

Theme of Identity Crisis in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*

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ABSTRACT

It is interesting to note that the theme of identity crisis runs through John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*. Many critics viewed the novel as an investigation into the tensions between freedom and loyalty, situational ethics and crisis theology, sexual ecstasy and vocational duty. But a few critics have observed that Rabbit Angstrom in one scene changes the stakes of these tensions when he wishes his mother dead – his mother or himself. This Oedipal wish raises queries about the meaningfulness of Rabbit's existential and ethical choices, his capacity for self-control and self-understanding. Suddenly Rabbit seems to be a sick young man in quest of a spiritual remedy for a mental problem. Yet the life of the spirit is vital to Updike and so, he contemplates on Kierkegaard's scheme, whether a turning around and repenting of sins, is a genuine possibility and an answer to the sick believer's anguish.

Keywords

Identity, love, responsibility, faithfulness, self-aggrandizement, grace, and repentance

In *Rabbit, Run*, Updike tries to exemplify and test Soren Kierkegaard's argument that sin should be understood as "sickness unto death" or despair rather than as appalling action. Ironically, he accomplishes this in a novel filled with Rabbit's execrable acts involving adultery, betrayal, abandonment and neglect, and most especially, despicable self-justification. For Updike and, Kierkegaard, the particular etiology of this sickness is the sufferer's distance from God, manifested in daily life through despairing acts. Unlike Kierkegaard, however, Updike is informed by and appears to have accepted theories of depth psychology which reframe desolation. These theories, originating in Freud's insights into Oedipal mechanics and proper separation of the male child from the mother, the healthy relinquishment of incestuous desire for her and, later in life, her substitutes, reframe the despair of sin into a dimension of personality. As Updike comments, "we are incorrigibly ourselves" (Foreword 10). This is both a remark about sin and about our psychological make-up. Updike seems particularly

persuaded of the relevance and explanatory power of theories of identity crisis. It is through the idea of identity crisis that we will come closer to the specifically Christian relevance, in a Lutheran key, of *Rabbit, Run* – the novel's investigation of human goodness and faithfulness among the stresses of the early sexual and existential revolts.

Updike explores whether someone like Rabbit might gain the confidence of a genuine faith as postulated by Kierkegaard, whether in fact even God's grace might defeat the thoroughgoing identity problems that seem to infect contemporary men and women like Rabbit. In *Rabbit, Run* Updike raises the question of whether ethical wrongdoing and sin – acts for which we would hope Rabbit would take responsibility and repent – even exist for those with confused identities, especially when genuine loving requires sexual restriction. Here we may ponder, along with Updike, whether grace penetrates not only sinful incorrigibility, but also theological confusion, genetic predisposition, and mental illness.

In his essay *Lust* (1993), Updike develops his sense of the connection between identity crisis and Christian faithfulness. In this essay on lust as a traditional sin, Updike considers the Freudian portrayal of "the helplessly sexual nature of humankind" and the "futility of sexual repression" (*Matter* 42). Tracing notions of lust through St. Paul, Augustine, Freud and Denis de Rougemont, Updike suggests that our sexual drives give life much of its beauty and excitement, yet he acknowledges that to be in love with being in love. Rougemont's Tristanism is precisely to violate personhood, to accept a "cheery automatism" and to deny a more tragic vision of human loving. This tragic vision, a matter of recognizing the social and interpersonal pain of giddy loving as well as its bliss and its creative potential, is necessary for fully developed humanity. "Such is the confusion of this fallen world," Updike concludes his meditation on lust, "where sins lie intermixed with the seeds of being" (*Matter* 46).

For a better understanding of Rabbit Angstrom's identity crisis, Erikson provides us with the model of a troubled young believer named Martin Luther struggling with spiritual questions and identity tasks in order to seize a coherent selfhood and meaningful vocation. He provides

Updike with a psychoanalytical model, while Soren Kierkegaard and Denis de Rougemont provide Updike with a neo-orthodox Protestant theological dimension to this analysis, one that Erikson will not admit – “the insight that both psychological and spiritual identity is tied up with the search for a greater than human love, the promise of death suspended and joy consummated through communion with a loving God.” (Crowe 43:83). For these theologians, the consequent works of love one performs for the neighbor are not so much a task as a function of identity. Updike’s many depictions of confused identity and giddy loving are consistent with de Rougemont’s psychoanalysis of destructive Western myths concerning love, Kierkegaard’s claim that the pursuit of bodily and psychological pleasures is a form of spiritual seeking, and Luther’s assertion that to live is to sin so that we must live and sin boldly.

By all means young Rabbit is in psychological crisis. Mrs. Angstrom is implicated in some psychological damage to her son, or has at least given him cause to imagine matricidal and suicidal acts. Rabbit’s need for affection from his mother becomes a need for adulation from others, including God, and this need becomes the core of his identity crisis. Debates with the Reverend Eccles disclose Rabbit’s deep theological confusions related to his self-obsessive natural theology. True to Kierkegaard’s assertions about the irrelevance of mediation in a person’s leap of faith, Eccles’s feebly ethical advice is of no help to Rabbit in his self-orientation. Indeed, Eccles’s counseling provokes Rabbit to further self-aggrandizement. By the end of the novel, Rabbit degrades himself in self-justification: “Don’t look at me,” he tells his grieving wife at Rebecca’s funeral, “I didn’t kill” (R,R:253). This ghastly speech is a violation of love, insupportable in both evidentiary and spiritual terms.

For Updike and Erikson, the necessary result of human development is surely to attain a personhood in which such a pusillanimous denial would be impossible. According to Erikson, the developing subject seizes the opportunities of crisis in eight discreet stages in order to attain a meaningful adult role. “We are able to manage and creatively utilize our drives,” he argues, “only to the extent to which we can acknowledge their power by enjoyment, by awareness, and through the activity of work” (Erikson 218). Rabbit clearly lacks this awareness. He also shares a crucial part of young man Luther’s disorder, a desperate confusion of parent and God.

In order to comprehend Rabbit’s identity crisis as emerging from Updike’s Christian apologetics, the key critical task is to recognize the combination of sin, despair,

and simple worldliness in Rabbit, and to discover and define the particular form of irony with which Updike hints at options to his character’s acts. These alternative acts will be Christian works of love that, in Kierkegaardian way, surpass the ethical and exemplify a genuine faith and sanguine identity. Updike withholds from Rabbit and other key characters a truly racing or indicting satire. It is not that Updike shares Rabbit’s ethical latency. It is that he wishes for readers to see our own worldly and worse tendencies in characters like Rabbit, just as Updike in his memoirs confesses his own failings, calling himself “flirtatious, malicious, greedy for my quota of life’s pleasures, a distracted, mediocre father and worse husband” (*Self-Consciousness* 222). Updike’s favored form of irony neither excuses nor damns such a character. Such a form of irony might best be called “loving parody” (Crowe 43:84), a sagacious and sympathetic understanding of human shortcomings clubbed with subtle hints of hope for greater goodness.

Rabbit is certainly an admirable character and we may join Eccles and Mrs. Smith in liking him. His sense of humor is wonderful as is his acuity in discovering others’ secret motives and disturbing their pieties with literal and figurative slaps on the fanny. Updike teaches us through Karl Barth that “man is a battlefield” of good and evil, and through Kierkegaard that man is a “half-demoralized, half-honest bagatelle” (*Picked-up-Pieces* 90, 108). Rabbit Angstrom is no better and no worse a man. It is important to see Rabbit precisely as a sinner, and also as a man with what Updike calls “normal worldliness” (*Picked-up-Pieces* 126). Rabbit has his loving and ethical moments, as when he finally realizes his duty to Janice, Nelson, and his new baby, living with them in affectionate reunion. And of course, he has his coarse, brutal, and selfish moments, as when he repeatedly abuses Ruth’s loneliness for his own sexual and emotional solaces.

Rabbit’s divergent behavior emerges clearly from Oedipal origins. Early in the novel Mr. and Mrs. Angstrom agree that their son’s quandaries, which we are calling an identity crisis, began when he returned from Army service in Texas. Since then all their son has cared about, according to his chagrined father, is “chasing ass” (R,R:141). In one of his most complex psychological scenes in this novel, Updike outlines a reason for Rabbit’s change during his Army years. Rabbit’s most vivid memory is of a visit to a whorehouse, where the “sugar draws” and “ordinary factory-looking” faces lure him. Significantly, one prostitute’s offer of her services strikes Rabbit as “so motherly” (R,R:41). This identification of mother and whore seems very psychologically

complicated and unhealthy. Conspicuously, this is the identification that governs this novel about Rabbit's sacred and profane sexual choices, the mother, Janice and the whore Ruth. Further ironic reversals – the fact that Janice has manipulated Rabbit into a marriage through offers of sex, and Ruth is about to become a mother at the novel's end – deepen Rabbit's confusion about his mother and his sexual urges. After making love with Ruth for the first time, Rabbit realizes that he has betrayed her by feeling despondency, as though this lovemaking were understood by both of them as an act of existential consolation. He thinks, "Nature leads you up *like a mother* and as soon as she gets her little contribution leaves you with nothing" (R,R:75). In what sense has Mrs. Angstrom left Rabbit with nothing? This is not an entirely rational comment on Rabbit's part of course, but the Barthian word "nothing" seems important. Mrs. Angstrom does indeed participate in the profane Nothing that God did not create, in a version of her son's own sinful self-obsession. She pesters her husband and Eccles ruthlessly about what she perceives as their shortcomings, yet offers Rabbit only doses of absurd protection, such as her interpretation of her granddaughter's death: "Hassy, what have they done to you?" (R,R:250). Rabbit has been hurt and perplexed by his mother's self-serving manipulations, and perhaps by his father's mild inability to assert a more realistic sense of the world, and so for these and other reasons he is a desperately immature young man tortured by emerging existential realizations about his purpose, his identity, and his mortality. Lucy Eccles, who speaks the language of psychoanalysis, is probably correct when she diagnoses Rabbit as a "primitive father" who wishes not to know the psycho-sexual dynamics of his own home (R,R: 102).

Just as Erikson's protagonist, Martin Luther's crisis was grounded in his confusion of a cold, distant father with a cold, distant God, Rabbit's is based in a confusion of a doting mother who chides others with a doting God who never judges at all. Rabbit's story in *Rabbit, Run* should be properly understood as his catastrophically failed attempt to resolve this personal – theological confusion through family, friend and Church, and an even more severe failure to accomplish a personal move of repentance. This failure is all the more stunning because in this novel Rabbit confronts death and his guiltiness in the most personal terms: the death of his daughter. He is consequently rescued from a suffocating grief and self-hatred when he receives a grace-filled epiphany. As he listens to Eccles's prayers during Rebecca's funeral, the Christian answer to death becomes real to him: "Rabbit's chest vibrates with excitement and strength; he is sure his girl has ascended to Heaven" (R,R: 252). A moment later

this same thought finds Kierkegaardian expression, and presumably Updike's endorsement, as the gathered mourners give his baby, Rabbit thinks, the "force to leap to Heaven" (R,R: 252). There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of this Christian epiphany, coming as it does from an author who confesses to being branded with the Cross. However, within moments Rabbit is speaking cruelly to and running from those he is to love. We must wonder whether for Updike the effects of grace are so transitory, so lacking in transforming power.

Rabbit will not be transformed by an easy grace. Self-aggrandizement is the particular nature of Rabbit's identity crisis and failure of conscience, his inability to win adulthood and coherent faith.

In three key scenes, Updike slyly parodies Rabbit's self-aggrandizing theology and offers images that convey opportunities for grace and repentance. The first of these is the extended lovemaking scene involving Rabbit and Ruth on the evening of their first meeting. Apart from its particular meaning for this novel, this scene gives us the opportunity to pin down the typical purpose, across the tetralogy, for the frank and extended lovemaking scenes that have made Updike and his Rabbit novels famous. The second scene involves Eccles's and Rabbit's first round of golf together, an imaginative riff on Rabbit's part that first links individual clubs, balls, and natural features to persons in his life, then links together his grandfather, the sacrificial figure of the "Fosnacht," a stormy sky, and the perfect drive with the miracle of faith and redemption. The third of these special parodic scenes involves Rabbit's very literal sense of epiphanic grace at his infant daughter's funeral. This scene especially involves Harry's cruel and neurotic self-justification, but all three involve his central identity struggle with self-aggrandizement.

In the first key scene Updike employs irony to derive, paradoxically, marital right action and attitude from an adulterous sexual encounter. Indeed the scene points emphatically toward the sacredness of fatherhood and faithful married life as divinely ordained callings. As most critics of the scene have noted, Rabbit enters Ruth's apartment with a very particular plan about this encounter. Rabbit wants Ruth to pretend to be his wife, perhaps because earlier in the evening Tothero has reminded him sharply and inconveniently that he is married. Tothero asks at the restaurant whether he can borrow Rabbit's car, reminding him that the car "is only half his" (R,R:59). This feeling of being married and having parental responsibilities will recur for Rabbit throughout the bedroom scene, and in particularly Lutheran terms. Luther revolutionized the Catholic world's sense of calling, which

was a category of feeling and experience previously limited to persons in the clerical realm. He argued for the scriptural basis for dignity in all work, so long as that work rises out of gratitude for God's grace and attempts to serve a neighbor. As Kierkegaard and others in the Lutheran tradition have argued, the great calling, the calling that subsumes all others, is to love God and one's neighbor, and furthermore, for Kierkegaard, "can find no outer history, death is already lying in wait for it" (qtd. in Crowe 43:88). This insular, death-dealing love is precisely what Denis de Rougemont called Tristianism. For both Kierkegaard and de Rougemont it is the unselfish, active repetition of married love that aligns most closely with our love for God and gives people sensible work to do, a vocation in acting with love.

As Rabbit and Ruth step inside the apartment, he hugs her with a desperate seductive violence that frightens her. She pushes him and scratches his face. Rabbit's response anticipates the turning point in the novel, baby Rebecca's death, and also clarifies its point. "I had to hug you," Rabbit says, then thinks to himself, "Her fear and his inner knowledge are so incongruous: he knows there is no harm in him." "Hug...", Ruth replies; "Kill felt more like it" (R,R:66). Those readers who want to equate Rabbit's instinctive goodness and handmade spirituality with Updike's own faith cannot read this moment properly. Rabbit is indeed capable of violence, even of killing – for he will kill through his selfish neglect of Janice, Nelson, and Rebecca. Mired in the aesthetic stage of existence, both are tormented in Kierkegaard's words by "sterile restlessness" and "unrelieved boredom". Yet, both Updike and Kierkegaard unwittingly reveal to the careful reader a deep hunger for a better, more meaningful way to live, the truer love relationship, the blessed union with spouse and family. Nonetheless, Updike wants us to transcend philosophy or theology and learn to live faithfully if not rightly.

Rabbit's hunger for his true calling becomes apparent in this scene as his conscience returns again and again to thoughts of Janice and Nelson. Rabbit is after what Kierkegaard calls an aesthetic rotation, an experience of fresh difference within comfortable habits. On this evening he pretends to be married, but to an excitingly different woman. The rotation will succeed, but unsatisfyingly. At the end of the lovemaking scene, Rabbit feels despair as his unconscious motive is to return home in imagination.

Despair, in Kierkegaard's work, is the force that those in the aesthetic and the ethical stages feel when their psyches cannot resist the knowledge that they will die, and do not

know how to live. It seems that Rabbit lives for aesthetic novelty and pleasure, while Eccles and his wife Lucy, the elder Angstroms, and the Springers live by the community's ethical standards. Rabbit cannot bring this idea into consciousness, though he has reason to. He notices the rose window in the church visible through Ruth's apartment window, how "this circle of red and purple and gold seems in the city night a hole punched in reality to show the abstract brilliance burning underneath" (R,R:70). Rabbit has had no Christian epiphany here. This appreciation is essentially aesthetic, and so Rabbit's conscience is not engaged. Here is a forsaken opportunity to grapple with what Updike has called the church's rumor of good news, and to transform his lust into a form of love. Kierkegaard describes this love: "I love my father and my mother differently, my wife, in turn, in another way, and each different love has its different expression. But there is also a love with which I love God, and this love has only one expression in language – it is repentance". (qtd. in Crowe 43:90).

Rabbit has much to repent of by this point in the novel. His psyche tells him so: as this lovemaking scene concludes, he experiences a horrible dream in which unconscious mind conflates a verbally abused neighbor girl, Carolyn Zim, with his sister Mim. Carolyn's mother is an actual abuser (R,R:18). In this dream Mrs. Angstrom abuses Mim, calling her a "tart," and then Mim becomes Janice in this dream (R,R:77). Rabbit feels himself and his sister and his wife to be under the occult control of his angry mother, his brotherly love and sexual energy in profound confusion – and we know that his identity crisis is in full flower.

A similarly comic and parodic scene ensues when the Reverend Eccles invites Rabbit for a round of golf and a session of marital counseling. When Rabbit, seething with anger over his game and Eccles's distracting ethical preaching and despairing anti-idealism, finally makes a simple graceful swing and hits a beautiful drive, he calls, "That's it!" (R,R:116). By "it", Harry seems to mean the ideal experience, the expected moment of grace. And his self-oriented, instinctive natural religion seems to have won the day.

Nevertheless, Updike is careful to tell us that Rabbit's "That's it" is spoken of with a "grin of aggrandizement" (R,R:116). Once again, Rabbit has confused momentary pleasure with God's endless love. We realize on second thought that it is a symptom of his identity crisis that during the waking nightmare of this horrible round Rabbit obsesses over his mother's sexuality. True, Eccles's liberal theology is vacant of genuine faith, merely

doubting, despairing, ethical talk in the end, but Rabbit's momentary act of grace is also problematic, as the complex symbol set leading to the wonderful drive attests.

However, Kierkegaard would say that Rabbit has not "chosen himself as guilty," and therefore has not chosen himself at all. His identity crisis and his despair will continue. It is possible that Updike's thundercloud refers to a passage about repentance in Kierkegaard's writing as well. In Updike's stormy scene, however, Rabbit is not rebuked and will receive neither love nor education and release from pain.

Rabbit does feel God's rebuke in the final scenes of *Rabbit, Run* – the scenes involving Rebecca's death and Harry's response to it. When Rebecca dies, Rabbit is rightfully chastened, fully aware of his guilt: "[H]e is a murderer. He accepts the thought gracefully; it's true, he is, he is, and hate suits him better than forgiveness" (R,R:245). As Fred Springer reports that his buddy the coroner has declared the death an accidental drowning, with no manslaughter charge pending, Rabbit is disgusted "to feel the net of law slither from him" (R,R:246). Rabbit's sense of guiltiness is complicated by his thoughts of his mother and father, whom he dreads to meet under these circumstances. He has always performed with grace for them, and this situation puts him in the wretchedly wrong. So painful is this family drama for Rabbit that here he thinks, as I have noted, that "either he or his mother must die" (R,R:248). This conclusion is not a momentary unutterable thought. Rabbit tells us that he keeps coming back to the conclusion again and again. Here we find Rabbit torn between genuine repentance and his deep Oedipal need to be viewed as graceful and in the right, viewed in this light especially by his mother and his God.

As Eccles prays for grace, Harry feels God respond: "Rabbit's chest vibrates with excitement and strength; he is sure his girl has ascended to Heaven" (R,R:251-2). We realize, however, that Rabbit's need in this scene is two-fold. First, he needs to respond to grace by "choosing himself" in his eternal validity, by sensing his dread, admitting and repenting his sin, and receiving faith. Competing with this impulse, and on a completely different plane, he hopes to be justified before this crowd as he had always been consoled by the basketball fans, justified by this congregation that includes his demanding mother. It is the second impulse that wins out. While

Rabbit has the opportunity to accept his epiphany of grace with Kierkegaard's spirit of repentance and so receive faith, he instead serves his identity crisis, converts precious grace into a profane, irresponsible simplicity, and cries out in self-justification, "Don't look at me... I didn't kill her" (R,R:253).

Updike has written that *Rabbit, Run* addresses the modern behavior of "unrestrained motion," specifically the motion we see in the young men of *On the Road*, a seeking of peace through frantic travelling, and love through radically free sexuality (*Picked-up-Pieces* 502). Updike wants to redefine the moral meaning of motion, and in doing so he borrows an emblem from Kierkegaard almost verbatim. This emblem is about the impossibility of meaningful action without attachment to the divine. To the attentive reader interested in the life of faith, the three key scenes we have just examined for evidence of Rabbit's identity crisis and self-aggrandizing theology convey through a loving parody at least the following Archimedean points: that the calling and joy of parents is to be with their children, providing love and counsel; that the calling and joy of spouses is to be with their partners, working on a mutuality of purpose and a form of love that is involved more in act than in feeling; and that the calling and joy of work is to direct God-given talents and aptitudes to the neighbor's need.

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