



## The Balance Between Ideal and Reality

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### Abstract

In *Rabbit, Run*, the protagonist Harry feels himself firmly caught by the life net, and his freedom pursuit makes him constantly struggle to escape and toughly explore the meaning of life existence, wandering between social responsibility and personal freedom, seeking for the balance between conflicts. In the novel, Updike points out the dilemma of people in contemporary society, and tries to find a way out for those struggling in the conflict.

**Key words:** Rabbit; Social reality; Individual freedom; Balance

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### INTRODUCTION

John Updike was once regarded as a novelist presenting the most realistic features among all “the third generation” realistic novelists. When he was 28 years old, he published the novel *Rabbit, Run*, which is his second work piece. This novel reflects the situation of the life existence and spirit of people in that particular historical period. The novel records the personal experience of a young guy Harry Angstrom nicknamed “Rabbit” in 1950s, successfully describing the traditional theme of American literature—the conflict between individual pursuit and social environment limitation. As Khan points out that

“How an individual can be rebel against the compromised environment of an organized society is the subject of *Rabbit, Run*.” (Khan, 2000, p.65) Rabbit is known as a classic figure in American literature, a symbol of the American middle class, whose personal difficulties reflect the American spirit difficulties at the times. When reading this work, we may come to these questions that, why did Harry Rabbit run? Where is he going?

### 1. NET

The age of Harry is known as the silent 50s, in which the United States was closed and conservative society. In politics, the cold war thought and McCarthyism were the key words of American postwar foreign policy. The domestic American political life was shrouded in the repressive atmosphere of “fear of Communist” and “anti-Communist”. In the economy, highway, railway, automobile industry gained rapid development, television began to spread, service industry was also developing quickly, and large companies emerged.... These factors together made the United States rich and prosper in material production, making its economy enter a period of rapid development with a social prosperity after the World War II. In the postwar peaceful life, there were more young people getting married very early and most families still were the traditional ones with male working out and female working home. The middle-class living in a society that emphasized consistency and conformity maintain the traditional values of thinking highly of family, work and wealth. However, the superficial prosperity of the society could not heal the trauma of war in people’s heart. The depressed political environment had destroyed the harmonious relationship, mutual understanding and mutual trust. At the same time, the rapid development of industrial society after the war also accelerated the non-understanding between people and the spirit of depression. Thus, loneliness and fear had become a common problem

in the minds of the people in that era. The Puritanism still controlled people's thoughts, which emphasize the importance of individual's following the social norms and morality, so all social life was bound in the system of ethics. People's subjective initiative could not be exerted, and free will could not be expressed. People were working for abundant material life all day long, with their spiritual need of being not met.

The story in *Rabbit, Run* is about the protagonist Harry who lives in Mount Judge, a suburb of Brewer, Pennsylvania. Harry's understanding of life is that: life is a net, which is his initial feeling of the world, and is also his final understanding of the world at the end of his story. Mathew points out that "He is sickened by his degrading job of selling Magi Peel peelers, by his drab apartment which clutters with waste everywhere and by his 'dumb mutt' of a wife, Janice, whom he had to marry for having got pregnant." (Joycemol, 1998, p.58) The external factors in the novel turn into ubiquitous "nets", which envelop Harry. The image of "net" runs through the whole story. Schiff says that

Updike weaves together a vast, seamless network of substantive tropes and images. For instance, his recurring use of such terms as net, trap, and hole figures not only in rabbit's quest for escape, but in a web of associations involving basketball, golf, and sexuality—in each, Harry attempts to put the ball in the hole. (Schiff, 1998, p.35)

Specifically, What Harry thinks as "net" are mainly manifested in the following respects.

The first net is the crowded and dreary life. Rabbit was an excellent basketball star in high school. At that time, he was full of popularity, with a lot respect, admiration, honor and beauty accompanied. When Rabbit is 26 years old, he is selling magic peelers in a cheap kitchenware shop. He is married and has children, and his wife, Janice, borne their second children. His young wife indulges herself in boring TV show and alcohol, not good at keeping and managing family. When he comes home from work, what he sees is a messy crowded scene: A glass filled with rotten sediment, ashtray put on the chair armrest, carpet crumpled, newspapers loosely piled, children's toys scattered around, a doll with leg off, rolls of hair under the radiator, and brand marks, price marks, food, automobile, household appliances, furniture, etc.. All these messy things fill his whole field of vision. "The clutter behind him in the room—the continual crisscrossing mess clings to his back like a tightening net." (Updike, 2006, p.14)

When Harry is running on the road, he finds that the staggered road is also a "net": All the place-names are gone, and all that he can see is a map, a net with red lines, blue lines and asterisk, a network, which trap him. During his driving, a stream of commercials on the radio makes him feel uncomfortable. After a night of tossing and turning, Harry is still not able to break free of the shackles

of the net, and has to drive to find the former basketball coach Tothoro for help. In this process, the traditional morality and conscience make Harry feel that

the faded night he left behind in this place as a net of telephone calls and hasty trips, trails of tears and strings of words, white worried threads shuttled through the night and now faded but still existent, an invisible net overlaying the steep streets. (Ibid., p.43)

Rabbit can tear up the map, but can not tear the life network, because the network is everywhere. No matter how he runs, Harry will be deeply caught in the network.

Secondly, the tasteless, suffocating marriage is another net. Although men need women, and need women to surrender physically and mentally, but do not want to be restricted. They are not willing to bear the obligations for women, and do not want women to become their burden, and therefore, men want to escape from marriage. It is also the same that Charlie who is wise unwilling and unable to marry. Here Rabbit was not ready for his marriage but had to do so because Janice got pregnant, so it is logical that later he runs away from home after marriage. A piece of writing in the novel is well worth paying attention to: The bed is almost as high as his shoulders when he sits down, and he enjoys being in this strange relation to a woman as if he's carrying her on his shoulder but without the weight (Ibid., p.224). This implies that man wants to be the protector of the woman, making the woman to attach them to meet their vanity, but does not want to take too many responsibilities.

On the other hand, his wife Janice is definitely not a perfect housewife in the cultural ideal. She does not like neatness, not good at cooking and keeping family, making food with no taste and not timely, either. The home is often in a mess, and especially she cannot understand her husband's misfortune and depression. In a word, she is not the ideal middle-class housewife, not a good wife and loving mother for Rabbit. He considers his marriage as "second-rate" thing, and does not satisfy his every day of life. In this gloomy marriage, Rabbit feels his home simply a big net, trapping him so firmly that he could not move. This feeling of being trapped is exactly what Rabbit tries to get rid of, and it is also the internal motivation that drives him to seek the true self and realize his ideal. As Greiner says that "Inarticulate but full of feeling, Rabbit expresses his need to break the limits of society by acting out his yearning in sexual escapades." (Greiner, 1984, p.50)

He wants to escape from the chaotic reality, but unexpectedly, under the misleading of his coach Tothoro and the priest Eccles, he gets into trap one after another. Later, Nelson's girlfriend was pregnant, and Harry knows his son and his negative responsibility, and he learns that marriage is a trap, and once one who falls into it may never escape from it. He does not want his son to be brave, so he tried to persuade his son to run away.

Rabbit's own experience makes him deeply felt the shackles of marriage, so he would seriously suggest that his son Nelson escape from marriage, but this effort is still making the ending with sad tears.

Thirdly, the monotony of the work is also a net. Rabbit was a former basketball star in high school, but now he is working as a humble salesman selling kitchen knife in a small shop. His glorious past and present mediocre reality form a huge gap. The identity of the former basketball star makes Rabbit aware of the self existence, and now the humble job makes him lose the sense of identity, turning him to something like "quasi commodity". Salesman, this ordinary work, reveals the social characteristics of the United States in 1950s. For Harry, a salesman does not have much autonomy in working, because the only thing he needs to do is to "transfer" the stuff given by the company to the hands of others. No matter "accept" or "transfer out", Harry cannot control the whole process of the program. Every day Harry is constantly on the run but does not know what to do and what he wants to do. This kind of work under social norms makes people lose the personality, with standardized and trivial nature, leaving little space for personal development, not allowing individuals to fully meet the requirements in various kinds of social activities. Harry is really a little man, without root, without a clear life purpose and focus, and perhaps he does not know where he is going. In this sense, this should be his real motivation to find the true self, to achieve personal ideals, but he has chosen to run away from home to show his resistance to the social reality.

Rabbit thinks he is held in this damn net all day long and nowhere to run. He is trapped in the net of the family and society, unable to breathe. He feels crowded in real life and his deeper crowded feeling was from the spiritual suffocation sense, because the responsibility and obligation of his social ethics make people repress themselves, which are just like a way of self killing for Rabbit who is always acting on his feeling.

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## 2. ESCAPE

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Like a beast trapped in the net, Harry does not satisfy their current depressing life, but he is weak and unable to change the entire social conservative and mediocre situation. In order to get his own breathing space, Harry could do nothing but choose to flee reluctantly. As Mathew points out, "The fifties in America was a time of conformity and national somnolence". Robert Lowell had called it "the tranquilized Fifties" (Lowell, p.85). It was also a time that saw the beginnings of revolt against that conformity. Updike's Rabbit is an outsider-individualist who experiment with new ways of dealing with his social situation (Joycemol, 1998, p.73). The history of American literature has always shown no shortage of escaping

characters. From the Rip Van Kerr to Huckleberry Finn, from Yoder to Holton. Now Rabbit Harry also joins the ranks, trying to escape from the bondage of disturbance, fear, disappointment, on a quest for self existence and value. As Aarthy (2015, p.5) says, "He is fed up with his mediocre existence, so he decides not to play by the rules any longer." Harry is the epitome of the generation who grew up after the war. His escape is a helpless survival strategy, but also an attitude to resist the silent 50s. Rabbit is a kind of person behaving in accordance with their own will and feelings, so his leaving is not only a way of escaping social responsibility, but also shows his courage to pursue free will.

As a little person in the society, Harry comes up with the consciousness of pursuit when he escapes. The reason for Rabbit's first Runaway is his longing for the ideal world. Through the escape, he wants to get rid of all the responsibility that the society and the family need him to bear, so that he can become a free man. He wants to get away from everything in real life, to find what he wanted. Sreenivasulu points out that "We observe Rabbit's dissatisfaction with his work as an almost menial demonstrator of practically useless kitchen gadgets. This dissatisfaction ultimately leads him to his unhappiness with almost every social institution, especially marriage." (Sreenivasulu, 1993, p.17) And what does Rabbit pursue? 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, 2006, p.133)

There seems to be something in the mind of Rabbit, which cannot be expressed accurately, and he has to call this thing as "it". Hsieh Chin Jung says "Rabbit seeks freedom to lead a better, less secular life.... On the other hand, he wants to be free from the social demands, responsibility, restraints, and fear of death." (Hsieh, 2002, p.91) In high school, Rabbit was an excellent basketball player, the city champion. So for Rabbit, basketball and basketball career in high school were dazzling aura, full of infinite glory and the meaning of existence. Basketball makes Rabbit realize who he is. Basketball star and Rabbit are closely linked, which cannot be separated. Rabbit's feeling on basketball, which he cannot find in real life, is a sense of identity, a sense of security, and it proves that he is different from the others. However, he doesn't play basketball for score—"you ran not as the crowd thought for the sake of the score but for yourself, in a kind of idleness." (Updike, 2006, p.40) For Rabbit, playing basketball itself is more important than its score, because this is the only way for him to fully play and show his ability, to confirm his existence on the world, and find his perfect value and the unfettered self. Later, in Rabbit's playing golf with Eccles, when Rabbit sees the ball rolling into the hole, he exclaims suddenly and excitedly, "that's it." And "it" here is what he has been pursuing, that is, his unrestrained, unfettered self.

If young Rabbit took basketball as his paradise in the past, the adult Rabbit, in addition to the memory of his basketball career, also attempts to seek a sense of victory and conquest from sex, seeking spiritual transcendence. Detweiler (1984, p.40) says that, "Rabbit is at last pitifully content to identify his Grail with the sex act, the athletic success, the ambiguous praise of a friend." However, he does not indulge in sensual enjoyment. As his memory of basketball, sex eagerness makes him get a feeling as a winner and conqueror. This feeling is to let him feel the existence of self.

Rabbit had a girlfriend in high school. For Rabbit, "once sport campaign was gone, sex was about the realest thing left to him." (Bragg, 1994, p.223) he tries to find the meaning of life through sex, so as to fill the gaps in reality. He is very satisfied with the relationship with his middle school girlfriend Mary Anna, and he believes that period of sex is perfect: "As if she wasn't sure but he was much bigger, a winner. He came to her as a winner and that's the feeling he's missed since.... So that the two kinds of triumph were united in his mind." (Updike, 2006, p.205) The triumph on the basketball court and the triumph of sex are interwoven in his mind. He is deeply intoxicated by his past glory and victory. For Rabbit, real life is a failure because of his lack of success and honor. He is so obsessed with sex in that he can find himself in the process of sex. Marie Ann is the best in his eyes, because she gave him the most, and always gave him a star effect and victory.

Later, he moves to live with the prostitute Ruth. In fact, Harry at first regards sex as a mysterious force indeed, hoping to achieve the transcendence of mediocrity with Ruth's body. Therefore, in the process of communication with Ruth, and even sex, Harry is not interested in sex itself, but a kind of transcendental revelation. Rabbit's indulging himself in making love with Ruth can fully reveal the inner deep desire for elegance and transcendence. He wants to find the meaning of life, and to prove that he is different, to find more "Something" in life. Because of this, he makes the first love making with Ruth very ritualistic. Because in his opinion, this "Oracle" could take him to a mysterious place, giving him a chance to complete self realization. He goes climbing with Ruth, and as he approaches the top of the mountain, he suddenly becomes very excited and shouts to Ruth, "My queen", "my good horse" (Ibid., p.120). At this time, he seems to be immersed in his own spiritual world, and seems to find his own existence in this mysterious transcendence.

What the rabbit is longing for is a real self, a self that can exert himself, a self that can reflect the value. Therefore, through the external, physical pursuit and internalized spiritual desire, he has been in the process of sex transcendence which also confirms his self importance, although it is contemptible around. But

the only person who appreciates him is his lover, Ruth, because she thinks, "cause you haven't given up. In your stupid way you're still fighting." (Ibid., p.96)

### 3. THE BALANCE

In the real life, the net brings Rabbit the spiritual distress, which is the superficial phenomenon, the essence of which is the conflict between Rabbit's individual ideal and the social reality, namely the conflict between the realization of the self identity and the fulfillment of social responsibility. Rabbit has been immersing in the basketball which gives him the glory in the past, he hopes that life can be like a basketball game, in which there are certain rules, with him at the center, while being protected by others. However, the life and the basketball game cannot be the same. Life needs to fulfill the responsibility, but Rabbit is often self-center, rarely taking into account the feelings of others, and he does not want to bear social responsibility, either.

In order to pursue the so-called "Something", in response to God's voice, Rabbit continues to pursue his own ideal and the truth, but he is always in a dilemma of freedom and responsibility, in all sorts of contradictions in social and personal fields. As Burchard points out that, "He must decide between society's plan for his life on the one hand, and freedom to follow his intuition, a course which he feels is a sacred responsibility." (Burchard, 1971, p.50) The role of Rabbit in the family and society requires that he should be responsible for the duties and responsibilities of the role. But in real life, chaos and disorder, social corruption, choking congestion and fear of death prompt him again and again to flee from home. Trachtenberg says, "it might be well to remind ourselves that Rabbit, Run is about the tricky business of balancing the costs of a messy marriage against the costs of a messy flight." (Trachtenberg, 2007, p. 67) In this way, Rabbit's behavior is both personal and social. In the pursuit of his goals, he always chooses the latter, to defend his own ideal, which shows his obstinateness, but also reflects his selfish, immature and irresponsible character.

Rabbit's firm perseverance on his belief often hurts him. Furthermore, his relentless pursuit and his wandering back and forth between the public opinion and his pursuit of self hurt the surrounding people deeply. Rabbit is not a guy completely losing conscience, because although he has decided to run away, he has still left the key of the car to Janice before taking his clothes leaving home, for the car is their common property. When he hears that his wife will give birth soon, he resolutely leaves Ruth and comes back to his wife. His reason is: I got to go this once, it's my baby she's having and she's such a mutt I don't think she can do it by herself. Our first one came awfully hard (Updike, 2006, p.199). At this time, his social role is stronger than the role of self. During



his waiting in the hospital, Rabbit repented himself. He knew that Janice and the baby would die because of his sins. On his way driving to leave, Rabbit feels guilty and fearful of his action, always thinking of Janice, his mother, his son and sister; “He imagines himself about to shoot a long one hander; but he feels he’s on a cliff, there is an abyss he will fall into when the ball leaves his hands.” (Ibid., p.28) Rabbit’s sub-consciousness subtly reflects his ambivalence: He aspires to succeed, and get the recognition and appreciation from others, but he also realizes that he is standing on the edge of the cliff, and his leaving home would bring himself and others hurt that they could not afford. No one can understand him, and he will be spurned by the people, isolated, “he will fall into the abyss”.

Harry’s struggle for free will is painful and lonely. He is constantly wandering between social responsibility and free will. He runs away from home for three times, and the circuitous route of running away and returning is also the mapping of the balance between the conflicts. His pursuit is correct, positive, and praiseworthy, but the result of his struggle is a failure, painful and compassionate.

There is an irreconcilable contradiction between responsibility and freedom. Rabbit’s all these opposing elements are Updike’s reflection on the contradiction to human beings. In each novel of John Updike’s, it can be seen as a picture of tension and conflict between personal and social life, which is very complex to deal with. In fact, in the novel, Updike tries to compare two ways of life: “One would be the rabbit approach, a kind of dodgy approach—spontaneous, unreflective, frightened..... and the second was to be the horse method of coping with life, to get into harness and pull your load until you drop.” (Bellis, 2005, p.223) In real life, everyone is playing two roles as “horse” and “rabbit” at the same time, the absence of any role of which will make him a social knockout. It can be seen that Updike’s understanding of the contradictions of human existence runs through all his work.

In the novel Rabbit has been like a pendulum in the wandering pattern “run – return – run – return – run”. Until the end of the novel he is still running. Rabbit is pure and full of passion, running up against the wall in the troublesome and complex society. He can only bounce back and forth around the conflict as a ping-pong ball, looking for the balance until the end of his life.

At the end of the confrontation between personal freedom pursuit and traditional social forces, the final winner is always the group following those stereotypes and tradition, for the limited life is so fragile, the heart for freedom constantly crashes into dust in the infinite universe. Where does one go to find the ultimate comfort? Updike does not give an exact answer to his novel, but different readers will get different answers in different periods.

In fact, Rabbit dilemma is a kind of American dilemma in the late 1950s. At that time, after World War II, although the United States was becoming richer in the material production, people felt the loss of their own values. Many of them puzzled and lost, some of them chose to escape, some chose to compromise, and some struggled in a foolish way like Rabbit. Because the individual cannot get rid of its social side, and the self that is pure and transcending society cannot be realized, so it was a goal which could never reach at the time under that social condition. There is no compromise between the desire for life and the satisfaction of external life. You want to live forever, and you have the desire to conquer, to fight for the endless freedom, but the society has established strict restrictions on its members. Because of the contradiction between individual needs and social demands, it takes a long time or even a lifetime of hard work and struggle to realize the goal.

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## CONCLUSION

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In short, Updike’s own understanding of contradiction in life existence is fully reflected in his novel “Rabbit, Run”. Through the characterization of the hero Rabbit, Updike depicts the plight of human existence and the direct cause of this dilemma—the conflict between individual freedom and social reality. As Updike says, “to be a person is to be in a situation of tension, is to be in a dialectical situation.” (Samuels, 1994, p.34) According to the writer’s opinion, the individual is a man in the society, so the individual and society will inevitably lead to fierce conflicts. The existence of human beings is full of contradictions, while they always seek balance between them, which cannot be in absolute satisfaction and happiness. However, it is this kind of contradiction and endless pursuit that give people the meaning of existence. Rabbit is controlled by the external environment, and driven by social forces that is stronger than personal intention, so his spiritual pursuit is not only his own, but is also the American middle class, and is all the more the entire human world.

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