



Sex As Dharma : The New Morality In John Updike's *Couples*

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ABSTRACT

The Rabbit Quartet sees the demolition of Christian dreams in contemporary America. In the two novels *Couples* (1968) and *Marry Me* (1976), John Updike tests the validity of D.H. Lawrence's prophecy that sex shall be the religion of the new civilization. Can sex be the source of spiritual elevation in the contemporary age? Updike picks this theme for dramatization in *Couples* (1968), a novel in which he deals almost exclusively with the present-day America. For the first time Updike writes a novel in which no older figures link the narrative view to the past, with the exception of Foxy's brief and unsatisfactory reunion with her mother. The parents of the central character, Piet are dead; and so is the past they represent.

Key Terms: sex, civilization, spirituality, religion, morality.

It remains for Piet only to recognize and accept the fact that there should be no regret for what has gone. With the burning of the church the meaningfulness of not mourned, for "the old church proved not only badly gutted but structurally unsound; a miracle it had not collapsed of itself a decade ago". Sex fills the emptiness created by the loss of Christianity in the lives of the characters. In American society, the morals are being so degraded that people don't care for religion or any social obligations. Men don't care for their wives and children and keep mistresses. They divorce their faithful wives impulsively. Wives don't care for their husbands and have illicit relations with other men. They condemn religion.

Updike has written here about the permissive society, a society in which everything is permitted. There remains no shame, no religion and no morality. People are absolutely frank about their affairs, as Updike portrays in *Couples* -married men and women openly keep

mistresses and lovers. Families break easily. The very name of the place in the novel suggests the theme-Tarbox which means a box filled with tar i.e. a place where nobody is spotless or immaculate, everybody is black, and the couples living in Tarbox have affairs among themselves making their married lives and children unhappy.

Couples is mainly a story of Piet's swinging between his angelic wife, Angela, and his earthbound mistress, Foxy. Though living in a Permissive Society Angela is pure and immaculate. She is faithful towards her husband to the utmost. She maintains no affair in her life. But Piet is unable to give her the same response. He seeks life (specially physical) outside his family and falls in love with Foxy. Foxy conceives through him though she is married to Freddy Thorne, a dentist. When this shameless affair is disclosed to Freddy and he comes to know that Foxy and Piet want the abortion of this child. Freddy agrees for this but demands a night with Angela in return. But since Angela is pure, she cannot bear her husband's liaison and decides to leave him.

Although explicit descriptions of sexual activities in the novel are vulnerable, the novel clearly presents the climate of America, and Updike has in Tarbox,- "a climate still furtively hedonist" (P. 114) Divorce and remarriage cannot, in America, be construed as radical, ensuring that at the end of *Couples*, Tarbox remains, as Donald Greiner (1984) writes, "a long way from the garden" (151). What is actually to be seen is that in choosing the controversial theme of sex as religion Updike is attempting to satirize or to celebrate in the novel the emergent religion of sex.

In the novel *Couples* there is both—a satire and celebration—at once. The main story of the novel portrays the celebration of sex. It fulfills Updike's purpose of treating his theme of sex as the emergent religion, seriously, sympathetically and without satire. However, some minor characters and certain symbols in the novel are deliberately presented as satirical.

Couples is Updike's first novel in which he fully depicts a society, which has lost all hope of the supernatural, a society which has accepted sex as a substitute for the spiritual longings. Updike's treatment as celebration as well as satire of sex as the emergent religion reflects his dualism, which is not new for us. It has been a constant basis of Updike's thought. Piet's gradual acceptance of sex as the emergent religion, his relinquishment of those Christian

hopes and fears which he earlier retained, is presented sympathetically. Piet's affair with Foxy is the most profound celebration of sex. Piet's strength, Hicks felt, was not his religious impulse; rather, it lay in his understanding that "important as sex is in his life, he enjoys sex as sex, not as a substitute for anything" (131). But sex is not a supernatural experience. It is natural and within this world, and hence, it does not show a way to the other world. In the contemporary society of Tarbox the other world can never be reached or attained. America has lost its dedication to Christianity which the sermon from 1795 (P. 464) suggests it once had. Updike's sense of satire lies in the fact that the contemporary society has lost its pervious religion, and hope for the other world, the disappointed hope or perhaps even the memory of it. The inadequacy of sex as the emergent religion is presented as a slap on the society's face.

Indeed, none of Updike's readers would expect from him a novel like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* where D.H. Lawrence presented a simple celebration of sex as the new religion. Since Updike was not entirely satisfied with such a one-sided picture his duality in the novel had to come forth. The sophisticated contemporary audience are relieved to read a book which is dualistic in treating the theme of sex as the emergent religion as not only celebration but also as a satire. Just as Updike's duality prevents him from an entirely collaborative vision, so does it prevent him from taking what would be an equally unrelieved satire.

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