

John Updike's Existential Vision in *The Poorhouse Fair* and *The Centaur*: From Faith to Doubt

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1. Introduction

In 1959 John Updike published his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, which won the Rosental Award. It is generally agreed that *The Poorhouse Fair* sets a pattern for Updike's later writings, especially, in terms of Updike's thematic motifs. Considering the fact that Updike deals with the problems of post-war American society throughout his novels, it can be said that *The Poorhouse Fair* is a platform, in which he "projects onto the arena of a whole society the system of values which later provides the internal dynamics of his subsequent, more narrowly focused novels."¹⁾ *The Poorhouse Fair*

1) Joyce B. Markle, *Fighters and Lovers: Theme in the Novels of*

deals with such existential themes as the sterility of contemporary society, Christianity, rejection of systems, and absurdity of death, which are also the main thematic concerns in the "Rabbit" novels. However, the most dominant theme of the novel is the loss of Christian faith, which will be the main topic of this paper. This theme of the loss of Christian faith in terms of existentialism is more evident in *The Centaur* (1963). In an interview with Charles Thomas Samuels, Updike mentioned that "Conner was a preliminary study for Caldwell in *The Centaur*."²⁾

2. Nietzschean Vision of Existentialism

It seems to be necessary to mention the philosophies of Søren Kierkegaard and Frederich Nietzsche in order to discuss the theme of Christian faith in terms of existentialism. According to Kierkegaard, man's genuine self-knowledge can only be achieved when he is sure of an encounter with God. In other words, God can be understood only subjectively, not rationally or objectively, because God exists only for subjectiveness in inwardness. Kierkegaard repudiates the objective faith of Christendom and emphasizes a true inward relationship to God. Therefore, Kierkegaard's ultimate faith is transcendental. Without an inward relationship to God and transcendental awareness, man is doomed to alienation in sickness and despair. The despair coming

John Updike (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1973), p. 13.

2) Charles Thomas Samuels, "The Art of Fiction XLIII: John Updike," *Paris Review*, 45 (Winter 1968), 93.

from the lack of faith in God is "The Sickness Unto Death."³⁾ In order to overcome despair, man must discover the truth for himself subjectively and create a true self through a transcendental awareness of his private relationship to God.

In the religious aspect, Nietzsche is contrary to Kierkegaard: Nietzsche does not share the idea of Kierkegaard's new Christian. The Nietzschean man moves from religious faith to doubt, while the Kierkegaardian man moves from doubt to religious faith. In the beginning, the individual may have faith in God; however, as he grows up, he is confronted by the various contradictions and predicaments of life which make him recognize the futility and absurdity of existence. As a result of this, he finds himself in an utterly meaningless universe and begins to doubt the presence of God. Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche attacks hypocritical Christendom: he proclaims the complete failure of Christianity as the foundation of human life and civilization. Nietzsche makes Zarathustra declare that God is dead: "Once the sin against God was the greatest sin; but God dies, and these sinners died with him."⁴⁾ For Nietzsche, man is potentially qualified to become God by surpassing himself through his free will. Despite his transcendental capacity of becoming God, Nietzschean man might fall into dreadful chaos due to his free choice.

3) Søren Kierkegaard, "The Sickness Unto Death," in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretell (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1946), p. 34.

4) Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *Existentialism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 50.

It is clear that Updike shares Kierkegaard's idea of a new Christian: if one is to be an existentialist, he must be a Christian one. Without the supernatural revelation in inwardness, Updike believes that every problem is insoluble and that man only falls into despair and death. However, it is difficult to say that his protagonists belong to the group of Christian existentialists. It is evident that most of his main characters have a Christian perspective, even though they are not able to achieve authentic faith. Especially, in Updike's first three novels--*The Poorhouse Fair*, *The Centaur*, and *Rabbit, Run*, the protagonists profess their belief in God: Christianity is one of the major thematic concerns in the novels. In the beginning, they might be Kierkegaardian heroes who intend to move from doubt to faith toward "authentic religious existence," in which an individual attains "a specifically religious inwardness that is informed by faith in the historical revelation and Incarnation of Christ."⁵ However, in the end, they become Nietzschean heroes who move from faith to doubt and, consequently, undergo the absurdity of human existence in a godless universe.

3. *The Poorhouse Fair*: Faith on Christendom

The Poorhouse Fair is the story of one day at the Diamond County Home for the aged, in New Jersey. It is the third Wednesday of August, around 1977, which is about twenty years after its writing. The residents of

5) Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Existentialist Revolt* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1952), p. 241.

the home are preparing for a fair which is annually held for the towns-people. Rain threatens the fair: An injured cat is shot and a delivery truck smashes a wall; however, the fair is held. The main action of the novel consists of the discussion between its two main characters: John Hook, the oldest resident of the home, and Conner, the prefect of the home. The topic of their discussion is mainly about Christianity. Hook has a belief in God and a sense of human specialness, while Conner is a social humanist who believes that heaven could be built here on earth by men.

It is evident that Hook's philosophical thought is clearly different from Conner's, especially in terms of his views on death and heaven. Hook's view of life and death is based completely on a Christian belief. Through his debate with Conner, Hook clarifies his beliefs.⁶⁾ Joyce B. Markle summarizes Hook's Christian beliefs as follows:

God exists: the universe and the interior spokesmen attest to this. Virtue therefore also exists: it is obedience to God's will. Suffering is caused by evil but provides the opportunity for the exercise of virtue, the two fitting together like a carpenter's joints. Without belief, Hook concludes, there are no values for defining goodness: there is only "busynes"⁷⁾

Hook believes in the existence of God, creation, and immortality. Accordingly, the inmates of the home, who generally agree with Hook's beliefs, are not afraid of

6) John Updike, *The Poorhouse Fair* (New York: Fawcett 1959), pp. 114-15. All further references from the text are to this edition.

7) Markle, p. 24.

death. For instance, they recall the former prefect Mendelssohn's death with a kind of tenderness (p. 29). Amy Mortis, whose name means a Friend of Death, is willing to invoke her own death with happiness: "I doubt if next year I'll be able to find any, but I'll be dead by then anyway, with luck" (p. 155). In other words, for Mrs. Mortis, to die is a blessing. After the stoning event in which she has participated, she thinks: "As for herself . . . if he killed her tomorrow it would be a blessing" (p. 151).

The inmates of the home miss the former prefect Mendelssohn and his view of death. Unlike Conner who attempts to deny death with perfect health care, Mendelssohn was sympathetic to death and shared with the inmates an awareness of death:

They were seeing him now. . . . As the songs grew more religious the rims of Mendelssohn's eyes grew redder, and he was dabbing at his cheeks with the huge handkerchief he always carried and was saying . . . how here they all lived close to death . . . here they lived with death at their sides . . . (pp. 84-85)

Conner rejects Mendelssohn's view of death. Conner's only concern is physical death, while the inmates are concerned about their spiritual death. Conner, who represents the welfare system of late 20th century America in the story, is engaged in lengthening the old people's lives with a scientific and well-organized welfare system. Conner's ultimate vision is to make an earthly paradise: "There will be no waste. No pain and above all no *waste*. And this heaven *will* come to *this*

earth, and come soon" (p. 114). His duty as the prefect is to make the inmates healthy and unafraid while alive. He is proud of the fact that the population of the Home is growing mainly because of "lengthened lives, smaller domiciles, the break-up with traditional religion, of the family" (p. 68).

In a sense, Conner is "a rebel and an idealist" who is eager to clean the world and to make it an earthly paradise.⁸⁾ When his assistant Buddy shoots a diseased cat which Conner wants killed, the narrator of the novel analyzes Conner's professional idealism:

Conner had no regrets about ordering the animal killed. He wanted things clean: the world needed renewal, and this was a time of history when there were no cleansing wars or sweeping purges, when reform was slow, and decayed things were allowed to stand and rot themselves away. (p. 67)

Thus, Conner's idea about the wounded cat is related only to his principle to remove anything diseased and in pain. Likewise, his first job as the prefect of the home is to care for the inmates' health so that they may not be sick. For instance, when he feels that Mrs. Mortis looks "unsteady with her absurd towering bonnet" and "a little pale" (p. 44), Conner worries about her health and advises her to move beneath the trees. When Mrs. Mortis doesn't want to move into the shade, Conner gets angry and reminds her of his only concern: welfare.

As Markle points out, Conner "considers not people

8) David D. Galloway, *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1970), p. 111.

but people's welfare, as Angelo concentrated not on Lucas but on the card recording his health."⁹⁾ When Lucas goes to the health center of the Home to have his ear treated, a medical doctor, Angelo, treats Lucas only in terms of his medical record card. Howard M. Harper Jr. interprets Conner's dehumanized vision as follows:

Conner represents the secularization of American life, the increasing concern with material values. Updike may have chosen the name to suggest the secular con men who deprive us of spiritual depth and meaning at the same time that they enhance our physical comfort. Despite his intelligence, his organizational ability, and his compassion for his "guest," Conner cannot minister to their real needs. He cannot even understand them; ironically he is conning himself rather than his old people.¹⁰⁾

In other words, Updike criticizes the materialized and dehumanized American society, which is typified by Conner's idealistic welfare system in *The Poorhouse Fair*.

Updike's criticism of the present state of American affairs is well expressed when he describes the people who come to the fair:

Heart had gone out of these people; health was the principal thing about the faces of the Americans that came crowding through the broken wall to the poorhouse fair. They were just people, members of the race of white animals that had cast its herd over the land of six

9) Markle, p. 20.

10) Howard M. Harper, *Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin, and Updike* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 164.

continents. . . . The nation became one of pleasure-seekers: the people continued to live as cells of a body do in the coffin, for the conception "America" had died in their skulls. (pp. 169-70)

Galloway also understands *The Poorhouse Fair* as "a novel of dismissal in which the author suggested the failure of various traditional systems to fulfill contemporary man's spiritual needs.¹¹⁾ If Conner and his work represent the welfare state of late 20th century America, it is obvious that Updike criticizes the American welfare system. Updike's criticism of the welfare state is reflected best in a letter to Conner from one of the townspeople:

Stephen Conner--

Who do you think you are a Big shot? Yr duty is to help not hinder these old people on there way to there final Reward. I myself have heard bitter complant from these old people when they come into town where I live. They call you Pieface you and that moran Buddy. The nature of there complants I will disclose latter, and will write the U.S. gov.mnt depending. Things have not gone so far these old people have no rights no pale peenynotchin basterd can take away.

A "Town's person" (p. 190)

Updike denounces the sterile world represented by Conner's welfare system, in which the subjectivity of human existence is disregarded. In this sense, a poorhouse symbolizes a disintegrated state of contemporary social institutions in which it is impossible for individuals to

11) Galloway, p. 111.

communicate with each other, or to make decisions concerning their own lives. It might be said that Updike is conveying his concern that the contemporary world is running down. One of the reasons why Updike projects his story about twenty years into the future might also be that he intends to portray a society of worsening conditions with higher technology and wondrous institutions. Despite its progressive goals, a social-political system has a strong possibility of sterility and nothingness.

As he criticizes the social welfare systems through the inmates' rejection of Conner's welfare policy, so does Updike cast doubt on the traditional value systems through Conner's criticism of the inmates. The traditional values the poorhouse inmates believe in are represented by Mendelssohn. The poorhouse inmates dismiss Conner by recalling their former prefect, Mendelssohn, and the special quality of warmth and vitality he had shown during his administration. However, Conner feels that "Mendelssohn had in part thought of himself as God" (p. 13) and regards him only as a poor administrator and heavy drinker, who is inadequate to be the prefect of a poorhouse.

Considering the fact that religious belief is the most traditional value, it is meaningful that Conner denounces the inmates's Christian belief, especially as represented by Hook and Mendelssohn. Conner, who has an ideal concept of Heaven only on earth, says to Hook:

The truth is, Mr. Hook, that if the universe was made, it was by an idiot, and an idiot crueler than Nero. There are no laws. Atoms and animals alike do only what they

can't help doing. Natural history is a study of horrible things. (p. 121)

To Hook, however, nothing is authentic without God, as he protests against Conner:

There is no goodness, without belief. There is nothing but busy-ness. And if you have not believed, at the end of your life you shall know you have buried your talent in the ground of this world and have nothing saved, to take into the next. (pp. 121-24)

Despite their antagonism, however, Hook and Conner share in common the rejection of systems. Hook rejects the social welfare system represented by Conner, while Conner rejects the traditional value system represented by Hook. Updike explores this theme of rejecting systems in more detail in *Rabbit, Run*, in which Rabbit's running is purely related to his rejection of systems.

The antagonism of Hook and Conner is never reconciled. These two main characters, one an old Christian survivor, the other a social idealist, never come to understand each other. The book ends:

As a teacher, Hook's flaw had been over conscientiousness: there was nowhere he would not meddle. He stood motionless, half in moonlight, groping after the fitful shadow of the advice he must impart to Conner, as a bond between them and a testament to endure his dying in the world. What was it? (p. 198)

Hook is thus eager to give Conner a message or a vision, probably in terms of his Christian faith, but he

seems unable to do it.¹²⁾ In other words, it seems that Updike gives dominance to neither Hook nor Conner by the end.

The critical views on the ambiguity of the ending are various. For instance, Alice and Kenneth Hamilton praise Hook in the way that he represents the soul of America.¹³⁾ Likewise, Howard M. Harper recognizes Updike's support for Hook:

Updike clearly favors the older view, even though he recognizes its shortcomings. Like Polonius, Hook is a pompous, windy bore: yet his instincts are right, and his philosophy meets the deepest human needs. Hook does not trouble himself with problems such as free will.¹⁴⁾

Robert Detweiler claims that the novel must have no protagonist.¹⁵⁾ David D. Galloway sees the ambiguous ending as a pattern in Updike's novels:

The novel was an indictment of the life-denying impulses of an age, and while it offered no solution and raised no successful protagonist to this succession of denials, it had to be written to free Updike to create the absurd heroes who appear in *Rabbit, Run* and *The Centaur*.¹⁶⁾

It is true that most of Updike's novels are ambiguous and open-ended. *Rabbit, Run* ends with the protagonist still running: "Ah: runs. Runs." In *The Centaur*, the

12) Markle, p. 35.

13) Kenneth and Alice Hamilton, *The Elements of John Updike* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 123-24.

14) Harper, p. 165.

15) Robert Detweiler, *John Updike* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), p. 28

16) Galloway, p. 21.

reader is left doubting whether Caldwell has died, despite the final wording of "Chiron accepted death." *Rabbit Redux* also ends with the open-ended question: "He. She Sleeps. O. K.?" As Markle points out, "these enigmatic closing sentences have become an Updike trademark."¹⁷⁾

Concerning the ambiguous ending of Updike's novels, as Galloway remarks, "The reviewers of Updike's novels have repeatedly argued that he refrains from committing himself to any of the philosophies which he probes and exposes."¹⁸⁾ Updike himself admits the open-ending of his works. In a filmed interview, he warns: "it's a mistake I think to look in books or at least my books for a finished message."¹⁹⁾ Instead of a finished and definitive message, Updike seems to expect his reader to find meaning himself through the ambiguity he draws:

. . . Once into my blindly spun web of words the thing itself will break: make an entry and an account of itself. Not declare what it will do. This is no mystery . . . What is it? Its breadth, its glitter, its greenness and sameness balk me. *What is it?* If I knew, I could say.²⁰⁾

Updike also says in a speech that the absence of a definitive message might be the ultimate message in his novels.²¹⁾

Despite the ambiguous ending, it seems that, as

17) Markle, pp. 35-36.

18) Galloway, p. 111.

19) *USA Writers: John Updike* (NET: 1966).

20) John Updike, "The Sea's Green Sameness," *New World Writing*, XVII (1960), 59.

21) John Updike, "Why Writer?" in *Picked-Up Pieces* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1976), p. 31.

Harper asserts, Updike prefers Hook to Conner in *The Poorhouse Fair*. For, as Markle observes, Conner "adopts the very recognizable role of a Christ figure when he is stoned by the inmates," despite his negation of Christ.²²⁾ When the Pepsi-Cola man, Ted, drives his truck through the poorhouse wall, it is discovered that the wall is only a shell packed inside with rubble, symbolizing that Conner's management of the poorhouse is a failure (p. 67). Later when Conner loads the gravel and stones into a wheelbarrow to repair the hole in the stone wall, several inmates who are helping Conner begin throwing stones at him. Conner at first runs and feels wrongly victimized:

One stone of medium size hit Conner on the back of the head, where the skull is thinnest. Stunned and quickly sickened, Conner felt as a revelation dropped from a red heaven the word *unjust*." (p. 140)

This scene is based on a Biblical source, as Updike recognizes in a "Foreword" to a new edition of the novel in 1964: "I thought, in 1957, fondly composing this latter version of the stoning of St. Stephen, that the future did not radically differ from the past."²³⁾ Conner takes care of the old men like St. Stephen, whose task is to care for the elderly widows in the Bible. As St. Stephen died a martyr for his faith and task, so Conner envies "the first rationalists their martyrdoms and the first reformers their dragons of reaction and selfishness"

22) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

23) John Updike, *The Poorhouse Fair and Rabbit, Run* (New York: Modern Library, 1965), "Foreword."

(p. 69). Conner is also cast in the role of the forgiving martyr. When he returns to gather the stones, Conner tells his assistant, Buddy, who arrives to help him:

"How did it start?" Buddy asked.

"I have no idea."

"What are you going to do?"

"Forgive them."

"Forgive them? Just that?"

"All of that. It's a great deal. I'm quite hurt: I had no idea of that much hate."

"But at least you could punish their leader."

"I'm their leader." (p. 143)

Despite his forgiveness, it is difficult to see Conner as a saint, because his forbearance is forced upon him by the Christian stone-throwers. In this sense, Updike seems to favor Hook's Christianity over Conner's scientific idealism. But Hook's Christian faith is not strong enough to defend him against Conner's scientific and logical argument. Hook is not able to give Buddy any religious consolation when Buddy tells about his brother's death from cancer. He also fails to give any message to Conner at the end of the novel, despite his willingness to "reward with help" (p. 198). That is to say, despite his professed belief in God, Hook's "simple-minded vision of heaven" casts doubt on his authentic faith.²⁴⁾

Considering the failure of reconciliation between the two antagonisms by the end of the novel, it is clear that Updike rejects the systems represented by both Conner

24) Markle, p. 36.

and Hook. Hook's Christianity is based on Christendom which Christian existentialists repudiate. His belief in God is mainly related to his fear of death: he tries to overcome this fear by recalling Mendelssohn on his death-bed. He never experiences private, subjective, and inward revelation from the Holy Spirit. As Kurt F. Reinhardt points out, Kierkegaard's authentic Christian faith is based on "a unique spiritual force which, breaking into the temporal and finite self, consumes it, and raises out of its ashes the eternal and infinite self."²⁵ Hook fails to overcome existential anguish and despair in terms of Christian existentialism, because he is not able to achieve authentic faith.

4. *The Centaur*: Acceptance of Death

The theme of transition from faith to doubt becomes more evident in *The Centaur* (1963). The protagonist of the novel, George Caldwell, was born a minister's son and was raised to believe in God: "I was a minister's son. I was brought up to believe, and I still believe it, that God made Man as the last best thing in His Creation."²⁶ Caldwell, as a Christian, devotes himself to teaching his students and loves people with a sacred duty, as Racheal C. Burchard asserts: "Updike expresses in *The Centaur* his certainty that God lives. Caldwell's life is evidence of God's presence."²⁷ When

25) Reinhardt, pp. 241-42.

26) John Updike, *The Centaur* (New York: Fawcett, 1963), p. 52. All further references from the text are to this edition.

27) Racheal C. Burchard, *John Updike: Yea Sayings* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1971), p. 61.

he stays in a hotel owing to some trouble with his car. Caldwell says to his son Peter: "Don't worry about your old man, Peter. In God we trust" (p. 128). He tells the hitchhiker whom he picks up against his son's objections: "If Heaven didn't look after fools I'd be in your shoes" (p. 70). When he is informed that the hitchhiker has stolen his gloves from the back seat of the car, Caldwell's reaction is quite forgiving. As he gives his money to the alcoholic whom he happens to meet on the street, Caldwell's action is associated with a good Samaritan:

My father dug into his pocket and brought out some change and gave it to the young man. "I'd like to give you more, my friend, but I just don't have it. This is my last thirty-five cents. I'm a public school teacher and our pay scale is way behind that of industry. I've enjoyed talking to you, though, and I'd like to shake your hand." (p. 122)

Caldwell's Christian faith affects his son Peter. Although he is not able to understand his father's strange attitudes, Peter believes in the presence of God. Peter assures his mistress Penny that "We lived in God's sight" (p. 57).

As Markle remarks, however, "although [Caldwell] feels protected by a vague divine benevolence, he is not reassured by a sense of being in God's *gaze*."²⁸⁾ Despite his professed Christian belief, Caldwell's life is a failure and has an unhappy view of life and an obsession with death. He admires the hitchhiker's way of moving

28) *Ibid.*, p. 77-78.

around and says:

Have you done anything you like to remember? I was awake all last night trying to remember something pleasant and I couldn't do it. Misery and horror: that's my memories. (p. 69)

He tends to blame himself for the shortcomings of the world. He condemns himself when his car breaks down and when the school swimming team doesn't win (p. 115). He does remind his Olympian students of love:

And Love set the Universe in motion. All things that exist are her children--sun, moon, stars, the earth with its mountains and rivers, its trees, herbs, and living creatures. Now Eros was double-sexed and golden-winged and, having four heads, sometimes roared like a bull or a lion, sometimes hissed like a serpent or bleated like a ram: beneath her rule the world was as harmonious as a beehive. Men lived without cares or labor, eating only acorns, wild fruit, and honey that dripped from trees, drinking the milk of sheep and goats, never growing old, dancing, and laughing much. Death, to them, was no more terrible than sleep. Then her scepter passed to Uranus (p. 78)

Caldwell's love is thus based on Eros, not Agape. In the early part of the novel, Caldwell's mythic imagination originates from supposing the erotic relationship between himself/Chiron and Vera Hummel/Venus (p. 22). Despite his Christian belief, Caldwell's view of life is gloomy, doubtful, sensual, and even rebellious. As Sidney Finkelstein asserts, *The Centaur* does reflect "the dominant feeling of Updike's

alienation."²⁹) To Galloway, Caldwell's journey through life suggests "a significant rebellion against the apparent meaninglessness of life."³⁰)

Caldwell's transition from religious faith to doubt seems to begin at his father's death bed, as he recalls:

I look at those dumb blank faces every day and it reminds me of death. You fall through those kids' heads without a trace. I remember, when my old man knew he was dying, he opened his eyes on the bed and looked up at Mom and Alma and me and said, 'Do you think I'll be eternally forgotten?' I often think about that. Eternally forgotten. That was a terrible thing for a minister to say. It scared the living daylight out of me (p. 73).

Caldwell's religious doubt is evident in his verbal style of self-mockery. For instance, Caldwell tells Doc. Appleton who has examined his body: "You're a straight-shooter and I'm grateful" (p. 105). However, outside Caldwell complains to his son that Doctor Appleton doesn't know anything about his body. When he attempts to get his car fixed late at night, Caldwell faces the manager's kind but decided rejection. Caldwell's response is also self-mocking, as Peter recalls it:

My father said hurriedly, "Don't apologize, mister. You've told me what you think is the truth and that's the greatest favor one man can do for another." But outside the garage, again walking in the night, he said to me,

29) Sidney Finkelstein, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* (New York: International, 1965), p. 246.

30) Galloway, p. 41.

"That poor devil didn't know what he was talking about. Peter. I've been a bluffer all my life so I can spot another. He was what they call talking through your hat. I wonder how he got to be manager of an important place like that: I bet he doesn't know himself. He acted just the way I feel half the time." (p. 119)

Caldwell's transition from faith to doubt is suggested throughout the novel by an elaborate device in which the story of Caldwell and the myth of Chiron mingle. George Caldwell, a science teacher at the age of 50 in Pennsylvania, doubles as Chiron the centaur, a great teacher of wisdom in Olympus. As Chiron gave up his life so that Prometheus the fire-giver could live, Caldwell tends to sacrifice himself for his son Peter. Each character in the novel has a mythical counterpart, although the correspondences are not entirely systematic.³¹⁾

In *The Centaur*, thus, Updike employs the mythic narrative, in which the protagonist George Caldwell becomes Chiron in his mythological world. According to Finkelstein, the effect of these classical mythological forces is "to abstract the picture of contemporary small-town America still further out of history, to give its bleakness a philosophic universality, to intimate that the world has not progressed from the primal raptures of the age of mythology but has merely decayed and hardened."³²⁾

31) George Caldwell becomes Chiron, the centaur-teacher; Peter Caldwell, George's son, becomes Prometheus; Zimmerman Zeus; Hummel is Hephaestus; Mrs. Herzog is Hera; Vera is Venus; Penny is Pandora; Appleton is Apollo; and so on.

32) Finkelstein, p. 247.

According to Galloway, Updike's use of the myth is helpful in presenting a failure of or a lack in contemporary life:

Mythological references in *The Centaur* therefore both illustrate the narrowness and mediocrity of the modern environment and suggest the overriding, universal significance of the human struggle. It is, however, on the level of Caldwell the man rather than that of Caldwell the centaur that the novel has its great significance.³³⁾

According to Harper, Updike's view of the human condition in *The Centaur* is that man is located in the border between heaven and earth as a creature of something both god and beast.³⁴⁾ At any rate, it is clear that the Greek mythological heaven is not the Christian one. If Caldwell achieves authentic Christian faith, his prototype should be Christ, not Chiron, even in his imagination.

Caldwell's doubt of Christian faith is also expressed when he tries to discuss the question of man's fate with Reverend March. He identifies himself as a minister's son and a Lutheran but cannot understand the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination:

My old man was a Presbyterian, and as I understand it from him there are the elect and the non-elect, the ones that have it and the ones that don't, and the ones that don't have it are never going to get it. What I could never ram through my thick skull was why the ones that don't have it were created in the first place. The only reason I

33) Galloway, p. 46-47.

34) Harper, pp. 181.

could figure out was that God had to have somebody to fry down in Hell. (p. 189)

Reverend March replies that the concept of predestination "must be understood as counterbalanced by the doctrine of God's infinite mercy" (p. 189). But Caldwell still doubts the doctrine of God's infinite mercy: "I can't see how it's infinite if it never changes anything at all. Maybe it's infinite but at an infinite distance--that's the only way I can picture it" (p. 189).

According to Kierkegaard, man's self-knowledge comes from an "intensified awareness" of his encounter with God. Caldwell's anguish originates from his failure of achieving authentic Christian faith. Accordingly, Caldwell as an existential protagonist must undergo sickness and despair in a state of alienation. Instead of searching for authentic religious existence, Caldwell obtains his freedom by intending to sacrifice himself for others:

The X-rays were clear. A white width of days stretched ahead. The time left him possessed a skyey breadth in which he swam like a true grandchild of Oceanus: he discovered that in giving his life to others he entered a total freedom . . . Only goodness lives. But it does live. (p. 220)

However, Caldwell's despair comes partly from the fact that his vision of human loveableness is not properly accepted by other people, even by his son. This causes his self-mocking complaints. The hitchhiker is so ungrateful in stealing Caldwell's gloves that Caldwell must say: "That poor devil never knew what hit him" (p.

73). He gives some hints for the coming quiz to Judy Langel but cannot help saying, "That poor femme, her father'll have an old maid on his hands" (p. 85).

The relationship between Caldwell and his son Peter in the novel parallels that of Chiron and Prometheus in Greek mythology, in which Chiron gives up his immortality so that Prometheus may live his life unhampered. Likewise, the fact that much of the story is narrated by his son fourteen years later seems to emphasize the survival of Peter. In this sense, it might be said that *The Centaur* is a story about sacrificing oneself for one's child. Caldwell's consciousness is full of worries about Peter throughout his last days. Even while removing the poisoned arrow from his ankle, he worries about his son (p. 15). As much as he feels death coming, he worries about his son's future, as he talks with one of his colleagues, Phillips:

"I can't afford a sabbatical. What would the kid do? He couldn't even get to high school. He'd have to go to school in the sticks with a lot of clodhoppers on the bus."

"He'd survive, George."

"I doubt it like hell. He needs me to keep him going, the poor kid doesn't have a clue yet. I can't fade out before he has the clue. You're lucky, your kid has the clue." (p. 168)

Peter is also most concerned about his father's health and tries to protect him, as Caldwell is accompanied by Peter through the last three days. Peter's sincerity and concern for his father are well expressed in this dialogue with his girlfriend Penny:

I stubbed out my cigarette and pleased, "I must go after him." I asked her. "Do you pray?"

"Pray?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Will you pray for him? My father."

"All right."

"Thank you. You're good." (p. 94)

Despite the seemingly reciprocal concern between father and son, however, they are baffled in understanding each other. Sometimes Peter does not understand what his father is doing. For instance, when Caldwell worries that his position is threatened by his seeing Mrs. Herzog comes out of Zimmerman's office, Peter feels uncomfortable with his father's nervousness. Peter doesn't understand his father's nervous reaction: he points out that his father is so exhausted that he can't relax (p. 192). He doesn't understand his father's excessive kindness to the hitchhiker and protests against it and advises him to have "More sense once in a while" (p. 72).

Despite his father's strong concern, Peter is not up to the expectations of his father. He has been, in some sense, expected to fail because of psoriasis he has had since from his boyhood, as Caldwell feels its seriousness:

With Cassie, he had never noticed until they were married, just one spot on her belly, but with the kid it was a plague: arms, legs, chest, even on his face more than he realized, bits of crust in the ears like dried soap

and the poor kid didn't know it. Ignorance is bliss. . . . Now his son's face, dappled, feminine in the lips and eyelashes, narrow like a hatchet, anxious and sneering, gnaws at Caldwell's heart like a piece of unfinished business. (pp. 148-49)

As Galloway comments, "the 'curse' laid on Prometheus takes the form of adolescent awkwardness and psoriasis." ³⁵⁾ Now, at age 35, Peter describes himself as "an authentic second-rate abstract expressionist living in an East Twenty-third Street loft with a Negro mistress" (p. 81). He is narrating the story to the Negro mistress who is sleeping.

Caldwell's life is absurd, because he ceaselessly struggles to find value in a world of blindness and meaninglessness. Caldwell is an existential protagonist who experiences the hopeless estrangement of heaven and earth. The preface to the novel is a quotation from Karl Barth: "Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth." For Friedrich Nietzsche, man is great, because he is a dangerous bridge between heaven and earth. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra proclaims that "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman--a rope over an abyss."³⁶⁾

Like other existential protagonists, Caldwell encounters his own mortality, the ultimate absurdity. Caldwell is consistently conscious of his death throughout the last three days. His fear of death begins

35) Galloway, p. 125.

36) Nietzsche, p. 50.

with his father's death. When his father as a minister thinks that death will render him "eternally forgotten" (p. 73), Caldwell has to accept the truth that he must die and live with an awareness of death. He has been, in some sense, preparing for his own death since his father's death, as Peter narrates:

My father had turned fifty just before Christmas: he had always said he would never live to be fifty. Breaking the barrier had unbridled his tongue, as if, being in mathematical fact dead, nothing he said mattered. His ghostly freedom at times did frighten me. (p. 46)

The beginning of the novel is related to the death motif, as Caldwell is shot with the arrow in his classroom. During the last three days following this, Caldwell feels he is dying of the arrow's poison: he awaits, symbolically, the X-ray report about his actual cancer. In the final chapter of the novel Caldwell is informed that his health will be all right. But he cannot escape from his awareness of death: "He had been spoiled. In these last days he had been saying goodbye to everything, tidying up the books, readying himself for a change, a journey. There would be none" (p. 221). In his consciousness of death his car even becomes a "hearse" (p. 210) or "an undertaker's car" (p. 220)³⁷; even in the school gymnasium he sees former students as "living corpses". Chapter V which functions as a

37) Peter also associates the breakdown of the car with Caldwell's strange behaviour: "Now it occurred to me he had had an 'attack' and the inexplicable behavior of the car was in fact an illusionistic reflection of some breakage in himself" (p. 115).

bridge between the first and second halves of the novel is a kind of obituary for Caldwell.

The end of the novel concerns the death of Chiron: "Chiron accepted death" (p. 222). Considering Caldwell's consistent consciousness of death and the death motif throughout the novel, it is beyond doubt that Chiron's death means that of Caldwell. Harper remarks: "The final statement that 'Chiron accepted death,' the obituary of Caldwell in Chapter V, and the enshrining of Chiron among the stars in the Epilogue have led many readers to believe that Caldwell dies at the end of *The Centaur*."³⁸)

However, it is disputable whether Caldwell dies at the end of the novel or not. Though Caldwell parallels Chiron in the story, the final wording about death might be only for Chiron, not for Caldwell, since the death of Chiron is true in Greek mythology. It might also be said that the obituary reflects only Peter's fears of his father's death, for there is no date of death despite the detailed dates of other events in the obituary. Furthermore, the final scene, in which Peter watches his father, is related to the moment when Caldwell is leaving home to go to school. They talk with each other:

"Are you sure there's school today?"

"Yep, the radio says they're all ready to go. The monsters are ready to learn."

"Hey, Daddy."

"Huh?"

"If you want to quit or take a sabbatical or something, don't not do it on my account."

38) Harper, p. 179.

"Don't you worry about that. Don't you worry about your old man, you got enough on your mind. I never made a decision in my life that wasn't one hundred per cent selfish." (p. 217)

Updike has commented upon Caldwell's death, though it is still ambiguous: "By the way, I must repeat that I didn't mean Caldwell to die in *The Centaur*: he dies in the sense of living, of going back to work, of being a shelter for his son."³⁹⁾ Updike's comment may mean that Caldwell's life is continuous "in giving his life to others," especially to his son, regardless of his physical death. Caldwell's individual death may serve the community, at least his family. In his class on evolution, Caldwell emphasizes the role of the microscopic volvox. The volvox continues to exist as each cell dies. Likewise, Caldwell accepts his physical death so that his son, his family, and even his community may continue to exist. Burchard takes this view: "The animal, man, is tragic because he knows he must die, individually, that his species may live eternally."⁴⁰⁾

Once Caldwell has accepted the absurdity of death, it is not significant to discuss whether he really dies or not at the end of the novel. For he has no fear of death; it cannot render his existence absurd any more. In other words, the meaning of Caldwell's life should come from his acceptance of death as an existential protagonist. By accepting the absurdity of death, Caldwell is free to seek authenticity in life in a world of meaninglessness. Harper interprets the ending of the

39) Samuels, p. 92.

40) Burchard, p. 63.

novel as follows:

And paradoxically, the acceptance of death, the acceptance of our human mortality, is our ticket for the journey. In that acceptance the animal part of us dies and we are set among the stars. It is this climactic epiphany, rather than the physical death of Caldwell, which the final pages of *The Centaur* reveal. The acceptance, in absolute fear, of the fact of death is the first requirement for the existential acceptance of life.⁴¹⁾

In short, Caldwell is close to the Nietzschean hero in that he overcomes the absurdity of the world by accepting his own mortality.

5. Conclusion

As discussed above, the ultimate theme in Updike's early novels is atheistical in terms of existentialism, despite his own view of Kierkegaardian Christianity. In this sense, Updike's following comment is worth noticing: "It is true that besides your conscious intention, you put many unconscious things into a book, like a well-known example in English literature, *Paradise Lost*. . . . there's an awful lot now of reading a book just to dig up the author's view or his prejudices and that doesn't seem to be a very fruitful way to examine a book."⁴²⁾ The main characters in *The Poorhouse Fair* and *The Centaur* try to resolve the dilemma of human existence through their Christian

41) Harper, p. 181.

42) Wang-rok Chang, "A Conversation with John Updike," *The Korea Times*, 14 (November 1991), p. 7.

belief. In the end, however, they fail to achieve an authentic Christian faith through which they experience private and subjective revelation from the Holy Spirit. As a result of this, they become Nietzschean protagonists rather than Kierkegaardian ones in terms of existentialism.

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국문초록

존 업다이크의 『양로원 바자회』와 『半人半獸』에
나타난 실존주의적 믿음의 문제

변 중 민

존 업다이크는 자신이 유신론적 실존주의자인 Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich로부터 많은 사상적 영향을 받았음을 명백히 인정하고 있다. 그러나 "Rabbit" 4부작을 비롯한 그의 주요 작품에 등장하는 대부분의 주인공들이 겪는 삶의 여정은 무신론적 실존주의를 반영하고 있다.

예컨대, 업다이크의 소설세계를 이해하는 데 빼놓을 수 없는 초기의 두 작품, 『양로원 바자회』(1959)와 『반인반수』(1963)에서 주인공들은 자기 본질에 대한 의문을 갖고 실존적 고뇌를 하게 되는 출발점, 즉 신앙적 믿음의 좌절을 겪게 된다. 『양로원 바자회』의 중심인물이라고 할 수 있는 후크(Hook)나 『반인반수』의 주인공 칼드웰(Caldwell)은 자신들이 하나님을 믿고 있음을 솔직히 인정하지만, 진정한 의미에서 하나님과의 일체감이나 구원의 확신을 갖지 못하고 정신적 방황을 함으로써 실존적 고뇌와 절망을 거듭하게 된다. 말하자면 Kierkegaard가 언급한 신앙을 통한 실존적 부조리의 극복이라기 보다는 Nietzsche가 언급한 믿음의 회의로 인한 존재의 불안과 고뇌를 경험하게 되는 것이다.

요컨대, 업다이크는 인간이 오로지 하나님과의 주관적이고 내적인 만남과 합일을 통해 모든 실존적 부조리를 초월할 수 있다는 Kierkegaard의 기독교적 실존주의 사상에 공감하고 있다. 그러나 그의 작품세계에서는 이와는 반대로 형식적이고 객관적인 신앙의 논리에 빠져 결국 믿음을 상실하고 실존적 부조리를 수용할 수 밖에 없는 Nietzsche의 무신론적 실존주의의 분위기가 짙게 깔려 있다. 이런 모순적인 상황을 통해 업다이크는 기독교 세계가 표방하는 보편적 신앙의 위선과 허위를 지적함은 물론 역설적인 방법으로 유신론적 실존주의의 본질을 강조하려고 한 듯 하다.