

Mary O'Connell, *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma: Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996. xiv + 268 pp. ISBN: 0-8093-1949-7; cloth; \$34.95.

There are several reasons for not liking John Updike. At least three of the reasons can be expressed in zoological metaphors: stylistically, his words seem to multiply uncontrollably like rabbits; politically, during the Vietnam war, he was a conservative eagle; and ideologically, he is still supposed to be a chauvinist pig. Mary O'Connell's book seeks to challenge the stereotypical portrait of Updike by providing the first sustained reading of the Rabbit quadruplet (*Rabbit, Run*, (1960); *Rabbit Redux* (1971); *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981); *Rabbit at Rest* (1990)) from a gender theoretical viewpoint. O'Connell examines how Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom, the protagonist of the quartet, experiences masculinity and how his gender identity affects his development and relationship with other characters. It is O'Connell's contention that, far from being a promoter of given gender roles, Updike problematizes socially constructed masculinity and reveals its limitations. However, O'Connell does not merely treat the Rabbit novels as case studies of actual gender positions but also links the problematic to its aesthetic articulation: to the form, structure, narrative point of view, and use of language. All this certainly sounds exciting and any reader of Updike is likely to expect radically new readings of the Rabbit novels. To a degree O'Connell succeeds in fulfilling the expectations she raises in the Introduction, but as a whole the book is somewhat disappointing.

First, O'Connell's version of gender theory turns out to be surprisingly shallow. The author is content with paraphrasing such grandmaster theorists as Freud, Lacan, and Cixous through their exegetes rather than going *ad fontes*. Furthermore, O'Connell seems to be

unaware of the recent discussion on the problem of gender in philosophy or critical theory; for instance, such a must as Judith Butler does not figure in the author's theoretical repertoire. It is symptomatic that O'Connell utilizes Bruce Woodcock's book *Male Mythologies: John Fowles and Masculinity*, which appeared more than a decade ago, as a model for her readings. Now I realize that O'Connell's main interest lies in the new analyses of Updike, not in keeping up with the most recent theoretical developments. Nevertheless, a more varied development of her theoretical stand would perhaps have yielded even more insightful readings. For instance, Ramchadran Sethuraman's Lacanian articles on the Rabbit novels, which are not included in O'Connell's otherwise comprehensive list of secondary material, exemplify the interpretive force of theoretical knowledge. Second, in her attempt to contextualize Rabbit's progress, O'Connell tends to draw on (popular) socio-psychological studies whose formulations are so general that the similarities between fiction and reality are somewhat inevitable. O'Connell's project is a hybrid of critical approaches whose mutual compatibility is sometimes questionable. No doubt unwittingly, the book seems to mime the tradition of Updike scholarship: archetypal-mythical references to Laius, Oedipus, and cosmogonical cycles are combined with findings drawn from sociological and historical studies. By thus widening its focus, the book loses some of its potential critical force.

Despite the limited theoretical depth of her study, O'Connell does, however, reread the Rabbit novels in a refreshing manner. O'Connell examines the varieties of masculinity and gender by close reading of the characters and their relationships in *Rabbit, Run*. What is even more intriguing is O'Connell's acute analysis of the ways in which gender, linguistic capability, and narrative voice interrelate in the novel. Although the masculine dominates the novel's form and content, the suppressed and inarticulate feminine breaks the illusion of narrative transparency and problematizes the universality of male experience. Julia Kristeva's and Hélène Cixous's ideas about the semiotic and the preverbal could have enriched O'Connell's analysis more than the Jungian archetypes which she brings into play here.

If the young Harry Angstrom would actively fight or flee the constraints of society, the Rabbit of *Rabbit Redux* practices passive resistance. Both strategies fail to resolve the protagonist's problems with patriarchy but they do dramatize important aspects of masculinity vis-à-vis sexism, racism, nationalism, and technology. The new characters of *Rabbit Redw*, Jill and Skeeter, are papery representatives of flower children and black militants respectively instead of being truly believable human beings. This and the self-consciously foregrounded depictions of the printing process in a way make the novel postmodern. Like the majority of Updike scholars, O'Connell does not discuss this interpretive possibility, although it could relate to the novel's material and thematic heterogeneity. O'Connell's treatment of the novel's imagery is precise and she manages to link it with the problematic of masculinity. The author emphasizes the homosocial in Rabbit's relationships with other men, especially with Skeeter, although in some instances *homoerotic* would be a more appropriate term.

Rabbit Is Rich is largely based on what could be called ironic symmetry: Rabbit's son Nelson repeats the deeds and errors of his father. Rabbit for his part has grown from a young rebel *puer* into an affluent *senex*. This state of affairs seems to call for some intertextual ancestors, and O'Connell – somewhat forcedly – reads the novel through the story of Laius and Oedipus. O'Connell provides an excellent reading of the novel's economic metaphors and convincingly manages to combine it with the context of masculinity. The brief section on masculine modes of narration is intriguing but it could have profited from a more sophisticated narratological treatment.

Even more than *Rabbit Is Rich*, *Rabbit at Rest* picks up the events, motifs, and themes of the prior novels. The dying Rabbit loots at the world around him with a sense of resignation. The strict self/other and man/woman dichotomies develop, in Harry's mind, toward a reconciliation. O'Connell makes a fascinating comparison between *Rabbit at Rest* and Wagner's operatic *Ring* cycle, which was performed and aired in the US during the time of the novel's composition. The question of actual influence aside, O'Connell's analysis is at least heuristic, especially when she cross-reads the two works on a general structural level. However, O'Connell's comparison of details is somewhat far-fetched, as in: 'Wotan is betrayed by his beautiful daughter Brunhild while Rabbit is betrayed by his daughter-in-law Pru, and Sigfried inadvertently tastes blood, which, like Rabbit's parrot food, enables him to understand the language of birds' (225).

One is surprised that O'Connell's book ends with a less than one-page Conclusion. A thorough summing-up would certainly have been more appropriate and reader-friendly. As a whole *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma* marks a gendered change in Updike monographs. It is to be hoped that this well-documented and at times illuminating book will be followed by more daring and theoretically astute works concentrating on the complex problem of masculinity in Updike.

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