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John Updike

Taken from <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/upd0bio-1>

A Guiding Light Called Conscience

A fast-paced world, devoid of values, governed by self-serving reason than real consideration, and a world deluged with allurements in all its forms - this perhaps sums up the new millennium! This high tech world, replete with the latest electronic gadgets, has got people into a weird mould. They are made to think faster and view things from an analytical perspective. They live in a world where there is little time for God. The new millennium needs God – is what can be deduced from the fiction of John Updike (1932 – 2009).

Through his characters, Updike focuses on mainstream American Protestantism which tends to be critical of the forces of life that were threatening the fabric of society. His preachers have decided to serve God, but in some inexplicable way, they are torn by the corporeal world. The power of discernment is perhaps the greatest gift anyone could have on earth. God's gift of the conscience helps people discern good and evil. The gift is lost as one grows insensitive to the voice of the conscience. Layers of guilt and remorse can block this guiding light called conscience, and make men more resentful, jealous, vile and cruel.

Short Stories of John Updike

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John Updike has defined the ethos of the new millennium very aptly in his short stories. The world today needs people who could be more compassionate, more understanding, wiser and more balanced in their attitudes towards their fellowmen. According to Benedicta Cipolla, “Updike's studies of theology and Scripture have led him to form strong opinions, though he remains reluctant to position himself as an authority on anything except his own oeuvre”.

Pigeon Feathers

In his “Pigeon Feathers”, he takes the readers to the countryside, where things slow down and people have much time for thought and reflection. The story is about a boy called David whose sensitivity to the supernatural takes him through an unexpected spiritual journey.

The fear of death haunts David all the time. One day, during his stay in the countryside, his grandmother asks him to shoot all the pigeons in the barn. Without a moment's hesitation, David shoots all the birds ruthlessly. Later, when he is asked to clear up the mess, he takes a closer look at the dead pigeons. At that moment, the beautifully, crafted feathers of the birds strangely strike a chord in David's heart. He is reminded of his creator who happens to be the birds' creator too. He realizes that God who lavished such care on him would definitely care for him.

The death of the birds brings David close to the heart of compassion. It refines him and reminds him of his vulnerable nature and of his need for God. This is reminiscent of the death-scene in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. This is the scene where Prince Andrew softens and sees something of the supernatural when he has a close brush with death. He senses the overwhelming presence of God and asks in wonder, “Is this death?”(2103).

The thought of death which could be frightening to most people is pleasant to Prince Andrew, because he has learnt obedience already by being sensitive to the voice of his conscience.

Role of Death in Our Life

Death mellows down people and reminds them of their own vulnerabilities regardless of who they are. Sometimes it all takes the shadow of death to soften people and make them wonder at a higher power beyond their grasp. It gives them a moment to pause, look at things that matter most and talk of things that matter most in their heart. Few words are overused as “love”. Almost nothing in life touches us deeply. Love needs to be rightly understood, for it to be rightly practised” (Mannath, 5). In fact, love is life's most precious gift that anyone can possess on earth. Love does not need a language to make its presence known. . It is overtly expressed in the actions of the most loving and selfless people who are sensitive to the needs of their fellowmen.

This story, “Pigeon Feathers” reminds people of the need to pause and ponder over the graver issues of life. In this world, where violence is at its peak, people have only looked at the havoc it has caused. There is a failure to delve deeper and get to the heart of the matter. Violence has crept into virtually every area of life. Unfortunately, people are so caught up with their schedule that they have become insensitive to the still small voice of their conscience, because of which they continue to do what they have been doing.

“Our normal way of viewing the world is dominated by scientific knowledge and thus we have lost the art of seeing God revealed in and through his creation” (Toon, 15). In the story, “Pigeon Feathers” the death of the pigeons reminds the boy of a higher power quite mysterious, incomprehensible, beyond his grasp. Perhaps death is the only thing the scientists and technologists would never get hold of. The impact caused by the death of the pigeons, small as it may seem to most people, draws David’s attention along profound lines. The gruesome act, over which he regrets lamentably, points him to his Creator and encourages him to think about God. He had prayed about War Time posters, which arrived late, signifying the fact that God answered prayers in His own time.

If people did not sin, they would not need any external guidance and conscience alone could direct their behaviour. The necessity for the written law arose from original sin when man, dimmed by passion failed to hear clearly the inner voice. In the world, today, both the written law and the inner law of conscience are needed. However, in their daily relationships, people subconsciously trust their conscience more than written laws and regulations. Indeed, it is impossible to have laws for every imaginable situation and to foresee any attempts at breaking them. After all, shrewd people manage to twist and manipulate even the clearest of laws.

Therefore, the conscience works inside every person with the object of urging people to do what is morally good and just. It happens sometimes that a man caught in the swirl of his some strong passion or over whelmed by fear appears not to hear the voice of their conscience and so the inner voice is suppressed and is a voiceless entity.

The Supernatural

The supernatural is there for everyone to see. However, few perceive it and understand its implications. God has patterned his message in virtually every object of the environment. Therefore, even if people get past their conscience, His creations outstare them and remind them of God’s omniscience. When the inner voice is drowned, perhaps nature in all its beauty helps one feel the solemn presence of God. John Updike seems to suggest the idea that man might need an outside help to stimulate his finer side.

In most of his short stories, John Updike uses the things of the environment to drive home his point. As can be seen, the dead pigeons in the environment cause a stir in David’s heart to make him moralise and think about God for a moment. The incident has a lasting impact on him.

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Church-Going

In another story of John Updike, entitled, “Church-Going”, the grassy path to the church brings along with it the thrills that perhaps the church service does not offer.

On the way to the church, there are some tethered goats grazing by the wayside. This distracts the little boy David and his parents too and makes them wonder about God’s creations.

On entering the church, people fall silent and an air of solemnity and awe for God fills the air. David’s father quickly occupies the aisle seat for convenience. He does not pay much attention to the sermon just as anyone else does in the congregation. The churchgoing itself becomes a compulsory ritual for the people.

“Everywhere I go, people tell me the same thing: church is boring. And I have to admit they have a point. Being a vicar, I go to a lot of churches, and many of them are extremely dull. Many church services are so boring that God is asleep as well” (Chalke,11)

In describing a local church in his short story “Church Going,” John Updike is describing the kind of vicars, besides the kind of congregation in most churches. The emphasis is more on rituals and ceremonies than the actual issue. Most people imagine that they are close to God if they just worshipped him in churches while actually God was someone distant in their lives.

“If you are going through a heartbreak and really having a difficult time, don’t blame God! Human error is always the culprit: error of judgement, error of will, or error of purpose. Human selfishness, indifference, rebellion, folly, stupidity, brashness can always be found as the root cause of human misery and suffering...” (Schuller, 43).

You Will Never Know How Much I Love You

The short story, “You will Never Know How Much I Love You,” is about a little boy called Ben who goes to a fair, hoping to enjoy himself immensely.

As it turns out, he loses his money at the wheel of fortune. He comes home, disillusioned and frustrated. John Updike seems to suggest the idea that the world itself is like a fair, which ensnares people with all its allurements. Most people are in the throes of all the excitement that the world can offer. The things of the world give them a temporary satisfaction. Later, they realise the futility of their worldly pursuits.

The very title of the story, “You will Never Know How Much I love You,” suggests the love of God which is unparalleled in the world and the failure of people to discern it.

The objects of nature in all their silence overshadow people with God’s awesome presence. Unfortunately, only people with a high degree of sensitivity perceive God’s hand in nature.

“We hardly see God revealed in his universe and we therefore do not think of this world as itself dependent upon that other world of heaven, where God uniquely dwells and is wholly known and experienced by his creatures.” (Toon, 15).

The Leaves

In the short story, “The Leaves”, a man bemoans the betrayal of his wife. As he looks out of the window, one day, the leaves in the garden fascinate him. The scene takes him on a quest. He notices that the leaves cast different shadows on the ground. This reminds him of the varying dimensions of troubles that one could face in life. He realizes that there is also an unseen great power in the universe in whose grasp the entire universe lies. He attributes this great power to God. With God’s help, he could take on the challenges, head on.

Rabbit Run

Rabbit Run is about a man called Harry Angstrom Rabbit’s escapades. He is always on the run, fleeing from the environment he is confronted with. Married to Janice, he feels the monotony of life taking its toll on him. He relies more on instinct rather than wisdom for his future actions. In short, he turns out to be an unprincipled youth, who is always on a relentless quest, seeking for a meaning to live. In the process, he is embroiled in many unpleasant experiences. Initially, as the story begins, he is watching a basketball match. Later, as he himself plays the game, he rediscovers his hidden talents, rather nostalgically. This newfound ambition, which was apparently dormant within him, finds an outlet. He is on the playground, unmindful of his wife, Janice who would be giving birth to his baby.

In a bid to shirk his responsibilities, Rabbit seeks the love of another woman called Ruth. The relationship is short-lived. Then once again, Rabbit is on the run. This time he is hired as a gardener to one Mrs. Smith.

Rabbit seems to be on a religious quest beyond the natural world. He likes the fragrance of flowers, as he tends the garden. In between, the church bells remind him of God and of his need to ask for God’s forgiveness.

Updike directs us in the words of Alice and Kenneth Hamilton “to those aspects of earth which can speak to us of heaven and show us how to relate ourselves qualitatively to it. He gives us specific situations confronting us everyday--he lets us see that behind the shifting surface of experience, life brings us there is a constant question which each of us must answer for himself. Does the universe blindly ruled by chance, run”. (Hamilton, 42)

Updike makes use of metaphors extensively. Rabbit is the only one seeking for meaning. Rabbit’s heart is described as a fist, an amphitheatre, a drum, a galley slave, a ball player, waiting for the whistle. Julia Keller in *The Creator of 'Rabbit': At rest after dazzling life* quotes Updike in an interview with the National Book Foundation. Updike said that he saw Rabbit as "the kind of man who won't hold still, who won't make a commitment, who won't quite pull his load in society," a guy who once was somebody, "and then everything afterwards runs downhill." “Rabbit, then, is like all of us: not what we were. Not what we ought to be. But still trying to play the game, even if it's only a friendly little competition in a scruffy alley, just before dusk.” (Keller)

Short Stories of Updike

Updike, in his short stories, has reminded people of the extent to which they can rely on their own capabilities. He has suggested that the inner lives of people are more important than the outward. The description of nature in all its serenity, in Updike’s short stories, has taught people to sway to the tender rhythm of life. The things of nature evoke love and compassion and more importantly, they remind them of the love and compassion of God.

In fact, the objects of nature can brighten up anyone’s day and give one a reason for living. They can smoothen the rough edges of a dreary life and mellow down people. He says, "My books are all meant to be moral debates with the reader" in which the fundamental concern is to get the reader to ask the question, "What is goodness?" (quoted by James Yerkes, ed., *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1999.)

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