted his trouser leg...Through his knee Caldwell felt Hummel's back shift with twitches of fitting; he felt metal touch his skin through his sock. The fender shuddered unsteadily. Hummel's shoulders tensed with effort and Caldwell clamped his teeth upon an outcry, for it seemed the cutters were biting not into a metal shaft but into a protruding nerve of his anatomy. (Updike) The three workers in the garage turned into Cyclops garage who was the students of Chiron and have learned from Chiron. On his way back to the classroom from the garage, he met Vera who just finished bathing, when he became centaur Chiron while Vera became Venus. Image Vera standing in the steam reduced the story of Chiron and Venus. They were of the same clan. Chiron was the father Chronos's "love seed" left to Philyra in his energetic incarnation as a horse, which made his mother would rather turn into a tree and reluctant to raise their child. God's world is licentious. Venus lured Chiron with her beauty, but Chiron had resisted the temptation of love and

rejected her love. This episode ended with the emergence of Venus and the disappearance of Zimmerman in the bush, which also indicates that the incarnation of the role of Zimmerman as Zeus. Zimmerman is the key of the school where Caldwell worked, the same as Olympian chief god Zeus. In the words of the Venus, Zeus was "a libertine womanizer, and in real life Caldwell is always worried that he may be fired if he has seen Mrs. Herzog walking out from the principal's office with dishevelled clothes. As John Mctavish points out that "Zimmerman, after all, is the earthly personification of Zeus, who is not only the principal god on Mount Olympus but also the most lecherous. The actions of the school's principal, therefore, are quite in character for the mythical figure he is embodying." (Mctavish, p.601)

In the sixth chapter, Peter appears from time to time in the image of Prometheus. "AS I LAY ON MY ROCK various persons visited me. First came Mr. Phillips my father's colleague and friend, his hair indented by the memory of a shortstop's cap. He held up his hand for attention and made me play that game which he believed made the mind's hands quickly." (Updike) After a while, when Mr. Phillips played volleyball, Peter felt that hubbub is sounded on all the tops of mountains behind him. "I strained to bat it back over the net but my wrists were chained with ice and brass." (Updike) When he wanted to take his purse, my shoulder muscles ached in their frozen sockets; my back seemed welded to the rock. The words "rock" or "chained" constantly remind the readers Peter is Prometheus.

With the development of the plot of the story, the protagonist's inner world and real life contradiction conflict intensifies, which metaphorizes that Caldwell in life bear various kinds of hardships, made a last resort, that is, sacrifice himself to his family and his son's future; just as Chiron at the expense of his life in exchange for the rebirth of Prometheus.

At the end of the novel, the Chiron was alone in the snow, walking to the Buick car which was divided. "He tried to keep that leg from touching the floor, but the jagged clatter of the three remaining hooves sounded so loud," in which Chiron and Caldwell combined again. Here, myth and reality are blended once again, and the myth takes account of the reality. The description here is like the first chapter of the novel, which is still a myth and reality integration, in which the characters are located in the myth, but heavy snow and Buick car are objects in the realistic scene. In this narrative, there are both factual descriptions and metaphors. The fact is that Caldwell is wanting to get back home in a new Buick car, and here the old Buick is a metaphor. This old Buick car in 1936 in the novel repeated in failure, make Caldwell and his son weary on the way home for three days, which represent Caldwell's failure life. In this sense, the image Chiron with Caldwell's walking to the old Buick would say that he has accepted his fate. Because "he discovered that in

giving his life to others he entered a total freedom," he found a new life and was reborn. Caldwell who sacrificed himself like a tragic hero in color, seemed to be the shadow of Christ.

## 2.2 Internal Consistency

The ancient myths and legends and the reality of the modern story seem totally unreal, but upon some analysis, it can be found that the story of Chiron and the story of Caldwell in fact have a lot of similarities.

First of all, the incidents of the two have revealed the pains suffered by the good people in life. In Greek myth, Chiron is a mentor to many of the Greek heroes, was unfortunately and accidentally poisoned by a student's arrow, and he was overwhelmed with pain and lived with death. On the surface, Heracles let Chiron suffer pain. In fact, is not just the fate playing Chiron. Chiron gave up immortality while he requested for exchanging the rebirth of Prometheus, free Prometheus who were bound for stealing fire. Caldwell's passion begins with the beginning of a symbolic plot: Caldwell's ankle was shot by a student's arrow and hurt. In the reality of the story, from the surface of the student renovated the teacher, and in fact. It is a cruel reality that is playing the trick and hurting the middle school teachers. The crossed and integrated description of the two images helps readers quickly enter the world of Chiron and Caldwell. Also, for his son Peter, Caldwell sacrificed his dreams, living a humble life. Peter finally realized his dream and became an artist when he grew up.

As for their profession, both Chiron and Caldwell are teachers, the former of which is teaching human and Greek heroes various techniques, the latter of which is teaching the natural science on the platform. The first and third chapters of the novel describe the scenes when they are in class. In character, the two are good, kind, and willing to sacrifice. Chiron gave up his immortality in exchange for his death for Prometheus's freedom; Caldwell sacrificed of his dreams for his son, for the family, accepting the spirit of death, at the same time full of love for students and strangers as well.

In this way, a kind person is accidentally suffered, bearing difficulties, temporarily died (Chiron is in physical death, Caldwell is in spirit death), which are the common elements of the two stories.

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## 3. INTEGRATION OF GOD AND MAN

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In the front page of the novel, Updike cited the words of theologian Karl Barth: "Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth." These words are quoted from "Dogmatics" written by a Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Updike was deeply influenced by his religious thought, so this passage can be regarded as the point of

understanding the novel. Heaven and earth are a basic contradiction of the mutual opposition. For example, the kingdom of heaven is god's world on behalf of spirit, while the earth is secular on behalf of the material. There is a contradiction between spirit and material. Victor Strandberg says that "Duality essentially means the division of reality into two dissociated spheres: earth and heaven, matter and spirit, flesh and soul." (Strandberg, 1982, p.187) Karl Barth regards human as a creature between heaven and earth, living in the middle, being the combination of the two. Man is essentially a creature with the characteristics of both gods and animals, and half of them are beasts, and half of them are gods. Therefore, people not only live in the spirit world, but also live in the material world; not only have the spiritual needs, but also material needs; not only pursue noble spiritual realm, but also meet the trouble for the lack of daily necessities. People are secular, subject to the constraints of time and space, but want to pursue infinite and eternal realm, so the human's worship of God is reflecting the pursuit of that aspiration.

But when humanity is between the poles, which pole would the human tends to deviate to? The forefathers believed in the world of myth and religion, so they are very close to the divinity, but how about the people in modern society? In the modern society, people's belief is missing, and people are more and more close to the secular world, to the secular and mediocre, making the mankind farther away from the divinity. Karl Barth thinks that heaven is the world that human cannot perceive and the earth is the world that humans can understand, which is not to say that people should not feel and touch heaven, but that, in this era of expansion of the material, people have not been able to stick to the transcendent heaven, but more and more close to the earth ground.

*The Centaur* reflects the dual nature between heaven and earth, god and human, human and animals, soul and body. Character Chiron that has the duality of men and horses, represents human contradiction and unity: He is standing between heaven and earth, with a life in the world of mortals, and on the other hand with eternal divinity. Image Chiron who is half like human, half like horse, symbolizes the dual nature of people, between heaven and earth, secular and yearning for divinity, although he is in the fall of the world, he is still longing for heaven. The dual nature embodies the unity and opposition of human nature and divinity, the ordinary and the noble, the secular and the sacred. Updike believes human have the tendency to embrace divinity, but they also have the tendency to be subject to the dark side of humanity: greed, corruption, indulgence and evil. The reality and myth are considered to be the opposites, but in *The Centaur*, Updike naturally placed the dual nature into one to tell the story of ordinary people in the modern society, in which Caldwell is of human nature, and is endowed with the divine nature. The novel explores how

to solve the conflict between the divinity and human nature, to find “the place where the man and the horse are integrated”.

*The Centaur* shows opposition and dependence of Caldwell’s dual nature, represents the tension between human nature and divinity. James A. Schiff says “In his epigraph Updike describes ‘man’ as ‘the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth,’ and his protagonist, George Caldwell, is himself a divided creature—part god, part beast.” (Schiff, 1998, p.23) Here in the novel, Chiron represents the eternal life, while Caldwell represents the people in plight with time and space constraints. Chiron’s nobleness is that when he was tortured by the occasion of the pain he still thought to use good deeds to end his suffering, so that to benefit human beings, and he rescued Prometheus who was punished by Zeus. Caldwell’s body also shows a dual nature. Divinity implies the sublime of Caldwell’s belief, which is love and altruism. On the one hand, he has the love of others, and strives to impart knowledge to students, has a strong sense of responsibility for his families, and also cares for the colleagues. This is his divine nature. David Thorburn says “Caldwell’s gift is to bring God’s infinite mercy down to earth in the only form it can take.” (Thorburn & Eiland, 1979, p.133) At the same time, his body hurt, and constantly threatened with death, full of the fear of death. This is the human side of his time and space limitations. Chiron can be used to live in the way of others, but also can be used in the way of death for others. But in real life, Caldwell can not save others with death. Because he is a student’s teacher, he is a husband and a father, he can not evade the real life responsibilities, so for his family and work responsibilities, he chose to go back to the school which is like hell. This is Caldwell’s ordinary and humble side. For Caldwell, one pole is on the ground of the humble. The other pole is yearning for the heaven of the noble. Humbleness is a kind of process of his life, a kind of subjective state of mind, the result of his life, and a kind of objective spirit effect.

Updike uses the words of Karl Barth to lead the whole novel, making a contrast between Chiron suffering and Caldwell suffering, to convey his vivid understanding of modern American life. In the fate of injustice, life is suffering everywhere. In ancient time, the ancient Greeks used the story of God to express their attitude about the suffering—with the physical death of the body to save others, while saving others would get self-help. Man created the myth that the “perceived” and the “non-perceived” can be connected. Updike exhibits another world behind the secular life world through the blending of myth and reality. The world behind is a prelapsarian innocence unstained world before the human committed the original sin, is a world echoed with the metaphor everywhere. With the combination of Chiron and Caldwell, Updike transfers how people integrate the divinity and human nature of Caldwell in the modern

society, find the true value of life, and find the juncture that the man and the horse are connected.

The novel ends with “Chiron accepted death”. Some critics argue that Caldwell has finally sacrificed his life for his son in the end of *The Centaur*. But Updike points out “I didn’t mean Caldwell to die in *The Centaur*; he dies in the sense of living, of going back to work, of being a shelter for his son”. (Updike & Plath, 1994, p.27) Robert Detweiler also says “He does not die physically, in love with death as he is, but chooses, for the sake of family and vocational duty, to return to the hell of daily teaching.” (Detweiler, 1984, p.66) At the end of *The Centaur*, Updike said: “he discovered that in giving his life to others he entered a total freedom.... Sky and Gaia mated again”. Because of the dedication, all these regain vitality. Updike said: “it (Morality) is indeed alive”. So Caldwell is just as Chiron, having a religious tragic, just lack of Chiron’s noble beauty for he is an ordinary person.

In the novel, the other character that is going through the whole story is Caldwell’s son, Peter. By telling his father’s story, his memories of the days spending together with his father, Peter has got a sense of their own life, and finally understand his father’s “sacrifice”. In a loft in Manhattan, he challenged himself and questioned his father on whether his father’s sacrifice is worth, “is it the reason that my father abandoned his life?” In the eyes of the young Peter, the world was a depressing place, full of pains and conflicts, so he complained. He complained that his father is clueless, with meager income, with which it is difficult to make life. As the story progressed, Peter was becoming more and more aware of his father’s selfless dedication and sacrifice spirit. He realized that what his father worries are not about his own difficulties, but the responsibility of the family and the son’s future. The three days of extraordinary experience with his father made him understand how to repay his father’s sacrifice, and forced him to change himself. If the young Peter is full of hatred for his father, then adult Peter is full of reverence and guilt for his father.

Through the recalling of Peter’s childhood with his father through the days, the father and the centaur Chiron are integrated. Peter had a sense of guilt, and eventually realized what message his father wanted to send to him. Love is the source of all things, which are what Chiron tries to transfer to his students in Olympus. “Only virtue lives on. But it is alive.” Caldwell’s Father’s love is alive.

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## CONCLUSION

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Though *The Centaur* is not as popular as his “Rabbit Series,” it is highly valued for its remarkable writing skills and theme. The writing skill in this novel reflects the perfect blend of theme and form. Updike describes what happens in realistic level, as well as in mythical level, and explores the dual narrative mode. The dual nature opposition is the core of the inner construction of

*the Centaur*. By the application of various artistic writing, the work achieves a perfect unity of theme and techniques with Greek mythology and reality intertwined. This paper provides a new way for the study of *The Centaur* and helps to enrich and develop the study of Updike's works.

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