

## CHAPTER III

## UPDIKE AND THE WORLD OF INNOCENCE

The child has always been the centre of attraction for a host of writers. The world of the child is different from that of grown-ups. A child has its own way of looking at the world. According to Rousseau children are only the passive recipients of sensation. Wordsworth thought they have superior insight. One has to admit that the children look at the things with innocence and this innocence has charmed the writers. The mind of a child is open to any new meaning or impression, so the writer can easily convey his interpretation through his child characters. The world of children is more blissful; a visionary state every man would long for but would never return to. But the artist returns to it through his imagination. He can catch the vibrations of a child's mind. So the writers adopt the child's point of view. It is deliberately cultivated as an artistic policy. It has given the writers many insights, despite its limitations. The writers who adopted the child's point of view regarded child as a superior witness of the world, free of all besetting doubts and distresses of adult life.

Twentieth century writers have often used this 'innocent eye and through their child and childlike characters

they have tried to find new dimensions. Sometimes with the help of nostalgia, they have tried to capture the moods of childhood and thereby the innocent vision. It has been a prominent style with many modern American writers.

John Updike who has devoted more of his works to the portrayal of the grown-ups and their world has been also hailed as one of the best portrayals of child. It is very interesting to note that his portrayal of a child gives us a good idea of his portrayal of the adult world. Many of his heroes are childlike who like to think in tune with Sherwood Anderson who had said, "A man, if he is any good, never gets over being a boy".

John Updike has given a very fascinating picture of the child through the child character in his fiction. Furthermore he has tried to look into the child character through the glass of the adults, when his adults become nostalgic and peep into their childhood.

Before studying his child characters it must be kept in mind that the child in Updike's fiction is purely American. The fruit of American Society, born and brought up in Twentieth century, not like Rousseau's or Wordsworth's child. The unhappy parents and their tragic marital drama would be in the background to which this child has to be an unwilling witness and that would give him a different character.

## II

Children in Updike's fiction are not only passive observers. They have in their own way, a deep understanding of what happens around them. It is easy to brand them as superior witnesses of the world in the words of Wordsworth. In small affairs and big problems the children in Updike seem to be wiser than the grown-ups.

"Friends from Philadelphia" (The Same Door) tells about a young boy John. There is much candidness in the story. The boy in this story is growing into manhood, although his childhood has not left him. He is attracted towards his girl friend and is very much possessive about her. He tells her that she should not pluck her eye-brows which shows that he has some definite ideas about his ideal partner. With her father and mother he tries to behave like a grown-up by showing them that he knows how to drive a car. He is a little irritated when he is treated like a little boy that he is. When the girl's father lets him drive his car he tries to keep his legs from trembling. It is a beautiful study of a boy, who is slowly growing into manhood. The awareness of the maturity gives the boy the confidence he needs.

Gloria in "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and So, Forth" (The Same Door) is a child endowed with a capacity for

instinctive knowledge. She is a school going kid, who kids her teachers by passing chits that read that she admires that particular teacher.

The boy in "Intercession" is a keen observer. He comes to the golf club to collect the balls. He spots Paul, a well established man one day and gives him lessons in golf:

"Boy, all those people with their crackpot systems. You listen to them, you'll go nuts. My father and a guy he plays with, who is pretty near a pro, he's as good as a pro—he was second in a tournament three years ago that was nearly statewide—they say just take natural grip and pay no attention to everybody's weird systems."

Paul is a mature man, who is well-settled in life, but he listens to the boy's advice with rapt attention, because it is a purely innocent child's vision, which teaches him that one should not pay attention to anybody's weird systems but should take only a natural grip to make things go right. The boy's advice is not only for golf but also for everybody's day-to-day life. Paul does not take it lightly.

Similarly Mary Landis in "A Sense of Shelter" (Pigeon Feathers) is a wise girl. She senses Billy's growing attraction in her. Billy is a scholar, whom she respects. The story that follows is very touching. Billy does not know how to express

his love as he is very shy. He knows that she is not a virgin but his love is of platonic kind and he wants to marry her. On the other hand Mary is maturer and does not want to ruin this scholar:

"You don't want to marry me," she said. "You are going to go on and become a great man."

He blushed in pleasure; is this how she saw him? as worthless now but in time a great man? had his hopes always been on view? He dissembled, saying "No, I am not. But anyway you're great now. You are so pretty, Mary." <sup>2</sup>

The child's sensitive response to the marital problems and disturbances is touchingly portrayed in "Dear Alexandros" (Pigeon Feathers). The story is woven in two letters. Little Alexandros is an orphan and is living in an institution run by charity estates. He is troubled because his foster parents are having marital trouble and are on the brink of separation. Little Alexandros writes to his father. His father's response reveals the state of his mind.

Then were Mr. and Mrs. Bentley who sent me happy letters from America and photographs of their children and a sweater and a jackknife at Christmas telling lies? Why do they not live together any more? <sup>3</sup>

The little child listening to a tale told by her father in "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" (Pigeon Feathers) is intelligent.

She cannot bear it that the wizard, who did the right thing in casting away the dirty smell of a baby skunk was hit by the skunk's mother. Her father has made this change to make the story realistic but she tells her father to change it:

"Tomorrow I want you to tell me the story that, that wizard took that magic wand and hit that mommy" her plump hands chopped fiercely—"right over the head."<sup>4</sup>

The story has other implications but as far as the child character is concerned, Updike has shown marvellous insight.

Children in Updike's fiction are not merely intelligent and sensitive, they have something more in them. Ben in the story "You'll Never Know Dear How Much I Love You" (Pigeon Feathers) bets his only fifty cents. He feels like a grown up. A new kind of awareness awakens in him. He is smitten with the desire of getting rich quick.

A titter moves swiftly through the immense adult heads all around. Ben understands the familiar role that he has undergone a hundred times with his teachers and older boys, of being a comic prop. He understands everything and wants to explain that he knows that his eyes are moist and cheeks red but that it is because of joy, freedom, not because of losing.<sup>5</sup>

Ben is only a child. He does not feel any grief over losing his only fifty cents but he is elated because of the freedom he is enjoying. This yearning for freedom is very peculiar to children.

"The Allegators" (The Same Door) is a pure study in child behaviour. It shows the mental development of Charlie a fifth grade student. He notices a newcomer girl in his class. Everybody else laughs at her because she looks plain in her usual outfit. Somehow Charlie has different feelings about the girl. He is attracted towards her and he admires her calm and gentle manners. In his childish imagination he begins to feel protective towards that girl. There are bad boys in the class. Charlie feels that he should love Joan Addison like a hero and should protect her from those bad guys.

And then comes the realization:

He planned to walk her again, and further after school. All through lunch, he kept calculating. His father and he would repaint the bike. At the next haircut he would have his hair parted on the other side to get away from his cowlick. He would change himself totally; everyone would wonder what had happened to him. He would learn to swim and take her to dam. 6

This is the planning of a fifth grade student to win his beloved. It is planned to the minutest detail. But finally the poor kid learns something unexpected and sad.



He learns that Joan was not hated but was and is loved by everybody in the class, when he spots her walking with one of the bad boys in the class. The sight of that produces mixed reactions in him:

'It came to him that what he had taken for cruelty had been love, that far from hating her everybody had loved her from the beginning and that even the stupidest knew it weeks before he did. That she was the queen of the class and might as well not exist, for all the good he would get out of it.' 7

Sudden realization and its quick acceptance without any malice is typical of the child in Updike's fiction. This typical suburban child seems to be endowed with understanding. A good perception of the affairs of the grown-ups alongwith a sensitive response. They seem to be acutely aware of so many things. The child in Updike's fiction is also curious about Christianity and religion in general. With the religious background of the suburban America Updike has raised so many serious enquiries through his child character. It is another typical feature of his child character. It also stresses the point that child character is a deliberately developed artistic strategy.

## III.

Religion and religious practices may be customary to the grown-ups. They may do it as a routine procedure, but the innocent mind cannot get a clear picture of it. It is all strange to him so it arouses certain grave questions in his mind. In fact they are the questions raised by the artist through his child character. Updike's child has many questions. The elders are unable to answer them so he tries to find his own answers through his innocent way of thinking. In trying to do so Updike has tried to answer some of the age-old questions through the ever enquiring child mouth.

David in "Pigeon Feathers" is such a curious child :

David slipped into Wells's account of Jesus. He had been an obscure political agitator, a kind of hobo, in a minor colony of the Roman Empire. By an accident impossible to reconstruct, he (The small h horrified David) survived his own crucifixion and presumably died a few weeks later. A religion was founded on this freakish incident. The credulous imagination of the times retrospectively assigned miracles and supernatural pretensions to Jesus;..<sup>3</sup>

The boy is curious about the origin of religion. His restlessness drives him to Wells's account. The plain words and the small h horrifies him because deep in his mind he wants the base of religion to be sacred and true.

He read the account again and again to satisfy his curiosity:

But prayers had been answered. What prayers?

He had prayed that Rudy Mohn, whom he had purposely tripped so he cracked his head on the radiator not die and he did not die. <sup>9</sup>

This is his simple solution. If the prayers are answered then there must be something. Something freakish would not answer prayers. This is the way of childish thinking.

When his parents talk about soul, he is curious. Whether the land, earthworm, human beings have souls or not is a big problem now. But now he does not go to wells because 'his engines of knowledge only proved the enemy's point'. He turns to dictionaries to find out the exact meaning of the word soul. He asks one clergy about it. "Where is our soul then in the gap?" (The gap means the time between we die and the day of Judgement.) The reverend fails to satisfy him. The eternal question remains unanswered. And then he himself finds the answer:

"Mother, good grief, Don't you see? "-- he rasped away the sadness in his throat--"if when we die there is nothing, all your sun and fields and what not are all, ah, horror? It's just an ocean of horror"<sup>10</sup>

This is the innocent way of thinking. There must be something or it would be horrifying. To avoid horror then

It must be assumed that there must be something concrete behind.

For the Christians churchgoing on Sundays may be an obligation or it may be customary routine. Child's point of view is in "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, and a Traded Car" the last story in Pigeon Feathers. The hero of the story says;

Throughout my childhood, I felt nothing in church but boredom and an oppressive futility. 11

This boredom is an indication of child's restless energy. He has to sit quietly for hours and listen to the sermons, he does not understand. To him doing something mischievous is quite important. The fear of church as a place of boredom reflects in this paragraph:

I tried not to go, but it was not in me not to go. I never attended the same church two Sundays in succession, for fear I would become known, and be expected. To be known by face and name and financial weight robs us of our unitary souls, enrolls us against those others. Devil's work. We are the others. It is of the essence to be a stranger in church. 12

So the notion of religion is entirely different as far as the innocents are concerned. Through his child character Updike has voiced some universal truths. Many unanswered questions leaves these children pondering over them. Going to church as a routine is a silly and boring thing for them but at the same time they fear nothingness and want something concrete at the base of religion.

## IV

The love of innocence has led Updike to create some childlike characters, who feel happy in their child-like visions. They are grown-ups still their mentality tends to be childlike to the extent that they are not emotionally assimilated into the adult world. Their vulnerability and innocence is captivating, touching and blissful.

The Ace in "Ace in the Hole" (The Same Door) is not at all serious at any thing. However grave the situation might be, he is his usual self. All he thinks about is his former championship in baseball and nothing else. He has a wife and a child to take care of, still he loses his jobs all the while. And when his wife tries to scold him he starts making love. He is not ready to shoulder any responsibility. When he listens to music he feels that he is great again, as he was in his prime. While listening to music he feels that all the other kids are round him, in a ring, clapping time. Ace is like a child. To him responsibility is a big burden and he wants to spend his time musing over the happy past. That happens to be a blissful time for him. It shows that Ace is a child though he is a grown-up.

The teacher in "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and so Forth" (The Same Door) does not believe that the girl Gloria is not serious and that she is only poking fun at him and the like of him. He is another of the childlike characters. He does not believe that he is an incompetent teacher. He is only ready to believe that Gloria loves him:

In his determination to find the right words, he had been staring at Gloria, without meaning to. Embarrassed she nodded, and realizing what had happened, he smiled at her 13

Gloria passes the note that reads that she likes him in the class. She has been doing this to every teacher but this poor teacher believes that she loves him.

In a way most of Updike's heroes are childlike. Rabbit the hero of the Rabbit trilogy or the minister in the novel A Month of Sundays, the poor old mates of the poorhouse in The Poorhouse Fair all of them are innocent and childlike in nature.

The most lovable among Updike's childlike heroes is Henry Palamountain or Hub in "The Christian Roommates" (The Music School). His portrayal is very appealing. He is very straight forward and simple-minded. He does not hesitate to express his thoughts at any time.

If he thinks some girl is beautiful, he tells her so. He is not ashamed to do anything that he likes. The difference can be clearly seen when compared with his roommate Orson who is very sophisticated.

"The Hermit" (The Music School) is Stanley. Fed' up with the world he is living like a hermit in woods. It opens new horizons for him. Like a child he is in direct contact with nature which gives him more insights and unknown delights:

A single twig lay half in, half out of an oval  
of moisture the shape of the stone had collected  
A breeze of transparency touched treetops and in  
a flickering of green the high leaves themselves  
against the whetstone of light. A silence embraced  
all phenomena; the sound beneath the silence  
approached. Stanley leaned his back against the  
wood, wandered vaguely which was which and relaxed  
into a joy indistinguishable from fear.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of experience can only be had in that blissful and visionary state called childhood. Stanley's hermitism leads him back to innocence where there are no laws of the grown-ups. His oneness with nature makes him bold to wander naked in the woods which astonishes the passers by. His ecstatic oneness with nature shows his childlike nature.

These childlike heroes of Updike enjoy a blissful state through their curiosity and understanding and this happiness very akin to children.

V

Child characters in contrast with adult characters are helpful in showing the difference between the two. John Updike has tried to show this in certain in which he stresses the joy felt and bliss enjoyed by the child while the adults suffer from the agonies of the situations. The doubts and distresses of the adult world cannot even touch the blissful state of children. And that is why all long to be children or childlike in nature.

"The Kid's Whistling" (The Same Door) tells about a kid's whistling. This kid is brought in by Roy to assist him in his work. Roy is trying to get more money and so he is working very hard. He is keeping late hours. His wife visits him at his working place and finds him working and the kid whistling. The story shows the difference between two grown ups and a kid. They have their own problems and worries but their attitude is different. The highschool kid does not show that he has problems. He is enjoying his late hours is evident from his whistling. Roy is worried because he knows that he is hurting his wife's feelings by keeping her alone when she is eager to have his company. The wife is hurt because she has to adjust to loneliness. The boy enjoys his whistling and is indifferent to the grown-ups. Roy is irritated by this but the boy stops whistling when the wife visits the place. The silent and gradually growing tension between

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the couple run parallel in the story to the kid's whistling. The parallels show the difference between children and grown-ups.

The troubled family, and a tiny tot appear in the story "Incest" (The Same Door). Updike shows the glimpses of the world of small kids. These glimpses are very delightful compared to the world of adults:

While they had been talking, the child had been keeping herself quiet with the sugar bowl. It was a new trick of hers, to push a chair and climb on it; in this way a new world, a fresh stratum of things was made available to her curiosity. The sugar bowl, plump Swedish pewter lived casually on the waist high cabinet near the wall little Jane had taken and inverted it, and with an arrie, repetitious, patient dabbling motion had reduced the one shining Alp to a system of low ranges. She paid no attention to her mother's shouts, but when her parents drew closer and sighed together, she quickly turned her face towards them as if for admiration, her chin and lips frosted. Her upper lip when she smiled, curved like the handlebar of a bicycle. The sight of her incredibly many, perfect blue, inturned teeth struck joy into Lee's heart. <sup>15</sup>

The story tells of the happy relationship between the two. The little girl in many attractive child's ways makes

her father forget his problems and be happy. The father is rapt in enjoyment with his daughter.

The bored couple Jack and Clare are quite tense in "Walter Briggs" (Pigeon Feathers). They are trying to find new ways of entertainment. Their daughter Jo does not know about it. The story begins with a happy chatter between the father and the baby. The nursery rhymes, the things from the nature are the things the kid loves and the parents are worried because very soon there would be no more games and their marital bliss would be over. The story points out that it is fortunate to be a child and to get engrossed in small things and to attain so much delight.

In "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" (Pigeon Feathers) the small girl is enjoying the story told by her father. She has many queries, whether the magic spells are real, whether God is really in the sky and so on. She listens with rapt attention, and corrects her father now and then. It is interesting to note how children get rapt in the stories. She really becomes very sad when the occasion demands it. When Jack tries to put something realistic, she does not like it. In children's world the unreal and fantasy becomes real and true which they like very much and do not want disturbed.

Little Jo's question "Should wizard hit mommy?" leads to "Should Jack hit Clare?" as she is moving things she should not. It is Updike's way of telling the difference between

the two worlds. In fact the implications of such stories are very helpful in the analysis of the family life in America. Updike does not linger in details but leaves it to the reader.

## VI

From the observations in the earlier sections a clear picture of the child character in Updike's fiction emerges. As pointed out earlier, it must be kept in mind that the child character in any fictional work is an artistic strategy deliberately developed. It gives a new artistic vision called the 'innocent vision'. John Updike is very much fond of it. In the beginning he wrote exclusively for children.

A Child's Calendar, a collection of poems for children in which he wrote rhymes for every month or his very first short story "Friends from Philadelphia" depict the world of child. He is regarded as the 'poet laureate' of domestic life in America but the child character in his fiction helps to develop that image perfectly. He has shown the innocents and their understanding which helps them attain that blissful state. From the examples cited it becomes clear that the child in Updike is endowed with an instinctive awareness of the surrounding. Their world is full of joy as they look at it from different angles and outlook.

This is what Updike has tried to convey through his childlike character also. The more one is close to child

in nature, the more joy and the more delight to him. The innocence opens new horizons, gives new meanings and entirely new perspective to live happily with.

This picture is from suburban America. Updike has limited his themes to the portrayal of the suburban man so his fiction gives us exclusively the domestic picture of the suburban society. The child character in his fiction is supplementary to this main picture which means it fills up the gaps and gives us a thorough image. Many critics regard Updike as one of the best portrayals of children's world but his main objective has always been to explore the reality of the domestic life of the province called Pennsylvania and he has been successful in doing that.

Martha Heimberg found the children in Updike's fiction vulnerable and indeed they are so. They are the products of a society where parents are always daggers drawn at each other, where marriages are always on the rocks and where the parents are always engaged in extra-marital affairs. A good picture of this can be seen in Too Far To Go, a collection of Maples stories. The children in this collection move like puppets. They are unwilling witnesses to the sad marital drama that takes place. In the story "Separating" the Maples are sad, almost tearful because the marriage has come to an end but the children appear cold. They are indifferent to the outburst of emotions for they have accepted

reality without any particular feeling. They seem to be wiser than their parents. The life in these stories is a 'fragmented life' as Martha Heineberg calls it. All the modern American writers have tried to mirror this life in their works. John Updike has tried to depict this fragmented life with all its elements namely the couples, their parents and their children and a clear reflection of this sexual and emotional reality is found in his fiction. His sense of minutest details and outwardly trivial things is always discussed by the critics.

But surprisingly Anatole Broyard finds the children in Problems and Other Stories boring and dull.<sup>17</sup> He finds them so because he does not consider the basic theme of the stories. He gets that prejudiced view only because he takes into consideration only Problems and Other Stories. He would have found children in Museums and Women boring too. It must be kept in mind that John Updike is initially the writer trying to portray the domestic life of suburban America. The suburban middle-class society, the broken and would be broken marriages, the sad marital drama that evolves, have been the major themes and the child character is there to supplement this basic material in his stories.