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Glimpses of disloyalty in relationships in John Updike's Fiction

Dr. Akbar Ali[1], Dr. Shabina Khan[2]
[1] Assistant Professor, Dar Al Uloom University, Saudi Arabia
[2] English Lecturer, Arab Open University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract
In this paper we have tried to discuss how vividly and successfully John Updike has accentuated the problem of disloyalty in family relations and love. He hardly ignores any opportunity to depict the fake and artificial aspects of the ultra-modern society, which he himself is a part of. He very effectively draws a picture of what the life in Middle America has become. Through his protagonists in *Couples*, *Villages* and *A Month of Sundays*, Updike represents how the western culture has embraced the way of life that is replete with sex and adultery. Updike's heroes are both successful and immoral. Owen Machenzie, the chief character in *Villages*, is very talented but his love for females is fake. Updike also throws light on how one's earnest desire to sleep with multiple people leads him/her to a life where having sex with more than one person is the only way to enjoy life. The author has also justified his depiction of adultery by highlighting incestuous relationships developed out of unsatisfactory marriages. This can be easily perceived in his portrayal of Tom Marshfield in *A Month of Sundays*. The protagonist reluctantly retreats to a desert place to recover from his distraction.

Keywords: Owen Machenzie, ultra-modern society, *A Month of Sundays*

Introduction

John Updike has highlighted the highly susceptible issue of adultery in his major fictional works. As a matchless and tremendously successful architect of such themes, he has left no stone unturned in dealing with this theme in his novels, especially in *Couples*, *Villages* and *A Month of Sundays*. It represents some kind of serious view on the western culture and the way of life people have adopted in general.

Villages, one of the best novels of Updike, abounds in scenes of adultery and unusual sex. The author casts a new character, sexually spent seventy-something, Owen Machenzie. Both his intensely active professional life and his sexual glory years are behind him. Owen exhausts his well-financed retirement days painting and his dream-filled nights avoiding sexual encounter with his energetic and younger second wife. Updike describes the family life of a man in Middle America. Thomas Karshan has appropriately analysed the novel:

> Updike is close, some would say too close, to the familiar domestic scenes of Middle America, its suburban marriages and infidelities, its big cars, high-school reunions, parades, arguments about drugs and race and Vietnam, images so immediately recognisable that they tend to be passed over…
> Updike wants to 'sing America', and he takes it as his job to make everything and everyone fit into place – the traditional role of the epic writer… His first job after leaving college was writing 'Talk of the Town' pieces for the *New Yorker*, where 'the problem was to perpetuate a cosy tone about a city that had ceased to be cosy,' and he has spoken since of being able to 'pull a kind of friendly village … out of New York's ghastly plenitude'. His new novel, *Villages*, takes his interest in the banal to its limit. (*London Review of Books*) [1]

In more than one way Owen possesses the unlikable characteristics that one is accustomed to finding in previous Updike's heroes. The shadow of Rabbit past looms over the figure of Owen present. His character has been demarcated in a very attractive and realistic way. M. Consol has rightly praised Updike's style of characterization and relevance of digital devices:

> It also has a flamboyant cast of characters, led by Owen Mackenzie, who Updike takes from boyhood to the grave in a whirlwind expedition through childhood hi-jinx, courtship, marriage, fatherhood, numerous extra-marital affairs, business relationships and a career as a computer engineer and entrepreneur. You get a surprisingly well-informed and entertaining history of the computer industry's evolution. Updike makes extraordinary observations about digital devices and their analogies to the humanity. (*Amazon*) [2]

As a youth, Owen is talented and single-mindedly driven to succeed in the budding software industry. As he grows older and becomes successful in business, it is clear that personally he remains shallow, self-absorbed, and only slightly aware of anyone else. He likes the people who are sexually attractive to him. According to Ash Ryan:

> But what *Villages* is really about is sex. It follows Owen's sexual development from childhood to old age. Most of the book is about his many affairs with practically every

> woman in town. Updike has some interesting things to say about sex, some insightful things, some obvious things, some inconsistent things, and some just plain wrong things. On the whole, the attitude toward sex in this artistic portrayal of it isn't exactly healthy, but neither is it as sick as, say, Joyce's in Ulysses. (*goodreads)* [3]

The distractions like these seem to originate generously and often, much like the incessant targets on a carnival shooting gallery stage which keep replicating themselves until all the ammunition has been exhausted. There is little that seems to redeem poor Owen. The website emotes.com confirms, "Yet rampant sexual encounters are not accepted as orthodox in the small towns of Middle America. They are the object of disapproval, sometimes shock, and eventually heartache for the participants as well as for their families." (*enotes.com*) [4]

The description of how Owen spent the time he once had proceeds in the usual Updike manner: straight-ahead, from A to B, without gimmicky chronological distortions but with frequent intermissions for reverie and meditation. Though Updike has dabbled in experimental fiction in much the same way that his solid artistic conformist who succeeds by embracing conventions, not surprising them, and embracing them so avidly and strenuously that they yield surprising new juice. The author accepts the truth that time is a river. However, he also sees that this river is full of whirlpools where emotion and awareness spin in place, creating little images of eternity.

Walter Kirn has compared these too revealing details of a woman's body to Hanry James' details of clothing and furniture. He writes:

> In early and middle Updike, every set of human genitals had its own distinctive physicality, often presented with clinical precision, as well as a soulful individuality. What Henry James did with clothing and furniture- turned them into characters- Updike did with the reproductive organs and with their behavior when aroused. (*The New York Times*) [5]

The artificiality and hollowness of Owen's love for females is reflected in what Elsie thinks about her love for him. Elsie, after making love with Owen, like to pretend that what has happened had not happened at all. When they ate holding each other, Owen wants more and says that just holding each other is not enough. Elsie's reply to this makes Owen shy. She refuses to do more because of the fear of some negative consequences, which might not be good for Owen. She never touches his prick and never says, "I love you," knowing it will put him to the discomfort of saying the same thing back, when he is not ready to do so. If her love for him was true, she could have explained by expressing her emotions and feeling of love for him.

The things they do in cars and offices are reflective of the adultery this novel has to offer. Both Owen and Elsie know that they have something more between them. Elsie seems to be less afraid of what is happening between them than Owen. He refuses to test how far she will let him go. It has become their way in the car for him to bend over and kiss the silky warm inner sides of her thighs and then press his mouth as far up as he can into the warmth, its aroma at times like the tang his mother used to give off on a summer day and at others of the musky mash bins in the back of his father's store. Her resistance to Owen's advances is just momentary as she, after a few seconds, comes to expect something from him. The descriptions of what these people wear serves as the tip off to get involved in sexual and sensual activities. The Author's description of the scene in a car is pictographic enough:

> In those days, even teen-age girls wore girdles: the crotch of her underpants was guarded by edges of stiff elastic, and though she shyly edged her hips forward in the car seat his lips could not quite reach the damp cotton. Not that he knew enough to make her come with his mouth, or how girls came at all. The pleasure was his, in being this close to a secret, in having her yield it up to him, even her fragrance, which was strong enough at times to exert a counterforce, a wish to pull his face away. But he loved it there between her thighs, and the graceless awkwardness this maneuver asked of her, still wearing her knee socks and loafers. (*Villages*) [6]

There is no denying to the fact that Updike's hero gets involved in many sex related scandals, but there is also an emotional aspect to this hugely adulterous novel. Ken, a blogger on Updike, defends Owen's adulterous life in a very tricky and somehow logical way:

> The sexual history of a fearless adulterer is at times a work of pornography, with repeated scenes of hardcore sex. The redeeming quality is that Owen Mackenzie's sexual history is also a sexual history of his generation, with interesting comments about the progression of sex roles from the 1960s to the present as Owen contemplates his various lovers. And the last chapter, when Owen at 70 turns away from his wife's caresses and takes up oil painting, is full of reflection on his relations with women throughout his entire life -- from his doting mother in Pennsylvania to his girlfriend in high school, to his first wife, Phyllis, who gave him four children before killing herself in an automobile accident when he asked for divorce (*A Review on Amazon*) [7]

The summer, for instance, when Owen goes off to MIT, his relationship and experiments with Elsie take on a desperate edge. She knows he is slipping away. Owen has gotten a summer job on a surveying crew, tending the target marks and chopping brush out of the sight lines. On top of this, Elsie has been sent to a Lutheran camp in Ohio, where she works as a counsellor for six weeks. Now onwards Owen will get rides with the crew to far corners of the country and have to be fetched from Alton when he cannot hitch a ride south. He will come home exhausted and dirty, and try not to think that college in a foreign region is swooping down upon him and will carry him away.

Updike seldom ignores when viewing human nakedness. His scenes are an acquired taste, just as sex itself is. Owen's transformation from a sensitive schoolboy who is sickened and transfixed by filthy pencil drawings into a prowling middle-aged libertine who has sex with a young employee

during office hours does not proceed seamlessly. It moves by fits and starts, through pangs of revulsion and flashes of revelation. As he consummates his first illicit liaison, Owen notes, in classic Updike fashion, the difference between his lover's vaginal textures and his wife's. The lover's organ is 'smoother, somehow simpler, its wetness less thick, less of a sauce, more of a glaze.' Such erotic gourmandism feels dated now, but it accurately reflects the mind-set of Owen and his peers, who made 'Playboy' magazine an institution and books such as *The Sensuous Man* best sellers. In those days and for those men, sex was a sort of winery tour. A new lover was rolled around inside the goblet first, then sniffed and tasted, sipped and savored. The process was all very conscious and humane and behind it lay a philosophy of pleasure that Updike touchingly resurrects for those of us who recall its existence but are foggy on its particulars.

To a young generation in a new century, for whom the literature of shagging is commonplace rather than taboo breaking, the prospect of reading old men on the subject can be unenticing. The structure of *Villages* will not make it any easier for them, since Owen's middle years read like one damn fling after another: all the women I ever slept with Phyllis, Faye, Alissa, Vanessa, Jacqueline, Antoinette, Mirabella, Karen and Julia. Owen recalls every last detail of his lovers- the clothes they shed, the feel of their skin, the noise they make during orgasm, and the colour and texture of their pubic hair. His women may not have careers- some are desperate homemakers, but he pays homage to 'the realm of purely personal' which they share with him. God and love are in the detail. The book is replete with telling details of various elements. The following part of summary on enotes.com is logical and appropriate:

> Those familiar with the John Updike corpus will find this latest novel typical of his work: biting humor, description of the ordinary with extraordinary clarity and carefully chosen language, fleshed-out pictures of his flawed but compelling characters. Perhaps predictably, Updike's fleshing out includes pervasively bawdy, sexually explicit scenes which, in spite of their prolonged detail, come off remarkably less sordid than similar descriptions one might find in romance novels. The passages, always well written and stubbornly candid, float above the tawdry and the titillating. They evoke some of Updike's earlier work in Couples (1968) and S. (1988). (*enotes.com*) [8]

As usual, Updike leaves no stone unturned when writing about sex, and *Villages* shows no diminution of inventiveness. At some places in the novel, the reader encounters highly adulterous and sexual descriptions like, Owen's penis is one eye clouded by a single drop of pure seminal yearning, and a woman climbing naked from a swimming pool. If the descriptions of sex are exalted in the manner of Blake or Lawrence, which is because sex, to Updike, is our redemption. The following lines clearly tell how Updike describes sex:

> A piece of village wisdom he was slow to grasp is that sex is a holiday, an activity remarkably brief in our body's budget compared with sleeping or food-gathering or constructing battlements for self-defense, such as the Great Wall of China. The unfaithful man and woman meet for a plain purpose, dangerous and scandalous, with the blood pressure up and the pupils enlarged and the love-flush already reddening the skin: is there not a praiseworthy economy in this, as opposed to sex spread thin through the interminable mutual exposure of a marriage? (*Villages*, p. 308)

In *Villages*, the sex is timid and fearful and frequently interrupted, and altogether new thing in Updike's fiction. Even as a boy, Owen is spooked by strange noises in the woods and backs out of intercourse with his first girlfriend, Elsie. When he reluctantly consummates his marriage on his wedding night, he is worried about the blood and Phyllis's 'mucous warmth' and 'the anxious little stink' of his 'poor prick'. The liaisons Owen conducts in Middle Falls during his first marriage are remembered with a neglectful guilty haste. When Owen meets his first lover for a picnic on a hilltop, there are more those 'faceless unofficial presences' that beset the erotic with an immobilizing self-consciousness: "A flock of crows, six or eight, raucously rasping at one another, thrashed into the top of an oak on the edge of the square of sky… He felt suspended at the top of an arc." (*Villages*, p. 154) The most memorable moment of the book comes early on, when the opening dream is transformed, the body resurrected, in a scene of Owen poised above his elderly second wife, Julia, her broken leg in a plaster cast. He tries to hover above her, on his elbows and knees, sparing her as much of his weight as he can, and to his grateful amazement feels her rise to him, in her excitement, quicker than usual; she grinds her pubic bone against his decisively and they come together-gemlike dragonflies coupling in the air. This image of one body hanging over another, menacing, resuscitating, concealing, addressing itself sexually or pulling back from sex, is the seed of *Villages*, an image tangled full of meanings that Updike unravels only tentatively. The exalted rapture of the gemlike dragonflies is an exception to the petty temper of *Villages*. Updike's work has always stood up for a maturity now threatened in American culture, but Owen is horribly humbled by old age. Memories of adultery alternate with the sing-song endearments he and Julia exchange, and long burbling accounts of her chastising him for spilling crumbs on the kitchen floor or wearing the wrong hat. His 'animal optimism' depleted, Owen wakes up to the day ahead with its hours to climb like rungs on an ancient, dangerous, splintering ladder.

Owen believes what a village holds hides it together. It hides sex by keeping it everywhere on view. The protagonist thinks that a village is woven of secrets, of truths better left unstated, of houses with less window than opaque wall. To Owen there is a polymorphous sharing noticeable not only at weddings, where the weeping parents and awestruck flower-girl unite to consign the bride to the connubial mysteries, but at polite adult parties where custom seats husbands and wives not together but beside the spouses of others, tempting potential confusion and exogamous trespass. Before lapsing into the chaste wisdom with which he concludes, Owen reflects: "Villages have inglenooks, root cellars, attics where mattresses covered with striped ticking quietly wait for the orgy to begin." (*Villages*, p. 265)

Updike very beautifully draws a clear picture about what the life is all about and how adulterous the life has become at these places. He also throws light on the positivity his hero is expected to feel after living a sensual life. However, the reader stumbles across such vulgar descriptions of female body: "The grip of her vagina had something infantile about it, something heartbreaking, like a child's shy, hopeful question." The novel is about the necessity of accepting the tragicomic fact of another person's unique reality, about the importance of coming to understand, as the young Owen ruefully supposes, that "each person probably thought of herself. as the center of the universe, just as Owen did". Like so many of Updike's men, he believes that he is leading a charmed, sympathetic life when he is blindly living a selfish and degraded one; he is an empty "O," as his best friend nicknames him. Yet Updike never completes the ironic premise; he never separates Owen the narcissistic character from Owen the novel's central consciousness. Naturally, the reader wonders whether such repelled and repellent passages about sex are the result of Owen's walled-off ego, or the author's. Instead of working Owen more completely into the novel, Updike gives us one badly rendered fornication after another. A bildungsroman is a novel of education, and Owen's education consists of learning from a "string of instructresses" lessons about life. But these lessons are only about sex, and the women who dispense them are mostly adulterous flings conducted during Owen's first marriage. Because carnal life has always been for Updike- as Spinoza said about money- "an abstract of everything," he seems to think it sufficient, in this novel anyway, to couch life's complexity exclusively in sexual terms. To quote the words of a celibate villager, "We know what not where we are. Beside, we are sound asleep nearly half our time. Yet we esteem ourselves wise, and have an established order on the surface." (*Villages*, p. 321) The author ends the novel with the following beautiful lines which reflect the guidance the author wants to give his characters as well his readers:

> Such a surface order makes possible human combinations and moments of tender regard. It is a mad thing, to be alive. Villages exist to moderate his madness-to hide it from children, to bottle it for private use, to smooth its imperatives into habits, to protect us from the darkness without and the darkness within. (*Villages*, p. 321)

Ethan Cooper's balanced arguments about this novel are mentionable here:

> But "Villages" delivered less pleasure to me, since it seems to employ Updike's amazing gifts only to explore a series of increasingly debauched extramarital experiences. While these are rendered masterfully, they don't seem to convey much more than a sad and decadent progression, which, ironically, comes to an end when the protagonist, Owen Mackenzie, meets his life's true love. In his final chapter, Updike summons his genius to create a moving context for this tale. But it's a brilliant ending to what I experienced as an uninspired tale. (*Amazon*) [9]

Updike's another novel that has adultery as its one of the major themes is *Couples*. It is the book that has been assailed for its complete frankness and praised as an artful, seductive, savagely graphic portrait of adultery in America. But be it damned or hailed, the book drew back the curtain forever on sex in suburbia in the late twentieth century. In this novel it is seen how people's earnest desire for lust leads them to a life where having sex with multiple people has become a fashion and only way to enjoy life. The action rotates around a building contractor, Piet Hanema whose general qualities are-honesty, heterosexuality and a sense of death. Though coward in nature, he is the embracer of life.

Piet, the protagonist in this novel, is married to Angela, but he does not seem satisfied with his partner. He likes to play with other women to quench his thirst for sex. He justifies his adulterous acts of having sexual relationships with several women by calling his actions as a result of his soft feeling and kindness towards women. Not just Piet, many other married people, men and women, in the town drift through their days trying to find some sort of excitement amidst all the sameness, dinner parties, basketball games, vacations, lounging around to avoid the notion that they are just killing time. The main characters in the novel linger and resonate, in all their loves and foibles, their jealousies and their loyalties. Central to all these fluctuations in the characters of Updike's protagonists is the effect of adultery and its related considerations, such as love, sexual satisfaction, moral purpose, and how the characters in this story are with one another.

The community of *Couples* is a peculiar sub-group, spawned by World War II and already half-extinct. They are the people who want to get away from the staleness of the Old America and the vulgarity of the new. They want to live beautifully in beautiful surroundings. Their dreams are to raise intelligent children in renovated houses in absolutely authentic rural centers. Finally, they brew up their own kind of staleness and vulgarity. The children are left to shift for themselves, and are lucky to grow up no worse than square. The author's slide-lecture on this crowd needles them better than any sociological study has done, or can do.

In this great piece of American literature, we meet the characters the way we meet actual people, that is, vaguely. As we follow them, we come to know about their more specific doings, like their adulteries, meaningless roar of the first cocktail party, etc. Bit by bit, the gossip comes in. Appleby is having a thing with Marcia little-Smith and Janet Appleby is returning the compliment with Harold little- Smith. Eddie Constantine and Roger Guerin are working out a homosexual attraction through wife swopping. Updike's main subject seems to be the relation of individual to collective decadence. He, with his great mastery, tackles it with the distancing irony of a white-coated Edward Gibbon, checking out a small branch of civilization. At the zenith of their powers, the couples have routed the original bores from Tarbox.

The Gen- Foxy episode has more than enough evidences about their adulterous relationships. At one place in the novel we see Foxy rapping her greatcoat tighter around her and in the same motion she raps her body. She feels ugly about the small sour trouble brewing in her womb. She blames Gen of liking some women with their push-me-up bras and their get-me-out-of-this giggles. The author describes these women as, "Quaker girls placidly wed to rising grinds, or else women armored in a repellent brilliance of their own, untouchable gypsy beauties

with fiery views on Cuban sovereignty and German guilt". (*Couples*) [10] Hearing Foxy's statement about a man's getting his first mistress, Ken behaves in a very strange way and looks at her to say something. He defends himself:

> What are you suggesting? We were invited. We went. We might as well enjoy it. I have nothing against mediocre people, provided I do not have to teach them anything. (*Couples*, p. 39)

Another incestuous scene in the novel is the affair and extra marriage relationship between Piet and Georgene. The lively depiction of this scene by John Updike gives a glimpse into what we call adultery and too much nakedness. The author very nicely depicts this scene:

> Georgene drew herself from his arms and stretched out again on the blanket. Giving the sun his turn: whore. The reflecting foil decorated her face with parabolic dabs and nebulae and spurts: solar jism. Piet jealously shucked his shoes, socks, and trousers, leaving his underpants, Paisley drawers. He was a secret dandy. He lay down beside her and when she turned to face him reached around and undid her bra, explaining, "Twins," meaning they should both be dressed alike, in only underpants. (*Couples*, p. 49)

The description of Georgene's breasts makes the reader understand how Updike has exaggerated the beauty of his good for nothing characters. The 'sunken paler nipples' of Georgene's breasts are one of the reasons why Piet has fallen in love with her. Before their affair, Piet had ignored Georgene, thus forcing her to keep herself hidden from him by his contempt for her husband. The most important was his and Angela's dislike of Freddy Thorne. Piet, not yet consciously unhappy with his wife, Angela, had not seriously dreamed of making love to other women. All of a sudden, he in his dreams began to transpose themselves into reality. His meeting with Georgene at a party gives him a chance to turn from Angela and start loving his new ladylove. The novel is replete with the scenes full of adulterous and sensual activities. R. Corey has perfectly put it:

> The story follows the marriages and affairs of several couples through a few turbulent years of the 1960's. The story draws you into the characters whose lies and deceits make most of them eminently unlikeable. All of them live in a state of paradoxical moral ambiguity. But still their stories are gripping and tragic. Updike breathes life and humanity into the characters while showing us how ugly they can be. As in life, in love you must be careful what you wish for and scheme for. (*Amazon*) [11]

A Month of Sundays, Updike's seventh novel, is also deals with the theme of adultery and incestuous relationships which develop out of unsatisfactory marriage lives of the characters in this book. It concerns the involuntary retreat of the Reverend Tom Marshfield to a desert place to recover from his distraction, although he prefers to diagnose his malady as 'the human condition'. It will be no surprise to find Updike's characteristically dense imagery conveying the essential ambiguity of that condition nor to find the relationship between man and woman an inexhaustible emblem. The names of his characters, drawn from *The Scarlet Letter*, show them to be the true children of their puritan ancestors, adept literalizers bent upon destroying paradise anew.

All of Tom's life has been lived in a context of church work and the ministry. He is the son of a pastor, and he grew up in a parsonage, went to a theological seminary, and married the daughter of his ethics professor. He is not, however, comfortable and at ease in his faith; as a parson, he is, in his own words, "not a hunting one, but a hunted." Tom's organist, Alicia Crick, tells him that he is the "angriest sane man" she has ever met- her prompt diagnosis is a bad marriage- and that although he is a married man he still burns. His answer is immediate: "She was right." From that point on- the time is early in Lent- their affair is fated, and they go to bed together for the first time soon after Easter. Tom and Alicia's sexual rage for each other consumes them. Tom feels as if he has confronted as in an ecstatic mirror his own sexual demon. The inevitable result is Alicia's wish to have Tom all to herself, his refusal to leave his family and the ministry, and the collapse of their affair with much bitterness on Alicia's part.

Marshfield, the chief protagonist in the novel, invites the reader to consider his personality in such mandala- like fashion but in excessively ego-conscious terms:

> Imagine me as a circle divided in half, half white and half black. In the white side were such things as father's furniture, Karl Barth's prose, the fine- gained pliancy and gleeful dependence of my sons when they were babies, my own crisp hieratic place within the liturgy and sacraments…. This was the Good. I credited God with being on this side. On the other side, which might be labelled the Depressing rather than the Evil, lay Mankind… my own rank body, most institutional and political trends since 1965, the general decadent trend of the globe…. Alicia, by claiming a wedge of mankind for the Good and the Beautiful, shifted the axis on the divider 10° and caused a re-labelling of the now- tilted halves: the white was the Live, the black was the Dead…. God, who has a way of siding with the winners, took Life as His element…. (*A Month of Sundays*) [12]

The mention of Alicia's important role in re- shaping Marshfield's "circle" becomes more than humorous fancy when seen in Jungian terms. For Jung a male's psychic maturation takes place only after a series of encounters with his unconscious feminine aspect of his own personality. Marshfield's diary records in the Jungian order his erotic encounters with the four significant women in his life: Jane, his wife; Alicia, the church organist; Frankie Harlow, the devout believer; finally, the elusive Ms. Prynne. Each corresponds with one of the four stages of the Jungian anima. In the novel, his wife Jane becomes merely an Eve, earth-mother figure, representing at best a biological relationship: "under my wife's good administration, sex had become a solemn, once-a-week business, ritualized and worrisomely hushed." (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 34) While he appraises her in Barthian theological language, he recently has learned that she has become "allergic to the sun" and so he looks

elsewhere.

His experience with Alicia, the organist, corresponds with Jung's second stage, i.e. one dominated still by Eros but on a more aesthetic and romantic level; here the anima becomes a Helen of Troy goddess. Marshfield tells us that "Alicia in bed was revelation. At last I confronted as in an ecstatic mirror my own sexual demon." (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 33) He describes himself with her in mythic language as a "lover as sky-god, cycling moisture from earth cloud the earth," (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 35) and says she eventually became "the soft center of my new world." (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 67)

Marshfield's relationship with Frankie Harlow marks the third stage, that of the virginal anima who raises Eros to the heights of spiritual devotion. His first interview with her "in its shifting transparence and reflecting opacities seems an experience so gnostic I'm blinding." (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 111) Frankie's virginal faith makes him sexually limp and, though never achieving true intercourse with her, each sexual encounter is described in devotional terms:

> Her forgiveness and pre- Adamic cave-woman fall of hair to her bare shoulders broke a capsule inside me. I dropped to my knees, a pro at that, and arranged her hands tangent as in prayer…. (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 131)

The enigmatic figure of Ms. Prynne becomes more than a literary in-joke on Updike's part or the chance for a somewhat silly sexual climax to the novel; she becomes the integrating symbol for the novel's whole movement on various levels. Descriptions of Jane were generally phrased in pragmatic language; Alicia summoned forth musical metaphors and Frankie Edenesque ones; but Ms. Prynne is addressed in terms of exorcism, ultimacy, and survival:

> Oh, I moved through you, understanding all this and more, and it came to me that love is not an e-motion, an assertive putting out, but a trans-motion, a compliant moving through. I saw through you, with you, Ms. Prynne…. As my end approaches everything grows vaporous, my future and my past are the same green cloud, and only you are solid, only you have substance; I fall toward you as a meteorite toward the earth, as a comet toward the sun. (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 217)

So Ms. Prynne herself finally takes on an explicit mandala-like shape, for Marshfield falls toward her like an iron pin toward a piece of magnet. Intercourse with her will signify his self's reintegration and re-birth, but it will also symbolize a good deal more. This is not surprising since, for Jung, the mandala-archetype for the Self is the same shape as the unconscious image of God. Jung stated:

> Strictly speaking, the God-image does not coincide with the unconscious as such, but with a special content of it, namely the archetype of the Self. It is this archetype from which we can no longer distinguish the God-image empirically. We can arbitrarily postulate a difference between these two entities, but that does not help at all. On the contrary, it only helps us to separate man from God. Faith is certainly right when it impresses on man's mind and heart how infinitely far away and inaccessible God is; bit it also teaches His nearness. His presence…. The religious mind longs for wholeness, and therefore lays hold of the images of wholeness offered by the unconscious which, independently of the conscious mind, rise from the depth of our psychic nature. (*Psychology and Religion: West and East*) [13]

In *A Month of Sundays* this ambiguous tension between identification with and alienation from the Self and God archetype are experienced by Marshfield the night before he writes that final sermon that could be preached:

> … I stepped out of this omega-shaped shelter, testing my impending freedom, and looked up at the stars, so close and warmly blue in this atmosphere, yet so immutably fixed in their dome of night; and I felt, for an instant- as if for an instant the earth's evaluation had become palpable- that particle or quantity within myself, beyond mind, that makes me a stranger here, in this universe. A quantity no greater than a degree's amount of arc, yet vivid and mine, my treasure. (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 204)

The final plea, "Even so, come," found as the last line of the *Book of Revelation*, is the Church's final plea for Christ's return that will inaugurate our final bodily resurrection. That these words are addressed here to Ms. Prynne is plurisignificant, for Marshfield's bodily "resurrection" is effected through intercourse with her. Her beauty and their congress are described in the baroque style of Preachers that began the book and was absent for a time, and reminds us of the elaborately ornate Song to the Shulammitess, the Jungian Sapientia figure found in the Song of Songs. Also, Ms. Prynne's "amazing breasts, so firm that they seemed small, the nipples erect upon little mounds of erectile issue, so that a cupola upon a dome was evoked, an ascent in several stages, in architectural successiveness" (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 228) recall the omega-shaped "dome" image of the two previous passages we quoted, and so she embodies here the "ascending stages" of the sexual, religious, and psychic.

In short, Marshfield's intercourse with Ms. Prynne, his unknown but ideal reader, dramatizes in a single symbolic act the psychic, erotic, religious and artistic resolution of the novel. That Marshfield's "month may seem a metaphor" is true. His diary has become the verbal counterpart to the conjoined processes it describes; and, like metaphor, each process when referred to inevitably points to its opposing counterpart through its ironic similarity. Marshfield's "month" records a man's psychic movement from his concerns with his ego, that distillery of his conscious life, to his encounter with the unconscious symbol of his self. The diary begins with the words "Forgive me," and its last entry starts with "Bless you" and ends with a communal "we" as it records their moment of meeting and union. In the interval, he has confronted not only the four stages of his *anima* but also his psychic "shadows" in the three clergymen with whom he makes a golf foursome throughout his stay until "these bankrupt clergymen have replaced the phantoms that chased me here." (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 198)

In the end, Marshfield's crisis of religious faith arises from his

inability to reconcile the more rationalistic and objectivistic orthodoxy of Karl Barth's theology with the more intuitive grasp of harmony and wholeness that his subjective, unconscious experience affords. Although he is capable of imagining himself as a "circle divided in half, half-white, half-black," because of his Barthian bias he cannot visualize God theologically in such imagery.

After reading the novel, it becomes evident that adultery is the protagonist's unoriginal sin, his corrupted telescoping of confession and communion. When he kneels to pray, his altar is a woman. To him, they are all voices crying in a wilderness of loveless marriages. He is Jacob wrestling with a succession of angels. To be true, Tom and Alicia's sexual rage for each other consumes them. Tom explains, "At last I confronted as in an ecstatic mirror my own sexual demon." The inevitable result is Alicia's wish to have Tom all to herself, his refusal to leave his family and the ministry, and the collapse of their affair with much bitterness on Alicia's part. During his passion for Alicia, Tom had tried to encourage as subtly as he could a romantic relationship. Steven Reynolds is right in his praise of this interesting and relevant novel:

> This is a wonderfully clever comic novel. It is rich with layers of symbolism and Biblical references - the Omega-shaped sanitarium, the forty days and nights in the desert - and bubbles along with puns, comic typographical errors, plus arch footnotes and endless wisecracks. It is beautifully plotted, impeccably structured, and like most of Updike's work, it is laugh-out-loud funny but utterly serious in its intent. It is an exploration of the nature and challenges of religious faith in contemporary America…. When you look back, you realize how meticulously crafted it has all been, and you are dazzled not only by that craftsmanship but also by how lightly it wears the weight. Updike's touch is deft, subtle and most of all incredibly funny. (*Amazon*) [14]

Another important novel that discusses adultery as its one of the main themes is *Gertrude and Claudius.* In this nineteenth novel, Updike brilliantly imagines the events leading up to the story told in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The books division into three sections echoes the typical structure of a Shakespearean play. The first section serves as the introduction of Gertrude and the principal players in this section. Second section is about the conflict that arises in the middle section (in the form of Gertrude's attraction to King Hamlet's brother, Claudius). The third section is denouement, which resolves the story on an ironic note providing a clever segue into *Hamlet's* opening scene. The story follows Gertrude's evolution from the impetuous young daughter of King Roderick of Denmark, to the initially unwilling bride of the soon-to-be King Hamlet.

Updike is very effective at explaining Gertrude's mindset; she comes alive for the reader in a way that she never quite did in *Hamlet*. She is the focus of this story and Updike astonishes us by deftly proving that Gertrude is a sympathetic character. Updike has added so much rich back-story to the characters and events that he has not only created an excellent story, but he has also enriched *Hamlet* itself.

To signal his respectful distance, Updike begins his tale using variations on the characters' names: Gertrude is Gerutha, Claudius is Feng and King Hamlet is Horwendil. Over the course of the novel, these unfamiliar names evolve into the names in the play as Updike begins filching lines from Shakespeare. His story opens as Gertrude's father is trying to persuade his daughter to marry the future King Hamlet. Like Ophelia after her, she is stubborn and independent, yet loyal to a fault. Thus Gertrude agrees to marry the brute in chain mail and leather epaulets even though he makes her feel like a comely plot of territory that had once blocked access to the sea. When they marry, Denmark becomes a province of her body.

Thereafter the king becomes aloof, and Gertrude becomes tired of nurturing the bratty young Hamlet. Longing for some excitement, she begins spending time with her husband's brother, Feng (Claudius), a swarthy, well-traveled free-lance with wolfish teeth, a rug of chest hair and a collection of falcons. As time passes, she begins to resent forfeiting her life to the king, a busy man who does not seek to know her any better. When she hits middle age, Hamlet goes away to school and, her nest empty, she finally employs Polonius' services to start an affair with Claudius.

Updike dives into their affair with alacrity, eliciting both the sadness and the elation the lovers feel at betraying their family allegiances in order to honor one of the spirit. As Hamlet will do later, Claudius succumbs to a decadent possessiveness over Gertrude, with whom he couples in barnyards and castle entrances. After a month of such feverish if furtive exploration- "this unfolding of herself"- Gertrude exclaims to her lover, "My father and future husband together bargained me away, and you have given me back my essential value, the value of that little girl you so belatedly dote upon." (*Gertrude and Claudius*) [15] However offensive this remark may be to modern notions of female selfhood, it is sadly in keeping with the realities of Renaissance England that found their way into Shakespeare's play.

Updike's tale leaves the swampy morasses of the barnyard sex and gathers steam. The affair goes awry, and Claudius begins plotting for more than just Gertrude's bounty. In taking the action of the play beyond its sullen hero's point of view, Updike gives us a drama that, with its machinations of power and its sexual tug of wars, resembles *Othello* more than it does *Hamlet*.

The main aspect of the novel, or rather its main contribution to the literary realm, is Updike's mastery in characterization. In the play, most of the characters are only as deep as their actions, thoughts and utterances and not least through what is said about them by other characters. Claudius, for one, is seen by most of the characters as a shifty, though resourceful character. He is represented mainly in comparison with his brother, old Hamlet. He is characterized, through a combination of fear and respect, by the other character and also by Updike more directly as the traditional fairy tale hero king, much like in the play. The mediating character here is Gertrude. Although the role of narrator shifts through the novel, the space given her, her intimate relations to both brothers and her position as he only fully developed female character in a court of men modifies the view granted in the play. Also, by voicing the largely silent and appendant female character of Gertrude, Updike can introduce new perspectives and depths of character into the story. Her position and

reflections on personality provides an aspect to the characters, which Shakespeare in his male dominated environment was unable to provide.

It is also worth noting how Claudius is the only character in the novel whose basic ambitions remain ambivalent to the reader. Whereas the agendas of most of the characters both in the play and in the novel are fairly easy to grasp, we never really know if Claudius really wants the throne, Gertrude or both. We are also never really sure how he sees his fellow characters; is Gertrude the love of his life or just a tool for usurping the throne? The shiftiness of his character is emphasized towards the end where he on one page sees his fate linked to Polonius and on the next more drastically feels the need to remove him. Interestingly, the only other character that comes close to this is Hamlet, who in the novel appears haughty and somehow beyond reach for his surroundings.

In the same vein, several textual references are made to Shakespeare's play. Not only the names, but several references to situations and lines from the play figure in direct or rewritten from in the novel. The sensitive relation to Norway, the reason why Hamlet idolizes his father and why the crown is so intimately associated with Gertrude are amongst the issues that are built on the play. In addition, their original speakers repeat several lines from the play in the novel. The last sentence in the novel, for instance, "All would be well" refers both to Hamlet's line "All is not well" (Act I, ii) and Claudius' line "All may be well" (Act III, iii). Elsewhere, Gertrude says "Elsinore has been a dungeon to me" (94) which of course reflects Hamlet's "Denmark's a prison", spoken to Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern in Act II, ii. Finally, one of the best quotes, is reshaped on the novel's 38th page. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will" (Act v, ii) becomes "There's a shape in things, fiddle and fuss however we will around the edges." (*Gertrude and Claudius*, p. 38)

Furthermore, Updike seems to have studied his European history. His contextual references are telling and manifold, referring to the Holy Roman Empire, Frankish battles against the Moors in Spain, Crusades, Genoa's struggles with Pisa over Corsica and Sardinia as well as a number of local references to Danish Kings. For someone with more time on their hands the temporal setting in the novel could probably be quite accurately pegged based on these references. Perhaps this is a fitting topic for a future post. It is worth noticing how Updike not only seems to respond to different versions of Hamlet in his novel, but also to critical approaches to the play. In empowering Gertrude he responds to both Feminist and Psychoanalytic criticism and in incorporating lower social strata as well as contextual signifiers he reflects the attitudes of Marxist and Historical criticism. This testifies to a rigid and extensive pre-productive study process on Updike's part, and one, which is surely reflected in the positive reception of this acclaimed novel.

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