

MEN AND WOMEN, MARRIAGE, AND ADULTERY
IN THE NOVELS OF JOHN UPDIKE

by

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A problem which is central to human existence is the conflict between impulse and obligation, and this is a central concern in novels by John Updike.

...Every human being who is more than a moron is the locus of certain violent tensions that come with having a brain. In fact there is an easy humanism that insists that man is an animal which feeds and sleeps and defecates and makes love and isn't that nice and natural and lets' all have more of that. But this is omitting intrinsic stresses in the human condition--you foresee things for example, you foresee your own death. You have really been locked out of the animal paradise of unthinking natural reflex.

You are born into one political contract or another, whose terms, though they sit very lightly at first, eventually, in the form of the draft, or taxes, begin to make very heavy demands on you. The general social contract--living with other people, driving cars on the highway--all this is difficult, it's painful. It's a kind of agony really--the agony vents itself in ulcers internally, rage externally. In short, all of our institutions--of marriage, the family, your driver's license--everything is kind of precarious, and maintained at a cost of tension. (Some people take) humanity as some kind of moral index, saying that to be human is to be good and our problems all arise from not being human enough. I think I take a rather darker view. We must of necessity lose our humanity all the time (5, 509).

Updike describes the basic roles of men and women in very traditional terms.

Laws enforce a stability whose ultimate domestic unit is the woman herself; her physiology and psychology turn on the cultivation of inner space, while the man's role calls for the conquest of outer space, for thrust and adventure, for arrowing forms of outward assertion as various as rape and theology, as admirable as scientific exploration and as deplorable as war (5, 269).

These basic roles become ritualized as men and women function in society. The attraction between men and women brings them together into marriage, and marriage brings responsibility. The husband's job, his

"conquest of outer space," comes to seem a dreary chore and he expects the wife to provide romantic and sexual relief from tedium. But the wife comes to see the husband's needs as part of her domestic duties, and as such, a responsibility sometimes to be met, sometimes to be avoided.

The Updike protagonist usually has some features in common from book to book. He is a man who retains many of his boyish qualities. He chafes at the predictability and mundanity of his life, and people around him see him as being groping and immature. He is married to a wife who responds to her mundane domestic life, including him, with a growing detachment and apparent serenity. The protagonist feels his life slipping away from him, significance all but gone, and death waiting. As he grows older he comes to need the admiration and adoration of a romantic woman, someone who caters to him rather than just tolerates him. He finds significance and renewed vigour in the arms of another woman, or women. Here is Piet, after waking from a dream in which he was about to die.

...Having faced the full plausibility of his death, he was unable to reenter the illusion of security which is life's antechamber.... He had experienced this panic before. Antidotes existed.... Piet tried to lull himself with the bodies of women he knew (2, 257).

He fantasizes about several women. This failing to soothe him, his mind wanders on to other worries--religion, his job. Then his thoughts turn to Foxy, his mistress. "She believed. She adored his p--k. With billowing gauzy width she had flung herself onto him, was his, his woman given to him" (2, 258).

This then is the basic situation which attracts the focus of Updike over and over again.

Outer Space: The Efforts of Men

Many of Updike's male characters are occupied in jobs which they initially like, feel challenged by, and enjoy. Piet is a builder of houses. Ken is a biochemist, and considers himself devoted to science. Reverend Marshall is a minister whose sermons reflect the deepest struggles of his mind and heart. But eventually the job comes to seem just a job; they feel their enthusiasm is wasted and futile. Piet is heard to say: "He wants three new ranch houses on Indian Hill by fall ... That's where the money is."

"Money," she said. "You're beginning to sound like the rest of them."

"Well," he said, "I can't be a virgin forever. Corruption had to come even to me" (2, 56).

Ken learns that even science is a competition with the possibility of losing.

...Ken came home from work looking more tired than she had seen him since graduate-student days.

'There's been a breakthrough in photosynthesis,' he told her.

'Who's found it?' she asked.

'Oh,' he sighed, 'a couple of Japs. Actually they're good men. Better than me; I've had it.(2, 324).

Reverend Marshall grows increasingly pained by the apathy of his stolid congregation. He starts an affair with the organist. His sermons become strange and disjointed as he bares his religious questionings.

Another character, Jerry, a former art student, goes through a similar disillusionment.

...As the art school faded, Jerry became an unsuccessful cartoonist and then a successful animator of television

commercials. Defeated in his ambition to become a 'name' cartoonist, and immersed in the organic and the mediocre and the familial, he suddenly dreaded death. Only religion helped (3, 77-78).

Some characters don't like their jobs in the first place. Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, 26 year old former high school basketball star, was a salesman of "Magi:Peel" vegetable peelers. He runs from this job and his wife and kids to live with another woman.

Piet meets his mistress-to-be, Foxy, when she asks him to remodel the house that she and her husband, Ken, have just bought. He abandons the money-making ranch house construction for the more exciting remodeling job.

Georgine asked him 'Why have you taken the job? You told me you had to build ranch houses.'

He answered her, 'Ranch houses are so boring. They all look alike.'

There was in Georgine a store of clubwomanly indignation, 'So do teeth. Teeth all look alike. (Her husband is a dentist.) Stocks and Bonds all look alike. Every man works with things that look alike. What's so special about you? What makes you such a playboy? You don't even have any money (2, 188).

Thus does Piet avoid the encroaching stultification of a job which was becoming monotonous and commercialized, but later his contracting partner dissolves their partnership and his wife divorces him. Many Updike characters who break out of their responsibilities suffer later as their life structure disintegrates.

Inner Space: "The psychological and social worlds that women dominate"
(2, 182)

The domestic regions in Updike's novels are shown in two perspectives. Domestic living is nurturative and supportive. In spite of how

shackled they sometimes feel, the male characters value their homes and families, and derive a sense of snugness and rootedness from them as a retreat from the competitiveness of their jobs. The husbands and wives are usually shown as having a comfortable coexistence.

And (there were) periods of twinned silence, which did not pain them, for they had begun in silence (in art school) contemplating an object posed before them, a collection of objects, a mystery assembled of light and color and shadow. In their willingness to live parallel lay their weakness and their strength (3, 284).

Many of the Updike couples have similar relationships between husband and wife. The husband does not feel dominant over his wife, try as he might. Sexuality is fading from the marriage; the wife feels only intermittantly aroused, and in-between-times, according to her mood, either honors his urges or puts him off. The husband comes to feel that her urges are independent of anything he does, and he can only bully or be good in hopes of gaining her humor. The specific causes behind this waning of the wife's sexuality are not clearly put forward, but the responsibilities of family life, the feeling of being obligated to please her husband, dissatisfaction with the husband--all seem to play a part. A feeling of detachment is frequently expressed by the wife. This recurs in different settings and different books. Ruth, Jerry's wife, has this feeling as she watches Sally's, his mistress', reactions to him.

Ruth was curious about her husband's potency, that it could produce such an effect. The wind that had broken this woman like a tree in an ice storm passed through her sometimes without stirring a leaf, and Ruth naturally wondered if she were alive at all (3, 149).

The Updike wife, always without exception occupied solely in the home, feels swallowed up whole by her family role. Unlike the husband, however, she is unlikely to seek rebellion in adultery. The one exception

takes a detached view even of her adultery.

...On the whole, she was well satisfied with her affair, and as she zipped up the children's snowsuits, or closed a roast in the oven, thought of this adventure snug in her past with some complaisance. She judged herself improved and deepened in about the normal amount--she had dared danger and carried wisdom away, a more complete and tolerant woman. She had had boyfriends, a husband, a lover; it seemed she could rest (3, 95).

The wife takes a detached view of life. Religion is silly; sex is an urge to take care of once in awhile, and in general one should see things in a wide perspective. The wife allows herself to become almost completely drained, sucked dry until she is a pleasant shell, cooking, sending the kids to school, slumbering quietly beside her husband each night. Struggling to keep her marriage together, Ruth tells Jerry of how she has to think of their children to keep herself alive.

"Don't say that. You have yourself to live for," he tells her.

"I have no self. I gave it away eight years ago."

"Nobody asked you to do that."

"Everybody did" (3, 157).

In her hard-earned serenity, the wife seems a placid rock to her husband, fulfilling her wifely obligations uncomplainingly, not responding to him in an attuned, moment-by-moment way, but in a fashion shaped by years of knowing him. Husband and wife become so familiar with each other that each individual reaction is viewed from a perspective, is seen as fitting into a general pattern; each action is robbed of its individual significance, and husband and wife respond to each other in stereotyped, accustomed ways.

The wife submits to her role, but this is not to say she submits to her husband. Often the wife is quite self-contained and impervious to her husband's will, and it is the mistress who lays herself at his feet.

Jerry says to Sally, his mistress, "I want to shape you, to make you all over again. I feel I could. I don't feel this with Ruth. Somehow, she's formed, and the best kind of life I can live with her will be lived in parallel" (3, 46). He says to Ruth, speaking of Sally, "She's mine. She belongs to me in a way you never have. When I'm with her, I'm on top. When I'm with you, it's side by side" (3, 120).

The husband feels his life slipping away. If he follows his role, he's set on a pre-planned road which ends in death. Following his impulse, his desire, seems a re-affirmation of his individual right to choice. Jerry says to Ruth,

'Whenever I'm with her, no matter where, I know I'm never going to die. Or if I know it, I don't mind it somehow.'

'And with me?'

'You're death. Very calm, very pure, very remote. Nothing I can do will change you, or even amuse you, much. I'm married to my death' (3, 144).

Angela, trying to save her marriage, tells Piet how she'll change, go back to school, get a job, see an analyst so she can learn to enjoy sex with him. But he wants Foxy, his mistress.

...There was a silver path beneath the stars. Obviously Angela barred his way. 'No,' broke from him, panicked as he felt time sliding, houses, trees, lifetimes dumped like rubble, chances lost, nebulae turning, 'no; sweetie don't you see what you're doing to me?' Let me go! (2, 211).

But he's not really sure he wants to leave. Later when Angela threatens

divorce, he says, "Don't make me leave you. You're what guards my soul. I'll be damned eternally" (2, 406). But she finally tells him, "I want out. I'm tired of being bullied."

'Have I bullied you? I suppose in a way. But only lately. I wanted in to you, sweet, and you didn't give it to me.'

'You didn't know how to ask.'

'Maybe I know now.'

'Too late' (2, 415).

Many of Updike's couples consist of a stable partner married to a partner who chafes, one who reaches for life, one who resents and envies the other's solidity and single-mindedness and sureness. "Foxy sought shelter in Ken's weatherproof rightness. She accepted gratefully his simple superiority to other people. He was better looking, better thinking, a better machine." (2, 41).

Jerry and Ruth met at art school.

...When they first saw each other naked, it was as if a new object of art had been displayed to each, and their marriage carried forward this quirk of detachment, having more in it of mutual admiration than mutual possession. Each admired the other's talent (3, 76).

Foxy, watching Piet's wife Angela,

...felt as if she were looking up toward a luxurious detached realm where observation and impressions drifted nodding by one another like strolling aristocrats. Every marriage tends to consist of an aristocrat and a peasant. Of a teacher and a learner (2, 60).

"Nine years later Piet still felt with Angela, a superior power seeking through her to employ him" (2, 4).

But as the marriage continues, one partner's remoteness becomes painful to the other. The apparent self-assurance and self-directedness of one leads the other to feel his/her own uncertain, uncongealed

personality brought into high relief by comparison. He/she feels simultaneously contemptuous of his/her partner's stolidness and envious of his/her lack of guilts and doubts, and jealous of his/her autonomy and detachment.

"Foxy came to imagine (Ken's) birth as cool and painless, without a tear or outcry. Nothing puzzled him. There were unknowns but no mysteries" (2, 40). Speaking of Ken's decision to divorce her, she says,

I've got to admit, he's the least neurotic man I ever met. He's decided this, and he's going to make it stick.

'You sound admiring,' says Piet, her lover.

'I've always admired him. I just never wanted him.'

'And me?'

'Obviously. I want you' (2, 436).

Ken, the biochemist, speaking to Piet after he learns of the affair between Piet and Foxy, says,

In chemistry, molecules have bonds. Now, listening to my wife tonight, not only what she said, the astonishingly cold-blooded deceptions, but the joyful fullness with which she spilled it all out, I had to conclude we don't have much of a bond. We should, I think. We come from the same kind of people, we're both intelligent, we can stick to a plan, she stuck with me through a lot of what she tells me now were pretty dreary years. She told me, Piet, she had forgotten what love was until you came along. Maybe I'm incapable of love. I've always assumed I loved her, felt what you're supposed to feel. I wanted her to have my child, when we had room for it. I gave her this house.... (2, 399-400).

One wonders does Ken, and the other characters like him, keep going straight and true because he doesn't feel the same temptations as other more libidinal people? Or does he accomplish his mature single-mindedness through an effort of will over his all-too-normal appetites and weaknesses? Is Piet a weak man or a free-spirit, a coward or a wanderer to be envied?

Piet has a dream.

...He was standing beneath the stars trying to change their pattern by an effort of his will. Piet pressed himself upwards as a clenched plea for the mingled constellations, the metallic mask of night, to alter position; they remained blazing and inflexible (2, 431).

Those characters married to partners more stable than themselves, while in some cases admiring them, still cannot give up their own restlessness, their own seeking out of greater significance. Rabbit says what probably any of them would say.

"If you're telling me I'm not mature, that's one thing I don't cry over since as far as I can tell it's the same thing as being dead" (6, 106).

The most basic reason for the adultery of Updike's characters can perhaps be said to be that each one wants to be loved for his or her self, or more truthfully, for no reason whatsoever. We all miss our earliest state, when our mothers loved us just because we breathed. We crave bounty un-worked-for. The knowledge that really hurts is that one has to work to live. People try at every point to escape realization of this chain of cause and effect. We emphasize the "social value" of our work. But we really work to eat.

A man comes into contact with this hurtful truth sooner and more fully than does a woman. He learns early to accept that he will not survive except by the sweat of his brow. This realization is delayed in women; because they are automatically desired for their woman's body, they are allowed to feel automatically loved. Their success depends as much on passivity as it does on action. In marriage, the housewife must do certain things to earn her keep, true, but these activities, many of which--love-making, being affectionate, having babies,--come more or less

naturally to her, are within a personal sphere and are therefore less obviously tied into the system of working for wages. The husband will not vary her food and shopping allowance according to the thoroughness of her housework, and so she can exist longer under the illusion that her efforts are all simply a labor of love. Therefore she lives in a dimension removed from that of her husband.

For his part, the love and moral support of his wife are the only things that even partially remove him from the tit-for-tat work world, the only thing that feeds his need for love without reason. And, if he suffers wage cutbacks or unemployment, even this might decline. Thus the idealization of the wife who will love her husband through thick and thin.

A woman uses her ability to inspire love as a means to insure her support. A man uses his ability to insure support as a means to inspire love. The woman is allowed to keep longer her childish faith that the world loves her because she is her. But even a strictly feminine life structure can engender the cynicism which is man's daily fare, because often her loveability is a commodity made valuable only by means of cosmetic aids and a passivity attained only through conscious suppression.

The conflict of interest between husband and wife comes because what he wants from her in terms of affection and moral support, he views as a pleasant interlude away from the demands of working for wages, but she may come to see her affections and other wifely duties in terms of something she does to insure her support, something which is part of the very structure he seeks to escape and therefore is not always a means of escape for her. The husband must make a commodity of the efforts of his muscles and intellect. But to make a commodity of ones' affections truly

seems more painful still. The husband seeks to escape his role of breadwinner when he comes home and immerses himself in the domestic, but the domestic sphere is the woman's role, and there is no escape for her.

Jerry says to Ruth, referring to their sex life,

...'Everything has to be perfect (for you). Once a month you're marvelous, but I don't have that much patience. I'm running out of time. I'm dying, Ruth.'

'Stop it. Don't you see, it's a problem any woman has; when she's a wife, there are no obstacles. So she has to make them' (3, 144).

"The new landscapes...": "The first breath of adultery is the freest; after it, constraints aping marriage develop" (2, 456).

The dynamics of adultery are not quite so simple as a fleeing from responsibility to freedom. The husband and wife, though "bonded," often do not possess each other; they live their lives parallel, and do not influence each other's emotions with as much immediacy and intensity compared to the adulterous, romantic couple. Oddly enough, many of Updike's adulterers feel more possessive of each other than of their own respective spouses. They flee the sanctioned bonds of marriage to forge their own bonds of romantic intensity. The adulterer comes to feel so significant, having his lover react to his every emotion and impulse, that his wife (or her husband) by comparison seems dull and insensitive.

"Angela asked, 'Was she that much better in bed than me?'

Piet answered, 'She was different. She did some things you don't do, I think she values men higher than you do'" (2, 402).

But sometimes it is shown that the wife, over a period of time, reacts to his most profound fears and changes, and her reactions are shaped by mutual knowledge and greater sympathy. She, after all, has invested

her life in his welfare.

The effect on the adulterous couple as they withdraw into their self-made dimension is virtually narcotic.

...They felt no hurry; this was perhaps the greatest proof that they were, Jerry and Sally, the original man and woman-- that they felt no hurry, that they did not so much excite each other as put the man and woman in each other to rest... The sense of rest, of having arrived at the long-promised calm center, filled him like a species of sleep (3, 7).

They are not so much excited by each other as put to rest--interestingly enough, all of the adulterers actually get more physical excitement and satisfaction from their spouses than from their lovers, as if sex functions at a higher pitch under the influence of some tension, some struggle, some emotional detachment, some sense of continued contact with harsher realities, whereas the lover's atmosphere is more like this:

...as the wearying wonder of her naked body being beside his sank in, (he) said with boneless conviction, 'Ah, your mine.' She put her blurred cheek against his. The tip of her nose was cold. A sign of health. We are all exiles who need to bathe in the irrational (2, 438).

The woman adulterer, being an "ultimate domestic unit," seeks to build a new marriage out of the adulterous situation. But the man balks.

What we have, sweet Sally, is an ideal love. It's ideal because it can't be realized. And any attempt to start existing, to move out of this pain, will kill us. Oh, we could make a mess and get married and patch up a life together... but what we have now we'd lose. Of course the sad thing is we're going to lose it anyway (3, 46).

Sally says, "What we have is love. But love must become fruitful, or it loses itself"(3, 53).

Updike describes Americans as "the wistful citizens of a violent society desperately oversold, in the absence of other connections, on love" (5, 127).

He describes a woman preoccupied with finding love.

Janet wished powerfully not to be frigid. All her informal education, from Disney's Snow White to the last issue of Life, had taught her to place the highest value on love. We move from birth to death amid a crowd of others and the name of the parade is love. However unideal it was, she dreaded being left behind. Hence she could not stop flirting, could not stop reaching out, though something distrustful within her, a bitterness, had to be circumvented by each motion of her heart. Liquor aided the maneuver (2, 157).

The spouse who is not adulterating views the romantic pair with mingled pain and pity. "Sally and Jerry: their thinking they were in love appeared pathetic. Ruth held their image in her mind and grew so big above them she wondered if she were going to faint" (3, 247).

Quite often in Updike's plots, the wife and mistress get together to discuss the problem of their man, this flighty creature, and then force him into a choice between them. However, choosing is not what he wants; he wants a double life. But this the women will not allow. So he vacillates between choices. First Piet wants a divorce. Then he begs Angela not to divorce him. Jerry tries to persuade Ruth into divorce.

'You could go back to the city and be an artist again. You haven't painted for years. It's a waste. I look at you boring yourself stupid around this house and feel I caught a bird in art school and put her in a cage. All I'm saying is, the door is open.'

'You're not saying that. You're saying you want me out' (3, 111).

In spite of the very real appeal of life without Jerry, Ruth just can't agree to divorce.

In good conscience she could not (give Jerry a divorce). An innocent man and a greedy woman had fornicated and Ruth could not endorse the illusions that made it seem more than that. They were exaggerators, both of them, and though she could see that beauty was a province of exaggeration, someone must stand by truth. The truth was that Sally and Jerry were probably better married to Richard and her than they would be to each other (3, 143).

She tells Jerry,

'I just can't feel that Sally is my real rival. I think my rival is some idea of freedom you have. I'll tell you this, as a wife Sally would be damn possessive.'

'In a way,' he said, 'it does seem reckless to rush from one monogamy into another' (3, 145).

Jerry wonders about Sally as a wife.

...He looked up at her and imagined himself on his deathbed and asked himself, Is this the face I want to see? Asking it was the answer; her face pressed upon his eyes like a shield; he saw no depth of sympathy in Sally's face, no help in making this passage, only an egoistic fear (3, 269).

So Ruth keeps Jerry. Angela, on the other hand, reacts differently. She wants out. Piet says,

'I'm not leaving.'

'Then I am.'

'Where could you go?'

'Ch, many places. I could go home and play chess with Daddy. I could go to New York and see the Matisse exhibit. I could fly to Aspen and ski and sleep with an instructor. There's a lot I could do, Piet, once I get away from you' (2, 415-16).

So the adultery ends, either in a new marriage or in the old one.

Jerry tells Sally, "It was alright to love you, but I shouldn't have wanted you. It's wrong to want somebody in the same way you'd want a lovely thing. Or an expensive house, or a high piece of land"(3, 268).

Piet and Angela separate, and Piet lives alone for awhile.

...He noticed a new woman downtown--that elastic proud gate announcing education, a spirit freed from the peasant shuffle, arms swinging, a sassy ass, trim ankles. Piet hurried along to get a glimpse of her front, and found, just before she turned into the bank, that the woman was Angela (2, 430).

Angela goes back to being a schoolteacher, and is apparently happier. Piet, living alone, remembers Foxy. "The world was more Platonic than he had

suspected. What he felt, remembering Foxy, was a nostalgia for adultery itself--its adventure, the acrobatics its deceptions demand, the tension of its hidden strings, the new landscapes it makes us master" (2, 429).

Piet and Foxy eventually marry, and live in Lexington, "where, gradually, they (become) accepted, as another couple" (2, 458).

Moral dilemmas--"...men don't like to make decisions; they want God or women to make them" (3, 286).

Updike makes curious connections between women and morality.

In Couples Piet is quite a modern man in that he really can't act for himself because he's overwhelmed by the moral implications of any act--leaving his wife, staying with her. While the women in that book are less sensitive perhaps to this oppressive quality, of cosmic blackness, and it is the women who do almost all the acting....I suspect that the vitality of women now, the way many of us lean on them, is not an eternal phenomenon but a historical one, and fairly recent (5, 503).

Several times Updike seems to differentiate between the man's world of strict morality and the woman's softer realm. After Foxy gets pregnant, and Piet begins to fear that Ken will learn it is Piet's baby: "Piet saw that he lived in a moral world of only men, that only men demanded justice, that like a baby held in a nest of pillows from falling, he had fallen asleep among women" (2, 345-6).

"Women have no conscience. Never their fault. The serpent beguiled me" (2, 236).

A more positive statement of the same idea: "Angela and Foxy fed into the room that nurturing graciousness of female witnessing without which no act since Adam's naming of the beasts has been complete. Women are gently fruitful presences whose interpolations among us diffuses guilt" (2, 395).

Altogether Updike has some interesting, conflicting images of woman. The temptress who pulls a man into chaos, the hausfrau who glues him to the earth.

...She sat up and began to unbutton his shirt. Her lower lip bent in beneath her tongue. Angela made the same mouth doing up snowsuits. All women, so solemn in their simple tasks, it tickled him, it moved him in a surge, seeing suddenly the whole world sliding forward on this female unsmilingness about things physical--unbuttoning, ironing, sunbathing, cooking, lovemaking. The world sewn together by such tasks (2, 47).

So woman can be a civilizing force on man, or can distract him away from civilization; the opposing forces push him into a moral dilemma.

My books are all meant to be moral debates with the reader....The question is usually, 'What is a good man?' or 'What is goodness?' and in all the books an issue is examined. Take Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit, Run*: there is a case to be made for running away from your wife. And I was just trying to say, 'Yes, there is certainly that, but then there are all these other people who seem to get hurt.' That qualification is meant to frame a moral dilemma (5, 502).

Updike does not view these conflicts as problems to be "solved," but as essential ambiguities in life, which give life its tensions and complexities.

A person who has what he wants, a satisfied person, a content person, ceases to be a person. Unfallen Adam is an ape. I feel that to be a person is to be in a situation of tension, is to be in a dialectical situation. A truly adjusted person is not a person at all, just an animal with clothes on (5, 504).

The Choices Before Us

Reading Updike, I was reminded of a short conversation I had with my dad when I was eleven years old. It took place right after my family had been to see the movie, Camelot. I thought Vanessa Redgrave was so beautiful as Guinevere, and I found it hard to condemn that adultery of

she and Launcelot; though I was a very righteous-minded child, I was easily swayed by romance. I asked my dad what would he do if he ever met somebody he started to love besides Mother.

"I'd stay as far away from her as possible."

"But what if you really loved each other?"

"I'd stay as far away as possible."

I suppose my father has a Ken-type approach to life. The most important thing in life is to make decisions and stand by them. After that, other possible choices are irrelevant. Whereas I, and my generation, feel glutted with choices and alternatives, Dad would probably say that the stifling of a strong, heartfelt desire in the interest of long-range considerations is no great tragedy, whereas we tend to base our reality upon the vividness of our emotions, and a denied desire is like an aborted child, a piece of ourselves denied and cast off.

We are defined by what we feel, and resist being defined by what we choose. Thus the current objection to the first questions of small talk--"Who are you married to?" "Where do you work?", or "What's your major?". The self-help psychologists tell us, "Don't answer these questions. You are not defined by where you work and who you marry." Don't ask me that! I might be in a different job next week. I might be married to someone else a year from now.

But I'm coming to believe that if we are not defined by our choices, we are not defined at all. Feelings don't make me an individual. A million other people probably have the same feelings as they hesitate at the threshold of adulthood. Choice based solely on feelings is no choice, because we feel so many different things.

not one of them really is. Angela comes the closest. She simply retreats from men altogether, living with her daughters, teaching at a girls' school.

Updike's male characterizations seem to cover a wider range than his female characterizations. I find it hard to identify with Updike's unreflecting female characters. I do identify with the males, however. My inner feelings do have a great significance to me, and much of social structure does seem bent upon eroding this significance. I find that the people I respect are those who have somehow put structure in their lives without damming their sources of significance and creativity.

Updike is a master at depicting the tragedy of lives which are being wasted. His protagonist is Everyman, anyone who feels that what happens to himself and what he does is important and should not be wasted in a programmed life. But his novels do not aid us in finding conclusions about life. The problem is portrayed, the various possibilities are acted out. But no conclusions are drawn, and we are simply left with a more vivid impression of the conflicts involved in life and the choices before us.

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