

2014-10

The Regulating Daughter in John Updike's Rabbit Novels

Sue Norton

Technological University Dublin, susan.norton@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschlanart>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Norton, S. : The Regulating Daughter in John Updike's Rabbit Novels, *The John Updike Review*, University of Cincinnati, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2014.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the TU Dublin Language Studies at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie.

The Regulating Daughter in John Updike's Rabbit Novels

SUE NORTON

To demonstrate that the patriarchal nuclear family is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, scholars of various disciplines have endeavored to prove that gender inequality, upon which the patriarchal nuclear form depends, did not always exist. They have argued that it arose in response to certain conditions generated by the first agricultural revolution, and that matrilineal and matriarchal societies existed in prehistory, and, indeed, continue to exist in certain "primitive" cultures. In other words, they have tried to do what Friedrich Engels did in a book which, Michèle Barrett writes, "tackles the question of the origin of human society." As Barrett points out: "Although we all know that such attempts are doomed because unprovable, they remain of abiding interest" (29–30). And they remain of interest, in all likelihood, because we seek permission from antiquity to invent ourselves, and our family configurations, as we see fit.

Toward that end, some contemporary American fictions have sought to reinvent family and to question the privilege afforded to the patriarchal nuclear family over the past half-century. They do so in ways that plainly seek to extract the appearance of "nature" from family form.

Anne Tyler, for instance, routinely repositions family borders. Her characters inhabit nuclear families only to break free of them or otherwise revise them. They are most likely to find hope or solace when they relinquish an idealized, nuclear version of family and opt instead to build their lives around new or extraneous family members. In *Saint Maybe* (1991), Ian Bedloe achieves tranquility after decades of restlessness by gradually incorporating his deceased brother's children

and stepchild into his own daily life. Macon Leary of *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) provides another example. After the random murder of his son and the ensuing failure of his marriage, he is eventually saved from the stifling insularity of his family of siblings by the radical otherness of the eccentric Muriel, whom he comes to love. In Tyler's work, individuals find comfort in alternative sensibilities and permeable family borders. Her characters derive their greatest rewards from inclusivity, rather than exclusivity.

Armistead Maupin also treats domestic themes in his nine-volume *Tales of the City* series. Maupin's characters decidedly eschew nuclear exclusivity, forming instead close family bonds engendered by common sensibilities. In stories that began appearing in 1974, his gay heroes and heroines flee conventionality in many respects. For them, the myth of the nuclear family feels all too real and far too constraining.

In the 1970s and 1980s, African American female writers including Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, also reckoned with established paradigms of family. The nuclear form, while it may appear inevitable in the work of white male writers such as John Updike, appears more or less impossible in key novels by Morrison and Walker. Though a tantalizingly desirable ideal to certain of their characters at times, the black nuclear family is presented in their work as not readily viable, given the social context in which it would seek to exist. Instead, other forms of family predominate and flourish, as, not surprisingly, they do in the works of feminist writers of speculative fiction, such as Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin.

By contrast, Updike's Rabbit books—*Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990)—revert always to conventional family form. Though in other novels Updike might be said to write against the patriarchal nuclear family, the Rabbit novels represent his magnum opus of family. Because they span three decades (four, if we include the 2001 novella "Rabbit Remembered"), they offer his most sustained fictional comment on the family in America.

To say, however, that the Rabbit books revert always to conventional family form is not to say that they do so unproblematically. As various critics have argued, in the Rabbit series the social demands imposed by marriage and parenthood appear at times to deny the possibility of self-fulfillment, thereby threatening to implode the nuclear form and its "natural" pretensions. Certainly the title *Rabbit, Run* forms an imperative command that urges the hero to light out for the territory before his roles of husband and father ensnare him in a net of his own

making.¹ Nevertheless, the “naturalness” of the nuclear family remains intact as an abiding ideological principle.

Indeed, Updike’s organizational strategies establish a preferred reading of the tetralogy as a whole, one that favors the familial and that seeks out and celebrates those fleeting moments when Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom discovers salvation in domesticity, despite his frequent impulses to flee or otherwise evade it. While it can be argued that Updike often focuses our attention on Harry’s individual longings in the face of institutional constraint, and in so doing elicits our sympathy for him, he nevertheless reminds us of the damage to others caused by Harry’s successive flights in *Rabbit, Run* and his various betrayals in the sequels.

When the characters of Tyler, Maupin, Morrison, or Walker avoid conventional family form, they tend to find some measure of lasting reward. Not so for Updike’s characters, who are more likely to incur disaster before returning to the roost.

Even when Harry or his wife, Janice, neglect to protect the sanctity and inviolability of family, the texts themselves, with their recurring pattern of stray-and-return, seem to do so for them. The plots of the novels function to protect the family as a closed system, to keep it intact, even as they expose the nuclear form to criticism and often leave us to wonder why Harry and Janice remain married. A reading of all four novels reveals Harry as continually, in one way or another, grasping toward something. Throughout *Rabbit, Run* he quests for what he calls “it.” By *Rabbit Redux* he has embraced a staunch anti-communist patriotism to conceal the absence of “it,” only to seek its replacement in a counter-culture, make-shift family that includes a flower child to whom he acts as both father and lover. Wealth has seemingly replaced “it” in *Rabbit Is Rich*, and by *Rabbit at Rest* Harry has settled into a junk-food complacency that allows very little in the way of real desire.

Despite the slow withering of Harry’s lust for transcendence, Updike manages to sustain his identity as a quest hero. The grail, however, takes on a shape that reflects, more than any other aspect of the narrative, the containment ethos of the nuclear family, for what Harry wishes to possess turns out to be not glory or grace, but a daughter. Other biological ties are, to be sure, crucial to his psychological and social well-being. But what becomes increasingly clear over the course of the series is that Harry has a deep need to symbolically reclaim the daughter he and Janice lost to his delinquency and her alcoholism when she inadvertently drowned the infant Rebecca June in the bath. No matter how murky the relation-

ship between Harry and Janice becomes in the subsequent years, Updike does not allow Harry, who intuitively tries to resist living a life of cliché, to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” Thus Harry’s lust for transcendence, his quest for “it,” is ultimately rendered ironic: though he seemingly wishes to evade his family, his focus on the recovery of his daughter, who reappears in the guise of several other characters, manifests his subconscious wish to contain his family.

Updike told an interviewer that “general academic criticism has tended to belittle the novel and the short story as a means of expression. In some ways it suggests that authors don’t know what they’re saying, and they’re all captive to this and that power group” (Singh 77). If we respect his claim to authorial intent, we must conclude that the Rabbit novels do precisely what Updike wanted them to do: though they query the ability of the nuclear family to nourish and sustain its members, they ultimately vindicate it.

We can see this vindication in the very structure of each of the Rabbit novels as, one after another, they suggest an enclosed, patriarchal, nuclear family. Harry is the (often reluctant) head of household, and therefore receives the most narrative attention. Janice and the couple’s son, Nelson, receive secondary treatment, and Harry and Janice’s parents, friends, and lovers are peripherally examined for their impact on the central “unit.” Eventually grandchildren become relevant. Updike is in many respects a traditional novelist, so such an approach comes as no surprise. His methods of storytelling have long been compared to nineteenth-century modes of realistic narrative discourse.² Kristiaan Versluys persuasively refines this comparison to suggest that though Updike’s modes of realism and naturalism are conventional to a degree, his fiction “stands closer to the teachings of poststructuralism than the denominator of realism seems to suggest” (33) and, in high modernist style, resists finite interpretations. True to realism, the treatment of time in the Rabbit novels is linear, the point of view is third-person omniscient, characterization tends toward the naturalistic (thus the name Rabbit), and the language, though evocative, is not especially self-referential. But true to modernism, it is hard to say with certainty whether Rabbit is a hero or antihero: the ways to read him are as multiple as his yearnings and prone to double back on themselves, thus endlessly postponing our judgment of him.³ While Updike’s questing protagonist may think he wants to be free of family, what he really wants is a greater degree of freedom *within* family.

This rendition of the nuclear family as a site of both sustenance and confinement goes to the heart of Updike’s thematic paradox, and also to the heart of a school of thought in family therapy called family systems theory, which ascribes

inherently paradoxical qualities to the nuclear family. Still flourishing, it achieved prominence in the 1950s as a variety of therapy that fosters coping rather than resistance, adaptation rather than revolt.⁴ In *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (1991), Paula Marantz Cohen uses family systems theory as a critical tool in reading representations of family in Victorian and pre-Victorian fiction. Cohen argues that "we still tend to think of nineteenth-century England as the site of an ideal model of family life and to still shape our expectations of family on what we imagine that model to have been like" (11). She analyzes the positioning of the daughter figure in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fictions and how the daughter, often through illness, performs a "regulating function" in keeping a fragmenting nuclear family together. Cohen's basic argument is this:

The family in Western society began conspicuously to change its structure from a porous, extended network of relations to a more restricted, "nuclear" unit of relations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries . . . It achieved temporary stability as a relatively closed, affective system in the nineteenth century. The novel evolved in parallel fashion. It moved away from its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century origins in the loosely stitched accounts of picaresque adventure to become the intricate, psychologically resonant narrative form that I refer to as the domestic novel, which we associate with the genre's maturity in the nineteenth century. By the same token, both the family and the novel have, since the end of the nineteenth century, revealed difficulty in supporting their legacy of closure. Just as modern literature has progressively defined itself through either a dramatic disregard for nineteenth-century literary conventions or a parodic attachment to them, so the family, from the turn of the century to the present, has exhibited escalating tendencies in these two directions. Reactions against nuclearity are reflected in rising statistics on divorce and alternative life-style arrangements, while attempts to bolster nuclearity are evident in the high incidence of illnesses like anorexia nervosa that seem designed to maintain family closure at all costs. (3-4)

My reasons for quoting extensively from Cohen's analysis are threefold. First, as noted earlier, Updike, like all twentieth-century novelists, wrote under the influence of nineteenth-century realism. Moreover, the plots of the Rabbit novels depend upon the central, though curiously absent, figure of the daughter. Finally, the Rabbit novels present a nuclear family striving to maintain its closure in a way that is illuminated by family systems theory. Regarding closure, Cohen writes:

In both the nuclear family and the domestic novel we are dealing, then, with closed systems that achieved relative stability in the nineteenth century and are now experienc-

ing visible strain and disruption. Of course, these systems, even during their heyday, were never more than relatively closed. Families must always interact to some degree with an external society; novels depend upon readers and are subject to individual values, tastes, and interpretive approaches. Yet the ideology of closure in the nineteenth century was a driving force in the development and elaboration of the form in which families and novels defined themselves. Families were seen as retreats from a hostile external world and, hence, the definition of sex roles, the requirements of etiquette, the rearing of children, and so forth, evolved to enforce that separation. Novels were expected to tie up loose ends, both structural and thematic, and so most novels tended to end with a well-deserved marriage or with a death that either glorified or appropriately degraded its subject. (4)

Rabbit often regards family as a retreat from a hostile external world but still feels compelled to interact with that world. The same can be said of Janice and the adult Nelson. All three experience ambivalent feelings for their families of origin, as well as for the families they create. Each of them has extramarital affairs. But they continue to conceive of family, essentially, as a closed and private space. When they must incorporate grandparents into their household configurations, as happens on several levels in *Rabbit Is Rich*, the arrangement is regarded as a sign of inadequacy that must be corrected. But nuclearity, once reestablished, again feels constrictive. Harry, Janice, and Nelson move through this vicious circle several times over. Their predicament reflects the paradox upon which family systems theory is founded. In Cohen's words, the theory

recognizes that closed systems are ultimately pathogenic, and yet it tries to heal the pathologies of closed systems. This paradox springs from a fundamental premise of family systems thinking, namely that sick families are merely well families writ large—families trying too hard and exaggerating those very saving techniques that the nuclear family needs to define itself. (5)

Theorist-practitioners in the field operate according to this premise for the reason that as a culture we are still linked to a nineteenth-century ideology of closure even as that ideology is being revised. Family systems therapists as well as novelists therefore persist in trying to accommodate the desire for closure.

The Angstrom family, especially Harry, lives within the paradox of the nuclear family, which is both sustaining and imprisoning. John Ruskin aptly epitomized the notions of family that the nineteenth century bequeathed to the twentieth. For Ruskin, the family's home is

the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. (158–59)

The family, thus idealized, keeps its members safe within the home, and keeps potential threats to their safety without. But as Cohen observes, “the logic of the nuclear family, . . . if consistently enforced, would never release its members” (16). She continues:

Ruskin’s concept of the family, which was echoed throughout so much of the literature of the nineteenth century, envisions the closed system of family as a source of social and individual well-being, as a site not of sickness but of health. Indeed, if it did not provide some of the solace and support that it promised—if it were not, in short, functional for its time—it could hardly have held sway as it did. Even today, we see that individuals may resist medical attention and cling to their symptoms as a means of keeping an otherwise disintegrating family intact. The benefits they gain from maintaining family closure seem to outweigh the suffering and debilitation they pay for them. (16–17)

Systems theory treats the family as a whole. It regards the family not as a compilation of individuals, but as an organism, and it treats the individual within the context of that organism. Thus it was at odds from the start with psychoanalysis, “which essentially saw the individual as an isolated entity and focused on unconscious drives and traumas of childhood” (Cohen 13).⁵

Despite the modern expectations of marriage that, in Updike’s mimetic representation, saturate their world, Harry and Janice enact a venturing-out dynamic over the course of thirty years.⁶ They, and later Nelson, cross over the boundary of marital fidelity and otherwise escape the nucleus numerous times, but always return to their “rightful” positions within the primary family. Society at large beckons, but the immediate family reclaims its own.

Sometimes that reclamation is achieved through the regulatory behavior of one family member. According to family systems theory, when one member suffers from a mental or psychosomatic illness—anorexia, alcoholism, or schizophrenia, for instance—the organism as a whole must be examined to determine if the symptomatic individual is subconsciously endeavoring to establish equilib-

rium and closure for the group. By localizing illness, the afflicted member forces the ailing or fragmenting family to unite in concern.⁷

Though there is no suggestion in that Updike was aware of family systems theory, his treatment of family rests upon a similar, though subterranean, acknowledgment of the need for a regulatory member. Certainly, reading the novels through the lens of family systems theory helps to bring their ideological position into relief. In each novel, we can discern an ethos of containment inscribed onto Harry and Janice's actions and sentiments. In *Rabbit Is Rich*, for example, while on an outing with his friends from the country club, Harry recalls his parents' emphasis on family unity and thinks:

They should have belonged to a club. Living embattled, Mom feuding with the neighbors, Pop and his union hating the men who owned the printing plant where he worked his life away, both of them scorning the few kin that tried to keep in touch, the four of them, Pop and Mom and Hassy and Mim, against the world and a certain guilt attaching to any reaching up and outside for a friend. (*Rabbit Omnibus* 456)

Clearly, in the understanding of family that Harry inherits, blood relationships are meant to be closed, immediate, private, and impenetrable. This is perhaps most strongly implied by the first chapter of *Rabbit Redux* whose title, "Pop/Mom/Moon," suggests the contrast between "outer" space and an "inner" domain. The chapter hints at the possibility of far-flung galaxies, humankind's uneasy sense of centrality in the universe, the alienating repercussions of new technologies, and the ideological stakes involved in the space-race. It situates a single American family in the midst of the Communist threat and an ever-expanding universe. As Lawrence R. Broer observes:

On the same day that Apollo 11 lifts off for the moon, Harry comes home to find his wife absent [because she's having an affair] and his teenage son talking about the rocket launch. The news on television about space travel matches the journey that Angstrom must suffer into the new loneliness of his heart. He must cope with jealousy, fear, lust, and defeat just as the television screen shows the first Americans walking on the moon. (26)

Updike's juxtaposition of outer space and inner space implies that something is amiss in the American home. Both Harry and Janice know by the close of the novel that it is time to reunite. Their family must be contained.

Yet, while Harry and Janice have internalized the ideal of the inviolability of family, they nevertheless come to expect that there will be yearnings for external

consolation. In *Rabbit Is Rich*, Harry looks back on Janice's affair and concludes that it made her "a niftier person" (471). And Janice accepts Harry's desires for other women, asking him how much he had wanted to go to bed with a young woman who had waited on him in a store, "[t]rying to find a topic he'll enjoy" (645).

While their recognition of their extramarital longings ironically indicates their empathy for each other, these and other violations of the nuclear ideal are carried out at a price. Updike is swift to exact that price and thereby demonstrate how such violations can make individuals and their communities suffer. But he is especially apt to show how individuals can suffer in order to mend the fabric, thus enacting the regulating function identified by family systems theory.

In *Rabbit, Run*, for instance, Harry returns to Janice after accidentally drowns their baby, and the Angstrom and Springer families collect around them in their grief, momentarily united. In *Rabbit Redux* Harry's mother suffers a long and painful death, leading Harry to sit by her bedside for hours at a time. In the same novel, Harry's lover Jill dies when the Angstrom house, in a scene rife with symbolism, burns to the ground, and Janice returns to the marriage.⁸ In *Rabbit Is Rich*, Nelson impregnates his fiancée, Pru, has an affair with her best friend, drops out of college, and smashes three cars. He succeeds in getting his parents' attention, and Harry allows him to work in the family's car lot. In *Rabbit at Rest*, Nelson has developed a cocaine addiction; his son, Roy, falls asleep so often he nearly always needs to be carried in the arms of adults; and his daughter, Judy, fakes her own near drowning in order to give Harry the opportunity to "save" her. When Harry, estranged from the family, is dying, Nelson and Janice race to his bedside. In his final moments, the three of them are together, with no "outsiders" present.

These and other regulatory behaviors and illnesses of the Angstrom family abound. Visible suffering on the part of one family member creates group cohesion on the part of the others. Thus, Updike simultaneously offers a critique of nuclearity and reinforces it.

More than any other factor, the partly absent/partly present daughter figure in all four novels localizes Harry's underlying craving for indissoluble blood ties, while at the same time indicating his suppressed desire to allow outsiders to penetrate the nucleus of family. Ironically, the original daughter-figure, the infant Rebecca June, is only briefly a member of the family. More often, the lost daughter appears in the symbolic guise of other girl children and operates as a unifying trope around which the family can coalesce. In *Rabbit, Run*, Rebecca June, whom Harry privately refers to as June, dies by drowning. In *Rabbit Redux*, Harry takes

in the runaway Jill, in whom he seeks both a lover and a child, and who dies by fire.⁹ In *Rabbit Is Rich*, he “saves” his granddaughter, Judy, from drowning and suffers a heart attack in consequence. Updike links all three characters by their four-letter names beginning with “J” and connects the rescued Judy to the drowned June by the image of water.

All along, though, the real and living daughter is Ruth and Harry’s daughter, Annabelle, and it is with her that Harry most wishes to connect. In *Rabbit, Run* he pleads with Ruth not to have an abortion. In *Rabbit Redux* he presses her with questions about whether her daughter is his. In *Rabbit Is Rich* he goes to great lengths to track Annabelle down. In *Rabbit at Rest* he deduces that she is his nurse in the hospital. His yearning for her, over thirty years, is never abated. He is, in fact, obsessed by her. But the social conventions of the nuclear family prohibit Harry from ever enclosing this daughter in the Angstrom family circle. His abiding awe of heredity and genetics, most fully explored in *Rabbit at Rest*, impel Harry toward Annabelle, the pull of “nature.” But Harry’s socially enforced commitment to an exclusive family unit built upon the contract of marriage and the ethos of containment forbid him access to her. The phantom daughter device allows Updike to collide the primal and the social. He can cast doubt upon the “natural” state of nuclearity by revealing its socially determined, rule-bound qualities, but also acknowledge the pull of “natural” blood -ties by emphasizing Harry’s desire for Annabelle.

An episode in *Rabbit Redux* reflects this contrast. When Harry confesses he has had a chance meeting with Ruth, Janice replies, “I can’t believe you never tried to get in touch with her after you came back to me. At least to see what she did about her . . . pregnancy” (ellipsis in original). Harry responds, “I felt I *shouldn’t*” but “sees now, in his wife’s dark and judging eyes, that the rules were more complicated, that there were some rules by which he should have. There were rules beneath the surface rules that also mattered. She should have explained this when she took him back” (*Omnibus* 218). Social conventions, then, keep Harry from any sustained attempt at the integration of his lost-biological daughter. Updike conflates the natural and the social more strikingly in *Rabbit Is Rich*, when Harry tells Janice he thinks he has spotted his daughter in the car lot. Janice’s vehement response is inconsistent with her earlier attitude:

“You’re telling me you’re still thinking of this bag you fucked twenty years ago and now you and she have a darling little *baby*. . . You are crazy,” she shouts. “You *always* want what you don’t have instead of what you *do*. Getting all cute and smiley in the face thinking about this *girl* that doesn’t exist while your *real* son, that you had with

your wife, is waiting at home right now . . . I don't know *why* you're such an unnatural father. . . . One thing definite, I don't want to hear any more about your darling illegitimate daughter. It's a disgusting idea." (459)

Janice's distinction between the "real" offspring, Nelson, and the "illegitimate" offspring, Harry's possible daughter, emphasizes the culturally dictated, contained nature of nuclearity, which can, at least semantically, render a particular offspring unlawful. The moment is an ugly one, and Harry regrets telling her. Momentarily swept away by the twentieth-century ideal of a companionate marriage, "[h]e had mistaken the two of them for one and entrusted to her this ghost of his alone" (459). Not until "Rabbit Remembered," when Janice confronts Annabelle in the fullness of her adulthood, does Annabelle stand a chance of incorporation into the Angstrom family, but by then Harry is long gone.

Updike's approach to nuclearity is, to say the least, complex. He does not shrink from revealing its social constructedness. He exposes its psychic cost in numerous ways, afflicting some characters with this or that ailment and killing others. But he does not renounce it. On a certain level, it appears to be Updike himself, at least as much as Harry, who needs this regulating daughter. She provides a central tension for the plot, to be sure, but she also provides a locus for both the transcendence and the grounding required by the text's protagonist. Updike, it would seem, wants to offer both a way out of the constrictions of family and a way back into the consolations of family. By granting Harry a lost daughter to search for, he can allow his hero the fluidity he badly desires and offer him a kind of grace through kinship. The possible daughter provides the allure of the unknown (the virgin territory required by American quest heroes) and an affirmation of natural blood ties (the salvation within biological/conventional family required by this particular American writer).

Whether Updike can be said to mythologize women to achieve his ends is a subject for another discussion.¹⁰ But certainly he makes sacrificial lambs of girls. June, Jill, Judy, and Annabelle serve to focus the attentions of his questing protagonist, for the Angstrom family and the narrative. Even by their absences and shadow presences, these girls regulate the actions of the other characters. They do so in ways that Nelson apparently cannot. At twelve years old Nelson may, to Harry's irritation, resemble a girl, but by *Rabbit Is Rich* he has become, according to Harry, "one more pushy man in the world" (553). Girls, however, provide Harry, and indeed the text itself, with equilibrium. A daughter can offer Harry the complementarity he seeks. Where Nelson is whiny, demanding, and accusatory, a daughter would, in Harry's imagination, have eyes like "pale blue little mirrors,"

thus reflecting him (585). Nelson certainly *is* pushy in *Rabbit Is Rich*, while Annabelle is nurturing, warm, and inviting—with Updike going so far as to make her a nurse, an updated “angel in the house.” The contrast with the other daughter figures is striking. They suffer physical disasters (drowning, fire), while she ministers to the physically unwell. In her therapeutic status as insider/outsider, she provides Harry with the emotional salve he yearns for, while the other daughter figures act as regulatory agents for the larger family.

Applying family systems theory, Cohen argues that the sick daughter of today (often anorexic) “carries the symptoms for the family, which is generally fraught with multiple covert tensions.” She maintains that “the daughter is logically the most prone to occupy the symptomatic role since she is stereotypically conditioned, by reason of age and sex, to be most accommodating to others’ needs. . . . [S]he is specifically conditioned to the needs of the father, the individual who, by choosing his wife, is responsible for bringing the family into being in the first place” (24).

Updike, as if recognizing the need in a family such as Harry’s for such a figure, gives to Harry and to the text itself the figures of June, Jill, and Judy. They fill the regulating role as, in a patriarchal, nuclear system, only a daughter can (though Nelson with his car smashing and cocaine habit certainly tries). They are twentieth-century variations on a nineteenth-century theme. Like the heroines of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic novels, June, Jill, and Judy “serve a double regulating function: within the family systems depicted in the novels, they balance the values and behavioral tendencies of other family members; within the fictional systems that *are* the novels, they are the characters most suited to the enactment of balance and closure that the genre favors” (Cohen 26). In addition, in a gesture that covertly recognizes the paradoxical nature of the nuclear family—its need for both insularity and external interaction—Updike brings in a figure who is both an accommodating insider and a biological outsider: the half-daughter Annabelle.

By this plot maneuver, his commitment to family closure never wavers, even as he flirts with the prospect of more permeable arrangements. Each Rabbit novel except the first, which concludes with Harry’s desertion, ends in affirmation of the contained family. *Rabbit Redux* puts Harry and Janice in the Safe Haven Motel after their house has burned, and ends: “He. She. Sleeps. O.K.?” (414). *Rabbit Is Rich* concludes with Pru handing Harry the newborn Judy: “Through all this she has pushed to be here, in his lap, his hands, a real presence hardly weighing anything but alive. Fortune’s hostage, heart’s desire, a granddaughter. His. Another

nail in his coffin. His." (700). *Rabbit at Rest*, as earlier mentioned, ends with Janice and Nelson distraught at Harry's deathbed, where Harry tries to tell Nelson "you have a sister" (512, italics in original).

When Nelson eventually learns of Annabelle in the final installment, "Rabbit Remembered," he wages a battle royal with Janice and her new husband, Ronnie Harrison, to allow Annabelle the family embrace he believes she deserves and that he himself so badly desires. Like his father, Nelson intuits salvation and self-revelation in blood ties. Once he knows of Annabelle's existence, he can barely contemplate life without her. He projects attributes onto her, to be sure, but he also recognizes her real strength, her vulnerability, and her separateness as an individual.

At first, Nelson makes much of their genetic link, "imagining her skin as half his, thinking, *My sister. Mine.*" (*Licks of Love* 258). He becomes driven to possess Annabelle in some fashion, imagining that she will complete him. He likens the two of them to the children in the wall mural at a diner, "a boy and a girl wearing old-fashioned German outfits, pigtails and lederhosen, holding hands, lost," like Hansel and Gretel (255). But later, as if to acknowledge the too-tight constriction of enclosed genetic ties, Updike has Nelson squirm and seek escape when, on the eve of the new millennium, Janice becomes emotional at the sight of Nelson alongside Pru, Billy Fosnacht, and Annabelle: "The teariness . . . blurs her survey of the four adult children, her son among them, and the mother of her grandchildren, all so touching, dressed up to greet this particular calendrical doom, with Harry and Fred and Mother and little Becky all squeezed inside them somehow, the DNA" (340). She makes fretful chatter about the encroaching New Year, Nelson "sees into [her] as into a dark well at whose bottom his own head in silhouette glimmers in a disk of reflected sky" (341). Embarrassed, he ushers the foursome out the door of what has been, in turn, the Springer, the Angstrom, and the Harrison home.

Ambivalence toward restrictive family form runs through the five fictions in a theme as deep as Nelson's imagined well and prompting as much reflected light. True to Updike's penchant for modernist multiplicity, the novella concludes with Nelson reintegrated into his own nuclear family with Pru while simultaneously affirming his relationship with Annabelle, promising to give her away at the altar if she marries Billy. Annabelle's manifold psychic purposes for both her father and her half-brother are seemingly endless and, perhaps by design, can be endlessly interpreted. In Kathleen Verduin's aptly chosen analogy from the field of genetics, Updike's mythologizing of women, along with the myth of self, "both run like a double helix through his work" (61).

And it is partly owing to the fact that Updike's meanings double and redouble upon themselves, that Kerry Ahearn's observation, though made before the appearance of *Rabbit at Rest*, still rings true:

The sacred and romanticized image of the nuclear family provides Updike with a myth in which to root his fiction most successfully, connecting the individual, familial, and social. In his created world, men must struggle mightily and live intensely, but are not prompted to do so by the secure family. In adultery they strive, but cannot live. Rabbit is his best exemplar of the ordinary man questing, and (Mim, Thelma, Jill, and even Ruth sees it) he is a family man. (81)

It is, therefore, no accident that the object of this ordinary man's quest turns out to be a part, yet not a full part, of what he has been evading: family. With the Rabbit series, Updike limns a complex debate about family life in late twentieth-century America. In doing so, he ratifies a form that is thought to be traditional, is reliant upon the covenant of marriage, is focused on biological relationships, and yet is mired in paradoxical impulses. He may inscribe a critique of nuclearity onto the Angstroms, but certainly not a disavowal of it.

For ultimately, the Rabbit series reinvests in the notion of an intact nuclear family, surviving against all odds and regardless of the psychic cost exacted from its members. Because the themes and plots never shrink from exploring the ways in which nuclearity is threatened by contemporary life—the commonplaceness of adultery, the discomfort of gender roles, the threat to religious faith posed by technology, and so on—the nuclear form comes across as nearly primal in its tenaciousness. Yet Updike's treatment is far from reductive: paradoxically, his characters must suppress their natural instincts, which are judged *unnatural* by the socially determined standards of the nuclear family, in order to maintain an enclosed family structure—a structure that, again paradoxically, is offered by society as the natural model of social organization. In Updike's hands, the nuclear holds within it an implied nobler reality. As in a hit song from Rabbit's middle-aged years, it is strong; it is invincible.

NOTES

1. For discussions of Updike's metaphorical use of nets, see Greiner, 56, and Donner, 25.
2. See, for instance, Alter, Burr, quoting Leslie Fiedler, 7; Detweiler, 167; Greiner, xiii; and Searles, 172.
3. Boswell observes that readers of *Rabbit, Run* are intentionally "left holding th[e] ball," not knowing whether "to nail Rabbit down for fleeing his social responsibilities" or "to congratulate him for heeding his inner call" (51).

4. Important works on family systems theory include Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), and N. J. Ackerman, *A Theory of Family Systems* (New York: Gardner, 1984).

5. Paul C. Rosenblatt also makes this: "In Western thought, explanations of what goes on in people's lives, even in the context of their families, typically are couched in terms of individual psychology. Understanding is considered to have been achieved when there are plausible words about individual motivations, intentions, needs, feelings, and thoughts. If family members have a place in an explanation, it is typically as a cause of individual dispositions. Family systems theory, by contrast, provides an understanding of the family. It focuses both on the mutual interplay of family member dispositions and on supraindividual family properties" (33).

6. In *Rabbit, Run* Harry moves in with Ruth. In *Rabbit Redux* Janice moves in with Charlie Stavros and Harry takes Jill and Skeeter into his home. Janice comes under the influence of Charlie's political ideas, and Harry comes under the influence of Skeeter's. Harry also has a sexual encounter with Peggy Fosnacht. In *Rabbit Is Rich* he and Janice swap partners while on vacation with friends, and Nelson mirrors their behavior by sleeping with the close friend of his pregnant fiancée. Janice, in a bid for more outside contact, begins taking real estate courses. United in their wish to stop living intergenerationally, she and Harry move out of her mother's house and into their own. In *Rabbit at Rest*, Harry is in the midst of a long-standing affair with Thelma and even sleeps with his daughter-in-law.

7. See Cohen, 12–25.

8. Kerry Ahearn's analysis of Harry's makeshift family in *Rabbit Redux* relates well to the ideas inherent in family systems theory. He argues, for instance, that the "contradictions in [the relationships between Harry, Jill, Nelson, and Skeeter] make for a volatile family, but the fact that hypocritical characters such as Janice . . . make the conventional 'moral' condemnations reminds us that the family group is neither 'good' nor 'bad,' and that any family's stasis contains the explanation of its destruction" (69).

9. For a discussion of Updike's willingness to sacrifice female lives so his hero can "move," see Gordon, 17–23. Gordon also treats the theme of the "moving boy" in the work of Faulkner and Dreiser.

10. Stacey Olster argues that it is Harry, not Updike, who suffers from a mythologizing tendency: Harry pursues women to achieve transcendence, but Updike "undermines his efforts at every turn," revealing the "inevitable failure to which mythologizing impulses are doomed" (109). Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that Updike endows Harry with a longing for a daughter in order to heal the split in his work "between man and the entire female part of creation: it images father-and-daughter genetic involvement as a transformation of the father into a woman" (78). Mary O'Connell maintains that "even though Rabbit enjoys privileges that he is unwilling to surrender, he is nevertheless described by Updike as being, in many ways, more confined than the women by gender identity" (8). Kathleen Verduin does not dispute Updike's mythologizing of women, but credits it with allowing highly conscious authorial introspection and the interrogation of western notions of femininity.

WORKS CITED

Ahearn, Kerry. "Family and Adultery: Images and Ideas in Updike's Rabbit Novels." *Twentieth Century Literature* 34 (1988): 62–83.

- Alter, Robert. "Updike, Malamud, and The Fire This Time." In *John Updike: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. David Thornburn and Howard Eiland. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979. 39–49.
- Barrett, Michèle. Introduction to *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, by Friedrich Engels. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Boswell, Marshall. "Updike, Religion, and the Novel of Moral Debate." In *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. Ed. Stacey Olster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 43–57.
- Broer, Lawrence R., ed. *Rabbit Tales: Poetry and Politics in John Updike's Rabbit Novels*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1998.
- Burr, Richard Wesley. *Puer Aeternus: An Examination of John Updike's Rabbit, Run*. Zurich: Juris-Verlag, 1974.
- Cohen, Paula Marantz. *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991.
- Detweiler, Robert. *John Updike*. New York: Twayne, 1972.
- Donner, Dean. "Rabbit Angstrom's Unseen World." In *John Updike: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. David Thornburn and Howard Eiland. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979. 17–34.
- Gordon, Mary. *Good Boys and Dead Girls*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991.
- Greiner, Donald J. *John Updike's Novels*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1984.
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1988.
- O'Connell, Mary. *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma: Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1996.
- Olster, Stacey. "Unadorned Woman: Beauty's Home Image." In *New Essays on Rabbit Run*. Ed. Stanley Trachtenberg. Cambridge UP, 1993. 95–117.
- Rosenblatt, Paul C. *Metaphors of Family Systems Theory: Toward New Constructions*. New York and London: Guilford, 1994.
- Ruskin, John. "Of Queen's Gardens." 1865. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Dinah Birch. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 158–59.
- Searles, George J. Biographical entry on John Updike. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, vol. 2. Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1994. 2171–2172.
- Singh, Sukhbir. "'Back on to the Life Wagon': An Interview with John Updike." *Irish Journal of American Studies* 5 (Dec. 1996): 77–91.
- Updike, John. *Licks of Love: Short Stories and a Sequel, "Rabbit Remembered."* Penguin, 2000.
- . *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit is Rich*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1990.
- . *Rabbit at Rest*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Verduin, Kathleen. "Updike, Women, and Mythologized Sexuality." In *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. Ed. Stacey Olster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 61–75.
- Versluys, Kristiaan. "'Nakedness' or Realism in Updike's Early Short Stories." In *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. Ed. Stacey Olster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 29–42.