

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY IN THE SHORT STORIES OF JOHN UPDIKE

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### ABSTRACT

John Updike is considered as one of the greatest American fiction writers of his generation. He is a seriously committed craftsman of the exacting shorter form. Updike has exhibited a sustained mastery of the short story throughout his career. While consistently advancing the level of his craft, he has contributed actively to the genre's revitalization through formal experimentation and stylistic excellence. Along with Updike, very few authors of short fiction have featured in *Best American short stories and Prize stories: The O. Henry awards*. Updike's stories have been featured a total of 22 times in the two major yearly anthologies, 10 times in *Best American Short Stories* and 12 times in *Prize stories: The O. Henry awards*.

**KEYWORDS:** Figurative Language

### INTRODUCTION

The personal touch of any writer can be seen in his technique- the way he tells the story, the manner in which he portrays the themes, plots and characterisation, the skill with which he elaborates the descriptions with a few symbols and finally the proficiency enables the reader to realize the thought of the writer.

Updike becomes comfortable with the short story form to experiment with a variety of narrative strategies, especially variations on first person such as the lyrical meditation. He revolutionized the American short story with the techniques of symbolism, epiphanies and dramatic monologues.

From the beginning of his career, his short stories have consistently subordinated the traditional emphasis on plot and dramatic action with rich figurative language and imagery. His distinct prose style, an essential feature of his fiction is characterised by its vividly descriptive passages, carefully wrought in striking, allusive and often esoteric vocabulary which reveals the author's infatuation with language. The beginning of the story **Dark** has a vivid description of a room which symbolises the gloom of the narrator:

The Dark, he discovered, was mottled, was a luminous collage of patches of almost –colour that became, as his open eyes grew at home, almost ectoplasmically bright. Objects became lunar panels let into the air that darkness had given flat substance to. Walls dull in day glowed. Yet he was not comforted by the general pallor of the dark, its unexpected transference; rather, he lay there waiting, godlessly praying, for those visitations of positive light that were hurled, unannounced, through the windows by the headlights of automobiles pausing and passing outside. (**Dark 203**)

In one of Updike's 'fresh air' interviews with Gross, he replies to a question asked by Gross that "why one has to

excel in accuracy in writing, accuracy in describing the details of objects and settings and of people and their lives". Updike answers:

Whether I read Henry Green or Nabokov or Proust or Tolstoy, is the sense that they have described precisely a certain level of experience, whether it's a dress or a chain, how a person's face looks, that really- the literary art is a fantastic one...accuracy is one way of describing the close approximation to the real that we all sort of live for. But I think its our fate as 20<sup>th</sup> century people to live with ambiguity and so we have tried the ambiguity as it exists.<sup>1</sup>

**Archangel** and **leaves** are the best stories where Updike uses images so dense which may not be easy to understand, unless a reader sees from the author's perspective. **Archangel** is written in the form of a dramatic monologue. Dramatic monologue is a poetic form in which a single character addressing a silent auditor at a critical moment, reveals himself or herself and the dramatic situation (Dictionary.com). It is also called dramatic lyric. In **Archangel** the heavenly narrator promises an abundance of treasures '*as specific as they are ever lasting*'. While the angel asks only for love and praise in return, the auditor feels the price of commitment is too high and doubts at his promises.

Such glimmers I shall widen to rivers; nothing will be lost, not the least grain of remembered dust, and the multiplication shall be a thousand thousand fold; love me. Embrace me; come touch my side, where honey flows. Do not be afraid. Why should my promises be vain? Jade and cinnamon: do you deny that such things exist? Why do you turn away? Is not my song a stream of balm? My arms are heaped with apples and ancient books; there is no harm in me; no .Stay. Praise me. Your praise of me is praise of yourself; wait Listen. I will begin again (Archangel 119)

Thus the auditor's refusal, not the angel's is the Updike's key theme. Updike dares to make his reader treat the angel as an unreliable narrator. When change and loss become increasingly prevalent in this world the auditor can accept angel's offer but his pertinent repetition hints that the 'opportunity is not lost with the refusal of earthly delights and it is transposed clearly into a finger key.

Where, then, has your life been touched? My pleasures are as specific as they are everlasting. The sliced edges of a fresh ream of laid paper, cream, stiff, rag-rich. The freckles of the closed eyelids of a woman attentive in the first white blush of morning. The ball diminishing well down the broad green throat of the fist at Cape Ann. The good catch, a candy sun slatting the bleachers. The fair at the vanished poor house. The white arms of girls dancing, taffeta, white arms violet in the hollows music its ecstasies praise the white wrists of praise the white arms and the white paper trimmed the Euclidean proof of Pythagoras' theorem its tightening beauty the iridescence of an old copper found in the salt sand. The microscopic glitter in the ink of the letters of words that are your own. The Brancusi room, silent. *Pines and Rocks* by Cezanne; and The Lace- Maker in the Louvre hardly bigger than your spread hand. (Archangel 119)

Though the angel promises to give him abundantly by saying '*These glimmers I will widen to rivers*', the auditor too strives to generate a receptivity to the world's richness and to facilitate the recapture of the past's fleeting treasures. Through the auditor, Updike shows how the people are ready to leave the eternal rewards because of materiality. The swing between the pleasure of the earthly world and the reward of the eternal world is clearly portrayed in the story. The Critics Alice and Kenneth Hamilton note that:

The angel's language at one point echoes Christ's revelation to Thomas to touch his side( John 20:27, New Testament, Holy Bible), to prove his divinity.<sup>2</sup>

Updike ends the **Archangel** in his classic sentence: '*nothing will be lost, not the least grain of remembered dust and the multiplication shall be a thousand thousand fold*': "Love me embrace me" (Archangel 119). It sounds so romantic to say this to probe one's true love. There is lushness in the sound of the written words, a depth to the sentiment that raises it. It carries the reader up in the emotion of the expression. These are the last words in the last paragraph of **Archangel**. The stream of language is too good to forget. Many times Updike's style often outstrips his substances.

**Leaves** is Updike's favourite story which begins and ends in a first person meditation. The story is a brief one with nine paragraphs. It is an example of Updike's integration of imagery and subtlety of its structure which represents his successful effort to engage the relationship between man, art and nature. The spider in **Leaves** teaches the narrator's natural and human realms which are contiguous but incompatible. But the narrator feels difficult to learn the truth from the spider.

A spider like a white asterisk hangs in air in front of my face. I look at the ceiling and cannot see where its thread is attached. The ceiling is smooth plasterboard. The spider hesitates. It feels a huge alien presence. Its exquisite white legs spread warily and of its own dead weight it twirls on its invisible thread. I catch myself in the quaint and antique pose of the fabulist seeking to draw a lesson from a spider, and become self-conscious. (Leaves 55)

While giving a response to his critics Updike says that '*If leaves is a lace, it is taut and symmetrical lace, with scarce is a loose thread... the way the leaves become the pages, the way the bird becomes his description, the way bright and multiform world of nature is felt rubbing against the dark world of the trapped ego. It is a mode of mine, the abstract – personal, not a favourite with my critics. It was written after a long silence, swiftly, unerringly as a sleepwalker walks*'.<sup>3</sup>

Though **Leaves** is not one of the favourites of the critics, Updike creates a story of a writer who gazing out of the window at grape leaves, reflects on their beauty and on the relation of the recent crises of his life to nature. The effortless creativity of nature and its freedom from guilt contrasts with the artifice of his writing and with his experiences of shame and fear. As he contemplates on nature, he begins to go down his memory lane thinking of his divorce, trying to make sense of his feelings of pain and love. He also contemplates his own activity as a writer, drawing the reader into the processes of capturing the images of life on a leaf of a paper.

A blue jay lights on a twig outside my window, momentarily sturdy, he stands sturdy, he stands astraddle, his dingy rump toward me, his head alertly frozen in silhouette, the predatory curve of his beak stamped on a sky almost white above the misting tawny marsh. See him and stamped him on this page. Now he is gone. And yet, there, a few lines above, he still is, "astraddle," his rump "dingy" his head "alertly frozen." A curious trick, possibly useless, but mine (**Leaves 52-53**)

The writer of the passage continues to enter in and out of descriptions of the natural beauty around him, dream back from entering fully into its profession by images of his wife's departure. Sunlight playing through the grape leaves casts shadows in menacing shapes, yet the intricacy of the colours and patterns among the leaves suggest innocence, shelter and openness as well. Outwardly he is drawn towards the embracing leaves of surrounding trees, but he is suddenly cast back inward to his sorrow. Updike's commitment to the short story has remained constant because it provides a congenial form for capturing critical moments of crisis and perception. If his novels serve as extended moral debates with his readers,

his short stories challenge assumptions about the ordinariness of daily experience and foster greater awareness of the particulars that subtly alter life's direction.

## REFERENCES

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