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# Running toward the apocalypse: John Updike's new America

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Running Toward the Apocalypse:

John Updike's New America

by

Bob Batchelor

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Dedication**

With love, to my wife, Katherine Elizabeth Batchelor, and our daughter, Cassandra Dylan Batchelor. Also, thanks for the ongoing support of my family: Linda and Jon Bowen and Bill Coyle.

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Running Toward the Apocalypse:  
John Updike's New America

Bob Batchelor  
ABSTRACT

My dissertation explores two critical points in understanding John Updike's recent career. First, I examine him from a perspective outside the heavily-studied Rabbit tetralogy. Focusing on Updike's novel *Terrorist*, I attempt to counter the misperception that he offers little beyond the chronicling of middle-class, suburban America. Instead, this work digs for a deeper understanding of Updike.

Next, I consider Updike's role as an artist, professional writer, and celebrity to draw out a sense of the writer's life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Using him as a case study enables the analysis to include his changing role as a literary writer who also had major bestsellers, as well as his standing as a celebrity and public intellectual. Rather than dismiss these cultural influences, I explore how they intersect with audiences, readers, and critics. Piecing together his commentary regarding fame and celebrity creates a model of the public Updike for scholars to examine.

The central task of this dissertation is a close examination of *Terrorist*, including the themes Updike addressed and literary techniques he employed to advance those ideas.

From this textual analysis, Updike's vision of America and the world in the twenty first century emerges.

By reassessing Updike's evolution as a writer, both in subject matter and literary technique, one realizes how his work reflects an increasing preoccupation with global issues, from American imperialism to terrorism. This study broadens the general conceptualization critics and scholars hold regarding Updike's work by exploring the themes and literary devices he used to portray the broader world.

Focusing on Updike the writer and *Terrorist*, his final standalone novel, this dissertation helps Updike scholars and critics address a central point that may well define his historical reputation: Is there an Updike beyond the Rabbit novels and is there an Updike beyond suburban nostalgia? I argue that *Terrorist* reveals a great American writer at his full powers as the world around him undergoes a watershed moment.

## Introduction

When I write, I aim in my mind not toward New York but toward a vague spot a little east of Kansas.

—From a 1968 interview with John Updike, (Plath 25)

Reviewing John Updike's novel *Terrorist*, formidable *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani asked rhetorically: "John Updike writing about terrorism? The bard of the middle-class mundane, the chronicler of suburban adultery and angst, tackling Islamic radicalism and the call to jihad?" Her tone – though without the snarky intimation – summed up the feelings of many casual Updike readers: why, why, and, oh yeah, where's Rabbit? Kakutani's rhetorical question also set the atmosphere for the scathing review that followed, which basically mocked Updike for possessing the temerity to address a topic outside what she views as his "typical" work.

Unlike most mainstream Updike-reading, Rabbit-yearning fans, however, Kakutani pontificates from a lofty national platform, her standing as the primary book reviewer for *The New York Times* makes her arguably the foremost professional literary critic working today. She did not hold back when reviewing *Terrorist*, lambasting Updike and the novel, using words and phrases such as "unbelievable," "one-dimensional

stereotype,” and “lousy job” (“A Homegrown Threat”). For an author like Updike who admittedly reads his own reviews, chews on them, and allows them to eat at him a bit, this disapproving summary of his work must have been bitter. Perhaps, however, the novel’s steady sales offset Kakutani’s ire.

Other reviewers, notably James Wood writing a much longer essay in *The New Republic*, found similar challenges with *Terrorist*. For Wood, Updike did not provide enough background to convincingly show how young Ahmad Mulloy developed from fatherless youth to potential terrorist. Ahmad is neither Islamic enough for Wood nor American enough. Much of the review, then, charts a path Updike might have taken to make the novel better. The author should have made Ahmad sound like other American teens, Wood says, “such a character would then be interesting in proportion to his resistance to a pressure—the great pressurizing blandishments of American postmodernity” (25). The critic simply wanted a book that the author did not write.

Given Updike’s standing among America’s literary elite, his books are reviewed by many publication’s top critics. Christopher Hitchens, for example, reviewed the book for *The Atlantic*, joining Kakutani and Wood in deriding the novel. Taken together, these three reviewers are undoubtedly among the most read and lauded book critics in the business. While a broader examination of how critics interpreted *Terrorist* is undertaken in Chapter Four of this work, this glimpse into the novel’s reception sets the stage for two aspirations at the heart of this dissertation: first, reexamining *Terrorist* to search for clues regarding Updike’s vision of America and the literary devices he used in the book to advance these notions; second, use the author as a case study for appraising what it means to be a professional writer and literary celebrity in the twentieth and twenty first

centuries. In discussing the second topic, I also introduce the social psychology perspective symbolic interactionism to help us draw inferences about Updike as a writer.

Despite the assessment by many professional reviewers that *Terrorist* is not a compelling examination of the challenges facing the post-9/11 world, close textual analysis reveals a novel thick with convincing explorations of America in the new millennium. I daresay the novel also reveals important examples of Updike's shifting vision of the nation, delivered by one of the country's most perceptive observers. Also important, as part of Updike's vast catalog, *Terrorist* is an example of the novelist deliberately moving beyond what Kakutani and others label the "middle-class mundane," using issues and events drawn from the wider world to create a new American worldview at this pivotal time in the nation's history – both post-9/11 and in the early twenty first century.

Publishing a book a year for fifty years, Updike is noted as a deft chronicler of American life. The Rabbit tetralogy, in particular, is seen simultaneously as a set of novels and also a skillful social history of American life stretching from the late 1950s to the 1990s. Other novels in his catalog are also strong in portraying the culture and daily lives of the characters that dwell in the Updikean universe. I view *Terrorist* as occupying that same kind of social history category for the early post-9/11 era. The primary difference is that in closely studying *Terrorist*, the reader finds that Updike invades the text, as if he feels the way the nation is transforming and must add his annotations.

Some readers might find Updike's editorializing in *Terrorist* off-putting, an unwarranted authorial raid on the novel's characters and plot. From another viewpoint, however, after studying Updike, it is impossible to not sense his preoccupation with two

intimately linked ideas – his own mortality and ultimate literary standing. He spent so much of his career assessing the output of his heroes and contemporaries that it probably increased his own fascination with the topic, however, perhaps no more than any other person whose work will outlast them. Presidents, ballplayers, musicians, and other celebrities take great pains to chart their post-death careers; Updike seems no exception in this regard. As such, I believe he realized that *Terrorist* might be his last, if not one of his last, novels. Thus, he took a considerably more active role in editorializing in the book, a kind of final statement on the nation that preoccupied his life. Furthermore, if one discounts *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), technically Updike's last novel, since it is a sequel and consequently must stick to extending the previous story, then *Terrorist* should be studied as his last novel.

At its core, this dissertation argues that Updike and what he writes is important. From a cultural perspective, his significance takes on a multifaceted perspective. On one hand, the public tackles Updike as artist—an individual whose writing draws countless readers, whether in magazine form or novels. Additionally, in modern society, celebrity often follows closely on the back of achievement. Taken together, these influences coalesce to create the modern writer, which at different times encompasses varying hues of talent, luck, fame, buzz, marketer, entertainer, and other characteristics that on paper are far afield from the act of writing. Perhaps what I am advocating here is that for many writers in today's literary world the examination of their work must stretch into cultural avenues outside writing. The celebrity world they enter, according to British scholar Joe Moran, “is not simply an adjunct of mainstream celebrity, but an elaborate system of representations in its own right, produced and circulated across a wide variety of media”

(4). Certainly, Updike epitomizes these “writerly” and “non-writerly” components. As one of the world’s most celebrated and famous writers, it is as if he serves as the sun in a galaxy of necessary (but often competing) forces of editors, publishers, journalists, critics, academics, readers, and others. Also interesting in this Updikean cosmos is that the parameters of his celebrity also underwent striking transformation over the course of his career. What it meant to be a celebrity in the late 1950s and early 1960s would be barely recognizable in the early 2000s.

What I hope to do in this dissertation is convince the reader that Updike matters and that *Terrorist* is a major novel, not by trumpeting his armful of national and international literary awards nor the millions of published words that poured from him over his long career, or even the bestseller status the novel achieved. Instead, I plan to show the reader through a deep, textual analysis of the novel that here is an American author (then seventy-four-years old) at the top of his game.

Not surprisingly, Updike understood that much of his long-term legacy would be in the hands of academic scholars who would write about him and assign his work in college classes. Consequently, he lectured at different universities across the nation, always exuding grace and humility. For him, pressing academic flesh was not entirely a calculated move in hopes that scholarly critics would be kind, since Updike’s public appearances also helped pay the bills, but one wonders how much of this was out-and-out agenda-setting or reputation-building.

One of the most recent books about Updike, for example, is a thin volume titled *Updike in Cincinnati* (2007), essentially a written documentary of two days the author spent visiting the Midwestern city. Throughout the text, Updike playfully interacts with

the leading scholars of his oeuvre. At the conclusion of a panel examining his short fiction, Updike says, “I’m appreciative of both these learned men taking the trouble to meditate upon my work, which is composed really in a rather desperate fashion, which doesn’t anticipate academic study...[producing] a few objects that will somehow be worth examining and treasuring, as in archaeology, later” (61). More telling, however, than Updike’s famous graciousness, is his willingness to work with scholars in producing these kinds of texts. He not only helped edit his recorded remarks with scholar James Schiff, but also provided introductory remarks for the book, certainly increasing the odds that it would find a publisher and broader sales.

Using Updike as a kind of case study, this work also examines issues central to being a writer in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. From basic questions about why one would choose to be a professional writer to the roles marketing and popular culture play in selling books, Updike’s career is pivotal. He is one of a handful of writers who personifies the post-World War II era and, arguably, made the smoothest transition from a print world to one dominated by television, then the Internet. What separates Updike from his peers, though, is his longevity and commitment to writing that enabled him to publish at least one book annually for more than fifty years, whether a novel, collection of short stories, poetry, or essays.

Throughout this transition, in a period marked by major popular culture upheavals, Updike played a key role in creating the Updike image for his audience, editorial and publishing staffs that he worked with, and the ever-changing mass media. Through Updike, one gains a better understanding of the intersection of writing, the writing life, celebrity, and fame in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.

Here, Updike's long career and standing as both an exceptional writer of fiction and nonfiction makes him unique – perhaps the nation's most lauded freelance writer. There are few aspects of Updike's life that he did not explore himself or find interrogated at the hands of journalists and scholars. In contrast, one can only imagine what a joy it would be to have this level of introspection and retrospection from Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and other American writers who self-destructed in their own time. Unlike the literary forefathers that he emulated at the early stages of his career, Updike remained viable and productive, thereby providing more material about his life, perhaps, than any writer who ever lived. Few writers in American history have talked more about themselves in interviews, appearances, and pop culture channels than Updike.

Across his long career, he understood the link between celebrity and his professional life. Rather than gruffly rejecting fame or feeling inhibited by its calling, Updike sheepishly embraced the idea that he needed to project another image of himself publicly, which would benefit him as a writer. In this cat-and-mouse game, the big-name, famous author uses his status to get more work, thereby filling the word-lust of the professional freelancer.

Interestingly, Updike purposely chose to not take the route into academe that so many of his contemporaries did in the post-World War II era. Given his early fame, this path may have been the easiest way of capitalizing on his youthful celebrity. As a result, Updike resides outside (or at best, tangential to) scholar Mark McGurl's "Program Era," the post-World War II timeframe in which he asserts "the rise of the creative writing program stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history" (*Program Era* ix).

Ironically, Updike foreshadowed McGurl in a 1974 lecture delivered in Australia, explaining that, “The writer as hero...has been replaced in America by the writer as educationist.” Further, echoing many of the doomsday scenarios that still exist in the publishing industry, he notes:

Most writers teach, a great many teach writing; writing is furiously taught in the colleges even as the death knell of the book and the written word is monotonously tolled; any writer, it is assumed, can give a lecture, and the purer products of his academic mind, the ‘writings’ themselves, are sifted and, if found of sufficient quality, installed in their place on the assembly belt of study, as objects of educational contemplation. (*Picked-Up Pieces* 47)

Still, Updike obviously benefits in a society in which serious writers and serious readers are created – they purchase his books for entertainment and study, attend his lectures, and pay his appearance fees – but he did not teach writing or major in writing while in college. As such, Updike is yet again a case study as one of a dying breed of American authors that we may never encounter again.

If drawn from nothing more than his work as a magazine freelancer and novelist, one must conclude that Updike stood keenly aware of audience. On one hand, he prepped his entire adolescence to become a writer for *The New Yorker*. He understood the magazine’s idealized reader as if the person stood next to him.

Despite widespread praise and standing as a literary giant, scholars have largely ignored Updike’s work outside the Rabbit tetralogy. Examining the texts and themes addressed in Updike’s more recent work, particularly in the new millennium, his vision of America and the world in the twenty first century emerges. Specific emphasis is placed

on Updike's post-9/11 fiction. These works have been hailed for providing deep insight into the American condition since that tragic day.

By reassessing Updike's evolution as a writer, both in subject matter and literary devices, one realizes how his work reflects an increasing preoccupation with global issues, from American imperialism to terrorism. This study broadens the general conceptualization critics and scholars hold regarding Updike's work by exploring the themes and literary techniques he used to portray the broader world.

This dissertation wrangles with a supposition that will occupy Updike scholars and critics into the foreseeable future: Is there an Updike beyond the Rabbit novels and is there an Updike beyond suburban nostalgia? Of course, there is no way to quantify this answer or come up with a scientific equation to solve the riddle. What becomes clear, though, is that Updike certainly did not limit himself in this way. Looking across his career at both the fiction and nonfiction work he produced, one finds a writer, critic, and essayist with deep interest in writers and works far afield from suburban America. I argue that this self-education expanded Updike's worldview, compelling him to write novels that tackled global issues and concerns.

### **The Writer as Symbolic Interactionist**

Sociology offers literary critics and scholars an approach both for interrogating texts and gaining certain insight into the author's mindset. In the case of the former, the use of theories drawn from the work of sociologists enables new potential avenues into the text. In the latter, these methods of inquiry help literary critics contextualize the work of individual authors and movements by providing a glimpse into provocative questions,

such as why write, the choice of subject matter, and what influences contribute to the creation of a text.

Much of the sociologist's goal – studying organized life and society – intersects with the novelist's task in creating stories and narratives, in other words, imaginary worlds for characters and actions to take place. The link between sociology and literary studies seems clear when examining a book as its own isolated or linked world invented by the writer. The formation of creative worlds necessitates that the author act as sociologist in some respects, though the critic occupies a more direct role when studying the creation.

The potential pitfall of using sociological theory in assessing what a writer is thinking as she creates a work is that one cannot truly know or fully understand the person's creative process, even in cases in which the author has spoken about these topics. Updike explains the consequences of attempting such interpretation, but also hints at the beauty in doing so, saying: "The writer of fiction, a professional liar, is paradoxically obsessed with what is true – what feels true, what rings true in the fabrication being assembled on his desk" (*Due Considerations* 72). The challenge is how much to believe when writers talk about themselves, since their inclination for storytelling can become part of their public persona, or attempts to shield one's inner self from public consumption. An ostensibly willing subject, such as Updike, then, confounds and enlightens simultaneously.

My hope is that by applying certain sociological theories, this dissertation will uncover innovative schemes of looking at Updike across his many guises: freelance

writer, novelist, celebrity, public intellectual, critic, and perhaps even simply a man as he ages in youth-obsessed America.

The sociological approach that serves as an underlying framework for this dissertation is symbolic interactionism, a theory that grew out of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century studies by William James, John Dewey, Charles Horton Cooley, and George H. Mead. Scholar Norman K. Denzin explains that interactionist thinkers are “cultural romantics...[who] believe in the contingency of self and society and conceive of social reality from the vantage point of change and transformations” (2). Growing out of pragmatism, symbolic interactionism explores how people create meaning for themselves and the broader society through a system of constant negotiation, modification, and re-assembly as they interact with others. In other words, people actively create meanings of themselves and society through dealings with others.

“Reality” is an ever-changing terrain based on new criteria and experiences bombarding the individual through additional interaction. According to C. Wright Mills:

The first rule for understanding the human condition is that men live in a second-hand world. The consciousness of men does not determine their existence; nor does their existence determine their consciousness. Between the human consciousness and material existence stand communications and designs, patterns and values which influence decisively such consciousness as they have. (375)

For scholar Joel M. Charon, then, interactionism provides a worldview of a human being as an active individual, thinking, creating, self-directing, and defining oneself internally and through exchanges with other people and episodes that take place. Thus, it is

essential for symbolic interactionism to include both perspective on how people interrelate and how an individual creates her own reality (26-34).

From a literary studies perspective, the value of thinking about an author and her work using a symbolic interactionism perspective is that communication (language and words) lies at the heart of the theory. According to scholar David R. Maines, “Through communication processes, people transform themselves and their environments and then respond to those transformations” (235). Charon is even more explicit, calling the symbol, “the central concept of the whole perspective.” Furthermore, he explains, “Words are symbols. They stand for something; they are meaningful; they are intentionally used by actors to represent physical objects, feelings, ideas, values. They are used for communication. Their meaning is social” (43, 50). As a result, everything that one sees or thinks is derived from words, which gives things meaning. Our only meaning – what we think, observe, and imagine – is garnered from the words we use to describe those impulses. “We act,” says Charon, “not toward a world out there but rather toward a world defined by others through symbolic communications...Meaning does not come from objects. Instead, we label objects with symbols” (61). Consequently, for the writer who employs words as the outward manifestation of a particular worldview, symbols provide meaning both for him and potential readers who interact with the text.

Another area where literature and symbolic interactionism intersect is in the narrative function of what Denzin labels “the epiphanic moment” (83). He indicates that four such epiphanies mark a person’s life: major upheaval, the cumulative consequence, illuminative instances, and the relived moment. Each deals with a real-life crisis situation, yet aren’t these also common story angles for novelists? In *Terrorist*, for example,

Updike repeatedly employs the major upheaval theme: Ahmad's father deserting the family, the terrorist attacks on the United States, and Ahmad's conversion to Islam. Although Updike uses each epiphanic moment in the novel, major upheaval is a deliberate attempt to connect to the reader's sense of those events, whether derived from one's own experience or through cultural examples that become part of one's internal viewpoint.

Although not directly using the language of sociologists and social psychologists when discussing his notions about writing, Updike sounds similar to a symbolic interactionist in an interview with scholar James Schiff, explaining: "Any piece of writing is an act of communication, an act of social interaction even, so that you are leading the reader on. You are teasing the reader, you are trying to startle the reader, you are trying to give the reader a reason to keep reading" (431). Updike's narratives appeal to readers because they relate to his sense of the personal and storytelling.

Infusing these features into his writing draws the reader into the narrative, and may account for the particular Updikean style, widely heralded by critics as a central facet of Updike's storytelling ability. For Denzin, it is symbolic interactionism applied to cultural studies that enables content/words to "connect and join people" (85). In this instance, Updike's facility with language must combine with content to create a specific experience for readers that is uniquely his. At the same time, the author is commodifying his personal stories (regardless of how autobiographical or biographical) to sell books, magazines, and other publications. Furthermore, in Updike's case, he is also offering himself as part of the package in his stance as "celebrity author."

Writers hold a unique space in the symbolic interactionist swirl of identity, selfhood, and one's place within the larger society. They are literally and figuratively selling pieces of themselves as producers of words and public figures. As such, the plea one often hears from writers regarding their lives as their material and the need to hold that close makes sense. The potentially finite number of good stories that translates into great work really may be a well that can dry up. However, the cultural machine feeds on content, forcing authors to become commodities, in fact, rewarding them for becoming "names," as well as celebrities.

Also at the heart of the symbolic interactionist perspective pertinent to writers is the idea of self and identity. Professional writers, by the very definition of what they do, assume many guises as they go about their jobs. Interestingly, despite similarities between symbolic interactionism and postmodernism, it is on the subject of self that the two split. According to scholar Peter L. Callero:

Symbolic interactionism's commitment to Enlightenment values that privilege reason and rationality are in stark contrast to the postmodern break with the discourse of science. In fact, much of the postmodern scholarship assumes a radical anti-essentialism that rejects on philosophical grounds the very concept of self. (116)

However, the value of symbolic interactionism, Callero explains, is that the "self is first and foremost a reflexive process of social interaction...[with] the uniquely human capacity to become an object to one's self, to be both subject and object" (119). As such, he claims, this reflexivity is derived from social experience. For authors, the notion of self as outlined above enables agency and creative action through the use of signs –

similar to a stop light that permits and holds back thought, deed, and movement. They employ strategies to construct self-meanings, including storytelling, faith, ideology, and cultural narratives, among others.

Callero explains that people deploy these strategies “in social settings to accomplish social objectives...particularly evident in the case of storytelling and cultural narratives” (123). In other words, a writer uses these devices to create an internal identity, but at the same time is constructing worlds via the written language that exist outside the self. In contrast to non-writers, an author’s creation of internal identity may well find its way into work meant for public consumption. Although a lifelong stutterer, for example, Updike discusses his ability to overcome the malady in front of large audiences, which reveals him using storytelling as a means of masking the true person underneath. He says: “Reading words I have written, giving my own impromptu answers, I have no fear of any basic misapprehension; the audience has voluntarily assembled to view and audit a persona within which I am comfortable” (*Self-Consciousness* 84). Thus, there is a real possibility for public display of the private self that occurs with writers that may not be as apparent as in other professions.

The writer unfolds her identity for public consumption. In Updike’s long career, this unwrapping of himself took place via interviews across multiple platforms, appearances, in published analysis and criticism, and through scholarly interpretations. The constant interaction that occurs, as a matter of fact, is a necessary part of a writer’s development. Callero says:

The self that is socially constructed may congeal around a relatively stable set of cultural meanings, but these meanings can never be permanent or unchanging.

Similarly, the self that is socially constructed may appear centered, unified, and singular, but this symbolic structure will be as multidimensional and diverse as the social relationships that surround it. (127)

However, this seems to be a necessary aspect of being a professional writer, particularly if one aspires to Updike's level of fame.

As mentioned previously, writers may possess a privileged place in the symbolic interactionist worldview, since they not only apply interaction to their own lives, but they add on the additional weight of doing the same thing for readers. From this perspective, writers become guides and acquire influence. As Charon deduces: "The symbolic interactionists...conceptualize society in the dynamic sense: as individuals in interaction with one another, defining and altering the direction of one another's acts" (158). Thus, the writer, who provides symbols that society uses to assess, define, and alter itself, plays an important role in the process. In this sense, the writer as a facet of mass media, disseminates symbols that others use as stimuli for creating their own worldviews.

An application of symbolic interactionist thought may also help account for the critic's and reading public's widely-held perception of Updike as little more than a highly-skilled, lyrical chronicler of suburban maladies, while he viewed himself as much more. Many readers, professional critics, and scholars defined Updike based on what they decided stood as his best (or, perhaps, least appealing) novels. As a result, the Updikean symbols they use to classify him as an author are neither correct nor incorrect, but instead based on limitations. The most famous example of this is Nicholson Baker's 1991 memoir/homage *U and I*, in which he admits that he looks to Updike as a model, yet has actually read little of his work. Baker admits, "I have been reading Updike very

intermittently, but thinking about him constantly, comparing myself with him” (29). At the time, he read “most or all” of only eight of thirty Updike volumes.

Ironically, the assessment of Updike is most likely tainted by his voluminous output. In other words, few readers (whether paid to review or for their own leisure) could keep up with his level of production, thereby creating an opinion of his books derived from his handful (or perhaps just one or two) best-known or bestselling works. Getting literary critics to admit similar statistics would be impossible, yet one cannot overlook that option when surveying Updike’s reviews for *Terrorist* and other novels. I submit that the easiest method of evaluating Updike, if one is going to compare and contrast his early fiction with later novels, is by using Rabbit Angstrom as a kind of fill-in for the author and his ideas.

From Updike’s perspective, his catalog of fiction and nonfiction may exist merely as one long collective body of work, which necessitates a fundamentally different outlook regarding who he is as an author. Symbolic interactionism asks that the critic or scholar attempt to examine the multiple influences (internally and externally) that lead to this moment’s transformations, which may help one understand an author’s motivations over the course of a career or lifetime. As a result, there is a constant loop between an individual as an actor in social processes that shapes the person, society, and additional external social interaction. In Updike’s case, his role as both writer and writer/citizen combined to create a need to work on global topics as his career evolved, most likely due to the forces reshaping his worldview. Additionally, for Updike himself, an interactionist outlook negates the kind of labels that others would place on his work.

I contend that Updike's dual roles of novelist and critic/journalist melded somewhat in the mid- to late 1960s, resulting in his worldview becoming strikingly more global. Updike's stance on the war in Vietnam and his State Department-sponsored lecture tours in the early 1970s (including stops in Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia) played a significant role in this change.

Updike's concurrent career as a professional reviewer and essayist also played a part in his broadening viewpoint. Given his standing as a young, celebrated American novelist in the 1960s, his editors at *The New Yorker* assigned him books most often outside North America, probably to allay criticisms of careerism if Updike reviewed his peers (as he would do later as his celebrity grew). In typical Updike lyricism, he explains how this came to be, saying, "The esoteric fiction of Europe, however, was an ocean removed from envy's blight, and my practitioner's technical side was glad to investigate imported gadgetry...Evidently I can read anything in English and muster up an opinion about it" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 13-14). The outside stimuli of deeply reading and reviewing global literature, combined with the travels he took as a representative of the United States, coalesced, leading Updike to produce works that differed from what outsiders would consider his norm.

### **Updike as Experimental Novelist**

From a symbolic interactionist viewpoint, Updike's use of external stimuli drawn from traveling and lecturing around the globe would certainly influence what he writes. As a result of purposely expanding the scope of topics beyond the American middle

class, the author produced a collection of experimental novels, from *The Coup* (1978) to *Toward the End of Time* (1997) and *Terrorist*.

Many reviewers, including Kakutani and Hitchens, briefly mentioned *The Coup* when reviewing *Terrorist*, but made little effort to explain why they enjoyed the former and not the latter. Ironically, Updike's guise as failed African dictator seemed more plausible and believable to reviewers in contrast to the American-born Ahmad in *Terrorist*.

The salient point, however, is that Updike deliberately took the path away from typical subject matter, thus one can infer that he did so as a result of wide-ranging engagement with world literature and his travels as both a tourist and literary celebrity. For example, he explains his thinking about the science fiction novel *Toward the End of Time*, saying that "was a deliberately experimental book, although I hope it wasn't an irresponsible one. One of my thoughts was, I had composed a good deal of consistent fiction and I wanted to take a little holiday from consistency" (Reilly 230). What one yearns for is a more detailed explanation or map of why Updike chose this path away from "consistent."

Since we do not have access to this information, perhaps an interactionist perspective provides some rationale. One thought is to look at how life histories (or, perhaps, a writer's experiences) play a role in producing fiction. Michal M. McCall and Judith Wittner offer insight into this brand of storytelling, in which one could arguably place much of Updike's fiction, saying that life stories enable people to "share their experiential solutions to common problems, and thus, create culture: shared understandings of their common situations and agreed-upon ways of acting in them"

(“Good News” 59). As a result, one concludes that Updike’s deliberate move away from what he labeled “consistent fiction” is a focused attempt at creating tools for readers (and himself) to interpret culture.

In this light, storytelling then becomes a collective activity that helps society interpret events. According to literary critic Barbara Herrnstein Smith:

[E]very telling is produced and experienced under certain social conditions and constraints and that it always involves two parties, an audience as well as a narrator...[and] as in any other social transaction, each party must be individually motivated to participate in it: in other words, that each party must have some interest in telling or listening to that narrative. (qtd. in McCall and Wittner 84)

Under these conditions, an author takes calculated risks in expanding his catalog. Updike faces a multitude of concerns as he ventures away from his typical fare, from the conscious decision to make that move to the use of text to create culture for readers. The authoritative voice of the novelist, then, accepts new vigor from an interactionist point of view, since the writer’s product is designed to be read and digested. Symbolic interactionism as a tool for literary analysis can be seen as a powerful means of supporting literature’s hope to serve the broader culture. For example, is it possible to look at war with the same mindset once one has read Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, or, for that matter, to conceive of the inner workings of a terrorist the same way after Updike’s *Terrorist* or Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*?

\* \* \*

I came to Updike first as a fellow Pennsylvanian. We both grew up in small towns, though Shillington is about 300 miles east of my hometown. Yet, here was a famous writer reared in my beloved state. That fact alone drew me to his work.

On second reading, several years later, I yearned to read a fictional social history of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Of course, I again turned to *Rabbit, Run*. Updike hooked me immediately with the lyrical writing and imagery at the beginning of the novel of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom playing pickup basketball. Being a former player, though not a superstar like Rabbit, I wondered if college were snatched away from me, if I might have ended up like him – stuck in a loveless marriage with an irrelevant job.

Rereading Updike’s most famous novel spurred me on to more of his work. Thankfully, in the early (read: poor) days of my post-collegiate life, I discovered that nearly all of Updike’s catalog could be found at used bookstores, the yellowing paperbacks often for no more than a quarter or fifty cents per book. Although the spines would soon crack and break on those little volumes of short stories and his early novels, they carried untold pleasures. They still sit – lovingly preserved – in my home office, even if I picked up a duplicate, old hardback along the way. I attempted to read all of Updike’s work, or at least as much as my miniscule bank account and the local public library allowed.

The beauty of Updike’s work in my mind, first and foremost, centered on what I call a “Pennsylvania sensibility.” Regardless of setting, Updike’s novels spoke to me as a fellow Pennsylvanian – either featuring characters I identified as similar to those in my own past or a narrative style that rang true to my ear.

In addition, I felt one could learn something fundamental from Updike. Consequently, for example, I learned more about my own mother-son relationship from *Of the Farm* and gained additional insight into the 1980s decade I grew up in from *Rabbit at Rest*. As I continued through his catalog, my eyes were opened to Africa, the travails of Jewish writer Henry Bech, reintroduced to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, and the mystery of the 1960s.

As I learned to reread books as a writer, pop culture scholar, and graduate student, I once again honed in on the careful consideration of words and the power of lyrical writing. I studied F. Scott Fitzgerald and looked for his literary descendants. I believe Updike falls in that category, though their struggles as possibly the most famous freelance writers of their respective generations charted decidedly different paths.

The decision to pursue Updike in this study originated in reading the reviews for *Terrorist* and catching Updike discussing it on several television and radio programs. I remember thinking about the disconnect between what reviewers said about the book and its debut on *The New York Times* Best Seller list. After reading *Terrorist*, I wondered how the professional critics could be so off, as if they were discussing a completely different book. What did not surprise me is that the negative reviews seemed to be based on a really superficial reading of the novel, rather than the deep textual study graduate students are trained to conduct. I determined to reread the book (again and again, for a grand total of about ten to twelve times) and use it as the focus of this study in exploring Updike.

The first chapter of this story examines Updike in his interlocked, but sometimes conflicting, roles of stylist, professional writer, and celebrity. My goal is to study these

various guises in an attempt to draw out a sense of the writer's life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly as arguably one of the last of a dying breed in American letters.

Employing Updike as a case study, I also analyze his evolving role as a literary writer who also had major bestsellers. The chapter looks for clues about the relationship between Updike's standing as a celebrity and public intellectual. It would be naïve to think that his role as a public figure did not play a part in how critics and scholars assess his work. Likewise, anyone looking into the industry aspect of being an author (for example, design, promotion, and marketing) would be remiss in not assessing Updike's role in building and creating his public persona.

What one finds is that unlike many other well-known authors, Updike participates in every aspect of book design and production, including the details about font to the selection of the author photo that adorns the jacket. One senses that as Updike's fame grew, that familiar wry smile in author photos struck some reviewers as inauthentic, that his humble, self-effacing attitude served as part of the act – a marketing gimmick, no more sincere than any other advertising copy.

In the end, though, Updike is a writer. Process is important to him, as is dedication to the craft. From his public comments about the non-creative aspects of being a celebrated author, such as book signings and interviews, one finds a professional less sure, yet willing to disclose and divulge, despite a lingering notion that sharing too much will somehow unduly draw from his personal (and possibly finite) fountain of creativity.

Studying Updike the person and Updike the writer – a distinction he sometimes used himself in analyzing his career – the researcher uncovers a professional dedicated to

the craft of writing, mirrored by a deep commitment to writing as a livelihood. One sees this in an article he penned concerning his status as a short story writer: “More closely than my novels, more circumstantially than my poems, these efforts of a few thousand words each hold my life’s incidents, predicaments, crises, joys. Further, they made my life possible, for I depended when young upon their sale to supply my livelihood” (*More Matter* 762). In Updike, craft and trade are inseparable.

The second chapter interrogates Updike’s *Terrorist* as a way of questioning the common misperceptions regarding the scale and scope of Updike’s fiction. I argue that the novel, which catapulted Updike onto various best-seller lists, became a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and sparked general controversy, but appeared to rather mixed reviews, captures Updike’s vision of a new America and the nation’s relationship to the broader global community in the twenty first century. By examining the novel’s content, the chapter attempts to recast Updike. Rather than encased in the mantle of the Rabbit series featuring everyman Rabbit Angstrom, in *Terrorist*, one sees Updike shape a new worldview transformed by the terrorist attacks on the United States. Incidentally, the author witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center firsthand on that fateful day from just a mile away. Later, he wrote about the event in *The New Yorker* and composed a short story “Varieties of Religious Experience” based on what he experienced.

Updike’s vision of post-9/11 America centers on the idea of faith and lack of faith in the modern world. For Updike, consumerism and its consequences replace religion and people’s beliefs in the American political and social system, ultimately debasing the foundational ideas that built the nation. Instead of a fervent belief in the American way or American dream, Jack Levy, one of the novel’s protagonists, laments the impulse to

purchase “tawdry junk” that fills people’s daily lives (20). The lack of faith, passion, or commitment to “the right path,” leads to a world “full of nuzzling,” according to Ahmad’s mentor, Sheik Rashid, “blind animals in a herd bumping against one another, looking for a scent that will comfort them” (10).

Chapter Three is a close study of Updike’s literary technique employed in *Terrorist*, providing evidence regarding his specific style and how those devices enable the writer to achieve his aspirations. I argue that interrogating Updike’s use of phrases, styles, and editorial commentary within the text will reveal *Terrorist* as an important work in Updike’s catalog and certainly one underappreciated by scholars and journalistic critics to date. From my perspective, the novel reveals a writer in the midst of transformation as important external forces—such as the 9/11 attacks—compel him to reflect major societal changes in his fiction.

What I find critical in *Terrorist* is that Updike uses literary technique to help solidify his worldview. For example, Jack’s wife Beth initially seems like a weak, mousy character teetering on major depression. She is 100 pounds overweight, unhappy, unhealthy, and simply taking up space.

Closer inspection, however, brings to light a different perception. As a device in expounding a specific ideology, Updike creates a character that the unnamed narrator and Jack see as frivolous. By extension, the reader is guided to feel that same way. As a result, an aura of ridicule surrounds what she says and thinks. Updike uses this as a setup to critique a number of popular culture topics, including Oprah Winfrey, psychiatry, and the color-coded threat levels issued by the Department of Homeland Security.

When Jack tells Beth that his moodiness is driven by lack of sleep, even though it is actually her fatness that disheartens him, she explains, “That’s a sign of depression, they were saying on television...Oprah had a woman on who’s written a book” (31). Jack’s negative reaction and conclusion that he has fended her off imply that the reader should not take her ideas seriously. When Beth next turns to confidential information she learned about the threat level in their Northern New Jersey region from her sister at the Department of Homeland Security, actually making Jack promise not to tell anyone, he gets sarcastic in an attempt to shut her up. “Bring ’em on,” he jokes, “I was thinking, looking out the window, this whole neighborhood could do with a good bomb” (32). In other words, anything that Beth finds important, the reader is steered to consider absurd.

Chapter Four examines the author from multiple reception perspectives, including his interaction with editors, publishers, and readers. By analyzing existing sources from this viewpoint, I explore what it means for a literary artist and celebrity to coexist as a working professional when examining topics and content and that is published and reviewed. For Updike, who has enjoyed both critical and mass appeal, an investigation into his readers and reception reveals interesting information about society on a larger scale, including changing literary tastes and cultural norms.

The chapter also provides insight on the critical reception of Updike’s work as he moved beyond novels about middle class Americans and suburban life. In examining the critical response to *Terrorist*, I will uncover clues about how an internationally famous writer struggles with the burden of fame. Like many artists and musicians, Updike found early success, and then had to confront that triumph with each subsequent work. For many *Terrorist* reviewers, the prominence of the Rabbit tetralogy more or less

predestined that they would dislike the novel. A broader examination of the critical reception provides some clues about Updike's attempts to branch out from his successful earlier novels.

*Terrorist* is an intriguing case study in examining Updike's body of work. First, in terms of genre, the novel is categorized as a thriller, completely new ground for the author well into a fifty-year career. Related to this notion is Updike's willingness to confront a difficult, topical subject, in a genre that demands attention to suspense and plotting perhaps more than Updike's traditional strengths in character motivations and development. Addressing the real world in seemingly real time necessitates that Updike elevate these techniques, which could be argued as drawing away from his natural style. Without doubt this transformation influenced the thinking of those who reviewed the novel.

At the same time, it stands to reason that Updike realized these points about *Terrorist*, due to his complete concentration on every aspect of the publishing business. Maybe he found motivation in achieving a spot on the *New York Times* Best Seller list toward the end of his career, since most of his work did not appear there. In fact, his most recent book to make it on the list had been an edited anthology of short stories, *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, edited with Katrina Kenison some seven years earlier. The fact that the author agreed to an extensive marketing campaign for *Terrorist* indicates that he had bestseller aspirations for the book.

\* \* \*

Let's return to the initial thesis – Updike is an important writer and cultural icon in contemporary society. This study is an attempt to prove the validity of that statement by closely analyzing his work. The resulting investigation uncovers what it means (and meant) to be an American in the Updike era.

Surprisingly, given that so much ink spilled in an attempt to summarize Updike's thoughts about writing, relatively little of this outpouring actually does what it hoped in providing a concise Updikean vision of writing. In one instance, however, Updike spoke about the power of books on the writer, explaining, "Over the years I have learned that, with luck, your books will educate you or awaken something deep inside" (Reilly 235). He often discusses writing from this perspective, more of an internal process for the author, rather basing it on what others think, feel, or consider.

## Chapter One—Why Write: Updike as Craftsman, Professional, and Celebrity

[W]hat a writer wants, as every aspiring writer can tell you, is to *get into print*. To transform the changing shadows of one's dimly and fitfully lived life into print...to lift through the doubled magic of language and mechanical reproduction our own impressions and dreams and playful constructions into another realm of existence...into a space far wider than that which we occupy, into a time theoretically eternal: *that* is the siren song that holds us to our desks, our dismal revisions, our insomnia panics, our dictionaries and encyclopedias, our lonely and, the odds long are, superfluous labor.

—From a 1974 speech by John Updike, reprinted in *Picked-Up Pieces* (52)

The American Dream offers a unifying national concept, yet at the same time is highly individualized. For many people, it is a concrete notion based on singular achievement or acquisition, like getting into medical school or owning a new home. Others create a mental image of the American Dream as a golden ladder leading to destination that culminates in a well-lived or prosperous life. Over time, the idea developed into a central tenet of what it means to be an American, thus establishing its

place in the collective popular culture as both a thing to be achieved and model for living one's life.

What seems nearly universal when considering the American Dream is that the pursuit is about freedom – the belief that individuals have the right to chase after it, particularly if the primary obstacles are based on gender, race, religious views, or other cultural differences. Yet, in modern society, it seems that some dreams are privileged above others, especially if the result vaults the pursuer into the realm of celebrity. As such, young people are applauded for spending hundreds or thousands of hours playing basketball, kicking around on the soccer field, or working out physically in hopes of achieving a one-in-a-million chance at athletic stardom.

Although the ladder to success for actors is less defined, the idea of leaving family and small town behind and heading to Hollywood or Broadway is a well-recognized path for would-be film and television stars. People view the chance to become the next big thing, whether it is Michael Jordan or Brad Pitt, as alluring and worth the risk. Later, if one overcomes the odds and achieves stardom, the struggle reinforces the idea that this kind of American Dream is possible. In this respect, the American Dream is a fantasy built on fame and the wealth that accompanies such a life. Moreover, it is a version of the dream that millions of people buy into, perhaps thinking that with the right guidance their son or daughter can become the next Tiger Woods or Danica Patrick.

There is an interesting duality, however, when a person's dream is to become a writer. Although a small percentage of writers achieve fame and wealth, most parents are not urging their children to put down the athletic equipment to huddle feverishly over

their keyboards each day. The slim odds are certainly a deterrent, but perhaps are actually no thinner than making it into professional sports.

Despite the difficulty of getting published and the painstaking work required to write a manuscript, however, the overwhelming majority of people consider writing a book something that they should (or could) do. A 2002 national survey conducted by Jenkins Group, a Michigan-based publisher, revealed that 81 percent of Americans believed that they “had a book in them” (qtd. in Tharoor). Reacting to this news, writer Joseph Epstein explains, “There is something very American in the notion that almost everyone has a book in him or her... Certainly, it is a democratic notion, suggesting that everybody is as good as everybody else – and, by extension, one person’s story or wisdom is as interesting as the next’s” (“Think”). Jenkins also estimated that about 6 million Americans wrote manuscripts that year, with only about 80,000 books eventually achieving publication (Tharoor). Epstein correctly emphasizes the democratic nature of writing and the ease with which one can enter the profession, in contrast, for example, the average person being able to hit a 95 mile an hour fastball or possessing other skills that would allow a career in pro sports.

The irony of becoming a writer is that most people do not grow up wanting to be writers the same way youngsters yearn and train to become athletes. On the other hand, by adulthood, most people think they could write a book or have a story compelling enough for publication. Untold millions actually write manuscripts, yet relatively few get published. Colleges and universities play a role in this transition, somehow enabling many students to see writing as a viable occupation. Furthermore, the avenues for getting words into print have expanded, which changes the way people view publishing.

Technology plays a vital role in this phenomena – the advent of Web-based communications enables anyone to create their own blog or Twitter site, which gives off a hint of publication without the messy details, like gaining approval from an editor or working through grammatical and style issues. Compounding the issue, though, is that some professional bloggers achieve a level of fame that they would never realize in the print world. Indeed, many arts and culture Web sites attain readership figures that would make print magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* drool.

What then, does it mean to be a writer in modern America? The answer is fraught with complexity and compounded when investigating the career of a writer like Updike. The challenge of searching for an answer, though, is imperative, particularly if one agrees that the author under consideration and his colleagues atop the Mount Olympus of American letters are a dying breed that will most likely not be replaced as our ever-changing culture and mass media leaves little or no space for future “literary lions.” Future generations of the literary elite will actually be far removed from the post-World War II cohort, certainly more technologically-savvy and social media-friendly.

The transition from a culture that values writers to one in which everyone thinks that they could or should be a writer is important. Lawrence Grobel recalls Norman Mailer once telling him that writers “may be an endangered species” (293). Another Updike contemporary, Saul Bellow, told Grobel, “The country has changed so that what I do no longer signifies anything, as it did when I was young. There was such a thing as a literary life in this country and there were people who lived as writers. All that changed in my lifetime” (xi). As a young boy, Updike identified his literary heroes (dubbing them “The Professional Writer”), such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Thornton

Wilder, Sinclair Lewis, and Pearl Buck, and set out to join the elite fraternity of “tweedy exemplars” (*Due Considerations* xviii). Updike, then, serves as a case study for interrogating the writer’s life over his long career spanning from the early 1950s through his death in January 2009.

Actually, Updike’s longevity is critical in understanding his career. Unlike many of his colleagues in the top echelon of American writers, he took an active role in unraveling what it meant to be a writer over the course of six decades. His early fame and participation in the burgeoning celebrity industry led to countless written and televised interviews, appearances, speeches, readings, and opportunities to draw out some bit about Updike the writer, not to mention the collection nonfiction books, each thick with insight into the topic.

Moreover, Updike included frank discussions about the links between his life and fiction, enabling the reader to see the lines drawn directly from events in his own experiences. In *Self-Conscious*, his 1989 memoir, for example, Updike describes many scenes from his life, and then provides the reader with a footnote quoting the incident as it worked itself into one of his stories. While the scholar is left to assess how much of a writer’s fiction is derived from “real life,” Updike often provides the answer. The larger question, perhaps, then becomes why he gives the reader this information, when other authors choose to keep it secret or at least make some effort toward masking it. Is this Updike participating in his own myth-making?

Some critics and reviewers took Updike to task, playing on the prevailing notion that every real event that happened in his personal life eventually turned into a piece of fiction. In a derisive 1997 essay, for example, writer David Foster Wallace chided Updike

indirectly by placing the question in the mouths of unseen under-40 female readers who ask “Has the son of a bitch ever had one unpublished thought?” Though the preceding quote sounds a lot like a certain then-under-40 male essayist, Wallace goes on to label Updike and his literary colleagues—the “Great Male Narcissists”—“phalocrats,” too “incorrigibly narcissistic, philandering, self-contemptuous, self-pitying...and deeply alone” to appeal to those readers and writers raised in the 1990s (“John Updike”).

Wallace’s animosity toward Updike and other writers of his generation captured the attention of the national media, and in many respects exemplified the changing role of the writer as the twentieth century came to a close. Updike and his peers undoubtedly participated in their own marketing and fame-building, but did not necessarily need to do it by taking down their predecessors. Wallace’s essay paraded the aggressiveness of the subsequent generation, essentially fighting for media space in a cluttered, information-overloaded society.

Given Updike’s penchant for divulging his motivations, it would be irresponsible to not follow the clues, searching for hints of what one uncovers to develop a deeper analysis of Updike as professional writer. Clearly, his American Dream centered on the printed word. As a result, the choices he made as a writer, including what topics to explore, are essential in grasping a fuller picture of his work. The questions dig at the heart of who Updike was as a writer. For example, why did Updike deviate from the popular novels examining suburban life, when fans, editors, and critics identified that as a niche he basically owned?

This chapter examines Updike as an artist, professional writer, and celebrity in an attempt to draw out a sense of the writer’s life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Using him as a case study enables the analysis to include his changing role as a literary writer who also had major bestsellers. The chapter also looks at Updike's standing as a celebrity and public intellectual. It would be naïve to think that his role as a public figure did not play a part in how critics and scholars assess his work. Likewise, anyone looking into the publishing industry part of being an author (appearances, marketing, etc.) would be remiss in not assessing Updike's role in building up that public persona.

What one finds is that unlike many other well-known authors, Updike participates in every aspect of book design and production, including the details about font to the selection of the author photo that adorns the jacket. One senses that as Updike's fame grew, that familiar wry smile in author photos struck some reviewers as inauthentic, that his humble, self-effacing attitude served as part of the act – a marketing gimmick, no more sincere than any other advertising copy.

In the end, though, Updike is a writer. Process is important to him, as is dedication to the craft. From his public comments about the non-creative aspects of being a celebrated author, such as book signings and interviews, one finds a professional less sure, yet willing to disclose and divulge, despite a lingering notion that sharing too much will somehow unduly draw from his personal (and possibly finite) fountain of creativity.

Studying Updike the person and Updike the writer – a distinction he sometimes used himself in analyzing his career – the researcher uncovers a professional dedicated to the craft of writing, mirrored by a deep commitment to writing as a livelihood. One sees this in an article he penned concerning his status as a short story writer: “More closely than my novels, more circumstantially than my poems, these efforts of a few thousand words each hold my life's incidents, predicaments, crises, joys. Further, they made my

life possible, for I depended when young upon their sale to supply my livelihood” (*More Matter* 762). In Updike, craft and trade are inseparable.

### **The Craftsman**

Updike is the fictional god of many created worlds, most often centering on the experiences of modest, white collar, male protagonists. The tumultuous universe of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, the über-middle American, is the most famous Updikean universe for general readers. Other connected or loosely-linked worlds revolve around characters such as Richard Maple, Henry Bech, and David Kern. Some observers see these figures as mere stand-ins for Updike, or at least different aspects of Updike’s personality.

In this instance, then, Henry Bech (a writer) is more-or-less just a Jewish version of his creator, granting Updike a vehicle for creating a humorous account of a novelist skidding out of control and taking shots at the critics, interviewers, and detractors that the (real-life) Updike cannot. Scholar William H. Pritchard labels the Bech character “an opportunity for aggressive self-definition” (152). But, one cannot take these similarities too far, even when the links between the author and his creations seem so snug. In a 1999 faux interview between Bech and Updike, the creator explains about his creation, “You are the person I, once a woeful country boy, wanted to be: a New York writer, up to his ears in toxic fumes” (*Due Considerations* 650). Updike cautions against reading too literal a resemblance between himself and his characters.

A unifying feature across these fictional landscapes is Updike’s voice, or what Pritchard labels “the writer’s sensibility and treatment” (3). It is writing as an art that is the center of Updike’s work, his “sentences unsurpassed in their witty, rhythmic,

intelligently turned and tuned performance” (12). How his sentences “perform” is crucial in understanding how proponents and critics have assessed Updike’s prose over his long career. Supporters relish in the poetic nature of his fiction, the way the words tie together in fresh sentences, regardless of the topic. Many detractors, however, view his style as a smokescreen blurring the reader’s vision and covering up a lack of actually saying anything.

Before others can pass judgment on an author’s creative work, however, the writer must create a worldview that drives the process. Otherwise, the long, lonely hours would never pay off, regardless of accompanying wealth and fame. In *Self-Consciousness*, Updike outlines his writing agenda and its link to his religious faith:

I have felt free to describe life as accurately as I could, with especial attention to human erosions and betrayals. What small faith I have has given me what artistic courage I have. My theory was that God already knows everything and cannot be shocked. Any only truth is useful. Only truth can be built upon...The fabricated truth of poetry and fiction makes a shelter in which I feel safe, sheltered within interlaced plausibilities in the image of a real world for which I am not to blame. Such writing is in essence pure. Out of soiled and restless life, I have refined my books. (243)

Yet, in contrast to the spiritual aspect of what writing means to him, Updike acknowledges that fiction and life are both “dirty business[es],” offending family members and friends used as models in stories for either being “reflected all too accurately and yet not accurately enough” (*Self-Consciousness* 244). As a result, there is a price one pays for writing fiction, particularly if the output mirrors the writer’s own life.

As a matter of fact, an initial question many readers ask themselves when picking up a novel is: how much of this is “real,” in the sense that it is merely scenes derived from the author’s life. Often, this seemingly simple question offers no easy answers, particularly for casual audiences. For many readers, the idea of getting caught up in an imaginary world is the great allure of fiction. Cracking a book, one is suddenly transformed into mystery, suspense, murder, adultery, and heroics, while resting assured that the author will deliver one safely at the end of the journey.

This familiarity is certainly what drives sales for the handful of most successful mass market fiction writers, such as James Patterson, Dan Brown, Nora Roberts, Danielle Steele, and Stephen King. While many critics write off the huge sales as some indication that readers want easy, formulaic novels that do not put much strain on their intellect, certainly there is something of value in how bestselling authors craft stories that gain widespread appeal repeatedly over time. Or, conversely, does it make a statement about the diminishing reading public?

Updike’s preoccupation is with “truth” as he sees it in the beauty and vulgarity of the world around him. In the mid-1990s, Updike discussed the early models he used for putting together short stories, as well as his desire to publish in *The New Yorker*, as a means of both supporting his family and gaining acceptance in the literary world. Reading a John Cheever story, “O Youth and Beauty,” a piece examining suburban angst and one man’s depression, Updike said to himself, “There must be more to American life than this.” Updike’s often-anthologized short story “Friends from Philadelphia” resulted from this mindset, which Updike called an “upbeat little story, with an epiphanic benefaction at the end” (*More Matter* 764). What the author reveals, which dates back to

his first fiction sale, is a keen understanding of the literature of the day and where his work fit into the mix.

What one finds shocking is Updike's ability to turn just about any daily occurrence into a piece of sellable fiction. Updike explains: "We shopped at the Atlantic and Pacific supermarket, and so I cooked up a story called 'A & P.' I drove my daughter to her music lesson, and out came 'The Music School.' A car accident at our corner, and thus 'The Corner.'" (*More Matter* 764).

Although Updike addressed the direct influence of daily events on his fiction, he also carefully retreats from the notion that any fiction writer's work is merely a dairy of such daily episodes. Assessing the role of literary biography as a genre of work, he assesses "the nature of artistic creation," saying, "The life of the writer, which spins outside of itself a secondary life, offers an opportunity to study mind and body, or inside and outside, together, as one" (*Due Considerations* 12). The key to successful literary biography, in Updike's mind, then, is when details of an author's life and experiences "enhances our access to literature," or, in other words, returns the reader back to the writer's words on the page (*Due Considerations* 13).

Getting at truth, Updike says, requires combining the impulse to draw from one's life, and then adding fictional components. The result is a stronger piece. In a 1988 interview, Updike explains: "I would say that all of my novels have been somewhat *unautobiographical*. In every case, there was something that kind of stretched me...for a novel there has to be something out of the autobiographical to excite the author, and one hopes to excite, then, the reader" (qtd. in Plath 209). The challenge is to continue living

or imagining experiences that the writer can build on to present some area of the American experience to the reader.

### **A Professional Writer**

If a single line could encompass Updike's thoughts about being a professional writer, it may be the opening of his last nonfiction book collection *Due Considerations* (2007): "Bills come due; dues must be paid" (xvii). In pure Updikean form, the sentence is both direct and mystical. Yes, bills always "come due," but what "dues" is the author paying? One suspects that the dues are to the profession and the "certain saleable artifacts" that Updike says makes up his simplistic view of the writer's life at the beginning of his career (*Due Considerations* xviii). Despite its brevity, the sentence speaks volumes about Updike's commitment to writing as a profession.

An additional reason Updike serves as an interesting case study for a dying breed of writers that will likely never again exist in the United States is that unlike so many of his colleagues, such as Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates who taught at universities while also writing, Updike derived his income solely working as a freelancer, his only livelihood, outside a short, two-year stint at *The New Yorker* in the mid-1950s.

Consistently, in interviews and articles that address his place in the literary world, Updike takes great care in outlining what it is in his mind to be a professional writer. As the turn of the century last century approached, perhaps a little giddy at the coming millennium, Updike wrote about his youthful aspirations in the anthology *More Matter*. "I set out to be a magazine writer, a wordsmith as the profession was understood in the industrial first half of the century," he explains. "I like seeing my name in what they used

to call ‘hard type’ (*More Matter* xxi). This romantic notion of seeing one’s name in print, that it still excites Updike decades later after millions of his words appeared, might meet jaded eyes in the twenty first century.

Today’s era is built around the idea of the blockbuster – a marketing plan and shot at instant wealth and fame – whether used to launch a new film, CD, or book. The release itself is carefully plotted among huddled media executives, yearning for some way to reach a mass audience. Even among bestselling novelists, the primary goal is to debut at number one. Yet Updike, from the rarified air among America’s greatest modern writers, returned to his foundational notion of what it is to be a professional. “An invitation into print, from however suspect a source” he says, “is an opportunity to make something beautiful, to discover within oneself a treasure that would otherwise have remained buried” (*More Matter* xxi).

It is clear that Updike understood the connection between his status as a professional writer and his participation in the mass media industry, necessarily marketing himself, as well as what he wrote. For example, discussing the lack of attention given to *The Witches of Eastwick* prior to the movie version being released, Updike told James Plath, “Well, what is attention? Now there are so many other claims on our attention, I guess an author is lucky to get any attention. And many quite good ones don’t get any in the landslide of books, all of them aimed at what seems to be a narrowing sector of the average bourgeois’s energy dispersal” (266). Even though Updike was perhaps America’s most famous and published freelance writer, he never seemed to forget that he was a hired literary gun.

At one point in the late 1960s, Updike joked with an interviewer, saying, “I would write ads for deodorants or labels for catsup bottles if I had to” (*Picked-Up Pieces* 497). One can only imagine how those mythical descriptions would have read. His tongue-in-cheek remark, though, has more than a sliver of meaning regarding the state of literature as it evolved over his career. Jump forward another twenty years and Updike discussed the difficulty of establishing oneself as a writer, saying, “it’s harder now to take writing seriously. The Gutenbergian age is in its twilight: [today’s writer must ask] why should I be doing this for an American audience which basically doesn’t read anymore, just flicks on the tube or whatever else it does – goes out and has a beer” (qtd. in Plath 199). One is impressed with Updike’s prescient foreshadowing, particularly since the Internet Age is still another decade away.

What seems observable is that what constituted a professional writer for more than a century no longer exists at Updike’s death, at least certainly not as he personified the image. Discussion in the current environment regarding the death of print magazines and newspapers and the subsequent failure of those mass media channels over the last several years makes an Updikean career nearly impossible. Consequently, the next generation of literary greats faces an entirely different world than Updike did at the start of his career in the 1950s.

### **Celebrity in a Celebrity-Obsessed Age**

As mentioned previously, many aspects of an individual’s quest to fulfill the American Dream are private and will never be exposed, unless a person chooses to reveal them. In Updike’s time, these explanations were reserved primarily for celebrities (for example:

ghostwritten “autobiographies” and “tell-all” memoirs), although confession is much more common today, in an age where Internet-fueled self-exposure trumps discretion on every cyber corner. Even now, though, a person’s motivations are often secret and deeply personal. Celebrities, however, live by a different equation. In that case, the admission and explanation of their hopes and dreams seems part of the tradeoff for fame.

Updike protests – sometimes loudly – at his place in the marketing machine, but still relents. Updike explained his position to an interviewer at the height of his national fame in 1968:

My life is, in a sense, trash; my life is only that of which the residue is my writing. The person who appears on the cover of *Time* or whose monologue will be printed in *The Paris Review* is neither the me who exists physically and socially or the me who signs the fiction and poetry. That is, everything is infinitely fine, and any opinion is somehow coarser than the texture of the real thing” (Plath 31).

The reader senses Updike’s conflict regarding the split between true self and professional self, yet, he delivered this clarification in the midst of conducting an interview.

Given his voluminous outpouring of nonfiction and countless interviews, it is possible that no other writer in history has written or discussed himself more than Updike. A recent book edited by scholar James Schiff is telling in its title and subtitle: *Updike in Cincinnati: A Literary Performance* (2007), which locks together his merged identity as writer and celebrity. The “literary performance” aspect of the book centers on Updike’s short stay in the Midwestern city and the star power attached to his appearance.

It provides a behind-the-scenes glimpse of how a famous contemporary writer intermingles with the public, scholars, and the academic community.

For further proof of Updike's ubiquity, look no further than his appearance (in cartoon form) on *The Simpsons*, or as the central character in the highly-publicized novel *U & I* by Nicholson Baker. As a scholar and fan, Schiff saw Updike appear in public on many occasions and describes them as "so effortless and graceful that one assumes that this is the very thing he was meant to do his entire life" (xvii). This outwardly natural ability to perform contrasts with Updike's sense of discomfort with his own skin (psoriasis) and voice (stammer) as outlined in his memoirs. For example, Schiff explains, "Updike appears to enjoy being on stage, yet doesn't get worked up or worried about it, and seemingly does little advance preparation" (xvii). The duality between his confessed internal discomfort and ease in front of large audiences either reveals the depths of his writer versus person "mask" or exposes an individual highly skilled in image-building.

Looking for clues that indicate how Updike approached his fame, the investigator realizes that he must have found something in talking through his work and life that made sense to him, because he carried on the task for more than fifty years. Universally described as "gracious" in public appearances whether in front of large crowds or in smaller settings, Updike must have realized the relationship between the industry aspects of publishing and how playing his part in interviews and campaigns enabled him to write more. For example, in 2006 Knopf launched a national marketing campaign to promote *Terrorist*. Despite five decades of past interviews and talking about himself, Updike (at 74-years old) actively participated in the process across print, Web, television, and radio. At the same time, National Public Radio host Terry Gross once admitted her fear of

interviewing the author, claiming “I think of all the people I’ve met, you have the strongest anti-interview feelings” (qtd. in Plath xi). This admission comes from a journalist famous for interviewing living literary greats.

One of the methods Updike used to validate his dual life as an individual and also a celebrity meant that he would view “Updike, Writer” as a kind of cartoon character or mask that enabled him to maintain a semblance of privacy while engaging with a growing public. An additional factor, which makes the author unique, is the way the publishing industry transformed as the America of the 1950s morphed into the technology age over the next fifty years. The Updike who experienced early fame in the mid-1950s coped with an entirely different world as his career progressed. In the mid-1990s, Updike penned an essay titled “Updike and I.” The piece focuses on the relationship between Updike as a man and the writer/celebrity that the “real” Updike “created...out of the sticks and mud of my Pennsylvania boyhood” (*More Matter* 757).

The unnamed “I” in the short piece sees Updike as a “monster” and is horrified at facing “the rooms that Updike has filled with his books, his papers, his trophies, his projects.” Yet, the two are fused into a “sacred reality” that makes it impossible for one to act without the other (*More Matter* 758). Despite the strident tone at the opening of the essay, the narrator fears Updike abandoning him, a tinge of doubt at the core of many successful people who wonder – am I really that good or did I just get lucky?

Clearly, the continued growth of America’s celebrity obsession, facilitated by successive technological innovations, has consequences for members of its creative class. Writers of Updike’s generation, born in an era when radio and film dominated mass media, certainly felt the acute transition as television, cable, and the Internet came to

dominate popular culture. With this change, a culture emerged that extolled confession. No scab remains unpicked and no question seems outside the bounds of good taste.

While Updike enacted a plan of self-revelation through his work, such as the 1989 memoir *Self-Consciousness* and personifies a gracious manner in interviews and readings that would deflate difficult examiners, some of his contemporaries addressed the change more aggressively. For example, in an interview with Lawrence Grobel, Norman Mailer took offense at being asked repeated questions about his marriages and other personal topics. Rather than smash Grobel in the face, as he might have done at an earlier stage in his career, Mailer explained his rationale, saying, “You want to discuss my life. I’m not going to give away my life. My life is my material. I would give you my life no more than I would give you my mate. That belongs to me, not to an interviewer” (309). Updike, Mailer, and many of their contemporaries wanted to differentiate between their work and the information they provided during celebrity moments. Yet, they also understood the connection their confession created with audiences.

Updike also tackled the consequences of celebrity status on the writer’s work, boldly declaring, “Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face.” For Updike, the recognition that comes with fame and the incessant requests to speak largely on any and all topics creates a wall around his “early impressions, taken in before the writer became conscious of himself as a writer.” As a result, “the ‘successful’ writer acquires a film over his eyes. His eyes get fat” (*Self-Consciousness* 266). Once fame sets in, much of the writer’s burden is to introduce new experiences that cut through the haze, returning him to a time prior to fame, when eyes saw events clearer.

In a surprisingly confessional mode, Updike linked his celebrity to internal needs for acceptance on a personal level, as the result of a lifetime of dealing with the skin condition psoriasis and a speech impediment. On one hand, he explains, “I need these excursions,” yet they “leave me feeling dirty and disturbed, as though I have wasted this time away from my desk, posing as an author instead of being one” (*Self-Consciousness* 250). In this light, one sees a vulnerable side of Updike, attracted to fame and its diversions, but realizing that it carries a price tag.

The two sides continue at war inside Updike. He lumps writing book reviews, public readings, and appearances together, calling them “superfluous,” but done “for the money and the easy exposure of it, the showing-off, the quick certification from a world that I fear is not hearing me, is not *understanding* me.” Concurrently, according to the author, “My public, marketable self – the self put on display in interviews and slightly ‘off’ caricatures in provincial book-review sections, the book-autographing, anxious-to-please me – feels like another skin and hurts (*Self-Consciousness* 250).

This Updike is wholly realistic about his celebrity status – confessing its use to fulfill an internal desire for acceptance and interaction with the outside world, as well as an additional means for drawing income from his work. In the poem, “At the End of the Rainbow,” for example, the author questions traveling to yet another (unnamed) university lecture, which ends with him alone in a drab motel room, with nothing but the electronic clock for company. Hardly the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, despite his brief stint on the celebrity pedestal, Updike contrasts the “thunderous applause / still tingling in your body” with the mundane realities of time on the road, “Hi-tech / alarm clock, digital. The John. The Check” (*Collected Poems* 253-54). Here Updike offers the

reader a behind-the-curtains image of the downside of fame – loneliness, austerity, and the deep-rooted, almost humiliating, realization that all of this is for nothing more sacrosanct than money.

If for nothing more than comparison's sake, we can contrast Updike's difficult relationship with celebrity to that of Norman Mailer, who orchestrated a much bolder dance with fame, yet running in a parallel timeframe with Updike. As celebrities, Mailer is his total antithesis – pugnacious, confrontational, brash, and unorthodox. Perhaps a writerly way of comparing the two is to say that in their public personas, Mailer is *Playboy* or early *Rolling Stone* (daresay, *Penthouse*, even?), while Updike is utterly *The New Yorker*.

Both Harvard alums, Mailer and Updike achieved early fame, though at twenty-five-years old, Mailer burst onto the scene, while it would take his colleague until twenty-seven-years old to begin the trek to literary fame. The two are interesting foils in discussing literary celebrity, first, because they are two of the most prolific writers of their eras, and second, since they took such differing approaches to fame.

While both started from the dream of producing the Great American Novel, Mailer used his quest as an exploration of self and celebrity, virtually absorbing, then personifying, the popular culture of the age. Updike took a less adventurous route (although audiences considered his content salacious) by retiring from the limelight of New York City at the tender age of twenty-five. Where Mailer strutted and charged, Updike tiptoed and uncovered. Each man's decision regarding how to deal with early fame appears to have had major ramifications for the subsequent work they produced.

For Mailer, according to literary scholar Morris Dickstein, fame changed his thinking, because he could no longer take part in “ordinary life,” instead leading him to “riskier kinds of fiction that pleased fewer readers, but also to personal reportage fired by the kinds of inwardness and depth that could make fiction so powerful.” As a result, “He would move far afield from where he began” (119). Applying a symbolic interactionist framework to this transformation reveals an individual using the impulses drawn from internal and external forces to emerge as a fully interactionist thinker. Mailer, much more than Updike, seemed a walking embodiment of symbolic interaction, at least from the height of his initial fame in 1948 through the mid-1970s. Interestingly, this timeframe also marks the early rise of television celebrity in the United States, which Mailer employed to build his own fame.

Mailer’s agonizing decision to move away from traditional fiction also set him in stark contrast to Updike, who remained committed to probing the soft underbelly of suburban America, with the occasional wild fling into more global subject matter. In *Advertisements for Myself* (a title one could never imagine Updike employing), Mailer explains, “there was no room for the old literary idea of oneself as a major writer...All I felt then was that I was an outlaw, a psychic outlaw, and I liked it, I liked it a good night better than trying to be a gentleman” (qtd. in Dickstein 124). Although Updike sometimes startled readers with graphic language and sexual situations in his fiction, as an individual, “gentleman” might be the most characteristic trait he possessed. Using a sports metaphor, which I think both men would appreciate, Mailer embodied boxing (if not a drunken fistfight out in the alley), while Updike golfed – the elegant swing and steely confidence of rolling in a clutch 12-foot putt.

## **Selfless as a Lens**

Updike's journey, he says, began with "cunning private ambitions and childish fascination" to "make an impression," but evolved as his career unfolded to making the impression "a perfect transparency...selfless as a lens." Along the way, however, fame creates barriers to one's selflessness. Ironically, success becomes a double-edged sword – enabling the writer to publish more often, but at the same time, "clouds and clots our rapt witness to the world that surrounds and transcends us." (*Picked-Up Pieces* 54). Surely, given the author's attention to words, the religious language of "rapt witness" and "transcends" is intentional.

Here is a writer who sees craft as creed. Creating prose is tantamount to religious experience. Still, the process necessitates attention to base ends, such as marketing campaigns, appearances, and interviews that may sap energy from one's true calling, drawing on a potentially finite well of publishable words. Updike explains:

A writer begins with his personal truth, with that obscure but vulnerable and, once lost, precious life that he lived before becoming a writer; but, those first impressions discharged...he finds himself, though empty, still posed in the role of a writer, with it may be an expectant audience of sorts and certainly a habit of communion. It is then that he dies as a writer, and becomes an inert cultural object merely, or is born again, by re-submitting his ego...to fresh drafts of experience and refined operations of his mind...To become less and transmit more, to replenish energy with wisdom – some such hope, at this more than mid-point of my life, is the reason why I write. (*Picked-Up Pieces* 54)

Yes, Updike is a craftsman, a professional, and celebrity. His long, successful career affords scholars a unique opportunity to examine both his work and the many thousands of words devoted to his standing as an artist and icon, using one as a means of exploring the other. Participating in the mass media machine over a career spanning 55 years, Updike, perhaps more than any writer in modern American history, enables a full interrogation of what it means to be a writer through the rise and fall of the American Century.

Of all his esteemed contemporaries, Updike managed to remain visible and viable, maintaining a prodigious publication pace that few could ever match. At the heart of this effort stood two interlocking tenets: Updike's ever-present need to explain and a sense of professionalism that craved publication. Early in his career, Updike looked to the literary lights of the preceding generation for models of what it meant to be a writer, yet unlike those archetypes, he did not self-destruct or lose steam. Certainly a literary celebrity – twice appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine – he did not let fame's constant yearning for attention overtake his role as a working writer.

Although routinely celebrated as a craftsman and artist, Updike's professionalism, (perhaps a nod to his Pennsylvania work ethic) seems to be his most faithful pillar. He possessed an uncharacteristic need to publish and carved out a life that fulfilled that necessity. In encapsulating this oeuvre, one turns to Updike, commenting on E.B. White's 1971 National Medal for Literature: "A good writer is hard to talk about, since he has already, directly or by implication, said everything about himself that should be said" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 420). What is left for the next generation of Updike scholars is to explore those aspects of the man's life and experiences that draw out new analysis of

his written work, or a call for the brand of literary biography Updike deemed most useful—one that provides deeper insight into what the author has written, the words on the page.

## Chapter Two—Racing Toward the Apocalypse: *Terrorist* and Updike’s New America

[T]he theme of terrorism was there, and I had my sense of participating in it vicariously, and I thought it would be a service to the state of the nation and the world of fiction if I tried to dramatize a young man, a young devout self-converted Muslim living in Northern New Jersey, in a not-very-promising metropolis city, and tried to dramatize him from within and show how he was slowly involved in a terrorist plot.

—From a 2006 interview with John Updike, (“Bartos Forum”)

Here is an argument for serendipity: John Updike, a resident of Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, who normally spends his mornings in virtual seclusion, writing, happens to be less than a mile away from the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Rather than watching from home or seeing clips played over and over again on subsequent news broadcasts, fate somehow intervened, resulting in Updike watching the Twin Towers fall from a tenth floor vantage point, on what he deemed an otherwise mundane trip “visiting some kin” in Brooklyn Heights (*Due Considerations* 117). Consequently, one of America’s greatest living writers just happens to witness firsthand the defining moment

of the twenty first century. It comes as no surprise, then, that *The New Yorker* published Updike's observance and response to the terrorist acts in its September 24, 2001, issue, its first to appear after 9/11.

Given Updike's prolific work as a journalist and critic, one presumes that his thoughts on the terrorist attacks would have been printed whether or not he actually saw the destruction, but his on the scene reporting gave his words added impact. Updike's description of the horror and personal response provided readers with an additional tool to process the events. He captured the heartache Americans felt at the moment, explaining, "We knew we had just witnessed many deaths; we clung to each other as if we ourselves were falling" (*Due Considerations* 117). Updike also summarized the immediate post-September 11 mood, saying, "The nightmare is still on. The bodies are beneath the rubble, the last-minute phone calls—remarkably calm and long, many of them—are still being reported, the sound of an airplane overhead still bears an unfamiliar menace, the thought of boarding an airplane with our old blasé blitheness keeps receding into the past" (*Due Considerations*, 117-18). Here, America's "man of letters" plays an important role in helping people mentally and emotionally process the terrorist attacks.

The power of Updike's nonfiction essay based on his firsthand account of September 11 is revealed in two ways; first, when the author died on January 27, 2009, many of the obituaries that appeared worldwide included the piece in their overviews of his life and work, despite an oeuvre that includes basically a book a year published from 1959 to 2009; and second, the short essay led to the creation of *Terrorist*, published five years later.

Comparing Updike's real life description of September 11 published in *The New Yorker* and the subsequent use of the theme in *Terrorist* reveals similarities, but also distinct differences. In the nonfiction essay, for example, Updike quotes terrorist mastermind Mohamed Atta telling a neighbor that he did not like the United States because "it was too lax...I can go anywhere I want to, and they can't stop me" (qtd. in *Due Considerations*, 118). Subsequently, in the post-9/11 world of *Terrorist*, Americans trade their physical freedom for freedom to pursue consumerism. Jack surmises that "America is paved solid with fat and tar," which keeps people bloated and satisfied, but allows "religious fanatics and computer geeks" free reign (27). In this instance, it seems as if Updike's initial thoughts and reactions to the real life terrorist attacks in New York City inform his later novelistic storytelling.

From the symbolic interaction perspective, Updike's use of real life events to fuel his storytelling efforts exemplifies the complicated nature that exists between self, topics, and experiences. Terrorism is a subject created according to cultural understandings (and possibly prior to 9/11, misunderstandings) of the term, yet Updike also interprets the idea based on his lived experience and the social interactions with others. Making matters more complex, the author's perception of terrorism and its consequences are filled with a lifetime of cultural representations, drawn from film, television, books, and journalistic accounts of terroristic acts. Interestingly, the characters in the novel confront the same interactionist issues. Although the fictional world of New Prospect, New Jersey, is imaginary, characters in that world face a quasi-realistic framework in which 9/11 occurred and presents ramifications.

In *Terrorist*, for example, Ahmad's Lebanese-American boss Charlie Chehab draws parallels between modern jihadists and the revolutionary forces led by George Washington. Charlie's underlying assumptions about both groups are drawn primarily from cultural representations, though he does in fact have firsthand experience with would-be terrorists. The idea of George Washington as hero of the Revolutionary War also holds its own meaning. Sociologist C. Wright Mills explains how the cultural machine is used to create self, calling it "the lens of mankind through which men see...interpret and report what they see...it is the semiorganized source of their very identities" (406). Charlie's heroic stance—tying jihadists and anti-American Muslims to the preeminent founding father—enables him to manipulate Ahmad based on their shared cultural representation of Washington.

If written prior to the terrorist attacks on the United States, *Terrorist* might have merely served as another example of an Updike fictional departure or, in the minds of some critics, a deviation—similar to earlier works in which the renowned chronicler of suburban America explored a global challenge. Given such a scenario, readers may have scratched their heads and wondered why Updike would produce a thriller with political overtones at this seemingly late stage in his career. Certainly critics would have noted the striking deviation from the content of the Rabbit series, perhaps comparing it to other significant Updike experimental works, such as *The Coup* or *A Month of Sundays*.

As interesting as questions about the novel are if the attacks on the United States did not occur, one cannot analyze *Terrorist* outside the context of September 11. The work is a product not only of the events Updike witnessed that day in Brooklyn Heights, but also derived from what pundits deemed "the post 9/11 world," a new cultural

environment fundamentally different than had existed before. In an interview appearing in *Book* magazine, Updike discussed his rationale for writing the novel, saying:

And as a novel like *The Coup* shows, I'm interested in Islam as a more fiery and absolutist and, some would say, fanatical brand of theistic faith. So it was not just my happening to have been there but my sensation that I was qualified to speak about why young men are willing to become suicide bombers. I can kind of understand it, and I'm not sure too many Americans can ("Interview").

Immediately after September 11, the nation turned more patriotic, lauding the heroic efforts of firefighters and police officers in New York City and around the country. President George W. Bush also garnered nearly universally support for military efforts, including the October 2001 military invasion of Afghanistan and other efforts to destroy Al-Qaeda, the terrorist cell network headed by Osama bin Laden.

The Bush administration also launched a series of domestic security programs to counter potential future terrorist threats. Bush authorized the creation of the Department of Homeland Security to coordinate efforts at home, naming former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge as its first director. Homeland Security initiated a national alert system indicating the threat level, ranging from red (severe risk) to green (low risk). The president also worked with members of Congress to pass the USA Patriot Act (2001), which granted federal authorities broad powers to sniff out and counter potential security threats.

On the cultural front, commentators argued that 9/11 would fundamentally change the nation's viewing, reading, and media habits. In response, many radio stations dropped songs with lyrics that might be considered offensive and movie and television studios

censored themselves. For example, producers of the \$85 million Arnold Schwarzenegger blockbuster *Collateral Damage* cut scenes related to plane hijacking and pushed its release date back to 2002. Meanwhile, executives in charge of the hit HBO television series *The Sopranos* deleted scenes of the World Trade Center Twin Towers from the program's opening credits. Although Updike is noted for the role nostalgia plays in his work, *Terrorist* focuses on what remained in the wake of September 11.

This chapter uses *Terrorist* as a way of questioning the common misperceptions regarding the scale and scope of Updike's fiction. I argue that the novel, which catapulted Updike onto various best-seller lists, became a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and sparked general controversy, but appeared to rather mixed reviews, captures Updike's vision of a new America and the nation's relationship to the world in the twenty first century. By examining the novel's content, the chapter recasts Updike. Rather than encased in the mantle of the Rabbit series featuring everyman Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, in *Terrorist*, one sees Updike shape a new worldview transformed by the terrorist attacks on the United States, which he witnessed firsthand from just a mile away on that fateful day.

Updike's vision of post-9/11 America centers on the idea of faith and lack of faith in the modern world. For Updike, consumerism and its consequences replaced religion and people's belief in the American political and social system, ultimately debasing the foundational ideas that built the nation. Instead of a fervent belief in the American way or American dream, Jack laments the impulse to purchase "tawdry junk" that fills people's daily lives (20). The lack of faith, passion, or commitment to "the right path," leads to a

world “full of nuzzling,” according to Ahmad’s mentor, Sheik Rashid, “blind animals in a herd bumping against one another, looking for a scent that will comfort them” (10).

### **Pieces of Updike’s New America**

In *Terrorist*, Updike utilizes a number of literary techniques designed to guide the reader through the complex ideas at the novel’s core. This is the type of writing that gained the author widespread acclaim from the earliest days of his career in the 1950s. While commentators often get caught up in examining Updike as a lyrical writer, within the unique style one finds a strong and distinct worldview. Many journalistic critics, however, overlook the foundational viewpoints and concentrate on his style, as if it is pretty gift wrapping paper concealing an otherwise empty package. Commenting on this criticism, Updike once noted:

My first books met the criticism that I wrote all too well but had nothing to say. My own style seemed to me a groping and elemental attempt to approximate the complexity of envisioned phenomena, and it surprised me to have it called luxuriant and self-indulgent; self-indulgent, surely, is exactly what it wasn’t—other-indulgent, rather. (qtd. in Tanenhaus)

The criticism regarding Updike’s perceived style over substance stuck in his gut. From this perspective, *Terrorist* can be read as the author’s attempt to answer this ongoing criticism.

Updike’s evolving ideas about the United States, the nation’s place in the world, and the consequences of this interaction become the driving forces behind the taut

thriller. At the heart of the change in Updike's perspective is the wholesale alteration in scope. Contrast, for example, the limited focus of *Rabbit, Run* and its sequels. In *Rabbit, Run*, the main protagonist's actions wreck havoc on his immediate family, perhaps most exemplified by the dehumanizing consequences on Rabbit's wife Janice. She combats her husband's infidelity and desertion with alcohol, resulting in the "accidental" drowning of their newborn daughter. *Rabbit, Run* symbolizes Updike's emphasis on the individual's place within the family and community and the dire results that deviating from that standard might produce.

In contrast, the reader finds in *Terrorist* that the primary characters possess broader impulses, though their lives are all intricately interconnected. While they are deeply joined on a personal level, characters such as Ahmad and Charlie also have ties to the larger world. For Updike the emphasis shifts from the axis of the immediate family and consequences on a small part of the community, as in the Rabbit tetralogy, to characters whose lives are intertwined on a micro and macro level. They hold worldly outlooks and view themselves as part of the global village—even if parts of this broader community must stand at odds.

### **Faith and authenticity**

Ahmad's faith is arguably the central topic in *Terrorist*. Although just 18-years old and a recent high school graduate, he grapples with life-altering ideas and events that are perhaps too complex for him to adequately assess. Consequently, some prominent journalistic critics found Ahmad problematic. For example, Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* labeled the character a "completely unbelievable individual," "cliché,"

“static,” and a “one-dimensional stereotype” (E1). These misgivings, however, are the product of not assessing what Updike wrote, but instead that the author did not create the kind of character the critic favored. Kakutani herself compares Updike’s Ahmad negatively to characters in the works of novelist Don DeLillo and the real-life portraits of the September 11 hijackers written by *Los Angeles Times* journalist Terry McDermott. In contrast, I argue that a deeper textual analysis reveals Ahmad as a complex character in the midst of wholesale transformation. In Updike’s post-September 11 worldview, everything is entwined.

The primary concern of critics such as Kakutani revolve around what one teen could think, feel, and believe at such a young age. On one hand, while reviewers could argue that many teens fall into a kind of angst-driven mentality when turning 18-years old and graduating from high school, what separates Ahmad is his true outsider status as an American-born Muslim at this specific moment in the nation’s history. He is different from other Muslims in the United States, not born into or raised in the faith or taught Arabic as a first language. Also, he is not part of the Black Nationalist Muslim movement, which has a modern history as a fringe, but somewhat accepted, religious group. Updike uses this context to provide the teen with a depth that asks the reader to think deeply about the consequences of September 11 and its aftermath on the meaning of America.

In a pivotal scene in *Terrorist*, Updike uses this context brilliantly to force the reader to engage with the nation’s foundational belief system, in both its institutional and legal senses and the broader set of ideas that people see at the heart of being American. Returning from a delivery, Charlie and Ahmad drive into a park in Jersey City, New

Jersey, where they get a clear view of the Statue of Liberty, with Manhattan jutting out toward them in the near distance. Although it is a beautiful summer day, in their work clothes of overalls, boots, and Ahmad's ever-present black jeans, the two foreign-looking men are viewed apprehensively. Instantly, they "attract suspicious glances from older, Christian tourists" (186). Charlie is disgusted by the "dirty little looks," they receive (187), Updike's nod at how white Americans view Americans of Middle Eastern descent in the post-September 11 world. Ironically, though, Charlie is actually in the middle of an anti-American tirade, basically prodding Ahmad toward agreeing to become a jihadist.

Charlie not only criticizes George W. Bush, but everyone who works "serving the empire in their way," whether that is a soldier, investment banker, or waitress (187). Charlie asks Ahmad if he would give his life to fight them, though there is confusion regarding who the term addresses. For Charlie it seems to be the United States, while Ahmad hesitatingly adds, "If God wills it" (189). Confusion exists because the stakes are not clear at the time and Ahmad does not want to disappoint his older, male friend.

In the scene, Updike is playing with people's prejudices, but creating an instance where their bigotry is warranted. The author asks the reader to contemplate a world in which seemingly ordinary people might be terrorists. He is also forcing the reader to consider the many ways an American might become anti-American.

Like many central fictional characters, particularly in coming of age tales, Ahmad carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. Although surrounded by others, he is essentially isolated from the outside world. In many respects, the young man is the ultimate outsider. He is uncomfortable in any of the worlds he orbits, from his identity as

a student to his place in a fatherless home with a gadfly mother who takes minimal interest in his day-to-day life. Clearly Ahmad is confused.

As a young Muslim, Ahmad turns to his strict religious training for answers, even though he does not believe that his teacher, Sheikh Rashid, holds God as close as he does. Consequently, as a result of his beliefs, Ahmad determines that American society is evil. Doubts, however, creep in. The teen is essentially left to himself to deal with the heap of existential angst produced as a result.

Ahmad's outsider status sets him apart from other characters and fuels his commitment to Islam. At school, Ahmad is a bright student, dunning down in "voke" classes and basically has no friends. Even his primary sport—track—is one that emphasizes individual achievement, despite the team setting in high school. At home, Ahmad and his mother have difficulty communicating, as if the ghost of his father, who abandoned the family, is ever-present.

Updike captures the conflict within Ahmad early in the novel. The reader's first interaction with the character is in what he internalizes: "*Devils,*" Ahmad thinks. *These devils seek to take away my God*" (3). The objects of Ahmad's disgust (the "devils") one finds in the ensuing lines are the individuals who make up the high school community: scantily-clad, tattooed girls; strutting, sauntering boys with "dead-eyed" expressions; and teachers who "make a show of teaching virtue," despite their "lack of belief" (3). Given the general mindset of most high school students, the idea of them actively attempting to take away someone's God is difficult to comprehend. Beginning the novel inside the main character's head, though, allows Updike to reveal the depths of Ahmad's struggle.

Although Ahmad is disgusted with his high school classmates, he directs his fury at Central High's teachers. Like teenagers that have a great deal of energy, but often lack wisdom, Ahmad lashes out at the authority figures nearest to him. Contrasting the way in which he disparages the students and teachers, it becomes clear that while Ahmad loathes the other high school students, he hates the teachers.

The critique of the students is actually somewhat detached, focusing on the way they look or act—"girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies"—based on traditional high school caste systems (3). When Ahmad disparages teachers, however, the attack gets personal. Teachers, according to the teenager, are "puffy" with "bad breath" and "unclean." He criticizes them because, "Their lives away from the school are disorderly and wanton and self-indulgent" (3-4). More importantly, though, they push a belief system that is "Godless," not because they believe in what they are saying, rather to "instill virtue and democratic values" supported by the state government and federal officials in Washington, DC (4). The vitriol Ahmad spews at the Central High faculty identifies those he actually believes are taking away his God. He indicts them for not being authentic, in contrast to the students, who merely act a role promulgated through mass popular culture channels and the nation's overwhelming consumer culture. In Ahmad's mind, the teachers should be severely criticized because they do not believe in the ideas they teach and at the same time stand as mindless consumers. Both roles carry out the wishes of the nameless, faceless authorities that control the country.

Updike moves quickly from what Ahmad is thinking in the first two paragraphs of the novel to a third person, omniscient narrator in the third. The scene begins from a detached perspective, placing the teen in an urban setting at the start of spring. In contrast

to the fiery rhetoric of the opening, Updike quickly switches tone, providing factual details: “Ahmad is eighteen. This is early April; again green sneaks, seed by seed, into the drab city’s earthy crevices” (4). There is a journalistic feel to these lines, though lightened by Updike’s flourishes of “green sneaks” and “earthy crevices.” Butted up against the anger of the earlier paragraphs, these lines serve as a kind of pause, allowing Updike to bring the reader to normality after the vitriol of those viewed as Godless.

The break, however, is short-lived. Updike jumps back inside Ahmad’s mind, saying, “He looks down from his new height and thinks...” (4). What the boy then thinks is another indication of his confusion “...that to the insects unseen in the grass he would be, if they had a consciousness like his, God” (4-5). The move from condemning Central High’s faculty for their lack of belief to his own vanity in assuming a God-like pose presents the central fulcrum of Ahmad’s dilemma. No one quite measures up on his scale of belief, thus proving that they are inauthentic, yet he himself doubts his own faith. This early passage sets a tone that many critics clearly missed—Ahmad’s fervor counterbalancing his youth and immaturity. At times, he seems like the classic male, only child in a single-parent home, forced to grow up quickly as “the man of the house,” yet still grappling with the added responsibilities.

Updike reveals the depths of Ahmad’s doubt in the same paragraph. As he contemplates his height after growing three inches in the past year, Ahmad thinks that he will not get taller “in this life or the next” (5). However, he cannot help questioning the thought: “*If there is a next*, an inner devil murmurs” (5). Ahmad continues the line of questioning, wondering what evidence proves that there is a next life. Instead of rigidly accepting what he has learned in the Qur’an, he believes that there must at least be a hell

to provide the energy needed to “maintain opulent Eden” (5). Oddly, after his rampage against his teachers, Ahmad uses an idea he could only have learned in school, asking “What of the second law of thermodynamics?” (5) By deliberately introducing the second law into the internal questioning process, Updike shows Ahmad at odds with his religious and secular educations.

What the reader finds in the first several pages of *Terrorist*, I argue, is a central figure wrestling with ideas crucial to his understanding of himself and the broader society. This analysis reveals Ahmad as a character with depth by exploring Updike’s use of rhetoric and internal monologue to show contrasting aspects of the teen’s mindset.

### **Consumerism as a new religion**

One of the criticisms leveled against Updike over his long career is that by chronicling the intimate details of the lives of suburban people that he in many respects supports or validates that lifestyle, particularly the cozy “Americanness” of the never-ending quest for more. However, the idea that a writer supports or validates a particular lifestyle because he uses it as a central topic is problematic. Similar to the way critics and scholars interpret F. Scott Fitzgerald’s interpretation of the rich, thinking of the author as a kind of apologist for the excesses of the American aristocracy, Updike’s deep insight into middle class life hangs like an albatross around his neck. The need for critics to create a sound bite overview or description of a writer’s work says more about the critic’s goals and aspirations than it does the novelist. Commentators who are able to create such pithy overviews can gain additional readers, some level of fame, and, ultimately, more

work by doing so. As a result, it makes sense for critics to use this kind of shorthand in their work, despite what a careful reading might reveal.

One of the central criticisms Updike levels against post-September 11 America is its emphasis on consumerism. Nearly every character in the novel holds negative opinions of America's constant need to buy things. Ahmad and Jack, in particular, launch into tirades condemning foods and other items that make people complacent, lazy, and apathetic. For example, Ahmad tells Joryleen, "All American wants of its citizens, your President has said, is for us to buy—to spend money we cannot afford and thus propel the economy forward for himself and other rich men" (72). When she protests that Bush is not her president, the boy responds that the individual holding the office does not matter, saying, "They all want Americans to be selfish and materialistic, to play their part in consumerism" (72). The exchange points to a major theme in *Terrorist*: how the American focus on consumerism developed into a new kind of religion.

Although Jack with his world-weary demeanor longs for times when consumerism played a less central role in American life—as if that time ever existed—it is Charlie Chehab, the first-generation Lebanese immigrant, who almost lovingly analyzes the national obsession with more. For Updike, Charlie can be seen as a kind of mouthpiece, but possibly an unreliable one, since at the end of the novel, he is identified as a CIA informant who manipulated Ahmad for the good of "the company." Once this plot point is revealed, the reader is left wondering what aspects of Charlie's relationship with Ahmad portray genuine friendship and what could be labeled pure manipulation. Basically, everything Charlie says must come under new scrutiny.

Charlie loves two things: George Washington and television commercials. At one point, he waxes enthusiastically about Levitra ads and the soft-focus camera shots of women tacitly talking about their man's erections. Charlie enjoys TV ads so much that he proclaims that he would be making them if it weren't for the responsibility of keeping the family business running. Ironically, Charlie realizes "it's crap," meant to keep "the masses zombified" and purposely designed to "mess with your heads," but he still wants to jump right in (173). The rest of television, from the evening news to sports programming is all worthless in Charlie's mind. Instead, he talks about "The new powers that be, the international corporations, [who] want to wash your brains away, period. They want to turn you into machines for consuming—the chicken-coop society" (172). What the reader does not realize until the end of the novel is that Charlie is actually orchestrating his own brainwashing campaign, acting out the traditional good cop role in his own little pro-terrorism commercial. Like the general public that envisions its dreams fulfilled in little pills and vials, Ahmad eagerly soaks up the pabulum, buying into Charlie's thinking, despite his doubts about his meaning and sincerity. While Ahmad references "the Straight Path" (173) and quotes the Qur'an, Charlie chatters on about Ex-Lax and female sex enhancement drugs (174-5).

### **Race**

In Updike's new, post-9/11 America, race remains a central challenge. The terrorist attacks and the Bush Administration's subsequent "War on Terror" just expanded the list of those who "regular" Americans could either secretly or openly distrust. It is as if the main focus of racism merely shifted for a time. Blacks, Hispanics,

and other minorities did not win an ideological victory, rather a short reprieve, as people turned their attention to those of Middle Eastern descent.

While Ahmad is still a high school student, Tylenol Jones (athletic, bully, African-American) derogatorily calls him an “Arab” (97-8) four times, meant to goad the boy into a fight. Earlier, Tylenol explained, “Black Muslims I don’t diss, but you not black, you not anything but a poor shithead. You no raghead, you a *shithead*” (16). Later, as other students gather in anticipation of a fight, Tylenol then says, “You all [Arabs] faggots, man” (98). The cutthroat world Updike creates in *New Prospect* holds no hope for any kind of solidarity of the oppressed.

Ahmad’s upright standing based on his religious training and neat appearance is often contrasted with the majority of high school students at Central High, primarily “blacks and Latinos, the gang allegiances declared by the blue and red of the belts on their droopy, voluminous drawers and their headbands and skull-fitting do-rags” (97). Updike uses the divergent styles of Ahmad and other students as a way to portray how low people of Middle Eastern descent fell in post-9/11 America. Examined objectively, one would assume that Ahmad would be considered attaining a higher social standing than Tylenol, but not in a world that sees anyone who looks Arabic as a potential threat.

For Ahmad, his mixed heritage is also a constant reminder of race. He often juxtaposes himself against his white, Irish-American mother, who he views as whorish, stupid, and overly-American in her consumerist mentality.

Updike’s sense of race seems little changed by September 11, beyond simply heightening suspicion of Arabs and Arab-Americans. As a non-practicing Jew, Jack offers rather harsh critiques of religion throughout *Terrorist*, but is cast as something of a

realist, though dour in his outlook. Despite this, however, Jack also reacts negatively to the Muslim imam who delivers a benediction at Central High's graduation ceremony. The Jewish teacher studies the imam, physically "slight, impeccable," but "embodying a belief system that not many years ago managed the deaths of, among others, hundreds of commuters from northern New Jersey" (112). Contemplating the continuing battle between Arabs and Jews worldwide, Jack decides, "the man in his white garb sticks like a bone in the throat of the occasion" (112). So, the one character in *Terrorist* who is thought to be somewhat level-headed from a political standpoint cannot get past his own racist sentiments and the aftermath of 9/11.

Neither does Updike forgive America for its racist past. He picks up on the vestiges of racism that shine through the nation's newly-intensified hatred of the terrorists and those who are suspected of possible terrorist ties. One senses that it is merely a matter of time before suspicions are cast back on the traditional culprits—blacks and Hispanics.

Beth's sister, Hermione Fogel, for instance, is brought into Homeland Security, informally called the "Undersecretary of Women's Purses," the narrator explains, to craft a way for security personnel to rummage through women's purses without offending the owners with "their naked hands" (45). The challenge, according to the unnamed narrator: "The dozing giant of American racism, lulled by decades of official liberal singsong, stirred anew as African-Americans and Hispanics...acquired the authority to frisk, to question, to delay, to grant or deny admission and permission to fly" (46). In other words, the majority of airline passengers (white) balked as newly-empowered security personnel (black and Hispanic) performed their duties. In addition, a class-based negativity also

rose. In the eyes of wealthy (again mostly white) travelers, “it appears that a dusky underclass has been given tyrannical power” (46). Interestingly, these passages are delivered by the narrator as an overview of post-9/11 America, not placed in the mind of one of the primary characters, though they do line up closely to the Secretary’s worldview.

An interesting aspect of the novel is that many of its characters realize that in twenty first century America they should be open minded about race, perhaps as an outcome of the politically correct language that pervades daily life. As such, upon first meeting Ahmad, Jack’s reaction is rather subdued given that the boy has openly spoken out against the American government and wants to learn to drive a truck (and possibly commercial trucks that can carry hazardous materials when he qualifies). Historically, trucks served as a primary delivery weapon for terrorists, so combined with Ahmad’s religious and political views, one would assume red flags would go off in Jack’s mind. Instead, he questions the boy’s commitment to the “technical side of it and all the regulations” (41).

Reviewing *Terrorist* in *The Atlantic*, Christopher Hitchens identifies the preceding scene as a glaring weakness and proof of Updike’s failure. On further examination, though, one wonders whether Updike actually used the truck scenario to present a nuanced exploration of race and political correctness in post-9/11 America. In fact, many pundits and security experts agreed that any further attacks on U.S. soil would most likely take place via truck or a container carried on a shipping vessel.

## Popular culture

Updike grapples with twenty first century America, providing a clear view of post-9/11 society, but cannot help also linking to its nostalgic past. The tactic Updike employs is in the thoughts, speech, and actions of Ahmad and Jack, the 63-year old high school guidance counselor who takes an interest in Ahmad and his future. Ironically, Jack holds two separate (and competing) views in his daily life—a kind of nostalgic yearning for the past and his youth, while being responsible for helping high school students plan for their futures. As such, this inward-looking man, who frames his worldview through the past, must continually confront the potential futures of the students he counsels.

For popular culture scholars, *Terrorist* presents an interesting duality. On one hand, Updike criticizes much of American pop culture, from the pierced and tattooed high school students in fictional New Prospect, New Jersey, to the mind-numbing dialogue of soap operas and drivel offered up in commercials. Familiar popular culture references fill the pages: Google, Disney, *All My Children*, and Times Square. Updike is clearly a student of popular culture, capturing the nuances and deeper meanings in the media-centric world comprising modern America.

As he has from the start of his career, Updike remains rooted in popular culture. In *Terrorist*, however, popular culture is used as a kind of anesthesia or poison, depending on the character discussing the topic. For Ahmad, television is nothing more than an instrument “using sex to sell you things you don’t need” (38). The teen contrasts his vision of pure Islam with impure pop culture, resulting “in a world that mocks faith” (69). Adding to the criticism of television and movies, he tells Joryleen, “it is all so

saturated in despair and unbelief as to repel my interest” (70), even though his religion does not forbid either.

When Ahmad’s sexual stirrings for Joryleen mount, he lashes out at her (and his internal doubt) through popular culture, not pausing to look inward for his uncertainty. Instead, Ahmad criticizes her and others like her, labeling them “slaves to drugs, slaves to fads, slaves to television, slaves to sports heroes that don’t know they exist, slaves to the unholy, meaningless opinions of others” (73). As a result, he tells Joryleen that she is headed “straight for Hell” (73). Hurt by the verbal assault, Joryleen responds that Ahmad “don’t know where he’s heading. You’re the one don’t know which fucking end is up” (73). The sad truth for Ahmad is that for all his devotion and use of popular culture and the shortcomings of others to mask his doubts, Joryleen is correct. He stands away from the rest of society, often judging everyone around him as less than adequate based on his notion of the Straight Path, but this is all to cover the confusion inside him. Ahmad does not know how to align his future with what he has learned, ultimately leaving him careening down a one-way street with his foot on the gas, but neither hand on the steering wheel.

In much of the novel, Updike uses popular culture as a benchmark for what is wrong with the world. Ahmad and Jack basically view popular culture as overtly evil. For Ahmad, the bare midriffs, belly rings, and low plunging necklines he sees in school each day represent an attempt to weaken his religious fervor. The older man contrasts today’s popular culture influences with those of his youth, seeing in the nostalgia his own losing battle with entropy and aging. In Jack’s mind, for example, today’s movies shown at the “seedy cineplex” are “too violent or sexy or too blatantly aimed at the mid-teen male

demographic” (25). He longs for the “dazzling subversive visions” released when he was first married, from *Midnight Cowboy* to *Dirty Harry* and *American Graffiti*.

When Jack thinks, it is in historical or nostalgic terms. On the brief mention of renaming a local street Reagan Boulevard, which Ahmad does not register, Jack explains it to himself as a lack of political knowledge on the part of high school students, replaced by their focus on “celebrity heaven” (37). As a result, students believe John F. Kennedy is the second best president ever, behind Abraham Lincoln, based on his “celebrity quality” (38). The idea here is that popular culture, driven by the mass media and its agenda setters, is able to basically rewrite the past, essentially solidifying “facts” based on ideals that have little or nothing to do with reality. Consequently, if history and some version of reality becomes unreal, then people will have nothing left to believe in, no one left to trust. For Updike, it is in this environment that zealotry thrives, as exemplified by the Bush administration and Muslim jihadists.

Even the Tom Ridge-like Director of Homeland Security Haffenreffer gets in on the anti-popular culture viewpoint, explaining, “The way things are going, there won’t be a thing America makes. Except movies, which are getting crappier each year” (260). For him, old-time actors, such as Kirk Douglas and Judy Garland “gave good honest value, every performance, one hundred ten percent” (260). He concludes his rant, which includes his racist feelings about Arab-Americans, by deciding: “If there’s anything wrong with this country...is we have too many rights and not enough duties” (261). In his mind, the softness of today’s “kid movie actors” (260) and society’s celebrity obsession are leading the nation to its knees. When he contemplates his own duties, he cites Jefferson’s holding onto his slaves and the iceberg-filled waters that sunk the *Titanic*. For

Updike, the Secretary's lack of faith in his position and his country to support his decisions lead him to blame popular culture, rather than look inward.

Updike portrays popular culture as either a way to numb society from its evils—a type of opiate for the masses—or as a mask for individuals to divert their shortcomings outward, rather than undergo the potentially grueling process of internal reflection. In post-9/11 America, the author shows pop culture as a central facet of life for individuals across racial, socio-economic, and cultural divides.

### **Authority**

For an author labeled as resolutely pro-establishment and pro-suburban America, Updike has little use for authority figures or institutions in *Terrorist*. From the teachers that traverse the halls at dreary, cracked New Prospect High School to the police officers patrolling the Lincoln Tunnel, no one that holds a position of power remains unscathed. Even God comes under fire, from Jack's soliloquies against the Jewish religion to Ahmad's temptations and doubts, despite that he proclaims he feels "God standing beside him—so close as to make a single, unique holy identity, *closer to him than his neck-vein*" (144-5). Updike consistently undermines those holding power, showing that the brave facades, whether propped up in public or questioned while in silent contemplation, are illusory. Authority that lacks true belief or faith at its core reveals the absurdity of power in post-9/11 America.

The Department of Homeland Security is treated particularly roughly in the novel, with Updike basically undermining every idea and individual that supports the agency. By creating a government body so utterly devoid of power, the author obliges readers to

share his viewpoint. For example, Hermione Fogel, the trusted, spinster underling, blabs state secrets and gossips about her boss “The Secretary” to her sister Beth on weekly phone calls. Underneath her air of superiority over her sister, though, is her yearning for her boss, which undercuts what she says.

As the two bureaucrats discuss whether to raise the threat color-code in the Northeast, Hermione pines over her position as second fiddle female in her boss’s life. “They should be her children,” she reasons. “spending twelve, fourteen hours a day in the same room or adjacent rooms, they are just as much one as if legally married... This thought gives her so much satisfaction that she must quickly erase an inadvertent smile from her face” (259). By portraying Hermione as little more than an ultra-devoted spinster, Updike tacitly weakens her position. After discussing the loss of “an asset” (Charlie’s murder), Hermione, “longs to comfort the Secretary, to press her lean body like a poultice upon his ache of overwhelming responsibility...to take his meaty weight...upon her bony frame, and cradle him on her pelvis” (260). The public view of her as a powerful government official is trampled by her private weakness, jealousy, and sexual longing.

Updike portrays Secretary Haffenreffer as even worse. As he contemplates his responsibilities, he alternately tells Hermione that “when the Arab League takes over the country, people’ll learn what duties are” (261), then internally compares himself to Jefferson, who “People blame...now for holding on to his slaves and fathering children by one of them, but they forget the economic context of the times and the fact that Sally Hemings was very pale. *It’s a heartless city*” (261). In reality, though, the Secretary is not worried about domestic security or lacking the real power to enforce laws that would

make the public safer. He declares that if “this thing in New Jersey blows up, there’ll be no sitting on fat-cat boards for me. No speaker’s fees. No million-dollar advance on my memoirs” (261). Greed is his goal, or viewed from another vantage, the payoff he expects after dedicating his life to government service. The revelation shocks Hermione. The Secretary “has fallen in her estimation” (261), but she does her duty, snapping him back to action. The scene ends with the Secretary ordering the increased threat level, his masculinity (and faith) momentarily restored.

The Secretary puts local officials on alert by raising the threat level, but the incompetent officers guarding the Lincoln Tunnel do nothing to stop Ahmad as he enters the tunnel with a truckload of explosives. Updike exploits the weakness in the link between federal officials in Washington and those charged with carrying out their orders in local settings. These officers are “benign onlookers,” more interested in flirting with a female patrol member than actually guarding the tunnel (297). Jack tells Ahmad that he will not get past the tollbooth just before the entrance, but to his surprise, there is no one inside, just an electronic eye that beeps “E-Z PASS PAID” (298). Ahmad, the lone terrorist, once again outwits the forces designed to stop him, just as he had done earlier in the day by eluding federal officers waiting in the Excellency furniture store parking lot waiting to apprehend him.

Updike’s caricature of Homeland Security is the ultimate oxymoron. In a nation that enables terrorists to roam free, no one is secure, despite the projected images that support the idea of protection, from color-coded threat levels to the physical presence of armed officers. After witnessing firsthand the devastation of September 11, perhaps Updike argues through his devastating portrayal of bureaucratic foolishness that the only

way to guarantee safety is by restricting the public's Constitutional freedoms. However, if this is his aim, why would he subsequently berate the Republican administration criticized by its opponents for moving closer to those aims?

In Updike's nonfiction piece about September 11, he views freedom as a cornerstone of American life and makes it "a country worth fighting for" (*Due Considerations* 118). Walking the streets that fateful day, "as ash drifted from the sky," he realized "Freedom...felt palpable. It's mankind's elixir, even if a few turn it to poison" (*Due Considerations* 118). In comparison then, the novel celebrates individual freedom in its final pages when Ahmad decides to not carry out the terrorist act. It is as if he finally understands the difference between God's role as a creator and destroyer on his own, without the manipulative efforts of the authority figures in his life. However, by arriving at this conclusion, Ahmad realizes, "*These devils...have taken away my God*" (310). What the teen means in this final thought may be that by granting himself the freedom to decide his own course, he chooses to live an ordinary life—God no longer is as close as a vein in his neck. Ahmad is reduced to be like the people he sees after exiting the Lincoln Tunnel: "insects...intent in the milky morning sun upon some plan or scheme or hope they are hugging to themselves, their reason for living another day...impaled live upon the pin of consciousness, fixed upon self-advancement and self-preservation" (310).

### **Coming of age and sexuality**

The uneasy feelings Ahmad contends with extend to his role as a teenager creating his own sexual identity. His religious studies are often at odds with the feelings he harbors for the opposite sex. Once again, he has nowhere to turn to find guidance. For

example, Shaikh Rashid boils the relationship down to its most base aspects, telling Ahmad that, “Women are animals easily led” (10). On the other hand, Charlie has a loving wife and family, but wants to hire a prostitute to take Ahmad’s virginity. As a result, his burgeoning sexuality and yearning for an authentic male role model influences Ahmad’s worldview.

On the first page of the novel, the reader is asked to recognize Ahmad as a teen boy with sexual feelings. Although he chastises the female students at Central High for baring their bellies and sporting “low-down” tattoos, at the same time he asks himself, “*What else is there to see?*” (3) The first time the reader views Ahmad interacting with Joryleen Grant, a female student, the narrator reveals that “His long body tingles under his clothes” (8) and “the crease between her breasts bothers him” (10). He wants to be near her, but is repelled by the vague language in the Qur’an regarding male-female relationships. As a result, he determines, “high school and the world beyond it are full of nuzzling—blind animals in a herd bumping against one another, looking for a scent that will comfort them” (10). Ahmad hardly thinks like a typical teenager charged up with hormones and yearning for an outlet. This is not a kid who is going out drinking on the weekends with his buddies and searching for a girl to lean on. His frustration over his confusion is palpable.

Because of his sexual uncertainty, Ahmad displaces his feelings. Through Shaikh Rashid’s connections, Ahmad is hired to drive a furniture delivery truck for Excellency Home Furnishings, run by Lebanese immigrants, The Chehabs. Through the sensation of driving the truck the teen suddenly “feels clean...cut off from the base world, its streets full of dog filth and blowing shreds of plastic and paper” (157). He likens the feeling to

his boyhood dreams of flying, which caused him to sometimes “awake with an erection, or more shamefully still, a large wet spot on the inside of his pajama fly” (156). After this sexual awakening, with nowhere else to turn, he consulted the Qur’an, but found no suitable answers.

Some part of Ahmad’s casting about regarding his impending manhood can be attributed to his difficult relationship with his mother Teresa. Raised in a single-parent home, since his father left the family when Ahmad was just a boy, Ahmad views his mother negatively because she does not measure up to the standards of Muslim women. He is most critical of her revolving door relationships with various boyfriends over the years and her overtly flirtatious demeanor. Early in the novel, Ahmad thinks that he often sees her less than one hour a day, since she works odd shifts as a nurse’s aid at a local hospital. Later, Teresa tells Jack at Ahmad’s graduation that the only present he wanted was for her to not look “like a whore” at the ceremony (116). Although he does not admit it to himself or anyone else, Ahmad seems to blame his mother for growing up without a father or siblings for support.

After Ahmad begins working and gets even greater distance from his mother, he begins grouping her with other Americans, whose vices are easy to identify. He thinks to himself that she is a “typical American, lacking strong convictions and the courage and comfort they bring” (167). Ahmad labels Teresa a “victim of the American religion of freedom,” which enables her to do whatever she likes with no real consequences (167). Interestingly, he disparages his mother for lacking the courage and comfort that accompany strong beliefs, yet cannot see his own frailty and doubt as similar weaknesses.

From her perspective, Teresa seems as unsure of the causes for the rift between them as her son, but is more willing to attribute the blame. She sees the turn to “Allah” as an attempt to find paternal guidance, explaining to Jack, “I guess a boy needs a father, and if he doesn’t have one he’ll invent one” (117). Probably more damaging, though, are the doubts Teresa holds about Ahmad’s sexual orientation. She brazenly questions why he does not have girlfriends like other boys his age. Ahmad fires back her: “Mom. I’m not gay, if that’s what you’re implying.” Unwilling to let that serve as the final say on the matter, she responds, “How do you know?” Although Ahmad is “shocked,” he can merely proclaim, “I know” (144).

Later, when Jack and Teresa launch their affair, Jack also inquires if Ahmad is possibly gay, explaining that “It doesn’t seem quite right” that a good-looking kid like her son would not have a girlfriend (166). Teresa is unfazed by the question, since she wonders herself, but chalks up her thoughts on the subject to mother’s intuition. She tells Jack, “I could be wrong, but I think I’d know that, too” (166). Next she brings up Shaikh Rashid, labeling him “kind of creepy,” basically equating homosexuality with creepiness. Perhaps on an even deeper level, Teresa also implies that the intense religious study conducted over the years between Ahmad and Shaikh Rashid is also disturbing.

Due to Ahmad’s lack of experience in relationships with males or females and Charlie Chehab’s desire to manipulate the boy, Updike portrays what seems like a growing friendship as something more sinister, perhaps a kind of sexuality between the two. In Ahmad’s first test run in the Excellency van—already noted as a feeling he equates with sexuality—Charlie gives directions and rules of the road, using a political analogy comparing Iraq and the United States to announce, essentially that “Bigger [is]

better” (157). Although Ahmad thinks the political talk is “slightly out of tune,” he realizes “he is in bed with Charlie, and submissively settles himself for the ride” (157).

The friendship between Charlie and Ahmad appears more like older and younger brother at other times. Charlie is obsessed with television commercials and goes into great detail about the roles the actors play in them, particularly ads for erectile dysfunction. After listening to Charlie prattle on about the “sexed-up” actress in a Levitra spot, Ahmad thinks about given entrance to “male talk” (171-2), but lamenting “his father might have provided in measured and less obscene fashion, had Omar Ashmawy waited to play a father’s role” (172). Still, Ahmad is hesitant and uncomfortable with the dialogue, admitting that he dislikes the impurity of commercials, which sets Charlie off on a dialogue ranging from Communist brainwashing to Barry Bonds.

In *Terrorist*, however, Updike does not allow the soliloquies to go on without reason. Charlie transitions to a more manipulative stance, using his influence over the boy to his advantage. In response, Ahmad thinks, “Lebanese [Charlie] are not fine-honed and two-edged like Yemenis [Shaikh Rashid] or handsome and vanishing like Egyptians [Omar Ashmawy]” (175). Ahmad clearly identifies Charlie as his replacement father. In turn, Charlie uses the status to further influence the teen, planting ideas that will ultimately convince Ahmad to agree to serve as a suicide bomber. For example, the older man often compares revolutionary (Muslim) forces in the modern world with the American Revolutionary troops led by George Washington. At one point, Charlie explains, “The old revolutionaries...have much to teach our jihad” (183). Then, he peppers Ahmad with questions about his own commitment to jihad.

Often, when Charlie probes Ahmad about the teen's commitment to life and death, he ends by calling Ahmad "Good boy," clearly playing a paternalistic role. Later, when Charlie feels that Ahmad has committed to serve, he invokes the nickname he gave the boy when they first met, saying, "Madman, you're a good brave kid" (189). Updike always ends the scene after these phrases of affection, not enabling the reader to know for certain how Ahmad feels. I view this as an unspoken indication that Ahmad, being fatherless, responds well to these verbal pats on the head.

### **Updike's New America**

In a prepublication interview with Charles McGrath in the *New York Times*, Updike discusses some of his reasons for writing *Terrorist*, explaining that he:

"Thought he had something to say from the standpoint of a terrorist...I think I felt I could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our system. Nobody's trying to see it from that point of view. I guess I have stuck my neck out here in a number of ways, but that's what writers are for, maybe.

He adds that detractors could not have asked for a "more sympathetic and, in a way, more loving portrait of a terrorist" (Updike interview). This belief in himself as an interpreter or interloper inside the mind of a religious zealot, 18-year old boy, and would-be jihadist speaks to Updike's power as a novelist. The qualified "maybe" in the quote above adds a smidgeon of doubt and modesty to the author's words, but also accentuates how he feels about the role of the writer: attempting to understand the inner workings of characters, taking chances that may or may not be popular, and confronting potential critics.

In the pursuit of this character and his world from a broader perspective, though, Updike creates a new America in the process. One finds the seeds of this post-9/11 United States in the nonfiction essay Updike wrote for *The New Yorker* after watching the World Trade Center Twin Towers fall—a steely hope that suffers a dent, but cannot be held down for long. Manifested in *Terrorist* a handful of years later, the combination of faith and hope enables Ahmad to experience an epiphany: “The pattern of the wall tiles...explodes outward in Ahmad’s mind’s eye in the gigantic fiat of Creation, one concentric wave after another, each pushing the other farther and farther out from the initial point of nothingness.” He realizes that God wills life and does not want people to “desecrate His creation by willing death” (306). Ahmad’s faith is no longer misdirected, because he devises a new worldview based on his own reasoning, not those who put ideas into his mind.

For Updike, perhaps the United States that stands up and gets back on its feet after September 11 is still hyper-focused on popular culture, addicted to consumerism, and growing increasingly fat and apathetic. But, the nation is also capable of greatness, particularly when its people hold on to their beliefs. For Ahmad, becoming his own man and thinker transforms his faith from the “Straight Path” he yearns to travel throughout most of the novel to “the path is straight” when driving the explosive-laden truck into New York City after deciding to not detonate his cargo (309). Yet there is still doubt and uncertainty in the teen. The last line of *Terrorist* echoes the opening, but in the later scene, Ahmad thinks, “*These devils...have taken away my God*” (310). In the anguish of the moment, Ahmad cannot comprehend this step as a victory. The devils took away his

angry, misguided God and replaced it with a God who rejoices in creation, not just destruction.

Ahmad and Jack wind slowly through the streets of the Big Apple, with people and automobiles swirling around them in a rush to get somewhere. These New Yorkers have no idea of the danger avoided at the point of Ahmad's revelation in the Lincoln Tunnel or the continuing threat posed by the still-armed truck. The unnamed narrator paints the picture of the scene, pointing out that whether well-dressed or not and attractive or not, the people seem small in the setting, "the size of insects," each acting on "some plan or scheme or hope they are hugging to themselves, their reason for living another day" (310). Each person is "impaled live upon the pin of consciousness, fixed upon self-advancement and self-preservation" (310). Clearly, at that moment, the narrator finds little reason for hope.

Given modern American society's obsession with consumerism, popular culture, and self, one reasons that in Updike's new world, those who do the opposite—focus on societal advancement and preservation—will become the new heroes. Perhaps the larger issue at stake is whether or not Updike thinks it matters. While blips of hope dot the landscape, blind, fat, and stupid America lurches toward the apocalypse, sidetracked by media-generated distractions as the end draws near.

### Chapter Three—Literary Technique in *Terrorist*

The book was going to be called *Land of Fear* initially, and then I changed it to *Terrorist*, decided to center it upon Ahmad, my protagonist, and was going to tell it from his point of view, first person, but that, I realized, would be much too confining, that what I really needed was a third-person view so that other characters in this New Jersey city could be evoked, and you could see things from their standpoint. The book means to be about religion and America, in a strange way, not so much about terrorism.

—From a 2006 interview with John Updike, (“Bartos Forum”)

Returning to Updike’s eyewitness account of the September 11 terrorist attacks that took place in New York City, published in *The New Yorker*, the reader at once confronts the now-familiar Updike style: “Suddenly summoned to witness something immense and terrible, we keep fighting not to reduce it to our own smallness” (*Due Considerations*, 117). On the surface, this one-sentence hook appears direct. On subsequent readings, though, the sentence virtually twists and crackles on the many hidden meanings contained within.

On one hand, there is the carefully chosen verbiage: “suddenly summoned,” “immense and terrible,” and “our own smallness.” This delicate and playful, yet powerful, language is Updike’s calling card, particularly among the magazine’s readers quite familiar with the author’s style. However, the sentence also reveals an interesting exploration of Updike’s use of technique to suggest substance. For example, how does one read “suddenly summoned,” without quickly wondering who it is exactly that is doing the summoning? Is it the “four-year-old girl and her babysitter” calling from “the [apartment] library,” (*Due Considerations* 117) or is it Updike’s feeling that some higher power summoned him personally to witness the carnage? Drawing on the latter, one could infer that in some manner Updike explains or rationalizes his entire career as extracting from divine intervention. Analyzing five decades of interviews with Updike, one consistently finds that he regards being a “writer” a profession, approaching it as if a trade position. Who then summons the craftsman to craft? For Updike, this question has (literally) loomed above his work from the start.

The second half of the sentence is just as cagey, first with the imprecise “we,” which could be the intimate audience of two—Updike and an individual reader—or the broader “we,” as in the American people. Furthermore, the “we” is “fighting not to reduce it to our own smallness,” yet isn’t the most biting criticism of Updike’s fiction that he is little more than a fancy navel-gazer, writing beautiful sentences about imaginary worlds that stretch no further than his own arm’s reach? This must be a counterpunch at that stable of Updike critics, for in the next sentence the “we” transforms to “where I happened to be” (*Due Considerations* 117). As “we,” it appears that Updike is already watching the terrorist attacks through the eyes of a writer and possibly addressing critics

who might appraise his interpretation. The turn to “I,” therefore, reveals that he is processing what he sees from the vantage of a writer and beginning to reduce the event to his own smallness—exactly what he worries about in the first part of the sentence.

Continuing, Updike’s voice—which I argue that he uses seamlessly whether writing fiction or nonfiction—is as much an essential facet of the article as the events he addresses. The reader finds the following words and understands that this is Updike and could only be Updike: “at first glance, more curious than horrendous: smoke speckled with bits of paper curled into the cloudless sky...strange inky rivulets...burst into ballooning flame...as on television, this was not quite real” (*Due Considerations* 117). The author is not capable of delivering a straight journalistic piece, nor would his *New Yorker* readers desire that from him. There is a relationship built between Updike and his audience, yes, and the foundation of that union is literary technique.

Over a five-decade career, spanning millions of published words, there is an Updike literary style that readers immediately recognize. His technique is a mixture of visions—drawn from a range of influences, from his boyhood dream of being a cartoonist to a fascination with flow, whether musical or in the fluidity of the golf swing. Over and over again, interviewers attempt to get at the heart of Updike’s style, and one can almost sense his frustration in pulling the words together to do so, too much of a stately Pennsylvanian to demur. In an interview conducted in the mid-1980s, Updike likened writing to creating ideas and characters “fitting” together, “a kind of music that the images make together” (qtd. in *Conversations* 185). Sensing the musicality and visual aspects of Updike’s work enables the reader to gain a broader understanding of the linkage between content and literary device.

The words themselves are not haphazard. As a matter of fact, one cannot imagine a novelist more exacting with word choice than Updike. Taking this notion at face value, however, forces one to then examine single words and short phrases as deliberate devices that propel the novelist's voice.

Many commentators contend that Updike's most enduring feature is his style. In the late 1980s, for example, literary scholar Harold Bloom based an entire book of criticism on this notion. However, unlike the general (and nearly universal) praise heaped on Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald for creating their own unique literary voices, critics do not arrive at a consensus regarding Updike. A review of academic and general criticism finds some individuals praising Updike for his ability to write lyrical prose, with words that seem to dance off the page and phrases that evoke new ways of interpreting life's most minute details. While others believe that Updike's style provides camouflage that masks otherwise empty plotlines, essentially invoking the old adage: "all sizzle, no steak."

This opposing viewpoint is reflected in the well-known *John Updike* volume in the "Modern Critical Views" series edited by Bloom. Famously, Bloom set the tone for years of ensuing Updike criticism, labeling the author, "A minor novelist with a major style" who "hovers always near a greatness he is too shrewd or too diffident to risk" (7). Several of the essays in the collection drive home the same general point. It is interesting to note, though, that Joyce Carol Oates and Cynthia Ozick, two fellow fiction writers and cultural critics, are much more even-handed in their assessments published in Bloom's book. Could this indicate a divide between how fiction writers approach other fiction writers versus how academic critics examine them?

The current chapter analyzes specific literary techniques Updike employs, providing evidence regarding his specific style and how those devices enable the writer to achieve his aspirations. I argue that interrogating Updike's use of phrases, styles, and editorial commentary within the text will reveal *Terrorist* as an important work in Updike's catalog and certainly one underappreciated by many scholars and journalistic critics to date. From my perspective, the novel reveals a writer in the midst of transformation, as important external forces—such as the 9/11 attacks—compel him to reflect major societal changes in his fiction.

What I find essential in *Terrorist* is that Updike uses literary technique to help solidify his worldview. For example, Jack's wife Beth initially seems like a weak, mousy character teetering on major depression. She is one hundred pounds overweight, unhappy, unhealthy, and simply taking up space.

Closer inspection, however, brings to light a different perception. As a device in expounding a specific ideology, Updike creates a character that the unnamed narrator and Jack see as frivolous. By extension, the reader is guided to feel that same way. As a result, an aura of ridicule surrounds what she says and thinks. Updike uses this as a setup to critique a number of popular culture topics, including Oprah Winfrey, psychiatry, and the color-coded threat levels issued by the Department of Homeland Security.

When Jack tells Beth that his moodiness is driven by lack of sleep, even though it is actually her fatness that disheartens him, she explains, "That's a sign of depression, they were saying on television...Oprah had a woman on who's written a book" (31). Jack's negative reaction and conclusion that he has fended her off imply that the reader should not take her ideas seriously. When Beth next turns to confidential information she

learned about the threat level in their Northern New Jersey region from her sister at the Department of Homeland Security, actually making Jack promise not to tell anyone, he gets sarcastic in an attempt to shut her up. “Bring ’em on,” he jokes, “I was thinking, looking out the window, this whole neighborhood could do with a good bomb” (32). In other words, anything that Beth finds important, the reader is steered to consider absurd.

### **Voice and Tone**

In Updike’s novels, his “voice” is to a large extent an additional character. Readers expect an “Updikean” treatment of the subject, written in that familiar, yet unique, style. The use of voice through literary device allows him to set the tone of the book, driving the aura the reader basically feels as the story progresses, similar to the way a film director uses lighting and shadow to project or heighten a scene or, for that matter, an entire motion picture.

In his most famous novel, *Rabbit, Run*, for example, Updike intentionally used the present tense to keep his hand on the throttle. The book dashes ahead at full sprint when Updike commands, while lulling to a crawl at other points, all driven by the author’s voice. Here is Rabbit, in flight away from home, racing for freedom: “The land grows wilder. The road evades great lakes and tunnels through pines. In the top of the windshield the telephone wires continually whip the stars” (35). The present tense gives Updike the ability to control the pace of *Rabbit, Run*, often mimicking the title and sprinting off into the unknown. The example above is not complex writing, but Updike adds layers of speed and precision by showing the reader what Rabbit sees outside the car

windows on desolate roads, with only lonely headlights, the stars, and moon to brighten the scene.

For further evidence of Updike using voice to dictate the pacing of a novel, one simply needs to examine the languorous tone of the next two novels he wrote after *Rabbit, Run—The Centaur* (1963) and *Of the Farm* (1965). Both books are meditations, thus they evolve slowly. The former, winner of the National Book Award in 1964, is Updike's fictional exploration of his father's life using mythological underpinnings to consider life in small town Pennsylvania. *Of the Farm*, in contrast, is set in present time, almost completely on an older, widowed woman's farm. The novel examines the relationship between mother and son, and the man's new wife and stepson. Although Updike explores universal themes in these works, the tone is reflective and analytical, often emotional, but in a detached voice. Clearly, Updike intends this languid pace because it reflects the subject matter.

Unlike Updike's previous novels, *Terrorist* is a literary thriller. Not as taut a page-turner or plot-driven as bestselling authors like John Grisham or James Patterson, I argue that Updike has broader aspirations in *Terrorist*, primarily to outline the "new America" that emerges post-9/11. This emphasis distinguishes him from other thriller writers, who seem to be most interested in telling a story in a dramatic fashion, with little concern with being considered literary. Although conforming in some ways to the thriller genre, Updike still dictates tone through voice.

One feels the tone of the novel established most clearly in the way Updike creates Ahmad's nuanced personality. The author portrays the dualities within Ahmad through use of the character's internal thoughts and in conversations. As a result, the reader is

presented with the angry, strident side of the teen when he thinks: “These devils seek to take away my God” (3). However, at the end of the same monologue that flips back and forth between the boy and the unnamed narrator, Updike infuses Ahmad with seedlings of doubt that will play a significant role later in the book. The narrator intones, “The deaths of insects and worms, their bodies so quickly absorbed by earth and weeds and road tar, devilishly strive to tell Ahmad that his own death will be just as small and final” (5).

*New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani blasts Updike for doing a “lousy job of showing us why Ahmad is willing to die and kill for jihad,” (E1) but Updike vividly depicts the anger and uncertainty festering within the teen. When Joryleen questions whether God’s existence and the possibility that no afterlife exists, Ahmad feels physically ill, explaining, “If none of it is true...then the world is too terrible to cherish, and I would not regret leaving it” (72). Interestingly, this discussion takes place in the midst of Ahmad’s doubt. He yearns for her sexually, despite his religious training, which advocates purity. In the passage, the boy is proud of his height and stands above the “short, ripe girl,” catching glimpses of the “tops of her breasts...still glazed with the excitement and exertion of her singing” (67). With no one to honestly help Ahmad understand the warring factions of faith and doubt he clenches in his heart, the teen is listless and uncertain. No wonder, then, that he falls in succession to a series of father figures, who all place their own needs above his.

I see the teen as an individual in the midst of crisis. When people enter these moments, otherwise senseless events can result, such as the real-life tragedies of the Columbine shootings or the almost daily suicide bombing incidents that take place in Iraq

and Afghanistan. Updike admits as much in a June 2006 interview with *BookPage*, saying, “I thought it was important to show how much Ahmad needed to make his own philosophy, as it were, because the environment wasn’t coming up with any” (“Interview”). Later, in the same interview, Updike directly references how religious zealotry can evolve, explaining:

I tried to understand him and to dramatize his world. Besides it's not just young Muslims who are killing themselves. We have all these American high school students, steeped in Protestantism and Judaism, who bring guns to school and shoot up the cafeteria knowing they're going to die at the end of this rush. There are a lot of teenagers who are going to take big chances. (“Interview”)

Kakutani’s criticism of the character, particularly in comparing Updike’s vision of a religious fanatic to works by Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Don DeLillo, sounds more like a case of complaining because the character is not what she expected or wished, rather than what Updike created.

At the heart of Updike’s creation of an American homegrown terrorist is the question regarding how the young man arrives at the decision to accept the role. In looking for the answer, one cannot discount the mental anguish Ahmad experiences, which Updike ties to the young man’s intense faith, burgeoning sexuality, and longing for a father figure.

The reader glimpses this chaos inside Ahmad in an early scene in which the two teens are talking outside Joryleen’s church. She is a member of the choir, but does not think deeply about (or even to show much interest in) religion. Ahmad, however, is overwhelmed by the billowing sermon delivered in a frenzy by the church’s black pastor.

Then, he longs for Joryleen as she sings, even though he is unable to admit this to himself. Afterward, standing there with her, the teenager is overcome with a toxic mix of strident faith, fear, and sexual repression. Unable to comprehend all these juices churning in him, Ahmad lashes out at Joryleen as the meeting ends, telling her: “You have a good heart, Joryleen, but you’re heading straight for Hell, the lazy way you think” (73). In this pivotal scene, the voice of *Terrorist* (Ahmad’s mix of faith and doubt) is cast through the teen, as he imagines a “world too terrible to cherish” (72), then casts out the one person who has shown an interest in him. Ahmad cannot control himself and Joryleen is the recipient of his pent-up hostility. At this point, the boy must strike. He continues to cast about, up until the time he decides not to go through with the explosion. In this way, Updike shows Ahmad undergo a kind of maturation process, breaking from following the direction of others to critically analyzing the situation and making up his own mind.

### **The lovable terrorist**

What a reader may or may not have known, considering one’s interest in Updike and attention to entertainment and book news, is that Knopf asked the author to go on a marketing tour to promote *Terrorist*. Given the interest in the subject matter and Updike’s standing as a literary giant, the book and author appeared in many venues. Obliging and used to a lifetime of interviews, lectures, and televised and live appearances, Updike spoke at length about the characters in the novel and his thought process in creating them.

As a result, readers did not have to dig deep to find out Updike’s motivations. For example, in a pre-publication interview with Charles McGrath of *The New York Times*, Updike admitted some trepidation about creating Ahmad, saying, “I sometimes think,

‘Why did I do this?’ I’m delving into what can be a very sore subject for some people. But when those shadows would cross my mind, I’d say, ‘They can’t ask for a more sympathetic and, in a way, more loving portrait of a terrorist’” (“Interview”). Given the pre-release hype surrounding the novel and its subsequent rise up the bestseller lists after publication, it is not much of a stretch to assume that many readers were drawn to the novel based on seeing or reading something about it in the mass media.

In contrast to Kakutani, Christopher Hitchens applauds Updike for creating Ahmad against stereotype, saying:

Let’s grant Updike credit for casting his main character against type: Ahmad is not only the nicest person in the book but is as engaging a young man as you could meet in a day’s march. Tenderly, almost lovingly, Updike feels and feels, like a family doctor, until he can detect the flickering pulse of principle that animates the would-be martyr. (“Review”)

The praise, however, seems half-hearted at best, considering the crushing negativity Hitchens heaps on the book. His primary concern, though, is the implausibility of the plot, rather than Updike’s rendering of Ahmad.

From his public statements regarding the novel, it is clear that Updike made a calculated decision to create a sympathetic terrorist. Surprisingly, given his desire to make Ahmad likable, there are not many reasons the reader should look at him in this manner. On the positive side, the teen is certainly respectful of authority figures, even Jack, who as a Jew, one would assume Ahmad would dislike. However, given that the reader is privy to the boy’s thoughts, he seems less appealing. When the two characters first meet, for example, Ahmad is congenial face-to-face, but thinks differently, seeing

Jack as a “weary, unkempt, disbelieving old Jew” (39). Moreover, when Jack questions Shaikh Rashid’s intentions, the teen views this as an attack on his relationship with God: “This old Jewish devil, beneath his cunning, worldly-wise, mock-fatherly manner, wishes to disrupt that primal union and take the All-Merciful and Life-Giving One from him” (40). In this scene and many others involving virtually every character in *Terrorist*, Ahmad is portrayed over and over as a hypercritical, hypersensitive kid, quick to judge and faster to push his internal demons off onto the closest target.

My analysis of Ahmad pins him as less than loveable. Ironically, while I disagree with many of the professional book critics regarding the novel, viewing it as a definitive statement about post-9/11 America from one of its most celebrated authors, I also do not agree with some critics, like Hitchens, who think Ahmad is the only good thing about the novel. Nor do I agree with Kakutani, who sees Ahmad as wooden. There is a depth to the character that she misreads, but I hardly find him as sympathetic as Updike claims. Given the changes in the world after the terrorist attacks and the ensuing wars in the Middle East, any depiction of a possible terrorist as anything other than altogether evil must be considered sympathetic and out of the ordinary.

### **Narrative Forms**

The reader does not have an easy task distinguishing between the inner thoughts of characters in *Terrorist* and points espoused when an unnamed narrator quietly slips into the text. For the casual reader, the blurry line between the two does not make the novel more difficult to follow. One wonders, however, if Updike purposely keeps this aspect of

narration fuzzy in an attempt to provide his own added perspective as an editorialist or implied author.

From a strictly technical standpoint, Updike presents some parts of a character's inner voice in italics. In these moments, the reader realizes that these are the explicit thoughts of a specific character. On the other hand, though, Updike routinely follows the italicized thoughts with traditional sentences no longer italicized, either indicating that the words are no longer inside the mind of a single character or that the narrator has assumed a more prominent role in "explaining" a character's intentions.

Frequently, Updike uses this murky narration as a vehicle to launch into a kind of pseudo-editorialist point of view. When done well, the blurriness mirrors what is happening in the plot, thus propelling the action as the reader ponders exactly who has taken center stage.

Exploring Updike's use of narrative form in *Terrorist*, I sense an intentional blurring of the lines between a character's thoughts and the intrusion by the narrator to further develop viewpoints. Throughout the novel, the reader is consistently bounced back and forth between a character's perspective and Updike's omniscient editorializing, but this shift rarely occurs consistently. The result is a somewhat chaotic tone, which one must infer is Updike's intention. The care he takes in composing—almost fussiness—makes it difficult to believe this technique isn't intended. Transitioning back and forth between the two enables Updike to make a statement about the chaos and confusion individuals feel regarding belief and doubt in post-September 11 America. Through the use of literary device, he might also be indicating that people do not have fully realized or

completely concrete thoughts about the difficult issues they now face, such as religious differences, Muslim-Americans, safety, and other hot button topics.

### **Inner voice**

Updike successfully slips between inner voice and authorial narrative early in the novel when the reader learns that Jack is an insomniac. He begins a page and a half long paragraph with the short sentence: “*Housing*, Jack Levy thinks” (26). What the reader knows at that point, is that the scene takes place at about 3 a.m. when Jack lurches out of bed in a fit of insomnia. In the darkness, Jack and the unnamed narrator take turns playing inside his head like it is match point at Wimbledon. As one would imagine an insomniac doing in the middle of the night, they mull over a broad range of topics. The thoughts flow through quickly, from his decision to quit violin lessons as a boy and his parents’ resulting sadness to great men, like Charlemagne and Napoleon, who learned that, “History is a machine perpetually grinding mankind to dust” (23). Here the author mimics the fate of someone constantly sleep deprived and tired by engaging the character in a shadowy dialogue, perhaps with himself inside his head or the narrator, who adopts an omniscient viewpoint.

Once the reader reaches the “*Housing*” thought, there are no further indications that what follows is still Jack’s thinking. The narration gallops off on an approximately 300-word diatribe providing an overview of the rise and fall of American neighborhoods.

When the narration returns to Jack, it says, “As Jack Levy sees it, America is paved solid with fat and tar, a coast-to-coast tarbaby where we’re all stuck,” (27), not “Jack thinks,” “I think,” or italics, but the formal use of the character’s full name. There

is a distance contained in that use that leads one to read those words as if coming from an outside source. It is not a drastic leap of faith to read Updike into the words of the disheartened, aging, white guidance counselor. As a matter of fact, Jack's worldview reminds the reader of another aging, cynical Updike character—Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom in *Rabbit at Rest*.

Returning to the beginning of the novel, Updike presents Ahmad's entire invective against those attempting to take away his God as an internal dialogue. At least it seems that way on the surface. Ahmad's first thoughts are in italics: “*Devils... These devils seek to take away my God*” (3). Yet, most of the next two sentences—which contain an explanation of the “devils” and the actions they perform to take away Ahmad's God—are not italicized. Then, mid-paragraph, the phrase asks, “*What else is there to see?*” in italics (3), though it is not Ahmad asking the question. The subject of the sentence is the female students' “bare bellies” (3) viewed through the eyes of the narrator.

The fact that this sequence begins the novel actually sets the tone as the reader confronts subsequent examples as the book progresses. Updike uses this literary technique frequently to provide the reader with in-depth information about the relationship between characters from one side's viewpoint. Also, Ahmad's work as a furniture truck driver hauling secondhand freight all over New Jersey gives him time to think, thus providing the context for Updike's use of inner voice and editorializing.

One of the most painful and troubled relationships in *Terrorist* is between Ahmad and his mother Teresa, an Irish-American free spirit, nurse's aid, and part-time painter. Rather than respecting her for raising him as a single-parent, even if in difficult

situations, Ahmad scorns her for driving off his father and, in his eyes, whoring around. Ahmad's inner thoughts regarding his mother spill out on a long day behind the wheel, though the narrator creeps in as well, leaving the close reader wondering where one ends and the other begins.

At the beginning of the passage, "Ahmad sees his mother as an aging woman still in her heart, playing at art and love" (168). However, he reacts negatively to the thought that her youngness is driven by a new lover. Ahmad recounts his interaction with the plethora of ex-boyfriends who vied with him for dominance, each he thinks, saying, "*She may be your mother but I fuck her*, their manner said, and this too was American, this valuing of sexual performance over all family ties" (168). The phrase "Ahmad sees" leads the reader to assume that the monologue takes place within the boy's mind. However, several sentences later, the text shifts to "Ahmad does not hate his mother; she is too scattered to hate, too distracted by her pursuit of happiness" (168-9). The intensity of the emotion has multiplied rather quickly, but the reader still cannot be completely sure whether this is Ahmad's thoughts or the narrator setting the tone.

Whenever their relationship is viewed through the lens of the Qur'an, it is Ahmad's mindset as he analyzes what he has learned versus what he sees in his mother. Another voice emerges, however, that appears distinct: "For some years it has been awkward, their bodies sharing the limited space of the apartment. Her ideas of healthy behavior include appearing before her son in her underwear or a summer nightie that allows the shadows of her private parts to show through" (169). While this section grows more intimate, the narrator seems to take over, even to bring in Teresa's point of view about healthy behavior. The narrator continues to add context to the mental imagery, but

distanced, explaining, “When he rebukes her attire as improper and provocative, she mocks and teases him as if he is flirting with her” (169). Perhaps Updike uses a more detached voice in this section to touch on difficult topics, in some way shielding Ahmad from them. As the thoughts become more intimate, Updike continues moving between Ahmad’s views and editorializing.

Interestingly, this section is not the first that addresses the Freudian aspects of Ahmad and Teresa’s relationship. Earlier, at the boy’s high school graduation, Teresa and Jack talk about him. The exchange reveals the depths of her ignorance about her son, waving off his religious training as “this Allah thing” that he did by himself (117). To her, the search for God equates to a search for his absentee father, which she resents, particularly for “a father who didn’t do squat for him” (117). Summing up her thoughts, Teresa explains (as much to herself as Jack), “But I guess a boy needs a father, and if he doesn’t have one he’ll invent one. How’s that for cut-rate Freud?” (117). In response, Jack thinks of her sexually, seeing the mention of Freud differently: “Freud, who encouraged a century to keep on screwing” (117). Bringing aspects of Freud into the novel has two purposes, first allowing Updike to foreshadow the relationship between Teresa and Jack and, ultimately, linking her son and her sexual partner in a closer relationship. Then, tacitly slipping Freud into the narrator’s intimate editorializing enables the author to expose the tension between mother and son.

Ultimately, the link to Freud is rejected, though the reader might feel that the rebuff is argued a bit too vehemently, as if the thinker is trying to convince himself. Again, however, the reader cannot be sure who is doing the thinking: “Praise Allah, Ahmad never dreamed of sleeping with his mother, never undressed her in those spaces

of his brain where Satan thrusts vileness upon the dreaming and daydreaming” (170). The reference to “Allah,” leads one to believe these are the teen’s thoughts. However, the next sentence clouds that interpretation, concluding, “In truth, insofar as the boy allows himself to link such thoughts with the image of his mother, she is not his type” (170). In the process of deep thought, people do not qualify with sayings such as “in truth” or refer to themselves as “the boy,” which suggests the narrator has slipped back into the text to contextualize the emotion-laden passage.

### **Implied author as editorialist**

Reviewing *Terrorist in Salmagundi*, writer Eugene Goodheart calls Updike’s editorializing “garrulous social criticism” and equates it to lawyer-speak, explaining that the passages “amount to a prosecutorial summation of what is wrong with America” (186). However, Goodheart criticizes the lashing as “familiar to the point of platitude” and “said again and again in the media” (186). Given the broad range of subjects Updike covers in the novel, ranging from the decline in quality of films to the attire of inner-city teenagers, it would be impossible to evaluate every topic for originality, but he hardly slips to Goodheart’s “point of platitude.” Rather than examine the content of the editorials, which is analyzed in the previous chapter, I would like to turn to the usage as a literary device.

Looking closer at the editorializing that takes place in *Terrorist* from a stylistic viewpoint, it appears that Updike includes much of this as a way to insinuate an air of authority, or perhaps dominance, in a particular character. Sometimes Updike editorializes from a character’s perspective so that he or she can gain an immediate

upper-hand, such as Ahmad's anti-consumerism rant while talking with Joryleen. The outcome is that the boy appears smarter and wiser than his female counterpart, even though he yearns for her sexually. The assumption is that the reader is going to agree with at least some of Ahmad's points, generating a positive linkage between the character and reader.

The editorializing feature is employed as a means of longer-term character building as well in other sections of the novel. Rather than just see these attempts as a momentary attempt to elevate one character, these scenes are foundational in creating the reader's overall impression of the character. For example, the reader learns about Shaikh Rashid from Ahmad's point of view on several occasions early in the novel, but does not encounter him until page 101, about one-third of the way into the book.

At this point, the reader knows little about the Muslim cleric, but learns that Ahmad has studied with him for seven years. Searching for clues about the relationship, blips of insight are revealed in Rashid's harsh tones. However, it is when he begins lengthy discourse on subjects seemingly tangential to the Arabic language lesson that the true meaning of the relationship is revealed.

In teaching the boy a particular sura from the Qur'an, the cleric compares a Yemeni-led attack on Mecca that used elephants to today's mechanized warfare, saying, "Armies in those days, of course, had to have elephants; elephants were the Sherman M1 tanks, the armored Humvees, of the time; let's hope they were equipped with thicker skins than the unfortunate Humvees supplied to Bush's brave troops in Iraq" (103). The Sheikh's sarcasm helps establish him in a bad guy role, gently manipulating the teen. As the lesson continues, Rashid touches on other topics in fact-laden speech meant to

indoctrinate Ahmad, from the evidence regarding the existence of Paradise to the true meaning of jihad.

In each instance, the cleric pushes the boy under the guise of teaching. Then, as the lesson concludes, he takes a 180-degree turn, praising Ahmad, saying “What a beautiful tutee you are” and “You gladden my heart” (108). Following this, however, he more gently rebukes Ahmad for visiting Joryleen’s church. His message is clear: “The unclean can appear to shine, and devils do good imitations of angels. Keep to the Straight Path...Beware of anyone, however pleasing, who distracts you from Allah’s pure being” (109). Updike uses editorializing in this scene to establish Sheikh Rashid as an important figure in Ahmad’s life, as well as a person who has a substantial amount of control over the boy. As a result, Rashid the teacher is viewed as an authority figure. Filling him with detail outside the traditional reader’s perspective adds an aura of power. Updike is essentially putting his finger on the cleric, indicating to the reader that this is a character they should give attention.

If Sheikh Rashid is a study in subtle manipulation, then Charlie Chehab is a master’s thesis in the art of intrigue. Charlie is the big brother that Ahmad longs for, and he uses that status as a means of drawing the teen into his internal spy game. However, what the reader does not know until the end of the novel is that Charlie is a double-agent, siding up to the terrorist sect ostensibly led by Sheikh Rashid and recruiting Ahmad as a means of toppling the plot. This role makes Charlie a more interesting character, because the reader is forced to rely on his actions, thoughts, and speech to ascertain his motives.

Updike turns Charlie into a walking encyclopedia of New Jersey history focusing on the Revolutionary War era in an attempt to give him an air of authority, essentially

attempting to equate intelligence with authority. There are not a handful of writers alive that would have a seemingly anti-American character use George Washington as a way of justifying terrorist actions in modern America. Yet, Updike deftly mixes historical fact with editorializing, resulting in the reader believing some aspects of Charlie's arguments. Consider, for example, the implicit message in Charlie's explanation to his father about why people are angry in the United States:

Papa...The zanj weren't given any rights, they had to fight for them. They were being lynched and not allowed in restaurants, they even had separate drinking fountains, they had to go to the Supreme Court to be considered human beings. In America, nothing is free, everything is a fight...Look at America abroad—war. They forced a country of Jews into Palestine, right into the throat of the Middle East, and now they've forced their way into Iraq...to have the oil. (147)

When challenged by his father, Charlie laughs off the insinuation that he is spewing propaganda, like a popular fraternity guy or office mate forgiven for telling an off-color joke. Many of Charlie's comments follow a similar pattern—a flurry of facts, followed by a quick, little rabbit punch in America's liver. The cumulative result is meant to wear down Ahmad's defenses.

### **Dialogue**

The most troubling aspect of *Terrorist* is how Updike depicts Ahmad talking. Updike is widely-heralded for his supple use of language and facility for picking up nuances in language, yet Ahmad simply does not talk like an 18-year old teenager. From my experience speaking with smart young people in this age group, one learns that there are

certain cadences and rhythms to their speech that Updike does not pick up on, from the overt mile-a-minute word flurry that erupts from this age group when they speak to the more subtle distracted, distanced tone they often employ when answering questions, as if they are used to talking to adults and have broken down whatever respect existed in previous generations. Perhaps it is too much to ask of Updike to find a way of mimicking these nuances via the written word on the page, but Ahmad is so stiff and formal that he sounds like a person who has learned English as a second language, rather than a native-born speaker.

Most readers would likely assume that Ahmad's conversations, alone in the truck with Charlie would be relaxed and friendly, since the older man serves as a kind of father-figure for the teen. Instead, one gets stilted dialogue:

My mother is too self-absorbed to spare me much curiosity. She is relieved I have steady employment, and contribute now to our expenses...I think recently my mother has suffered one of her romantic sorrows, for the other night she produced a flurry of interest in me, as if remembering that I was still there...I am not yet quite grown enough to be my mother's enemy, but I am mature enough to be an object of indifference. (212-3)

This lone example provides many examples of non-teen language. As a matter of fact, one could argue that antiquated words such as "sorrows," (substituted for "breakups") shows that Updike projects himself into Ahmad's dialogue. In contrast, Charlie and other main characters in the novel all speak in ways closer to the way the reader would expect.

Ahmad's distinct speaking voice sets him apart from the other characters in the novel, which Updike may have felt necessary given the totality of the conversion from

true believer to terrorist. Ahmad's formal language might also suggest that the boy is different from others his age, both more intelligent and thoughtful.

Curiously, in a portrait of a teenager in modern America, Ahmad does not make popular culture references, except when criticizing mass culture as consumerist or capitalist. Although the reader learns that Ahmad runs track and plays soccer in the fall, all of his thoughts are filtered through what he thinks he understands about the Qur'an, rather than through popular culture terms like most American teens.

Representing the boy in this manner enabled Updike to create a character in the midst of wholesale change, but in doing so, he set himself up for reviewers questioning Ahmad as a realistic portrayal. In her typically acerbic tone, Kakutani picks up on this facet of *Terrorist*, saying, "Ahmad talks not like a teenager who was born and grew up in New Jersey but like an Islamic terrorist in a bad action-adventure movie, or someone who has been brainwashed and programmed to spout jihadist clichés" (E1). Unfortunately, for some professional reviewers, Ahmad's dialogue provides a rationale for condemning the entire novel.

There is one sentence in the novel that suggests Updike realized Ahmad's formal speech pattern would distract readers. Early in the book, when Ahmad and Jack first meet in the guidance counselor's office, the narrator intones: "The boy speaks with a pained stateliness; he is imitating, Levy feels, some adult he knows, a smooth and formal talker" (34). Considering that the ensuing conversation uncovers Sheikh Rashid's influence over Ahmad, including the boy's decision to drop out of the pre-college curriculum, the reader must assume that Ahmad is "imitating" Rashid's formal style. Since the imam is a non-native English speaker, this would account for Ahmad's tone.

Ahmad's attempt to be like Rashid in speech suggests a closer relationship between the two than the rest of the text dictates. They have studied together for seven years, but only in short, weekly meetings. Furthermore, later episodes in which the two interact are depicted more as adversaries than mentor and student. Rashid is caustic at times and belittling in others. Perhaps this implies a kind of brainwashing that has taken place over time. In this light, Ahmad's imitation of Rashid's speech becomes a more pivotal aspect of the novel.

### **Language**

Updike is universally praised as a stylist, even by critics that view his use of language as a matter of style over substance. Even his harshest critics find a certain joy in a writer so committed to the craft. Oddly, however, for such a lyrical writer, there is a peculiarly "Updikean" use of dated, nostalgic, and sometimes explicitly offensive words and phrases that litter his novels. Considering that many of the same terms and phrases appear in the author's works dating back to the beginning of his career, one must assume that he employs them intentionally. What one cannot infer, though, is why.

This question takes on greater significance when one considers that many of these odd choices are outright offensive; even in today's "everything goes" society. Certainly, ignorance is not the answer. Updike is no stranger to the wars regarding political correctness and its consequences on language use over the past several decades. He is also aware of the implications of the Internet on exposing people of all ages to a broader range of mass culture than ever before in human history. A man whose life is consumed

by words cannot be granted leniency in understanding the transformation of language over time.

Updike uses the dated, offensive phrase “hot little twats” (43) to describe the potential conflicts that might arise in today’s high school environment when female students are in private offices with male guidance counselors and authority figures. In these cases, the potential for charges of sexual misconduct transfers the power from teacher to student. As a result, male teachers and other school officials rarely conduct serious or off-the-cuff discussions with female students behind closed doors. One wonders, though, why a writer who focuses on the use of language, as if every word is meticulously crafted, would use such a charged phrase.

Could it be that Updike employs the phrase as a not-so-gentle dig at the female critics that have doggedly attacked his works as sexist over the years? In this scenario, Updike the author is purposely thumbing his nose at potential detractors.

Also, I assume that most editors would either change the phrase themselves or negotiate with the author for it to be modified. Questions are then raised regarding the role of the writer as part of the editorial process. Maybe the simplest answer is that once an author reaches the heights of an Updike, no editor holds the power to truly edit or request changes.

From a stylistic perspective, it is difficult to ascertain exactly who is calling out female students as potential “hot little twats” (43). It is a passage that the reader could assume is taking place inside Jack’s mind, since it takes place between two instances of the guidance counselor talking to Ahmad. However, Updike never specifically indicates that the thought is actually a thought.

The passage might be explored with more authority as an example of intrusion by the unnamed narrator. The section begins: “He [Jack] stands and on impulse shakes the tall, slender, fragile-seeming youth’s hand, which he...would never do with a girl these days—the merest touch risks a complaint” (43). The end of the piece reveals Jack “startled” by Ahmad’s weak, damp handshake (43), an example of the narrator describing the scene from an omniscient viewpoint. Yet, encased between Jack’s dialogue, it blurs the line.

The passage takes on extra importance because it concludes the first meeting between Jack and Ahmad, the novel’s two central characters. Jack clearly holds a position of authority over the high school student, but they jockey for moral high ground. In the battle between the fervent Muslim youth and world-weary Jewish teacher, the power of Ahmad’s belief tilts the exchange slightly in his favor. The boy’s ability to argue for his belief system sparks an interest in Jack, which extends the conversation, even though he has already labeled the teen a “lost cause” (42). Several fatherly words, a firm handshake, and kind farewell enable the reader to witness a strange bond forming. Both characters qualify for Jack’s shorthand “lc,” however, the boy’s misguided faith versus Jack’s empty worldview.

More troublesome in terms of Updike’s language choices is his insistence in using the word “cunt” repeatedly in his career when referring to female genitalia. The simple fact is that “the c-bomb,” as it is now called in popular culture lore, is arguably the single most offensive word in the English language. One might even postulate that the word is beyond offensive, making any use of it obtuse and nonsensical. Yet, Updike drudges it up

again and again, more or less sticking it in the eye of female critics and readers. Certainly Updike understands this, which suggests that using it is deliberate.

In *Terrorist*, the use adds nothing to the storyline of the evolving and devolving affair between Jack and Teresa. The woman forces Jack to talk about hers, a sort of odd power-play showing her dominant role in the relationship, reversing traditional power roles. “Tell me about my cunt, Jack,” she says. “I want to hear it. Loosen up.” However, when he derides the discussion as “grotesque,” she lashes out, saying, “Why, you prim prick? You Jewish priss. What’s grotesque about my cunt?” (160). The testy conversation continues, eventually devolving into the inevitable argument over commitment that takes place in the midst of affairs.

Examining the section, however, one realizes that the exchange centered on Teresa’s vagina could have been deleted and still maintained the same level of importance. The tension is not lessened if the offensive word is taken out. In some respects, actually, it would strengthen the exchange of emotions, since the word is not used, even by men in their sixties and women in their late forties.

There are other odd, outdated terms that suggest Updike’s fondness for them and insistence that they remain. In the scene described above, the argument leads to discussion about the fight after it ends. The two each mention that they hate it when they “quarrel,” another old-fashioned word that is not commonly used in modern society (162). Instead, given today’s fast-paced, technology-driven lifestyle and hyper-violent forms of mass culture that fills people’s daily lives, when they argue, they use “fight.” The word “quarrel,” just does not sum up how people relate in a society built on sensationalism and emotion.

Another odd word choice occurs when Jack thinks about the 9/11 terrorists, who combined computer skills with religious fanaticism to form a new kind of threat. Thinking to himself, he complains, “Those creeps who flew the planes into the World Trade Center had good technical educations” (27). The use of “creeps” is interesting here, both as a counter to the stronger language used in the popular media to label the terrorists and due to the outdated word itself. The watered-down notion of “creeps” is in stark contrast to President Bush himself and members of his administration calling terrorists “murders,” “killers,” and other harsh names meant to persuade viewers and listeners to think of them in similar terms. “Creeps,” rather than “murders” or something similar suggests that Updike is asking the reader to soften his view. He may also be hinting that the novel takes place in a distant future where the strident rhetoric of the Bush Administration is no longer relevant.

### **Updike as Stylist**

Updike’s style in *Terrorist* propels the content of the novel, enabling him to achieve his aspirations, which seem twofold: first, envision an image of post-9/11 America and then, create a central character that experiences a profound transformation from religious to radical within that world. I argue throughout this chapter that the stylistic choices Updike makes are deliberate and purposeful.

The author understands or has a notion of the outcomes driven by his decision to utilize specific literary devices. Some of these techniques work extremely well, such as portraying the unrest within Ahmad’s evolving thinking through the combination of the character’s inner voice and the narrator’s viewpoint. In addition, when certain characters

launch into editorial narrative to project authority, the reader is compelled to follow, perhaps understanding that the speaker has some special insight. Charlie, for example, uses his seemingly insider knowledge of television commercials and their consequences and New Jersey history during the Revolutionary Era as a means of dictating or manipulating Ahmad's views. In other instances, Sheikh Rashid's deep understanding of the Qur'an is a way to portray his authority over the teen.

Some stylistic choices are more troubling, such as the repetitive use of offensive or outdated language. These instances, though, should be considered intentional, even if judged to detract to some degree from the book overall. Without delving into Updike's psyche, it is impossible to detail his commitment over five decades to certain offensive terms, but the use should be noted. Perhaps once all Updike's novels are available electronically, some enterprising scholar will use the technology to quantify the use of offensive or vulgar language in Updike over his long career. From this analysis, one could certainly draw conclusions about the evolution of such language in so-called "literary" fiction.

Throughout *Terrorist*, Updike uses technique to wrestle with content that he could only assume might make readers uneasy, particularly since Knopf released the book just months prior to the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States and while wars still raged in Iraq and Afghanistan. Updike's skill is in using literary devices to enable readers to interpret the many nuances contained in the novel—and by extension, the reader's perception and reaction to immigrants, terrorist threats, popular culture, and other troubling facets of the modern world.

What Updike achieves with Ahmad is interesting, since the character might just be a better example of the tumultuous nature of teenage life in post-9/11 America than of a would-be terrorist. Under the guise of extreme faith, feeling God “closer to him than his neck-vein” (145), the character contains deep layers that sometimes accentuate his belief, while at the same time, threatening to rip that closeness to shreds. Updike’s literary technique is the thread that enables such a nuanced, challenging portrait to surface.

## Chapter Four—Updike's Audience

Meanwhile the books multiply...Somewhere in their several million pondered, proofread, printed words I must have done my best, sung my song, had my say. But my panicked awareness...is of all that *isn't* in them—almost everything, it suddenly seems. *Worlds* are not in them. In the face of this vacuity arises the terrible itch to—what else?—write another book, a book that, like one more ingredient sprinkled into a problematic batter, will make the whole thing rise...Squinting, I can almost see the jacket, and make out the title page, in thirty-six-point Perpetua.

—From the 1997 essay “Me and My Books,” (*More Matter* 761-2)

Sitting alone, staring at a blank computer screen, and eager for words to pour out, a writer might feel far removed from his audience. Regardless of pedigree, creative spark, publication history, or approaching deadline, the writer begins in isolation. Even if one still employs pad and pencil or scribbles down notes and outlines, writers here share a link to a voice inside yearning for production. Novelist E. L. Doctorow examines this idea, explaining, “the work itself is hard and slow and the writer’s illumination becomes a taskmaster, a ruling discipline, jealously guarding the mind from all other and necessarily

errant private excitements... You live enslaved in the piece's language, its diction, its universe of imagery, and there is no way out except through the last sentence"

(*Creationists* x). The act of writing itself is painful and taxing, exacting both an emotional and physical toll. One might suggest that it is akin to a daily process of opening a wound just a little to let the blood flow.

The track record of famous authors who have dealt with these demons by wreaking havoc upon themselves reveals the potential depths of this anguish. Updike acknowledged the toll writing and celebrity takes, explaining in a 1975 interview at the height of his own fame comparing himself to a boyhood idol, "Hemingway was a writer who was truly...destroyed by his own persona and his own huge name, as well as by his own private lust for alcoholic fun" (Plath 81). Writers dream of publication, but anyone interested in how writers create must wonder why they push themselves like this, often with the odds stacked so clearly against getting in print. Yet, is there a writer without an audience?

When observed from this viewpoint, writing looks like an entirely isolated enterprise. The process, however, hinges on how potential readers interact with the work. Even if the writer considers herself her own primary audience, there are numerous other readers that must be considered, ranging from friends or others who might give the work a critical eye to series of editors and marketing professionals that decide to publish or reject it. What a writer sets out to do from that solitary moment gains momentum the second he wants to deliver the work to the larger world. Consequently, the awareness of the route to publication must enter the writer's outlook.

This chapter investigates how various audiences, from editors and publishers to general readers and professional critics, examine Updike's work, with specific emphasis on *Terrorist*. By analyzing existing sources from this perspective, I explore what it means for a literary artist and celebrity to also coexist as a working professional examining topics and content and that finds its way to publication and review. For Updike, who has enjoyed both critical and mass appeal, an investigation into his readers and reception reveals interesting information about society on a larger scale, including changing literary tastes and cultural norms. For this study, the focus on *Terrorist* provides analysis of Updike's reception as a famous author, which must be taken into consideration when looking at his later career. Since the book is his last standalone novel, an exploration of how audiences received, reviewed, and purchased it will deliver an exploration different than at earlier points in his career.

What follows also provides insight on the critical reception of Updike's work as the author moved beyond novels about middle class Americans and suburban life. I plan to examine clues about how an internationally famous writer struggles with the burden of fame and the prominence of the Rabbit tetralogy within his broad catalog as he attempts to branch out from those earlier novels.

*Terrorist* is an intriguing case study in examining Updike's body of work. First, in terms of genre, the novel is categorized as a thriller, completely new ground for the author well into a fifty-year career. Related to this notion is Updike's willingness to confront a difficult, topical subject, in a genre that demands attention to suspense and plotting perhaps more than Updike's traditional strengths in character motivations and development. Addressing the real world in seemingly real time necessitates that Updike

elevate these techniques, which could be argued as drawing away from his natural style. Without doubt this transformation influenced the thinking of those who reviewed the novel.

At the same time, it stands to reason that Updike realized these points about *Terrorist*, due to his comprehensive attentiveness to all aspects of the publishing business. Maybe he found motivation in achieving a spot on *The New York Times* Best Seller list toward the end of his career, since most of his work did not appear there. In fact, his most recent book to make it on the list had been an edited anthology of short stories, *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, edited with Katrina Kenison some seven years earlier. The fact that the author agreed to an extensive marketing campaign for *Terrorist* indicates that he had bestseller aspirations for the book.

This chapter asks readers to engage with Updike and the various audiences that intersect with the publication of a novel. I begin with his relationship with acquisition and general editors, publishing staffers, and others who are the first people outside the author himself to engage with the manuscript. Next, the chapter considers how Knopf's marketing department chose to publicize *Terrorist*. This analysis is often an overlooked aspect of the publishing industry, but critical in understanding how Updike and Knopf executives approached the book.

Naturally, considering that these first two parts revolve around getting the book into the hands of readers, the last two sections engage the post-publication reaction. The examination first views the public response to *Terrorist*. Then, attention is directed to the professional critics. Given the stakes of a novel like this one, which the publisher expects

to sell well, the critical reaction is an important part of the picture. In many cases, these journalistic pieces also set a tone for a novel's initial scholarly reputation.

### **Updike and Editors**

As a freelance writer, even one famous, celebrated, and hard working, Updike remained mindful of the marketplace. He approached the craft as a profession, which necessitated nurturing relationships with editors, particularly at *The New Yorker*. The magazine sustained his early career, and then enabled him to flourish as a freelance critic and essayist throughout the rest of his life. Outlining his thoughts about writing and product, Updike says, "I think you set up shop as a storyteller, a story maker, a story seller, and it becomes your product, something you're going to live by, like shoes" (Schiff "Conversation" 430). He set an early goal of publishing six stories a year in *The New Yorker*, which he calculated would enable him to support his growing family in small-town Ipswich, Massachusetts. Although he made the decision to quit his job as a staff writer for the magazine and move from New York City to a suburban home in the late 1950s, Updike remained keenly aware of who purchased his "shoes."

Over his long career, Updike left few topics unturned regarding the publication process. However, one must make a conscious decision to accept, accept with reservation, or decline what he said, since he wore several guises in these exchanges, including professional writer, literary celebrity, and salesman. From a symbolic interactionism view, the interview process itself seems suspect. Such exchanges certainly contain elements of performance, which Updike acknowledges. Not only is he facing a specific interviewer, but he understands that a potentially broad audience also exists who

will read, watch, or otherwise ingest the content he delivers. In that personal exchange with the interviewer, Updike's thoughts about a book or its characters might be pulled directly from his memory, but there is an exchange taking place with the other individual that is forcing the ideas to evolve.

Looking back on his early experiences with *The New Yorker*, for example, reveals a writer keenly aware of the predilections of his editor. In an interview with scholar James Schiff, Updike recalls, "There were many things he [editor Harold Ross] did not think should be in the magazine; he saw the magazine as entering a middle-class home, and he wanted something that the children of the household would not be threatened by" ("Conversation" 433). In response, Updike wrote short stories that fit Ross's expectations, sending racier pieces to other publications and editors that did not carry these same restrictions, such as *Harper's* or *Playboy*.

For a researcher, investigating how a contemporary author conducts business with editors is a difficult task. Often these interactions only surface long after a writer dies, or in an editor's memoir. Legendary editor Maxwell Perkins, for example, provided new insight into his dealings with Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald in his memoir. Today, though, book and magazine editors do not hold the celebrity status they once did. Given the consolidation taking place in the modern publishing industry and revolving corporate ownership of most houses, it is difficult to imagine this difficulty improving for future scholars.

Furthermore, the Information Age has diminished the central role of a writer's archive or papers, which scholars have utilized for generations. For example, depending on the working relationship between the author and editor, records were probably

erased—simply deleted from an e-mail inbox or voicemail system. In Updike’s case, he remained a letter writer, though many of these were merely brief notes.

Updike’s recent death and the subsequent outpouring of recollections from friends, family, and publishing associations, however, provide unique insight into how the author and his editors interacted. According to Sonny Mehta, publisher of Alfred A. Knopf, Updike:

[C]ared about the process, about the mechanics involved in making a book. He paid as much attention to those details as he did to his writing. He was an author with the heart of a publisher and a frequent visitor to our offices. He cared about the weight of paper, the inking on the page. He cared about the size of the trim, the trim of the book, the color of the top stain, he cared about fonts, and he cared about the images on a jacket. (“Tribute”)

Updike immersed himself in the tiny details of book-making because he correlated them with the conduct of a professional writer and the actions of an artisan.

Furthermore, since he rarely accepted advances on his novels—the lifeblood of the writing life for many fiction authors—the seemingly minute aspects of the industry took on added meaning. Inspecting the “shoe” as it transformed from manuscript to printed book must have developed into a natural step in Updike’s creative process.

In “Me and My Books,” a 1997 essay published in *The New Yorker*, Updike addresses his love of the book production process, explaining, “fussing with the type, the sample pages, the running heads, the dust jacket, the flap copy, the cover cloth—has perhaps been dearer to me than the writing process.” Whereas one would imagine a writer most closely allied to writing, for Updike, the final, published product “hangs as a

shining mirage luring me through many a gray writing day” (*More Matter* 759). Still, like today’s authors obsessed with Amazon rankings and Googling themselves, Updike admits searching for his own books in small-town libraries, fascinated with the ones that show the most wear and tear from repeated readings. Updike recognizes the strong tie between writing and publishing, hazily switching sides over which aspect is most dear to him, but remains mindful of the ultimate goal of attracting readers.

In attempting to interrogate the relationship between Updike and his various magazine and book editors, one would be remiss in not addressing the role the writer’s persona played, because Updike is almost universally praised for his kindness and humility by those who knew him well and others he met in passing. Yet, this kind of analysis is perhaps the most difficult to undertake, since I did not know Updike personally and many of the recent accounts have been laudatory, delivered after his death in celebration of his career. So, I will piece together some viewpoints here, understanding that it is done to hone in on some specific characteristics Updike employed with his editorial peers.

Foremost in Updike’s repertoire was his humor, much of it self-deprecating. For example, addressing a large group at a sponsored lecture series in June 2009, the author addressed the common myth that he could sneeze and *The New Yorker* would publish it, saying, “I’m still very rejectable (laughter) and still very grateful when I can get something into the magazine” (“Bartos Forum”). This humility, which cannot be assessed as real or contrived, worked to establish a persona the author found comfortable. Similarly, a 2001 panel appearance with a small group of English literature scholars showed Updike using laughter as a way to charm the audience. Discussing a relatively

obscure Updike short story, the author himself misquoted the title, while all the others knew it and chanted in unison. Rather than embarrassment, the author handled the exchange breezily, saying, “That’s right, I have all of these Updike experts here. It makes me feel relatively ill informed” (Schiff *Cincinnati* 55). Being on the ball with a quick quip or humorous remark served Updike well in creating his particular public persona.

In interactionist terms, Updike’s internalized self met with external forces (like a live audience) to transform into a version of Updike as speaker that he found comfortable and fit into the audience’s mindset of “author.” Social interactionists view this phenomenon as the “me,” or socialized self, that is the source of human freedom. Updike up on stage is conducting “mind activity,” and thus able to “analyze situations and direct himself...to perform a certain way in a situation.” The exchange process with the audience causes everyone involved to “reanalyze situations, to recall past and construct future as action unfolds.” Through the words flowing between Updike and his audience, new ideas are generated and fresh synthesis developed. The speech itself and the audience’s questions are, according to Charon, “new creative efforts by symbol users, synthesizing and analyzing in unique ways.” Furthermore, he explains, “Humans are not sometimes creative; they are creative in *all* situations” (191). Updike’s constant transformation, particularly on stage, includes adopting guises that make the role easier to fulfill.

One sees how Updike’s humor worked to his advantage when listening to David Remnick of *The New Yorker* tell stories about Updike’s interaction with editors at the magazine. Writing to editor Henry Finder about his new computer, Updike explained, “I finally found a typeface on this dratted machine that I like. Easy to read on the screen and

not too bad when printed out. It's called Lucida Bright, which sounds to me like an Evelyn Waugh heroine." At other times, Remnick recalls Updike adopting a weary, yet comical, voice. After reviewing Robert Alter's translation of *The Five Books of Moses*, Updike wrote, "Oy vey, as Moses said to Zipporah, what an assignment!" ("Tribute"). The wit and urbanity in such notes certainly endeared the author to the receiver.

Given the task of assigning a review essay, would any editor who could call on Updike not give him the assignment, particularly given the care he showed each piece? According to Remnick, even at a point in which Updike no longer needed *The New Yorker*, he continued to accept nearly every assignment given to him, regardless of the topic. Maybe gratitude is the simple answer. Perhaps Updike continued to publish in the magazine because it provided a stage early in his career that launched him to fame. Likewise, one assumes that enduring Knopf's cross-platform marketing campaign for *Terrorist* came down to Updike realizing that he could still give back to his long-time publisher.

Judith Jones, Updike's editor at Knopf for almost 50 years, echoes many of the statements made by his magazine editors, but adds to the picture by revealing the author's total participation in the book-making business. With Updike rarely taking an advance on his books, he had a certain freedom that most authors do not hold. He did not like to talk about his current projects, according to Jones. The day a manuscript appeared, she opened it as if it were a present. But, it was a gift with instructions on how to proceed: "the package would arrive, and we'd open it. It was complete with an image for the jacket, a sketch of how it should be designed, instructions to Peter Andersen about the type and once more we were plunged into the fun of making a book" ("Tribute").

For many writers the cat and mouse game between copyeditors, editors, and the writer nearly ruin the thrill of publishing. However, Jones found working with Updike exhilarating:

To me, it was always a treat to go through his first pass, his second pass, sometimes even a third pass, and see all the refinements he felt compelled to make, sometimes to sharpen what he called his ‘regrettable phrasing,’ sometimes to justify the line, and occasionally, because he got carried away with his own words, I was even asked to comment and tell him if I thought he had gone too far. (“Tribute”)

Examining the relationship between Updike and his editors, one must at least question the consequences of an editor receiving the familiar letter from Massachusetts with Updike’s smudged print in the left-hand corner. Certainly, if one accepts the premise that editors who work at *The New Yorker* are lovers (or at least admirers) of the written word, then it must have been a treat to receive a letter or phone call from Updike the literary celebrity. His long-time editors, such as Roger Angell, essentially grew up with him, but newer members of the Updike team quite possibly would have studied his work in college or read it for pleasure. Receiving a letter from Updike for a lover of words, then, is akin to getting a signed baseball from Willie Mays or an autographed photo of Marilyn Monroe.

Clearly, Updike relished working with editors. His graciousness played a part, revealing him as a thoughtful, courteous writer, who did not demand and bully, even though he could have acted that way as his fame grew. That Updike conducted himself

without an agent and did not count on advance money to finance his work speaks volumes about his standing as one of the last literary greats.

### **Updike's Public/Public's Updike**

Whether Updike accepted the label “public intellectual” or not, he undoubtedly played the role. There are conflicting reports of how he felt about his early and enduring fame. However, there certainly seems to be an aspect of the interplay that he understood to be part of the exchange between writer and his audience. Being “out there” in the public sphere, whether that meant writing literary criticism for *The New Yorker*, appearing on television talk shows, or speaking at a university lecture series, meant that people had ample opportunity to create an image or public persona of him that fit their impression of what it meant to be a “writer.” For some individuals, Updike and his public image may have served as their ideal vision of a writer.

More importantly, for a literary figure of Updike's stature, an additional expectation develops. According to James Phelan, the “lines between author, reader, and text become blurred...rhetoric is the synergy occurring between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response” (xii). The reading public, and certainly the author's devoted following, carves out of its collective consciousness what to expect from an Updikean piece. One imagines in this sense that the actual Updike the writer dissolves or disappears as the reader interacts with what they deem Updikean.

For his fictional works, readers anticipate (or possibly require) a similar voice and feel in each subsequent novel or short story because they sense in it something that they can relate to consciously or subconsciously. “Most readers,” scholar Janice Radway

explains, “willfully engage texts from their own ground, wandering about within them sometimes aimlessly, sometimes hell-bent on a purpose. They raid them, remake them, perform them...they write them anew” (339). In other words, readers return to authors that provide them with a setting, situation, or characters that allow them to adapt themselves to. As such, the old adage “diving into a book” makes perfect sense. In addition, though, the reader is also diving into the author.

Updike’s boyhood dream of writing for *The New Yorker* provided him an intellectual home. From the glossy pages of the magazine, countless readers poured over his work, whether fiction or nonfiction, expanding his readership far beyond most of his peers. According to David Remnick, “Anyone associated with the magazine has to admit that John was *The New Yorker*. He was the magazine. He enlarged it, he graced it, he gave it intellectual ambition and a particularly shimmery American tone. He gave it a horizon, just out of site (“Tribute”). Many of life’s certainties are not eagerly anticipated, but readers of *The New Yorker* could count on Updike’s appearance in its pages, almost like clockwork. The strong link between the literary sensibility of the magazine and Updike as its champion gave readers a way to approach the magazine and his work as an author.

Concurrently, Updike’s conception of the “ideal reader” of *The New Yorker* played a part in how he wrote, particularly in the early years of his career when he counted on the magazine as his primary means of supporting his family. According to literary theorist Walter J. Ong:

[T]he writer must construct in his imagination, clearly or vaguely, an audience cast in some sort of role – entertainment seekers, reflective sharers of

experience...[and] the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself. A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life. (12)

*The New Yorker* represented a comfort zone for Updike. He knew the magazine so well, pouring over the pictures and text as a young teenager and devouring it as he grew up, that he may have known the “typical” magazine reader better than the editors running the publication. Still, Updike could not be certain his “fictionalized” reader equated to the magazine’s actual subscribers.

At least early in his career, Updike imagined his ideal reader, “pampered and urban, needing a wholesome small-town change from his then-customary diet of Westchester-adultery stories...a body of my fellow Americans to whom these modest doings in Pennsylvania would be news” (*Odd Jobs* 135). Updike’s ideal reader found interest in a vision of “real” America, but he allowed for differences of what middle America meant for different people. He explains, “From *Rabbit, Run* on, I have often been accused of painting a bleak picture of American reality. But I must say that when I’m drawing that picture, I rarely feel I’m portraying something especially bleak” (Reilly 239).

Although not a central cog in scholar Mark McGurl’s postwar creative writing “program era,” in that he did not teach creative writing or derive his primary income from a college or university, Updike still benefited from the rise of creative writing in American institutions of higher education. As greater numbers of colleges implemented creative writing programs at the undergraduate and graduate level and students flocked to fill vacant seats, Updike held the increasingly sacred title – *author* – a position these

writing students aspired to attain. He and a handful of others who stood at the top of writing's Mount Olympus served as heroes or inspirations to those attempting the climb.

More importantly, however, as McGurl explains, "the largest number of serious readers in the postwar period...have been produced through the agency of the school, where millions of students were first introduced to the refined pleasures of the literary and convinced...of its worth as a mode of experience" (64). Out of these "millions," certainly, came the majority of Updike's most devoted followers. Who better than an audience trained to recognize beautiful writing to shimmer with anticipation at the arrival of each new Updike tome? The creation of this readymade audience of potential book buyers is the real benefit of the postwar creative writing movement.

In contrast to Updike's traditional path, writer Michael Chabon stands as the program era's version of Updike. After graduating from the University of Pittsburgh, Chabon entered the Master's of Fine Arts creative writing graduate program at the University of California at Irvine. Also a stylist, whose early work is noted for its delicately crafted sentences, Chabon scored the then-record highest advance payment ever given for a first novel for *Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1988). In 2001, he won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*.

Like Updike, Chabon does not rely on teaching to support himself and his family, though he has held visiting writer posts, lectured at universities, and spoken at writer retreats and conferences. Given the transformation of popular culture to a predominantly television and movie era, Chabon has work optioned by film production companies and worked as a screenplay writer. The former includes the critically-acclaimed *Wonder Boys* (1995), while Chabon also wrote for the blockbuster film *Spider-Man 2*, which grossed

more than \$783 million worldwide. Chabon's more recent works have been "quirkier," ranging from young adult novels to hardboiled detective pieces and science fiction.

Perhaps for Updike, the commitment to the full sweep of the institutionalization of creative writing programs smacked too much of rigidity or bureaucracy. Maybe he did not want to face the criticism that his good friend Joyce Carol Oates confronted for simply writing too much. As McGurl relates, Oates's prodigious output, what he labels "maximalism," drew fire, indicating to some reviewers that she "doesn't write books now, the books write her" (qtd. in McGurl 298). Although not a formal component of the system, Updike prospered in it. Teaching the love of writing (and by extension, reading) to eager undergraduate and graduate students created an audience for his work, whether art and literary criticism in *The New Yorker* or his most recent novel.

### **Interrogating 9/11 and Selling Terror**

The publishing industry lags behind its mass media brethren in using all the available marketing tools at its disposal to turn books into events. Even the splashiest marketing campaign for a novel pales in comparison with the release of a film or CD. For example, while a coup for a book launch might be an author appearance on NPR, advertisements for movies are shown nationwide for weeks prior to release. Sticking to its early twentieth century model for selling books, basically publishing them with little coordinated thought about how to get the thing in the hands of a reader who is ready or eager to buy it, keeps the industry at a perpetual disadvantage versus other popular culture channels.

Given the relatively ramshackle state of book marketing, publishing houses fall back on the few outdated modes of generating buzz they have used for generations, such as author appearances and book signings. For authors who have not yet established a following, these events are fraught with fears of reading to empty rooms and traveling hundreds or thousands of miles to a signing only to have a handful of people attend. Regardless of how dreadful and hit-or-miss these efforts are, they are viewed as a kind of rite of passage for writers the publisher believes might sell. On the other hand, one expects that mass-market writers will support their books via these channels, since their books are more important than literary ones in driving the bottom line.

Given the odd configuration of celebrity in modern bookselling, it is strange when a famous literary author like Updike goes on tour to launch a new novel. For one segment of the audience, he is a central figure in modern American letters. Others, however, will have little knowledge of him in the swell of more popular and famous mass-market authors. Scholar Loren Glass comments on this duality regarding the idea of celebrity in the modern bookselling marketplace, explaining, “Celebrity, of course, remains a crucial ingredient in the marketing of books, but like publishing itself, it has become almost entirely absorbed into the protocols of the general field of cultural production” (199). In this marketplace, publishers elevate certain books they decide “have legs,” at the expense of nearly every other title in their catalog. As Glass correctly indicates, it is the consolidation of the publishing industry from family-owned firms to multinational conglomerates that leads to a publisher primarily pushing mass-market titles and authors.

As a result, Glass sees the end of the literary celebrity in the image of Hemingway or Kerouac, simply because the culture industry no longer has room for nurturing careers nor building fame slowly.

In promoting *Terrorist*, one sees that Knopf hoped to capitalize on Updike's position as a historically significant literary figure, while at the same time, calling attention to his ability to address modern concerns in the post-9/11 era. The book jacket itself, a part of the publishing process Updike reveled in, is telling. While one's eyes might be drawn first to the shadowy figure at occupying the center of the image, it is Updike's name across the top of the cover that is most striking, significantly larger than the title and dwarfing the subtitle "A Novel" in the lower right hand corner. In accentuating the author's name, rather than the title or status as a novel, adheres to a trend used to sell mass-market books – using the author's name as the primary means of selling the book. One often sees marketing ploy used to promote books by authors such as Stephen King, Dan Brown, and James Patterson.

The publisher's decision regarding the sales potential of *Terrorist* is also evidenced in the difference between its cover and that of Updike's recent previous novels, including *Villages*, released two years earlier. The blue-gray cover for the *Villages* hardback placed the title at the top of the page in a reddish font. Updike's name is in the same color, though not as boldly as the title. The central image is the painting *The Turkish Bath* (1862) by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres containing a provocative display of a dozen or so naked women, in a neoclassical vision of a Harem scene. In 2002's *Seek My Face*, the hardback cover features a close-up of a featureless face. Updike's name is across the forehead of the face in a font larger than the title of the

novel, but the black lettering relegates it to secondary position. In contrast, the white lettering of the title stands out.

The decision to use renowned book jacket designer Chip Kidd, who had produced other Updike covers, such as *Memories of the Ford Administration*, to create the *Terrorist* cover separated the novel from Updike's stylish earlier ones. According to Kidd, he and the author worked closely on the design, with Updike finding the image and Kidd discovering a way to best employ it. "It's tough to do something fresh with the word terrorist because we're so inundated with it," Kidd says. "On the cover there's this initial shadowy figure, but when you turn it upside down it's just a guy's reflection on a rainy street" (Yurchyshyn "How"). The stark white font used for the title and Updike's name grew out of the author's initial idea to present the image as a newspaper headline.

Central to Knopf's marketing *Terrorist* was Updike himself taking a commanding role in selling the novel. While some factions of the book-buying public might not find Updike's promotional efforts appealing, his willingness to hit the road caught the attention of *The Wall Street Journal*. Reporter Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg noted:

The author, who has rarely promoted his previous books, is making TV appearances and touring several cities at the request of his publisher. It is the first time he's been on the road in 16 years. Carole Horne, the head buyer at the Harvard Book Store in Cambridge, Mass., says she ordered 700 copies of *Terrorist* in advance of a reading Mr. Updike is giving at the store on June 29. ("Updike's")

The campaign hinged on Updike's ability to use his fame as a means of attracting attention, such as answer questions about earlier works that he had dealt with many times

in the past, while at the same time enthusiastically promoting the new novel and fielding those questions with equal aplomb.

Rather than wait and see if Updike's book sold based on the topicality of its subject matter, or even his fame, Knopf approached the novel as it would a mass-market seller. The publisher sent out approximately 2,500 advanced reader copies (ARCs) to individuals who might play a role in selling it, from distributors and bookstore personnel to journalists and media people. By distributing ARCs, Knopf took a gamble that popular interest would overwhelm or at least balance out any potentially negative reviews that might appear. "It was about getting them to read Updike, whom they may not have read in some time," explains Paul Bogaards, a Knopf spokesman (qtd. in Trachtenberg "Updike's"). The move also showed Knopf's willingness to prove that Updike remained a relevant novelist, confronting challenges in the twenty first century.

From a researcher's perspective, it is impossible to ignore the strictly financial rationale for Knopf and Updike to take every possible step in marketing *Terrorist*. In modern publishing, the houses rely almost exclusively on mass-market sales to drive revenues. In other words, the potential profit from three or four James Paterson novels annually enables almost every other work to break even or lose money. Since Updike did not rely on large advances against royalties, Knopf had little to lose in designing a broad marketing campaign for the novel. More importantly, if *Terrorist* developed into a hit, it would unexpectedly stand as a revenue-generator for that fiscal year.

For Updike, the consummate freelance writer, the one who rarely (if ever) turned down an assignment, the opportunity to hit the bestseller lists one more time at the end of his career probably stirred his thinking. Updike told Trachtenberg that "he decided to do

a promotional tour because Knopf told him it would help sell books.” Moreover, using an appropriate sports metaphor, Updike explained, “It’s something I discovered I can do...like Muhammad Ali, who towards the end of his career discovered he could take a punch. I can take the punch of a book tour...and I might be on the mat before you know it.” (qtd. in “Updike’s”). There is an air of bravado in Updike comparing himself to the former heavyweight champion of the world. However, given his celebrity status and past accomplishments, the writer certainly shared similarities with the boxer as he faced down the end of his career. Updike also stood keenly aware of his dwindling time on the national stage. Updike explained to journalist John Freeman, “I felt while I was writing that this book had potential for selling a little better than the others. But my college education leads me to distrust any book that sells well” (A2). The prospect of leaving the literary world with another big seller had meaning for him.

The wish to leave the literary world one last bestseller, combined with Knopf’s desire to build a high-profile marketing campaign around *Terrorist*, led Updike to hit the publicity trail. The seventy-four-year old author spent two weeks touring the country, primarily granting interviews and appearing at lectures. After returning from the trip, Updike sat for a day filled with interviews in the publisher’s New York City offices. Each interviewer came in to speak to him in 30-minute timeslots. Interestingly, this style of interviewing grew out of Hollywood press junkets in which film stars endure a barrage of interviews just prior to the release of the film from a central location. Like satellite radio and television tours, the method enables a broad swath of reporters to receive access, thus satisfying their audiences without requiring the celebrity to travel extensively. Using this

style of interview for Updike's new novel suggests the height of his celebrity status and the interest in his work.

The ensuing media blitz surrounding *Terrorist* produced at least 975 newspaper articles, reviews, interviews, or radio appearances globally. Despite this number of searchable returns, the actual number of media "impressions" (potentially geometrically larger) through blog hits and Web articles is impossible to calculate. At this time, general search engines, such as Google and Bing, and more specialized private databases do not have the capability of finding this information. However, the tools that are available indicate *Terrorist* received widespread review and commentary both online and in traditional media outlets.

According to Trachtenberg, the marketing push resulted in Updike's biggest seller in decades, despite a number of negative reviews: "The book was No. 18 on Amazon.com on Sunday and debuted last Friday on *The Wall Street Journal* list at No. 6. Since its publication June 6, Mr. Updike's publisher...has gone to press six times and has increased the number of books in print to 118,000 from 60,000" ("Updike's"). In contrast, the author's previous novels ran in the 30,000 to 40,000 range, vastly more than most novelists sell, but nowhere near the major bestseller lists. A week later, *Terrorist* entered the *New York Times* Best Seller list at number eight.

### **Reception of *Terrorist***

Updike may be the most open literary writer in American when it comes to discussing his critics and reviews. Perhaps his role as a book reviewer and essayist increased his awareness of how authors are stacked up against one another, or maybe it occurred once

he occupied the more rarefied air of Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner. Regardless of the origin, Updike knew that reviewers, scholars, and critics kept score. As a result, he took pains to discuss who might have authority when examining an author's output, explaining:

You know, it's a strange experience talking about your own books, especially since an author is by no means the last authority about what he has written. I wind up talking about Updike's book according to Updike, but there is always the very real possibility that there is a good deal in the book which you, the author, don't understand. A more reliable memory involves what you were trying to do. (Reilly 240)

Like presidents who attempt to create the foundation for the way historians will interpret or assess their presidencies, Updike worked diligently to set the tone for his place in literary history. Many of Updike's Henry Bech stories, collected as *The Complete Henry Bech* (2001), for example, are amusing revenge stories in which a decidedly evil New York City writer exacts revenge on his critics.

It is no secret that Updike's 1989 memoir *Self-Consciousness* grew out of an attempt to get the details out before a potential biographer might. A decade later he spoke about literary biography (published in 1999 in *The New York Review of Books*) in honor of the two hundredth volume produced by the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, actually calling into question the sensationalist aspects of many of these tomes. Instead, he preferred biography that opened new inroads into reexamining a writer's work. Updike did not hide his disgust at the thought of a biographer: "disturbing my children, quizzing my ex-wife, bugging my present wife, seeking for Judases among my friends...and

quoting *in extenso* bad reviews I would rather see consigned to oblivion” (*Due Considerations* 10-11).

Although only mentioning reviews in passing, this statement reveals a great deal about Updike’s thoughts on the subject. What one sees in his writing is a conscientious decision to see bad reviews as settling into oblivion. At other times, the author talked about how books that received only fair reviews at publication, later morphed into being considered his finest works after reassessment by academic critics, particularly *The Centaur*. In another well-known case, scholar Harold Bloom loudly proclaimed *The Witches of Eastwick* Updike’s greatest novel, while curtly dismissing the rest, including *Rabbit, Run*. Updike later told an interviewer, “I was pleased Bloom liked the book, but at the price of all the others, it was a kind of heavy price to pay” (Plath 261). He understood the permanency of critical viewpoints.

Updike certainly owned a rollercoaster relationship with both professional and academic critics, which may have sparked his pragmatic thoughts about reviews. On the other hand, discussing reviews so openly might have also been a way to begin his own agenda setting when it came time for critics and scholars to analyze his catalog.

Returning to *Terrorist*, Updike’s tireless marketing work and Knopf’s willingness to invest resources into the promotional campaign vaulted the novel to best-seller status shortly after its release in mid-2006. The publisher pushed the book similarly to how it would a mass-market “name” writer and the results followed. While many mass-market thrillers sell well, most do not get reviewed in mainstream publications. In contrast, capitalizing on Updike’s celebrity and the new ground he covered in penning a thriller,

*Terrorist* received reviews in magazines and newspaper across the United States and abroad. Taken as a whole, though, the reviews were decidedly mixed, at best.

Unlike many other post-9/11 novels, such as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, *Terrorist* does not draw on the immediate aftermath of the attacks. For example, DeLillo's book literally begins with a main character emerging—soot-covered and dazed—from the World Trade Center. Updike's novel is set at least one year after September 11 and possibly several years in the future, though the character's vivid memories of that day and the popular culture references place the timeline within the near future.

Why would Updike skew so far from the safety of suburbia to write a novel that deliberately creates a sympathetic portrayal of a would be terrorist in post-9/11 America? Surely, if one looks back on the reasons Updike says he writes, then the conclusion is that he purposely meant to make a statement about the country and its people in the early twentieth century. In this light, I see *Terrorist* as his warning shot directed at readers who might then act upon the shoddy, flabby, yet wonderful, America he unveils. Scholar Molly Abel Travis explains, "Texts do not perfectly reproduce ideology, for language is not univocal, centered, and fixed. Resistance to ideology is inherent in every ideological stance" (5). Updike, then, is delivering his worldview, but doing so in hopes that the reader as agent will react.

Updike imagined this exchange in a futuristic, farcical essay, reprinted in *More Matter*, between a writer and Martian, explaining American fiction to alien life forms. In the piece, Updike calls the "distinction" between readers and writers "entirely illusory." He explains, "The writer is a reader, reading what he writes as he goes along, watching

the text create itself, and the reader as he reads creates the story in terms of scenery he can imagine, faces he can see – it's the story of his life!" (65). Updike then expounds on the positive outcomes of fiction, making the world more sympathetic and exulted, while at the same time reducing cruelty, xenophobia, and paranoia. The dance, in his mind, is between writer as writer and reader and reader as interpreter and inflator.

In examining the professional reception of *Terrorist*, one is drawn to the old adage "any publicity is good publicity." The novel stands as one of the most successful of his career from a sales standpoint, yet reviewers wrote negative (often scathing) invectives that collectively called into question just about every single aspect of the book. Even those who viewed *Terrorist* favorably did so with reservations, sometimes out of reverence or respect for Updike's past glories. Two thoughts that might account for abuse are that perhaps the marketing campaign somehow sullied the author, thereby predisposing the novel to poor reviews by serious reviewers who grew tired of hearing and seeing Updike plugging it. Second, given that the book is clearly a thriller, maybe reviewers thought they could be harsher, since it was not the author's typical literary fiction. In other words, in addition to taking shots at Updike, they also rebuked the thriller genre at Updike's expense.

### **Reviews**

Despite how he might have felt internally about the growing list of negative reviews for *Terrorist*, Updike approached them with his typical graciousness and self-deprecating manner. Speaking in front of a packed house at the New York Public Library, he joked, "I've been on tour with this book for two weeks and met a lot of people and

faced some audiences and mostly what I get is flattery and ‘how nice’ and ‘loved your stuff’ and all this so you begin to think that you’re a pretty swell fellow...and Michiko Kakutani brings you back to reality in a very healthy way” (“Bartos Forum”). Kakutani is arguably the most widely-read book reviewer in America as lead critic for *The New York Times*, so her scathing review of *Terrorist* made waves in literary circles and set a tone for the general impression of the novel. Despite several other more balanced reviews to appear in the paper’s pages, as well as an interview with Updike about the book, once Kakutani came out swinging, she provided the rest of the reviewer community with a license for brutality.

Asked specifically about Kakutani, Updike quipped:

“Michiko Kakutani and I have danced many a round together and her reviews of me seem petulant...she gets on a subject, a point of the book, one tiny point of the book, and won’t let it go. And she is censorious...I never feel in her much of an effort to say, “Well, that’s true, but this is good about the book, or this book does that.” I don’t feel this so keenly when she reviews other authors. (“Bartos Forum”)

Listening to the taped remarks, one hears the joking tone in Updike’s voice in answering the question about the reviewer and the audience’s uproarious laughter. In his dance metaphor and the use of the word “petulant,” though, one senses that the author purposely calls her out for her unreasonableness, but also that he expects nothing less. Petulant smacks of wording a parent might utilize to describe an ill-behaved child, so there is a tone of fatherliness in Updike’s usage, perhaps since her style appears to him a violation of his own rules regarding how one should compose book reviews.

In contrast to the prevailing negativity represented by Kakutani, writer Bryan Appleyard, reviewing for *The Sunday Times* (London) hailed the “public enthusiasm” for the novel that showed its staying power “beyond the terms of critical discourse.” For him, Updike stepped into a much-needed gap for Americans “seeking authoritative voice to tell them what is going on.” By purchasing the novel, the book-buying public sent a message about its own desires, according to Appleyard (“Our Eye”).

Writer John Irving noted how the terrorism culture that developed in the United States and globally after 9/11 played a central role in how professional critics reviewed the book, explaining:

His novel *Terrorist* was criticized by the sudden abundance of terror experts; Updike didn’t get this right, or he didn’t correctly understand this element, or—whatever. I thought the novel was an amazingly quick study, and an insightful one. I cared about the characters—something many intellectuals who write fiction don’t get at all. (“Dear John”)

Table 1 presents a sampling of American newspaper reviews of *Terrorist* by publication date and highlights some key thoughts contained in the review that encapsulates the reviewer’s thoughts regarding the novel. Although this group of reviews is by no means exhaustive, it encompasses many of the most admired and widely-read book reviews in the country. Given the relative difficulty of tracking Web-based information, even from just over three years ago, I decided to stick to print-based sources. At this date, it would be impossible to accurately track the number of blogs and other Internet sources that commented on or reviewed the novel. Given the geometric growth

of blogging and other social media Web sites over the last three years, one should assume that these channels helped Updike sell the book.

Table 1. A Sampling of United States Newspapers with *Terrorist* Review Date and Key Remarks.

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Review Date</b>	<b>Key Phrase(s)</b>
<i>The Washington Times</i>	4 June 2006	“tackles the biggest subject of our age yet manages to feel insubstantial...don’t confuse insubstantial with uninteresting;” “a page-turner, a treatise on unqualified hatred embodied by a lanky high school student;” “exquisitely detailed descriptive passages...eerie ability to capture a mood or moment in just a few phrases;” “subject matter strays far afield from his usual métier;” “adept at capturing Islamic radicalism's allure;”
<i>The Washington Post</i>	4 June 2006	“Nothing plausible about the characters of this book;” “their harangues are always delivered in a slightly satirical key, as if none of it really mattered;”

Table 1 (Continued)

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Review Date</b>	<b>Key Phrase(s)</b>
<i>The Boston Globe</i>	4 June 2006	“Emotionally daring...gripping in its insight...also uneven: sometimes dull...a couple of ludicrous plot developments that rob the novel of its ultimate punch;” “sometimes wrenching in its authenticity;” “riveting plot;” “usual grace with form and content;”
<i>The New York Daily News</i>	4 June 2006	“The book itself fails in its own higher purpose, trying to explain on a micro level how homegrown rage is nurtured. The good news is that Updike’s comfy genius still stands;” “Updike has too much humanity to really grasp the ugliness... ultimately suffers not because it doesn’t feel real, but because it really feels”
<i>St. Petersburg Times</i>	4 June 2006	“ <i>Terrorist</i> fails because Updike doesn’t know Ahmad Mulloy;” “book never achieves anything deeper than a rhetorical truth;”

Table 1 (Continued)

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Review Date</b>	<b>Key Phrase(s)</b>
<i>The Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	4 June 2006	“moves beyond stereotypes of the fatherless and brotherless to a meditation on the mysteries and terrors of alienation and faith;” “not without flaws...plot turns on clunky contrivances and coincidences;” “burrows beneath the surfaces of American popular culture, which Updike traverses so well, to truths worth remembering”
<i>USA Today</i>	5 June 2006	“most adventurous and accessible novel in decades...summer’s most rewarding book”
<i>The Los Angeles Times</i>	5 June 2006	“Feels flat-out rigged...indulges in some gratuitous button-pushing;” “collection of grotesques;” “contrived plot;” “an interesting, if failed, thought experiment;” “saturated in paint-by-numbers angst”
<i>The New York Times</i>	6 June 2006	“completely unbelievable individual: more robot than human...cliché...one-dimensional;” “cartoonish stick figure;” “lousy job;” “maladroit novel...dubious”
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	9 June 2006	“A high-brow novelist trying to write below his pay grade;” “uncongenial to his talent;” “It all falls flat...squandered by the hopeless plot”

Table 1 (Continued)

Newspaper	Review Date	Key Phrase(s)
<i>The Christian Science Monitor</i>	13 June 2006	“results aren’t always impressive;” “Updike never really seems to inhabit Ahmad;” “All the Muslim characters...in the terrorism business”
<i>The San Francisco Chronicle</i>	18 June 2006	“timely novel with a queasily plausible plot;” “wholly without credibility;” “Ahmad sounds [like] a wooden actor with a bad accent;” “Updike has lost, or perhaps abandoned his gift for characterization”

This sampling of twelve newspaper reviews reveals the disappointment in the reviewer community regarding *Terrorist* and supports the generally-held belief that the novel received mixed reviews. From an audience and reception point of view, however, the table amplifies the disconnect between reviewers and book buyers. Despite what would certainly be considered crushing reviews, particularly by Kakutani and Christopher Hitchens in *The Atlantic*, the novel debuted in the top ten on *The New York Times* Best Seller list, as well as many additional local lists. Clearly, the segment of the population that reads continued its fascination with terrorism, even five years after the attacks on New York City and Washington DC.

More important, however, is that Updike overcame negative reviews by committing to a tireless marketing effort. Also, it would be naïve to dismiss the author’s standing as one of the nation’s most acclaimed writers and the role that played in pushing sales.

Table 2 presents a sampling of magazine reviews of *Terrorist* by publication date and highlights key ideas contained in the review that encapsulate the reviewer’s opinion of the novel. Although the magazine reviewers generally had more space to discuss the novel in comparison to the limited word counts in most newspapers, as a whole, the longer reviews were about equally mixed.

Table 2. A Sampling of United States Magazines with *Terrorist* Review Date and Key Remarks.

<b>Magazine</b>	<b>Review Date</b>	<b>Key Phrase(s)</b>
<i>Library Journal</i>	15 May 2006	“Updike captures brilliantly the coercive tactics of the organization and the young boy’s uncertainties;” “falters in his portrait by depicting Ahmad as a ‘typical American teenager;” “All libraries will want to order this”
<i>New York Magazine</i>	28 May 2006	“latest in a long line of Updike boys failing their way to manhood;” “Ahmad wants to be used...a luminous jerk...a romantic egoist;” “characters in <i>Terrorist</i> may be sketchy...action perfunctory...stereotyping wearisome, but Ahmad stirs up sediment in us...we are made more complicated;” “Unlike every other novelist...Updike isn’t writing from the victim’s point of view”

Table 2 (Continued)

<b>Magazine</b>	<b>Review Date</b>	<b>Key Phrase(s)</b>
<i>Atlantic Monthly</i>	June 2006	“Given some admittedly stiff competition, Updike has produced one of the worst pieces of writing from any grown-up source since the events he has so unwisely tried to draw upon”
<i>Newsweek</i>	5 June 2006	“Make[s] you wonder if terrorists, like all monomaniacs who dread complexity and ambiguity, aren’t basically boring people;” “Lame-brained, improbable”
<i>The New York Times Book Review</i>	18 June 2006	“One of the most interesting things...is its convergence of imagined views about the way this country is and the way it appears;” “Its tensions are well calibrated and the points of view clearly and at times ironically presented;” “Seems meant as a fable...history, in disposing of empires, admits of no innocents and spares no one”
<i>Harper’s</i>	July 2006	“The portrait is troubling...seems to us something of a monster;” “The story line...contains few surprises;” “predictable and unremitting...formulas...one struggles in vain to take them seriously;” “Updike provides fixed positions and a vaguely plausible outline...no instinct for the stir of controversy;” “too much the prisoner of fact...too inhibited by his sense that things are as they are”

Table 2 (Continued)

<b>Magazine</b>	<b>Review Date</b>	<b>Key Phrase(s)</b>
<i>The New Republic</i>	3 July 2006	“Even Updike’s attempts to forgo his own lyricism and make Ahmad sound stumblingly prosaic do not really convince;” “Merely the generalized fluid of God-plus-sex that has run throughout all his novels”
<i>The Nation</i>	10 July 2006	“Lifted from the headlines like an episode of <i>Law &amp; Order</i> ;” “plot moves along with the slack predictability of a screenplay;” “real trouble lies with Ahmad, whose piety quite literally defies belief;” “all information, and it withholds from the reader the critical contribution fiction might make to our understanding: what it feels like to murder for God”
<i>The New York Review of Books</i>	13 July 2006	“burning-fuse plot makes this the most mechanically compelling novel that Updike has yet written;” “Ahmad Mulloy, a teenage John Updike with a prayer mat, who cannot help but love the America whose enemy he must become;” “Updike shrinks from giving any real credence to the ideology that drives his plot...the book becomes a temporarily enthralling, but ultimately empty, shaggy dog story”
<i>National Review</i>	25 Sept. 2006	“bold literary effort to come to terms with the post-9/11 world;” “atmosphere he creates is incandescent;” “manages to make a terrorist...a sympathetic subject”

Most of the ten publications listed above are glossy, consumer-oriented magazines. *Library Journal*, however, is included based on its status as a trade magazine for librarians, a key audience for getting books into the hands of general readers. According to a search of the WorldCat database of libraries worldwide, the hardback, English-language edition of *Terrorist* is held in more than 3,000 collections. In comparison, the hardback, English-language edition of *Twelve Sharp* by Janet Evanovich, one of the number one novels on *The New York Times* list while *Terrorist* was in the top ten is carried by slightly more than 3,500 libraries worldwide.

Examining the newspaper and magazine reviews to gauge how this particular audience interpreted *Terrorist*, two recurring themes emerge. First, the professional critics view Updike's prose style both strengthening and weakening the novel, as if the beauty of the observational writing diminishes from the jihadist anger Ahmad should profess. Second, many of the reviewers took Updike to task for not writing the book they wanted to read, rather than the book he authored. For example, writer Jonathan Raban, reviewing the novel in *The New York Review of Books*, explained:

If only the novelist had spent more time dreaming himself into the paranoid and angry world of [Sayyid] Qutb and his followers, and given Ahmad Mulloy sufficient intellectual and emotional wherewithal to justify his adherence to the crooked path of righteous violence, *Terrorist* might have stood among Updike's best work. As it is, it conducts an energetic, entertaining, but disappointingly unconsummated flirtation with its important subject. (10)

This brand of criticism is common among professional reviewers, although it violates Updike's own rules for reviewing. In *Picked-Up Pieces*, he outlined his thoughts after

being on the receiving end of negative criticism. First on his list: “Try to understand what the author wished to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt” (14). The Raban review quoted above falls into this category, as do several others. There are hints of this criticism in the infamous Kakutani review as well.

## **Conclusion – Evolution of a Literary Lion**

I set up shop rather innocently, naively, as a professional writer...I don't really do much else but write. And I write every morning and the books, the manuscript pages, do pile up.

—From a 2006 interview with John Updike, (“Bartos Forum”)

Updike's public persona and self-identity merge in the epigraph above, which makes it appropriate that he delivered it at a forum sponsored by the New York Public Library, a venue where he often delivered public lectures to packed audiences. The first part of the quote puts the reader (listener) in familiar Updike territory—the notion that he embarked on his career seemingly by accident, as if he stumbled upon the idea one day walking home from the grocery store.

The second sentence accounts for Updike's self-image of writer as professional craftsman, in his mind, not much different than anyone else who plies a trade and then realizes the results of the effort. This Updike takes the reader back to his early career, typing away in a dingy office above the Dolphin Restaurant in tiny Ipswich, Massachusetts. The final piece addresses Updike's prodigious output by placing it in

modest terms, which implies that through consistent, hard work, the pages materialize or mystically accumulate.

What one realizes when attempting to methodically unravel Updike is that finding out who he is at his core is impossible. There is too much intertwined, from his discussion of celebrity as a mask that eats at the face to the different roles he admits playing in an effort to cope with internal demons and public demands. Joe Moran estimates that Updike stands as “the most consistently successful and well-known ‘serious’ author in the United States” (83), a station that logically plays some role in how we examine his catalog. While these layers confound the researcher attempting to get at the heart of an author, perhaps the inability to do so contains a large part of the magic of literary studies. We can infer, interrogate, analyze, and examine, but in the end, all roads must lead back to what the author has written.

Maybe the closest we can get to a writer is to simply identify them as “storyteller” and proceed as if the entire life is one of creating narratives. Updike would be the first to tell the enterprising scholar that writers are professional liars. In that case, can anything be known about them, but what they have written? While some scholars view fame as a negative aspect of popular culture, creating a public identity does not automatically determine that a celebrity is nefarious. Perhaps, if one believes Updike and Mailer, it is closer to erecting a brick wall around the perceived notion of inner-self as the fountain for authorial material that he must draw upon. In this case, then, inventing a public persona is a necessity, because without access to the inner source of experience or the well running dry, the writer is left without a narrative.

\* \* \*

My dissertation explores two critical points in understanding John Updike's recent career. First, I examine him from a perspective outside the heavily-studied Rabbit tetralogy. Focusing on Updike's novel *Terrorist*, I attempt to counter the common misperception that he has little of to offer beyond the chronicling of middle-class, suburban America. Instead, this work digs for a deeper understanding of Updike as a writer.

Next, I consider Updike's role as an artist, professional writer, and celebrity to draw out a sense of the writer's life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Using him as a case study enables the analysis to include his changing role as a literary writer who also had major bestsellers, as well as his standing as a celebrity and public intellectual. Rather than dismiss these cultural influences, I explore how they intersect with audiences, readers, and critics. It seems naïve to consider that Updike's role as a public figure did not play a part in how critics and scholars assess his work. A rising star among journalistic critics could gain a reputation for toughness by attacking an author with Updike's prominence.

Anyone looking into the publishing industry aspect of being an author (appearances, marketing, etc.) would be remiss in not assessing Updike's role in building up his particular public persona. There is also ample evidence that Updike himself thought about his personal fame. In "Midpoint," one of his more well-known poems, the author writes about the downside of celebrity, including a "bucket of unanswerable letters" and "rancid advice from my critical betters." One wonders what event sparked

Updike's existential angst—appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine. “From *Time*'s grim cover, my fretful face peers out,” Updike says, but rather than rejoice in “making it,” he sees “warped” eyelids and “a crafty pulp of this my mouth” (*Collected Poems* 71). Piecing together his commentary regarding fame and celebrity creates something of a model of the public Updike that scholars can examine. The idea is that by placing Updike under this klieg light, the words he left behind will reveal some bit of information useful in exploring his standing as a writer and cultural icon.

The central task of this dissertation is a close examination of *Terrorist*, including the themes Updike addressed and literary techniques he employed to promulgate those ideas. From this textual analysis, Updike's vision of America and the world in the twenty first century emerges.

By reassessing Updike's evolution as a writer, both in subject matter and literary technique, one realizes how his work reflects an increasing preoccupation with global issues, from American imperialism to terrorism. This study broadens the general conceptualization critics and scholars hold regarding Updike's work by exploring the themes and literary techniques he used to portray the broader world.

Focusing on Updike the writer and his final standalone novel, this dissertation helps Updike scholars and critics address a central point that very well may define his historical reputation: Is there an Updike beyond the Rabbit novels and is there an Updike beyond suburban nostalgia? I argue that *Terrorist* reveals a great American writer at his full powers, as the world around him undergoes a watershed moment.

\* \* \*

Let's return to the initial thesis – Updike is an important figure in the history of American literature. What follows (and will continue to appear from my sweat-sopped brow for the next couple of decades) is an attempt to prove this declaration. Within the endeavor, though, is also a more encompassing aspiration: to prove that writing and reading still matter in the “Technology Age” dominated by Google, television (reality and scripted), and film. As outdated a notion as it may be, I remain committed to the idea that reading is important, even as college students sell back textbooks still in the original shrink wrap, instead choosing to obsess about Facebook status updates and text messaging.

Updike too—taking on the role of antiquarian fuddy-duddy—fought this battle over the last decade of his life. As a professional writer, he criticized the potential demise of publishing at the hands of Google's desire to create a digital version of every book ever written and e-book publishing, wondering where the writer-as-creator fit into the picture when a reader no longer needed to purchase the product. In other words, who pays for the content in a world that assumes content is free?

Updike the lover of words found an easy mark in the Internet, blasting it for turning books into “something impalpable and instantaneous.” As one who cares about culture, he worried:

The Web is conjured like the genie of legend with a few strokes of the fingers, opening, with a phrase or two, a labyrinth littered with trash and pitted with chat rooms, wherein communication is antiseptically cleansed of all the germs and

awkwardness of even the most mannerly transaction with another flesh-and-blood human being” (*Due Considerations* 73)

You see, Updike willingly took the highly-publicized flack from journalists and the technology intelligentsia because he believed in the power of books.

Obviously, Updike had a chit in the game, as it were. His livelihood depended on selling books and magazines. Yet, as proponents of the written word, we have no less stake in its propagation. As such, do we furrow our brows at the latest Dan Brown thriller selling 1 million copies on its release day or the publishing empire of J.K. Rowling, now one of the richest women in the world?

My goal is to advocate for literature and settle for reading. As a teacher, that means exploring (great) written words (and worlds) for the lessons they dispense and to continue interrogating authors and texts to reveal what might be learned. As a writer, this effort entails writing books, essays, and articles that engender critical thinking on the part of readers, asking them to create new ideas from the material as it interweaves with their own knowledge, lives, and experiences. Part of this task is to explore the work of writers like Updike in hopes that the scrutiny will appeal to future readers and, just maybe, instigate them reading either more of his work or researching themes, eras, and topics themselves.

Updike’s death in January 2009 resulted in renewed interest in his work. Knopf published a posthumous collection of short stories, *My Father’s Tears and Other Stories* that received widespread critical appreciation. His passing caused others to reexamine the several books published in the last year of his life, including the nonfiction anthology *Due Considerations* and novel *The Widows of Eastwick*. Even his final posthumous

poetry collection, *Endpoint and Other Poems*, gained wider readership and more mainstream reviews than his earlier poetry books. In this regard, Updike carries on the popular culture tradition of a celebrity or artist gaining broader appeal after death. That he left behind enough work to sustain this initial push was most likely a mix of Updike's realization that he faced death, thus producing more at the end, and Knopf's desire to meet the uptick in demand for his work.

Most interesting for those hoping to keep Updike's legacy alive, a core group of scholars (spearheaded by James Plath, Marshall Boswell, Lawrence Broer, Jack De Bellis, and James Schiff) launched The John Updike Society on May 24, 2009. The society plans to publish *The John Updike Review*, with Schiff as editor. Included in its mission statement is the goal of "awakening and sustaining reader interest in the literature and life of John Updike, promoting literature written by Updike, and fostering and encouraging critical responses to Updike's literary works" ("History/Mission"). While one wonders why it took so long for such a group to organize, the society's advent signals a positive for Updike's enduring legacy. As of mid-September 2009, The John Updike Society membership nears 100 and its founders are planning its first national meeting in Pennsylvania scheduled for October 2010.

\* \* \*

Of course, the nation changed dramatically over Updike's long career. In contrast to other artists, writers, actors, and musicians who could not adapt across the span, however, Updike remained one of the nation's foremost writers. It is in the guise of

America's storyteller that Updike excels. And, one must admit, Updike's own story is part of that effort.

At the end of the day, I argue, readers can still learn much from his work, even as today's Internet-based society seems like it could pass him by. Although it is difficult to quantify the notion that books simply do not matter as much as they used to, one can find evidence supporting this idea by looking at the drop in book sales, particularly in "literary" fiction, or by talking about reading habits with young people.

Perhaps more troubling, when considering Updike's long-term reputation, is that the focus among scholars and critics is onto other topics and new impulses, such as multiculturalism, gender studies, the "other," and those privileged and unprivileged by literature. It is this negative, rather narrow view of Updike that raises the hackles of those, such as David Foster Wallace and others, who denounce him and his contemporaries as "phalocrats" or relics of a male-dominated canon. For them, Updike exists primarily as a stand-in for Rabbit, an American (white) middle-class "everyman" easy to pick apart for his shortcomings.

While the stakes in Updike's historical reputation are really only important among a relatively small group of literary scholars, one can imagine Updike falling into the second tier of American writers, mimicking, for instance, the status of a Sinclair Lewis or William Dean Howells. Lewis, in particular, stood as one of the most famous author's in the world during his lifetime, culminating in runaway bestsellers and winning the 1930 Nobel Prize in Literature. Even if Updike suffers a similar fate, dropping like a stone into a secondary position, he could be elevated later, in the manner of F. Scott Fitzgerald to someday stand among the nation's greats. Few people outside English literature circles

understand how far Fitzgerald's star fell in the last decade of his life. His rebirth as a key figure in American literary history is a grand story in its own right.

This dissertation advocates a broader examination of Updike, encompassing his complete catalog. I argue that those who invest the effort will find the author offers a forceful critique of the United States, particularly evident in *Terrorist*. As a result, the reader will confront racism, the role of individuals in a consumer-based society, faith, commitment, authority, and the pitfalls of popular culture. This is Updike full steam ahead.

Yes: matters. Matters.

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