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A View of 1990s American Society through Updike's *Rabbit Remembered*

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Abstract:

John Hoyer Updike is considered as one of the greatest American fiction writers of his generation. He was a great poet, short story writer, essayist, novelist, art critic and a literary critic. To brief, he was a man of letters. Updike also was well recognized for his careful craftsmanship, unique prose style, and prolific output.

Updike's Rabbit series which comprises of the novels *Rabbit Run*, *Rabbit Redux*, *Rabbit is Rich*, *Rabbit at Rest* and the novella *Rabbit Remembered* is regarded as his supreme achievement by the critics. *Rabbit Remembered* draws a final close to the Rabbit saga. The novels *Rabbit is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest* won Pulitzer prize for fiction. Updike is one of only three authors to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction more than once. The protagonist of the series is an American small town, protestant, middle-class man, Harry Angstrom who is nicknamed as Rabbit. As Updike mirrored America in all his works, he was also considered as a great social critic. This paper aims at viewing nineteen nineties American society through the novella *Rabbit Remembered*.

Keywords : Y2K, Massacre, Adultery, Sex, Cable news channels.

Rabbit Remembered, a sequel to the rabbit series, was published in the year 2001. It is a novella and was first published in *Licks of Love* – a collection of short stories. This novella is published ten years after Harry's death in *Rabbit at Rest*. In *Rabbit Remembered*, Janice, Harry's wife, works as a real estate agent and has married Ronnie Harrison, who was Thelma's Husband. Thelma was actually Harry's illicit lover and she died of kidney failure and cancer in *Rabbit at Rest*. Harry's son Nelson, even at the age of forty two lives in his mother's house, but has recovered from the cocaine habit that led him to misuse tens of thousands of dollars from his parents' Toyota business in *Rabbit at Rest*. Disgusted with Nelson's unwillingness to grow up, his wife, Pru, has left him and has taken their two teenage children to live in Akron, Ohio. The novella discusses the effects of illicit love, technology, drugs and excessive sex.

Annabelle, is Harry's illegitimate daughter, born from Harry's affair in *Rabbit, Run* with Ruth Leonard. Annabelle is an attractive woman who has never married. In *Rabbit Remembered*, Ruth has died and on her deathbed told Annabelle, the truth about her father. After knowing the truth, Annabelle comes to meet Janice and Nelson, in order to manage a family connection and to attach herself with the Angstrom family. While Janice and Ronnie remain suspicious of Annabelle's motives, Nelson, has some sort of brotherly affection for her and welcomes her into the family with open arms. The novella begins with Annabelle knocking on Janice's door and it culminates in a fine comic moment at the new millennium New Year's Eve 1999, in which Nelson, on the verge of messing things, is allowed to succeed.

In Rabbit novels, the news of the day has served as a background noise, holding up the consciousness of characters and readers. This final novella is no exception and Updike describes many such current events. The novella focuses on the Year 2000 problem also known as the Y2K problem. It was a problem for both digital and non digital documentation and data storage situations which had resulted from the inability to recognize the century change in a date. The reason why they could not was because the year was stored with only two digits. The other hot topics of the period like the Volkswagen Beetle, also known as the VW bug, an economy car produced by the German auto maker Volkswagen; the custody and immigration status of a young Cuban boy, Elián González affair, whose mother had drowned in late nineteen ninety-nine while travelling with her son and boyfriend, from Cuba to the United States; the Columbine High School massacre in which two senior students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, embarked on a massacre, killing twelve students and one teacher and the death of John F. Kennedy Jr. are also found in the novella.

The Y2K problem, during the year 1999, is the common subject of every American and Doris, Janice's friend, in a casual conversation, crabbily asks her, "Are you talking about the Y2K bug? Deet says it's all been overblown, to whip up more income for the computer companies." (205). Computer – a technology, invented for easing human lives, has instead, complicated them and has brought the society to a standstill. While Janice moves to West Brewer in her car she likes to hear Patsy Cline's "Crazy" who died young in a plane crash. Immediately she relates it with Kennedy Junior's death and thinks "Patsy Cline, dead young in a plane crash just like that poor Kennedy boy." (199) Mass murders were common during the period. TVs and radios were full of news of mass murders. Nelson while driving a car listens to the radio news of a man shooting his separated wife and the three small children. He also listens to more news about massacre and watches many such events on television. Once, while driving in his car, Nelson listens to the radio news which is, "full of this gunman, one more straight-shooting psychotic, who killed seven and then himself in some Texas Baptist church, and terrorist blasts in Moscow killing dozens." (225)

Nelson in his mail to Roy discusses the Columbine massacre as, "it seems a little heartless, seeing that twelve young people were killed making that bonfire pile and most were freshmen who had just been told to do this by people who should have known better." (309) In 1995, the football hero, O.J. (Orenthal James Simpson), was tried for the

murder of his ex-wife, Nicole, and her male friend, Ron Goldman. This trial pointed out the continued racial division in the country as most blacks applauded the non guilty verdict while most whites thought an obviously guilty man had gotten away with murder. In *Rabbit Remembered*, when Janice comes to know of Annabelle, she is really shocked and upset of Harry's adultery. Holding a smudged drinking glass to Annabelle, she thinks: "Fingerprints on fingerprints. Now they use DNA- not that O.J. didn't go free anyway. That long-legged prosecutor outsmarted herself, and the black lawyer was slick." (186). Janice co-relates Harry's adultery with that of O.J.'s adultery and thinks both have cleverly escaped from their grave mistake.

Global Warming also finds its place in the novella. During his third lunch with Annabelle at Elm street Nelson thinks,

Elm street is bleak in December and part of the bleakness is the uncanny warmth, over sixty today, wiping out any anticipation of a white Christmas and rousing the same fear of global warming as this summer's drought. The planet is being cooked. The oceans will rise, the croplands will become deserts. The Greenery seems demoralized (319)

In the same meeting Nelson also refers to Elián González affair and asks Annabelle, "So what do you think? Should the little Cuban boy be sent back to his father in that miserable country or kept in Disney World?"(321). She responds, "Sent back to his father." (321) and Nelson replies, "I agree." (321)

Updike has portrayed the alternations that took place in the American society through the daily trivialities of his characters. The novella records the ever-shifting culinary fashion, the impact of technology from e-mail to the Sports Utility Vehicle (S.U.V.) introduced recently and the rapid, nearly untraceable fluctuations of taste, real estate values and religious practice. Thelma, Ronnie's previous wife was a clever cook and a zealous housekeeper but Janice's meals are never tasty. Though she thinks that she has followed the recipe exactly, the meal miscarries into a funny suspicious taste. At one point, while thinking about feeding Ronnie, she thinks,

With the yuppifying of greater Brewer, ... they said – there were more and more pleasant and not very expensive restaurants to eat out at; you didn't have to go downtown any more And otherwise the supermarkets sold wonderful frozen meals and sealed salads (214)

The above mental chat in which Janice summarizes her story, gives elaborate details about ready meals.

During nineteen nineties President Bill Clinton was accused for his sexual misconduct. Clinton and Monica Lewinsky mess which was the top political news of the period serves as a turning point in this work. As Nelson wants Annabelle to be accepted by the whole family, he invites her to join his mother, Janice and her new husband and the husband's sons and daughter-in-law for Thanksgiving dinner but the dinner

degenerates into political arguments about Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky mess. Annabelle and Nelson wind up defending the persecuted president much to the dismay of Ronnie Harrison and his family. President Clinton and his character are similar to that of Harry in many ways and by defending Clinton, they are also defending Harry in his absence. Annabelle defends Clinton by saying that,

He loves people, he truly does. And he has nerve. He knows when to gamble and when to hold back. And he doesn't hold a grudge, even against those in the Congress who hated him and tried to ruin him. Yes, it was too bad about – about his needing a little affection, but may be he was entitled to some.(296)

Annabelle's depending of Clinton rouse Ronnie's anger and he brutally insults her by asking about how she feels being the bastard kid of a whore and a bum. Sex played a dominant role in the 1990s American society and Nelson's own son, Roy, who lives with his mother in Akron, bonds with his father only by sending vulgar jokes over e-mail. One of the jokes he sent for Nelson is " ...A guys wife on there honeymoon begs off making love and she goes to sleep and gets up at 3 am to get a glass of water and sees hes still awake and asks why. He says his dick is so hard their isn't enough skin left to close his eyes with(264).

Though Nelson doesn't like his son knowing about sex just at the age of fourteen, he is helpless. This is because the society where he prevails considers sex as part and parcel of their life and it has been exposed to children of America even at a younger age. Through Annabelle Updike shows how the society views illegitimate children. Annabelle, because of being an illegitimate daughter of Harry and Ruth, faces lot of humiliaties in her life. Right from her step-father, everyone sexualized her and the society has failed to provide her neither respect nor security. In general, women enjoyed full freedom and most of them belonged to the working class. Divorces had become more common in the society.

Updike also subtly criticizes the twenty-four hour-a-day cable news channels of America that gives more coverage to trivial local news rather than critical national and international news. After hearing the death of Michael DiLorenzo, his drug addicted patient, Nelson watches the news to know whether the death has captured the attention of the news channels and finds out that it has not. The scene is described as,

The end of this very short day has begun to darken his windows before he has the heart to microwave the shepherd's pie and turn on the Oahu Bowl. Hawaii beats Oregon, twenty-three to seventeen, and on the six-o' clock news Jerry Seinfeld has married at last, the Hubble Space Telescope is back in working order, and some Sikhs have hijacked an Indian plane for no clear reason and are jerking it all around the sky. Michael DiLorenzo is not mentioned. He is strictly local news. (333)

The above passage clearly indicates how trivial local news gains more importance than an international news in cable news channels.

Throughout Updike's works, one finds the gentle observations of American life and customs. By telling the stories of ordinary people, Updike's books reflect social characters of the time. The plots and figures in his Rabbit series shows changes in American culture, society and values. The Rabbit novels are selected by *The New York Times Book Review* as one of the twenty five best novels published in the United States in the past twenty five years and the novels are also considered as a chronicle of that period in the United States. They have thus formed an American saga and Harry Rabbit Angstrom has become a definitive figure for contemporary cultural consciousness. Updike constantly asks the readers to reconsider common preconceptions of contemporary society. To read Updike is to confront the countless issues that are often discussed around coffee and lunch tables as well as internet chat rooms in every town and community in America.

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