

A Nietzschean Interpretation of John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*

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ABSTRACT

The paper is on the light of Nietzsche's interpretation on cause and effect, in which the usual sequence of cause and effect is inverted because the so-called "cause" is in fact the cause of the exploration on the perceptible phenomenon. According to Nietzsche, the perceptible phenomenon should be the cause, while the usual exploring "cause" should be the effect. With Nietzsche's understanding of cause and effect, the paper, taking Rabbit's confusing running as the cause in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, situates Rabbit's running to explore his inner calling from the horizontal perspective, i.e. the contiguity of Rabbit's running between two spaces formed by two women — his wife and his mistress, and from the vertical perspective, i.e. the succession of Rabbit's running away from, firstly, his job, and then, from the capitalist industrialized society. Through the situation of Rabbit's running, the paper gets conclusion that what Rabbit is running from is the oppression of the social class, which is the effect of capital oppression in the society. In the capitalist industrialized society, money rule penetrates in every corner of the society and deforms everything including the individual personality, the familial relation and the social norms.

Keywords: contiguity, succession, inner calling, alienation, deformation

I. INTRODUCTION

John Updike is perhaps one of the most controversial writers in 20th century's America. Throughout his literary career, he has attracted a diverse critical response. Some critics sneer the narrowness and commonness of Updike's household theme while others praise his greatness catching the major problems in the common American life. His works have been widely read and criticized, especially since the Rabbit saga brought him international fame. *Rabbit, Run* (1960) is his first step to this fame, which is not only a critical and popular success in academic circles, but has continued to be read and praised home and abroad ever since its publication. Donald Greiner said, "With Rabbit Angstrom, Updike adds his name to the short list of American authors capable of successfully creating immortal characters that first absorb and then define the national culture." (De Bellis, 2005, p.50) James A Schiff compared Rabbit Angstrom with Huckleberry Finn and Jay Gatsby, regarding him as "an icon in American literature, a mythical protagonist whose story speaks eloquently to and reveals much about his national culture." (Schiff, 1998, p.28) James A. Schiff also stated "one could argue that through its larger-than-life protagonist, its success in capturing the passage of time as well as a particular time and place in history, its national magnitude, and its

literal size, Rabbit Angstrom is a prose epic." (Schiff, 1998, p.31) From the comments above, it is not difficult to notice that Updike is an author with profound thought and his fictional character Rabbit Angstrom is a multidimensional literary figure and *Rabbit, Run*, the first in the Rabbit saga, can be read from different point of views. On the one hand, Updike's *Rabbit, Run* seems to depict a common American young man stuck in his common middle-class marriage and life during some common days in 1950s. As Norman Podhoretz says, "To me he seems a writer who has very little to say and whose authentic emotional range is so narrow and thin that it may without too much exaggeration be characterized as limited to a rather timid nostalgia for the confusions of youth." (Podhoretz, 1973, p.343) While those who appreciate Updike's works praise him for his ability to explore the inner core of his characters — to "get into" them, and regard him as the voice of his time. Rachael C. Burchard claims that John Updike is "the voice of today's honest searchers and a literary artist unsurpassed in the current American scene." (Burchard, 1971, p.4) It is the controversy which *Rabbit, Run* strikes that attracts the constant attention in readers and critics.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL CONCERN IN *RABBIT, RUN* AND CAUSE-AND-EFFECT

As the grandson of a Presbyterian minister (his first father-in-law was also a minister), Updike's writing in all genres has displayed a preoccupation with philosophical questions. One of Updike's philosophical concerns in *Rabbit, Run* lies in the tensions and frustrations of American middle-class life of the protagonist, especially in the relationship between Rabbit, and Janice, Rabbit's wife, and Ruth, the prostitute. Updike's philosophical concern is confined in the household in *Rabbit, Run*. This novel is Updike's attempt to explore the American middle-class who often mingles joys and sorrows of suburban life with a current of discontent. In fact, the plot in *Rabbit, Run* is centered on Rabbit Angstrom's discontent with his marriage and life and on his unsuccessful flights from the family. Through the successive flights, Rabbit has been seeking beyond the middle-class. What he is seeking, though invisible, has always intertwined with Rabbit's marriage and life in a perceptible way. Lacking the understanding of what Rabbit is seeking, many of his inner experience and outer behaviors will be baffling, or even worse, incomprehensible. What Rabbit is seeking is the key to understand Rabbit, and why he has to run as well as what he has to run from. Between Rabbit's running and Rabbit's seeking forms a kind of cause-effect relationship.

Causality is a basic principle of our universe. One event always causes another in our common sense. The principle of causality asserts the logical and temporal priority of cause to effect. But, Nietzsche argues in *The Will to Power* (1888), this concept of causal structure is not something given as such but rather the product of a precise rhetorical operation, a chronological reversal. (Adams, 1989, p.154) Suppose one perceives a painful itch. This causes him or her to look for a possible cause and targeting, perhaps, a mosquito. He or she thus presets a link and reverses the perceptual or phenomenal order, itch-mosquito, to produce a causal sequence, mosquito-itch. Jacques Derrida once describes in *Position* (1981), in a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other, occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy. (Derrida, 1981, pp.56-57) What we become conscious of in the outside world is always taken for granted as the cause though in fact it comes after our inner perception. Our inner perception, though often taken as the effect, comes first chronologically in the cause-effect sequence. In the phenomenism of the 'inner world' we invert the chronology of cause and effect. The basic fact of the 'inner experience' is that the cause gets imagined after the effect has occurred." (Culler, 2004, p.86) The experience of painful itch, it is claimed,

causes us to discover the mosquito and thus cause the production of a cause.

In the case of *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit's running as the outer behaviors, similar to the painful itch, should be the first to get studied to find out the "cause" behind, something in the inner world. One may detect the cause of Rabbit's running from family, from job and from society vaguely and partially in the inner experience. However, Updike's narrative, though presenting both the inner experience and outer behaviors of the protagonist, is still puzzling when one tries to establish a reasonable cause-effect sequence between the inner experience and Rabbit's running. That's to say, between the two still exists a gap. It is the gap that stirs the controversy among the readers and critics when reading the novel. And it is the gap that brings difficulty in the readers to understand Rabbit's running. What does Updike do to produce the gap? To conceal partially the inner experience of the protagonist? Or to conceal totally what is behind the inner experience of the protagonist? In either case, there will be a division of the inner experience, i.e. the division of the lower level and higher level. Those inner experience distinctly presented in the novel will be the lower level and those indistinctly presented the higher level, since without it, it will be confusing, even impossible to establish a reasonable or sense-making cause-effect sequence in order to understand the novel. It will be easier to understand if taking the division of different levels in the inner experience. For the sake of clarity, I would like to notify this higher level of inner experience the inner calling, or the inner motivation. From the perspective of the inner motivation, it will get a better understanding on Rabbit's running in *Rabbit, Run*.

When mentioning the development of discourse, Roman Jakobson says "one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity" (Jakobson, 2004, p.10). If similarity and contiguity are the two dimensions of discourse, contiguity and succession will be the interpretative dimensions in Rabbit's running under the cause-effect relationship. To understand Rabbit's inner calling, we have to locate the contiguity and succession of Rabbit's running, or, in another way, to examine the logical perspective and the chronological perspective of Rabbit's running.

III. CONTIGUITY OF RABBIT'S RUNNING

Between Rabbit's runnings, the novel presents two different spaces where Rabbit lives. One is the house Rabbit lives with Janice, his wife, the other is the apartment Rabbit lives with Ruth, the prostitute. With the two different living spaces, Updike also presents two different bodily spaces Rabbit finds in Janice and Ruth. For the sake of clarity, the space related to Janice

will be called the first space, while the space related to Ruth the second space.

The first space is in fact Rabbit's house with Janice, his wife. It's a shabby half-house in a shabby area with wide-spaced windows like the eyes of an animal and with the disgusting color varying "from bruise to dung" (Updike, 1991, p.12). Such house is far from comfort and satisfaction. Separated from its context, such depiction is almost painful to read. How can one, living in this house, be satisfied with one's life? The dissatisfaction will lead to regret and resentment, naturally relating to Rabbit's unhappy marriage with Janice. He and Janice Springer met a little over three years ago while both were working at Knoll's, a local store. Youthful passion led them to Janice's co-worker's bed every day after work. Soon Janice became pregnant, and the two were forced to get married. Seven months after the wedding, their first child, a son, was born. This is a hasty marriage which hides many potential problems. Now their son is two and a half, and Janice is again in her third trimester of pregnancy. To a young man of twenty-six, what he wants is neither a pregnant wife nor a son but his "once pretty girl" — the girl he met at Knoll's, the local store. Before marriage, Janice is far more from annoying. Occasionally, she is even scary in Rabbit's eyes: "When confused, Janice is a frightening person. Her eyes dwindle in their frowning sockets and her little mouth hangs open in a dumb slot. Since her hair has begun to thin back from her shiny forehead, he keeps getting the feeling of her being brittle, and immovable, of her only going one way, toward deeper wrinkles and skimpy hair" (Updike, 1991, p.16).

As a person who cares about neatness, what "Rabbit" feels most dissatisfied with his wife's is her incompetence in housekeeping. It is the messiness of their room he sees when he gets ready to go and pick up Nelson at his parents' home, which makes him suddenly aware of the constriction of his married life:

The cluster behind him in the room — the Old-fashioned glass with its corrupt dregs, the choked ashtray balanced on the easy-chair arm, the rumpled rug, the floppy stacks of slippery newspapers, the kid's toys here and there broken and stuck and jammed, a leg off a doll and a piece of bent cardboard that went with some breakfast-box cutout, the rolls of fuzz under the radiators, the continual crisscrossing mess — clings to his back like a tightening net. (Updike, 1991, p.19)

With this sickening picture in front of him, he hears Janice call from the kitchen to ask him to pick up a pack of cigarettes on his way out; "Rabbit freezes, standing looking at his faint yellow shadow on the white door that leads to the hall, and senses he is in a trap." (Updike, 1991, pp.19-20). And here begins Rabbit's running. Is it out of an impulse of immaturity or out of a caprice of personality that Rabbit abandons

Janice? In either case, Rabbit would be a jerk and there should be no one to help him out. It seems that Rabbit's abandoning his family is out of some deeper or more sympathetic reasons, for quite a few people are on his side to console, to help even to support him. Rabbit's case is not an easy one. Neither is the novel. It involves many aspects in life. Let's take this as a peephole and spy on Janice first, for Janice is the direct cause of Rabbit's running away.

The second space Rabbit lives is Ruth and her apartment. "(Ruth) is fat..., but not that fat. Chunky, more. But tall. She has flat blue eyes in square-cut sockets. Her thighs fill the front of her dress so that even standing up she has a lap. Her hair, kind of a dirty ginger color, is bindled in a roll at the back of her head. Beyond her the parking meters with their red tongues recede along the curb, and at her feet, pinched in lavender straps, four sidewalk squares meet in an X." (Updike, 1991, p.55). "Her complexion isn't good now. But her hair is thick" (Updike, 1991, p.56). This description for Ruth turns out that she is a big and tough thus secure and reliable woman. Ruth makes Rabbit relaxed, "the space between the muscles of his chest feels padded with warm air" (Updike, 1991, p.56). Moreover, Rabbit recognizes that Ruth is "so good-natured" (Updike, 1991, p.56).

The second space is where Ruth's good-natured quality is embodied. First, Ruth loves cleaning. After Rabbit spends a wonderful first night with Ruth, as soon as Rabbit gets up, Ruth "made the bed" "while he was out of the room" (Updike, 1991, p.88). Then Ruth is better at cooking. "When Ruth serves lunch he sees she is a better cook than Janice; she has boiled the hot dogs somehow without splitting them. With Janice, they always arrived at the table torn and twisted and looking tortured." (Updike, 1991, p.91) Ruth is placed in comparison with Janice and supersedes Janice in every way except the legal position of a wife. When Ruth is preparing their first meal, Rabbit notices "Ruth's curtains of dingy dotted Swiss blow; their gauze skin gently fills and they lean in toward him as he stands paralyzed by a more beautiful memory: his home, when he was a child, the Sunday papers rattling on the floor, stirred by the afternoon draft, and his mother rattling the dishes in the kitchen; when she is done, she will organize them all, Pop and him and baby Miriam, to go for a walk." (Updike, 1991, p.90) Ruth is identified with Rabbit's mother, a woman bringing him warm memories. The most significant superiority of Ruth to Janice lies in her humility and tameness. Under Updike's pen, Ruth seems willing to do anything Rabbit asks. Even, she is willing to please him by doing things better than Rabbit expects. "... the thought of her city girl's paper-pale feet bare on the stones for his sake makes his heart fevered with exertion, sob, and he clings to her tough body with the weakness of grief." (Updike, 1991, p.107) "... she's been trying to slim

down for him and had lost six pounds" (Updike, 1991, p.136) Ruth is not only humble and cooperative in sex but also tame and obedient in everyday life. What's more, Ruth asks Rabbit's opinion before making nearly every decision. In the second space, Rabbit is the master. In some ways Ruth is the type of woman Rabbit seems to be searching for. Though a little heavy, Ruth is neat, loves to cook, knows how to keep a house, and proves sexually satisfying. Ruth's total difference from Janice provides another possibility for Rabbit's life. Rabbit knows, "that's the sign" (Updike, 1991, p.56), because "he knows he has her." (Updike, 1991, p.89)

Rabbit's running from Janice, the first space to Ruth, the second space, brings him the sense of family and the sense of being a man. The second space appears as a "shelter" in his gloomy marriage life. In Ruth, Rabbit finds happiness and satisfaction in life, with everything perfect except Ruth is a prostitute.

IV. SUCCESSION OF RABBIT'S RUNNING

From the chronological perspective, Rabbit's running approximates job holding and job losing. Before Rabbit's running, he still holds a job and keeps his connection with the society. While after his running, he loses his job thus breaks the connection and drifts away from the society.

Before Rabbit's running, he has several humble jobs which support him a humble life. Without the necessary education to give him the edge for a better and more fulfilling job, Rabbit can only take jobs he does not desire yet is compelled to do by economic necessity. Apparently, he has been shifting from one job to another since his retirement from the Army. When the story starts, Rabbit has had his new job for only four weeks, "demonstrating a kitchen gadget [MagiPeel peeler] in several five-and-dime stores around Brewer" (Updike, 1991, p.14). Due to his limited earnings and the fact that Janice is home with their little boy and in her late pregnancy with another child, Rabbit's family can only afford a shabby half-house in "a development built all at once in the thirties" (Updike, 1991, p.12).

Rabbit's story happens when his hometown, Brewer, is going through a process of industrialization. Brewer has become the site of many sprouting factories:

[Brewer is] in the smoky shadow before dawn as a gradual multiplication of houses among the trees beside the road and then as a treeless waste of industry, shoe factories and bottling plants and company parking lots and knitting mills converted to electronics parts and elephantine gas tanks lifting above trash-filled swampland yet lower than the blue edge of the mountain from whose crest Brewer was a warm carpet woven around a single shade of brick. (Updike, 1991, p.41)

Indeed, Rabbit lives in humble conditions although the late Fifties was an era of affluence under President Eisenhower. The society in general has progressed, but Rabbit is said to have had "long gloom" (Updike, 1991, p.11) although no specific reason is given. In one instance when he arrives home at the beginning of the book, Janice is watching television. What Jimmy, the big Mouseketeer, is talking to a group of boys and girls on the screen seems giving a clue:

Know Thyself... It means, be what you are. Don't try to be Sally or Johnny or Fred next door; be yourself. ...God gives to each one of us a special talent ... God wants some of us to become scientists, some of us to become artists, some of us to become firemen and doctors and trapeze artists. And he gives to each of us the special talents to become these things, provided we work to develop them. We must work, boys and girls. So: Know Thyself. Learn to understand your talents, and then work to develop them. That's the way to be happy. (Updike, 1991, p.15)

As he finishes the speech, the Mouseketeer "pinches his mouth and winks." Harry imitates the pinching and winking and thinks:

That was good. ... getting the audience out front with you against some enemy behind, Walt Disney or the MagiPeel Peeler Company, admiring it's all fraud but, what the hell, making it likable. We're all in it together. Fraud makes the world go round. The base of our economy. (Updike, 1991, p.15)

Apparently Rabbit is familiar with and believes in this type of teaching in individualism and American dream, an essential part of the national spirit: As long as you work hard, develop your special talent, and pursue your own goal, happiness is promised and your dream will come true. But Rabbit is no longer one of the innocent "boys and girls" on the screen. He has worked hard, developed the talent given to him — playing basketball, still pretty good at it, but the promised "happiness" is nowhere within sight, and his dream remains a faltering, distant dream. Therefore, he is aware of the "fraud" in the American value system and sees in his mind's eyes "some enemy behind" in the external world. Rabbit's feeling is only an unconscious awareness, and he does not understand the nature of the "fraud", or recognize the "enemy behind". But he does recognize that fraud is the base of the economy. So he has to join the "fraud" if he wants to connect with the society. And he does do exactly in his job as a demonstrator for the MagiPeel and later as a used car salesman for Fred Springer, his father-in-law.

After his running, the social relationship is let loose in Rabbit's life. He gets a break to think about what the "fraud" is and who is the "enemy behind". Ruth provides Rabbit some possible answer. Through Ruth, Rabbit is reflecting on Janice and her upper-middle

class family. Though born into an upper-middle class family, Janice has been in a way a victim of her father's business prosperity. Fred Springer, Janice's father, devotes all his time and effort to the family business, a used car lot. Thus Janice has been emotionally neglected in her childhood. She is so eager to get her father's attention that, when her father calls her on the phone, she wishes "the conversation would go on forever." During the childhood, Janice has to compete with the family "lot" for her father's concern. Janice's emotional neglect from her father seems to be complicated by the severity of the overly critical mother. When her mother knows Rabbit's leaving home, she blames Janice as the family disgrace. The conditions of Janice's life indicate that the daughter of affluent parents may actually become the victim of their preoccupation with material pursuit and great concern with their reputation as an important family in the community, and that alienation has crept into the household in late capitalist society.

In comparison, Ruth's life background is similar to Rabbit's. Like him, she comes from a poor family. Unlike Rabbit, however, she loses her innocence early in life so as to compete with the rich girls in school. Ruth is much earlier to recognize the class differences in the industrial society. In a way even Ruth's turn into prostitution is her attempt to fight against the rich and is motivated by her consciousness of the social contradictions in the society. Ruth, of course, has taken a poor means, and as a result, she becomes a victim of the society. Meanwhile, Ruth appreciates Rabbit in that he has not "given up", "in the stupid way", he's "still fighting." (Updike, 1991, p.89) Here, Rabbit's running, though stupid and useless, is his fighting against the fraud and the enemy behind the industrial society, i.e. the alienation in the capitalist industrial society.

So in the end of the novel when Rabbit determines to run away and never come back, Rabbit feels "[a] strange strength sinks down into him" (Updike, 1991, p.271), as if "he has been crawling in a cave and now at last beyond the dark recession of crowding rocks he has seen a patch of light" (Updike, 1991, p.271). Symbolically, Rabbit's vision of the "light" is what he states as "the simplest truth" (Updike, 1991, p.272). That is, in the capitalist industrial society when one's childhood is penetrated with alienation, one's emotional life is destroyed and the whole society is deformed since the family, the minimal unit of society is deformed. What is good and what is right is mismatching. What is good, like the social values in the talent-propagandized TV program, is merely a fraud, a saying. What is right, like the money-making effort in Fred Springer, is replacing what is good as the current social determiner. Since then, everything, including the family, the wife, the child, the lover, in the society is getting contaminated. Thus, when Rabbit leaves

everything behind and runs away, his heels are growing "lighter and quicker and quieter" (Updike, 1991, p.284).

V. CONCLUSION

Updike tells his depressing and frequently sordid story with a true novelist's power in *Rabbit, Run*. Up to a point *Rabbit, Run* seems to be saying that this is what much of middle-class life in the U.S. is like.

Superficially, Rabbit can never be satisfied with an emotionally lame wife, nor with his marriage. Janice's innate lacking of love and care from her family gives her no clue how to sustain a family. She even does not know how to be a good woman before she grows up in haste. Rabbit, as a man living in 1950s in America, has no courage to break up with Janice in a divorce way, for it is against the social customs, which is too mighty a force for him to resist. Thus, flight is the most convenient way to escape the present trap. His destination is Ruth Leonard, a prostitute, also another pole extending in Rabbit's discontent with life. Though Ruth is everything opposite to Janice, Rabbit's familial tension is still kept irresolvable, for it is not Ruth who can solve Rabbit's dilemma. Rabbit's dilemma is complicated. As Updike's realistic descriptions inform us, Rabbit's discontent in life is not only caused by the household discontent, but, in the profound way, by the irreconcilable social contradictions in American society. Industrialization transforms the social values in America and money-making becomes the rule. The conventional social values are falling into propaganda and are being replaced by the money rule. With the prevailing and acceptance of the money rule in the American middle class, alienation begins to penetrate into every corner of the American society. Individual personality, family relationship and even the social norms are deformed by the alienation. Rabbit's running is a symbolic gesture to fight against the alienation. Rabbit's running as the fighting seems both courageous and stupid. Rabbit's inner calling urges him to do something to change the situation though he knows clearly how overwhelmingly powerful the current situation is. Meanwhile, his running away from the family and the society is futile since "from shore to shore all America was the same" (Updike, 1991, p.36). Rabbit's running is a kind of usable uselessness.

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