

Elisabeth Groebel

Reading, PA
Literary Studies, Psychology
Bernie Rodgers

The Fiction of John Updike



I plan to write my thesis on the fiction of contemporary American writer John Updike. I intend to focus on Updike's fiction, and am particularly interested in the way in which he manages to write about situations and concerns which, though relevant to many, can easily be overlooked or discounted as insignificant. I am interested in examining the ways in which marriage is presented in John Updike's work, with a focus on the themes of fidelity and infidelity, desire, and possession. I am also interested in examining the way in which gesture is used in his fiction as an indication and illustration of the interrelationships between characters, as well as their perceptions of each other.

From his beginnings in writing short fiction for the *New Yorker*, and continuing through his still expanding published oeuvre, Updike consistently returns to writing about suburban America and issues and intricacies of domestic life. Through his attentive and vivid use of detail directed at characters, situations, and objects which could easily be perceived as banal, Updike's work frequently imbues the mundane with significance and beauty. Despite his popularity, or perhaps because of it, Updike has been criticized by some for being merely a stylist rather than a novelist of "substance." The main reasons for this accusation seem to be Updike's tendency towards lengthy, often poetic description and the subject matter of his fiction, which often centers on domestic and private life. I believe that Updike has much to say with his poetry of the ordinary, and that, when successful, his rich descriptions of the mundane are more than stylistic exercises. Without presenting suburban life as anything close to utopian, Updike elevates his subject matter by giving such attention and space to the commonplace. I am interested in exploring the ways in which Updike presents the mundane and domestic in his work, through an examination of both his fiction, and the critical response it has elicited.

The centrality of marriage and domestic life in Updike's fiction can be looked at as an example of his tendency to write about the commonplace. Although marriage is frequently presented as limiting and potentially damaging in Updike's work both to the sense of intimacy within couples as well as to their individual sense of self--there seems to be something ultimately supportive about marriage for many of his characters.

The married couples in Updike's fiction have often known each other when they were young, and have accumulated extensive shared experience. This seems to create an appeal to the marital partner that often outlasts extramarital affairs. Even those characters who take on lovers or abandon their marriages are often nostalgic for their original domestic experience, and new lovers become more a reminder of loss than freedom gained or desire satisfied.

Despite their frequent forays into adultery, many of Updike's characters find that the realization of their sexual desire in infidelity does not ultimately prove satisfying or fulfilling. I hope to examine the way in which Updike's couples navigate marriage and infidelity, the way in which the presentation of marriage and infidelity relates to that of suburban and city life, and the ways in which their desires for escape, transcendence, or novelty are either realized or frustrated in the accumulation of new sexual partners and in attempts to construct new identities by leaving behind the past.