

Fire, Rain, Rooster: John Updike's Christian Allegory in *Couples*

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Most critics deal with John Updike's *Couples* (1969) as a book about "love,"¹ "sex,"² and "adultery."³ They invariably argue that in *Couples*, Updike advocates promiscuity as an antidote to the prevalent climate of nihilism, and he thereby repudiates a cardinal dictum of Christianity: "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery." These commentators pay scant attention to Updike's view of the supernatural and miss his allegorical motif in the novel. Contrary to their assertions, I will argue that *Couples* is a novel of spiritual awakening, taking into account the symbolic significance of the burning church in the text, and that in his novels Updike upholds the Christian belief in the presence of God and the piety of love, sex, and marriage.

Updike in his works affirms that the tendency of modern Christians to seek salvation through science, sex, and materialism has made their lives meaningless. Nevertheless, sex offers his protagonists a temporary relief from their existential anxieties. Having exhausted their search for the divine in their sexual pastimes, Updike's protagonists reach a state of total nothingness where they desperately need a clue to the presence of the supernatural power in their scientific universe.⁴ At this critical moment, Updike's protagonists unexpectedly become witness to some external natural phenomena which act for them as the visible manifestations of the invisible supernatural power. On witnessing such phenomena, they suddenly experience an epiphanic moment which gives them a faint perception of God's presence in their materialistic world. For that reason Updike in his "Foreword" to *Olinger Stories* (1964) says, "We are rewarded unexpectedly. The muddled and inconsequent surface of things now and then parts to yield us a gift."⁵ This gift—the quick, but feeble, intimation of a

¹ Joyce B. Markle, *Fighters and Lovers: Theme in the Novels of John Updike* (New York: New York University Press, 1973) 137–45.

² George W. Hunt, S.J., *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, Art* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980) 117–52. See also Diana Trilling, "Updike's Yankee Traders," *The Atlantic Monthly* April 1968: 129–31.

³ Elizabeth Tallent, *Married Men and Magic Tricks: John Updike's Erotic Heroes* (Berkeley, CA: Creative Art Book Company, 1982) 10–12, 45–61. Also see Donald J. Greiner, *Adultery in the American Novel: Updike, James and Hawthorne* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985) 29–49.

⁴ While talking about Barth's analysis of how Anselm "conceived of theology" in "Faith in Search of Understanding," *Assorted Prose* (New York: Knopf, 1965), Updike endorses the view that it is "the nothingness from which rises the cry for God" (292).

⁵ John Updike, "Foreword," *Olinger Stories: A Selection* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964) vii.

supernatural reality—brings Updike's protagonists, whether it be immediately or slowly, spiritual peace and domestic stability. For instance, David Kern, the protagonist of Updike's seminal story, "Pigeon Feathers," is visited "without warning" by "an exact vision of death: a long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you are drawn while the white faces above recede. You try to reach them but your arms are pinned."⁶ In such a state of void, David desperately needs a clue to the presence of God that can fill his life with faith and alleviate his fear of death. A very minor incident resolves his dilemma quite unexpectedly. After shooting the pigeons in his barn, David takes a closer look at the complex and colorful patterns on their shining feathers. The sight suddenly lifts "crusty coverings" from him. David now realizes "that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole creation by refusing to let David live forever" (PF 150). The insight assures him that "a God who would lavish such attention on tiny things would not render those things pointless by failing to make humans special and ultimately immortal."⁷ It convinces him of a divine presence, and alleviates his fear of mortality. Thus Updike's aesthetic purpose in his work is "to bring us into the centre and to make us see the mystery and wonder that escape our apprehension."⁸

Like David Kern, Piet Hanema, the protagonist of Updike's *Couples*, becomes aware of God's presence on witnessing the burning church towards the end of the novel. In fact, Updike says that *Couples* "is, of course, not about sex as such: It's about sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left."⁹ Here the novelist neither prescribes sex as a substitute for Christianity, nor a religion in itself. Rather, Updike in *Couples* suggests that sex in search of love is *divine*, and sex for the sake of pleasure is *demonic*. The progression of the narrative slowly spells out the dilemma of modern Christians in love, sex, and marriage, and, indirectly, indicates a solution to their problems through the symbolic suggestion of the burning church.

Couples presents a group of ten middle-class couples, living in a pastoral mill town, Tarbox, "to improvise here a fresh way of life."¹⁰ Their marriages have become stale: Foxy tells Piet, "We've known each other so long we're rather detached, and just use each other" (C 213, italics author's). And Georgine confides in Piet, "I'm miserable, Piet. I can't stand living with that man [her husband] much

⁶ John Updike, "Pigeon Feathers," in his *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) 13. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation PF.

⁷ Markle 179.

⁸ Robert Alton Regan, "Updike's Symbol of the Centre," *Modern Fiction Studies* 20.1 (Spring 1974): 88.

⁹ Eric Rhode, "An Interview With Updike," in *Picked-Up Pieces*, ed. John Updike (New York: Knopf, 1975) 605.

¹⁰ John Updike, *Couples* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1969) 114. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation C.

longer . . . I'm losing all sense of myself as a woman" (C 230). They suffer from an overwhelming sense of unbelief, sterility, and boredom, which drives them to find new ways of survival in contemporary America. The couples adopt adultery as a mode of getting "out in the world and seeking knowledge" (C 359), and of substituting "an essential fidelity set in a matrix of easy and open companionship" (C 114). Freddy Thorne tells the other couples in a priestly manner, "People are the only thing people have left since God packed up. By people I mean sex" (C 155). Frank Appleby tells Marcia Little-Smith, "Please sexualize me. . . . With this sloppy market running, it's probably the best investment left" (C 120). They collectively create a "variety of bonds" to achieve freedom from cultural and religious constraints through physical union with the persons of their choice. Fidelity and God are no obstacles for them. There is a Congregational church in the town, but it does not convince the couples of God's presence in their universe. The church has a "golden rooster" visible high above Tarbox: "Three edifices had succeeded their first meeting-house, a thatched fort, and the last, renovated in 1896 and 1939, lifted well over one hundred feet into the air a gilded weathercock that had been salvaged from the previous church and thus dated from colonial times. Its eye was a copper English penny. Deposed once each generation by hurricanes, lightning, or repairs, it was always, much bent and welded, restored. It turned in the wind and flashed in the sun and served as a landmark to fishermen in Massachusetts Bay. Children in the town grew up with the sense that the bird was God. That is, if God were physically present in Tarbox, it was in the form of this unreachable weathercock visible from everywhere" (C 21).

The gilded weathercock, a sign of the indestructible religious tradition and the omnipresent God for others, appears to the couples merely as an object. In the absence of God, they accept sex as a *substitute religion* to seek divinity and grace, and to save themselves from dehumanization and death. Although the couples temporarily feel like "survivors, the fortunate, the employed, the healthy, the free" (C 381), they fail to redeem themselves satisfactorily. Without faith their sexuality degenerates into animality, taking them nowhere. Their group disintegrates with two divorces, one death, and one abortion. In this context, one cannot miss the author's sarcasm when Freddy Thorne arranges an abortion for Foxy—"they had become gods moving in the supernature where life is created and destroyed" (C 393).

Of the characters, Piet Hanema, a Dutch Calvinist, alone visits the local church. He believes that "there [is] behind the screen of couples and houses and days, a Calvinist God who lifts us up and casts us down in utter freedom, without recourse to our prayers or consultation with our wills" (C 434). Piet therefore goes to the church less out of faith than fear (C 23). Hanema finds himself in a precarious situation when his wife, Angela, learns of his affair with Foxy and consequently turns him out of her house. He desperately tries to stick to his wife and children, but Angela sternly refuses to live with him. Thus Piet

loses his bearings in the Tarbox community. He feels hardly alive without a place in Tarbox. At this moment of spiritual disillusionment and domestic crisis in Piet's life, the Congregational church is burned down by lightning. The burning of the church serves as a *revelation* to Piet: "Flames, doused in the charred belfry, had climbed higher and now fluttered like pennants from the slim pinnacle supporting the rooster. . . . Through the great crowd breathed disbelief that the rain and the fire could persist together, that nature could so war with herself: as if a conflict in God's heart had been bared for them to witness. Piet wondered at the lightness in his own heart, gratitude for having been shown *something beyond him, beyond all blaming*" (C 464, emphasis added). Piet is amazed to see the *fire* and *rain* persisting together with the *rooster* standing as usual on the upright pinnacle. The "supernatural proclaim[s] itself" (C 460) in the "conflagration."

This significant episode works symbolically in two ways, suggesting the allegorical implications of the novel. Firstly, the rooster standing unharmed on the upright pinnacle, despite the destruction of the church, signifies the hope of redemption in life and resurrection after death. Writing in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, of the symbolic significance of the rooster, Manabu Waida says "as suggested by its representation together with Persephone and Hades, the cock [rooster] was viewed as the herald of the dawn of the new world, the future life; as such, it symbolized hope of life after death."¹¹ He further observes, "Christianity has continued this idea, making the cock a symbol of the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, the new light. In announcing the approach of day, the cock reminds Christians not only of Peter's denial but also of their own resurrection in a future life."¹² Hence the rooster standing on the upright pinnacle suggests the supreme importance of the unflinching faith in God for redemption and resurrection after death. Gertrude Jobes, in the *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*, says that fire is symbolic of the "divine anger."¹³ Similarly *Harper's Bible Dictionary* notes, "In reference to God's action, fire is more frequently a symbol of destruction associated with the wrath of God and His jealousy."¹⁴ Of the symbolic significance of rain in Christianity, Ann Dunnigan writes, "In the seasonal revival of nature and the infusion of new life, rain was seen as the dispenser of divine grace and plenty, the promise of survival. . . . In the New Testament, rain is the symbol of joy and fruition, and answer to prayer from a loving Father in heaven who sends rain on the just and unjust alike."¹⁵

¹¹ *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 3: 551.

¹² *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 3: 552.

¹³ Gertrude Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1962) 1: 571-73.

¹⁴ *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971) 309.

¹⁵ *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 12:201-02. "The ancient Hebrews also conceived of rain as a reservoir of treasure in heaven, a benison bestowed in return for loving God and obeying his law, and withheld as retribution for sin" (201).

As the church burns, fire, a symbol of death, destruction, and divine anger, and rain, a symbol of rebirth, recreation and "divine protection,"¹⁶ persist together to the great astonishment of the crowd, implying the authorial view that destruction and recreation (or revival), death and rebirth (or resurrection), disbelief and belief, punishment and reward, mortality and immortality coexist in the cosmic cycle. One inevitably follows the other, and the cycle continues endlessly. For example, in Updike's "Pigeon Feathers," the destruction of the pigeons saves David from disbelief and death;¹⁷ in *The Centaur*, George Caldwell's sacrifice brings a new life to his son, Peter Caldwell;¹⁸ and in *Rabbit Redux*, the destruction of Harry's house by fire and Jill's death by suffocation revive his faith and restore his domestic stability.¹⁹ Hence in Updike's cosmos one need not fear death and destruction, or worry about rebirth and resurrection. One should keep faith in God and succumb faithfully to the mysterious cosmic cycle, not resist it through scientific, sexual, and materialistic measures. For as Updike says elsewhere, "We struggle and thrash, and drown; we succumb, even in despair, and float, and are saved."²⁰

Seeing the marvelous phenomenon of fire and rain together, with the rooster standing as usual, Piet realizes the presence of a benevolent God who punishes and rewards, destroys and recreates, kills and resurrects. And one can feel His presence in "the world's splendor and wonder" and in the "mysteries" of life. As a matter of fact, Updike affirms in his interview with Charles Samuels, "I am attracted to the cool surface of some contemporary French novels, and like them, do want to give intimate or vegetable presences some kind of vote in the democracy of narrative. Basically, though, I describe things not because their muteness mocks our subjectivity but because they seem to be masks for God."²¹ In *Couples*, Piet's need for the realization of God's presence and its relevance for other Americans becomes explicit from the soaked pamphlet, a sermon dated 1795, he picks up out of the books retrieved from the church: "It is the indispensable duty of all the nations of the earth, to know that the LORD He is God, and to offer unto Him sincere and devout thanksgiving and praise. But if there is any nation under heaven, which hath more peculiar and forcible reasons than others, for joining with

¹⁶ Jobes 3: 1319.

¹⁷ See Edward P. Vargo, *Rainstorm and Fire: Ritual in the Novels of John Updike* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, 1973) 14. Vargo observes that "The Christian paradox in operation here is that through the killing of the pigeons, through this act of destruction, David is saved."

¹⁸ John Updike, *The Centaur* (New York: Knopf, 1963). George Caldwell's goodness does no good to him in this world. However, his sacrifice for "the good of the whole" (42) gives his son, Peter Caldwell, the young Prometheus, a mythical framework to complete his art which will bring light and fire to mankind.

¹⁹ John Updike, *Rabbit Redux* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971) 320-40. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation RR.

²⁰ John Updike, "Lifeguard," in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* 214.

²¹ Charles Thomas Samuels, "John Updike: The Art of Fiction," *The Paris Review* 12.45 (Winter 1968):16.

one heart and voice in offering up to Him these grateful sacrifices, the United States of America are that nation" (C 464, emphasis author's).

Secondly, fire traditionally symbolizes *sex*, rain signifies *fertility*, and the rooster suggests *faith* in God. Hence the complex image of the burning church also conveys to Piet the message that sex alone is not an adequate remedy for modern Christians' miseries; sex, with belief in God, yields the much-desired fertility and stability in love and marriage. It is therefore difficult to accept Vargo's view that "Piet interprets the burning of the Church as a punishment, an irrevocable destruction of the past, a declaration of abandonment by God, a sign for him to move into a new way of life."²² To the contrary, on seeing the wonderful phenomenon of the burning church, Piet acknowledges the presence of a supernatural power "beyond him," beyond doubt, and "beyond all blaming." As Greiner astutely observes, "The spectacular destruction of the Church shows Piet that something beyond him indeed exists, that separation from wife does not mean abandonment by God."²³ Consequently, Piet fearlessly surrenders himself to God and feels relieved of his existential anxieties. Thereafter he breaks with Angela and marries Foxy, whom he loves. The Hanemas "live in Lexington, where gradually, among people like themselves, they have been accepted, as another couple" (C 480).

Beyond *Couples*, one witnesses a similar allegorical strain of spiritual awakening running through Updike's other major novels such as the "Rabbit Tetralogy," *The Coup*, and *Roger's Version*. For instance, in *Rabbit Redux* (1971), Harry's wife, Janice, walks out leaving him and his son alone in the house. However, after the burning of Harry's house and Jill's death from suffocation inside, his life takes an unexpected new turn. He comes to stay with his parents where he feels almost redeemed: "So much passion, whereas he now feels none, amuses Harry, makes him feel protected, at home. It has been his salvation to be home again" (RR 300). Soon after this Harry loses his job as linotypist at Verity, and his sister Mim, a Las Vegas call girl, comes to stay with them. Devoid of his wife, house, and job, Harry approaches the end of his tether. But now he does not run away. Mim hires Janice's paramour, Stavros, away from her. Caught up between the two, Stavros has a heart seizure. Janice sacrifices her love to save Stavros and returns to Harry "purged of obstacles and illusions" (RR 332). The unexpected reversal in the situation makes Harry aware of the fact that sex is not everything in life, and it does not run the whole show: "There must be *something else*" (RR 340, emphasis added). For Harry, sex is no longer a means to satiating his carnal appetite. With his newly acquired faith in the supernatural, sex

²² Vargo 146-47. Vargo says further, "The burning of the Church demands an acceptance of fate where everyone is 'beyond all blaming.' This is a tremendous relief to Piet; he is released from his oppressive paralysis of guilt into a kind of freedom where he can choose Foxy without any qualms" (147).

²³ Donald J. Greiner, *John Updike's Novels* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1984) 158.

becomes for Harry a sublime arena of spiritual union that leads to healthy and stable marital relationships.

Similarly, Ellellou in *The Coup* (1978) goes from one place to another questing for the ultimate truth, of a divine order, to fill the vacuity at the "bottom of his soul." Unable to find any reason or remedy for his political and spiritual malady, Ellellou finally returns to a small town where his rivals throw him out of power. After his dethronement, it rains heavily in the drought-stricken deserts of Kush. "Sweet grass grew tall in the vacant lots. . . . The very bones strewn parched upon the sands put on flesh and gave milk; seeds dormant several millennia hurled toward the serried nimbus giant blossoms and bulbous fruit absent from even the most encyclopedic botanic hand-books."²⁴ The downpour of rain immediately after Ellellou ceases to be the ruler reveals to him the mysterious reason for the inhuman condition of his country—that he himself "was the curse upon the land" (TC 261). Ellellou now realizes that the supernatural imperceptibly plays its part in human affairs, and that God punishes the guilty and protects the innocent. His awareness of the omnipotent cosmic power operating from behind the human scene gives him wisdom to accept his ouster from power magnanimously. At the end, Ellellou is seen in France reminiscing about his past experiences. Now he is "happy, hidden. The breeze blows, the waiters ignore him. He is writing his memoirs" (TC 299). And also in *Roger's Version* (1985), Roger Lambert, an ex-Methodist minister and current professor of divinity, is ambivalent about the existence of God. Following his affair with Verna and his discussions with Dale Kohler, Roger reaches the peak of his predicament from where he may fall into an eternal abyss of unbelief. But, like Piet Hanema, he suddenly realizes the presence of God through an epiphanic revelation. While lying with Verna and "gazing upwards," Roger wonders "how much majesty resides in our continuing to love and honor God even as he inflicts blows upon us—as much as resides in the silence he maintains so that we may enjoy and explore our human freedom. This was *my* [Roger's] proof of His existence, I saw—the distance to the impalpable ceiling, the immense distance measuring our abasement. So great a fall proves great heights. Sweet certainty invaded me. 'Bless you' was all I could say."²⁵ As in Updike's other novels, one observes even here a spectacular reversal in the situation after Roger receives the intimation of God's existence in an epiphanic moment. Roger thereafter returns to his wife realizing the truth that "Esther is part of my life. I once went to a great deal of trouble to make her part of it and I'm too old to do any more rearranging" (RV 347). Esther also unexpectedly withdraws from Dale probably realizing, like Janice in *Rabbit Redux*, that she can live a happy life only in the sacrament of marriage, and can enjoy spiritual peace only when she

²⁴ John Updike, *The Coup* (New York: Knopf, 1978) 261. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation TC.

²⁵ John Updike, *Roger's Version* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1987) 302. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation RV.

believes in God. Indeed, Esther's return to Roger is suggestive of her renewed respect for the sacrament of marriage. And her going to church at the end is symptomatic of her renewal to belief in the supernatural. Roger's realization of God's presence redeems his spiritual, sexual, and marital problems. Hence Updike in *Couples* and in his other novels affirms the Christian belief in the spiritual chastity, sexual purity, and marital fidelity.