Seeking the white rabbit: The ethical and religious journey of Rabbit Angstrom

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Last October, John Updike published a collection of short stories he wrote during the first 20 years of his career, appropriately called The Early Stories. To promote the book, Updike scheduled a series of readings and started at the Free Library of Philadelphia, in his home state of Pennsylvania.

After spending a year admiring the breadth of knowledge Updike possesses and the previous two months studying his works as part of a senior thesis, I eagerly anticipated the reading. As far as I was concerned, Updike was only a step down from God in his omniscience; a seeming expert on everything and a vivacious prose writer, Updike would undoubtedly validate his deified status that night.

My fiancé, Toby (an avid Updike fan, too), and I were unable to attain tickets to Updike’s audience, and instead could only watch him speak through a television screen upstairs. As luck would have it, the only bathrooms in the library were located across from the auditorium where he was speaking; I visited the restrooms so frequently before the reading to catch a glimpse of Updike that I can only imagine what the guards thought of this incontinent visitor to the library.

Watching Updike on the closed-circuit television heightened the sense of separatism I already felt toward him; Updike was in the building, but he was still untouchable. Like God, he used an intermediary to talk to me; it was only via a television screen that he would communicate with me.
But then he started talking. His hands, covered in brown liver spots, shook. His voice quivered as he read a mere one story and three poems. And he looked at his watch at least twelve times, once while answering a question from a woman in the audience.

Seeing the man whose works so heavily informed my thinking, who made me believe that he was not only a twentieth-century novelist to be remembered, but also a poet, short story writer, critic, and theologian, show signs of age and insolence crushed me. Updike was no genius that night, nor was he God manifested in human form; no, that night he proved to be just what he is: a dying mortal man.

This demystification of his character made me utterly despondent, and I could hardly touch his novels for several weeks. Surely that which I had approached with so much hope and expectation could not fail me so miserably.

Ironically, a significant number of Updike’s novels explore this process of demystification as it applies to life in general. In his Rabbit tetralogy, Updike recognizes and recounts this process through his protagonist, whose search for meaning fails in the end. These four novels, published at ten-year intervals, tell the story of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, who (as his name suggests) anxiously confronts every aspect of his life. The first novel of the series, Rabbit, Run, describes Harry as a 26-year-old, who, despite his status as a soon-to-be father of two with his wife, Janice, and salesman of MagiPeel brand peelers, cannot help but still revel in his glorious high school days on the basketball court. Yet his life now is not only unglamorous (no crowd greets him with applause when he sells a peeler), but it is also restricting, a “tightening net” (Run 14). Through the remainder of the other three novels, we watch as Rabbit spends forty years trying to
reclaim the feeling of freedom and passion he had on that basketball court, and becomes more and more cynical and demystified as life and God continue to fail him.

Modernist writer Flannery O'Connor in her book of essays, *Mystery and Manners*, characterizes this era as one where people are utterly lost in their search for meaning: "Man wanders about, caught in a maze of guilt he can't identify, trying to reach a God he can't approach, a God powerless to approach him" (159). People, then, spend their whole lives and all their efforts struggling to personally bridge the gap between themselves and God, and become despondent as it becomes clearer that they cannot do it.

Rabbit fits this apt description of modern sensibilities, as his attempts to reach God throughout the four novels leave him further from Him. Despite this urgent seeking, though, Rabbit does not spend his Sundays at church, will not pray at meals, and attains understanding of God through Jimmy the Mouseketeer. In fact, most frequently, the methods Rabbit uses to reach God are seemingly inconsistent with those of contemporary Christianity.

In typical American Protestant churches, congregants are taught along with a constant reminder that it only takes faith to be saved, but that true believers will act morally, too. The Ten Commandments are emphasized as the code of law and morality: Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Honor thy father and thy mother. Churches also reinforce the idea that all of these have implications beyond their immediate meaning; you murder someone as much through cruel thoughts as you do with a knife or gun. *To hate your brother, we are told, is to murder him. Faith in the truth of the Bible then, is correlated to the correct action; to be a Christian means displaying the fruits of the spirit as passionately as believing in God’s saving grace.
Within the *Rabbit* novels, the relationship between religion and ethics is not as clearly defined as in typical American Protestantism. In fact, the relationship is ambiguous and tenuous at best. Throughout the four novels, religion and ethics share a defining attribute: shying away from abstract dogmatic rules, both concentrate on relationships between bodies. Faith in God is not determined by obedience, but by a feeling of closeness; ethics are not sustained by following rules, but by choosing actions based on their effect on other people.

While Rabbit actively searches for God, his unethical actions (like his numerous extramarital affairs) suggest that he does not believe in a higher moral authority. This dissonance in the context of American spirituality is a tension Updike develops throughout the four novels. Yet despite this development, Updike remains ambiguous (for which reviews have criticized his books, claiming them pointless) and never prescribes a single, easy answer to resolve the tension. He said in an interview, “My books are meant to be moral debates with the reader, and if they seem pointless—I’m speaking hopefully—it’s because the reader has not been engaged in the debate. The question is usually, ‘What is a good man?’ or ‘What is goodness?’ and in all of the books an issue is examined” (Hunt 31). Updikean religion, which is rooted in the theologies of Kierkegaard and Barth, espouses the idea that to be religious does not necessitate moral behavior. Moreover, as is apparent in Rabbit’s behavior, it could frequently require the denial of so-called abstract rules in pursuit of God.

Yet the denial of abstract rules while pursuing God must not be confused with a denial of all ethical behavior. It could be considered “good” that Harry shed the weight of his marriage to Janice by leaving her to pursue meaning, but to abstract this situation is
unfair. It is necessary to view it in its individual light, wherein it becomes clear that Harry left a seven-months pregnant wife with a two-year-old child for reasons he himself could not articulate. Considering ethics as relational makes Rabbit’s actions throughout his life far less excusable. Updike himself would support defining ethics this way; as a product of a Lutheran background, he believes that “the issue is not whether or not the rules get broken; the basic question is whether or not people get hurt” (Jodock 128). Relational ethics, thus, are far more important to moral behavior than strict adherence to the Ten Commandments.

As much as this approach contradicts contemporary Christianity, there is in fact Biblical precedent set for the denial of abstract ethical rules in favor of a more relational approach. The Pharisees perfectly exemplify men living by abstract rules, but ultimately failing to please God through rote and rehearsed “moral” actions. One of Jesus’s parables about the Pharisees attacks their blind adherence to abstract rules, when a Pharisee prays in the presence of a tax collector, “’God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’” Jesus responds to this arrogance by asserting, “’For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled’” (Luke 18:11-12, 14). Jesus attacks this behavior as wrong, despite the Pharisees’ strict accordance to the law.

Moreover, Jesus himself did not call for his disciples to obey the letter of the law, but rather, in the pursuit of acceptable moral behavior, to act according to how their actions would affect others; He calls the Law and the Prophets, “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them” (Matthew 7:12). Paul, who might be described as one of the New Testament writers most concerned with adherence to law,
acknowledges that some actions are only considered immoral based on the response of others: “All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble” (Romans 14:20b). According to Paul, then, food itself is not wrong, but could be considered wrong if one were to eat it in front of a person who might stumble. Thus morality is not abstract (or food itself would defined, with no qualifications, as wrong), but rather based solidly in our interactions with others. To act morally, then, is defined by how you (singular) treat an other (singular), and whether or not violations are broken based on the mechanics of that (and only that) relationship.

Although Rabbit certainly rejects the notion of abstract rules in both religion and ethics, his pursuit of meaning through alternate means proves ultimately unsuccessful, primarily because he confuses a denial of abstract rules with a denial of all ethical behavior; that is to say, Rabbit ignores social credo that are actually beneficial to maintaining fulfilling relationships. Rabbit’s approach to life, as well as religion and ethics, is articulated within the first ten pages of Rabbit, Run: “Naturals know. It’s all in how it feels” (6). His actions are primarily driven by his instinct at any given moment, and it is this intuition alone that determines what is correct, moral behavior. Rabbit no more looks to others to determine moral behavior than he does abstract rules. Bernard Schopen, in his essay, “Faith, Morality, and the Novels of John Updike” addresses this type of moral code, defending it as valid, “One [morality] is external, abstract, made up of biblical injunction, social and cultural mores, and all the precepts our civilization has established... But another kind of morality is a sort of response to an inner imperative; this subjective morality is less a system than a feeling or sense of the propriety of a given act” (527).
Nor, like religion, is ethics defined by abstract dogmatic rules. Instead, both concentrate on relationships between persons. Yet Rabbit is not fulfilled in his relationships with others by following his own “inner imperative.” Thus it is clear that proper ethical relationships are not discovered by inner urging, since Rabbit cannot sustain a meaningful relationship through these means. Based on his perceptions of religion (in which, per Søren Kierkegaard, the rejection of human relationships is key to attaining a meaningful dialogue with God), Harry cannot sustain both a faith and an ethic. In order to embrace God, Harry must turn wholly to the self, which means he must always place himself at a higher priority than anyone else. The notion of this disconnect changes throughout the four novels, and as God consistently fails him, Harry ends his life as a character that has lost his faith, and has never understood how to maintain an ethical relationship.

This notion (to denial of abstract rules in pursuit of religion) is largely based on Barth and Kierkegaard’s theologies, although Schopen correctly points out that the religion in the Rabbit novels should be attributed solely to Updike; or, as George Hunt articulates in John Updike and three great secret things: Sex, Religion, and Art, “what Kierkegaard and Barth discussed, [Updike] dramatized” (21).

One way to better understand Rabbit’s ethical failures is to look at the work of Kierkegaard, a significant influence in Updike. The most salient Kierkegaardian element in Rabbit’s thinking is his insistence that God can be attained only through the denial of the mortal world. Kierkegaard believed that “Truth” cannot be discovered as Hegel described it, as a move from thesis to antithesis to synthesis (Hunt 19). Rather, Truth exists between the constant tension of Yes and No, and while it resides in the middle of
these extremes, it is unreachable by humans. This Yes and No, moreover, serves as an accurate picture for man’s battle between the self and society; “Kierkegaard... inspired writers to portray man as one who seeks authentic selfhood despite his own anxiety and despite the absurdity of the bourgeois world” (Hunt 21-22). Thus man hangs in the balance between the pursuit of self and the debase world, and inevitably falls too heavily to one side or another, because the center cannot be attained.

Barth, a twentieth-century philosopher who himself was influenced by Kierkegaard, develops a similar argument about the tension humans face between God and society that informs our reading of Rabbit just as it did Updike. Rabbit’s “faith in God is only that: it concerns no one other than himself and God, and has no influence on his human relationships” (Schopen 530). Thus, by acting “selfish,” Rabbit is in fact acting in accordance with his faith in God; he thinks that he will ultimately find God through his actions motivated by intuition. Harry is caught between moralities, “the one requiring adherence to those modes of behavior enjoined by religio-social codes, the other demanding a complete and honest response to an ‘inner imperative’” (Schopen 530). The result, then, is that Rabbit “must spurn the claustrophobic pressures of society in order to pursue ‘motions of grace’ from within that compel him toward some higher ideal” (Hunt 42). Throughout the four novels, Rabbit repeatedly expresses his belief that he is being propelled to Something higher. At one point in Rabbit, Run, Harry bullies Ruth into taking a walk with him, because something intuitively is driving him to the mountain. At the crest of the mountain, Harry thinks,

“O.K. He brought them up here. To see what? The city is huge in the middle view, and he opens his lips as if to force the lips of his soul to receive the taste of
truth about it, as if truth were a secret in such low solution that only immensity can give us a sensible taste... His day has been bothered by God” (Run 98).

Even Harry has the insight to realize that Something drew him to the mountain, and he could not stop himself from obeying. And on that crest, Rabbit has one of the more spiritual experiences of his life; a vastness and nothingness spread over the land and into his soul, reflecting God where Harry can find it nowhere else; for “goodness lies inside” (Schopen 531). Notably, Harry brought Ruth to the mountain against her will, but his intuition so strongly drove him there that it did not matter who stood in the way. The disconnect between religion and ethics is apparent here; although Harry has found God at the top of the mountain, he did it at the expense of someone else. This denial of Nothingness in pursuit of Something is a purely Barthian element.

Nothingness is defined by Barth as evil, although imperfections of creation are not synonymous with Nothingness, though, because “nature might seem evil to us but it is not in itself, for nature always embodies God’s gift of creative grace” (Hunt 37). Thus while creation may contain shadows from the darkness of “nothingness,” these shadows are in fact willed by God for His service and to fulfill His work on earth. The nature of nothingness can be “rooted in any number of particular external circumstances: human relationships, goals, dangers, passions, hatreds—anything humans are likely to hold up as supremely worthy of either possession of avoidance” (Anderson 4). Even though Rabbit is “propelled by his very fear of Nothingness” (Hunt 46), Nothingness infects his human relationships, he flees everyone, especially his wife, Janice. Upon his return to her after the birth of their daughter, Rebecca, he attempts to show his love to her through intimacy. After she refuses him, he leaves the house, saying, “I’m going out. I’ve been cooped up
in this damn hole all day”’ (Run 249). The imagery of this scene is striking in the context of Barthian Nothingness; Rabbit’s home life is not just unfulfilling, its reflection of Nothingness (a “hole”) is directly opposed to his search for Something. But, Hunt argues, nothingness is the only “thing” Rabbit has ever known. The two major fascinations of Rabbit, sex and basketball, often use nothingness imagery—“emptiness, darkness, holes, and the like” (Hunt 47).

Thus the challenge of faith for Harry in these novels is that he has little control over his relationship with God, but he is supposed to deny everything, including his relationships with other people, when God’s presence drives him elsewhere. Rabbit must consistently balance on the edge of Something and Nothingness, Yes and No. Moreover, it is clear that to sustain his razor-edge balance, Rabbit must deny distractions, the Nothingness that clutters his world. Both of these conflicts advocate the religiosity of the “self,” wherein a person pursues goodness wherever the heart leads, without consideration of external factors. Clearly, the ethical implications of this pursuit of faith are problematic, since it requires nearly the complete denial of others to approach God. This disconnect of a person, by necessity, having to exist in society, and trying to pursue God through the self at the same time will be the major conflict Rabbit faces both with himself and others.

Notably, Rabbit is always feeling like there is something, somewhere, and constantly runs away from the “nothingness” of his life to try to achieve redemption. During the first time Rabbit runs away, he stops for gas and directions, and the proprietor of the station tells him, “The only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you’re going before you get there.” Rabbit responds, “I don’t think so” (Run 26).
Rabbit, then, does not necessarily run to a defined Something, but always runs away from the Nothingness as a means to achieve Something, sometime.

The nature of Rabbit’s faith changes throughout the four novels, although his behavior toward others never improves. At the beginning of the series, which starts in what Robert Lowell called the “tranquilized fifties,” Rabbit’s faith is childlike and reminiscent of general American culture: raised in the Christian faith, he has a strong belief that God exists and that he himself is a Christian (Run 9). During the course of the next three novels, as the political, cultural, and social aspects of American life change, and as Rabbit himself ages and observes God’s often absent hand in life, his grasp on faith and religion slowly loses hold.

Yet it is not just God’s absence in significant events that bothers Harry; he consistently thinks of death throughout the novels, and God’s absence in saving innocent lives is a major factor in Harry’s disbelief. In this sense, Harry’s interest in sex, which he himself frequently connects to death, serves as an interesting metaphor for God and religion. Rabbit simply believes in cause-and-effect relationships, and this is further seen after the death of his daughter. Rabbit equates sex with Janice (which produced Rebecca) to death, and so completely avoids sexual intercourse with her; in Rabbit Redux, it is implied that he has not had sex with her for ten years: “It has all seemed like a pit to him then, her womb and the grave, sex and death, he had fled her cunt like a tiger’s mouth” (23). Conversely, after Janice has her tubes tied in Rabbit is Rich, intercourse with her became meaningless; his involvement in sex becomes irrelevant, because there is absolutely no potential for result. To Harry, sex is meaningful, and his recoiling from it after his infant daughter’s death implies a loss of faith in something that he had once
considered so powerful. The act of sex, in fact, has a power to overcome death; orgasm, called "le petit mort" (the little death) by the French, allows those engaged in sex to redeem and resurrect themselves.

Harry’s interest in sex is actually a faith in the transcendent; the more sexually active he is, the more faithful he is to both sex and God. Martin rightly notes that physical activity draws Rabbit closer to God, and "the primary instance involves sexual intercourse and particularly orgasmic climax" (105). Moreover, sex with anyone other than Janice is ethically wrong, and Rabbit consistently betrays his marriage and Janice to pursue God in the bodies of other women. The primary tension between his ethical behavior and his desire for God is apparent in his sexual relationships.

In the first sexual scene in the novel, Updike purposely draws a direct correlation between sex and faith. After making love to Ruth the morning after their first night together, the first thing Rabbit sees is people streaming into a church across the street; in response to this pious scene and his sexual fulfillment, Harry prays and defends God despite Ruth’s antagonism toward Him (Run 90-91). By the end of the fourth novel, sex becomes a bore, and Harry realizes that while "sex is the promise of the possibility of escape, but it is also always the enactment of the impossibility of escape" (Wilson 91). Thus, the act of sex becomes a manifestation of Rabbit’s faith, and as Rabbit’s faith diminishes at the end of the four novels, so does his interest in physical intercourse.

In Rabbit, Run, Harry calls himself a Christian, and stubbornly holds on to the faith he learned as a child. In this novel, Harry is a young father who, two years ago, married his wife seven months before she gives birth to their child, Nelson. Now as their second child is about to be born, Harry cannot help but feel trapped in the life he created,
and runs away from the Nothingness in his home to pursue his dream of finding
Something. “Better, Rabbit reasons, to flee than to conform; better to keep his spirit
alive, even destructively, than to let it die in conventionality” (Wood A Celebration 52).
Through his old basketball coach, Tothero, Harry is introduced to Ruth, a cynical
prostitute who proves, through their engagement of sexual intercourse, to be that
Something that Harry seeks. “His improvisations are based on the insistence of the
primacy of his own feelings,” (Wilson 91) and Harry remains with Ruth as long as he
feels intuitively drawn to her.

Despite this peculiar view of the way Christianity works, it is also clear that
Harry’s faith is a real, pervading force in his life. He cannot deny the force of Something
in his life, propelling him to certain actions anymore than he can deny that he will only
find this Something through relational means. Personal intuition, not abstract rules, will
lead Harry to God.

In fact, Rabbit explicitly expresses this sentiment to Reverend Eccles, an
Episcopalian minister desperate to reconcile Janice and Rabbit, while they play golf one
afternoon, “‘Well, I don’t know all this about theology, but I’ll tell you, I do feel, I guess
that somewhere behind all this’ – he gestures outward toward the scenery…‘there’s
something that wants me to find it’” (Run 127). Later, Harry again discusses his faith
with Eccles, explaining why his seemingly unethical actions have been propelled by his
fervent search for God:

“‘Harry… why have you left her? You’re obviously deeply
involved with her.’

‘I told ja. There was this thing that wasn’t there.’
'What thing? Have you ever seen it? Are you sure it exists?'

[The gold ball] hesitates, and Rabbit think it will die, but he’s fooled, for the ball makes his hesitation the ground of a final leap: with a kind of visible sob takes a last bite of space before vanishing in falling.

‘That’s it!’ he cries and, turning to Eccles with a smile of aggrandizement, repeats, ‘That’s it.’” (Run 133-134).

This scene accurately sums up Rabbit’s reaction to God and faith in Rabbit, Run: primarily created and sustained through Harry’s intuitive reaction, God is a being that overcomes death and gives hope when one least expects it. But Harry himself could not articulate that he holds this view of God at this point in his life. In his mind, in this first novel, he has not yet decided what he feels about the nature of God; all he knows at this point is what feels right.

Throughout the novel, Rabbit relies on sex, although unethical, as a means to confirm his intuitive decisions. On the first night he stays with Ruth, he refers to her and treats her as his “wife,” a role that has higher significance (especially in Rabbit’s mind) than a mere marriage license. Instead, marriage, in which “two become one,” is a spiritual union between two souls; it is a God-ordained sacrament, and the relationship between spouses, in Rabbit’s mind, should reinforce this union conceived by God’s hand.

The scene when they first make love is riddled with bridal imagery, which draws a clear connection between Harry trying to attain Something and his sexual liaisons. When he first approaches her in the bedroom, Harry realizes that “it is not her body he wants, not the machine, but her, her” (Run 79). As Ruth undresses, Rabbit notes that
“women all look like brides in their slips” (Run 80) and he later “makes love to her as he would to his wife” (Run 83). Through sex with her, Harry has filled the gap between himself and God, and proves this by praying the next morning.

Harry acts this same scene out later, with Janice, when he is intuitively drawn to her as his wife. Updike again draws blatant connections between sex and religion; after going to Eccles’ church one morning, Harry comes home and tries to make love with Janice for the first time since his return home, “his wish to make love to Janice…like a small angel to which all afternoon tiny lead weights are attached” (Run 243). That night, after an afternoon of caring for their two children, they lie in bed together, and Rabbit sees her as his wife, the mother of his children; the connection he feels with her he immediately tries to fulfill through sexual intercourse.

When Janice asks Rabbit, “Can’t you go to sleep?” he responds, “No I can’t. I can’t. I love you too much. Just hold still” (Run 248). Rabbit’s affection for Janice is real; at this point, Janice “feels right” to him, and he realizes that through her at this moment, his faith in God will be manifested. After Rabbit is not only refused, but also rebuffed sexually, he gets up and says, “I’m going out. I’ve been cooped up in this damn hole all day” (249). The imagery of holes in this scene is apparent; through sex, Rabbit not only hoped to fill the Nothingness, but also attempted to make the marriage to his wife as sacred a union as it was designed to be, through sex and the attainment of Something.

Despite the death of Rebecca through an accidental bathtub drowning, Rabbit, Run ends hopefully, with Harry escaping once again from the life that ensnared him:

“…he runs. Ah: runs. Runs” (Run 264). His re-entrance into society, by returning to his
wife, has only resulted in tragic consequences: his marriage is sacramentally unfulfilled and his daughter is dead. His marriage to Janice became more claustrophobic than ever, and he is further trapped when he discovers that Ruth is pregnant with his child. Although he begs her not to abort it, he is still in the position where sex, once an escape, has ensnared him with more responsibilities. Rabbit is “betrayed by the outside world...the book ends with Rabbit beginning a new pilgrimage; defeated without, he will seek ‘goodness’ within” (Hunt 47-48).

Yet Rabbit, Run also foreshadows the dangerous and tricky elements of faith that will eventually catch Rabbit throughout the rest of his life. Although Harry retains his belief that God will be there if Harry needs him to be, other characters in the novel do not share that same confidence. Interestingly, Ruth’s perspective on God is similar to the conclusions Harry reaches 30 years later, at the end of his life. After Ruth performs fellatio on Rabbit, a humiliating act during that era, the phone rings; it is Eccles telling Rabbit that Janice is in the hospital, giving birth to their child. Rabbit instantly leaves, despite the havoc he wreaked on Ruth by demanding that she degrade herself for him, and Ruth stays and, betrayed, thinks:

“It’s like when she was fourteen and the whole world trees sun and stars would have swung into place if she could lose twenty pounds just twenty pounds what difference would it make to God Who guided every flower in the fields into shape?” (Run 193).

Ruth’s cynicism toward God is not fueled by disinterest or modern sensibilities, but instead because when she needed the God who created the Heavens and the Earth to
help her lose a little weight, he was conspicuously absent. This perspective on God, that
he failed when she needed him most, will slowly become Rabbit’s view of God in the
later novels. In Rabbit, Run, though, Harry’s faith is perpetuated through his intuition
and instinct, and oftentimes, as Kierkegaard would support, draws him away from his
social obligations.

Most obviously, Harry leaving his wife to live with a prostitute is difficult to
excuse, and many other ethical problems exist in his attempts to find God. Rabbit’s
ethics in this novel are troubling in light of his attempts to find God. After all, while
Kierkegaard and Barth acknowledge that Nothingness could come from human
relationships (Anderson 4), it is doubtful that either would support a man leaving his
seven-months pregnant wife to find fulfillment in the home of a prostitute. Although he
unknowingly subscribes to Kierkegaard’s theory that to pursue God is to deny society, he
at the same time thinks only of himself. All of his actions are propelled by selfishness,
and this is highlighted by a conversation he has later with Ruth, immediately after he
returns to Janice for the birth of their child: “I don’t know. I don’t know any of these
answers. All I know is what feels right. You feel right to me. Sometimes Janice used to.
Sometimes nothing does” (Run 306). Ruth’s function in Rabbit’s life as a manifestation
of Something is only sustainable insofar as Rabbit’s instincts continue to push him
toward her; he can as easily return to Janice when he believes that it is her that “feels
right.” This utter disregard for both Janice and Ruth places Rabbit in the position where
it’s clear his actions are entirely propelled by selfishness.

Interestingly, although readers abhor Harry’s actions, the most amazing aspect of
ethics in Rabbit, Run is that no one around him seems too upset about his actions.
Rabbit's ethical attitudes are far from atypical because people actually excuse his actions. In that sense, the whole book is almost comic: Rabbit is a mere ten minutes away from his home in Mt. Judge; he is staying with a woman everyone knows (and so her number would be readily accessible in any phone book); and yet not one person—not Janice, not Mrs. Angstrom, not Mrs. Springer, no one—makes the effort to seek him and confront him during those many long weeks he is gone. No one actually articulates that which Christian ethics would imply: that Rabbit should move out of a prostitute's home and return to his pregnant wife and two-year-old child. Eccles, at first, seems to represent this perspective, strongly encouraging Rabbit to be a good Christian and act correctly, but even he eventually capitulates. During his meeting with Kruppenbach, the Angstrom's Lutheran minister, Eccles seems to almost deny that Rabbit acted unethically, determining that a number of outside factors forced Rabbit to run: "[Eccles] explains what he thinks happened: how Harry has been in a sense spoiled by his athletic successes; how the wife, to be fair, had perhaps showed little imagination in their marriage... how the four parents, for various reasons, were of little help" (Run 169). According to these statements by Eccles, Rabbit should be completely absolved of guilt and Janice, Mr. and Mrs. Springer, and Mr. and Mrs. Angstrom should bear the weight of blame.

And Eccles is not the only character who seems willing and eager to absolve Rabbit of responsibility. At the funeral of Rebecca June, Harry's mother immediately embraces him and says (using his childhood name), "'Hassy, what have they done to you?' She asks this out loud and wraps him in a hug as if she would carry him back to the sky from which they have fallen" (Run 292). Interestingly, both Harry's mother and Eccles absolve Harry of guilt, and no one else seems the least bit interested in pursuing
his responsibility in anything that happened. Rabbit’s ethics, though in conflict with larger societal expectations and the general cultural conscience, do not seem (with the exception of Janice) to significantly bother those to whom he is supposedly closest.

At the beginning of the next novel, Harry’s priorities seem to have changed, and he has started to slowly enter society, ignoring God’s pull outward. Sometime during the ten years that transpire between his last run toward Something in *Rabbit, Run*, and the beginning of *Rabbit Redux*, Harry has returned to Janice and his responsibilities as a father and husband. He no longer runs wherever intuition drives him; now he just wants to make it through a day. Exhaustion has settled in, and Rabbit simply can no longer sustain the exhaustion of leaving the support of his job and family and going wherever his intuition might lead him to God.

The first page of *Rabbit Redux* conveys Harry’s sheer exhaustion in life:

“Men emerge pale from the little printing plant at four sharp, ghosts for an instant, blinking, until the outdoor light overcomes the look of constant indoor light clinging to them…

“The small nose and slightly lifted upper lip that once made the nickname Rabbit fit now seem, along with the thick waist and cautious stoop bred into him by a decade of the Linotyper’s trade, clues to weakness, a weakness verging on anonymity” (1).

Middle-age’s spread and a stooped posture are sad evidence of Rabbit’s entrance into society; he now fulfills his duties as a husband and father by going to work each
morning, sustaining a full time job, and going home at night to spend time with his son before doing it all over again.

This exhaustion reaches such a degree that Rabbit reflects a near apathy to anything meaningful in life. Not only will he not deny society and follow his instinct and thus, God, but he also shows no effort to sustain anything social that already exists in his life.

Within the first several pages of *Rabbit Redux*, Earl Angstrom, Harry’s father, presents him with the news that the whole town thinks Janice is running around with another man. Harry dispassionately inquires about a name, but when Earl cannot produce one, Rabbit drops the topic. To most men, the idea of their wife cheating on them is so terrible, so heart wrenching and so *humiliating*, that they would immediately attempt to address the situation.

Rabbit, on the other hand, does not. Moreover, when he does, he shows passion at first (beating Janice until she admits to it), but upon her confession, he asks:

"'Would you like to keep him?'

'What are you saying, Harry?'

'Keep him, if he makes you happy. I don’t seem to, so go ahead, until you’ve had your fill at least.'

'Suppose I never have my fill?'

'Then I guess you should marry him'" (*Redux* 62).
Rabbit’s apathy toward Janice’s affair lies not in his understanding her need for escape or excitement. His words do not even suggest a man who has fervently tried to make things right and must now give up. Instead, Rabbit’s reaction to their relationship is one of near disinterest; Janice can do whatever she wants. Rabbit has no stake in her decision either way.

After Janice leaves to live with her lover, Harry’s house becomes overrun with an eighteen-year-old runaway, Jill, and an African-American drug addict named Skeeter, whose views (and drugs) addict the entire household. At one point, Jill, who must pay for her drugs through sexual acts, begs Rabbit to get rid of Skeeter. Rabbit responds, "'You brought him here.' He takes her talk as the exaggerating that children do; to erase their fears by spelling them out” (Redux 205). Rabbit acts entirely indifferent to Jill’s valid concerns, and dismisses them as juvenile fears.

Despite what would seem like an exciting house, Rabbit continues to act stuck in a rut throughout the novel. Although this certainly stems from a sheer tiredness, it is also suggested briefly that Rabbit retains the view that to be religious is to deny social ties. During a conversation with Peggy Fosnacht, he almost supports Janice leaving, saying that perhaps this is giving her a chance “to live.” Peggy responds,

"'Who’ll hold families together, if everybody has to live? Living is a compromise, between doing what you want and doing what other people want.

'What about what God wants?'"

'Don’t you think God is people?"
‘No, I think God is everything that isn’t people. I guess I think that. I don’t think enough to know what I think’” (Redux 94).

Rabbit does not show certainty in this idea like he did in Rabbit, Run. In the previous novel, he realized that there was Something, an It waiting to be found, and he easily denies all relationships in sacrifice for this pursuit. In this passage, it seems as though Rabbit is not quite as positive that God can be found through the self. Another passage suggests that Rabbit still believes that God is out there, waiting to be found, but is perhaps hiding more than he was ten years ago: “He did feel last night’s marijuana clutch at him, drag at his knees like a tide. Never again. Let Jesus find him another way” (Redux 220). Religious experience, then, still resides within one’s own body, but now, for Rabbit, the power it has faded and cannot be sustained.

Rabbit’s religion and faith in God in Rabbit Redux are interesting in light of the other three books in the tetralogy. Rabbit has started to pray superficially, asking for presents from God as he would Santa Claus, “Make the L-dopa work, give her pleasanter dreams, keep Nelson more or less pure, don’t let Stavros turn too hard on Janice, help Jill find her way home. Keep Pop healthy. Me too. Amen” (Redux 170). Reciting a catalogue of those who are important to him, Rabbit’s prayer reads as a checklist. However, Rabbit still seems to have much more faith here than in the later novels, because he has not become cynical about God’s place in the world. Unlike Ruth in Rabbit, Run, he does not question why God lets bad things happen, and how this might suggest his absence in the world. In one scene, “Rabbit fiddles with the lock, trying combinations at random, trusting to God to make a very minor miracle, then, this failing,
going at it by system” (*Redux* 266). Although insignificant in light of the death of his
daughter or the Lockerbie explosion, in this scene, Rabbit does not question why God is
absent from giving him the combination to the lock; he merely acknowledges it and
moves on.

Rabbit’s faith has suffered because he no longer seeks God. His sexual interests
(or lack thereof) reflect this diminishment. After the death of Rebecca in *Rabbit, Run*,
Rabbit cannot help but equate sex with Janice to death; also since “Janice is unable to
have any more children, sex with her is no longer serious; it has been deprived of an
edge” (Wilson 98). Harry, then, has refrained from sex for ten years, since his last
attempt to find Something through it utterly failed. This disinterest affects his first
extramarital affair since Ruth; when Jill tries to perform oral sex on him during their first
intimate time together, he thinks to himself, “Must turn the garage light off” (*Redux* 125).
But directly after, he says to her, “You’re nice not to lose faith” (*Redux* 126), and then
says to Nelson during a telephone conversation later that same night, “What’s on your
schedule? When was the last time you went to Sunday school?” (*Redux* 128). From
references earlier in the novel, the reader knows that Nelson has not attended Sunday
school since he was two years old; Rabbit’s re-ignited interest in both his and Nelson’s
faith is directly correlated to his reactivated sex life, which continues to grow throughout
this novel.

Harry’s interest in both sex and religion, though, is fleeting. He as frequently
rejects sex as he embraces it, and spends significant portions of the novel denying his
innate urgings to pursue God. Instead, interestingly, Rabbit’s faith in God in this novel
has been replaced by a faith in America. This novel takes place during the Vietnam War,
and Rabbit defends America with a faith that is frequently viewed as unsubstantiated and naïve by others. Yet Rabbit stills functions by instinct and "he has replaced his lost belief [in God] by a participation in the illnesses of his culture...and turns with nostalgia to a dream of America" (Martin 107). Updike explicitly draws the connection between America and God when he describes Rabbit’s unshakeable faith in America, “America is beyond power, it acts as a dream, as a face of God. Wherever America is, there is freedom, and wherever America is not, madness rules with chains and darkness strangles millions. Beneath her patient bombers, paradise is possible” (Redux 41). To Harry, God is not protecting the oppressed around the world; it is instead America who offers salvation to millions.

Despite his “almost religious belief in America” (Wilson 93), the presence of Skeeter, who lives in Rabbit’s home and “educates them” (Redux 284) on social issues nightly, changes Rabbit’s perspective on, or faith in, America. During dinner with Charlie Stavros, Janice’s lover, early in the novel, Rabbit strongly advocates his perspective of America, arguing that it is the divine right of America to be present in and bomb Vietnam. After several of Skeeter’s sessions on the evils of American government and social structures, Rabbit begins to change his mind, even noting that the flag decal on the back of his car looks “aggressive, fading” (340). Perhaps most notably, though, is the connection Updike makes between America and sex. During a conversation with his sister, Mim, he tells her,

"I learned some things."

‘Anything worth knowing?’

‘I learned I’d rather fuck than be blown.’
'Sounds healthy,' she says. ‘Rather unAmerican, though’” (*Redux* 311).

Whenever Rabbit’s sex life is not in sync with another aspect of his life, there is always something wrong. In this case, Rabbit has lost his faith in America (he cannot even be intimate the American way), and his faith in God Himself is starting to slip. *Rabbit Redux* acts as a significant transition novel from a faith-driven *Rabbit, Run* to a socialite *Rabbit is Rich*. Religiously, Rabbit retains an active interest in God, but he is beginning to suffer doubts about how one can attain God while also satisfying familial and societal needs.

Despite Rabbit’s newfound interest in fulfilling his responsibilities, it is necessary to note that these symptoms are merely the start of his complete integration into society (which certainly happens by the end of *Rabbit at Rest*). In *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit still has no friends to speak of, so no person or group really influences him outside of his family. His lack of societal influence becomes clear the night he allows Skeeter to live with him, Nelson, and Jill. In an all-white neighborhood during that era, it would have been considered socially unacceptable to invite an African-American to live in one of the homes. Repeatedly throughout the book, Rabbit denies any interest in knowing what the neighbors think about his decision, thus ignoring the influence societal expectations have on most people.

Superficially, Rabbit appears to be ethical at points, which seems to be more symptomatic of his general exhaustion than any maturity on Rabbit’s part. He and Nelson visit his mother on her sixty-fifth birthday, and “when the cake is cut the kid only
eats half a piece, so Rabbit has to eat double so not to hurt his mother’s feelings” (Redux 84).

Rabbit’s relationship with Janice at the beginning of this book also reflects this sense (in which he hears, but never listens), and exhaustion propels his actions to fight more than concern. Janice screams at him right before she leaves for good,

"'Aren’t you going to stop me?’

‘Stop you from what?’

‘From seeing him!’

‘No, see him if you want to’” (Redux 67).

Later, too, she calls him at work to announce her decision to get a divorce from him and says,

"'I’ve seen a lawyer and we’re filing a writ for immediate custody of Nelson. The divorce will follow... I’m sorry. I thought we were more mature than this, I hated the lawyer, the whole thing is too ugly’

‘Yeah, well, the law is. It serves a ruling elite. More power to the people.’

‘You might at least have fought a little’” (Redux 189).

In both of these conversations, Rabbit (to an almost amazing degree) completely neglects to actually hear what Janice is trying to say to him, and is utterly disinterested in expending any more energy on understanding. In the first conversation, Janice only
wants to hear sadness or fight in Rabbit’s voice, to feel as though she so bravely left
something that was significant to someone.

At the end of Rabbit Redux, after Jill burns to death in a fire at Rabbit’s home
and Skeeter has run away, Harry finds himself essentially void of obligations. His wife
has left him, he has no job, his son prefers to stay at the Fosnacht’s home, and he doesn’t
even have a mortgage anymore. This seems to be the opportunity Rabbit has sought for
the past 20 years; finally free of all social responsibilities, he can pursue that which is
important to him, that Something that has always tugged him away from society. But
“now that Rabbit is sprung free from society, his freedom liberates him into nothing, into
the impracticality of solitude, and he retreats into the social” (Wilson 97). Rabbit finds
Janice, and the two reunite with each other at a hotel room, and Harry feels, as only a
husband could, “the familiar dip of her waist” and they peacefully sleep (Redux 353).

Ethically, Rabbit has not changed since the first book; while no longer necessarily
stomping on other people to have his desires met, he still does not acknowledge the needs
and feelings of others in his life. At this point, his actions are less motivated by a
rejection of society in pursuit of Something, and more force of habit weighed down in
exhaustion. In Rabbit is Rich, Harry is still exhausted, “the fucking world is running out
of gas” (1). But a significant change has occurred: Rabbit is rich. He is now the owner
of Springer Motors, and a socialite at the local country club. The tension he felt between
God and social responsibilities largely diminished, he devotes “little time to the ‘kick
against death’ that he used to pursue [and] he finally ‘gave in and went to work’”
(Anderson 15). Also, Rabbit, who spent so much of his life denying society, “entirely
relinquishes his status as outsider. He not only has a position within society, but he has
also become resolutely social, part of a circle of friends and acquaintances” (Wilson 98). At the country club, Rabbit not only socializes, but he also has his own clique of friends.

Throughout the previous two novels, Rabbit lived a simple life, in which his eight-hour days at the Linotype factory and selling MagiPeels were barely sufficient to pay all of the bills. Despite his extravagance in other areas of his life (like the frequent occurrence of having one too many women around), Rabbit never had the means to be frivolous or extravagant in terms of money. *Rabbit is Rich* marks an important turning point in the *Rabbit* series, because it is the first time that Rabbit has all the money he could want and is free to spend it however he likes. During a conversation with Charlie Stavros, Melanie and Bessie Springer, Janice’s mother, one evening, Harry listens to their three opinions on materialism and its place in American dreams. Harry thinks to himself, “He wants less. Freedom, that he always thought was outward motion, turns out to be this inner dwindling” (*Rich* 86). Although his intuition always drove him to pursue something through the self, Harry has almost always tried to find this ideal through his surroundings; in *Rabbit, Run* he sought it out in Ruth, and in *Rabbit Redux* he believed that he would find freedom through America. Despite Harry’s insistence that he look for freedom “within,” this book continues in the trend of the previous two, as the reader watches Harry fall back on the materialistic gift of money as a means to escape.

Money, like the American dream in *Rabbit Redux*, offers Harry alternative means to pursue freedom. And it seemingly brings more joy than anything has offered him before; “he feels he is floating—on their youth, on his money, on the brightness of his June afternoon, and its promise that tomorrow, a Sunday, will be fair for his golf game” (*Rich* 14). Despite it being Sunday, the Sabbath, Harry’s plans revolve around a golf
game, not church. Even more than that, though, golf does not have the same surreal element it had in *Rabbit, Run*; Harry does not play it for the quality of hope it displayed when he played with Eccles, but for fun, a way to "cultivate the leisured life he can now afford" (Wood *Ambiguous Pilgrim* 143). With golf, Updike purposely replaces money where God used to be, and repeats this exchange several times throughout the novel.

This replacement of money for God is manifested in Harry’s response to sex. He still realizes that sex is meaningful, that there is a connection between it and Something:

"When Harry was little God used to spread in the dark above his bed like that and then when the bed became strange and the girl in the next aisle grew armpit hair He entered into the blood and muscle and nerve as an odd command and now He had withdrawn, giving Harry the respect due from one well-off gentleman to another, but for a calling card left in the pit of the stomach, a bit of lead true as a plumb bob pulling Harry down toward all those leaden dead in the hollow earth below" (*Rich* 208).

Now, though, God no longer enters Harry’s veins to become manifest through the girl in the next aisle or in sexual relationships. As Harry exercises one day, he considers his sexual relationship with Janice, "At night when he’s with Janice, she needing a touch of cock to lead her into sleep, he tries to picture what will turn him on, and he’s running out of pictures" and in the same paragraph, he thinks to himself, "Sometimes he prays a few words at night but a stony truce seems to prevail between himself and God" (*Rich* 125). This correlation between sex and God is apparent: referring to nightly activities, both fail in their outcomes.
Instead, now, money acts as the main means to turn Harry on. Except for his night with Thelma (which will be discussed later), Harry only makes love to Janice once in the novel. The scene occurs right after the Angstroms purchase 29 Krugerrands (gold coins), and when they arrive home, Janice asks, “Where are you going to keep them?” to which Harry responds, “In your great big cunt” (Rich 195). Their tousling in bed continues, and Harry attempts to place the coins right where he said he would; he then makes love to her, all the while thinking about “the recent hike in the factory base price of Corollas” (Rich 196). For a man usually unable to get aroused, and for Updike’s treatment of the significance of sex throughout the four novels, this scene gives insight into Rabbit at this time in his life. Rabbit “pours Krugerrands over the naked Janice to arouse his desire for her, [and] keeps thinking about Consumer Reports when he ought to be concentrating on more erotic matters” (Wood Ambiguous Pilgrim 142). Sex and money are consistently intertwined throughout this scene, both physically (the coins) and through Rabbit’s head. To draw a metaphor between this novel and the others, money has replaced God as the ultimate realization in this sex scene.

Rabbit only seeks fulfillment elsewhere because he has finally discovered the nature of God that Ruth held in Rabbit, Run: that God is oftentimes absent in times of crisis. Now, Harry blames God for his absence in everything, for the dead “undone by diseases for which only God is to blame... think of all the blame God has to shoulder” (Rich 64). Thus, because God chose to deny sympathy to humans, Harry has chosen to not allow God a place in his life; “God [has] shrunk in Harry’s middle years to the size of a raisin lost under a car seat” (Rich 353). God’s very nature in this novel has shrunk,
been lost and is defined as “maybe God is in the universe the way salt is in the ocean, giving it taste” (Rich 419).

Anderson notes that “Harry will not acknowledge any religious impulses he might feel because he wants to maintain the not unpleasant equilibrium he enjoys with his Flying Eagle buddies, being the big man at Springer Motors, and lusting in pleasurable torment after Cindy Murkett” (14). However, Rabbit is not as indifferent to the progression of his faith as Anderson suggests. Rabbit has only rejected self and the pursuit of God because he has been forced into that position; God left him first.

Moreover, the exhaustion that Harry felt in Rabbit Redux continues to worsen through this novel, making it even harder to persistently run away from society to a nameless, faceless notion of fulfillment. Sustaining a faith in which he has no support from other people and in which God seems noticeably absent would be impossible for someone to support indefinitely. It seems as though Rabbit himself subconsciously realizes this difficulty, as he still dwells on the death of his daughter, Rebecca, in Rabbit at Rest, “And yet he has never forgot how, thirty years ago it will be this June, his baby daughter Rebecca June drowned... God hadn’t pulled the plug. It would have been so easy for Him, Who set the stars in place. To have it unhappen” (7). God’s absence from this event, when He could have saved Harry’s daughter, would be impossible to excuse, especially when Harry’s faith primarily hinges on a relationship with God.

Despite this belief, Harry cannot escape intuitive urges that continue to rise within him; he still believes that God is around, somewhere. He tells Nelson, affirming the idea that Harry has not quite given up running and searching, “Maybe I haven’t done
everything right in my life. I know I haven’t. But I haven’t committed the greatest sin. I haven’t laid down and died” (Rich 344).

Toward the end of his life, as God’s influence begins to wane, Harry begins to look for meaning in human relationships. But even when he tries to find meaning, he cannot help but be overwhelmingly insensitive. Rabbit’s entrance into society is fueled by money, not by an understanding of others, or even desire to understand others. Despite his previous lifestyle as a rebellious seeker, Rabbit now has a consistent clique of friends with whom he spends his spare time. The relationship between money and society is apparent throughout the book, and Updike himself draws a connection between the two early on, referring frequently to advertising jingles and Rabbit’s own acknowledgement of his admission into culture:

"'Loser’s buy,’ Harry virtually shouts. Such loudness years ago would have been special to male groups but now both sexes have watched enough beer commercials on television to know that this is how to act, jolly and loud, on weekends, in the bar, beside the barbecue grill, on beaches and sundecks and mountainsides” (Rich 52).

Harry seems to have an understanding of the culture he is in, realizing that reality is seemingly not determined by one’s own desires and motives, but by what television dictates as normal and “correct” behavior. This understanding of “correct” behavior is diametrically opposed to an ethic that considers a person’s relationship to another, because advertising, in its attempt to coerce people of all walks of life into buying a certain product (or even persona), does not consider a fundamental difference in mindset
between, for example, a college professor and a college student buying a case of beer on the weekend.

Although Rabbit is undeniably integrated into both society and culture, and his been accepted by a clique where others have not, he still has not developed an ethical relationship. With one exception, conversations between friends in this novel never surpass superficiality, and mainly resemble fraternity or sorority gatherings, with people dramatically speaking about topics that they all agree on. After Nelson crushes cars at Springer Motors, Harry goes golfing with Webb Murkett and Buddy Inglefinger, two friends from his clique, and tells them,

"I haven’t felt close to Nelson since he was two. What makes me feel rotten, he was right... people aren’t counting their pennies anymore, they’re throwin’ ‘em out the window.’

‘Like the Arabs,’ Webb Murkett says.

‘Jesus, those Arabs,’ Buddy Inglefinger says. ‘Wouldn’t it be bliss just to nuke ‘em all?’ (Rich 153).

This conversation strikingly resembles a group of boys talking about an opposing baseball team; the dialogue flows naturally because it requires no thought, no consideration of what the person before has said. Perhaps most shockingly is that Harry says something substantive (that he has not had a relationship with Nelson since he was two), but his friends ignore that revealing statement and proceed to wish death upon the Arabs. This sort of incongruence in conversation is seen throughout the novel, as people
discuss serious topics, but do not seem to really address the person or concerns to whom they are talking. For example, Peggy Fosnacht joins the group one evening, and she rants about the views of the Pope,

"'He said everything outside marriage was wrong. Not just if you’re married, but before you’re married too. What does that man know? He doesn’t know anything about life, life as she is lived.'

Webb Murkett offers in a soft voice, 'I like what Earl Butz said some years ago. "He no play-a the game, he no make-a the rules."'

'No play-a the game!' Peggy Fosnacht yells. 'See if you’re a pregnant slum mother and can’t get an abortion legally if you think it’s such a game'"

(Rich 258).

Although this specific passage is an exaggeration of a typical incongruent conversation in the group, it represents the inability of these friends to hold substantive conversations. As people in the group grow uncomfortable with certain subject matter, the topic is dropped rather than pursued more vigorously. Indeed, the dynamic of the group is superficial, with conversations (and even understandings of each other) unable to surpass that. They are in a beer commercial, having fun and letting nothing serious spoil the day.

It is clear in this novel that Rabbit’s clique is composed of nothing but a group of adults wishing they were in a college fraternity. Janice, the one person who should be notable to Rabbit and should be treated ethically, continues to be treated with near disinterest on Rabbit’s part. In Rabbit Redux, Harry showed little concern about Janice’s
affair with another man, and by the time of *Rabbit is Rich*, his interest in her has
dissipated even further. Harry himself acknowledges this when he realizes, “Still, he
cannot dislike this brown-eyed woman who has been his indifferent wife for twenty-three
years this past March” (*Rich* 34). While in the Caribbean on vacation, the group of
friends agrees to switch partners for the night, and Harry “had been figuring Janice would
have to take Ronnie, and felt sorry for her, except from the look of him he’d fall asleep
soon” (*Rich* 372). Harry is less interested in his wife being used by another man and
more disgusted of who the man is, because of his personal conflicts with him. Janice’s
actions continue to be of no interest to Harry; the pair coexists, but seemingly have no
attachments to each other.

During the partner-switch, though, Harry encounters the sole ethical moment he
will have with another human during the *Rabbit* tetralogy. After he and Thelma have
satisfied each other, they engage in real, honest conversation:

“She thinks he should seek out Ruth and ask her point-blank if that is his
daughter… on the subject of Nelson, she thinks the child’s problem may be an
extension of Harry’s; if he himself did not feel guilty about Jill’s death and before
that Rebecca’s, he would feel less threatened by Nelson…”

“But he’s not like me!” Harry protests, having come at last into a presence
where the full horror of this truth, the great falling-off, will be understood” (*Rich*
380).
The reader is not privileged to know the conversation that occurred before Thelma started voicing her opinion, but it is clear that Harry revealed some of his deepest secrets, hopes and desires with Thelma. Harry himself seems to realize the unique quality of their conversation, thinking to himself that he is finally talking to someone who not only understands, but takes the time to listen.

And Harry responds in kind, listening to Thelma describes “her marriage with Ronnie, his insecurities and worries beneath the braggart manner that she knows annoys Harry” (Rich 380). These two one-time lovers have engaged in a deeper relationship than they have with any other person in their lives, and behind closed doors share one of the few substantive interpersonal moments in the entire series.

Harry, who has sought after this sort of ethical understanding and fulfillment for his entire life, tries to hold on to Thelma, even after the night is over. At lunch that day, when all of the couples reunite, he first accidentally touches Thelma’s knee beneath the table, and she pulls away instantly. Then he “deliberately seeks to touch Thelma’s knee with his under the table but her knee is not there for him. Like Janice down here she has become a piece of static” (Rich 384). The comparison to Janice in this scene is striking; for Harry to equate anyone to Janice is to reduce his relationship to that person to Nothingness. Indeed, since Thelma acts cold and unresponsive to Harry’s needs, she is similar to Janice, and the ethical bond between the two has broken.

Ten years later, in *Rabbit at Rest*, it is clear that Thelma and Harry reignited their bond shortly after their last scene together in *Rabbit is Rich*. They have carried on an affair for the past ten years, during which time Thelma became struck with lupus and Harry suffers a mild heart attack. This long-term quality of this relationship is atypical
for Harry, since he previously had been unable to attain fulfillment from other relationships with women and left within months (or, in Janice’s case, remained married but emotionally dead). Consequently, it is suggested that Harry’s relationship with Thelma reaches a level of intimacy he had not reached with anyone else. Harry himself, after trying to kiss her, acknowledges, “But he had meant it more comfortably, settling in his rocker opposite the one person who for the last ten years has given him nothing but what he needs. Sex. Soul food” (Rest 179). He says to her later, “I ought to run. But let me sit here a little longer. Being with you is such a relief... you’ve been all gravy, Thel. I know it’s cost you, but you’ve been terrific” (Rest 184). And just as Harry is about to leave, he tells her and honestly means, “Without you, I don’t have a life” (Rest 187).

It is obvious that Harry means these words by the way he treats Thelma in conversation. For one thing, Harry does not shy away from talking about his own personal problems and circumstances; in their brief visit, he discusses his heart attack, problems with Nelson, and the nature of his relationship with Janice. This openness is sharply contrasted with the way he talks with other characters. At Thelma’s funeral, Harry tries to tell Cindy Murkett all of the things he has learned from his heart attack, but stops, realizing, “This is too deep for her, too confessional. There was always in his relations with Cindy a wall, just behind her bright butterscotch-brown eyes, a barrier where the signals stopped” (Rest 341). With Thelma, on the other hand, they can always discuss the most intimate subjects without awkwardness or shyness.

Moreover, Harry actually acknowledges Thelma and thinks to ask her about her health and surprisingly, notes emotional changes in her disposition, “I just was.
Remembering. You seem sad)” (Rest 179). Although Harry questions whether or not he would leave Janice, it is clear through his dialogue and acknowledgement of Thelma that her presence and importance in his life could never be replaced by Janice.

Although Thelma is always very giving in her relationship with Harry in regard to both her body and interest in his life, it is never quite clear how she views their relationship. For one thing, she seems surprised that Harry has come over just to talk; he asks, “Why do you think I’m here?” to which she responds, “To make love. To screw me. Go ahead. I mean come ahead. Why do you think I answered the door?” (Rest 183). From this statement, it seems as though Thelma thinks that Harry’s interest in the relationship is purely selfish, meaning that her interest has to be at least partially selfish to compensate.

She clearly loves Harry, but the effect of their relationship (their sin) has resulted in a closeness to God that has to do with what’s wrong with their relationship, not what’s right. For her,

“The affair has enriched her transactions with God, giving her something to feel sinful about, to discuss with Him. It seems to explain her lupus, if she’s an adulteress. It makes it easier for Him, if she deserves to be punished” (Rest 177).

Her interest in the relationship is at least partially to sustain her belief in God, to explain why God has created lupus in her body, a disease that eats her away, inside out.

Despite their open candor, God is one topic about which they both (although primarily Harry) feel uncomfortable talking. Thelma brings up the topic, seemingly to pique Harry’s interest and save his soul; for her, “it helps the panic, when you think of all
the things you’ll never do that you always thought vaguely you might. Like go to Portugal, or get a master’s degree.” But Harry strongly avoids the religious aspect of the conversation, “squirming inside” and responds, “You might get to Portugal yet. They say it’s cheap, relatively” (Rest 186). Yet despite this inability to talk about God, Thelma and Rabbit obviously have a relationship that proves to be more ethical and substantive than either have in their spouses; their affair, it is clear, was just as emotional and intellectual as it was physical.

Rabbit likely avoids talking about God because he himself has serious concerns and doubts about the nature of Him. Harry’s faith has grown more and more diminished. God’s absence in the world consistently pervades Harry’s thoughts, from his daughter’s death 30 years ago to the Pan Am flight blowing up over Lockerbie, Scotland that year. At the beginning of the novel, Harry plays golf with his Jewish friends and “the soldier in Harry, the masochistic Christian, respects man like this. It’s total uncritical love, such as women provide, that makes you soft and does you in” (Rest 56). This rough edge of God, though, is what seems to have killed his faith, both during present circumstances and as he reflects on God’s absence in the past. “The Rabbit tetralogy asks how God can be forgiven his spirit-numbing withdrawal from the world, his heinous refusal to intervene at Rebecca’s death no less than the Holocaust,” and this point is driven home in Rabbit at Rest (Wood Ambiguous Pilgrim 135).

References to this absence abound throughout the novel, and one of the most interesting examples is when Harry is watching the Superbowl: “The announcers… seem indignant that God could do this, mess with CBS and blot out a TV show the sponsors are paying a million dollars a minute for and millions are watching” (Rest 147). This scene
combines two elements of Rabbit's faith: that God is absent and that commercialism has replaced Him. Although God is not absent in this instance, it is clear that Harry's faith is in the commercial and material, that God is faraway and absent from that which is familiar to him. Wood notes that commercialism overpowers Harry's faith in *Rabbit at Rest*:

"Television and advertising are the purveyors of our everyday nihilism...

Harry and his kin turn to television during times of crisis. After a near-fatal boat accident, when Rabbit and his granddaughter tack desperately back to shore they do not voice hymns of praise, but empty jingles, ""Coke is it,"" Judy sings, ""the most refreshing taste around, Coke is it, the one that never lets you down, Coke is it, the biggest taste you ever found"" (140)"" (146).

It is clear here that it is not God who will never forsake Harry, it is in fact Coke that ""never lets you down."" The praise songs are ironically addressed not to an Almighty power, but instead to commercialism and products which, in a sense, have not failed to appear whenever Harry has wanted them.

Despite Harry's reluctance to believe in God, he is still riddled with feelings of Something out there. He notes, he once told ""someone, a prying clergyman, somewhere behind all this there's something that wants me to find it. Whatever it is, it now has found him, and is working him over"" (*Rest* 122). He also remembers his true religious experiences with the copper beech next to his house:
“The huge spreading copper-beech tree on the left side where Harry and Janice’s bedroom used to be, a tree so dense the sun never shone in and its beech nuts popping kept Harry awake all fall, is gone, leaving that side bare, its windows exposed and on fire. Nelson had cut it down. *Dad, it was eating up the whole house. You couldn’t keep paint on the woodwork on that side, it was so damp. The lawn wouldn’t even grow.* Harry couldn’t argue, and couldn’t tell the boy that the sound of rain in that great beech has been the most religious experience of his life. That, and hitting a pure golf shot" (*Rest* 227).

Harry’s understanding of God has not matured much since his early days in *Rabbit, Run* and, even worse, his attempts to reach God have become more futile and less insistent. He does not try to reach God through any means anymore; he “cannot even contemplate anymore the provisional transcendence of sex; it is as if the distinction between the promise of escape in sex and the enactment of the impossibility of escape had collapsed, and all Harry can see is its sad futility” (Wilson 103). For Harry, both God and sex have been harder to attain in his old age, and he has reduced the pursuit of either to futile.

At the beginning of the novel, Harry is waiting at the airport to pick up his son, Nelson, his wife, Pru, and their two children, Judy and Roy. While waiting, he visits an airport concession stand and sees all of the “skin mags” on the rack. Rabbit “imagines himself buying one... sadly foreseeing that he will not be enough aroused, boredom will become his main feelings, and embarrassment at the expenditure” (*Rest* 15). At this point, it is nearly impossible for Rabbit to get excited (both sexually and religiously), and
he further confirms this the night Nelson leaves for rehab. Rabbit has just come home from the hospital, and he and Pru are left alone in the house. She comes crying into his room, looking for comfort, and makes sexual advances on him. Rabbit, though, is only “aware through the length of his body a cottony sleepiness waiting to claim him” (Rest 313). He later recalls the incident, “to keep his prick up he kept telling himself, This is the first time I’ve ever fucked a left-handed woman” (Rest 322). Although Harry has been eyeing Pru since they first met ten years ago, when he finally attains her, he cannot help but feel sleepy and it takes more than physicality to arouse him. Harry’s sex life is nearly non-existent, because his relationship with God has diminished:

“Funny, about Harry and religion. When God hadn’t a friend in the world, back there in the Sixties, he couldn’t let go of Him, and now when the preachers are all praying through bullhorns he can’t get it up for Him” (Rest 409).

The sexual inference in this passage further confirms the connection between sex and religion in the four novels. Primarily, it is clear that Harry’s religious life starts with very little footing in Rabbit, Run and he gradually declines during the next three novels. Several aspects of his life affect his relationship with God: Janice, money, American dreams, and sheer exhaustion. But it is God’s consistent absence in Harry’s life (and especially at the one event that continues to come up in Harry’s mind, the death of Rebecca June) that ultimately causes Harry to lose his faith in having a relationship with a higher being. Flannery O’Connor said of modern-era people, “At its best, our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily” (Mystery and Manners 159). This insight into her age
aptly describes Harry’s condition: at his best, he is a rebellious seeker, but at his worst, he sinks into the mire of society and money to pursue meaning through the comforts of life.

The ethical considerations of this novel revolve around the choices Harry makes throughout the four novels in regard to how he treats other people. Both Barth and Kierkegaard advocate a separation of worldly and religious pursuits, and “there is no question that for Updike the problems of human morality are subordinate to that of faith” (Schopen 526). For Rabbit, who believes that his world is devoid of meaning, this presents a problem, because pursuing God requires him to ignore other people in his life. “For the most part, [Rabbit is in] a more constricted universe and his pilgrimage is an interior journey, a quest to discover a gracious something in a world apparently bounded by Nothingness” (Hunt 38). However, it is clear that although Rabbit’s unethical and moreover hurtful actions toward others might have started while he sought God, his actions continue to be unethical even during the later years of his life when his attempts to find Something are not related to God or religion.

Kierkegaard and Barth would not subscribe to hurting others in pursuit of God, but their theologies seem to inevitably point in that direction. No person can completely deny society, and so it seems clear that an attempt to do so would hurt someone. Rabbit, throughout his religious journey, has failed to reach God (who Barth and Kierkegaard both deem “unreachable”) and has also failed to sustain any meaningful relationships. Moreover, his actions have seriously hurt those to whom he is closest; Nelson has many issues of insecurity and anger at his father throughout the novels, and blames Harry for many of the problems in his own life.
Ultimately, the Updikean religion in the *Rabbit* tetralogy is unsustainable and, as evidenced by Harry, ends in failure in multiple areas. Because Harry spent so much time pursuing his own interests in an attempt to reach God, he failed to reach out to God-sent relationships on earth, like his wife. Moreover, his attempts to reach his goal, a relationship with God, also failed. Harry expected a God that would grant wishes at his request, and this kind of God is not only unreal, but also suspect. The religious and ethical considerations of the *Rabbit* tetralogy, though complex, paint a realistic, but sad, picture of the current state of the American soul; when selfishness becomes a primary element of faith, and one’s focus is turned inward, there is only darkness.
Works Cited


