

Updike and Politics: Does Rabbit Angstrom’s Political Evolution Help to Explain Trump Supporters?

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An episode of BBC’s “Great Lives” series that was broadcast in 2014 began, “John Updike was one of the 20th century’s most read of serious American writers.” There is general agreement, worldwide, that Updike, though often accused of embracing male characters whose actions are sexist and, at times, racist, is one of America’s finest writers. When it comes to politics, though, Updike and his positions become less clear. Like his father, he was a lifelong conservative Democrat, and though Updike died not long after Pres. Barack Obama was inaugurated, he had voiced his earlier support. Yet Updike was one of only four Americans in history to receive both the National Medal of Art and the National Humanities Medal in White House ceremonies—selected and honored by two Republican Presidents, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. The case of his best known character, Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, is even more complicated and fluid when it comes to political leanings.

The summer before the Trump’s surprising—some would say “shocking”—election to the U.S. Presidency, literary scholar Scott Dill published an essay in *Front Porch Republic* that asked the question, “Would Rabbit Angstrom Vote For Trump?” Since Harry is often considered an American everyman, it seemed a fair question—one that Pennsylvania government affairs worker Charles F. McElwee III also asked several months later in *The American Conservative* with a slightly different focus: “Did John Updike Foresee the Trump Era?”

Panelists from The John Updike Society explored those questions in a May 2017 open session at the American Literature Association annual conference in Boston, and society members will revisit the still-fertile territory of Rabbit and Trump voters when they convene for their first international conference outside the USA from 1-5 June 2018 at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. The closing session of the conference—“Updike and Politics: Does Rabbit Angstrom’s Political Evolution Help to Explain Trump Supporters?”—will be open to the public and hosted on Tuesday, 5 June 2018 at 5 p.m. by the National Library of Serbia, where Updike was a guest when he visited Belgrade in 1978. The panel, which I will moderate as I did in Boston, features editors and contributors from a forthcoming book on *Updike and Politics: New Considerations*: Sylvie Mathé (Aix-Marseille University, France), Yoav Fromer (Tel Aviv University, Israel), Biljana Dojčinović (University of Belgrade, Serbia), and Dill (Case Western Reserve University, USA).

Many have argued that Rabbit is a distinctly unique yet typical American character, among them CNBC’s Dick Cavett, who called the four Rabbit novels “a splendid account of American life following the Second World War,” and writer Ian McEwan, a keynote speaker for the upcoming conference, who has argued that the Rabbit tetralogy stands as the prime contender for the Great American Novel.

As McElwee summarized in his conservative view of the character, “In Rabbit, Updike presented an everyman who inelegantly navigated the political, social, and economic coordinates of his time. The glance of a newspaper headline, an overheard song on the radio, the survey of a changing neighborhood—these were the plot elements that directed Rabbit’s dysfunctional march into modern time. Revisiting Updike’s *Rabbit*

novels is a rendezvous with prescience, for no collection of postwar fiction could help us better understand how working-class populism—in the form of Donald Trump—prevailed on Election Day 2016.”

Like many Americans, Updike’s Rabbit is changeable when it comes to his political beliefs, and therein lies the challenge of trying to predict how Rabbit would have responded during the Obama and Trump presidencies. Harry, on the surface, appears to have shifted his political values as his sense of self changed over the years. “Show me a young Conservative and I’ll show you someone with no heart; show me an old Liberal and I’ll show you someone with no brains,” Winston Churchill is credited with saying. Or, as Updike put it more philosophically, “A cynic is a kind of romantic who has aged.” That’s certainly a fitting description of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom.

When readers first meet Harry in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Eisenhower is president and Rabbit is a 26-year-old former high school basketball star who had peaked too early in life and married too young. Stuck in a succession of sales jobs, some of which force him to work door to door, he is restless enough to run but has no idea what options are even available to him. The Beats were rejecting conformity and Harry has a vague impulse to rebel, yet his is so stubbornly traditional and idealistic that he romanticizes his past and, according to writer-critic Elizabeth Tallent, even feels compelled to “marry” the women he beds, as if to somehow negotiate the tense opposition of his family’s Protestantism and his own libido. Contradictions like that make him both a highly unique character and a representationally American one.

There are also complicating factors. As D. Quentin Miller persuasively argues, “Like Updike, Harry came of age in the 1950s, when Americans sought fervently to

define themselves in relation to the Soviet Union”—a kind of them/us nationalism that, while it might have dissipated, nonetheless left its mark on a generation. Then, as Miller points out, “Vietnam complicates the subject of the Cold War to signify more than the simple ‘we-they’ of the Eisenhower years” as American grappled with a decade Updike described as “the most dissentious American decade since the Civil War.” Rabbit and Updike’s support of Lyndon Johnson’s escalation of the Vietnam War can seem confounding, given their largely pro-labor, Democratic leanings, but as Pennsylvania native McElwee points out, “Rabbit and his Diamond (Berks) County ilk are conservative Democrats, products of the New Deal who support entitlements, defend Vietnam, possess an unbending patriotism, question their country’s economic future, and nurture a working-class intuition.”

McElwee summarizes the political ground that Rabbit travels: “Although Rabbit supported Humphrey in 1968, he later has a ‘Reagan Democrat’ conversion, voting for George H.W. Bush in the final novel. If anything, he’s the fictional embodiment of a political prototype, a cross-party coalition infuriated by the loss of what communities like Brewer once symbolized: economic prosperity and a shot at a stable middle-class American life.”

Yet, as Updike scholar Dilvo I. Ristoff reminds us, Rabbit once asked a very telling question that suggests national identity is very much a part of personal identity. In *Rabbit at Rest* he inquires, “Without the cold war, what’s the point of being an American?” As Ristoff suggests, “The question is extremely meaningful when we consider that Rabbit is somebody who had anticommunism as a major goal in life and who in essence, throughout the 1980s, along with Reagan, pushed the world toward a

new cold war. For him the end of the cold war is less a goal achieved than the loss of purpose in life.” Trump too has stirred the ashes of the cold war, poking Russia and North Korea and even picking a fight with longtime ally Mexico. Would Rabbit be comforted by a renewed sense of “them against us” or would the current level of divisiveness in American politics muddy the waters because for true nationalism to flourish the nation must be united against a common enemy.

Then there’s the equally vague transition that Rabbit experiences from economic hardship to a financially comfortable life, as he works his way up the ladder at his father-in-law’s Toyota dealership during the Jimmy Carter years, when gas rationing (and gas-guzzling American-made cars unable to compete with the more efficient imports) made Rabbit rich.

As McElwee summarizes, over the course of four novels, “Rabbit’s life parallels the political and social milieu of postwar America, whether it’s rebellion against conformity in the 1950’s (*Rabbit, Run*), racial conflict and cultural anarchy in the 1960s (*Rabbit Redux*), financial excess in the late 1970s (*Rabbit Is Rich*), or uncertainty about the country’s future in the late 1980s (*Rabbit at Rest*).

“In places like Berks County, Trump’s supporters personified a labor movement, comprising Democrats and Republicans who were devoid of ideology and believed Hillary represented the policymakers who eroded the state’s working class. . . . They’re the reason Trump became the first Republican to win Pennsylvania since 1988,” McElwee suggests, and it’s worth discussing the texts more carefully to explore whether evidence supports such claims. There are influences and evolutions to consider, as well as causes, effects, and contributing factors.

In the end, perhaps the strongest influence on Rabbit is the pull of nostalgia, coupled with his unflinching support and love of the United States, which he once called the “happiest f***ing country in the world.”

As Dill summarizes, “Rabbit’s patriotism was accompanied by nostalgia, racism, sexism, and a general anti-cosmopolitanism to the extent that, were Updike around to give us another installment, it would probably involve at least one Trump rally Whether or not he would have voted for Trump, Rabbit longed to love the good gift of living where he was, when he was, how he was. His political instincts stemmed from a fathomless ache of guilty gratitude” that he was an American.

The John Updike Society hopes that you will join us for this historic session at the National Library of Serbia, where there will be time afterwards for questions and comments from the audience.

Sources

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