

II. LITERATŪROS NARATYVAI IR KONTEKSTAI / NARRACJE LITERACKIE I KONTEKSTY

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ARCHETYPES AND MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS: JOHN UPDIKE'S LEGACY REVISITED

John Updike is widely considered to be one of the greatest, one of the most popular and sometimes most controversial writers concerned with the American small town and middle-class materialism. A lot of literary critics and researchers observe that Updike's finest work came from his exploration of ordinary America and from his use of elegant prose, rich with metaphor, to portray the public and private feelings of Americans, their daily rounds of life. In addition, discussing Updike's individual works a lot of literary critics and researchers have observed the writer's attempts to re-write myth in "the mythical age"¹ of the twentieth century.

*Naturally enough, as the return to myth is assumed to be a certain feature of the Modernist movement, half a century later since Updike's famous novel *Centaur* was penned, it is indispensable to re-examine the writer's fictional intentions in the usage of myth. More importantly, it is needful to determine whether we can see the mythic elements and realistic details as a continuum or as the contrasted opposites in his so called "historical chronicles".*

Updike's novels and stories are filled with mythological motifs and character archetypes. Thus, the study aims at revisiting John Updike's creation considering mythological elements and archetypal images of his heroes alongside with heroic masculinity, war, terrorism and American perfectionism.

KEY WORDS: Myth, Archetype, Mythology of Self, Masculinity, Dichotomy, Other.

Introduction

Updike, whose literary legacy consists of over fifty books, is one of the most prolific writers in modern American literature who received numerous honours, including the National Book Award, The Pulitzer Prize, and election to the

¹ The formulation of "the mythical age" belongs to a German novelist Hermann Broch.

prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters. He was one of the most financially successful of post-war American writers and established a reputation of a keen observer of contemporary American life. His settings range from the court of “Hamlet” to postcolonial Africa, though he concentrated on suburban America. He was praised for his floating poetic style of writing as nothing was too small or too great for Updike to poeticise (more information is available at Italic 2009). To quote Don Greiner, Curator of Modern American Literature at University of South Carolina, “John Updike was an American treasure. In the second half of the twentieth century, Updike and Saul Bellow inherited the mantle of ‘literary giant’ that William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway wore in the first half. A master of the elegantly lyrical sentence and the precisely observed detail, Updike used these gifts to probe the yearnings, both spiritual and mundane, of ordinary Americans” (in McTavish 2016: 5). Furthermore, John McTavish’s study publicised in 2016 as a result of the long time reading of Updike’s works from a specific perspective – their relation to myth and Christianity – offers new pathways for re-reading Updike’s legacy.

Significance of myths and archetypes

Professor Gerald James Larson explains myth or mythology as “a narrative or a collection of narratives about the gods or supernatural beings used by people-clan, tribe, or ethnic community- for purposes of interpreting the meaning of their experience and their world both individually and corporately. Such narratives may describe the creation of the world or man, the destruction of demonic forces, the origin of death, the exploits of heroic figures and so on. What is fundamental in the definition of “myth,” however, is that myth articulates the basic self-understanding of a people and thereby operates as a kind of charter for the total cultural life. As a result, various components of a people’s mythology are often used in the context of cultic life; that is a myth or a group of myths may function as a means of giving symbolic expression to a set of continuing religious actions” (Larson, Littleton 1975: 2). Therefore, ‘myth’ marks the beginning of something relating to history and is closely coherent to the religion that is codified in mythical stories which can be referred to as sacred narratives. Meanwhile American mythologist, scholar and writer Joseph Campbell defined myths as “stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance... Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of human life” (Campbell 1998: 5). To rely on Campbell’s formulation, “Myth has a thousand faces; each countenance has similarity and nuance when compared with one another. The myths of gods, goddesses, heroes and their adventures can be traced back centuries to not only the ancient Greek and Romans, but also tribes to Africa, Australia, and the Americas” (in Whitt, Perlich 2014: 2).

When discussing mythology A. Galkowski emphasises that it “is the basis of the code which constitutes a significant part of a country’s culture and language” (Budzowska 2015: 329). Mythology itself is a piece of culture which helps preserving a particular country’s traditions and beliefs.

Furthermore, myths contain archetypal patterns and images. Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell developed the idea of the archetype “as a recurring pattern of images, situations, or symbols found in the mythology, religion, art, and dreams of cultures around the world” (Lauriat 1954: 232). Jung claims that the archetypes are essential to a person’s relationship with the outside world. Hence, those archetypal images become a foundation for universal symbolic language which lead us to new understandings. Certain cultural experience is crucial trying to realise the universal language of myth and archetype as all cultures are connected in various ways examining the unknown. Therefore, in order to perceive the meaning of myth properly it is also necessary to know how to read the symbols found throughout mythical stories.

The literary concept of archetype is derived from that of Jung’s: he emphasises the repeating human experiences, common to dissimilar nations and different historical periods. Thus, the universality of archetype “most powerfully appeals to the great primary human affections”, usually unconscious, and in such a way gains its “unique aesthetic power” (Lauriat 1954: 232).

It is necessary to emphasise that Campbell’s vision of myth is the most flexible and complete. According to Campbell’s classification, there are four main functions of myth: metaphysical, sociological, cosmological and pedagogical (1998: 31–32).

Furthermore, it is clear that mythological patterns which appear in modern novels are filled with mythological motifs. To rely on John White, who spoke about mythology in the modern novel, “motif-patterns are more complex because they refer the reader not only to the archetypal patterns in the novel’s plot when it is actualized, but because they are represented in such a way as to generate in the reader patterns of hypothesis, conjectures and illusions concerning what is going to happen to the fictive characters” (White 1973: 118–119).

It is equally important to discuss representations of an archetypal character or hero.

Sophon Shadraconis in his study *Leaders and Heros: Modern Day Archetypes* discusses modern day archetypes relying upon Campbell who “in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces* Campbell (2008) explores the hero’s journey and provides rich mythological cross-cultural mythos from which parallels can be seen. Campbell believes that heroes can be willing or reluctant. In the words of Shadraconis, “in many myths, the hero often engages in self-sacrifice and overcomes adversity and hardship for others. The brave actions and sacrifices of heroes are retold within the affected community. The hero’s journey involves many stages: living ordinary life; crossing the threshold; overcoming ordeals; embracing rewards; and returning home (Campbell, cited in Shadraconis 2013: 2–3).

Ultimately, the hero faces a challenge which tests bravery and the integration of knowledge accumulated in the journey. If successful, the hero can return with an elixir, or panacea, to resolve problems of the community. Leaders play this role and undertake this journey” (Shadrakonis 2013: 2–3).

In addition, taking into consideration the scope of this research and John Updike’s hero, it would be reasonable to rely on Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette (1991) ideas

suggested in their book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* where the authors offer a romanticised vision of the mature masculine psyche distinguishing and amply discussing four principal masculine archetypes that are in relation to this study.

Representation of archetypes and expression of mythological motifs in John Updike's works

John Updike is widely considered to be one of the greatest, one of the most popular and sometimes most controversial writers concerned with the American small town and middle-class materialism. A lot of literary critics and researchers (Samuels 1968, Boswell 2000, Schiff 1992, Mazzano 2013, McTavish 2016) observe that Updike's finest work came from his exploration of ordinary America and from his use of elegant prose, rich with metaphor, to portray the public and private feelings of Americans, their daily rounds of life, their language, clothes, food, houses, cars, boyfriends, and girlfriends. His most common themes were sex and death and their correlation. At the heart of his work is the universal angst and social ills of a society.

Updike's education and work, his passion for Christian theology and his stance as art and literary critic authorised his recognition for his careful craftsmanship. He was one of the few authors who won Pulitzer Prize for Literature twice.

In his exploration of the paths in life, conformity and consumerism in modern America, Updike employed a number of archetypal settings at the same time remaining squarely in the realist tradition.

There are a number of character archetypes exerted in his short story *A & P* (1961): the hero, the threshold guardian, the ally, to name just a few, though the most important archetype is the shapeshifter. An attentive reader sees this archetype in a number of the characters, even if they have another role to play in the story. Four archetypal settings are observed in *A & P*: the 'wasteland', summer, the ocean, and the town.

Updike's first widespread popular recognition came with *Couples* (1968), a novel of suburban life and the descriptions of compulsive adulteries, that brought a vast commercial success. *The Centaur* (first published in 1962) was noticed for its greater artistic significance. It is Updike's approvingly symbolic and allusive novel with transcendent-religious background, drawing heavily on classical myth of Chyron that won the National Book Award.

In 1978 Updike published *The Coup*, a dark comedy set in modern Africa that reports the reminiscences of a one-time dictator of a newly emerged African nation, though, as previously observed, Updike was conspicuously famous for setting his fiction in small-town America-rural villages and prosperous suburbia – a landscape described in many of his short stories, in four *Rabbit* novels: *Rabbit Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), and in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984), a satirical story of witchcraft and demonic possession that was made into a comic and remunerative movie.

Nevertheless, Updike has said that "plain realism has never seemed <...> to be enough," and in order to scrutinize what he sees as the "intricacy and opacity of the real world" he

often turned to fantasy and illusion (Updike in Scott 2000). In two other novels, *Roger's Version* (1986) and *S.* (1988), aiming to portray the loves and follies of affluent “spiritual seekers” in today’s America Updike reworked themes and re-created characters from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel of Puritan New England, *The Scarlet Letter* (Scott 2000).

In *Brazil* (1994), his sixteenth novel, Updike turned again to what he identified as “fine excess”, this time reworking the legendary medieval love story of Tristram and Iseult to mock the modern social landscape. Updike placed his lovers in modern Brazil, where the hero is not Tristram, the noble knight, but a teenage mugger named Tristão. The heroine is not Iseult, the daughter of a king, but Isabel, a spoiled beauty of the Brazilian upper class, whose ruling desire is to evade social conventions and to revel in forbidden adventures. Updike’s fictional Brazil is exotic, mystical, even melodramatic, and it is written in an ornate style, rich in metaphor, like the medieval legend from which it is drawn. To quote Kingsolver, “the author has left his favored fictional terrain, the metaphorical deserts and jungles of suburban American marriage, for the very real deserts and jungles of class-engraved Brazil” (Kingsolver 1994).

In his seventeenth novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), Updike described four generations of an American family who are degraded by the materialistic and illusory culture of America but who struggle through loss of religious conviction to a re-awakening of spiritual faith. This was “another double-length historical novel, profusely recording the vicissitudes of four 20th-century generations. Its familiar abundance, its detailed accounts of past places, customs and technologies, as well as of individuals and their interrelations, familial and sexual, are as usual impressive (a comparison with Arnold Bennett comes, uninvited, to mind, only to be dismissed unexamined, as almost certain to be deceptive)” (Kermode 1996).

His *Terrorist* (2006) was written as a response to the events of 11 September 2004 that drove Muslims off to the opposition. Portraying the events that take place in *Terrorist* J. Updike aimed to look to the world not only through the eyes of a Muslim but also through the eyes of everyone who is of different origins.

Most importantly, Updike remarkably challenges the reader to recognise and re-interpret (and perhaps, re-invent) his/her preconceptions. It is through Updike’s examination of the tragic events of the frustrated individual’s life that these tragedies in Updike’s universe due to his specific writing style quite often turn into comedies.

In *Rabbit* novels in particular, Updike celebrated America as a place, with all its ugliness:

Don't read your reviews,
A*M*E*R*I*C*A
You are the only land. (Updike 1969: 59)

Clearly, Updike’s *Rabbit* novels reflect the myth of American perfectionism. Read as a whole, his canon reveals a changing, darkening, increasingly sceptical view of Americanness (Greiner 2006: 149–161). Though “primarily existential in nature”, as Marshall Boswell confirms, “this vision – an interdependent matrix of ethical precepts, theological beliefs, and aesthetic principles – is less a creed than a versatile formal device; it is, in effect, the scaffold on which Updike has built the entire tetralogy” (Boswell 2000: 3).

In *Rabbit, Run* we, likewise, encounter with Rabbit Angstrom who, even though often being unreasonable, rejects the reality not trying to adapt himself to suit the world. Joyce Markle sees Harry as one of Updike's "life-giving" heroes.

In *Rabbit Redux* Skeeter rises to the surface of revolution like Robespierre. Despite the fact that he is "known far and wide for his lack of sympathetic qualities", Skeeter is also a charismatic figure who radiates the vitality that Rabbit and his society have lost (Updike 1995: 446). Skeeter also has a compelling vision of history. Even though Skeeter claims to be "the real Jesus...the black Jesus" (Updike 1995: 449), few critics have taken Updike up on his challenge to view this character in the light of religion. George Hunt, for example, dismisses Skeeter as a "despicable character" and the biblical imagery surrounding him as "arbitrary and jarring, given the discrepancy between the dramatic character and the symbol" (Hunt 1981: 374). Edward Vargo, on the contrary, defends Skeeter as "the most vibrant and credible black in literature written by a white man", yet he insists on viewing Skeeter as an *anti*-Christ (Vargo 1973: 210–211). Only Joyce Markle and Marshall Boswell confirm Skeeter's Christ-like status (Markle 1973: 151; Boswell 2001: 108–109). All this becomes more credible when we take into consideration Updike's dialectical vision of the world on which this Christ-like status is based. If *Rabbit, Run* affirms the "something" aspect of God, then *Rabbit, Redux* affirms that aspect's opposite. Accordingly, as Boswell suggests, Skeeter is not an anti-Christ at all, but rather "the messiah of the novel's God of Nothingness" (2000: 111).

In Updike's Barthian word, the God of life is also the God of death, while the "yes" and the "no" must always be held in dialectical tension. Whereas the Christ of light is the messiah of order, the Christ of darkness – that is, Skeeter – is the messiah of chaos, that is, the Christ of the new religion Rabbit discovered in his dream of "lovely life" and "lovely death". In addition, specific Christ references in the tetralogy recall the New Testament. When Babe, upbraiding him for the hate in his heart, tells him "he needs to wash", Skeeter goes on the attack: "Wash is what Pilate said he thought he might do, right?" (Updike 1995: 370). The New Testament's inscriptions witness the episode when a Pharisee, overhearing Christ's exhortation, is said to have marvelled that Christ had not washed before dinner. Christ replies, that Pharisees make clean the outside of the platter, but their inwardness is overloaded with ravaging and wickedness. Christ wonders whether the Creator of the inwardness has not created outside as well? (Gospel of Luke 11: 39–40). Skeeter assumes the role of the unclean Lord, while the outwardly clean but inwardly corrupt whites become stand-ins for Pharisees, law-givers, hypocrites, and unclean arbiters of superficial cleanliness. In fact, Skeeter *might be* the black Jesus Christ or the novel's God of nothingness. But few critics if at all have noticed that he might also *be* Rabbit's *other self*.² Like in *Rabbit, Run* in *Rabbit, Redux* Harry Angstrom is still astonished that he exists. The difference is that he has to realise there are others and he has to learn, in Heidegger's conception, the "Dasein-with, and everyday being-with, as Being-with is an existential constituent of Being-in-the-world"

² Analysis of Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom a Tetralogy* with the focus on existential phenomenology was carried out by the author of this publication in her doctoral project (2000–2004) at Vilnius University (Ulvydienė 2004).

(Heidegger 1962: 163). Rabbit is captured by his own anxiety of being-there-in-the-world full of chaos, drugs and blacks. Once again Updike expresses Heideggerian conception about the structure of the world. The structure of the world's worldhood is such that others are not proximally present-at-hand as free-floating subjects along with other Things, but show themselves in the world in their special environmental Being, and do so in terms of what is ready-to-hand in that world (Heidegger 1962: 160). Thus, Skeeter proclaiming himself to be the Black Jesus "about to change the world" is the best example of Heidegger's environmental Being.

Updike announced Rabbit Harry Angstrom to be "the very archetype of the American macho male (whose fantasies dwell not, like Emma Bovary's, on romance, but on sports)", and who "appears as Uncle Sam in a Fourth of July parade in *Rabbit at Rest*, and the impersonation is a locally popular one. Rabbit, who knows little of any culture but his own, and that a culture severely circumscribed by television, is passionately convinced that "all in all this is the happiest <...> country the world has ever seen" (Updike 1995: 1045). As in *Rabbit Redux* he was solidly in favour of the Vietnam War, so, as his life becomes increasingly marginal to the United States of his time, in ironic balance to his wife's increasing involvement, he is as unthinkingly patriotic as ever – "a typical good-hearted imperialist racist", as his wife's lover put it in the earlier book" (Oates 1990).

In addition, Updike uses myth to expand and enrich the meaning. Being in the world that echoes with Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Rabbit becomes equal to mythical heroes. He is a force without history, without cultural baggage; he arrives from an offstage "nowhere", bearing redemption:

It's been a religious duty to me, to keep Horace's garden up ... I won't be here next year to see Harry's rhodes come again. You kept me alive, Harry; it's the truth; you did. All winter I was fighting the grave and then in April I looked out the window and here was this tall young man burning my old stalks and I knew life hadn't left me. That's what you have, Harry: life. It's a strange gift and I don't know how we're supposed to use it but I know it's the only gift we got and it's a good one (Updike 1995: 192).

Ultimately, Basem L. Ra'ad clarifies that "Although it is still possible to see some of Updike's fiction as continuing in the modernist mythic mode (as we can obviously see in *The Centaur*), to do so means to lose the point that Updike, as a contemporary writer <...> When he uses old myths as parallels, he maintains much more nakedly than before the sense of incongruity in applying old structures in the present context. His intention, therefore, is totally parodistic – a mode "which marks the exhaustion of any prefigurative theme" and, in his creation of new American myths out of ordinary elements in the American landscape (his dominant mode), Updike insists on the desultory nature of these new myths as bizarre, unsatisfying inventions of a blinded, almost soulless self" (Ra'ad 1994: 25–33).

Religion and heroic archetypes play crucial roles in *Terrorist*. Updike's terrorist antagonist fulfils the role of the essentialised and diametrically opposite *Other*. Protagonist Ahmad is unlike other Muslims in the United States, as he was not born into the religion and Arabic is not his native tongue, nor is he part of the Black Nationalist Muslim society,

which is a more or less accepted religious movement. Arguably, this lack of a clearly outlined identity makes him even more of an outcast to society, which may partly explain his feelings of resentment towards it. Thus, the Western Self and the Arab and/or Muslim Other are equally juxtaposed in Updike's novel.

Even though Updike claimed he was aiming to show this young man "as sympathetically as he could" and called him "my hero" attempting to understand him and to dramatise his world (Mudge 2006), Lina Mohamad who carried out a research on *The concepts of The Hero and the Terrorist-Villain in Post 9 / 11 Popular Fiction* (2015) objects that, "by selectively quoting the Qur'an Updike highlighted the stereotypically-perceived 'brutality' and 'absolutism' of Islam; there is little in *Terrorist* to suggest otherwise but the connection between violence and Islam (and / or Arabs)" and Updike failed to render a balanced representation (Mohamad 2015: 222).

Moreover, "this superficial demonstration of knowledge of the Arab world and its culture does indeed detract from Updike's claim of offering a sympathetic portrayal of a terrorist. Instead of fostering understanding of the *Other* through its lead character, the novel reasserts all the reasons why the *Other* should be feared and why the war on terror was the correct (and only) way to proceed following the attacks of 11 September. Rather than showing the spiritual depth of Islam, *Terrorist* instead implies that the teaching and propagation of hatred, violence and intolerance are central to this religion. It thus provides a one-sided depiction of Islam emphasising primarily negative rhetoric and contributes to the circulation and reinforcement of stereotypes" (Mohamad 2015: 223).

Ultimately, with his *Terrorist* Updike remained loyal to his way of expression of *self* and *other* rhetoric vividly expressed in *Rabbit* novels, construction of heroic masculinity and archetypal terrorism.

Conclusions

The study that originated from previous research and observations by Updike's readers and critics proved that myth in Updike's works is created by constant return to the events of the mythic childhood or the past in general.

Updike's first early novels were loaded with Barthian myth. *The Witches of Eastwick* is charged with nothingness, *Marry Me* can be seen as a reconstruction of myth of Eros and the myth of Chyron finds reflection in *The Centaur*. In addition, in the case of *The Centaur*, Caldwell-Chiron-Christ serves as a model of behaviour striving at a higher level of existence.

Furthermore, Updike uses a number of archetypal settings to explore growing up, the paths in life, conformity and consumerism in modern America. Sometimes, the author endows his heroes with non-archetypal traits and weaknesses that make his characters seem more believable.

Updike's women evoke gender patterns archaically anchored in Western culture, archetypes of earth mother, femme fatal and witch. Meanwhile if discussed in the light of mythology Updike's mythology turns first on a myth of self, motifs of the latter being vividly expressed in *Rabbit* novels.

In addition, Updike encourages our liking for his protagonist Rabbit even while he explores the negative aspects of his masculinity. Rabbit, who seems to be running away from death and circles back, is said to have acquired archetypal status.

Although in *Terrorist* Updike focuses on the terrorist character who as protagonist distances himself from the rhetoric of heroism, like in the case of *Rabbit Harry Angstrom*, Updike in his *Terrorist* negotiates the dichotomy of the *Self* and the *Other* as a central theme in his novel. Despite Updike's admission of the reader into terrorist's thoughts via an omniscient third-person narrator, it only emphasises the character's uncompromising religiosity as an archetypal terrorist's essential characteristic, though Updike's archetypal terrorist is in direct opposite to Jungian archetypal warrior masculinity.

Ultimately, heroic character traits, such as individualism, honour, nationalism and justified violence, as well as characters' largely stereotypical relationships with women, all contribute to reaffirming the theory of the archetypal hero as a powerful and viable cultural image in America.

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