UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE - FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Evolution of the Approach to Death: John Updike's Novels of the 1960s

Vývoj přístupu ke smrti v románech Johna Updikea z 60. let

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Anglistika-amerikanistika

Praha, srpen 2019

Declaration

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Acknowledgements

I would like to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to my supervisor PhDr. Hana Ulmanová, PhD, M.A. for her valuable advice, patience with the abundance of questions, kind support and humane approach during the consultation of my BA thesis. I would also like to thank my friends and family for their infinite love and support, especially Harry Altoft for dedicating his time to proofreading the thesis.

Abstrakt

Tato práce pojednává o přístupu ke smrti v románech Johna Updikea z 60. let, konkrétně v dílech *Králíku, utíkej!*, *Kentaur* a *Dvojice*. Přesto, že význam smrti v Updikeově próze je uznáván, kritické práce se zabývají hlavně jinými tématy. Hlavním záměrem práce je pozorování vývoje přístupu ke smrti nejen hlavních postav jednotlivých románů, ale i celková změna Updikeova přístupu ke smrti napříč těmito třemi romány.

První kapitola představuje teoretické pozadí dvou pohledů na smrt, na základě kterého budou romány analyzovány. První perspektiva je křesťanský pohled na smrt, druhá se opírá o Freudovu teorii pudů. Křesťanství je důležitým aspektem v Updikeově tvorbě nejen proto, že Updike sám byl křesťan, ale většina jeho hlavních postav je věřících, nebo alespoň vyznává křesťanské hodnoty. Tradiční křesťanské ideje jsou rozšířeny o koncepty představené Haroldem Bloomem v jeho publikaci *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (*Americká víra: vznik post-křesťanského národa*.)[1] Výběr Freudovy teorie je založen na úzkém vztahu mezi sexem a smrtí v románech, který koresponduje s teorií rozvinutou ve studii *Mimo princip slasti*.[2]

Jednotlivé romány jsou analyzovány v následujících třech kapitolách. Každá kapitola zkoumá původní přístup hlavního hrdiny ke smrti, relevanci tohoto přístupu k daným teoretickým perspektivám a postoj hlavního hrdiny ke smrti na konci románu. Nejvýznamnější sekundární literatura společná pro všechny tři kapitoly je *John Updike Revisited* of Jamese A. Schiffa a *Konverzace s Johnem Updikem* od Jamese Platha. V každé analytické kapitole je zohledněn jeden prominentní sekundární zdroj, jehož myšlenky jsou použity a zkoumány ve vztahu ke křesťanskému pojetí smrti a Freudově teorii. Toto poskytlo analýzu hlavních postav a následné dokázání vývoje jejich přístupu ke smrti. V druhé kapitole

[1] Český vlastní pracovní překlad.
[2] *Mimo princip slasti a jiné práce z let 1920-1924*, trans. M. Kopal J. Pechar (Praha: Psychoanalytické nakl. J. Koco:1999).

je tímto hlavním sekundárním zdrojem "Rabbit Angstrom as a Religious Sufferer" (Králík Angstrom jako věřící trpitel)[3] od Lewise A. Lawsona, ve třetí kapitole "The Questing Fear: Christian Allegory in John Updike's 'The Centaur'" (Pátraní strachu: Křesťanská alegorie v 'Kentaur' od Johna Updikea)[4] od Davida Mayerse a ve čtvrté kapitole "Updike's 'Couples': Eros Demythologized" (Updikeovy 'Dvojice': Eros demytologizován)[5] od Roberta Detweilera.

Výsledky předešlých kapitol jsou porovnány v páté kapitole. Nejprve jsou shrnuty změny v přístupu hlavních hrdinů ke smrti, následně jsou postavy porovnány s ohledem na jejich původní názory na smrt, víru, relevanci k Freudově teorii a jejich finální pojetí smrti. Závěrem této kapitoly je přehled celkového vývoje tématu smrti v jednotlivých románech, z čehož vyplývá znázornění vývoje Updikeova pohledu na smrt napříč analyzovanými romány.

V závěru práce je obsažen krátký souhrn výsledků práce. Zároveň je v této části blíže prozkoumána sekundární literatura a myšlenky v ní obsažené. Dané myšlenky jsou představeny, abychom práci zasadili do širšího kontextu studia Johna Updikea. Dále jsou uvedeny další možné přístupy ke třem vybraným románům, stejně tak, jako k tématům, o kterých práce pojednává. Tato část je pojata také jako návrh možného budoucího zkoumání Updikeovy tvorby.

[3] Český vlastní pracovní překlad.
[4] Český vlastní pracovní překlad.
[5] Český vlastní pracovní překlad.

Abstract

This thesis explores the approach to death in the novels of John Updike published in the 1960's, namely *Rabbit Run*, *The Centaur* and *Couples*. The importance of death in Updike's prose is universally acknowledged, but most critical works are concerned with other themes. The main focus of this thesis is the development of the approach to death of the main characters in the aforementioned novels as well as the overall change of Updike's approach to death over the three novels.

The first chapter presents the theoretical background for two perspectives on death: death in Christian teachings and the theory of life and death drives by Sigmund Freud. Christianity is an important aspect of Updike's prose, not only because he is Christian himself, but the majority of his focal characters either are Christian or share Christian values. Traditional Christian notions are expanded upon by the concept of The American Religion, introduced by Harold Bloom in *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. The selection of Freud's theory is based on the close connection between sex and death in the novels, which is in accordance with the theory explained in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

In the following three chapters, the individual novels are analysed. Each chapter examines the initial position to death of the main character, its relevance regarding the theoretical background provided, and finally the character's attitude towards death at the end of the novel. The crucial secondary sources used in all three chapters are *John Updike Revisited* by James A. Schiff and *Conversations with John Updike* by James Plath. In each analytical chapter, there is one prominent secondary source; in chapter two it is "Rabbit Angstrom as a Religious Sufferer" by Lewis A. Lawson, in chapter three "The Questing Fear: Christian Allegory in John Updike's "The Centaur'" by David Myers, and in chapter four "Updike's "Couples": Eros Demythologized" by Robert Detweiler. The core ideas explored

by the sources are used to analyse the main characters and the progress of their approach to death in conjunction with the two perspectives on death.

Chapter five provides the comparison of the findings established in the previous chapters. Firstly, a summary of the changes of attitude towards death of each character is presented. The characters are then compared to one another in respect to their initial position to death; faith; the relevance of Freud's drive theory and their final attitude towards death. This chapter concludes with an overview of each novel's development, producing a representation of the evolution of Updike's attitude towards death.

The conclusion includes a short summary of the results of the analysis. Closer examination of the secondary sources and the ideas contained within is presented in relationship to this thesis, placing it in the context of Updike's scholarship. Other possible perspectives on the three selected novels and themes are mentioned, hopefully providing plausible suggestions for future research.

Table of Contents

Introduction

John Updike belongs amongst the most influential and widely read writers of the twentieth century. His work, especially prose, is important in American literature for its depiction of the middle class,[6] which Updike manages to describe with authenticity as well as humour and wit. His focus on everyday problems and the inner turmoil of his small-town characters offers a realistic portrayal of the middle-class life throughout the five decades Updike published.[7] He openly admitted his work is, to some extent, autobiographical and influenced by his own experiences. In a 1988 interview with Terry Gross, Updike explained:

> I'm kind of stuck in the middle, as far as my life goes, and hence my imagination tends to zero in on things which are indeed in the middle. I don't write about the very rich, whom I scarcely know, or the very poor, whom I don't know at all.[8]

The importance of his life in his works is most prominent in his early works of the 60's, in which his novels shift Pennsylvanian setting to New England as he moves there himself.[9] With this geographical shift comes also a thematic shift: from a young Pennsylvanian male protagonist and the world of his family to the New England married life and its problems.[10] Although this alteration results in major changes, the focus still remains on the middle class, as well as the major topics Updike deals with, like death.

My thesis will focus on the novels of the 1960's, regardless of whether they are set in Pennsylvania or New England. Even though *Rabbit, Run*, and *The Centaur* belong to the stories of Pennsylvania and *Couples* are part of the New England novels,[11] they still share the topic of death. This thesis will discuss the evolution of the approach to death of the main characters as well as the general development of Updike's approach to death across the three novels. I will present the main characters' ideas and philosophies concerning death as well as

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[6] Justin Quinn, et al., *Lectures on American Literature*, 3rd edition (Prague: Karolinum, 2011) 264.
[7] Quinn 265.
[8] James Plath (ed.), *Conversations with John Updike* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 208.
[9] James A. Schiff, *John Updike Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998) 11.
[10] Schiff 66.
[11] Schiff 11.

the actual deaths in the novels. Death is a significant part of the entire work of Updike, but those three novels are relevant not only because they are his earliest and most critically acclaimed ones, but also due to the social and political changes of the 60's. Those issues are scarcely addressed or implied in the novels, since Updike's work does not tend to be overtly political. Still, the novels depict the middle class which was undoubtedly affected by the changes of the 1960's. Alongside the Civil Rights movement, the Anti-war movement, feminism, gay activism and many other socially liberating movements there were the issues of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Cold War and the Vietnam War. All those events influenced, impacted and often threatened the middle class.[12] Whether it was the turbulent social atmosphere or the threat of war, Updike's writing frequently features fundamentally different approaches to death. The characters of the 60's novels encounter, experience, meditate and dread death. There are two explicit concepts of death in Updike's novels; the Christian idea of death and Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive.

The Christian idea is relevant not only because God, sins, going to church, and other Christian concepts are frequently featured in the novels, but also because Updike himself was raised as a Lutheran.[13] As was previously established, Updike's work is influenced by his own life and he was very open about the Christian influence on his work. In a 1978 interview with Jeff Campbell Updike stated:

> I would call myself a Lutheran by upbringing, and my work contains some of the ambiguities of the Lutheran position, which would have a certain radical otherworldly emphasis and yet and off retention of a lot of Catholic forms and a rather rich ambivalence toward the word itself. That is, Luther's feelings about the devil and the world are quite interesting to me. He seems to greatly admire, to adore, the devil.[14]

The idea of the devil being admired or at least not mortally feared frequently presents itself in Updike's novels, especially in the matter of adultery and generally sin. One of the aims of this

[12] Quinn 264.
[13] Plath 94.
[14] Plath 94

thesis is to examine whether it is Updike's religion subtly professing itself in his writing or simply the characters' nature. Either way it is impossible to analyse Updike's writing without taking into consideration his beliefs. There are many instances of the characters being religious themselves or they at least have adopted some Christian habits. This is relevant to death on many levels, whether it is the characters' idea of the afterlife or fear of suffering for their sins.

The second concept of death, or rather the effect death has on human life, is the death drive introduced by Sigmund Freud. Freud is mentioned in the novels several times, most notably in *Couples*, when the main character's wife reads and discusses Freud on a couple of occasions. Updike himself mentioned Freud in numerous interviews. In a 1985 interview with Willi Winkler, where he mentions the influence Freud's work had on him and on American society: "Since Freud, sexuality is also something positive, not something negative as it was suggested by the Puritans. Freud's concept of the death and destruction drive moves me, even if I can't agree with it."[15] Contrary to his disbelief in the death drive, his characters display self-destructive behaviour. This, just like the Lutheran idea of the devil, is expressed in the way Updike handles sexual themes in his novels. It is, especially in *Rabbit, Run* and *Couples*, evident how sex is connected with mortality, just like Freud's life drive, professed as a sexual drive, is connected with the death drive.

Detailed explanations of the concepts of Christian death and Freud's death drive will be presented in the theoretical part of this thesis. This part is incorporated in the second chapter where I will attempt to explain the concept of death in Christian teachings in detail sufficient for the purpose of this thesis. The concept of death in Freud's work will also be introduced in this chapter to provide necessary background against which the approach to death in individual novels will be discussed.

[15] Plath 175.

The following chapters will therefore be dedicated to the important novels, ordered chronologically according to the date of publication. Starting with *Rabbit, Run*, *The Centaur*, and finally *Couples*, this thesis will examine the main characters' evolving approach to death in each novel as well as any actual deaths that occur in. The method for those analyses will be close reading since the characters' opinions are often either scattered throughout the novels, incomplete or ambiguous. The analysis will roughly follow the timeline of each novel, focusing on the theme of death, religion and relevance of Freud's drive theory, to examine the evolution of the main characters' perspective on death. The findings of those analyses will be compared in a separate chapter, consisting of a summary of the attitudes towards death in the three novels, and a clear presentation of the developments of Updike's approach to death.

The conclusion will briefly summarize the result of the comparison, major secondary sources used in this thesis and their agreement or disagreement with my findings. I will also present different perspectives for possible future research of the theme of death in Updike's work.

Chapter 1 Religion, Freud and Death

Updike's work is deeply concerned with the matters of religion.[16] He openly admits his novels are influenced by his Christian beliefs,[17] specifically Protestantism.[18] To fully understand the religious notions included in his work, this chapter will introduce how different relevant religions perceive death. The majority of information about religious matters will be drawn from *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* and Harold Bloom's book *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. The relation between death and religion is here defined as such: "Religion, whether it be shamanism or Protestantism, rises from our apprehension of death. To give a meaning to the meaningless is the endless quest of religion."[19] Similarly, "when death becomes the center, then religion begins."[20] This inherent connection between death and religion is crucial for contemplating Updike's characters' relationship to death.

In an interview with Jane Howard, Updike states that his subject is "the American Protestant small-town middle class."[21] He then relates religion to the mere fact of existence:

> I believe that all problems are basically insoluble and that faith is a leap out of despair [...] I've felt that existence itself was an effort to be forgiven. I've felt in myself and in those around me a failure of nerve - a sense of doubt as to the worth of any action. At such times one has nothing but the ancient assertions of Christianity to give one the will to act, even if the act is only the bringing in of the milk bottles off the front porch.[22]

The Christian assertion, in this case the biblical notion of death, is the first to be discussed. It is essential to establish the original religious thought of death to further relate it to what Bloom calls the American Religion. The concept of the American Religion is relevant, since it

[16] Charles Thomas Samuels, *John Updike* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1969) 10.
[17] Plath 202.
[18] Plath 203.
[19] Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, (New York: Simon&Schuster, 1992) 29.
[20] Bloom 29.
[21] Plath 11.
[22] Plath 14.

discusses “the process of democratizing and Americanizing of Christianity.”[23] Bloom traces the beginnings of the American Religion to the American Revolution, and mentions Emerson as its first theologian.[24] This clearly puts Updike into the context of the American Religion, which began with Emerson and continues to this day, a religion, in which the notions of traditional Christianity are adjusted. [25]

1.1.1 Biblical Notion of Death

Death is inseparable from every living thing. Since the beginning of Christianity, death has been one of the primary concerns of believers. In *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, death is defined in the relation to the Old Testament and New Testament. Both testaments see it as something inevitable, since every man has to experience death, his own or his loved ones. It is not a pleasant thought for someone who enjoys this world but can be a desirable thing for someone who suffers.[26] Where Old Testament and New Testament differ is what death actually means.

Death can be understood as non-existence, because what is beyond death cannot be grasped by the living. Old Testament, however, does not regard death as a complete annihilation: even though the body is dead, the soul goes to Sheol, a realm likened to hell, where the soul is forgotten by God. Whilst not a hopeful image, Old Testament states, that truly wise people accept death and take it as “a divine decree (2 S 12,23; 14,14), which underlines the lowliness of human condition when faced with an immortal God.”[27] Yet in death the “penalty of sin”[28] is seen, and death itself manifests the presence of sin. In Old Testament a man without faith in God “has already made a pact with death and has chosen his

[23] Bloom 17.
[24] Bloom 16-17.
[25] Bloom 45.
[26] Xavier León Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Saint Pauls books & Media, Boston. 1973) 114.
[27] *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 115.
[28] *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 115.

portion (Ws 1,16)."[29] This begs the question, what happens to innocent people, who believe in God and still die. Old Testament presents the answer in God's Kingdom. Only God can save people from death and only He can triumph over it, destroy it. All innocent people, who are not sinners, will rise and go to God's Kingdom, which promises immortality. In Old Testament, present life is less than eternal life in God's Kingdom.[30]

In New Testament, the triumph over death is assigned to Christ. Therefore death "takes on a new meaning for the humanity which died with Christ in order to be with Him eternally."[31] This stems from the fact, that Christ, in order to save humanity from death, himself took on the burden of mortality, then sacrificed himself for the entire human race. Christ's death on the cross, and his salvation by God, brought on the death to Sin. Simply, Christ died for people "when we were sinners; thereby He gave us manifestation of supreme love (5,7; Jn. 15,13; 1 Jn 4,10)."[32] When Christ took on himself the nature of the human kind, all men died at the cross with Christ. All men are therefore already dead and their lives are hidden with Christ in God. By dying with Christ, they died to Death itself - by living in sin they were dead already, now they are resurrected. Baptism is the symbol of the unity with the death of Christ. Therefore, Christ's resurrection was not only a manifestation of love, but also of God's power to fight death.[33]

The New Testament dictates, that people, who believe in God and live according to his religion, will be immortal, and people, who live in sin and do not believe in God, will therefore die, and then die the second death. Bodily death, for Christians, is not only an inevitable destiny, but for a just man, who dies for God, it is an entry into peace, eternal rest

[29] *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 116.
[30] *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 114-116.
[31] *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 117.
[32] *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 118.
[33] *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 117 - 118.

and perpetual light. This is the reason, why for a Christian, death should be, in the last analysis, a gain, since Christ is his life.[34]

To summarize, New Testament dictates, that by resurrecting Christ, God professed his nature to be kind and loving, therefore those, who accept God and live according to His will, will be after 'death' rewarded with immortality, which is being with God in his Kingdom. Death, for traditional Christianity, was not something to be feared, if one was not a sinner. Since many of Updike's characters are at least partially religious, but are sinners at the same time, death becomes something more complicated, more frightful.

1.1.2 The American Religion according to Harold Bloom

As previously mentioned, the American Religion according to Harold Bloom started with the American Revolution and continues to this day. He defines the state of faith in contemporary United States as follows:

> Religion, in the ostensibly Protestant United States, is something subtly other than Christianity. [...] We are post-Protestant, and we live a persuasive redefinition of Christianity. It is so persuasive that we refuse to admit that we have revised the traditional religion into a faith that better fits our national temperament, aspirations, and anxieties. [35]

Bloom says that although most American believers label themselves as Christian, they are "closer to ancient Gnostics than to early Christians."[36] The connection between traditional Christianity, Protestantism and Gnosticism is explained:

> The American Religion, which is so prevalent among us, masks itself as Protestant Christianity yet has ceased to be Christian. It has kept the figure of Jesus, a very solitary and personal American Jesus, who is also the resurrected Jesus rather than the crucified Jesus or the Jesus who ascended again to the Father. [...] The most Gnostic element in the American Religion is an astonishing reversal of ancient Gnosticism: we worship the Demiurge as God, more often than not under the name of manifest Necessity. As for the alien God of the Gnostics, he has vanished, except for his fragments or sparks scattered among our few elitists of the spirit, or for his shadow in the solitary figure of the American Jesus.[37]

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[34] *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* 119.
[35] Bloom 45.
[36] Bloom 21.
[37] Bloom 32.

Bloom states that the American Religion is often labelled as Protestantism. This makes the American Religion even more relevant to Updike because he was a Protestant. The beliefs of the American religion differ from traditional Christianity in the fact that they are very biblical. Since the basic views on death in the biblical sense have already been described above, the other aspects of the American Religion will be explained. Arguably the most important is the figure of Jesus Christ.

Bloom calls the figure of Jesus in the twentieth century United States "The American Christ, who has become a *personal experience* for the American Christian."[38] According to Bloom "American Christ is more an American than he is Christ."[39] By this, he draws attention to the notion of American self, which connects to the idea of freedom. For the American Religion, freedom is "not what Protestants once called Christian Liberty, but is a solitude in which the inner loneliness is at home in an outer loneliness."[40] The solitude of the American Religion is individualism in spiritual life. There is no longer a need for community and society in spiritual quests of contemporary Americans.[41] The desire to achieve a solitary freedom points to the fact, that there also has to be a religious anxiety, which Bloom identifies as fundamentalism.[42]

According to Bloom, fundamentalism is "an attempt to overcome the terror of death by a crude literalization of the Christian intimation of immortality. [...] which is the shadow side of what is most spiritual and valuable in the American Religion."[43] This is where the biblical notion of death differs from the American Religion notion of death. In the biblical concept, death is not to be feared, whereas in the American Religion, there is a fear of death. This fear of death is manifested in Updike's novels, perhaps because "all of us are affected by

[38] Bloom 25.
[39] Bloom 25.
[40] Bloom 31.
[41] Bloom 27.
[42] Bloom 39.
[43] Bloom 39.

the consequences of our national faith."[44] The role of death is important for the idea of Eros, which Bloom explains as: "the poetic character [...] begins in a rebellion against death"[45] Bloom sees Eros as connected to romance, and the American Religion "is severely internalized quest romance, in which some version of immortality serves as the object of desire."[46] Again, the notion of religious desire and religious anxiety is introduced: where the American Religion fears death, it desires immortality. To some extent the actions of Updike's characters exhibit similar motivations, and this puts them into the frame of the American Religion.

When introducing the Christian Science, Bloom criticizes its reluctance to accept the "enlightened wisdom" of Sigmund Freud's reality principle, which is "our necessity for coming to terms with our own inevitable death."[47] This might seem like a contradiction to his previous statement, that the American Religion fears death and seeks immortality, and whilst that might be true, he explains that "the God of American Religion, and indeed Christianity, is [...] the Reality you set against the Freudian reality principle, the necessity of dying, really dying, once and for all."[48]

1.2. Sigmund Freud's Drives

Sigmund Freud first discussed the theory of death drive in his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[49] The concept of death drive, also called death instinct or Thanatos,[50] can be fully grasped only in the context of three other principles: the reality principle, the pleasure principle and Eros, also known as life drive or life instinct.[51] Those four notions are

[44] Bloom 38.
[45] Bloom 40.
[46] Bloom 40.
[47] Bloom 131.
[48] Bloom 186.
[49] Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961.
[50] Robert M. Goldenson, *Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry* (New York: Longman Inc, 1984) 203.
[51] *Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry* 266.

essentially the driving force behind our entire being, hence the term 'drive.'[52] Before understanding the drives and the pleasure principle, it is crucial to define the reality principle:

> The regulatory mechanism that represents the demands of the external world, and requires us to forgo or modify gratification or postpone it to a more appropriate time. In contrast to the pleasure principle, which represents the id or instinctual impulses, the reality principle represents the ego, which controls our impulses and enables us to deal rationally and effectively with the situations of life.[53]

The reality principle therefore ensures that people act in a reasonable way rather than senselessly fulfilling their carnal needs. Those needs are represented in the pleasure principle:

> The psychic force that motivates us to seek immediate gratification of our instinctual, or libidal, impulses, such as sex, hunger, thirst and elimination. Freud said that when these needs or drives are unsatisfied, we are in a state of tension, and when they are fulfilled, the reduction in tension evokes the experience of pleasure. The p.p. dominates the early life of the child but is gradually 'tamed' and modified by the reality principle.[54]

The fact that the pleasure principle and the reality principle are inherently intertwined is clear. The drives are explained to originate in the pleasure principle. In Freud's words: "the consideration that the pleasure principle demands a reduction - [...] of the tension of needs (*nirvana*) - leads to the relationship [...] of the pleasure principle to the two primal forces, Eros and the death drive.[55] This tension can only be reduced by the satisfaction of impulses that need gratification. One group of the impulses is pleasurable, Eros, the other seeks destruction, the death drive. In other words, by satisfying those impulses, the tension is reduced and evokes pleasure, which is the basis of the pleasure principle.

This thesis is mainly concerned with the death drive. In *Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry*, death drive is defined as follows:

> A universal impulse for death, destruction, self-destruction, and aggression. [...] is under control of the repetition-compulsion principle, which impels us to repeat

[52] Sigmund Freud *The Penguin Freud Reader*. Edit. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2005) 130.
[53] *Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry* 623.
[54] *Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry* 564. P.p. is used in the dictionary as an abbreviation for pleasure principle.
[55] *The Penguin Freud Reader* 53.

> earlier experiences regardless of pleasure or pain, and ultimately to return the organism to the inorganic state.[56]

The return to the inorganic state stands for death. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud expands on Schopenhauer, for whom death is "the true result and to that extent the purpose of life" while the sexual instinct is the embodiment of the will to live.[57] Freud explains, that the death instincts "pursue the goal of guiding the living being to death"[58] and therefore they have been present from the very beginning of life on this earth.[59] In the context of the pleasure principle, the death drive gratifies the impulses of elimination and destruction.

The other force operating in the pleasure principle is Eros: "the drive that comprises the instinct for self-preservation, which is aimed at individual survival, and sexual instinct, which is aimed at the survival of the species."[60] Although it seems that the life instinct stands in the opposition to death drive, Freud explains, that those instincts of self-preservation function to assure that the organism follows its own path to death.[61] Instead of the self-preservation instinct, Freud sees sexual instincts as the true life instincts, because they preserve life and aim for its renewal, therefore truly operate against the purpose of death instinct.[62] The sexual instincts might operate against the death instinct, but according to Freud: "the two kinds of instincts seldom - perhaps never - appear in isolation from each other."[63] The inseparable occurrence of those drives is what life consists of:

> In living creatures, the erotic and the death-drives regularly form blends and alloys; but it is also possible to unmake these combinations. Life consists in the manifestations of the conflict or interference of the two kinds of drive, and brings the individual the triumph of the destructive drive in death, but also the victory of Eros through reproduction.[64]

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[56] *Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry* 203.
[57] *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 44.
[58] *The Penguin Freud Reader* 130.
[59] *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 41.
[60] *Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry* 266.
[61] *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 33.
[62] *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 34.
[63] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontent* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962) 65.
[64] *The Penguin Freud Reader* 130.

Not only is the concept of death drive connected to Updike's novels, Eros also plays an important role. The sexual instincts are undeniably one of the most prominent aspects of Updike's work, especially in *Couples*. When asked about sex in a 1992 interview, Updike references Freud: "Freud says, only an obsession with sex is healthy. Isn't that the truth that we are all weaned on?"[65] The connection between Updike's work and Freud's theory of drives rises from the fact, that Updike's characters do not use sex as means of literal reproduction, but rather as an escape. Whether this escape is from death and therefore agrees with the theory of drives will be discussed in the analyses of individual novels.

[65] Plath 230

Chapter 2 Rabbit, Run: The Running Man

The Rabbit tetralogy is considered to be Updike's "commanding achievement" and the character of Harry Rabbit Angstrom his "supreme creation."[66] As the title suggests, the main character is on the run; from his wife Janice, from responsibilities, from second-rate living.[67] The primary concern of Harry in *Rabbit, Run* is to fill the nothingness of a hole inside him through sex, basketball or golf.[68] Updike himself described the novel as "a deliberate attempt to present both the escapist, have-it-my-way will to live versus the social restraints, the social voices in the book, the ministers', and other people's too..."[69] Harry's inability, or disinterest, to distinguish between right and wrong leads him to live purely on his "own worst instincts" (115) regardless of the pain he causes. The consequences of his actions do not affect Harry until tragedy strikes and his newborn daughter dies. Her death causes Harry to question his beliefs, increasing his already existing fear of death, of nothingness.

Her death, though, is not the first time the novel is meditating death, for Harry contemplates it even before his daughter is born. As Kyle A. Pasewark states in his essay on the Rabbit series: "Although thoughts of death increasingly occupy Rabbit as the years pass, this zero-sum game is present already in [Rabbit,] Run."[70] Though the indications are subtle, Harry's attitude towards death shows from the beginning of the novel to the very end. He is given many epithets throughout the novel, but most notable are Mr. Death (260), a saint (124) and giver of life (192). Those three names are akin to the approaches to death that profess themselves throughout the novel: the fear of death itself, the religious tones and the life drive. The fear of death drapes over the remaining two outlooks, creating a suffocating atmosphere, which is enhanced by strong death imagery.

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[66] Schiff 28.
[67] John Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006) 92. All future page references from this source will be included in parentheses in the text.
[68] Schiff 39.
[69] Plath 98.
[70] Kyle A. Pasewark "The Troubles with Harry: Freedom, America, and God in John Updike's Rabbit Novels," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 6.1 (1996): 31, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1123971>, 28 Oct 2018.

The significance of the death for the main character begins to show in the first few pages. On his way home, Harry sees displays of decay: ice plant with its rotten wooden skids, stalks of dead flowers, mouldering toy, decaying walls (8-9). Those images suggest death or nothingness to Harry;[71] even his wife, Janice, seems to decay (9). When he returns to their apartment after he runs away, it is flooded with decaying images: pork chops cold as death, something sweetly rotting, a breath of steam like a whisper in a tomb (86). In the hospital, he confesses to Janice why he ran away, describing the sight of her in the apartment: "You get the feeling you're in your coffin before they've taken your blood out." (185) It is this what Harry runs from in the first place.

The defining word for Harry is fear. Updike himself called him "Angstrom - a man of angst, and he is afraid."[72] The statement that Harry is afraid is easy to make, but what he is afraid of is not as transparent. Although he himself claims that it was the second-rate living that made him run (92), he also admits to Janice she reminded him of death (185). On the road Harry finds that freedom does not suit him, because it is terrifying in its nothingness.[73] He has nothingness[74] in himself as well, and he tries to fill it with "pure physical sensation, which allows him to reconfirm his innate state of feeling special."[75] This lost feeling of specialness is brought on by a basketball game, where Harry remembers his glory days as a county famous basketball player (7). Immediately after that the image shifts to "his body is weighty and his breath grows short. It annoys him, that he gets winded." (7) His own mortality shows as he realises he is no longer the young Rabbit Angstrom.

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[71] Lewis A. Lawson, "Rabbit Angstrom as a Religious Sufferer," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42.2 (1974): 239, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1460689>, 28 Oct 2018.
[72] Plath 224.
[73] Schiff 38.
[74] *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines nothing as "the non-existence of all things; a concept that can be frightening, fascinating, or dismissed as the product of the logical confusion of treating the term nothing as itself a referring expression instead of a quantifier." The experience of nothing is "the failure of hope or expectation that there would be something of some kind at some point. [...] The difference between existentialist and analytical philosophers on the point is that whereas the former are afraid of Nothing, the latter think that there is nothing to be afraid of." Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 255.
[75] Schiff 38.

His youth is what he is trying to recapture throughout the novel. He wants to relive his days as a basketball player, thus he runs to the person closest to it - Tothero, the coach. At first Harry sees Tothero as a link to his specialness; but that quickly changes as he realises that "Tothero shows no interest in him except as a partner on a joyride." (45) Before that, Tothero praises youth several times, praises Harry several times (44). As the perception of Tothero changes, Harry loses his interest in him and moves on to another thing that makes him feel special - women. Even on the road he remembers making love to young Janice (13), contemplates various women (24) and finally a prostitute, who faked her half (42). He leaves Tothero for Ruth, one symbol of youth and specialness for another. When he lives with Ruth and works for Mrs Smith, he is in a land of irresponsibility,[76] something only youth is forgiven for. His fear of letting go of the young Harry, of growing older and maturing stems from the likeness he sees between maturity and death. This analogy is crucial for the understanding of Harry's actions - he runs, as a kid would run, to hide from maturity, from death. His fear of death becomes evident the first time he meets the minister. Eccles calls him immature for running away from his wife and living with another woman. To this, Harry replies: "If you're telling me I'm not mature, that's one thing I don't cry over since as far as I can make out it's the same thing as being dead." (92) But even his symbols of youth and immaturity change to reminders of death.

The figure of Tothero, first a divine figure,[77] changes to a figure of death as the story progresses. Tothero's transformation starts when Harry notices how girls perceive Tothero, calling him old bum, and how bloated he is (46-59). When he visits Tothero in the hospital, the connection is finalised and Harry is "choked by seeing poor Tothero stretched out as good as dead" (183). A similar fate awaits Ruth, first a symbol of careless sexuality. When Janice starts giving birth, Harry sees Ruth as a dead animal (165). When he waits home for Janice to

[76] Lawson 240.
[77] Lawson 235.

return from the hospital, “he must bolt Tothero and Ruth out of his mind both remind him of death. They make on one side this vacuum of death and on the other side the threat of Janice coming home grows.” (198) He has lost both of his symbols of his specialness and what he is left with is Janice, the reason he ran in the first place.

There is a minor contradiction in Harry’s approach to death - when he describes a good sleep, he says he slept “Like death. Not a dream or anything” (178), which indicates Harry’s connection of death and nothingness. Another good sleep is also described as: “otherwise he’s dead, beyond harm.” (42) This shows that death for Harry, or at least Updike, is to a certain degree something safe, a place where nothing can reach him. Even after the death of his daughter, Rebecca June, he “has witnessed is the explanation of death: lovely life eclipsed by lovely death.” (242) At the funeral, he would rather die than be confronted by his mother (248), who he knows gave life to him and can just as easily take it away and that would be “the grave itself.” (248) He then concludes that he or his mother has to die (248). Those developments of his relationship to death stand in the opposition to the fact that “he hates all the people on the street in dirty everyday clothes, advertising their belief that the world arches over a pit, that death is final.” (201) With death’s increasing presence in Harry’s life, he seems to start accepting it, but at the end of Eccles’ speech at Rebecca June’s funeral - a place full of death - Rabbit runs once again.

The primary hints of Harry’s attitude towards death are intensified by religion. With the introduction of Eccles, the novel gains another perspective. At first Harry’s actions are connected to God only by the act of leaving his wife and “living in sin” (141) with another woman. This opens the discussion whether Harry really is Christian, which he sincerely believes he is.[78] Through lengthy conversations with Eccles he articulates his true belief: “I guess somewhere behind all this [...] there’s something that wants me to find it.” (110) Eccles

[78] Lawson 237.

cannot accept this idea and tells Harry "Christianity isn't looking for a rainbow. [...] We're trying to *serve* God, not *be* God." (115) The deviation from Harry's Christian beliefs is further explored when Harry visits Eccles' church after his daughter is born: "Harry has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity, the *going through* quality of it, the passage *into* death and suffering that redeems and inverts these things, like an umbrella blowing inside out." (203) Harry "will not believe that God entered history as Christ, then died to redeem mankind."[79]

Harry's relation to God and death seems more based on Old Testament, where death is seen as a penalty for sin. This becomes evident in the hospital, where Harry is waiting while Janice is in labour: "He is certain that as a consequence of his sin Janice or the baby will die. His sin a conglomerate of flight, cruelty, obscenity and conceit; a black colt embodied in the entrails of the birth." (169) His fear even takes away his initial certainty that he is a Christian and he denies God: "*There is no God; Janice can die*." (170) His faith is restored when both Janice and his daughter, Rebecca June, survive and he goes to church: "Harry is happy to go to Eccels' church. [...] because he considers himself happy, lucky, blessed, forgiven, and wants to give thanks." (201)

This happiness does not last long and his daughter drowns as a result of yet another of his flights. John Stephen Martin states:

> This death is apparently no more than a stupid, tragic accident; however, in religious terms it is a demonstration of God, a sign by which he makes His presence felt. The tragedy is that Rabbit fails to understand the religious significance of the baby's death.[80]

Harry not only fails to understand the demonstration of God, his thoughts suggest it proves the opposite - God does not exist, and if He does, He is unfair: "He thinks how easy it was, yet in all His strength God did nothing. Just that little rubber stopper to lift." (237) This is

[79] Lawson 244.
[80] John Stephen Martin, "Rabbit's Faith: Grace and the Transformation of the Heart," *Pacific Coast Philology* 17.1/2 (1982): 106, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1316399>, 28 Oct 2018.

further supported by the appearance of Tothero: "Tothero, leaning on a cane and his face half-paralyzed; but talking, walking, alive. And the baby dead." (239) Although Harry's understanding of the situation is not clearly explained, one thing is obvious: Harry does not feel guilty for his daughter's death. As Pasewark states:

> "The immediate connection between God's will, self-knowledge, labor, and happiness suffuses Harry with a guilt typical of American religious consciousness. There is no sin of transgression; Rabbit has done nothing objectionable."[81]

At the funeral, Harry blames Janice and says "You all keep acting as if *I* did it. I wasn't anywhere near." (253) Pasewark explains: "Harry revolts against death and also against the guilt that [...] is the sting of death."[82]

After purging himself of the blame, Harry returns to his irresponsible state and runs back to Ruth. There he finds she was pregnant, but Ruth does not instantly tell him whether she kept the baby or not. She blames him for killing Rebecca June, saying: "Boy, you really have the touch of death, don't you." (260). She even calls him Mr. Death himself (260), saying his actions - or rather inactions - cause death. In this moment he realises not only one of his children was taken, but another could have been as well, so he prays: "*God, dear God, no, not another, you have one, let this one go.*" (261). Again, he does not admit guilt - that his actions could have caused Ruth getting an abortion. He believes there is a God, a God that punishes him by taking his children.

Harry's children are of great importance to him but that does not stop him from deserting them. When he leaves Janice for the first time, he rarely ever mentions his son Nelson. But when Janice is in the hospital and Harry is alone with Nelson, he keeps making sure Nelson is alive, because he fears Nelson will "break the membrane of life and fall through to oblivion." (197) Even in his sleep he is haunted by death and "awakes before dawn being tipped again, frightened on the empty bed, with the fear that Nelson has died." (199)

[81] Pasewark 3.
[82] Pasewark 18.

This fear of losing a child is similar to Harry's thoughts before Rebecca June is born (169) and his desperate plea to God when he thinks Ruth had an abortion (261). The parental fear for the life of one's children is amongst the most important instincts, but in the case of Harry he does not manifest any other characteristics of a loving parent. It seems he cares about his children as long as he thinks they are in mortal danger; he needs to make sure his genes will survive. This, according to Freud, is the primary function of sexual instincts (also life instincts) - to preserve life, procreate - in attempts to defeat the death.[83] His concern for the life of his offspring is not the only example of the sexual instincts in Harry's life.

Perhaps the most notable exhibition of the life instinct is Harry's lust for sexual endeavours. As was previously mentioned, Harry uses women to feel exceptional and important. Even when he leaves Janice, he remembers their sex life before they were married (13) and thinks about several other women (24-42). When he is with Ruth, he is still not satisfied and lusts after Lucy, Eccles's wife (107). When he goes back to Janice, he is actually convinced Lucy wants him (206). Furthermore, he is called out on his behaviour several times, most notably by Eccles: "It's the strange thing about you mystics, how often your little ecstasies wear a skirt." (111)

Lawson sees this need for sex as a "desperate attempt to get back on dry land by re-experiencing ontological assurance through the sexual act, seeking the certainty he had lost."[84] Schiff connects this behaviour to instincts: "for the man of instinct and reflex, pure physical experience is the ultimate sensation, the thing that vanquishes death and nothingness."[85] Schiff's link between sexual instincts and the vanquishing of death is in correlation with Freud's theory of drives. Lawson too uses Freudian concept when states that Harry believes "in the renewal of Eros and the possibility of freedom through flight."[86]

[83] Freud, *Beyond Pleasure Principle* 34.
[84] Lawson 233.
[85] Schiff 38.
[86] Lawson 246.

Harry's behaviour is often seen as instinctual;[87] he admits it himself (125), since he does not think his future plans through and acts on impulses. The first time he runs, he does not have a plan, it sort of happens (22). He then runs to Ruth, where he attempts to fulfil his sexual needs.

The whole affair with Ruth is a display of the life instinct taking over Harry. The obvious sexual aspect aside, he uses her to spread his genes, his life. Before they have sex for the first time, Ruth wants to use protection but Harry forbids her, making excuses like "but I know it's there. Like a rubber kidney or something." (67) When the act is over, Ruth wants to go to the bathroom to minimize the possibility of pregnancy, and once again Harry tries to stop her (75). He knows the consequences, yet he does all he can to prevent Ruth from protecting herself. Whether it is his carelessness or purpose, this behaviour supports the theory of sexual instincts and their primary function of procreation. Harry is oblivious to all the signs pointing to Ruth's pregnancy, although he instantly guesses she is pregnant (258). He claims to not have known she was pregnant, but she says she "was sick enough." (259) Even after she admits she thought he would leave her if he knew (259), which he did anyway, he says "I'm happy you're pregnant" knowing she certainly will not let him stay. (259) Immediately after that he starts worrying whether Ruth had an abortion. She admits she did not and gives him an ultimatum: "If you can't work this out, I'm dead to you; I'm dead to you and this baby of yours is dead too." (262) This is the breaking point for Harry and his instinct-dependant life, because "he likes things to happen of themselves" (262), returning to his state of no responsibility. His final flight of the novel is enabled by a realisation that Ruth will let his child live and both Ruth and Janice have parents to help them (263). When he knows his kids will be taken care of, his primal function is fulfilled and his life will continue in his

[87] Martin 104.

children, he decides to give in to the irresponsibility of his quest of finding the "thing behind everything" (241) again and does what he does best: runs.

Harry's story is a story of an irresponsible man dissatisfied with his life, taking action based on instinctual whims. His dissatisfaction has many sources. Whether it is the dullness of his life with Janice, the need to recapture the specialness of his youth or his sexual needs, they are all connected by one thing: they are reminders of his mortality, the reality of death. His fear of death stems from its nothingness and as the presence of death around him increases with the progression of the story, he is forced to confront his fear and alter his relationship with death. Pasewark notes that "Rabbit sees the tragic character of the conflict between life and death, tragedy that belongs partly to finitude itself and partly to Rabbit's relation to the finite."[88] Harry's relation to the finite is the driving force of *Rabbit, Run* and even when he seems to be reformed, his instincts take over and he runs again, proving that his relationship to death changed, though not radically; he accepted that death is a part of life, but he is still afraid of it.

[88] Pasewark 11.

Chapter 3 The Centaur: A Change of Heart

The Centaur is considered one of Updike's most autobiographical novels.[89] Updike himself admitted that he based the main character, George Caldwell, on his father.[90] *The Centaur* blends together a modern story with Greek mythology, presenting George as Chiron, the centaur. The plot spans over three days and revolves around the relationship of George and his son Peter. Their relationship is affected by the possibility of George having cancer, which makes death the central theme of the novel.[91]

The concern with death is introduced before the novel begins, in an excerpt from *Old Greek Folk Stories Told Anew*:

> Ever tormented with the hurt and never to be healed, the immortal Centaur longed for death, and begged that he might be accepted as an atonement for Prometheus. The gods heard his prayer and took away his pain and his immortality.[92]

At the beginning George, like Chiron, longs for death, but his feelings change throughout the novel. His cynicism, and consequently fear of death, derives from his uncertain beliefs. He is also burdened with the responsibility to his family, namely Peter. George's desire for death transforms in the final pages of the novel, as he sacrifices himself for his son. But the journey to his sacrifice requires a change of his approach to death.

The story begins when George, a teacher, is shot by one of his students in the foot with an arrow (3) which, he is convinced is poisoned (12,17). He confesses to his wife his concerns regarding the students: "They'd like to kill me, and now they're doing it." (47) Later it becomes clear the students are not making attempts at his life, and George's relationship to teaching is the true problem. He talks about teaching with one of the students and admits: "Even though you're my worst enemy I don't wish it on you." (99) Updike himself states, that

[89] Schiff 20.
[90] Plath 54.
[91] Schiff 21.
[92] John Updike, *The Centaur* (New York: Random House Trade, 2013) title page. All future page references from this source will be included in parentheses in the text.

George's life became unbearable to him,[93] because he is not happy with his job, yet he is unable, or unwilling, to quit. David Myers recognizes the problem as follows: "Caldwell makes his body sick by concerning himself exclusively with his soul."[94] His unhealthy relationship to his body is indicated by his doctor:

> "You see, George, [...] you believe in the soul. You believe your body is like a horse you get up on and ride for a while and then get off. You ride your body too hard. You show it no love. This is not natural. This builds nervous tension." (125)

This is not the only occurrence of people trying to help George, since his dentist (214), his colleague (223) and the headmaster Zimmerman do so as well. Zimmerman even suggests that George should go on sabbatical (240), which is later echoed by Peter: "If you want to quit or take a sabbatical or something, don't not do it on my account." (282) Those instances identify his teaching as the true cause of his misery, which could easily be solved by leaving the job.

George, though, sees death as the solution (132). He believes he has cancer and says with certainty that he is carrying death in his bowels (46-52). With the same certainty, he accepts it and states that he is not frightened of death (45- 46). Peter then explains his father's approach to life:

> My father had turned fifty just before Christmas; he had always said he would never live to be fifty. Breaking the barrier had unbridled his tongue, as if, being in mathematical fact dead, nothing he said mattered. His ghostly freedom at times did frighten me. (53)

George seems content with the possibility of death, especially when he talks to Peter: "Don't worry about me, Peter. Fifty years is a long time [...] My old man never knew what hit him; he left us a Bible and a bucketful of debts." (183) His father's premature death is a possible reason why he believed he would not live to be fifty. He also sees his father's death as a supporting argument for his own futility: "You don't need me, Cassie. You'd be better off

[93] Plath 96.
[94] David Myers, "The Questing Fear: Christian Allegory in John Updike's "The Centaur,'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 17.2 (1971): 79, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/606813>, 28 Oct 2018.

with me on the dump. My father died at forty-nine and it was the best thing he ever did for us." (54) Later, the impact of his father's death on George proves to be more complicated, since it is one of the defining factors of his life.

George's confidence in his own death also shows in the way he treats Pop Kramer: "Pop *should* outlive me. He's led a good life. Pop Kramer deserves to live forever." (54) But when George and Peter are unable to go home for three days, George realises Pop Kramer could fall down the stairs (204). When they come home, George is sure Pop has fallen down the stairs and is shocked to find out that Pop is alive and well. He calls Pop a miracle, asaying "at some point in your life you must have done something right." (277) This presents a conflict of George's belief of imminent death and the living reality, which sums up George's mental anguish. As Edward P. Vargo states: "[George] struggles with his desire for death and his feel for life."[95]

Pop Kramer introduces another aspect of George's conflict in saying "time and tide wait for no man" (50). George asks whether any man waits for time and tide. (50) He explains his frustration: "I was a minister's son. I was brought up to believe, and I still believe it, that God made Man as the last best thing in His Creation. If that's the case, who are this time and tide that are so almighty superior to us?" (61) Here, the contradiction of George's faith and death is displayed. As Bernard A. Schopen claims, George "is obsessed with death, largely because he fears that it will bring with it the loss of faith."[96] This notion originates from the death of his father:

> I remember, when my old man knew he was dying, he opened his eyes on the bed and looked up at Mom and Alma and me and said, "Do you think I'll be eternally forgotten?" I often think about that. Eternally forgotten. That was a terrible thing for a minister to say. It scared the living daylights out of me. (84)

[95] Edward P. Vargo, "The Necessity of Myth in Updike's The Centaur," *PMLA*, 88.3 (1973): 458, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/461525>, 28 Oct 2018.
[96] Bernard A. Schopen, "Faith, Morality, and the Novels of John Updike," *Twentieth Century Literature* 24.4 (1978): 529, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441200>, 25 March 2017.

After meditating his past, George thinks: "Things never fail to fail. On his deathbed his father's religion: 'eternally forgotten?'" (189-190) George is undergoing a crisis of faith, which makes him gradually more terrified of death.[97] The turn of his approach to death is presented when George talks with a drunk: "I thought I was ready to die, [...] but now I wonder if anybody ever is." (152) This marks a shift from George's sober acceptance of the possibility of death to fear. When talking about young people dying, George asks whether age makes a difference, whether older people are more ready for death and then admits: "I'm not ready and it scares the hell out of me. What's the answer?" (215)

George's attempt to find an answer is shown at the basketball game, where he talks with a minister:

> "As I understood it from [his father] there are the elect and the non-elect, the ones that have it and the ones that don't, and the ones that don't have it are never going to get it [...] The only reason I could figure out was that God had to have somebody to fry down in Hell." (243)

Then the minister contradicts George with God's infinite mercy,[98] to which George replies: "I can't see how it's infinite if it never changes anything at all. Maybe it's infinite but at an infinite distance - that's the only way I can picture it." (244) He fails to find the answer he was looking for, leaves the room and becomes "heavy and giddy with his own death." (245) The answer, at least for George, is found in leading a moral life[99]. This is confirmed by

[97] Myers 74.

[98] In Old Testament, God's mercy is a special instance of his grace and love, it belongs to the divine nature, and stems from God's absolute freedom, yet even a sinner can still hope for mercy. In New Testament mercy is the heart of God's work of salvation. It is not the emotion, but rather practical works of mercy. "God himself shows mercy to him who is merciful, and does not show it to him who is himself unmerciful." Johannes B. Bauer, "Mercy," *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology Volume 2* (London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1970) 574-575.

[99] In Christian theology, life imposes moral obligations on a person and is "dependent on the moral conduct of each one and his observance of the law." Ernst Schmitt, "Life," *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology Volume 2* (London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1970) 500-502. The law is Decalogue (Ten Commandments). In Old Testament, Decalogue "is based, in its essential elements, on obedience to God's command and was made known as a moral imperative demanded by God who had manifested himself expressly as the Lord of morality." In New Testament "the love of God and one's neighbour is the measure and the consummation of all moral conduct." Othmar Shilling, "Decalogue," *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology Volume 1* (London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1970) 188-190.

Updike: "A figure like Caldwell in *The Centaur* is a Christian, he keeps announcing, and is trying to lead a good life"[100]

Schopen states: "the novel suggests that Caldwell's basic orientation is toward that part of Christianity which is 'merely ethical,' and that he is immersed 'in the world of Christian morality' because he is afraid that there is nothing else."[101] This is supported by Updike in a 1969 interview with Eric Rhode, where Updike admits George is based on his father in "my father's immersion in the world of Christian morality, in trying to do the right things and constantly sacrificing himself, always going off to church meetings and yet complaining about it all the time."[102]

There are not many instances of George behaving amorally, but the most striking example of his moral struggle is his first encounter with Venus. Venus tries to seduce him and he does not fight her until he remembers Zimmerman and leaves (29-30). He then has a "confused sense of having displeased, through ways he could not follow, the God who never rested from watching us." (30) The triumph of morality is also shown when the word "fuck" written on the wall of the restroom is transformed into "book" (238). Myers explains:

> He feels that this is the heaviest mystery of all the mysteries that have been thrust upon him in his pilgrimage, and is depressed by his inability to comprehend it. To us, however, it is clear that this is a symbol of the mind's transformation of sex and the body into spirit, and is a triumph of anti-sensual Christianity over unashamed paganism. (74)

For George, who is yet to arrive to this realisation, this message is lost, but there is lack of sexuality and sensuality from the beginning of the novel.

Unlike *Rabbit, Run* and *Couples*, *The Centaur* presents a relatively small number of sexual scenes. George's meeting with Venus exposes the truth about his mother, who neglected him as a child and showed him no love, which left George seeing women as

[100] Plath 254.
[101] Schopen 529.
[102] Plath 51.

shallow and selfish.[103] When he is confronted by Venus about not liking women, he does not answer. (23) George's reserved relationship to women is reflected in the lack of sexual motives in the novel, which are significant in Freud's drive theory. Still, one of the few instances of sexuality is interrupted by death; when Peter is on his knees, embracing his girlfriend "his face held in the final privacy, the blunt probing thought of his father's death visits him." (238)

The example of sex drive in the scene of Peter and Penny is overtaken by the personification[104] of death drive, George. George is obsessed with death, he wants to die and accepts death. When he describes chemical processes, he says: "When this process stops [...] you become what they call dead. You become a worthless log of old chemicals." (181) A slightly less cynical view on death is shown in his understanding of the Universe, as he presents it to his students:

> While each cell is potentially immortal, by volunteering for a specialized function within an organized society of cells, it enters a compromised environment. The strain eventually wears it out and kills it. It dies sacrificially, for the good of the whole. (40-41)

Terrence A. Doody explains this as follows: "Updike makes it clear that resistance to entropy does not conquer death. In fact, George Caldwell explains to his class that the evolutionary beginning of organic differentiation is itself the beginning of necessary death."[105] Although George sees death as necessary, it is preceded by a specialized function in an organized society. (41)

Throughout the novel it becomes clear that George sees his function as a provider for his son, but at the beginning, when he wants to die, it is not so. The fact that his wife accuses

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[103] Vargo 455.

[104] *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines personification as "The impersonation or embodiment of some quality or abstraction; the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects." J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 661.
In this thesis the word 'personification' is not used in its literary meaning, but rather the literal one of embodiment.

[105] Terrence A. Doody, "Updike's Idea of Reification," *Contemporary Literature* 20.2 (1979): 214, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207966>, 9 April 2017.

him of hating sex (67) and that Peter is an only child indicates that George feels like he's already fulfilled his primary function. He produced one offspring, Peter, and now he will live on in him, which gives freedom to George's cynicism. But throughout the novel, as the relationship to his son becomes more exposed, George realises his role in Peter's life is greater.

In Freud's theory, the relationship between father and son is based on a certain antagonism; the son must eliminate the father in order to gain freedom.[106] In the case of *The Centaur*, it is the father who realises this, though the elimination does not come in the form of George's actual death. When he talks to his students, besides admitting he does not like teaching, he also says he has a wife, kid and an old man to feed (97). Later he confesses: "If I were to kick off now, he and his mother would sit out there in the sticks and try to eat the flowers off the wallpaper. I can't afford to die." (186) He is the provider for his family and that is his purpose, but his relationship to his son is even more important:

> He needs me to keep him going, the poor kid doesn't have a clue yet. I can't fade out before he has the clue [...] My old man went and died before he was my age [...] and I didn't want to double-cross my own kid like that. (216 - 217)

He is greatly concerned with the well-being of his son and decides to sacrifice his own wants and needs for Peter's well-being and freedom. He tries to preserve his son's life, which agrees with Freud's theory of life and death drives.[107] In this case the life drive does conquer the death drive, at least for some time, in George's sacrifice for his son.

Throughout the novel, George tries to battle his fear of death, which is rooted in his doubts of faith, and the awareness that he has to enable his son to have a normal life. Only when he finds out he does not have cancer, he must face the reality of the job he hates. When his wife tells him the X-ray showed nothing, he asks: "Do you think he's lying, Cassie? [...] Do you think he can read X-rays, Cassie?" (278) Possibly, George is still trying to hold on to

[106] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. J. Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 197.
[107] Freud, *Beyond Pleasure Principle* 34.

his death wish. Cassie sees George's behaviour as an attempt to get more attention (279) but George himself says: "God takes care of you if you let Him." (282) implying that he is happy to be given another chance. He finally realises what is morally right for him to do, what will not betray his faith and help him take care of his son. He accepts that "ultimate freedom and true life can be found only in self-sacrifice."[108]

At first, the final few pages of *The Centaur* created confusion in the critical world. Some critics see George's sacrifice as suicide, others as a heart attack.[109] Neither of these readings is in agreement with Updike's intention, which is explicitly stated in a 1968 interview Charles Thomas Samuels: "I must repeat that I didn't mean Caldwell to die in *The Centaur*; he dies in the sense of living, of going back to work, of being a shelter for his son."[110] When George leaves the house to go to work; the sacrifice he makes is in the frustration of his job;[111] his outlook changes (285) as he sees buds in the snow.[112] He then thinks:

> And all the rest, all that was not joy, fell away, precipitated, dross that had never been. He thought of his wife's joy in the land and Pop Kramer's joy in the newspaper and his son's joy in the future and was glad, grateful, that he was able to sustain these for yet a space more. The X-rays were clear. A white width of days stretched ahead [...] he discovered that in giving his life to others he entered a total freedom [...] Only goodness lives. But it does live.

In this moment, he affirms his role, his sacrifice and starts to see the point of living for others. He also realises his faulty outlook, preparing to leave everything behind (287). He accepts his new fate, which he is not entirely prepared for; he is scared, but still willing to undergo the journey (288). By losing the desire to die and accepting life - even though it means being

[108] Myers 80.
[109] Myers 80-81.
[110] Plath 27.
[111] Myers 81.
[112] Vargo 458.

unhappy - George defeats death.[113] As Myers notes: “in living for others he wins a freedom that goes beyond the death of the egoistic individual.”[114]

The journey of the characters of *The Centaur* is full of fear, coming to terms with oneself and reality. The relationship of George and his son Peter is in the centre of the book, alongside the threat of death. George is unhappy with his life, since his teaching job slowly ruins him to the point of possible cancer. From a cynical individual who longs for death, George, through the three days he spends with his son, undergoes a change into accepting his life as it is, and sacrifices his own happiness for his son. This sacrifice is the core of their relationship[115] and the climax of the novel.

As Schiff states: “Caldwell is renewed though not radically transformed. Having paved the way for his son’s emergence, Caldwell will return to the responsibilities of life and will accept his death when it comes. ”[116] Since the beginning of *The Centaur*, George Caldwell was obsessed with death, but only his son made him change his relationship to it. Although George is not ready to die in the final pages as he freshly accepts life, he also accepts death, but only when death is ready to take him.[117]

[113] Vargo 458.
[114] Myers 81.
[115] Schiff 26.
[116] Schiff 27.
[117] Vargo 459.

Chapter 4 Couples: Setting Death in Motion

Updike's fifth novel, *Couples*, linked him with sexually explicit fiction.[118] Although there is a heavy emphasis on sexual endeavours, *Couples* is concerned with deeper themes; James A. Schiff sees *Couples* as "a sophisticated and ambitious novel about sexuality, marriage, religion, adultery, death, and gossip."[119] Reducing *Couples* to a merely sexual novel is ignoring most of its contents, since sex is juxtaposed to religion, morality and especially death. Robert Detweiler states:

> But certainly the stress upon death in the novel as a whole is as strong as the concentration upon sex. In fact, one is tempted to reply to the reviewers who have sensationalized its sexual aspects that *Couples* is really a death-ridden novel, and the sexuality assumes relevance only in its relationship to death.[120]

The connection between sex and death is exposed several times, for example the death of J.F. Kennedy and a consequent party of the couples or the dying John Ong and the sexual needs of his wife.[121] Where the relationship of those two themes becomes the most prominent is in the character of Piet Hanema. *Couples* focuses on the affairs of several couples from Tarbox, but Piet is certainly a foregrounded character.[122] Piet, like Harry of *Rabbit, Run*, combines the three major themes of the novel: death, religion and sex. And just like the approaches of the main characters of *Rabbit, Run* and *The Centaur*, Piet's relationship to death changes throughout the novel as well.

The first time the theme of death is discussed in the novel is when Piet and Angela's daughters are introduced. Nancy and Ruth present two different attitudes toward death:

> She, who could tie her shoes at the age of three, had lately, now five, begun to suck her thumb and talk about dying. *I will never grow up and I will never ever in*

[118] David Heddendorf, "The Modesty of John Updike." *The Sewanee Review* 116.1 (2008): 113, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27549939>, 25 March 2017.
[119] Schiff 67.
[120] Robert Detweiler, "Updike's "Couples": Eros Demythologized." *Twentieth Century Literature* 17.4 (1971): 242, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/606807>, 25 March 2017.
[121] Detweiler 243.
[122] Detweiler 237.

> *my whole life die.* Ruth, her sister, nine last November, hated to hear her. *Yes you will die everybody will die including trees.*[123]

Nancy's refusal, or perhaps fear, of death is analogous to Piet's, whereas Ruth's cold acceptance is the reminder of death's reality. The role of the daughters is even greater when their pet hamster is killed by their cat. (76) This event reminds Piet of the fleetingness of life, because he "could not convey to [Nancy] why he found the mishap so desolating, the dim-witted little exploration that had ended with such a thunderclap of death." (76-77) The replacement of the hamster is also traumatising for Piet: "The new hamster by sleight of hand would become the old one, the one moldering nose-down underneath the scilla. A religion of genteel pretense." (93) But Piet is not the only one traumatised by this death, since Nancy, already worried about death (58), becomes even more obsessed.

When she asks Piet if she is pretty and he tries to give her a diplomatic answer, she cries and explains: "But I'll *die*," (192). Piet realises that Nancy thinks pretty people do not die and he explains to her:

> "But pretty people must die too," Piet told her. "It wouldn't be fair to let only the ugly ones die. And nobody looks ugly to people who love them." (192)

At the end of this conversation, when Nancy says Angela told her she will first grow old and then die (192), Piet is once again reminded of the unavoidable death and replies to Nancy's fantasy of dying of old age: "Isn't that nice?" (192) Those two instances alone make Nancy the embodiment of the fear of death, and she is trying to understand it, which forces Piet to think about death too.

Nancy confronts Piet with death one more time. The death of Jackie Kennedy's baby raises questions in Nancy's mind, and she seeks the answers from her father. He tries to explain: "The baby was too little to be scared. The baby never knew anything, Nancy. It had no mind yet." (212) This does not satisfy Nancy, who is contemplating her own mortality:

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[123] John Updike, *Couples* (London: Penguin Books, 2007) 14. All future references from this publication will be featured in the parentheses in the text.

> "Mommy said I would never die until I was an old old lady wearing earrings."
> "That's absolutely right." [...] "But the little baby was even smaller than you?"
> She nodded helplessly.
> [...] "But the baby came out too soon, it was a mistake, God never meant it to live, like a big strong chubby girl like you."
> [...] Nancy pulled from his arms and shouted from the head of the stairs, "God should have teached the baby not to come out!" (213)

This confrontation of Piet's beliefs with the seemingly unfair event of a baby dying is further emphasized by his other daughter, Ruth, who calls God retarded because: "He lets little babies die and He makes cats eat birds and all that stuff." (215) This makes Piet's already fragile relationship with his faith even less stable, resulting in a nightmare.

He dreams he is an airplane, which begins to dive. According to Freud, dreams are manifestations of otherwise suppressed drive-impulse.[124] In dreams, wishes are fulfilled without consequences[125] - in this case Piet's dream is the manifestation of his death drive. He wakes up and must confront his feelings: "He knew there could be no pulling from this dive and awoke in darkness, convinced of his death." (256) The fears Piet was trying to suppress up to this point, are suddenly exposed: "He was alive. Yet, having faced the full plausibility of his death - the screaming air of the dream had been so willing to swallow him, so voraciously passive - he was unable to reenter the illusion of security that is life's antechamber." (256) Unable to calm down, he is overcome by fear and wants to stop it, even seeking comfort in death itself:

> In a sense what a mercy to die and no longer torment his children with the apparition of their father. The death of another always a secret relief. Tides of life swing up to God for slaughter. (259)

This incident leaves Piet almost paralysed by the fear of death,[126] to the point where he has to confess to his lover Foxy: "Terrified of death lately. [...] It's not practical death I'm worried about, it's death anytime, at all, ever." (270) Although Nancy's question and Piet's unnerving dream expose Piet's fear of death, it was already present in Piet long before the novel started.

[124] *The Penguin Freud Reader* 20.
[125] *The Penguin Freud Reader* 24.
[126] Heddendorf 114.

Piet's perhaps most traumatic experience is the premature death of both of his parents. This leads Piet to being terrified of death,[127] which is further emphasized by Nancy's own fear. After the death of his parents, Piet begins to doubt his faith.[128] When he visits church at the beginning of the novel he meditates their death while praying:

> Piet bent his thought toward the hope of his parents' immortality [...] From the odd fact of their deaths his praying mind flicked to the odd certainty of his own, which the white well-joined wood and the lucent window beside him airily seemed to deny. (19)

Here, it seems that Piet's faith is still strong and the following line confirms it: "To break with a faith requires a moment of courage, and courage is a kind of margin within us, and after his parents' swift death Piet had no margin." (20) Piet tries to look for comfort in his faith, hoping "that the soul continues after death."[129]

Bernard A. Schopen sees Piet's behaviour throughout the novel as "attempt to make some sense of his life, to understand himself and his relation to God and to his fellow man, and to defend himself-with faith and love-against the ominous possibility of eternal death."[130] The fact that he is a Christian is announced in the first few pages, when Freddy's idea of the couples making a church of each other is ridiculed. To the exclamation that Piet is the only one who goes to church, Piet replies: "It's the source [...] of my amazing virility. A stiffening sense of sin." (8) Piet jokes about his relationship to faith, but throughout the novel he becomes less and less sure of himself. Angela, his wife, is the exact opposite of Piet. She does not believe in God, and admits to her husband: "I love sleep, just delicious nothing sleep. I'd love not to wake up" which Piet calls sinful (209). Angela's approach, though, is not surprising, since after the death of the hamster, Angela confronts Piet:

> Now she wants me to take her to Heaven so she can see for herself that there's room for her, and a little wheel. I really do wonder, Piet, if religion doesn't

[127] Schiff 68.
[128] Doody 213.
[129] Schiff 70.
[130] Schopen 533.

> complicate things worse than they'd have to be. She can see that I don't believe it myself. (79)

Angela later challenges Piet's faith even more openly:

> She asked me if the Kennedy baby was up in Heaven with the hamster going round and round in the wheel. Honestly I wonder, Piet, if religion's worth it, if it wouldn't be healthier to tell them the truth, we go into the ground and don't know anything and come back as grass. (215)

Finally, she utters what Piet has been reluctant to admit, pointing out that going to church only makes Piet more miserable (251). His parents' death, the beginning of his fear and doubt toward his faith, together with Angela's persistent reminders of the effects of his faith, begin to reflect in Piet's relationship to God.

When talking to Foxy he says: "*God doesn't love us any more. He loves Russia. He loves Uganda. We're fat and full of pimples and always whining for more candy. We've fallen from grace.*" (200) He believes God has left him, and this feeling is repeated after his nightmare:

> Piet tried to pray. His up-pouring thoughts touched nothing. [...] He had patronized his faith and lost it. God will not be used. Death stretched endless under him. [...] His parents were twin flecks of mica squeezed in granite. No light touched them into light. The eternal loss of light. [...] Bite down death. Bite down. (257)

In this case Piet blames himself for God's abandonment of him. He then begins to see comfort in death, which is reminiscent of Angela's behaviour, deemed sinful by Piet himself. What he condemned at first, begins to resonate with him. With the loss of faith, his fear of death and disappointment in himself grows to the point where he does not even dare to say "God." (341) He believes he had abused his faith and therefore he is not worthy, which connects not only to his relationship to death, but also to his other sins.

The problem of morality is presented in *Couples* in various affairs among the married couples. Piet suffers from certain guilt for transgressing laws of morality,[131] which in his case

[131] Schopen 526.

is participating in several extramarital affairs. As Schopen states: "Faith alone makes man responsible for his actions, and makes him accountable not to himself or to other men but to God,"[132] and Piet understands this. He does not feel guilty towards his wife, nor Foxy, nor anyone else, but God. He tries to find excuses for himself, for example sex being a part of nature before Christ (11). When asked if he feels guilty about Foxy and Ken's divorce, Piet says: "A little. Not much. They were dead on each other and didn't know it. In a way I was a blessing for bringing it to a head." (413) He lacks remorse for being unfaithful and breaking up not one but two marriages since, according to Doody, "morality is a relative matter compared to the absolutes of life, which are death and the physical relation of bodies to each other."[133]

Piet's extramarital affairs are, alongside faith, an attempt to overcome his fear of death.[134] According to Detweiler: "he seeks to conquer many women and thus violate the secret of the infinite hidden in Eros,"[135] but at the same time "Eros actually only increases the awareness of death."[136] (243) This is in agreement with Freud's theory of drives explored in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Not only does Angela read Freud, and namely Beyond the Pleasure Principle (367), she also explains id, ego and super ego to Piet, trying to make him realise his affairs are an attempt to overcome death. (207) Schopen even states, that Angela sees Freud as God, opposed to Piet's Christian God.[137] Alongside Angela's interpretations of Freud's theory, the principles make an appearance in the text several times, for example: "between the death and rebirth of gods, when there is nothing to steer by but sex and stoicism and the stars."(372) The most striking instance of the sex-drive defeating the death-drive, is Piet himself.

[132] Schopen 528.
[133] Doody 208.
[134] Schiff 68.
[135] Detweiler 239.
[136] Detweiler 243.
[137] Schopen 533.

Detweiler sees the character of Piet as a combination of Tristan and Don Juan. This relates not only to his approach to women, but mainly to what he tries to achieve by those conquests.

> Tristan seeks to avoid death by losing himself in the passionate love of a woman, and yet that effort, precisely because it has the flight from death as its object and not the true encounter with another being, only betrays the continuing intensity of the death wish. Don Juan attempts to outdo and overcome death by the conquest of many women, and yet the variety and exhausting athleticism of his seductions are in themselves death-dealing. Piet acts out both of these roles, [...] and embodies the different attitudes toward love and death.[138]

This double-sided effect of sex on Piet's perception of death is exposed when Piet has his nightmare and is confronted with raw fear of death; he thinks of sex: "Think of skin. Piet tried to lull himself with bodies of women he knew." (251) Perhaps the most compelling argument for the drive theory present in Couples is Piet's sexual encounter with Bea, which according to Detweiler, is a clear attempt to overcome death:[139]

> Bea sucked his fingers, and her nether mouth widened until he was quite lost, and he experienced orgasm strangely, as a crisisless osmosis, and ebbing of light above the snow-shrouded roofs. Death no longer seemed dreadful. (336)

This moment marks a shift in the novel, since Piet is not afraid of death anymore. But that does not mean that death leaves the novel altogether. Even though Piet has at least partly conquered his fear, he still has to deal not only with the consequences of his affairs, but also with death. Unfortunately for Piet, those two are intertwined.

When Foxy tells him she is expecting his baby, the solution introduces death to Piet's life once again. Foxy even says she would rather risk death then tell her husband about the baby (344). Piet is forced to think about death again:

> Piet struggled to see his predicament as relative, in any light but the absolute one that showed it to be a disaster identical with death. Pregnancy was life. Nature dangles sex to keep us walking toward the cliff." (354)

[138] Detweiler 242.
[139] Detweiler 242.

Piet understands that his pursuit to defeat death by sex cannot result in anything other than death. After Freddy agrees to perform the abortion, Piet thinks: “They had become gods moving in the supernature where life is created and destroyed.” (375) His pragmatic view of the situation, and perhaps a disturbing lack of guilt, becomes clear in the following scene: “Yet last night, playing Concentration with his two daughters, knowing he had set death in motion, he cared enough to concentrate and win.” (375) This apparent coldness towards the subject of the abortion is also exposed when Foxy speaks to him:

> “I think of it as *him* who made me kill my baby. It’s *just* the thing he’d do.”
> “Sweet, it wasn’t him, it was *me*.” (380)

Piet is knows that he is the source of this death, and even though he does not appear to feel guilty about it, he is aware of the consequences: “Death, once invited in, leaves his muddy bootprints everywhere.”(380) The experience makes Piet contemplate death once again, but this time, his fear does not return.

John Ong, one of the town’s couples, is dying in the hospital and Piet visits him. He sees the effects of the disease (426) and yet “the adventure of visiting the dying man served to show Piet how much time he had, how free he was to use it.” (428) He meets with Foxy and they rekindle their romance, followed by a weekend of intense sexual encounters. By the end of the weekend, Piet says: “One more fuck, and I’m ready to die.” (437) In this exclamation, death and sex are still connected, but Piet is no longer afraid. In light of the hospital visit, Piet stops worrying about death altogether, therefore he has no need to conquer it with sex, making way for his and Foxy’s relationship to develop further. The only thing left unresolved is Piet’s faith.

In the final pages of the novel, the town church burns down. It is struck by lightning and is almost completely destroyed, leaving only the weathercock, which was previously described as God in Tarbox (17), untouched. Whether the event is caused by God, or is a

profession of the absence of God, is unclear[140] but for Piet, a Christian suffering from guilt towards his God, the destruction of the church only shows His presence: "Piet wondered at the lightness in his own heart, gratitude for having been shown something beyond him, beyond all blaming." (443) For Piet, this is the closure he had been searching for. He is no longer afraid of death because he believes there is something beyond. He is a happy man.

The very end of *Couples* shows that the Tarbox couples have distanced themselves from Piet and Foxy. Updike himself explains: "Piet is not penalized for committing adultery with Foxy but for trying to legitimize the whole thing through marriage."[141] Piet and Foxy, now married, move away to another town. Piet gets a good fulfilling job and they are accepted as "another couple." (458) To Schiff, Piet's happiness means that "he becomes merely a name in the last paragraph: he becomes satisfied person and in a sense dies."[142] Though not an actual death, it is in agreement with Updike's view; he states that his characters "go back to work; that's the real way people die."[143, 144]

Couples, though a story about sexual relationships between several couples, is not a gratuitous celebration of sexuality, nor a condemnation of it. Updike, when talking about the Tarbox couples, called them: "religious community founded on physical and psychical interpenetration, but - what else shall we do, as God destroys our churches?"[145] Through the character of Piet Hanema, Updike explores the American middle-class of the early 60's.[146] At first, Piet is terrified of death and tries to fight his fear by sexual encounters with various women. His fear of death is connected to the death of his parents and his wavering faith. Throughout the story he comes to terms with his mortality and no longer fears death, but he is

[140] Schiff 73.
[141] Plath 162.
[142] Schiff 73.
[143] John Updike, *Picked-Up Pieces* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975) 519.
[144] Comments of the author cannot be taken at face value since there is no possible way to determine whether it is meant ironically or not. However in this case the quote is in agreement with Updike's previous comment on *The Centaur* introduced on the page 30, in which he states George experiences death in the form of going back to everyday life.
[145] Plath 33.
[146] Plath 149.

forced by circumstance to kill his unborn child. Despite this, his faith is restored in the final pages, when he witnesses the church burning. And thus he becomes a happy man unburdened by the fear of death.

Chapter 5 The Journey to Acceptance of Death

Death and immortality are common themes in most of Updike's work.[147] There are many similarities in the way Updike's characters attempt to handle death, most notably the core approach. According to Terrence A. Doody, this approach is: "to Updike himself and to his characters haunted by death, things offer a stability that may not amount to immortality, but that does seem firmer than human life."[148] The characters of *Rabbit, Run*, *The Centaur* and *Couples* are no exceptions to this, but their journeys to finding that stability differ significantly. Still at the beginning of the novel, each main character - Harry of *Rabbit, Run*, George of *The Centaur*, Piet of *Couples* - is terrified of death. They all have to confront their faith, instincts and finally the fear of death. The way they choose to deal with their issues is where the characters vary, yet their approaches in the final pages of their novels are not entirely dissimilar.

5.1 The Hero at the Beginning of the Novel

To compare the evolution of the approach to death in the three novels it is important to summarize the starting point of each character. At the beginning of *Rabbit, Run* Harry is reminded of his past glory, which causes him to think of mortality and decay, as discussed in chapter two. Harry, much like Piet of *Couples*, is terrified of death, fearing the possible nothingness of it. The reminder of Harry's mortality is the catalyst of the book, since it is what makes Harry run. Being on the road is equally scary to Harry, because once again he is reminded of nothingness. In an attempt to find stability, he contacts his former coach. As was previously established, the figure of Tothero symbolizes youth and specialness to Harry, and when this figure fails, Harry moves on to Ruth, trading memories of youth for finding stability in sex.

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[147] Jerome Klinkowitz, "John Updike's America," *The North American Review* 265.3 (1980): 71, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25125830>, 25 March 2017.
[148] Doody 219.

Similarly, at the beginning of *Couples*, Piet is reminded of mortality through the death of his daughters' pet hamster and their subsequent questions about death. This, as shown in chapter four, is one of several instances where Piet must explain death to his daughter Nancy, which gradually exposes Piet's fear of death. Like Harry, Piet tries to find comfort in having affairs with various women, trying to vanquish death by sex.

The initial position of *The Centaur's* George to death is the complete opposite to Harry and Piet. As stated in chapter three, George is cynical, dissatisfied with his life and sees death as the solution to his problems. He is also the only character out of the three who is under a direct threat of death. He thinks his health is failing and presents the possibility of having cancer to his family with a surprising lack of fear. He believes his family would be better off without him, but as the events of the novel progress this soon changes. George's acceptance of death also undergoes a change, as it slowly transforms into fear.

Even though George appears to be completely different from Piet and Harry, he and Piet share the same traumatic experience - the death of their parents. For George, as discussed in chapter three, the death of his father is one of the pivotal events of his life, being the source of his cynicism. Throughout the novel it becomes clear that the death of his father, who was a minister, has a great impact on George, especially regarding faith and consequent fear of death. For Piet, the role of his parents' death is connected with his fear straight away, as established in chapter four. Similarly to George, this event makes Piet doubt his faith, which contributes to his fear of death.

5.2 The Hero and Faith

Even though all three novels deal with the question of faith, *Rabbit, Run* is the most explicit in this matter, since there are various discussions between the main character and minister Eccles. *The Centaur* also introduces two ministers, one being the dead father and the other appearing briefly at a basketball game, neither being nearly as prominent as Eccles. In

Couples, the figure of a minister is completely absent and the contemplation of Christian values is only explored through Piet.

Still, all three characters are described as Christians. Harry's beliefs are perhaps the most polarizing out of the three, since he refuses certain ideas of Christianity. As was established in chapter two, Harry is searching for "the thing behind everything."[149] He, just like Eccles, is unable to define this thing behind everything, because it is not a concept present in Christianity. He also refuses the Christian idea of life being the passage into death, as a means to arrive at God's Kingdom. Since he does not have a clear idea of what comes after death, his fear of nothingness is enhanced, and he has to search for other means of stability.

In chapter three, George's faith is shown to be connected to his dead father. Confronted with the possibility of his own death, George remembers his father's final words, which admit the loss of faith. This is the key to understanding the shift in George's approach to death, since he fears that in the face of death he will lose faith. He desperately tries to find comfort in faith again, consulting another minister, but he is left unsatisfied. Just like Harry, he tries to find stability in something else, which turns out to be his son Peter.

Piet's relationship to God is more complicated than George's. As discussed in chapter four, Piet loses his faith throughout the novel. What started after the death of his parents gradually grows into belief that God has abandoned everyone, even Piet. Where George fears death because he believes it can lead to loss of faith, Piet sees the relationship reversed; he fears death because he has lost his faith.

Morality is one of the aspects of Piet's relationship to God, which can be said about Harry and George as well. Harry, the youngest of the three characters, is not concerned with his moral conduct throughout the most of *Rabbit, Run*. The evolution of his conscience is

[149]Updike, *Rabbit, Run* 241.

shown in chapter two. He knows what he is doing is wrong, but feels no guilt over it, until Janice and his daughter are in mortal danger. He believes he will be punished for his sins and the punishment will be the death of either Janice or his daughter. At that moment he promises to himself and to God that he will be a good husband, father and Christian. When his assumption proves to be wrong and both Janice and Rebecca June live, he attempts to fulfil his promise, but he quickly fails, running away from Janice again. Consequently, his daughter drowns. At this point it would be expected of Harry to feel guilty, but he fails to learn from his mistakes. He sees God as unfair and assigns no responsibility to himself. Instead of facing his problems, he runs away once again, proving his morals remain unchanged.

The opposite of Harry is George. Chapter three shows that George spends a considerable amount of time contemplating what would be morally right to do. When he is tempted by Venus, he immediately regrets his thoughts and realises the amorality of the situation. Even his approach to death changes because of what is morally right. Initially, he wants to give up and die, but as the story progresses, he begins to understand his responsibility towards Peter. As this awareness of his own importance grows, so does the fear of death, since George feels obligated to take care of his son. He realises that in order to provide for Peter, he has to continue living. This leads not only to the change of relationship to death, but most importantly to the acceptance of life.

Unlike Harry, Piet realises his own wrongdoings, but contrary to George, he does not do what is morally right. As stated in chapter four, Piet does not feel responsible towards anyone else than God, and when he starts losing faith, he behaves progressively more amorally. For Piet, sex overtakes the role of faith as the defence against fear of death. What started as a purely sexual affair with Georgene, turns into a love affair with Foxy, and several different infidelities. When faced with the problem of Foxy's pregnancy, Piet not only agrees with the abortion, but he ensures it happens, even if it means making his wife sleep with

another man. After this, he does not show any signs of guilt, because he no longer feels obligated to God. Piet's faith is only restored at the end of the novel when the church burns down, after which he stops his affairs and marries Foxy.

5.3 The Hero and the Drives

When examining death in Updike's work, it is almost impossible not to mention sex. As Doody states: "Because sex and death are dialectically opposed in much of Updike's writing, to talk about one is to talk about the other as well."[150] The three novels considered are no exceptions to this, since all the heroes manifest the behaviour of both life drive and death drive. In the case of Harry and Piet, the life drive is expressed through sexual encounters with various women, whereas George's life drive is focused on his son. In all three novels, life drive has the same function: to defeat death drive.[151]

When confronted with growing old, as expressed in chapter two, Harry realises his mortality and fears his death. He tries to return to the state of his youth and he uses sex and women in general to recapture the feeling of specialness he felt when he was young. Thus, he temporarily forgets about death, and sex assumes the function of a life drive.

Analogically, Piet uses sex in the same way, but in *Couples*, Updike made the relationship of sex and death significantly more explicit. As previously analysed in chapter four, when having sex with Bea, death is no longer dreadful to Piet. Originally, he tried to vanquish death with faith, which is apparent in the way he explains death to his daughter, but as he loses faith, sex is what replaces it. He too uses sex to conquer death, and he also succeeds.

Once again, George's behaviour stands in contrast to that of Harry and Piet. Whether it is George's stronger moral compass or his initial acceptance of death, he does not seek relief in sex. Though not entirely missing from *The Centaur*, sexual scenes are few and never fully

[150] Doody 212.
[151] Freud, *Beyond Pleasure Principle* 34.

developed, making the presence of drives more obscure. Although sex is the primary life drive, it serves the purpose of the renewal of life.[152] In George's case, the renewal of life means his son Peter. To ensure Peter's development as an individual, George must overcome his death wish and continue living, to be able to support Peter. In this case, the life drive successfully defeats George's strong death drive, making him afraid of death in the process.

Both Harry and Piet are fathers as well. For Harry, his children are a by-product of his actions. He does not try to be a good father, he leaves Nelson, Rebecca June and his unborn child with their mothers for a quest to recapture his youth. His life drive in the sense of leaving an offspring begins and ends exactly there, as was explained in chapter two. Piet on the other hand does not show any signs of life drive working in favour of his children. His actions regarding the abortion of his and Foxy's child, as described in chapter four, do not correspond with the renewal of life, since he ensures the death of his unborn baby. The fact Piet already has two children should be taken into consideration, but Harry, even though he also has a child, still begs Ruth to let his unborn baby live, whereas the cold demeanour in which Piet approaches the abortion shows disregard to his unborn child.

5.4 The Hero at the End of the Novel

Each character's approach to death changes throughout all three novels. For Harry, the source of his anxiety is not immediately identified, but his fear of death is finally confronted in the death of his daughter. After this, he accepts death as part of life. The acceptance, however, is short-lived. When Ruth calls him Mr. Death himself, Harry once again faces the reality and consequences of his actions. He makes sure his unborn child is safe, falsely promises to stay with Ruth and then turns to the only defence mechanism that has worked for him so far: he runs away from his responsibilities. Even though he is said to have accepted death, his actions prove otherwise, since he continues his search for the thing behind everything.

[152] Freud, *Beyond Pleasure Principle* 40.

Unlike Harry, and Piet, George begins his journey with a cynical attitude towards life; he sees death as an escape from all of his problems. George's gradual change from being ready to die to fearing death is caused by the possibility of the abandonment of his son together with the idea of loss of faith. Though George spends the majority of the novel preparing himself to die despite his fear, he is glad to find out he does not have cancer. At first, he refuses to believe it, but then he realises he has the chance to sacrifice[153] himself and his happiness to ensure his son's happiness. From wanting to die, through fearing death, George arrives to the acceptance of death, but only when it is truly his time.

Piet stops fearing death before the end of the novel, but that does not mean he accepts it. After setting death in motion by ensuring Foxy's abortion, death seems to loom over Piet just as strongly as at the beginning of the novel. The visit of the dying John Ong helps Piet realise he still has his life to live, and the destruction of the church, which Piet sees as a demonstration of God, restores Piet's faith in something beyond this world. By the end of *Couples*, Piet seems to have ended his immoral behaviour, which he used as a defence against fear of death. This, together with his renewed faith, indicated that Piet, just like George, has accepted death.

Although there are three different journeys in *Rabbit, Run*, *The Centaur* and *Couples*, still there are numerous similarities among the characters. Firstly, they are all afraid of death at some point. Secondly, they seem to have accepted death at some point in the novels as well. They all use life drive to battle their fear of death, but this is where the analogy among all three characters ends. Where Piet and Harry undergo a change of heart from fear of death to a seeming acceptance through means of sex, George goes the opposite way: he begins to get ready for death but with the realisation of his responsibility to his son he starts to fear death.

[153] The term "sacrifice" is used as David Myers uses it in his essay "The Questing Fear: Christian Allegory in John Updike's 'The Centaur,'" meaning sacrificing one's needs for the good of others, self-sacrifice.

George is also the only one who faces the real possibility of death in the form of cancer. Only when he finds out he is healthy, is he able to accept death.

When the real outcome of each character's journey is taken into consideration, it is Harry who stands out. Where George and Piet accept death (when the time is right) and return to mundane everyday life, Harry flees. If Updike's comment about his characters dying in the way of going back to work and normal life[154] is taken literally, Harry is the only one who actually escapes death in some sense. But without Updike's comment mentioned above, Harry, unlike Piet and George, appears to still be frightened.

Rabbit, Run, the earliest novel out of the three, shows the attempts to overcome fear of death by recapturing youth by various means. Even though at one point it looks like Harry is content with the reality of death, his final actions show that he has not entirely accepted death. The second novel, *The Centaur*, shows the opposite journey. From accepting, even desiring death, George undergoes a change to fearing death, only for him to accept it once again, with the consequence of being unhappy. The last novel, *Couples*, shows that defeating the fear of death and accepting death does not mean vanquishing it. Only when Piet realises he has the rest of his life to live, instead of just wasting it, is he able to make a change and become a happy human being. Updike's approach to death in the novels of the 60's seems to evolve, just like the individual characters' approaches. From difficult and partly unsuccessful attempts to overcome fear of death in *Rabbit, Run*, he moves on to the acceptance of death through the sacrifice for others in *The Centaur*, and finally in *Couples* defeating fear of death not only by accepting death, but by realising life still has to be lived.

[154] Updike, *Picked-Up Pieces* 519.

Conclusion

The prose of John Updike introduces the lives of small-town or suburban white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. As was previously established, death is amongst the most prominent topics in the majority of Updike's novels. *Rabbit, Run*, *The Centaur* and *Couples* are no exceptions to this, since all three main characters have one thing in common: fear of death. Each novel presents a struggle of the main character to come to terms with their mortality, exposing their pursuits to either overcome or vanquish death. Harry, George and Piet contemplate their beliefs, morals and needs, whilst attempting to find a way to eliminate the fear of death. Since their approaches to this issue differ, so do their journeys and results. Still, each character undergoes a certain evolution of his attitude towards death. Whilst Harry partly fails, George and Piet manage to accept death, indicating a successful change of perspective. From running away, the approach to death evolves into overcoming death not only by accepting death itself, but also by accepting life.

To ensure the complete comprehension of the development of Updike's approach to death in the novels of the 60's the analysis of *Of the Farm*, published in 1965, would be a desirable addition. I decided to omit this novel from my thesis, since it is considered Updike's weakest and his least critically acclaimed novel of the 60's.[155] It is often compared to *The Centaur*, presenting similar themes and patterns,[156] therefore analysis of both was redundant considering the limited scope of the thesis. For the same reason Updike's short stories collections *Pigeon Feathers* (1962) and *Olinger Stories* (1964) were not analysed although both include stories dealing with death, such as "Pigeon Feathers" or "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Cat."

Similarly, the range of the thesis prevented further research into different psychological and philosophical theories. I chose to utilize Freud's theory, since the

[155] Schiff 13.
[156] Schiff 12.

relationship between sex and death presented in Updike's writing is exemplary to the theory of drives. The theme of death could be analysed in relation to many philosophical approaches, e.g. existentialism, which Updike discusses in a 1976 interview with Jeff Campbell. Updike names specifically Martin Buber, Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre.[157] Each of these thinkers offers another possible outlook on the topic, as well as for example Carl Jung. The analysis of religious motives in the three novels could also be more extensive, but for the purpose of this thesis this aspect was explored sparingly.

The analysis of each novel with regards to faith and Freudian theory would not be possible without ideas taken from secondary literature. The pivotal essays used in the analysis of *Rabbit, Run* are "Rabbit Angstrom as a Religious Sufferer" by Lewis A. Lawson and "The Troubles with Harry: Freedom, America, and God in John Updike's Rabbit Novels" by Kyle A. Pasewark. Lawson and Pasewark agree on the importance of Harry's beliefs for the development of the novel, including his fear of death. Those two essays provided the basis of Harry's motivations through which the analysis of the change in Harry's approach to death was enabled. Contrastingly, John Stephen Martin sees in his essay "Rabbit's Faith: Grace and the Transformation of the Heart" the change of Harry's approach to death as successful, since Harry sees death as lovely;[158] but as was stated previously in this thesis, this is not supported by Harry's actions.

Although Bryant N. Wyatt identifies George's motivations in accordance to other critics in his essay "John Updike: The Psychological Novel in Search of Structure," he belongs among the critics who incorrectly read the ending of *The Centaur* as a suicide. This fact is pointed out by David Myers in "The Questing Fear: Christian Allegory in John Updike's "The Centaur,'" which provided my thesis not only with reassurance that George

[157] Plath 97-99.
[158] Martin 107.

did not kill himself (in fact he did not die at all) but also with necessary insight into George's relationship to faith and his initial desire to die, stemming from the hatred for his job.

For *Couples*, the core ideas of Robert Detweiler's essay "Updike's 'Couples': Eros Demythologized" concerning the relationship of sex and death together with the religious aspects of Piet's conflict presented in Bernard A Schopen's essay "Faith, Morality, and the Novels of John Updike" offered a sufficient foundation for my analysis of Piet. Although a valuable asset throughout the entire thesis, "Updike's Idea of Reification" by Terrence A. Doody focuses very little on Piet's approach to death. This is due to the fact that Piet's fear of death is often compared to Freddy's acceptance of it, Doody being no exception. For this reason the comparison of Piet and Freddy was avoided as much as possible, to provide a detailed analysis of Piet's attitude towards death alone.

The attempts to obtain more current critical essays on the three discussed novels were unsuccessful. Possible reasons why there is a very small amount of new critical writings after the year 2009 are either Updike's death or the fact that contemporary critics are preoccupied with such issues as e.g. multiculturalism, which are not explored in Updike; or, in the case of feminism, Updike's novels present a problematic view. The fact that the novels analysed in this thesis are from Updike's early career is another factor in this issue, since most of the later critical publications focus on Updike's later novels.

Naturally, similar research to this thesis could be applied to the entirety of Updike's novels, which would present a comprehensive analysis of the treatment of death in his prose. The evolution of the approach to death throughout the *Rabbit* tetralogy is explored to some degree in Kyle A. Pasewark's previously mentioned essay, yet the *Rabbit* tetralogy could be submitted to even more detailed analysis regarding death. The *Rabbit* series is not the only instance of death being a prominent theme in Updike's prose. For example, *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) explore death quite liberally, even featuring several murders. The aftermath

of nuclear war is described in *Toward the End of Time* (1997), which presents an explicit influence of death on the characters. The analysis of the theme of death in the entire prose of Updike would undeniably provide valuable results, but the format of the thesis is insufficient for a detailed examination of such a number of publications, thus one decade was selected for research.

The 1960's present a wide range of different literary movements as well as cultural and social changes. The influence of the Cold War, Vietnam War and nuclear threat brought the awareness of death to American citizens. With the increasing interest in psychology and the inner world of human beings, authors like Updike found audience. He is often talked about together with Phillip Roth and Saul Bellow,[159] but the theme of death is not as prominent in their works. An interesting comparison of the approach to death of Updike's prose would be to the prose of Flannery O'Connor. This is not only because death is a recurrent theme in her writing, but also because of the theme of Christianity, which was the focus of O'Connor's work. Unfortunately such comparison was not possible due to the limits of the thesis.

Since the analysis of the theme of death in Updike's work offers countless possibilities, this thesis was focused on a necessarily selective portion of possible research. Still, it offers valuable insight into the motivations and attitudes of the main characters as well as a proof of Updike's developing approach to death. In this sense the purpose of this thesis was achieved in providing detailed analysis of the change of the approach to death in Updike's novels of at least one decade, contributing to the discussion of Updike's work.

[159] Charles B. Harris, "Review: Updike and Roth: The Limits of Representationalism," *Contemporary Literature* 27.2 (1986): 279, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208663>, 27 May 2018.

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Key Words

Couples
Death
Death drive
God
John Updike
Life drive
Morality
Rabbit, Run
Sex
Sigmund Freud
The Centaur

Klíčová slova

Bůh
Dvojice
John Updike
Kentaur
Králíku, utíkej!
Moralita
Pud smrti
Pud života
Sex
Sigmund Freud
Smrt