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## Early and Late Patterns of the Search Motif Contrasted in John Updike's Fiction *Rabbit, Run* and *The Coup*

Carolyn Anne McKinney Afshar

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EARLY AND LATE PATTERNS OF THE SEARCH  
MOTIF CONTRASTED IN JOHN UPDIKE'S  
FICTION RABBITT RUN AND THE COUP

Carolyn Anne McKinney Afshar



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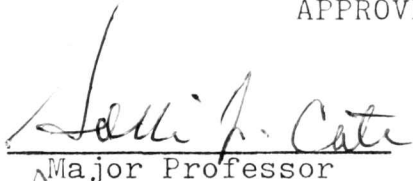
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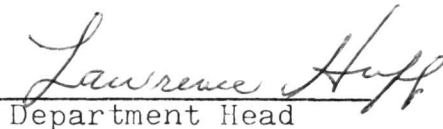
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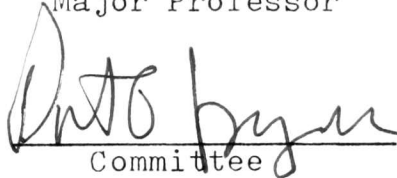
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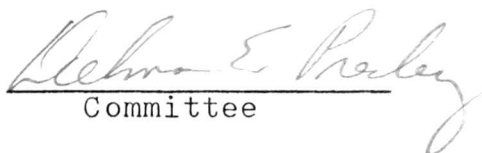
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## Introduction

John Updike, one of America's best-known contemporary novelists, is also a writer whose works have raised much controversy. He is a popular author whose novels consistently reach the best sellers' lists, and any writer who manages to sell books so easily immediately becomes suspect in the eyes of literary scholars and critics. Thus, some critics, for example Donald Miles, have charged that Updike's works are often too "slick" and "middlebrow."<sup>1</sup> These critics cite Updike's two-year tenure from 1955 to 1957 on The New Yorker staff as contributing to this alleged "slickness." Praised on one hand for his "elegant style"<sup>2</sup> and the poetry of his prose, Updike has been denigrated on the other hand for his attention to detail. For example, Richard Stern contends that the "inability to stop fondling detail"<sup>3</sup> hampers Updike's narrative, while Norman Mailer claims that Updike's style is "stale."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Miles, The American Novel in the Twentieth Century (London: Barnes & Noble, 1978), p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>Edward P. Vargo, Rainstorms and Fire: Ritual in the Novels of John Updike (Port Washington, N.Y.: National University Publications, 1973), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Stern, "The Myth in Action," rev. of The Centaur and Pigeon Feathers, by John Updike, Spectator, 27 Sept. 1963, p. 389.

<sup>4</sup>Norman Mailer, "Norman Mailer vs. Nine Writers," Esquire, July 1963, p. 67.

Still other critics downgrade Updike's subject matter. Paul Gray, for instance, while admitting that "few writers can be as entertainingly cerebral as Updike," finds that Updike has exhausted his subject matter: ". . . after nearly two decades of distinguished service as the thinking man's John O'Hara, Updike seems to have reported everything he knows about the sexually tormented middle class."<sup>5</sup> D. J. Enright notes that, though Updike knows how to write, he does not know what to write about.<sup>6</sup> This criticism of Updike's work is one of the most common, for many critics contend that Updike is kept from literary prominence by his neglecting the great universal issues of man and existence. For example, Keith D. Mano, in a particularly unfavorable review of Updike's works, insists that "great issues aren't at issue in Updike's fiction."<sup>7</sup> Updike's flaw, according to Richard Gilman, is that he does not undertake "the supreme task and burden of literature: the appropriation and transfiguration, in one way or another, of suffering, struggle, conflict, disaster and death."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Paul Gray, "Ring Around the Collar," rev. of A Month of Sundays, by John Updike, Time, 17 Feb. 1975, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup>D. J. Enright, Conspirators and Poets (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), p. 140.

<sup>7</sup>Keith D. Mano, "Doughy Middleness," National Review, 30 Aug. 1974, p. 987.

<sup>8</sup>Richard Gilman, "The Youth of an Author," rev. of The Centaur, by John Updike, New Republic, 13 Apr. 1963, p. 25.

Some critics treat Updike's supposed deficiencies as symptomatic of an immature writer. Since the publication of his first novel, The Poorhouse Fair, in 1959, these critics, notably Granville Hicks, have been holding out for Updike's "Great Novel." For example, Miles says that Updike has not yet fulfilled his real promise,<sup>9</sup> while Enright states that, notwithstanding his defects, Updike "still has time."<sup>10</sup>

Other critics have been more generous in their criticism of Updike. William McPherson, for one, believes that, despite his flaws (albeit minor ones), "John Updike may be America's finest novelist"<sup>11</sup> and repudiates the oft-cited "narrow vision" of Updike by comparing him to Nathaniel Hawthorne. According to McPherson, Updike shares with the classic American author "a vision . . . remorselessly terrifying": an enigmatic God, man as fallen angel, and social forces acting as a stabilizer for man.<sup>12</sup> David D. Galloway refutes those critics who claim Updike does not treat the "great issues" by stating that existence is the central question

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<sup>9</sup>Miles, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup>Enright, p. 140.

<sup>11</sup>William McPherson, "Sacramental Relations," rev. of A Month of Sundays, Book World (The Washington Post), 16 Feb. 1975, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup>McPherson, p. 1.



in Updike's work.<sup>13</sup> One critic answers Gilman's criticism by listing among Updike's themes pain, loneliness, and death.<sup>14</sup> Robert S. Gingher also defends Updike by proposing that the novelist "does have a great deal to say."<sup>15</sup> According to Gingher, "to a greater degree than most of his contemporaries, Updike treats the larger issues"<sup>16</sup> because "he deals not so much with individual psychoanalysis as with an aggregate portrayal of the human heart."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, to the list of Updike's concerns Gingher adds religion and sex.<sup>18</sup> Updike himself admits that one of his concerns--both in his writing and in his personal life--is religion. Of his convictions he says, ". . . I try to [religious]. I think I do tend to see the world as layered, and as there being something up there; certainly in Couples (1968) it would seem to be God. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Lest one be surprised at this display of

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<sup>13</sup>David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction: Updike, Styron, Bellow, Salinger, rev. ed. (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1970), p. x.

<sup>14</sup>Thaddeus Muradian, "The World of Updike," English Journal, 54 (1965), p. 577.

<sup>15</sup>Robert S. Gingher, "Has John Updike Anything to Say?" Modern Fiction Studies, 20 (1974), p. 99.

<sup>16</sup>Gingher, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup>Gingher, p. 105.

<sup>18</sup>Gingher, p. 105.

<sup>19</sup>"John Updike Talks to Eric Rhode about the Shapes and Subjects of his Fiction," The Listener, 19 June 1969, p. 363.

religious faith, Harry T. Moore points out that Updike "is among the few leading American writers who admit an affiliation with organized religion [Congregationalism] . . . ." <sup>20</sup> Furthermore, according to Francis L. Kunkel, in The Poorhouse Fair and Couples, Updike explores what follows Christianity in a society which is turning from its traditional religion toward humanism (The Poorhouse Fair) and sex (Couples) as the modern gospel. <sup>21</sup>

Despite these positive reactions, however, many other critics have been bothered by what they view as Updike's inconsistency or indecision. They are especially puzzled and irritated by the ambiguity of Updike's work, particularly his endings. Joseph Waldmeir is not annoyed by this alleged flaw of Updike because he views the novelist's intent as the revelation of "the thing itself-- scene, situation, character, even argument--as perceived, with no revelation beyond the perception. . . because he has no revelation to make . . . ." <sup>22</sup> Thus, Waldmeir claims that the seeming ambiguity and inconclusiveness of Updike's

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<sup>20</sup> Harry T. Moore, Pref., John Updike: Yea Sayings, by Rachael C. Burchard, Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques, ed. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. viii.

<sup>21</sup> Francis L. Kunkel, Passion and the Passion: Sex and Religion in Modern Literature (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), pp. 75-83.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Waldmeir, "It's the Going That's Important Not the Getting There," Modern Fiction Studies, 20 (1974), p. 16.

novels are actually a perceptual matter and not a matter of lack of skill or vision. Edward P. Vargo agrees that understanding Updike's work requires a study into the perception of Updike by the reader. Whereas some critics castigate Updike for his attention to details, Vargo sees this as characteristic of Updike's desire to be "a mythmaker, . . . who realizes the interconnection of all things in this world" and who quests "for the unseen and elusive ambiguity behind life . . . ." <sup>23</sup> As Vargo points out, then, Updike realizes that there are no easy solutions in life and accepts the ambiguity of man's existence. "My books feed, I suppose, on some kind of perverse relish in the fact that there are insolvable problems," concedes Updike. <sup>24</sup> Moreover, Updike says that all of his books are "meant to be moral debates with the reader, and if they seem pointless--I'm speaking hopefully--it's because the reader has not been engaged in the debate." <sup>25</sup>

Just as in his work Updike searches for the answer to a question or for the reality behind ambiguity, so do most of his protagonists embark upon a quest for an answer or for a reality. With the publication of his

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<sup>23</sup>Vargo, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup>Frank Gado, ed., Conversation with John Updike (Schenectady: Union College, 1971), p. 16.

<sup>25</sup>"John Updike Talks to Eric Rhode," p. 863.

second novel, Rabbit, Run (1960), Updike intently focuses on the search motif. Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, the novel's protagonist, searches for "something" which he cannot see and whose existence he cannot prove but feels instinctively. Concomitantly Rabbit searches for a "first-rate" life free of everyday pressures and responsibilities. In his latest novel, The Coup (1978), Updike again presents in the person of a dictator, Colonel Felix Hakim Ellellou, a questing protagonist who searches for a solution to his country's drought and for self-identity. Although both novels utilize the search motif, they differ in the treatment of the motif. The purpose of this thesis is to contrast the early and later patterns of Updike's search motif through these two novels and, at the same time, to trace the development of Updike's vision of man who, according to the novelist, must necessarily quest, for "to be a person is to be in a situation of tension, is to be in a dialectical situation. A truly adjusted person is not a person at all--just an animal with clothes on or a statistic. . . ."26

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Quoted in Gingher, p. 101.

## I. OVERVIEW OF THE SEARCH MOTIF IN AMERICAN FICTION

According to Sam Bluefarb in The Escape Motif in the American Novel, the escape motif in the modern American novel reflects a dominant mood in American life. Europeans fled to the New World, and settlers in the young America continued this flight by migrating to the West. Although the frontier closed by the 1880's, the impulse to flee remained. Thus, in later years the pattern of flight was transferred to lifestyles (as seen, for example, in the Beats of the 1950's and the Hippie movements of the 1960's and 1970's), a transfer which resulted in the twentieth century in an intense examination of the way man lives, of his place in the universe and, in a more inward direction, of the self. In his book Bluefarb studies the pattern of development of the escape motif in the American novel, starting with Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (1884) and ending with Richard Wright's Native Son (1940). Twain's novel contains optimism about the protagonist's ability to gain something by his flight, but by the 1940's, Wright's protagonist engages in a blind flight which does not lead anywhere, or at least not too far. Consequently, as the escape motif in the American novel reflects the mood of American life, so the development of the motif in the novel reflects the

change in Americans' view toward the mood or impulse to escape.<sup>27</sup> As Bluefarb declares, "the very urge to escape--after the Civil War especially, but most especially in the twentieth century--was born out of desperation and hopelessness, so that escape finally became not so much an act of hope, optimism, and Emersonian self-reliance as of hopelessness and confusion."<sup>28</sup> Flight does not necessarily connote a one-way direction, however, for if one flees from something, he usually flees toward something else. Therefore, as Arthur E. Waterman notes, the fleeing protagonist in the American novel is also on a quest.<sup>29</sup>

Protagonists in American literature flee for various reasons. For example, many escapers flee from the law or engage upon a flight for survival.<sup>30</sup> Huck Finn must escape from the law because he is helping Jim, a slave, to escape to free territory. In Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms (1929), Frederic Henry flees military law after he deserts the Italian ambulance corps during World War I. Tom Joad of John Steinbeck's Grapes of

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<sup>27</sup>Sam Bluefarb, The Escape Motif in the American Novel: Mark Twain to Richard Wright (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1972), pp. 3-5.

<sup>28</sup>Bluefarb, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup>Arthur E. Waterman, Flight and Search: Three Essays on the Modern American Novel, Georgia State College School of Arts and Sciences Research Papers, No. 7, ed. C. L. Grant (Atlanta, 1965), p. ii.

<sup>30</sup>Bluefarb, pp. 125, 85.

Wrath (1939) and Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Native Son (1940) by Richard Wright, run from the law after they have committed murder. Thus, these characters' flight from the law is also a search for asylum. All of the above protagonists engage upon an escape for survival, too. For instance, Tom Joad and Bigger Thomas must flee to sidestep the death sentence, while Huck Finn's well-being is threatened by his father. Frederic Henry deserts because his survival--like Yossarian's (of Joseph Heller's 1961 Catch-22--is endangered by the "world of death"<sup>31</sup> that is war and also by the gendarmes who would shoot a deserter. Therefore, in another sense these escapers search for safety or survival as did America's founding fathers, who fled religious persecution in the Old World in order to seek asylum in the New.

By the 1940's, another reason for escape emerges, that is, the dissatisfaction and restlessness stemming from a feeling of alienation from society.<sup>32</sup> Isolation is a common theme in modern American literature, for it became readily apparent to post-World War I authors that burgeoning government, industry, and cities produced in direct proportion burgeoning alienation of their human components. In addition, relationships within families and communities and between individuals seemed to be

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<sup>31</sup>Waterman, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup>Bluefarb, p. 115.

breaking down as a result of more migration and of a change in traditional values and ways of living. Carson McCullers mirrors this alienation in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940). In this novel Jake Blount, a non-affiliated radical labor organizer, travels from town to town proclaiming his social gospel. However, he is rejected by every community and thus moves on to the next, living a life alienated from society. Therefore, what he and other isolated escapers search for is integration into society.

New lifestyles of the 1950's and 1960's provided new material for the escape/search motif. In America the Beats of the 1950's and the Hippies of the next decade sang the joys of freedom: freedom of sexuality, freedom from The Establishment, freedom from responsibility, and--through drugs--freedom from daily reality. In fact, Ihab Hassan observes in 1961 that "America remains, in dwindling measure, a persistent escape toward freedom . . ."<sup>33</sup> However, as Bluefarb notes, escape from daily realities and responsibilities is "far less forgivable" than other types of escapes.<sup>34</sup> Although freedom is called an "inalienable right" by our republic's basic statutes, giving up a certain amount of

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<sup>33</sup>Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1961), p. 37.

<sup>34</sup>Bluefarb, p. 5.



that freedom precludes any type of human relationship. Consequently, those protagonists who try to escape daily reality and responsibility in their search for total freedom are not only doomed to be alienated from society but are also doomed to fail. Arthur Waterman describes Jack Kerouac's On The Road (1957) as about "a rebellion against the standard cultural, religious, and racial responsibilities. . . ." <sup>35</sup> However, the narrator, Sal Paradise, fails in his search for freedom from convention and conformity, and Dean Moriarity, who presumably will continue his life "on the road," is fated to be alienated from that society which he rejects.

Related to the search for freedom is the search for reality, for many of the people who flee daily reality feel there is a truer world somewhere. Thus, these excapers seek the answer to such questions as "What is the true meaning of life?" and "What is the real nature of the universe?" Herman Melville's Moby-Dick (1851) is an early example of this philosophical search. In the novel Captain Ahab ostensibly searches for the "great white whale" to take his revenge. However his search runs more deeply than that, for he identifies the whale with the limitations placed upon man, limitations which obfuscate reality or the true nature of the universe:

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Waterman, p. 24.

"All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event--in the living act, the undoubted deed--there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the White Whale is that wall, shoved near to me."<sup>36</sup>

A more recent example of this type of search is in Saul Bellow's fiction. According to Leonard Lutwack, "The last four novels of Saul Bellow are devoted to a single theme: the effort of a perplexed man to discover enough of himself and reality to continue living in a time of personal and public crisis."<sup>37</sup> Tommy Wilhelm of Seize the Day (1956) searches for the true nature of life and recognizes that life is full of pain and trouble. However, he does not learn enough to rise above this simple recognition, so he is not entirely successful. Bellow's subsequent protagonists are more successful in their searches. Professor Herzog (of the 1964 Herzog) quests for a reason for living after his wife has an affair with another man. Though he does not regain his family, Herzog does learn that problems must not stop us from living and that we must put aside self-pity and bitterness toward man and God if we are to continue living

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<sup>36</sup>Herman Melville, Moby-Dick or, The Whale (N.Y.: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963), p. 204.

<sup>37</sup>Leonard Lutwack, Heroic Fiction: The Epic Tradition and Novels of the Twentieth Century (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971), p. 88.

satisfactorily.<sup>38</sup> The protagonist of Henderson the Rain King (1959) escapes the United States for Africa and "sets out upon a quest to end the frustrations of his life and find something worth living for."<sup>39</sup> Ihab Hassan identifies Henderson's quest as also a search for reality. According to Hassan, Henderson learns to be more concerned with Being rather than Becoming, or to "absorb the pure moment." Furthermore, Henderson, who had at first been shaken by an inner voice that repeated, "I want," discovers that everyone wants. Consequently, he learns to live in rhythm with society.<sup>40</sup> Finally, in Bellow's latest novel, Mr. Sammler's Planet (1970), the protagonist searches for the meaning of life. Amidst the chaos of the modern world with all its violence and madness, Sammler tries to discover something which gives order or meaning to his life. He finally learns at his nephew's deathbed that all one can do--must do-- is to do all that is required of one, or to "meet the terms of his contract."<sup>41</sup> Consequently, unlike Melville's Ahab, Bellow's questing protagonists gain some measure of success in their philosophical quests.

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<sup>38</sup>Lutwack, pp. 91-98.

<sup>39</sup>Lutwack, p. 102.

<sup>40</sup>Ihab Hassan, "Quest and Affirmation in Henderson the Rain King," in The Modern American Novel: Essays in Criticism, ed. Max Westbrook (N.Y.: Random House, 1967), pp. 225-227.

<sup>41</sup>Saul Bellow, Mr. Sammler's Planet (N.Y.: The Viking Press, 1970), p. 316.

Finally, especially in more recent literature following the advent of popular psychology, many protagonists escape former or innocent selves to reach a new self or greater maturity. According to V. S. Pritchett, because the frontier is gone, the territory ahead becomes the territory within.<sup>42</sup> The narrator in Ralph Ellison's The Invisible Man (1952) tries to free his people from racial discrimination. Simultaneously, then, he attempts to forge a new identity and individualism on a hitherto nameless and faceless group of people.<sup>43</sup> It is this new identity to which he refers when he remarks, "'All my life I have been looking for something.'"<sup>44</sup> However, the narrator is not able to forge this identity for himself or his people during his lifetime.

Elena of Joyce Carol Oates' Do With Me What You Will (1973) is more successful in achieving a new self, here in the form of greater maturity and independence. Elena has been sheltered by her mother and then her husband all of her life. In fact, she seems hardly a real person but more of a doll, concerned with the details of making up and dressing attractively. Her plunge into

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<sup>42</sup>V. S. Pritchett, "The Beat Generation," New Statesman, 6 Sept. 1958, p. 292.

<sup>43</sup>Lutwack, p. 122.

<sup>44</sup>Ralph Ellison, The Invisible Man (N.Y.: Random House, 1952), p. 10.

real life and toward greater maturity begins with her decision to take a night course in law, taught by her husband's younger rival, who eventually becomes her lover. At the end of the novel, Elena cuts her prized long, blonde hair as a sign of her new-found defiance, leaves her husband, and sets out to gain her married lover: "Never had she been selfish, never evil or adult. And now if she wanted Morrissey she would cross over into adulthood to get him, into the excitement of evil."<sup>45</sup>

In their quest for the holy (or secular) "grail of raw experience" or for self through escape, Americans have chosen many ways to escape, for escape is individual and is based on a decision to go somewhere.<sup>46</sup> One of the earliest forms of escape was the frontier or Westward movement. As Americans flocked westward in search of land, wealth, or adventure, so do American literary escapers flock westward in search of asylum or tranquility. At the end of Huckleberry Finn, for instance, Huck decides he must go West to elude Aunt Sally and thus to secure his freedom. However, as noted before, by the late 1800's the frontier was closed. Thus, Huck

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<sup>45</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, Do With Me What You Will (N.Y.: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1973), p. 544.

<sup>46</sup>Bluefarb, p. 7.

articulates for all escapers/searchers when he remarks in the novel's last line, "I been there before."<sup>47</sup> Jack Burden, the protagonist/searcher of Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men (1946), also goes westward in his attempt to escape reality. Of course, by the 1940's not only has the frontier closed, but it is also settled. Consequently, unable to escape reality in the West, Burden notes that the westward urge has atrophied into a reflex action, "the Great Twitch," which is no longer valuable as real action.

Related to the frontier movement as a form of escape is the flight to the wilderness or woods, which Bluefarb claims "are not simply a setting for escape but a haunting symbol of the restless American spirit searching for a quest."<sup>48</sup> Thoreau retreated to the woods "to front only the essential facts of life"<sup>49</sup> and in the process learned about life and himself. In fact, John B. Pickard insists that the Walden experiment was primarily a spiritual quest and that in the woods Thoreau discovered "the spiritual laws which are a part of nature and yet beyond it."<sup>50</sup> Woods are also a symbol

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<sup>47</sup>Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (N.Y. Grosset & Dunlap, 1948), p. 373.

<sup>48</sup>Bluefarb, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup>Henry David Thoreau, Walden, or Life in the Woods (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), p. 100.

<sup>50</sup>John B. Pickard, "The Religion of 'Higher Laws,'" The Emerson Society Quarterly, 39 (II Quarter 1965), p. 71.

of forbidden freedoms and of paradise as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Maypole of Merry Mount."<sup>51</sup> In Hawthorne's story Edgar and Edith enjoy the Edenic life at Merry Mount until their Maypole marriage and their confrontation with the Puritans. With their realization of their true love and of a world of "care and sorrow" beyond Merry Mount, the couple have reached maturity and so must leave the innocent woods. Natty Bumppo, the hero of James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, retreats to the woods because he finds them less threatening than the society of the city.<sup>52</sup> In fact, Natty becomes so enamored of the primitive innocence of his place of refuge that he "is barred from marriage and the family by a prior commitment to a lonely life in a state of nature . . . an abstract and fruitless union with the wilderness itself."<sup>53</sup> Therefore, as a place of escape, the wilderness or woods--unless one accepts Bumppo's fruitless union with them--are valuable only in the knowledge they offer, for as Thoreau says of his finally leaving Walden, one has other lives to lead.

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<sup>51</sup>Marjorie J. Elder, Nathaniel Hawthorne: Transcendental Symbolist (Ohio: Ohio UP, 1969), pp. 16-18.

<sup>52</sup>Bluefarb, p. 11.

<sup>53</sup>Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, rev. ed. (N.Y.: Stern and Day, 1966), p. 210.

The withdrawal from the woods is equivalent to what Carl van Doren terms the turn-of-the-century "revolt from the village."<sup>54</sup> Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century turned from the villages and streamed into big cities in search of greater opportunity and of other lives, for an escape from one's home is also an escape from an identity bound with that place.<sup>55</sup> In F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925), lower middle-class Jay Gatz leaves the predominantly rural midwest for New York, where he amasses a sizeable fortune and becomes Jay Gatsby, a mysterious millionaire of questionable means and of seemingly no past. His escape is also a search for a new identity that will enable him to recapture his former girlfriend, Daisy, who had shunned his marriage proposal years before because of his poor and undistinguished background. However, his goal sounds his death knell as Gatsby is murdered as a result of his later entanglement with Daisy.

Other forms of escape offered especially in the city are women (or sex) and drugs. These are not valid forms of escape, though, for as Jack Burden's "Great Sleep," they offer only temporary dulling of

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<sup>54</sup>Carl Van Doren, The American Novel, 1789-1939 rev. ed. (N.Y.: The Macmillan Company, 1945), p. 295.

<sup>55</sup>Bluefarb, p. 8.



the senses, or a temporary escape from some type of reality. The Sun Also Rises (1926) is notorious for its characters who try to escape the anxieties of post-World War I reality and of their personal lives. Brett Ashley, for example, stays drunk twenty-four hours a day and roams from one bed to another in an attempt to blur the edges of a stark and often ugly picture of life into a "pretty" one. But as Jake Barnes (and Hemingway) realizes, life is not always pretty; it is only "'pretty to think so,'"<sup>56</sup> and all the drugs and sex in the world will not change that reality.

One of the last forms of escape lies in the past. Because American frontiers have been closed, the "territory ahead . . . now lies behind us, in the past."<sup>57</sup> Thus, Americans in the last two decades have been increasingly turning to the past as an escape from the present. In the 1960's communes and individuals embarked upon older lifestyles as an answer to the complex modern world. Modern technology was shunned as these people returned to agrarian ways of life. Folk arts and crafts made a comeback in the 1970's, along with the natural food craze. One hears country music on many radio stations today, and more and more people are tracing

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<sup>56</sup>Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), p. 247.

<sup>57</sup>Bluefarb, p. 4.

their lineage since the publication of Alex Haley's Roots (1976). Remembering the past is fine, but trying to relive it is impossible. Jack Burden tries to recreate the innocent past of himself, Adam, and Ann. But, of course, they have all been corrupted by their years of maturity, a fact which he must finally realize. Thomas Wolfe also reminds us that we cannot escape fully into the past when the protagonist Eugene Gant of his novel Look Homeward, Angel (1929) concludes after searching for a return to the childhood home he had known that one cannot go home again. Similar to the escape into the past or memories is the retreat into daydreams and fantasies. Although Brian Attebery is correct when he points out that not all fantasy amounts to "an irresponsible evasion of reality,"<sup>58</sup> much daydreaming suggests a retreat from one reality in search of another. However, as Miss Willerton, the daydreamer in Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Crop," proves, a habitual resort to the past or fantasies will not produce an abundant harvest in life.

Escapers/searchers in literature share some traits and some rituals of escape. Two traits many escapers

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<sup>58</sup>Brian Attebery, The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), p. 109.

share are talking and walking.<sup>59</sup> Walking (or running) is an obvious trait of men fleeing or searching since it involves motion. For instance, Francis Marion Tarwater, the protagonist of Flannery O'Connor's The Violent Bear It Away (1955), walks from Powderhead to the city, within the city at night, from the city to his former home, and at the end back to the city again. He walks in an effort to escape his fate to be a prophet and searches for a "normal" life. Another characteristic of escapers/searchers, talking, is exhibited by George Willard, who escapes the small town at the end of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (1919). For example, when he searches for recognition for his growing maturity, George talks, or brags, to Belle Carpenter and Helen.

Rituals are important for an escape, for they mark stages in the development of the flight or quest. These rituals include religion, baptism, and rebirth.<sup>60</sup> Many escapers/searchers turn to religion, especially in the form of prayer. However, for Huck Finn, Frederic Henry, and Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley, prayer does not work. For example, Brett says church makes her "damned nervous;" and Jake admits that "praying had not been much of a success."<sup>61</sup> As Horton Davies notes, religion in the modern American novel is often

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<sup>59</sup>Bluefarb, pp. 121-24.

<sup>60</sup>Bluefarb, pp. 20-22, 71, 86, 90-110.

<sup>61</sup>Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises, p. 208.

rejected,<sup>62</sup> so religion as a ritual becomes increasingly weak. Immersion into water and the donning of new clothing and of a new name are also important rituals of escape. Immersion into water symbolizes the baptism of escapers/searchers; as the characters plunge into water, so they should concomitantly plunge into a new set of values. Frederic Henry, for example, must cross the Tagliamento River bordering Italy and Switzerland. This "immersion" initiates Henry's baptism and prepares him for the next stage, rebirth, in his escape/search. Rebirth is represented by the donning of new clothes and/or a new name. Henry celebrates both rituals once in Switzerland, for he trades his military for civilian garb and also assumes a different name. Thus, rebirth produces--at least temporarily--a new identity. Another ritual of rebirth is sacrifice. In A Farewell to Arms Catherine Baclay is sacrificed for Henry when she dies during childbirth. However, whether or not that sacrifice will be properly honored by a complete rebirth is up to the escaper/searcher.

A complete rebirth suggests a successful escape. Consequently, let us look at what makes an escape/search successful. According to Fiedler, the prototype of escape/search novels, Huckleberry Finn, "seems a circular book, ending as it began with a refused

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<sup>62</sup>Horton Davies, A Mirror of the Ministry in Modern Novels (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), pp. 3-17.

adoption and a projected flight."<sup>63</sup> Bluefarb, too, describes escape as a merry-go-round, ending with a return to the beginning, or a regression. Therefore, he feels that what is of value in an escape and search is not the ends but the means. In other words, what does one learn from the experience? All escapers want to cut off from their present situation to learn "what lies beyond the horizon of the future. In doing so, they perhaps learn something, as much about themselves as they do about life and the world beyond the peripheries of their immediate environment."<sup>64</sup> Francis Marion Tarwater does not escape his fate as he had wished, so he is unsuccessful in reaching that goal. However, he is successful in attaining self-knowledge, for at the novel's end he realizes that he must accept his fated prophecy: "His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping."<sup>65</sup> Jake Blount, on the other hand, learns nothing from his experience and gains no self-knowledge. He continues to go from one town to another with false hopes of converts to his doctrine. Moreover, similar

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<sup>63</sup>Fiedler, p. 285.

<sup>64</sup>Bluefarb, p. 165.

<sup>65</sup>Flannery O'Connor, The Violent Bear It Away (N.Y. Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960), p. 243.

to Bigger Thomas' plight, his escape/search is a dead-end flight, symbolized in both novels by the scene of poverty and desolation at the end.<sup>66</sup> Bluefarb theorizes that the fact that the frontiers have closed and that escape results in a dead end in American novels "sums up the major dilemma of our time," that is, that the optimism of the escape/search of Huckleberry Finn has evolved into the despair of present-day novels,<sup>67</sup> which have become a search for the secret of life's lost meaning.<sup>68</sup>

Although Updike may not have found the secret of life's lost meaning, many critics contend that he does at least try. According to Rachael C. Burchard, for example;

Much of what [Updike] says is still in the form of questions, but they make sense to young searchers. He asks questions about the meaning of life in our time--now. He searches for religious distinctions to fit the present. He seeks answers to the age-old questions about man's relationship to man, the existence of God, and the relation of the individual to Him. He asks about immortality--all in such a way that even the agnostic listens. He makes it meaningful to ask anew the questions for which the usual answers are quickly invalidated by change in man's perspective. Updike is a resolute and honest searcher.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Bluefarb, pp. 129-31.

<sup>67</sup>Bluefarb, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup>Miles, p. 107.

<sup>69</sup>Burchard, p. 2.

Other critics echo Burchard's findings, as, for instance, Suzanne Henning Uphaus, who maintains that religious searching, "a quest in which doubt fights desperately with faith," takes place in all of Updike's work.<sup>70</sup> David D. Galloway also claims that the quest motif is present in all of Updike's works and that the hero of those works is "a pilgrim in search of that world where his soul can give its best."<sup>71</sup> Joseph Waldmeir agrees with Burchard, who says that in Updike's work the "search itself becomes worthy of consideration."<sup>72</sup> In fact, according to Waldmeir, in Updike's work the quest is actually a structural motif since the going through, not success at the end, is important. Updike, he contends, "confronts them [his protagonists] with all the temptations both of flesh and spirit which the questing hero must face, with all the problems and the myriad solutions to them."<sup>73</sup> Let us move from this general overview of the search motif in American literature and Updike's work to a more detailed examination of the search motif, here contrasted, in two of Updike's novels, Rabbit, Run and The Coup.

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<sup>70</sup>Suzanne Henning Uphaus, John Updike (N.Y.: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), p. 5.

<sup>71</sup>Galloway, p. xv.

<sup>72</sup>Burchard, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup>Waldmeir, p

## II. CONTRASTED SETTINGS

One obvious difference between Rabbit, Run and The Coup is their settings: geographical, temporal, political, and social. Although they are obvious, this chapter will examine these differences in detail and point out the significance of the disparities for the search motif. Rabbit, Run is set in the United States during the "fun" 1950's of the Eisenhower era, more specifically in the spring and summer of 1959. To realize the temporal setting of the novel, one only has to peruse the list of songs the car radio plays while Rabbit is on the first of his escapes. "No Other Arms, No Other Lips," "If I Didn't Care" by Connie Francis, "That Old Feeling" by Mel Torme, "Pink Shoe Laces" by Dody Stevens, and "Everybody Likes to Cha Cha Cha" are among the tunes. In addition, the evening news reports that "President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan begin a series of talks in Gettysburg."<sup>74</sup> The Coup, on the other hand, opens in Africa in 1973, during the Watergate crisis. Michaelis Ezana, one of Ellellou's ministers, discusses the American President Nixon's

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<sup>74</sup>John Updike, Rabbit, Run (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p. 30. Further references will be parenthetical.



dilemma with Klipspringer, a visiting American Department of State official:

"Your Mr. Nixon," Ezana prattled in his musical, trippingly accented English, "I do not think this Watergate matter should do him any harm. How could such a puny contretemps offset his stirring accomplishments of the last six months? He has ceased to bomb Cambodia, renewed relations with Egypt, created trustworthy governments in Chile and in Greece, provided himself with a new Vice-President as tall and handsome if not as eloquent as the old, and enhanced the American economy by arranging with the Arabs to double the price of oil."<sup>75</sup>

Rabbit, Run, first published in 1960, and The Coup, in 1978, are then set in 1959 and 1973 respectively. So are most of Updike's novels set contemporaneously with the time of their writing. In part, the time settings are important because they attest to the presence of a sense of history in Updike's novels, an element which some critics have claimed Updike's work lacks.<sup>76</sup> The time periods of these novels are also important since they partly determine the reason for or the type of the search in each novel. For instance, of Rabbit, Run Updike observes, "In the late Fifties beatniks were preaching transcontinental travelling as the answer to man's disquiet."<sup>77</sup> And of the sex in the book and the

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<sup>75</sup>John Updike, The Coup (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 227. Further references will be parenthetical.

<sup>76</sup>John Updike, "One Big Interview," in his Picked-Up Pieces (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 501.

<sup>77</sup>Updike, "One Big Interview," p. 503.

1950's Updike explains, "In Rabbit, Run what is demanded, in Couples [set in the 1960's] is freely given."<sup>78</sup> Thus, two of Rabbit's forms of escape spring in part from the period in which he lives.

Ellellou's predicament is also a reflection of the time in which he lives. Africa in the 1970's was the scene of the rise of third-world nations. Thus, for this continent at this time, change and upheaval are the main characteristics. In Picked-Up Pieces Updike includes notes from a symposium he attended in Africa in 1973 as a Fulbright lecturer. He quotes one African novelist, Kole Omotoso, who describes Africa of the 1970's as follows:

"The old forms . . . are changing . . . . The old forms are going to die. The new forms of doing things have not yet taken hold on us, so we are in a society which is in flux and is changing."<sup>79</sup>

Therefore, Ellellou's quest is in part directed by this flux, for he searches partially for stability amidst this change, as for instance when toward the novel's end he visits his wives and mistress. "Kadongolimi [Ellellou's first wife from his birthplace] had said, 'In this house you will be welcome when everything else crumbles'" (p. 272). But Kadongolimi, as other supports

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<sup>78</sup>Updike, "One Big Interview," p. 503.

<sup>79</sup>Updike, "Addendum: Excerpts from a Symposium," in his Picked-Up Pieces, p. 340.

in Ellellou's life, gives way to change (in her case to death) when Ellellou needs her. Consequently, Ellellou responds to the change in his life while Rabbit, of the stable, static 1950's, responds in part to the lack of change in his life, to the uneventful existence he leads.

As mentioned above, the social and political settings of the two novels are also widely divergent. Rabbit, Run is set in a white, middle-class, Protestant capitalistic country. The Coup has for its social/political background a black Islamic Marxist state. With the first setting readers of Updike's fiction are familiar. However, with the second they may be surprised. One reason that Updike sets his latest novel in such a different milieu is perhaps to show his versatility, a lack of which is a common criticism of him. More important for the purposes of this paper, however, Updike expands his search motif with his most recent novel. By placing a quest in such a different setting, Updike proves the universality of the search. For Christian Rabbit, for example, the God to whom he turns is symbolized by church windows and churchgoers dressed in Easter finery. For Moslem Ellellou, however, God is represented by the punishing drought and the Koranic promises of a carefree paradise after death. To Ellellou the drought and its concomitant famine have great connotations, that is, a message of dissatisfaction

from God. Ellellou first became interested in Islam not in Africa but in the United States, where he was indoctrinated in the peculiar form of Islam of 1950's black America. As Ellellou writes, the Messenger of Allah "disclosed to me riches that were, unbeknownst, mine" (p. 161).

He taught me that the evils I had witnessed were not accidental but intrinsic. He showed me that the world is our enslaver, and that the path to freedom is the path of abnegation. He taught me nationhood, purity, and hatred: for hatred is the source of all strengths, and its fruit is change, as love is the source of debility, and its fruit is passive replication of what already too numerous exists. (p. 161)

Consequently, the Islamic faith as taught by the Messenger is the basis for Ellellou's social/political ideology.

Although much could be made of the racial connotations in The Coup, Ellellou and his society are significant for their human qualities rather than for their "black" qualities. Except for dress and speech, the characters of this novel actually differ little from the characters of Rabbit, Run. Therefore, what Catherine Juanita Starke says of Cross Damon in Richard Wright's The Outsider (1953) is also true of Ellellou: "the fact that he is black is less important than the fact that he is a human being, seeking self-identity and relatedness proper for him with other people."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Catherine Juanita Starke, Black Portraiture in American Fiction: Stock Characters, Archetypes, and Individuals (N.Y.: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), p. 201.

Perhaps the most significant of the setting variations between the two novels is the geographical contrast. Rabbit, Run is set in Brewer, Pennsylvania, while the geographical setting of The Coup is Kush, an imaginary sub-Saharan country. As many reviewers have noted, "it may seem strange that Updike has turned to such an alien setting when the bulk of his fiction has been set in the small-town Pennsylvania of his youth and the suburban New England of his adulthood."<sup>81</sup> Again, this departure on Updike's part from his usual setting proves his diversity, but more importantly, it has great implications for the search motif and for these two novels. When Rabbit tries to escape geographically from Brewer, he decides to head for the Gulf of Mexico, where the allure of "orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women" (p. 26) beckon to him, for the east, where he lives, is "the worst direction, . . . unhealth, soot, and stink, a smothering hole where you can't move without killing somebody" (p. 28). Though his goal is ostensibly the South, Rabbit finds himself going westward. The call of the frontier beckons to him, but the frontier has been closed for nearly a century. Therefore, this means of escape is doomed at the outset. "The move to the West . . .," says Bluefarb, "has atrophied into the

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<sup>81</sup>Peter LaSalle, "More Than Are Dreamt of in Your Philosophy," rev. of The Coup by John Updike, in America, 23 Dec. 1978, 482.

twitch and reflex of the disjointed limb. . ."82 Since there is no new frontier, then, such a direction of escape must terminate in a dead end. For Rabbit, his move literally ends in the dead end of a lovers' lane.

Some reviewers have ignored the geographical setting of The Coup, claiming that the setting is still basically the United States. As Leonard Lutwack remarks of Bellow's use of the African setting in Henderson the Rain King, the "removal of the hero to Africa must not be interpreted solely as a primitivist attack upon American civilization of the sort that is implicit in the works of Hemingway; it may also be seen as a motif in the tradition of quest epic, a device to accentuate the hero's exploits by having them occur in strange lands and amid unusual circumstances."<sup>83</sup> It may not be clear that Rabbit is on a quest when he drives his car from Pennsylvania, U. S.A., southward or westward. It is quite clear, however, that Ellellou is on a quest when he travels by donkey and on foot across a desert. Thus, the African setting does emphasize the search motif.

Whereas America's frontiers are closed, Africa conjures up vistas of vast space, a new frontier. Moreover, it is less "settled" than the United States. Therefore in Africa is hope of being successful in one's geographical

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<sup>82</sup>Bluefarb, p. 6.

<sup>83</sup>Lutwack, p. 103.

flight or of a revelation, perhaps, in the wilderness. In fact, as shall be examined later, for Ellellou the wilderness does provide revelation. For example, in his last trek through his vast country, Ellelelou discovers an American boom oil town, a town which defies all of Ellelelou's ideology. In addition, he does not wish to make the journey before he begins, partly because he has already been on so many odysseys.

Ellellou saw that truly he must travel on, westward to the Ippi Rift; but as this new leaf of adventure unfolded before him he felt only an exhaustion, the weariness of the destined, who must run a long track to arrive at what should have been theirs from the start: an identity, a fate (p. 219).

Thus, for Ellelelou, too, the flight westward has atrophied into a reflex action. He must go to either confirm or deny reports of the American-style city, as he has been driven to seek out all evidence of Western culture. In addition, as he writes, he feels destined to travel westward, for he is a driven man, driven on his search for identity. Consequently, whereas Rabbit's going westward would not have made any difference, for Ellellou the trip does, for he is not sure what he will find. As it turns out, he, as any American searcher would, runs headlong into "civilization." Ironically, then, Ellelelou begins again the merry-go-round of escape which Bluefarb describes, for years before he had fled this type of civilization in the United States. Now he comes face to face with the same consumerism, so out of place in his African

space. Therefore, although he uses such different settings, Updike would seem to prove Bluefarb's point that in the modern American novel, geographical escape has become impossible, and protagonists must turn to other forms of escape.

Finally, although one may not be able to escape geographically, Africa is still a frontier, especially Kush, as it is an experiment. Howard Mumford Jones explores the frontier and its effect on literature. One may also explore its effect on personality. Jones calls the frontier spirit "contradictory":

While it is individualistic, experimental, it also includes a quality of arrogance, of boastfulness, as if the frontiersman, unsure of himself, wished to compensate for an inner security by a great many words. . . . But arrogance is associated with sensitivity; the frontier, as the works of Mark Twain show, suffers from a sense of patronage, regards itself as inferior to the effete East, and, in sudden rushes of envy and shame, wishes to return, as it were, to that which it has despised, so that a quality of nostalgia, a yearning for the culture that has been left behind, a sentimental conservation of old forms is, oddly enough, found on the frontier in entire contradiction to the experimental spirit. . . .<sup>84</sup>

One could use the same description of the frontier spirit to describe Ellellou, for he is clearly arrogant, gesturing, and yet oddly nostalgic. Therefore, perhaps the frontier, Kush, has much to do with his character and the quest he undertakes. Let us look, then, more closely at both him and Rabbit and at their searches.

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<sup>84</sup>Howard Mumford Jones, The Frontier in American Fiction (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1956), pp. 32-33.



### III. CONTRASTED CHARACTERS

Another striking contrast between Rabbit, Run and The Coup exists between the protagonists. Rabbit is partly the product of his environment, for he is a WASP, or white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Of the middle class, Rabbit leads a rather ordinary existence, fraught with all the frustrations inherent therein of that class: marital disputes, financial worries, and boredom. It is this lifestyle which provides the impetus for Rabbit's search.<sup>85</sup>

Ellellou is also partly a product of his environment. Born in a small African village in 1933, the bastard product of a raider's rape, unlike Rabbit Ellellou is a middle-aged man by the time the novel's action begins. At 17 he joined the Kush (then Noire) army and was sent to Indochina to help squelch an Algerian uprising, as both African countries were French colonies. Ellellou deserted because he would not fight against his fellow Africans, and the late 1950's found Ellellou attending McCarthy College, a small Wisconsin school. After graduating, Ellellou returned to Noire, became King Edumu's chief military aide, helped oust the French and its puppet government, and in 1968 became president of the newly-named Kush.

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<sup>85</sup>Robert Detweiler, John Updike (N.Y.: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 46.

Therefore, Ellellou's existence has been anything but ordinary, so it is not daily reality or a mundane life which he wants to escape or an exciting life for which he searches. In fact, the impetus for Ellellou's search is the drought which plagues Kush. He is doubly concerned because the drought began five years earlier upon his taking office. Consequently, throughout much of his memoirs Ellellou searches, on one level at least, for both an end to and for the meaning of the disaster.<sup>86</sup> Whatever drives them on their quests, however, Rabbit and Ellellou are similar in one respect, for in part both embark upon quests for self-realization and knowledge.<sup>87</sup> However, as will be shown, the characters and their quests differ in essential ways.

First, indicative of his former athletic bent, Rabbit acts on instinct only. For example, upon initially leaving his wife Janice, he spends his first night away from her with Tothero, his high school basketball coach. Upon awakening he misses Janice and his home, but then "deeper instincts flood forward, telling him he is right," and he "feels freedom" (p. 51). At the end of the novel, Rabbit still trusts in his in-

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<sup>86</sup>David Lodge, "The King's Head," rev. of The Coup, New Statesman, March 1979, 404.

<sup>87</sup>Burchard discusses Rabbit's search for self-realization, pp. 43-49; LaSalle notes that one of The Coup's main concerns is Ellellou's search for self, p. 482.

instincts, for when his mistress Ruth, confronting Rabbit with the fact of her pregnancy, asks Rabbit what he plans to do about her and about Janice, Rabbit cannot reply; he only knows what he "feels."

"Please have the baby," he says. "You got to have it."

"Why? Why do you care?"

"I don't know. I don't know any of these answers. All I know is what feels right." (p. 281)

In addition, while playing golf with Rabbit one day, Reverend Eccles tells Rabbit, "'The truth is . . . you're monstrously selfish. You're a coward. You don't care about right or wrong; you worship nothing except your own worst instincts'" (pp. 125-26). As if in agreement, after making an especially good shot, Rabbit cries, "'That's it!' . . . and, turning to Eccles with a smile of aggrandizement, repeats, 'That's it!'" (p. 126)

Ellellou, on the other hand, a man of a more intellectual bent, acts less on impulse or instinct. Perhaps this difference can be accounted for partly as a result of the differences in the men's ages. Rabbit, for example, is in his twenties, while Ellellou is middle-aged. Education may be another factor. Rabbit is a high school graduate while Ellellou holds a college degree. However, this writer believes these factors account only superficially for this difference, for the real reason lies in their personalities. While Rabbit relies unthinkingly upon his instinct, Ellellou's character demands thought before action. When, for example,

Ellellou orders the stockpile of American aid and its distributor, Gibbs, destroyed, he does so only after wrestling with his pity for the American and his hatred for the culture which he represents. In addition, he knows that the Kush tribesmen who have gathered at the border will set fire to the foodstuffs and Gibbs anyway so that he lifts his arm to give the signal for their destruction "so the inevitable would appear to come from [him]" (p. 42). Moreover, Ellellou reluctantly orders the execution of King Edumu only after mulling over the advantages and disadvantages of such an action.

Another difference between the two protagonists is that Rabbit is inarticulate, while Ellellou (like many "talking" searchers) is highly articulate. For example, Rabbit tells Reverend Eccles that "'somewhere behind all this . . . there's something that wants me to find it'" (p. 120). When Eccles asks Rabbit why he left Janice, he can only reply, "'There was this thing that wasn't there'" (p. 125). Toward the novel's end is another, more devastating example of Rabbit's inability to articulate his feelings and ideas. At the funeral of his baby June, he feels uplifted by a faith in immortality and by the fact that he did not actually kill June and that he forgives Janice, who did:

The sky greets him. A strange strength sinks down into him. It is as if he has been crawling in a cave and now at last beyond the dark recession of crowding rocks he has seen a patch of light; he turns, and Janice's face, dumb with grief, blocks the light. "Don't look at me," he says. "I

didn't kill her."

This comes out of his mouth clearly, in tune with the simplicity he feels now in everything. Heads talking softly snap around at a voice so sudden and cruel.

They misunderstand. He just wants this straight.  
(p. 271)

Yes, they misunderstand because Rabbit cannot properly articulate his feelings, but instead of trying to make them understand, he always runs away, following the example of other "walking" searchers.

Ellellou is quite articulate. For example, in the desert with Sheba, his fourth wife, he contemplates the universe and man's place within it, a contemplation which disturbs him.

"...The stars. Are they not terrible?"

"No. Why?"

"So vast, so distant. Each is a sun, so distant that its light, travelling faster than the fastest jinni, takes years to reach our eyes."

"Even if such a lie were true, how would it affect us?"

"It means we are less than dust in the scheme of things."  
(pp. 148-49)

Later in the novel Ellellou remembers a conversation he had had with one of his professors in America. The political science professor, Craven, had slept with Ellellou's then-girlfriend, Candace, and upon discovering that Ellellou plans to take Candace to Kush with him as his wife, asks why.

"Two reasons at least. Because she wishes it, and because you do not. She has asked to be rescued, to be lifted from the sickly sweetness of her life in this sickening-rich country and re-planted in an environment less damaged. Though you would all, black and white, deny her this, I will grant it. I will grant her freedom, in the

style of your heroes, with their powdered hair and rouged faces, the Founding Fathers; Liberty or Death is the slogan you fling from your ivied fortress, your so-called Department of Government; I fling it back, demonstrating that your instruction has not been entirely wasted upon me." (p. 203)

A third difference between Rabbit and Ellellou is their denial or acceptance of responsibility. Rabbit's flights are partly the result of his shirking of responsibility for his actions and his family as he searches for total freedom. When he first leaves Janice he tells Eccles:

"It just felt like the whole business was fetching and hauling, all the time trying to hold this mess together she was making all the time. I don't know, it seemed like I was glued in with a lot of busted toys and empty glasses and television going and meals late and no way of getting out. Then all of a sudden it hit me how easy it was to get out, just walk out, and by damn it was easy." (p. 100)

The second time he leaves Janice he thinks about returning but is held back by his reasons for fleeing.

...[W]hat made him mad at Janice wasn't so much that she was in the right for once and he was wrong and stupid but the closed feeling of it, the feeling of being closed in. He had gone to church and brought back this little flame and had nowhere to put it on the dark damp walls of the apartment, so it had flickered and gone out. And he realized that he wouldn't always be able to produce the flame. What held him back all day was the feeling that somewhere there was something better for him than listening to babies cry and cheating people in the used-car lots. . . . (pp. 250-51)

He never seems to think about Janice or their son Nelson when he leaves them, he does not provide for them financially, and he does not take responsibility for his relationship with Ruth, either. Part of Rabbit's

problem, then, is that, as Eccles suggests, he is immature. Another weakness of Rabbit that stems from this immaturity is his inability to accept guilt, when necessary, for his actions. At first Rabbit accepts some of the blame for June's death. But later he disavows any such liability and puts all of the blame on Janice. True, he did not actually drown June, but his desertion indirectly caused her death. Rabbit's denial of responsibility, his immaturity, and his refusal to accept guilt point to a still graver problem, for he "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" (p. 219). Therefore, Rabbit always takes the "easy" way in life.

Ellellou is the opposite of Rabbit in this regard. First, he gladly accepts responsibility, though it may be a burden to him, especially as he has the responsibility of a nation on his shoulders. For example, he feels personally responsible for everything that takes place in Kush. When he goes to the Kush-Sahel border, he asks some of the nomadic tribesmen there if they blame him for the drought and if they expect him to free the land from its troubles. He muses:

And when I asked others if they blamed Colonel Ellellou, the President of Kush and Chairman of SCRME, one man responded, "Who is Ellellou? He is the wind, he is the air between mountains."

And I felt sickened, hearing this, and lost in the center of that great transparent orb of responsibility which was mine. . . . Some had not heard of Ellellou, some thought he was a mere slogan, some hated him for being a freed slave, one of the harratin, from the south. None seemed to look to him to lift the famine from the land. Only I expected this of Colonel Ellellou. . . . (p. 32)

In addition, he tells Kutunda that he loves the king because Edumu forgave him "everything." When his mistress asks what he should be forgiven, he replies, "'I was born of a rape. And now I govern a starving land'" (p. 52). Thus, he is ready to assume guilt, even if the guilt may not properly be assigned to him. In addition, he eschews the "easy" way for a path of hardships. For example, his conversion to Islam, which demands a life of abstention and deprivation, shows such a choice, as do his numerous trips throughout his country by foot or on camelback, trips which, as Sheba says, abound in hardships and which are "'necessary for [Ellellou's] purpose: to purify his life and redeem his land'" (p. 208). Therefore, Ellellou is almost eager for the "going through" quality of life.

Another contrast between Rabbit and Ellellou are their self-images. Rabbit is partly driven to flee his rather mundane situation by the image he holds of himself. He explains this image in his first conversation with Eccles.

Eccles continues, "You speak of this feeling of muddle. What do you think it's like for other young couples? In what way do you think you're exceptional?"



"You don't think there's any answer to that but there is. I once did something right. I played first-rate basketball. I really did. And after you're first-rate at something, no matter what, it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate. And that little thing Janice and I had going, boy, it was really second-rate." (p. 101)

Similarly, while waiting for Janice to deliver June, Rabbit reminisces about his high school girlfriend, Mary Ann: "He came to her as a winner and that's the feeling he's missed since" (p. 184). Thus, the image Rabbit holds of himself is an image from his past, the image of a first-rate winner. Therefore, Rabbit cannot accept the idea of his being second-rate at anything, especially in his sexual relationships, for he went to Mary Ann as a winner to make love "[s]o that the two kinds of triumphs were united in his mind" (p. 184). Ellellou, on the other hand, is not motivated by a former self-image but by an image he has never personified.

First, unlike Rabbit, Ellellou has never known his father, born as he was of a "whirlwind" (p. 115). Consequently, he feels deprived of this type of identity. Second, although he engages in sexual activity with  
 ↓ five women, he has produced no offspring to call his own, or with whom to establish an image. However, all of the women with whom he has had sex testify to his search for an identity, an identity which he finally assigns to Kush. He realizes that he has used Kush as a projection of the self-image he would like to create and that he has also used his women, for when Sheba is

close to death in the desert, Ellellou writes that "I thought of all the women I had led into such a wilderness, a promised green land of love that then had turned infertile, beneath the monomaniacal eye of my ambition, my wish to create a nation, to create a nation as a pedestal for myself, my pathetic self" (p. 183).

Not only do Rabbit and Ellellou differ in some basic characteristics, but they also differ in the patterns and results of their quests. First, Rabbit begins his quest in an effort to escape the chaos and confusion of his homelife. An order-loving man, he is revulsed by the clutter of his apartment, which "clings to his back like a tightening net" (p. 14), and he is frightened by the confusion his wife suffers when she drinks, which is often. In addition, on the evening on which the novel begins, Rabbit must pick up his car from his detested mother-in-law and his son from his overbearing mother. "The problem knits in front of him and he feels sickened by the intricacy" (p. 14). The "problem" is part of the frustration and confusion of daily life, which Rabbit sees as an ever-enclosing trap: "[H]e senses he is in a trap. It seems certain" (p. 15). Consequently, in order to escape the confusion and insignificance of his life, Rabbit, upon obtaining his car, decides to go south, where life seems calmer and healthier. However, Rabbit gets confused in his directions and stops at a service station to get a

map. When the service station attendant asks him where he wants to go, Rabbit admits he does not know. "'The only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you're going before you go there'" (p. 28) the attendant advises. And good advice it is, for throughout the novel Rabbit is hampered by his indirection. However, Rabbit spurns the advice and continues on his way southward, for once he gets there "he can shake all thoughts of the mess behind him" (p. 31). As mentioned earlier, however, Rabbit does not continue on his sojourn; rather, he must retreat and retrace his steps to his hometown in order to rethink his direction:

"Decide where you want to go and then go: it missed the whole point and yet there is always the chance that, little as it is, it is everything" (p. 36).

Ellellou is primarily driven by his revulsion for the West, especially the United States, for he views this part of the world as the fountainhead of a dangerous and unhealthy consumerism. For example, when Ellellou hears an American rock song playing on a transistor radio in Kush's capital, he orders a systematic search for that symbol of Western degradation.

Soldiers at the command of the government systematically searched the hovels of Hurriyah for transistor radios, cassette players, four-track hi-fi-rigs, and any musical instrument other than the traditional tambourine, alghaita, kakai, hu-hu, hour-glass drum, end-blown reed flute, or that single-stringed instrument, whose sounding box is a goatskin-covered calabash, called the anzad. Ellellou at this point in time vigorously prosecuted the cause of cultural, ethical, and political purity in Kush.  
(p. 83)

Moreover, whereas Rabbit is hampered in his search by a lack of direction, Ellellou is always certain of his destination. For instance, while attending McCarthy College, Ellellou first begins to form an ideal of the future Kush. Once returned to his homeland, he is "spurred on by [his] Edenesque visions of Kush"<sup>88</sup> so that all of his subsequent actions are directed toward that ideal. Furthermore, all of Ellellou's odysseys--part of his quest--are carried out with a specific goal in mind, whereas Rabbit's journeys never have any definite destination, commanded as they are by reflex.

After his aborted trip southward, Rabbit's next journey is into the past, especially that part of his past connected with his high school days when he was his county's star basketball player. In order to recapture the spirit of the past, Rabbit turns to his ex-coach Tothero, who is now an alcoholic living in a seedy athletic club. Joseph Waldmeir points out that in his past Rabbit seeks the perfection and certainty that he once knew in basketball.<sup>89</sup> As he and Tothero rehash the old days of glory, however, it is not the

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<sup>88</sup>George W. Hunt, John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 197.

<sup>89</sup>Waldmeir, p. 19.

most competitive games Rabbit fondly recalls but the game at Oriole High School, which gave him such a sense of significance:

"And there are just a couple dozen people sitting up on the stage and the game isn't a league game so nothing matters much, and I get this funny feeling I can do anything, just drifting around, passing the ball, and all of a sudden I know, you see, I know I can do anything. The second half I take maybe just ten shots, and every one goes right in, not just bounces in, but doesn't touch the rim, like I'm dropping stones down a well."  
(p. 65)

However, Rabbit cannot make Tothero and the other listeners feel what was so special in that past moment, just as the platitude-mouthing Tothero is unable to tell Rabbit how to find what he is looking for:

"You and I know what the score is, we know--" And right here, arriving at the kernel of his lesson, Tothero is balked, and becomes befuddled. He repeats, "We know," and removes his arm. (p. 48)

This dependence on the past suggests a passive approach to one's troubles. Whereas Ellellou also spends much time recalling the past, he--unlike Rabbit--is anything but a passive character. Instead, he is a dynamic, gesturing character who answers his troubles--rightly or wrongly--with action. For example, in his "prophetic zeal"<sup>90</sup> in keeping Kush culturally and politically pure, Ellellou orders the murder of Gibbs, the American State Department official who is to distribute foodstuffs to Kush, plagued by drought and

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<sup>90</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, rev. of The Coup, The New Republic, 6 Jan. 1979, 35.

famine. Ellellou orders Gibbs' death for various reasons. First, he is angry because the United States dares to send aid, and second, the "aid" is in the form of breakfast cereal, condensed canned soup, and instant dried milk, all of which need liquid, so scarce in Kush, for preparation. Third, Ellellou is enraged because the goods have been brought to the Kush border through neighboring Sahel, Kush's wealthy enemy state. As Ellellou explains, "[c]ontempt inspired me, enlarged me, at the thought of my rival state and its economic inequities" (p. 34) so that the aid becomes even more unbearable to him. Finally, Ellellou blames the United States' government and other foreign governments in part for his country's drought since their previous agricultural projects had backfired, diminishing water supplies and creating deserts. Consequently, he does not want to accept anymore "aid" from those governments. In his search, then, to realize his ideals of a self-sufficient, ideologically pure Kush, Ellellou orders the fire set to the pile of food and to Gibbs.

In another effort to purify Kush of its "unclean" elements and to lift the drought from the land, Ellellou decides to execute the former King Edumu, whom he supposedly executed during the 1968 revolution but whom he has secretly been harboring in captivity.

"The famine exists, and therefore must have a meaning, both Marxist and divine. I think it means our revolution was not thorough enough; it left a pocket of reaction here in the Palais d'Administration, on the floor below us, in the far wing." (p. 58)

The "pocket of reaction" is the king, and Ellellou himself beheads the former king after proclaiming the execution in the name of God and Kush: "Sentimental elements within the Supreme Conseil have preserved his life to this moment! This was a mistake, an abomination! God has cursed this land accordingly! . . . I act now not as myself, not as Ellellou, but as the breath of L'Emergence. . ."(pp. 72-73). Despite his public rhetoric, Ellellou is troubled by his execution of the king and becomes even more troubled when he hears that the king's head, which was stolen at the execution by mysterious horsemen, has revived as an oracle in a distant part of northern Kush, the Balak region, or the "Bad Quarter." With one of his wives, a chauffeur, and a bodyguard, Ellellou sets out on a physical search for the oracle. Consequently, whether ordering the death of a man, beheading another, or making a physically and spiritually demanding sojourn, Ellellou is the man of action, willing things to happen, whereas Rabbit is passive, allowing things to happen to him.

One area to which both Rabbit and Ellellou turn on their quests is sex. Let down as he is by the failure of his past to help him in his escape, Rabbit turns to

sex as a more immediate means of escape. His partner in this part of his quest is Ruth, a part-time prostitute: "As they deepen together he feels impatience that through all their twists they remain separate flesh; he cannot dare enough, now that she is so much his friend in this search" (p. 83). Rabbit should realize, however, that sex will not be the answer to his search, for even on their first--and best--night of lovemaking, "everywhere they meet a wall" (p. 83), and at the moment of orgasm he feels not happiness or even security but only despair. Rabbit thinks, though, that Ruth and sex will provide him with an escape from the chaos of his life and prepares to move in with her the morning after they first meet:

Yesterday morning the sky was ribbed with thin-stretched dawn clouds, and he was exhausted, heading into the center of the net, where alone there seemed a chance of rest. Now the noon of another day has burned away the clouds, and the sky in the windshield is blank and cold, and he feels nothing ahead of him, Ruth's delicious nothing, the nothing she told him she did. (p. 96)

Rabbit tries to make himself believe that in Ruth he has found the answer to his search. He thinks that he loves her and feels secure in that love. David D. Galloway claims that Rabbit is a saint-like figure and that his "peculiar saintliness demands, in fact, that he not be celibate, for it is largely through sex that he is able to see Ruth's heart."<sup>91</sup> But just before he

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<sup>91</sup>David Galloway, "The Absurd Man as Saint: The Novels of John Updike," Modern Fiction Studies, 20 (1974), p. 117.



leaves Ruth to return to Janice, he reveals the true inadequacy of his feelings by acknowledging that a wall exists between them and that sex--not love--is the only way to destroy that wall. "'I saw you that way tonight,'" he says, "'and I felt a wall between us and this sex is the one way through it'" (p. 186). However, sex is not to be the means of his search for freedom from care because, as he finds out later, it can cause complications in his life. When he leaves Janice for the last time and wants to return to Ruth, he discovers that Ruth is pregnant by him. She delivers an ultimatum: if he wants to return to her, he must divorce Janice and marry her.

The mere engineering of it--the conversations, the phone calls, the lawyers, the finances--seems to complicate, physically, in front of his mouth, so he is conscious of the effort of breathing, and every action, just reaching for the doorknob, feels like a precarious extension of a long mechanical sequence insecurely linked to his heart. (p. 305)

Faced with these complications and the accompanying chaos of his activities, Rabbit realizes that Ruth and the sex in which she shares do not provide what he is searching for.

As part of his search for self, Ellellou also engages in sexual relationships with four wives and one mistress, each representing a phase Ellellou and Kush pass through. Kadongolimi, his first wife from his native village, represents the adolescent Ellellou and

the Kush of memory. Candace, his American second wife, represents the years Ellellou spent in the United States and the temptation of Western materialism and consumerism, which finally seduces Kush. His third wife, Sittina, the daughter of a tribal chief and a former sprint champion at an Alabama college, symbolizes the joining of Africa and America and Ellellou's eventual compromise. Sheba, Ellellou's fourth wife who is always stoned and empty headed, represents Kush's future, that is, spiritual emptiness,<sup>92</sup> as does his mistress Kutunda, the ambitious and selfish power climber. Sheba's emptiness also points out that Ellellou will finally be overthrown and that he will have no hand in Kush's future. Thus, Ellellou's relationships depict a development in his character, a development we miss in Rabbit. As mentioned earlier, unlike Rabbit, who impregnates Janice twice and Ruth once, Ellellou is sterile and never produces the child he wants. Perhaps his sterility, however, is more helpful than Rabbit's fertility, for it, along with the absence of his biological father, puts the burden of identity and self-realization on Ellellou himself rather than on his roots or on outgrowths of himself.

Another area which Ellellou and Rabbit share on their quests deals with God and religion. For example,

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<sup>92</sup>Hunt, pp. 204-05.

Rabbit repeatedly turns to God and religion as a way to find the meaning of his life. In fact, Howard M. Harper, Jr., is one of the critics who see Rabbit's search as a spiritual quest. According to Harper, all of the "traps" (Ruth, Janice and the Reverend Eccles, for example) Rabbit tries to escape are "manifestations of a larger and ultimately inescapable one: the prison of an entirely secular way of life, with its promise of salvation through social and economic success."<sup>93</sup> However, this writer believes that the spiritual quest is just one of the paths Rabbit takes in his larger search for self-realization. Rabbit is described at the novel's beginning as a Christian for whom "God's name makes [him] feel guilty" (p. 9). Thus, from the start the kind of "Christian" Rabbit is is questioned, for he is made uncomfortable by the sound of God's name. In fact, it is debatable whether Rabbit is a Christian at all, for he identifies himself as the "Dalai Lama" (p. 50), an oriental spiritual leader. Whether he is a true Christian or not, though, Rabbit professes to believe in God. Nevertheless, this is debatable, too, for when Ruth, an atheist, asks Rabbit if he believes in God, he replies, "'Well, yeah. I think so'" (p. 89). Later that evening Rabbit thinks that his day has been "bothered by God: Ruth mocking, Eccles blinking--why

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<sup>93</sup>Howard M. Harper, Jr., Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin, and Updike (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 167.

did they teach you such things if no one believed them?" (pp. 112-13).

Nevertheless, Rabbit does try to use religion to seek his life's significance, for he tells Reverend Eccles, "'Well I don't know all this about theology, but I'll tell you I do feel, I guess, that somewhere behind all this . . . there's something that wants me to find it'" (p. 127). So he turns to religion to try to escape from care and chaos, for in looking at a church after his first night of making love to Ruth, the church's "childish brightness seems the one kind of comfort left to him" (p. 86). Rabbit will not be able to find comfort in religion, however, because of the "childish" view he holds toward religion since Rabbit cannot sustain his faith in God in the face of the darker side of religion. For example, when he thinks of death, Rabbit's faith is shaken as when he is waiting for Janice to deliver their daughter he thinks simultaneously, "There is no God; Janice can die" (p. 198). In addition, his concept of God and immortality is attached to material, outward appearances:

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, that the wandering thread of his feelings leads nowhere. Correspondingly he loves the ones dressed for church; the pressed business suits of portly men give substance and respectability to his furtive sensations of the invisible; the flowers in the hats of their wives seem to begin to make it visible; and their daughters are themselves

whole flowers, their bodies each a single flower, petaled in gauze and frills, a bloom of faith, so that even the plainest, sandwiched between their parents with olive complexions and bony arms, walk in Rabbit's eyes glowing with beauty, the beauty of belief, he could kiss their feet in gratitude; they release him from fear. (pp. 234-35)

Rabbit's shallow religious convictions are not furthered by Reverend Eccles, who should have helped to strengthen them. As John S. Hill points out, religion as a source of belief or help becomes ludicrous, for Eccles gets nothing from religion and thus can offer nothing to Rabbit.<sup>94</sup> In fact, Eccles damages what little belief Rabbit has, for he tells him that Rabbit is a mystic and gives people faith. But what kind of faith can Rabbit, he with the little faith, give? As Reverend Kruppenbach points out to Eccles, his duty is to "burn" Rabbit with the force of his belief (p. 171), which Eccles, also of little faith, cannot do. Therefore, it is no surprise when at the end of the novel Rabbit looks to the church for comfort, he no longer finds the brightness it once held for him:

Afraid, really afraid, he remembers what once consoled him by seeming to make a hole where he looked through into underlying brightness, and lifts his eyes to the church window. It is, because of church poverty or the later summer nights or just carelessness, unlit, a dark circle in a stone facade. (p. 306)

Thus, Rabbit's last hope for a way to find meaning in

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<sup>94</sup> John S. Hill, "Quest for Belief: Theme in the Novels of John Updike," Southern Humanities Review, 3 (1969), 168.

his life has also been found ineffective, so again "he runs. Ah: runs. Runs" (p. 307).

√ Ellellou is also concerned with God and religion, as we saw earlier, but this concern is seen especially on his search for the King's head. Thus, Ellellou's trip through the Bad Quarter is more than just a "quixotic trek" across the northern desert<sup>95</sup>; it is also a religious quest. Uphaus views his trips as a religious pilgrimage, though she claims that Ellellou's "faith has that element of doubt that is always constant in Updike's fiction."<sup>96</sup> According to Uphaus, this doubt makes Ellellou, supposedly a devout Moslem, recognize that all religions are dead, but he goes on his quest anyway, "knowing that the oracular head is a hoax yet taking comfort in his own enactment of the traditional ceremony of the pilgrimage."<sup>97</sup> Ellellou does reflect that

in the attenuation, desiccation, and death of religions in the world over, a new religion is being formed in the indistinct hearts of men, a religion without a God, without prohibitions and compensatory assurances, a religion whose antipodes are motion and stasis, whose one rite is the exercise of energy, and in which exhausted forms like the quest, the vow, the expiation, and the attainment through suffering of wisdom are, emptied of content, put in the service of a pervasive

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<sup>95</sup>Pearl K. Bell, "Imagings of Africa," rev. of The Coup, Commentary, April 1979, 76.

<sup>96</sup>Uphaus, pp. 116-17.

<sup>97</sup>Uphaus, p. 117.

expenditure whose ultimate purpose is entropy, whose immediate reward is fatigue, a blameless confusion, and sleep. Millions now enact the trials of this religion, without giving it a name, or attributing to themselves any virtue.  
(p. 91)

However, he never voices disbelief in God as does Rabbit. After leaving the comfort of the presidential Mercedes to finish his trek to Balak by camel and by foot, Ellellou discusses with Sheba the insignificance of man in the face of the universe. Sheba asks, "'What can be done, then?'"

"Nothing, but to pray that it not be so."  
 "So that is why you pray."  
 "For that, and to reassure the people of Kush."  
 "But you do not believe?"  
 "For a Muslim, unbelief is like a third eye.  
 Impossible."  
 (p. 149)

Thus, this writer does not agree with Uphaus that Ellellou accepts that religions are dead, although he may recognize that to others they are, but she does agree with Uphaus' comment that Ellellou reaches for God but realizes that God may not reach down.<sup>98</sup> Of God Ellellou notes that "Allah's option is to exist or not; mine, to worship or not. No fervor overtops that which arises from contact with the Absolute, though the contact be all one way" (p. 112). Therefore, as pointed out previously, Rabbit is unable to submit to the "going through" quality or the suffering necessary for a deep religious belief, while Ellellou seems to welcome the grapple with pain and mystery.

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<sup>98</sup>Uphaus, p. 117.

Finally, and most importantly, Rabbit and Ellellou differ in the self-realization and knowledge they reach at the end of their search, a point which will be discussed in the next chapter.



#### IV. CONTRASTED DENOUEMENTS

The denouements of Rabbit, Run and The Coup seem obviously different on the surface. At the end of Rabbit, Run, Rabbit is still running. By the time of Ellellou's writing his memoirs, we are told that Ellellou has settled in France. However, some critics claim that the two novels end on an ambiguous note. Donald Miles, for example, notes that all of Updike's novels are open-ended, leaving possibilities of the characters' growth or decay.<sup>99</sup> Updike himself admits his endings are ambiguous:

One has this sense that the old-fashioned novel, and indeed films and television plays, are falsifying life terribly by making events happen, by creating tensions and then resolving them, by setting up trials and then handing down the verdicts--for in fact verdicts don't usually get handed down. All my books end on a kind of hesitant or ambiguous note.<sup>100</sup>

However ambiguous the conclusions of his novels, one can still make at least a tentative judgment of them.

As we have seen, Rabbit tries to escape the confusion and insignificance of daily reality chiefly through a new land, the past, sex, and God and religion, and

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<sup>99</sup>Miles, p. 99.

<sup>100</sup>"John Updike Talks to Eric Rhode," p. 862.

none of these have helped Rabbit to attain his goal. Thus, it would seem that his quest has been unsuccessful. However, critical opinion is divided upon the resolution of the novel. For example, Galloway views Rabbit as a "socially disreputable hero" who is in pursuit of truth and for whom escape becomes fulfillment and irresponsibility becomes responsibility. Consequently, he views Rabbit as triumphant, not because of the success of his quest but because of his ongoing, saintly struggle against the meaninglessness of life.<sup>101</sup> Although he does not view Rabbit and his success so favorably, Granville Hicks feels that Rabbit's even thinking of pursuing a new life after what he has been through is admirable. He concludes that there is "something in this man . . . that demands our respect."<sup>102</sup> Hill believes that the resolution of the novel shows Rabbit representing the potentiality of man who must find some value in life, and if he does not find that value, he must, like Rabbit, continue to run away from life.<sup>103</sup> Rachael Burchard also views the ending optimistically. "It is the fact that one must search that is hopeful. Rabbit searches because

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<sup>101</sup>Galloway, "The Absurd Man as Saint," p. 121.

<sup>102</sup>Granville Hicks, Literary Horizons: A Quarter Century of American Fiction (N.Y.: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 111,113.

<sup>103</sup>Hill, p. 175.

he can't do otherwise; man searches because he is impelled to."<sup>104</sup> Thaddeus Muradian agrees that Rabbit must continue running to search for moral certitude: "perhaps by running he will finally find that certitude somewhere, somehow."<sup>105</sup>

On the other hand, some critics judge Rabbit more harshly. Waldmeir, for example, says that Rabbit has a chance to end his quest successfully when he returns to Ruth but that he runs away again and thus fails.<sup>106</sup> Edward P. Vargo claims that Rabbit, who seeks love and responsibility to self and others, could have been successful, but he does not succeed because he lacks love as a result of not being able to accept everyday life.<sup>107</sup> John C. Stubbs also regards Rabbit's search as unsuccessful because it is impossible. According to Stubbs, Rabbit wants life to be like a circle (the church window, basketball goal, golf hole): complete and perfect. Thus, "Rabbit's search is, by definition, self-defeating" since he wants "to capture unattainable perfection."<sup>108</sup> George Hunt, who describes part of

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<sup>104</sup>Burchard, p. 52.

<sup>105</sup>Muradian, p. 581.

<sup>106</sup>Waldmeir, p. 26.

<sup>107</sup>Vargo, p. 56.

<sup>108</sup>John C. Stubbs, "The Search for Perfection," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, 10, no. 2 (1968), p. 99.

Rabbit's search as a "questing non-quest," notes that at the end, Rabbit's search is all in terms of the negative, or nothingness.<sup>109</sup> Robert Detweiler describes Rabbit as a "non-hero" who "runs compulsively but aimlessly" on a quest without a goal.<sup>110</sup> Finally, Detweiler claims that Rabbit must flee "the chaos of himself,"<sup>111</sup> a self which has become "no more than a reflex"<sup>112</sup> because Rabbit has lived by his reflexes. Alice and Kenneth Hamilton also castigate Rabbit, for he chooses the dark, sterile way "down Summer Street to where the city ends," that is, not the "right way" but the "other way" (p. 283) which leads to a dead end.<sup>113</sup>

If Rabbit is again running and if Summer Street is a dead end, is Rabbit not back from where he started? If so, it appears that Rabbit has not been successful in his search. Yet according to Bluefarb, all escapes end with a return to the beginning. Consequently, he feels what is of value in an escape and search is the knowledge one gains from the experience.<sup>114</sup> Rabbit

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<sup>109</sup> Hunt, p. 42.

<sup>110</sup> Detweiler, p. 46.

<sup>111</sup> Detweiler, p. 51.

<sup>112</sup> Detweiler, p. 53.

<sup>113</sup> Alice and Kenneth Hamilton, The Elements of John Updike (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 155.

<sup>114</sup> Bluefarb, p. 159.

never finds a "first-rate" relationship with anyone as he deserts Janice and Ruth and Eccles in the end. In addition, not only does he never find the "something behind all this" for which he searches, but at the novel's end, with the church window darkened, he seems to have lost faith in religion and perhaps in God. This loss of faith is particularly important because in a letter to George W. Hunt, Updike describes Kruppenbach, who emphasizes faith, as the "touchstone" of the novel.<sup>115</sup> Therefore, with the loss of faith Rabbit moves further from the "right way."

Rabbit's failure to gain any valuable knowledge or to reach self-realization is also highlighted by Easter day near the end of the novel. Spring, and especially Easter, are frequent symbols of rebirth. Therefore, Rabbit could have used his reconciliation with Janice to effect a self-renewal, but he refuses to accept the opportunity. On Easter night when Janice shuns his sexual advances, the immature and selfish Rabbit does not try to understand why she reacts as she does. When Janice asks him to imagine how she feels, he replies, "'I can. I can but I don't want to, it's not the thing, the thing is how I feel. And I feel like getting out'" (p. 230). Consequently, Rabbit does not use his opportunity to establish a satisfactory relationship

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<sup>115</sup>Quoted in Hunt, p. 42.

with Janice by communicating with and caring about her, nor does he accept the opportunity he has to perhaps establish a valuable life with Ruth. Thus, two rituals which could have offered Rabbit a chance for a successful quest--rebirth (Easter) and sacrifice (June's death)--are shunned by him. Therefore, though some critics, for example Thaddeus Muradian, claim that Rabbit finds himself at the novel's end,<sup>116</sup> one must finally agree with Edward Vargo that Rabbit, though cast in the running quester tradition, must finally turn inward and answer the question "Who am I?," a question which Rabbit obviously fails to answer since he is still running at the novel's end.<sup>117</sup> He is "simply one of many modern Huck Finns wanting to quit society and avoid growing up but with no 'territory' to light out to."<sup>118</sup>

The ending of The Coup has been viewed differently by different critics. For example, Deborah McGill finds that Ellellou goes to France in defeat following his ouster from the Kush government.<sup>119</sup> Peter S.

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<sup>116</sup>Muradian, p. 583.

<sup>117</sup>Vargo, p. 56.

<sup>118</sup>Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 284.

<sup>119</sup>Deborah McGill, "Boy's Life," rev. of The Coup, Harper's, Jan. 1979, 87.

Prescott, who also views Ellellou's ending as a defeat, claims that, after having tried to resist Western consumerism, Ellellou's exile to the West is ironic,<sup>120</sup> while Pearl K. Bell calls Ellellou a tragic victim of American technology and consumerism.<sup>121</sup> However, although Ellellou's ouster from Kush and the subsequent change in Kush policy mark a type of failure for Ellellou, they do not necessarily mark a failure in his search. Yes, the Kush of Ellellou's dreams does fail, but does he gain anything by his experiences? First, as we have witnessed, Ellellou realizes in the desert that his relationships with his wives have been sterile because of his ambitions for Kush. Second, although Alastair Reid maintains that Ellellou truly loves Kush and became its president as a result of dedication,<sup>122</sup> not ambition, Ellellou himself refutes this. In the desert he admits that he has used Kush to project the kind of self-image he would like to attain, a heroic image, not a "pathetic" one. Third, he also realizes, after reaching Balak and the cave which houses Edumu's head, that he had in fact loved Edumu very much and as a father. Ellellou finds himself crying when he tears the wired head from

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<sup>120</sup> Prescott, pp. 124-25.

<sup>121</sup> Bell, p. 76.

<sup>122</sup> Alastair Reid, rev. of The Coup, The New Yorker, 25 Dec. 1978, 65.

its post, "for in life this head, mounted atop the closest approximation to a father the barren world had allowed him, had never been held by him thus, and the act discovered the desire" (p. 216). He also understands, once he reaches the Ippi Rift and practically, though not officially, is out of power, that he has been the blight on his land, for with his removal from office begin the rains.

Perhaps with this realization Ellellou finally lives up to his name, which means "freedom." According to Uphaus, Ellellou's name means freedom from materialism.<sup>123</sup> Although this meaning is initially apparent, by the novel's ending Ellellou has realized Updike's definition of freedom. According to the Hamiltons, to Updike freedom is not absolute but comes only from recognizing and respecting the limits on freedom. "The free man is supremely the man who has learned that self-will is slavery, since it is the desire to create the real rather than to respond to it."<sup>124</sup> Ellellou had been enslaved by his self-will in creating an idea of Kush and then trying to impose that idea on his country. Thus, he attempted to create a country and a people free of the taint of consumerism rather than to respond to the country and the people that actually exist.

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<sup>123</sup>Uphaus, p. 116.

<sup>124</sup>Hamiltons, p. 41.



Consequently, Ellellou failed since in fact Western goods were imported and a Western oil town was built. However, he does finally realize the limits on his freedom and that he cannot "use" a country and its people, whereas Rabbit, who searches partly for absolute freedom from daily frustrations and boredom, does not realize that such a freedom is either impossible or ultimately disastrous.

The most important attribute Ellellou acquires is self-acceptance. First, the rain is an important symbol for this acceptance, for when he lives in the Americanized Ippi Rift, the rains begin, symbolizing the hope of a rebirth or of a fertile life for Ellellou. Also, Ellellou's return to the Western Hemisphere is actually a type of victory, for it shows that he has reached an acceptance of self. As the King's head had prophesied, Ellellou's hatred of the West actually hid a love for it,<sup>125</sup> and Ellellou's frequent fond memories of his life in America attest to that.

"This man," the head continued, the mechanical action of its lips now uncannily corresponding to the drifting way Edumu had talked, as if a kind of wind blew in and out of his heart, "pretends to unite the multitudinous races and religions of Kush against the capitalist toubabs, the fascist Americans who carry forward the cause of international capitalism on behalf of the world's rapacious minority of blue-eyed white devils. . . ."

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<sup>125</sup>Gene Lyons, "Cultural Deformations," rev. of The Coup, The Nation, Feb. 1979, 119.

"...This man, while proclaiming hatred of the Americans, is in fact American at heart, having been poisoned by four years spent there after deserting the Troupes coloniales. He is profoundly unclean. One of his wives is American, the wife who is called the All Wrapped Up. Because of his black skin, he was subjected to discrimination and confusing emotional experiences in the land of the devils, and his political war, which causes him to burn gifts of food and assassinate those functionaries who bring these gifts, is in truth a war within himself, for which the innocent multitudes suffer. He has projected upon the artificial nation of Kush his own furious though ambivalent will; the citizens of this poor nation are prisoners of his imagination, and the barren landscape, where children and cattle starve, mirrors his exhausted spirit. He has grown weary of seeming to hate what he loves. Just as nostalgia leaks into his reverie, while he dozes above the drawingboard of the People's Revolution so vividly blueprinted by our heroic Soviet allies, so traces of decadent, doomed capitalist consumerism creep into the life-fabric of the noble, beautiful, and intrinsically pure Kushite peasants and workers."  
(pp. 212-13)

Though the head's speech is written by the Russians, some truth lies in its pronouncement. Although repelled by the West, especially the United States, at the same time Ellellou has never lost his awe at its culture and so is emotionally torn by this disgust and affection. His final return to the West points to a resolution to this conflict and an acceptance by Ellellou of his "weakness." In addition, the wife who accompanies him in his exile is Sittina, the embodiment of the compromise between Africa and America, a compromise which Ellellou finally reaches.

Thus, at the end Ellellou attains self-knowledge and acceptance. This self-knowledge is also shown by

the rituals which Ellellou undergoes, rituals explained in Chapter II as characteristic of successful searchers who have found a new self. First, Ellellou undergoes a symbolic baptism not only in the Ippi Rift rains but also in his crossing (immersion into) an ocean, from Africa to Europe, to start a new life (similar to Frederic Henry's crossing the Tagliamento River). Moreover, he assumes a new identity in France as he sheds his khaki soldier's uniform for civilian garb, again like Henry. Finally, a sacrifice has been made so that Ellellou is able to attain a more mature self. First, Sheba is sacrificed to Ellellou's willingly hard journey, and the Kush of his dreams is finally sacrificed at the end with the erection of the oil town. However, these sacrifices are not wasted as Ellellou learns something from each one which will help him.

As Hunt notes, Ellellou has suffered a fall from his Kush paradise and is expelled,<sup>126</sup> but his fall also marks increased maturity and wisdom. By the time he writes his memoirs Ellellou can admit, "'I was the curse upon the land'" (p. 261). Thus, unlike Rabbit, Ellellou no longer has to run or search. He faces his limitation, accepts his ideological imperfections, and embarks on a settled, full life. Rabbit loses all societal supports at the end, family and religion, whereas Ellellou at least has a family with whom he is fully involved. For example, he looks with pride on Sittina's daughters, he says, and

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<sup>126</sup>Hunt, p. 198.

worries about her sons. Whereas Rabbit rejects his child to be borne by Ruth and that child already borne by Janice, Ellellou realizes that Sittina and her children, though he is not their father, are now his responsibility, a responsibility which he accepts. Finally, Ellellou is described as "happy" (p. 299); therefore, he seems to have experienced growth by the novel's end. On the other hand Rabbit, surrounded by the scene of desolation and decay which Bluefarb says is typical of modern dead-end flights, does not.

## Conclusion

Joyce Carol Oates, reviewing The Coup, comments on the evolution of Updike. She claims that, as Twain did, Updike in his earlier work expressed optimism, hope, and promise; in The Coup his cynicism is now apparent.<sup>127</sup> However, this writer believes that Updike has evolved in his writing from an early idealism to a more mature realism, an evolution which can be seen by contrasting the early and later patterns of the search motif in his novels.

At the end of Rabbit, Run Rabbit may still be idealistically searching, but this search, devoid of any spirituality or direction, is empty. In addition, Updike reminds us that his work usually says "yes, but." "Yes, in Rabbit, Run, to our urgent inner whispers, but-- the social fabric collapses disastrously."<sup>128</sup> Or yes, transcontinental travelling may be the answer to "man's disquiet," "but then there are all these other people who seem to get hurt."<sup>129</sup> Although at one point Updike describes himself as "an apologist for the spirit

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<sup>127</sup>Oates, pp. 34-35.

<sup>128</sup>Updike, "One Big Interview," p. 503.

<sup>129</sup>"Updike Talks to Eric Rhode," p. 863.

of anarchy--our animal or divine margin of resistance to the social contract,"<sup>130</sup> at another he describes himself as a conservative.

There may be something also in the novelist's trade which shades you towards conservatism. Things exist because they evolved to that condition; they cannot be lightly or easily altered. It is my general sense of human institutions that they are outcroppings of human nature, that human nature is slow to change, that in general when you destroy one set of institutions you get something worse.<sup>131</sup>

What is one to make, then, of Updike's work in the midst of these conflicting statements? Should one simply echo Updike, who says that his work is "necessarily ambiguous" because life is ambiguous, and "if there were no contradictions, there would be no questions, no need to search"?<sup>132</sup> This writer thinks that one can make a better judgment than simply admitting Updike's work is ambiguous by looking at the search motif in Rabbit, Run and The Coup.

Rabbit, Run was published in 1960, when Updike was 28 years old. This is the novel in which the searcher is still searching by the novel's end. The Coup, on the other hand, was published in 1978, when Updike was 46, a more mature man. Thus, at the novel's end Ellellou realizes that he must accept his imperfections and that his fantasy of Kush as a paradise on earth cannot realistically be effected. Rabbit, and Updike, are still naive and

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<sup>130</sup>Updike, "Bech Meets Me," in Picked-Up Pieces, p. 12.

<sup>131</sup>Updike, "One Big Interview," p. 508.

<sup>132</sup>Quoted in Burchard, p. 4.

idealistic enough to believe that one may be able to escape responsibility and the frustrations of daily reality. Eighteen years later, Updike and his middle-aged protagonist realize that man's impulses and desires must necessarily give way to a compromise with society to form a mature man. Thus, because of Rabbit's immaturity and unrealistic idealism, the search proves unsuccessful, whereas in The Coup the search for "an identity, a fate" is successful as Ellellou accepts a compromise between his ideals and the realities of the world.

This evolution in Updike's work reflects an evolution in the search motif in American literature as a whole and perhaps in the collective American mind. In his study of the escape/search motif in American literature, Bluefarb concludes that the search or flight in modern American novels terminates in a dead end. However, though his book was published in 1972, the most recent novel Bluefarb treats in his discussion is Native Son, published in 1940. Nevertheless, Bluefarb's thesis seems to hold true throughout the 1950's and 60's. Thus, in Rabbit, Run, published in 1960, Rabbit's search and flight do conclude in a dead end. Furthermore, as Bigger Thomas' last escape is an act of desperation, not of hope,<sup>133</sup> so is Rabbit's flight at the end of

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<sup>133</sup>Bluefarb, p. 156.

Updike's novel an act of desperation.

By the 1970's, however, a period Bluefarb does not study, Updike and other novelists seem more optimistic about their protagonists' quests. Certainly a physical flight, as evidenced by Bigger Thomas and Rabbit, is out of the question, but the search turned inward appears more rewarding. Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet, published in 1970, ends on a note of hope as Mr. Sammler realizes that what gives order to the modern world is the "contract" into which every man enters with God. Elena's search for independence in Oates' 1973 Do With Me What You Will is successful when she turns her physical flight from her husband to an inward quest for maturity. Therefore, she is able to forge a new and better identity. Finally, Updike reflects this optimism about the inner search in The Coup, published in 1978, for though Ellellou's flight from Western values is unsuccessful, he is able to reconcile the conflicting parts of his personality and ultimately to gain self-knowledge and acceptance. Consequently, perhaps Updike and these other novelists of the 70's reflect a surge of optimism among the American people about their ability to cope with the present, at least on a personal level, and a hope for the future that this ability may carry over into society as a whole.



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