



Paradise Pursuit in John Updike's Works

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Received 24 June 2016; accepted 13 August 2016

Published online 26 September 2016

Abstract

In the "Rabbit" series and *The Centaur*, the disappearance of human ideal world and unpleasant work and daily life are revealed from different angles by the author Updike, in which their protagonists have been always pursuing an ideal, in order to get rid of the mediocrity and depression in their daily life. In this paper, the author discusses the thoughts and feelings towards the pursuit of human paradise.

Key words: Paradise; Labor; Pursuit; Harry; Caldwell

Liu, Q. Z. (2016). Paradise Pursuit in John Updike's Works. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 13(3), 53-58. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8867>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8867>

INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s of the American society, World War II has been cleared away, but the following wars like the Vietnam War, the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War impact the moralities and values of the American tradition and unprecedentedly challenge its religious beliefs. In the era of modern American life and the time of Updike, there appeared many problems such as the vulgar social and cultural values, empty values, and prevailed materialism, while the diversity of the world and the development of modern society continuously dissolve and distort human's beliefs, in which the Garden of Eden in the human mind has been collapsed.

However, what has been never changed in the human's minds of humans is their expectation to find the lost dreamy paradise with milk and honey which God has promised to keep for humans.

In his series of novels, Updike has been trying to find a place that is similar to the original pure ideal place, and create the original natural state—Eden. The finding and reconstruction of the Garden of Eden are going throughout Updike's entire novel writing, whether in his novels and short stories, or novellas. In his writing, this belief, ideal and life are in a poetic fusion, showing elegance and harmony with a primitive pastoral atmosphere. On the one hand, it responds to people's inner demands; on the other hand, it expresses the author's dissatisfaction and criticism to the real society.

1. THE EDEN COMPLEX

The Garden of Eden, in *the Bible* which is one of the sources of Western literature, has become the common image of the beautiful home of mankind, a symbol of the perfect original life of the human being, carefree and affective. The Garden of Eden is like paradise, full of prosperity and happiness, with all kinds of trees growing, various exotic fruits and different colorful flowers, rivers flowing through the garden, and creatures comfortable living on the land. Human ancestors Adam and Eve were living in this rich, peaceful and tranquil place, and later as a result of stealing and eating the Fruit of Wisdom on the wisdom tree in the garden, they were driven out of the *Garden of Eden* by God, and lived a suffering life. Since that day the humans were driven out of Eden by God, the struggling human in the real misery life has never ceased to pursue their dream to return to Eden which has been unconsciously embedded in human's mind as a kind of collective unconsciousness. Most of human activities can be seen as their efforts to return to paradise and re-establish their contact with God.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse portrays the non-repressive existence mode of the two archetypes Orpheus and Narcissus in the ancient Greek mythology, giving them a new interpretation of philosophy and cultural connotation. In his view, the human will build a new order in human society—a non repressive order. This non-repressive order contains the following elements: The transformation of toil (labor) into play, and of repressive productivity into “display”—a transformation that must be preceded by the conquest of want (scarcity) as the determining factor of civilization (Marcuse, 1998, p.193). Contrary with the western tradition hero Prometheus who is suffering with jobs, technology and the eternal misery, Orpheus is living with singing as his language while game as his work. The world of Orpheus and Narcissus represents a poetic world, in which human is in non repressive existence in the pursuit of freedom and non-repressive existence. They have got rid of the pain of oppression, being free and open, and full of vitality. Such people are inoculating with other people and nature as a whole, who play freely and dwell poetically in the earth.

The Garden of Eden often appears in American literary works. In Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, both are in a quest for the Garden of Eden. The title of Steinbeck's work *East of Eden* directly uses the image of the Garden of Eden. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*, *Of Mice and Men* and other works, people think of the Garden of Eden as a paradise, always as a heaven of the world, and in the novel, the faith of the reconstruction of Eden is going throughout the changes and developments of the main characters' thoughts in the novel. After World War II, the United States novel has been continuously influenced by pastoral literature, and one of the recurring themes is to regain the paradise through the movement of space, stopping the clock rotation, in order to return to the past.

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2. THE IDEAL PLACE

With the rapid development of capitalism, the increasing environmental pollution, resource depletion, the relationship between man and nature is more and more unharmonious. Updike's *Rabbit* series, as a record of the social changes in the forty years after the war in the

United States, show that such an environment has been destroyed in the world. In *Rabbit, Run*, readers can find the dilapidated environment, in which Harry catches sight of a messy broken chaos on the way home after work. There are the deserted ice plant, its rotting wooden skids and Ashcans. Harry describes his home with derogatory terms like wan, the eyes of an animal, dung, molders, decay and so on, which sufficiently evidence his discontent and disgust to his homeland. Around the scruffy world, rabbit's house is a piece of decadence and confusion. The clutter behind him in the room—the Old-fashioned glass with its corrupt dregs, the chock-full ashtray balanced on the easy-chair arm, the rumpled rug, the floppy stacks of slippery newspapers, the kid's toys here and there broken and stuck and jammed, a leg off a doll and a piece of bent cardboard that went with some breakfast-box cutout, the rolls of fuzz under the radiators, the continual crisscrossing mess (Updike, 1962, p.14).

In Rabbit's first drive west, he is driving on the dense highway network, seeing modern roadside signs everywhere, the damaged ridges lying in the town and city, the industrial ruins between no wood, various factories and garbage.... The change of human's control on the earth has caused changes on the small Kaki town: The idyllic farms disappeared, replaced by villas which are like broken mirrors segmented by TV antennas.

In *Rabbit Is Rich*, Harry witnesses the terrible world, even green grass in the golf course turning into black, every blade of grass under his feet going to die.

In *Rabbit at Rest*, with the speeding up of the industrialization and urbanization, nature has been threatened by growing crises, human production and living environment has changed dramatically, and the environmental pollution is becoming more and more prevalent. Through the eyes of Rabbit, Updike looks out the sacred land of Florida, but under its heaven-like appearance, the hidden is the decline and death. The disappearance of ideal world makes human's psychological order reach their limit that it can endure, so human cannot infiltrate themselves in high-quality aesthetic pleasure, with poetic existence far away from people's spirit and vision.

In the face of the disappearance of ideal world and the worsening situation of the relationship between man and nature, human has no other choice but correctly reconstruct a reasonable relationship between man and nature, pursues the harmonious development of man and nature, to achieve the sustainable development of human beings. In *Rabbit, Run*, Updike's pursuit of the harmonious development of human and nature is obvious. In the face of reality, Harry chooses to escape, to reshape his own spiritual world. In the pursuit of his ideal and his true self, Harry chooses to return to the embrace of nature. He sets returning to nature as his goal, to seek comfort in nature. He is going to

follow the Appalachian Valley down to the wonderful, comfortable cotton fields. He yearns for the sea. Harry's choice of returning to nature fully reflects his pursuit of the harmonious development between human and nature.

Later, working in the garden of Mrs. Smith, Harry finds the Garden of Eden, achieving harmony between man and nature.

The scenery of the Garden of Eden is mostly expressed by the beautiful flowers. In Mrs. Smith's garden, there are thousands of flowers and trees. Updike is extremely patient and meticulous in the use of beautiful and colorful language to describe the appearance of the whole garden. The garden is full of flowers, such as crocus, Daffodil, violet, forsythia, rose, nasturtium, poppy, petunia, rhododendron unmatched in the United States, magnolia, cherry tree, crabapple, plum tree and so on, which keep the eyes fully occupied, and there are many birds and various of vegetation, all of which make people feel that this little garden is like the whole world. When describing a variety of plants, Updike sweeps away his dark plain narration before, suddenly giving the small garden a multitude of colors: dull red, golden, whiteness, black, purple, salmon, pink... At the same time, he also describes it from different angles such as the olfactory, auditory and visualization to praise the small garden as a beautiful place. This is an idealized utopian world. In this land of idyllic beauty created by Updike, we can find easily the human expectations of Eden life and patterns. Here the life is long, quiet and peaceful, with elegant beauty. The garden has a wall with a variety of animals and plants meticulously farmed, which is close to the powerful symbol of human imagination about heaven, and which is an integration of natural beauty and human architectural order. In modern society, people generally have a sense of fear, insecurity and wandering. However, in this garden, people can not only have a good rest, but also have their life guaranteed, which is the most ideal dwelling place expected by the modern people.

In the *Bible*, Adam, a human ancestor, is responsible for the care of the Garden of Eden. In the novel the prototype that takes care of the garden is precisely the reappearance of Adam, and the garden is left by Mrs. Smith's husband Horace. The nickname of Horace is Harry, which implies that Harry is the owner of the garden. Correspondently, the prototype of the garden of Mrs. Smith is the Garden of Eden.

When Harry is working in the garden, he is just like Adam and Eve, full of happiness and security. In Horace Garden of Mrs. Smith, Harry lives poetically in the garden like Eden, regaining nature via working with the hoe on the land, understanding the universe existence and origin. The spirit of Rabbit is fully integrated into the wonderful nature, in which the relationship between human and nature achieves harmony to the ultimate.

Similarly, in the novel *The Centaur*, Updike does also make a detailed description of the natural beautiful scenery on Chiron's way to class. There are cedar, silver fir, arbutus, wild pear, cornel, box, etc.. Fragrance of flowers, trees and new branches are everywhere, with the singing of the birds. Vargo points out that "while Chiron hurries to his class, the sonorous series of names for the herbs and flowers and poisons that Chiron uses create an unearthly quality; the recitation of his druggist's knowledge bears the character of invocation." (Vargo, 1973, p.458)

The place is called Arcadia in which Chiron and the students teach and study, and it means "the paradise on the earth" or "the land of idyllic beauty". In this place, shepherds, in two and three, on the grass with flowers blossoming, or under the shade of trees, are talking with eloquence, telling about the story and legends handed down, or missing alone their lover far away, or singing to compete with each other; people can talk and interact with gods including Appollo, Orpheus, Goddess of Song, Goddess of Fate, Goddess of Forest, etc.. Here is the heaven of poetry, the home of music, no hard work, no worries, no war persecution, where people live leisurely and carefree, isolated, and have pastoral life, with the time staying in spring forever, birds twittering and flowers fragrant. Like the Garden of Eden in the *Bible*, it is a place that the modern hard working people are longing for. This is an ideal place bringing inspiration and creativity to many writers. In the Renaissance, Both Sannazaro, an Italian poet, and Philip Sydney, a British poet, wrote poetry or drama about Arcadia. In addition, its influence on the future generations is not only in the literature, but also into all areas of people's social life, showing the collective expectation of people of all ages. Italy Portugal Acadia college in seventeenth Century and Arcadia poetry society in eighteenth Century are named after it.

Chiron talks to the students about *the Genesis of All Things*, and he gives the students a description of the beginning of the universe. Here Updike makes the most complete portray of an imaginative earthly paradise, which is in the golden age of Greek mythology. It is said that in the early days of human society, there were no four seasons on the earth and it was always warm as in spring. People had no toil work, for there were a rich variety of vegetables and fruits and grains. Green grass and trees were everywhere, flowers were blooming like a piece of brocade, nectar was dripping continuously from the trees, and milk was flowing in the river. Men ate only acorns, fruit, and honey that dripped from trees, drinking the milk of sheep and goats. There were no walls, no war, no laws, only trust, justice and security. The world was as harmonious as a beehive. Men lived without cares or labor. In this pure land, people deeply attached to each other, no hatred and diaphragm; man and nature were in harmony. Men never grew old. Death, to them, was

no more terrible than sleep. As described in the Bible: leopard and lamb harmoniously get along. The people here were permeated with a kind of joy of all things, and all things were in harmony together.

Updike, through the Greek art charm, shows that people may have a free and harmonious state with fantasy, which is not only the dream of Greek, but the dream of all people in all times. In their dream, the ideal harmonious and free state of human being are retained, which has been lost or cannot be obtained in reality.

3. THE IDEAL WORK

Harry has been looking for “something”, which is Harry’s motions of Grace, and it also reveals the meaning of his “run”. Looking for something is what Harry is different from the others in the mediocre world. He wants to escape from the real life, to find what he wants. As he says in the novel, “I do feel, I guess, that somewhere behind all this, there’s something that wants me to find it” (Updike, 1962, p.120). Then, when Harry plays golf with the local priest Eccles, he catches sight of the ball rolling into the cave, and he finds his high school basketball sensation, and suddenly he excitedly exclaims, “That’s it!” (Updike, 1962, p.126) Greiner says that “Rabbit craves fluidity, freedom, in short the motions of grace as exemplified not only by Pascal but also by the tee shot. It makes no difference that he cannot define ‘it’; he knows that ‘it’ is there.” (Greiner, 1984, p.58) There seems to be something in Rabbit’s mind, and because it cannot be accurately expressed, he has to call this thing “it”. “It” is “something” that he has been looking for. If we say that “It” is the pursuit of Rabbit, then the next question is: “What is ‘it’?”

Rabbit is an excellent basketball player in high school, taking basketball as a very important aspect of his life and thought. When playing basketball, he feels equal to anything: running, stopping, passing, shooting, doing everything so well, so perfect. His unparalleled performance on the court earns him the appreciation of the coach, the admiration of his teammates, and the adoration of the girl. Rabbit, as a basketball star, is a perfect man. It is worth noting that most athletes on the pitch strive to score a basket, but Rabbit is not the same, playing not for scoring—“you ran not as the crowd thought for the sake of the score but for yourself, in a kind of idleness.” (Updike, 1962, p.40) For Rabbit, the score is not so important, and what is important is playing basketball itself, because only at that time he can give full play to show their ability, to prove the existence of the self. Detweiler says “Basketball is not really a game for him but a model for existence.” (Detweiler, 1984, p.37) In this sense, the basketball court is Rabbit’s paradise, where he can find his value and perfect self. And “the whole novel, in a sense, is his

restless, mindless necessity of trying to become all over again the county high scorer, the champion, the darling of the crowds.” (Ibid.) The freedom, the perfectness, the glory and the self that Rabbit is asking for are the essence of “something”, and his dream is to find all these (something). And while he plays golf, Rabbit finds the feeling similar to high school basketball playing. Schiff points out that “Harry’s movements are haphazard and impulsive; he simply runs toward desire, and away from entrapment. His primary impulse is to regain what he once possessed.” (Schiff, 1998, p.37)

In *Rabbit, Run*, Harry is working as a peeling tool salesman for kitchen supplies company. Salesman is a very representative job in the United States. For Harry, the salesman has not much autonomy, and the only thing he has to do is to hand the company’s product to others. Whether “accept” or “transfer”, Harry cannot control the process of the whole process. Every day Harry is constantly on the run but does not know what to do and what he wants to do.

In *Rabbit Redux*, Updike makes the reader feel the same way by the career change of Harry. During the time that came in 1969, Harry was not a salesman, but typesetter for the printing plant in the town. Manual typesetting was once one of the signs of handicraft production, when the industry needs individuals to make the manual labor into products so labor can fully reflect its value. In this situation, the people are satisfied and happy, achieving the meaning and dignity of individual in the work. However, it is difficult to realize the meaning of personality and work in the modern society. In *The Poorhouse Fair*,

Conner scoffs at the idea that “a young carpenter in Syria two thousand years ago” could have been a God. “As to be a carpenter,” Hook answers, “it has often struck me that there is no profession so native to holy and constructive emotions, or so appropriate for God to make flesh assume.” (Thorburn, 1979, p.21)

Updike has found the most profound and sad truth when he looks at the human predicament in the era of mechanical industry. As Harry types in this process, every day he is accompanied with cold monotonous type. Harry loses the independence and creativity of the people when he is at work, only engaging in some monotonous and boring action, that is to say, just as a part of the machine, a tool in operation. People feel that they cannot extricate themselves from a fragmented world, with no center, no meaning, with boring repeating. Living in such a cold and hard environment, people also gradually lose the pursuit of the passion of life. Marx says, First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind (Marx, 1988, p.74).

The people around him are immersed in this atmosphere. Even Harry, who has been pursuing freedom and “something”, has become muddle along without any aim, never hearing from the outside world. He gets absent-minded most of the time in the work, and those that occur in the real world have nothing to do with him, so few of typesetting are done in smooth coherence. Harry’s life is cold, very boring. This pressure exists in all aspects of life, which is changing the living conditions and life of everyone who live as Rabbit’s. Mechanized production destroys Rabbit’s life, and his value becomes not worth a hair in machinery. It is conceivable that if one wants to survive in such a society, it is necessary to bow down to the machine, and to follow the operation of the machine. Thus man becomes a machine operator who really follows the mechanical properties of the machine’s regular activities, and loses the autonomy and creativity which are the most important human nature. Looking back on the course of human development in modern times, the whole human society operates from coping with nature to cope with machines, and such people as Rabbit is becoming the accessories of a machine.

Whether working as peeling tool salesman for a kitchen supplies company, a compositor in the printing factory, or later a car salesman in the garage of his father-in-law, Harry’s jobs are far from the ideal one, which only bring him a sense of frustration, make him feel like a loser in life. However, his cultivation experiences in Mrs. Smith’s garden lets him find that his work brings back the joy, realizing the dream of looking for the Garden of Eden, and finding “something” that he has been looking for. Rabbit gets forty dollars a week working in Mrs. Smith’s garden, with flexible working hours, less than forty hours a week. His spare time is overriding the working hours, so his free time overrides his non free time, so that working becomes independent activities, maximizing the reduction of labor time. Rabbit has his work become independent behavior, free and conscious, full of joy and happiness, from which obtaining the supreme satisfaction. Labor is no longer forced, but conscious; it is not painful, but a kind of entertainment and enjoyment, in which creativity, joy, beauty and various games overcome profit and efficiency. For Rabbit, working in Mrs. Smith’s garden not only has the meaning of the struggle for survival, but also achieves his own self in that process. Rabbit has unified work and leisure together, and enjoyed the happiness of life in this relaxing labor. Although the gardener is far from the work of shaking heaven and earth, Harry finds the balance and harmony in the heart here. Every time he plants a seed, he has a new hope and another new expectation. In the embrace of nature, in harmony with the plants and trees, Harry not only helps Mrs. Smith get rid of loneliness, but also finds the value of life, the joy of life, which can be said as a return to the nature.

In *The Centaur*, although George Caldwell is kind, sensitive and able to bear hardships and has been struggling for a lifetime, he still cannot reverse his poverty. In reality Caldwell is at the bottom of society and most of the time he works hard and suffers for his family, without founding the sense of identity and achievement in his work and life. He has worked as a salesman of encyclopedias, the driver of a sightseeing bus, athletic supervisor, fireman, hotel bellhop, and restaurant dishwasher, and experienced the 1930s economic crisis sweeping the United States, and later had his own poor family. When he loses his job and the whole family would go to starve, his friend throws a helping hand for him to get a teaching occupation. The next 15 years, he has been a middle school teacher, with his wife and son living in his father-in-law’s home. If there is anything worse than poverty, it is obviously a sense of suffocation. Caldwell teaches the students about the universe and the people in the chaos of the classroom. One morning with his son off to school, the Caldwell called the school as “slaughterhouse”, “hate-factory” (Updike, 1963, p.69), “those dumb blank faces” (Ibid, 1963, p.92), which made himself think of death, in order to have that “fall through those kids’ heads without a trace”. (Ibid.) Students do not regard him as a teacher, who committed all kinds of outrages without restraints in the classroom, even hurt his ankle with an arrow. His classroom discipline is a mess, while the boys are leering on the girls with a lot of paper airplanes flying around the room, the girls are eager to show the answer of the question with random words. Caldwell struggles to continue to teach in shame. It can be seen that this work for Caldwell is a kind of helplessness and pain, that he is engaged in a career not suitable for his own. He can not conceal his panic when he catches the schoolmaster and his female colleague with disheveled clothes and flushing face and fear of unemployment for that. And the spite from his schoolmaster, tricks from the students, no sense of work achievement, make him hard every day, and even the son of Peter asks him why he doesn’t relax? Poverty makes him restless and weary and painful, but the heavy sense of failure leads him to go to the end.

This contrasts with the quiet nature of the Chiron’s classroom. At the beginning of the third chapter, Chiron walks on the road with a vibrant, bright green variety of flowers and trees, finding a clearing place in the forest to give students classes. The students have already sit together, happily cheering in unison to the teacher, greeting him, fully showing the respect of students to the teacher. The best student Asclepios has exceeded Chiron in many ways, and Chiron regards him more as companion rather than student. In this city full of vigour Olympus, Chiron teaches his more than 10 children “the Genesis of All Things”, “everything origins from love”, and “Love set the Universe in motion”. Updike gives us a detailed description of the Chiron’s classroom, in which

students are obedient, paying respect for teachers, and there is love between teachers and students. Furthermore, Chiron gets a sense of accomplishment at work. Chiron does not have to worry about unemployment, no pressure from superiors. Teaching as a free and conscious work, is full of joy and happiness, from which he obtains the supreme satisfaction. It is the very classroom that Caldwell wants.

CONCLUSION

In *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit keeps running in order to look for “something”, and then he finds it in Mrs. Smith’s garden, where he is satisfied with his work and lives happily. For Caldwell, the ideal work place is Arcadia where Chiron teaches his students. In these works, Updike reconstructs an ideal place for us.

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