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## LIBERAL FAILURE: POSSIBLE WORLDS IN JOHN UPDIKE'S *RABBIT, RUN*

### Abstract

John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* addresses the human condition under the reign of capital in the context of a society in transition toward a neoliberal state. By depicting a protagonist preoccupied with desire and consciousness through recounting his immediate experiences, the narrative delineates the confusion inherent in the capitalistic state for the protagonist in search of a way out toward self-actualization. Through the application of possible world theory, it is argued that the imbalance between Rabbit's counterfactual possible worlds and his actual world accounts for the failure he experiences in his quest. As such, the possible worlds' disequilibrium, we argue, ultimately leads to Rabbit's bitter failure in his search; too many possible worlds in their counterfactual state produce a kind of counter-reality where there are too many fantasy/wish worlds, but few obligation worlds, a situation that leads to all the inevitable consequences we witness at the end of Book One of the Rabbit tetralogy.

**Keywords:** John Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, cognitive poetics, immediacy, possible worlds vs. actual world, blending, neoliberalism

## Introduction

Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, written in 1960, owes a great deal of its popularity to its realistic portrait of an American *everyman*, a young man of modern times known as Harry Rabbit Angstrom. The agenda of the author is a humanistic project depicting the individual and his relationship to others in society, without passing judgments on him. Constructed in the form of a bildungsroman plot, the narrative lets the reader accompany Rabbit in his pursuit of success and his due share of the American Dream through self-actualization. A third-person omniscient narrator recounts the story in straightforward chronological order with flashbacks interspersed throughout the novel, filling the reader in on all the relevant data. The narrative is reported in the present tense, which, as it will be discussed, is significant in the development of the plot. When the narrative begins, Rabbit is currently a demonstrator of a hand-held kitchen gadget; he is a former high-school basketball player married to his high-school sweetheart. Shortly after the story begins, we witness Rabbit's sudden outbreaks in search of something more to his life by continually running from himself and the life he has been living. He constantly justifies his actions, remarking that "there's something that wants me to find it" (Updike 133) and "after you're first-rate at something, no matter what, it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate" (Updike 111). According to Susan Norton, Rabbit "intuitively tries to resist living a life of cliché" (18). Rather than a contemporary sense of attachment, he is after a sense of achievement through escaping the mundane and the ordinary. Writing about contemporary American fiction in 1962, Ihab Hassan sees his novelist contemporaries' attempts at presenting such scenarios as follows: "Dissent from the ballyhoo and lunacies of a mass society finds, in consequence, a more compelling means of expression on a second and more fundamental level of responses to culture. On that level, the search for love and for freedom continues with radical intensity" (3). Quentin Miller concludes that Rabbit manifests "an obsessive need to escape, including a need to escape thinking about the future, which may be too horrifying to consider" (21).

The criticism on *Rabbit, Run* so far has focused on differentiating Rabbit's case as that of an existential anti-hero or, as Marshall Boswell puts it, "a being in ontological doubt" (12) in search of salvation. The novel is often criticized as depicting the individual's quest for self-actualization through flight from the boredom of the entrapped experience of everyday existence within a setting that is presented "as a unique emblem of wasteland, the scenery where its characters

are condemned to live in perpetual sterility” (Gallo 44). Brian Keener makes an interesting analogy by mentioning that, in *Rabbit, Run*, “Updike envisioned contrasting two approaches to life: the dutiful horse and the feckless rabbit” (463). Thaddeus Muradian decides that Updike’s characters are in search of “moral certitude” (581) in a hopeless world. Taking sides with either Kierkegaard or Barth, other scholars have come to the conclusion that there is a constant juxtaposition between religion and morality in *Rabbit*. Bernard A. Schopen, for instance, declares that “Updike’s faith is Christian, but it is one to which many of the assumptions about the Christian perspective do not apply – especially those which link Christian faith with an absolute and divinely ordered morality” (523). The problem is that religion is often basically viewed as an institutionally defined entity. Therefore, in the world of declining institutions, there is nothing that can keep religion safe from deterioration. Nonetheless, the best conclusion is perhaps to be found in Hassan: “The central and controlling image of recent fiction is that of the rebel-victim. He is an actor but also a sufferer. Almost always, he is an outsider, an initiate never confirmed in his initiation, an anarchist and clown, a Faust and Christ compounded in grotesque or ironic measures” (3). *Rabbit* is constantly oscillating between the need for individuality and the conformity that society requires. He is, in short, “a man in the middle, a middle-class father sandwiched between the competing demands of sensuality and society, the sacred and the profane” (Boswell 26). Updike’s method of treating *Rabbit*’s account and his later sketching of his life are not simply intended to entertain but to indirectly prove a point. Charles Thomas Samuels thus notes:

Since he is a serious writer, his action always has a point; but establishing the point is usually less important to him than creating the action. More exactly, he trusts that action, if described truthfully enough, will establish its own point, make us aware of some possibility inherent in human behavior. And since he believes that human behavior is always ambiguous, Updike wants his stories to reflect this fact. (10)

The present article aims at disclosing the Updikian method in addressing the absurd, existential human condition under the reign of capital in the context of a society in transition toward a neoliberal state. Updike’s narrative delineates the inherent confusion that is created under a capitalistic state, one which frustrates self-actualization. Through the application of possible world theory, it is argued that there is an imbalance between *Rabbit*’s counterfactual possible worlds and his actual world, accounting for the failure he experiences in his

quest. Too many possible worlds in their counterfactual state, we argue, produce a kind of counter-reality in which there are too many fantasy and wish worlds, but very few obligation worlds, a situation that leads to the inevitable sense of failure Rabbit experiences in all the novels of the Rabbit tetralogy.

### **Possible Worlds in Liberal/Capitalistic Society**

Before embarking on our discussion of Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, we will briefly review the major concepts of cognitive poetics related to our discussion, sketching how these concepts are to be related to our understanding of the paralyzing effects of a liberal/capitalistic state on the individual psyche as represented in Updike's novel.

Philosophers' interest in exploring the logic of modality in the recent decades has led to wide-range discussions in the realm of possible worlds, a topic that has found its way to literary and interpretive branches of criticism in recent years. Possible world theoreticians are of the opinion that *possible worlds* "turn abstract logical categories into concrete sets and states of affairs" (Ronen 49) and that our "actual world is only one world among others" (Lewis 85). In other words, the actual world of experience is set in opposition to the potential, non-actual possible worlds that could have been but are not. This actual world, then, "is special, closer to our hearts and distinguished somehow from others that are 'merely' possible" (Divers 5). Contrasting possible and impossible worlds, Marie-Laure Ryan proposes: "For a world to be possible it must be linked to the center by a so-called accessibility relation. Impossible worlds cluster at the periphery of the system, conceptually part of it – since the possible is defined by contrast with the impossible – and yet unreachable" (99–100). Counterfactual worlds, therefore, center on the question of "what if?" Counterfactuals are among impossible worlds that cannot be materialized yet persist because human thought depends on them to understand the world and to make sense of circumstances. In short, by highlighting what is not possible, the capacity for counterfactual thought helps set the difference between the actual world and counterfactual worlds.

The process of cognition, possible worlds philosophers agree, helps us orient ourselves in the world. This also holds true for how we make sense of literature. Since its birth, the world of literary artifacts has been known to complement the

actual world as a reflection of it. In other words, it has served as a microcosm to the macrocosm of reality. Ryan's explanation can clarify this further:

The idea of textual world presupposes that the reader constructs in imagination a set of language independent objects, using as a guide the textual declarations, but building this always incomplete image into a more vivid representation through the import of information provided by internalized cognitive models, inferential mechanisms, real-life experience, and cultural knowledge, including knowledge derived from other texts. The function of language in this activity is to pick objects in the textual world, to link them with properties, to animate characters and setting – in short, to conjure their presence to the imagination. (91)

As a simulacrum of the real world on a smaller scale, in literary works it is easy to distinguish a text world and several possible worlds that are considered non-actual on the basis that they are not real. As mentioned before, all possible worlds are related to and dependent on one actual world. “The artist,” Jerome Bruner points out, “creates possible worlds through the metaphoric transformation of the ordinary and the conventionally ‘given’” (49). Things in the literary world also retain a sort of spatio-temporal connection to each other. Ruth Ronen argues that “literary theorists treat fictional worlds as possible worlds in the sense that fictional worlds are concrete constellations of states of affairs which, like possible worlds, are non-actualized in the world” (51). In line with this argument, Elena Semino explains, “the ‘world’ of a text is in fact best seen as a ‘universe’, with a central domain counting as actual, and a range of alternative worlds counting as non-actual” (86). Semino's explanation owes a great deal to Ryan's earlier formulation of possible worlds. To Ryan, a narrative features a textual actual world, which remains in utter opposition to the many possible worlds projected by the wishes, obligations, fears, goals, plans, and dreams of the characters. Possible worlds in the text act as subworlds created through flashbacks, perspective or possibilities to enrich the text and may or may not be realized in the course of the story but will inevitably affect the order of things.

Another notion that needs elaboration is that of mental spaces, which, in the formulation of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, are “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action – they are very partial assemblies containing elements, structured by frames and cognitive models” (“Conceptual” 58). Using mental spaces, we are

able to construct meaning and understand daily communication. Mental spaces also function as constitutive elements of the conceptual blend, which, linguistically speaking, refers to a term also developed by Fauconnier and Turner to depict a dynamic process during which mappings are created between temporary mental spaces. Acknowledging that blends “arise in networks of mental spaces,” Fauconnier and Turner explain that in “blending, structure from two mental spaces is projected to a new space, the blend” (*Way* 47) out of which a new blended mental space known as the emergent structure emerges.

Having defined the notions we are going to deal with in examining Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*, we can now turn to the statement of the problem — that is, the inability to maintain the balance between the possible worlds and the actual world, a situation that is part and parcel of the cognitive inadequacy of modern man in the context of a capitalistic, liberal society in transition toward a neoliberal state. First, we need to clarify that Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*, though written prior to neoliberal times, has the necessary characteristics to be qualified as a “neoliberal novel” and is hence treated like one. The focus of this study, therefore, will be on the imbalance caused by the multiplicity of the counterfactual possible worlds both in their relationship with each other and with the text actual world and the ensuing confusion their disharmony brings to the protagonist, who is a depiction of *everyman* in American capitalistic society.

Subsequent to the aftermath of World War II, a form of liberalism was developed in the 1950s and 1960s that would guarantee high rates of economic growth under strict control of the state, promising a better and tranquil life based on individual liberty. However, ever since its introduction, its steadfast protection of capitalistic spirit has disclosed the inherent problems rooted within the very foundation of liberalism. Capitalist culture, either liberal or neoliberal, needs a special type of mentality, one that responds to “the ubiquity of market logic” (Johansen and Karl 203) and is run by it. This mentality, however, comes at great cost in that it de-stabilizes the cognitive balance the individual needs to live with because it promises fake worlds of success and individual self-actualization while simultaneously preventing proper access to them. In line with this argument, the problem of equality vs. individual freedom has also been a key challenge to the foundation and practice of a liberal form of government in a society run by the standards of biopolitics. Considered from a cognitive perspective, liberalism opposes the real world of social life – with its demanding obligation

150 worlds – by prioritizing the individual pursuit of happiness, i.e. individual wish

worlds over social obligation worlds. Still, another de-stabilizer of individual psyche has been the introduction of immediacy to the culture and experience of modern life. David Harvey notes that, under capitalism, “the objective qualities as well as the meanings of space and time also change” (204). In fact, to him, a quality of capitalism is “speeding up social processes while reducing the time horizon of meaningful decision-making” (Harvey 229). This sense of acceleration provides for the hasty life the individual sees himself entrapped in. To quote Harvey once more, the “general effect, then, is for capitalistic modernization to be very much about speed-up and acceleration in the pace of economic processes and, hence, in social life” (230).

Making Harvey’s insight relevant to our discussion would require constructing a productive dialogue with notions of immediacy (discussed at greater length later) and fast-paced life in *Rabbit, Run*. It is argued that both notions are depicted in the form of the quick-paced narrative that tends to reveal “the paralysing effects of omnipresent contemporaneity in a system that is built upon yet begins to crumble under the weight of immediacy” (Nilges 369). Furthermore, here, we argue, endless adherence to the present time of the narrative tends to transfer the immediacy of the life the characters live to its readers. Offering no long-term view for the protagonist, the logic of immediacy introduced to the culture prohibits the formation of future “intention worlds” because the future possible worlds it helps build are just short-term and transient. Our contention is that market under liberalism has successfully turned to a self-perpetuating market because it works along with the culture that, according to Mathias Nilges, not only does not become “subsumed” by neoliberalism but also acts as “capitalism’s driving energy” (365). In other words, capitalistic society weaves its consciousness into the individual psyche through contaminating it with consumer culture. To critics like Foucault, Harvey notes, the space of the body in such a society becomes “the irreducible element in our social scheme of things, for it is upon that space that the forces of repression, socialization, disciplining, and punishing are inflicted” (213). Still, there is control, but this time the “difference lies in the way state power in the modern era becomes faceless, rational, and technocratic (and hence more systematic), rather than personalized and arbitrary” (Harvey 213). Elaborating on Foucault’s discussion of this type of governmentality, Johanna Oksala explains that this form of government, known as biopolitics, “began to take shape in the seventeenth century and crystallized in the extended welfare states of the 1960s and 1970s” (62). Oksala further adds that the

demands of biopolitics thus posed a theoretical challenge to liberal governmentality, and biopolitics and liberalism formed a historical intersection: they were linked de facto, not de jure. Nevertheless, Foucault argues that liberalism fundamentally determined the specific form that biopolitics assumed in Western societies. (62)

Foucault's concept of governmentality focuses on techniques that render affairs and individuals governable. It also extends to biopower control of the population, which works on a preventive basis through collaborative cooperation of all the members in a given society. This way, rather than dealing with individual aberrations through a judicial system, biopolitics deals with how to contain the problem. This is done through producing knowledge and certain discourses that spread as a network of knowledge within the societal body and get internalized by individuals in order to guide the behavior and expectations of the population. It robs individuals of their chance to logically probe the real causes of events. Since biopolitics functions on a social basis, its regulatory effects are even greater in that all members play an active role in their own self-government. When the whole society follows such a regulatory basis, aberrations – like a Rabbit that tends to escape the pre-determined rules – will face no direct disciplinary punishment. Rather, all members of a given society will try to bring the aberrant individual back into their circle and contain the disease. The problem with such a dominant ideology, however, is that biopolitical governmentality remains on the surface, not finding its way to the depth.

We can now turn to our discussion of *Rabbit, Run* as a precursor of the neoliberal novel, partaking of all the subtleties of life in the age of market ethics. Discussing the neoliberal novel, Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl classify it as a social genre and add that “it is this very sociability, and specifically sociability under capital, that renders the novel such an appropriate venue for the interrogation of what Smith calls ‘our condition’ under neoliberal orthodoxy” (202). *Rabbit, Run* can thus be understood not only as a reflection of the society it depicts, but also as a meticulous examination of the psyche of the person experiencing life in such a society. Not surprisingly, this type of study will prove the point Emily Johansen has in mind: “If earlier forms of the *bildungsroman* sought to reconcile the self to capitalist and statist sociabilities, the transformations of capital (and the state) under high imperialism begins to disrupt even the possibility of such reconciliation” (300).

## Discussion

In Updike's novel, we are introduced to a society in transition toward a neoliberal state. Immersed in the text through departing from our own deictic center and shifting to that of the narrator in order to relocate ourselves in relation to the narrative, we let the specific type of narration take us further, step by step, through the maze of the factual space, which Updike has built in this American city neighborhood. Interestingly, what we experience through our abrupt introduction to the narrative *in media res* is a rarely constructed spatio-temporal immersion into the text. Believing that narrative maintains special distance between the parties involved, Ryan explains this process of relocation as follows:

From a logical point of view, the narrator and narratorial audience of a story told as true fact are located in the textual reference world, but this (re)location does not necessarily land them on the scene and at the time of the narrative window – to the heart of what some narratologists call the story-world. One of the most variable parameters of narrative art is the imaginative distance between the position of narrator and addressee and the time and place of the narrated events. Spatio-temporal immersion takes place when this distance is reduced to near zero. (130)

Such a close encounter with the heart of the narrative results from Updike's choice of immediate style of narration through the application of the present tense and his reporting strategy. Updike's style represents a particular way of perceiving the surroundings through the minute explanation of Rabbit's whereabouts. Using his particular style of reporting through present tense narration, Updike successfully achieves his deliberate cognitive influence on the reader. His method of narration has various significations. For one thing, it depicts life as a basketball court where the ongoing events are related by a dispassionate reporter whose unbiased attitude toward his reporting hands in no clear-cut judgment on Rabbit's actions. Besides, never is the outcome of this game known till the very end. On a metaphorical basis, it symbolically represents the age of capital domination, which has exacerbated and set in motion the idea of rivalry and everlasting competition – embedded within the daily rat race – for a better life as promised in their American Dream. This idea is clearly depicted in the following passage from the novel: "Run, run, run. Run every minute their feet are on the floor. You can't run enough" (Updike 64). Boswell notes that

in both *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Angstrom* as a whole, the present tense proclaims a very precise thematic idea: Rabbit's fictional identity is existential in the sense that it is predicated on pure tendency, on pure becoming, as existence in the Rabbit books is founded upon the fleeting claims of freedom and flux. In fact, the present tense is nearly as crucial to the basic structure of the completed work as its employment of dialectical irresolution. (12)

In line with his early argument, Boswell adds that the "present tense both depicts the existential individual concerned with his/her own life as it is played out in immediacy *and* manages to inspire in the reader a sense of displacement and uncertainty – angst, in other words – that can eventually lead to [a] kind of first-person self-examination" (13).

From a cognitive viewpoint, the application of this method of narration is remarkable in that it prevents the formation of any fixed, long-term knowledge world which can be the logical consequence of the circumstances. Building on the premises of an individual's impulses, it accounts for incomplete knowledge worlds in which, through its reporting style, immediacy of the world is brought into attention. It is also shown that the formation of new worlds is fast, unstable, and subject to a process of immediate action and reaction. This way, knowledge worlds for the reader are repeatedly made and altered since the data is being accumulated on a step by step basis. In other words, the reader's knowledge world is continuously refreshed through the plethora of information that flows in ceaselessly, a process that offers no long-term view of what things may lead to. Hence, it can be concluded that the reader is soon afflicted with the same notion of immediacy and is entrapped within the present time of the text. In short, just like Rabbit who is directly involved in the process, the reader experiences postponements in the formation of his knowledge worlds and is consequently entangled within the same atmosphere replete with existential angst, an atmosphere in which the immediate consequences of Rabbit's actions haunt him and the reader.

So far, we have discussed how the reader's cognitive stimulus is hence shaken into self-examination due to coming across something that has no definite temporal distance from him. In other words, once the reader's sense of spatio-temporal distance with the narrator is obliterated, he enters Rabbit's space as a companion walking along with him in an attempt to understand what he is

about to do and how things will turn out for him. In short, the reader becomes another Rabbit who does not know what the future holds.

In the course of the narrative, the reader is introduced to the text actual world of *Rabbit, Run*, which depicts a very ordinary nuclear family in a very ordinary society. Ordinarity plays an important role in the novel as well as in the social context. Laura P. Alonso Gallo explains that it “is this national ground that allows Updike to faithfully create realistic human types and events” (44). The Angstrom family includes a husband, Rabbit, a wife, Janice, their son (Nelson), and a baby girl they are expecting (Rebecca June). This nuclear family is in turn surrounded by grandparents and, occasionally, neighbors or people of some significance in the story like the Reverend Jack Eccles, his wife Lucy, and Ruth. As an emblem of a usual Updikian narrative, it also represents all the entities and urban surroundings of a modern lower middle-class life to the touch. The Angstrom family, the reader is informed, has a small apartment and a fairly typical lifestyle, plus a set of possessions the capital values of which are time and again mentioned in Rabbit’s flashbacks or memories throughout the narrative.

The narrative itself follows a matter-of-fact style through the focalization of its main character’s viewpoint in that the narrator re-centers perspective on what Rabbit sees, thinks, or pays attention to and closely follows him and his response to circumstances well up to the end, except for some aberrations where the omniscient narrator temporarily leaves Rabbit to give the reader an account of what happened in response to what was going on between Rabbit and the person in question. The two scenes in which Rabbit leaves Ruth and Janice near the end of the novel are instances of temporary changes in the narrative’s focus.

Through step-by-step present-time narration, the narrative relates the immediate experience of the protagonist in a series of events that are abruptly triggered following Rabbit’s encounter with some boys playing basketball on the street. The basketball scene is the earliest snapshot we get from what is going on in the plot. This scene presupposes life as already in motion within the plot and, as we later come to understand, plays a pivotal role in the reversal of the current state of affairs in the life of Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom. It also contributes a great deal to the development of the plot.

Within the scope of a few paragraphs, this early scene turns out to be a set frame that, to use cognitive poetic terminology, is read as the earliest instance of a conceptual blend in the narrative. A blend, as already mentioned, joins par-

tial structures from two separate domains into a single structure and, therefore, manifests emergent properties resulting from the integration. It combines data provided by these two domains and results in a reformed state of being known as the emerging structure. A closer look at this scene reveals the two inputs that are provided from two different temporal orders, two different experiential domains, of past and present. The narrative starts with the following sentence: “Boys are playing basketball” (Updike 6). Rabbit sees the boys playing basketball, takes off his jacket, and joins in the game. So far, the reader has no idea of the existence of the blended space but is soon to be given a full account of how Rabbit’s successful career at basketball came to an abrupt stop by his marriage and moving to adult life. In short, the basketball game is to come to the reader as the point of conflict between Rabbit’s text real world and the greatest looming wish world haunting him.

In this blended space, the reader has Rabbit’s world in separate pieces. The present does not follow the past anymore. Rather, the past comes to join the present within the blended space of Rabbit’s cognition. The reader construes this space through joining his memory and the text’s present time, which immediately fills him in on Rabbit’s history to the moment. Inputs from these two different points of time are provided through association of thoughts. Basketball and Rabbit himself are the two common points within the blend where the two Rabbits meet. In his actual world, Rabbit is a modern day lower middle-class MagiPeel demonstrator in a capitalistic society who, after a day’s work and on the way back home to his mediocre household, is standing in the middle of a street basketball field at the age of 26. In the second input space, which belongs to the past and is hence unreal for now, he is a high school student and a star basketball player who has a natural talent for basketball and is nothing less than “first rate” (Updike 111). As for the emergent structure of the blend, it is noteworthy that, within this blended space, Rabbit’s escapade is initiated. His play with the boys juxtaposes the world he used to know – and the world that used to know him – with the world in which he is reduced to *Citizen Z*. It simultaneously becomes a trigger point for his adventure because this blended space also provides for the imbalance that occurs in Rabbit’s perception of his world. Soon after this seemingly unimportant affair in the street, Rabbit experiences a departure from the reality of his actual-world existence. In other words, his actual world – and its accompanying obligation worlds – comes to be invaded by the looming presence of the subworlds containing his wishes, dreams, and fantasies.

Having temporarily lost himself to this constructed blend of his own, he is shaken aware to his present status and runs toward his home, where the reader is introduced to his wife, Janice, and to his mediocre lifestyle. The ubiquity of media images, as well as a lack of communication, is keenly felt in Rabbit's household. They listen more to the TV than to each other. Even when Rabbit wants to attract Janice's attention, he uses his advertising piece to relate his ideas. This scene opposes the text actual world and Rabbit's wish world initiated in his blend. What he encounters at home, the failure and the consequent marital suffocation he is experiencing in his married life with Janice, brings about a sense of entrapment for a rabbit ready to run away: "Rabbit freezes, standing looking at the white door that leads to the hall, and senses he is in a trap" (Updike 18). Boswell argues that "Updike depicts Rabbit's own anxiety as a feeling of entrapment between the irreconcilable possibilities of finitude and infinity, confinement and freedom, decision and potentiality" (34). The result of the conflict between his possible worlds and the actual world is in accordance with what Lionel Trilling observes about two different and opposed notions of reality when writing about Don Quixote:

One is the movement which leads toward saying that the world of ordinary practicality is reality in its fullness. It is the reality of the present moment in all its powerful immediacy of hunger, cold, and pain, making the past and the future, and all ideas, of no account. When the conceptual, the ideal, and the fanciful come into conflict with this, bringing their notions of the past and the future, then disaster results. (208)

Hereafter, we will witness Rabbit's constant struggle to evade "the paradox of the nuclear family, which is both sustaining and imprisoning" because "in the *Rabbit* series the social demands imposed by marriage and parenthood appear at times to deny the possibility of self-fulfillment, thereby threatening to implode the nuclear form and its 'natural' pretensions" (Norton 16). Muradian concludes that only when Rabbit "escaped *out of the present* into the future did he find his Hope" (578). Such accounts are simplistic, as Rabbit never escapes to the future because he is stuck in the looming present of his time. We are in more agreement with scholars who tend to take sides with Rabbit's existential state caught between his choices and their inevitable consequences. Such a conclusion draws on the fact that, even though Rabbit never succeeds in self-actualization, he is worthy of attention due to his initiative. "Despite his animality and its tragic consequences," Samuels points out, "Rabbit admits the inarguable facts

of life. He is a beginning, not an end; but in a dead-end culture even so poor a beginning has its value. Therefore, his creator, scrupulously neutral till the last words, permits himself a final cry of affirmation: 'Ah: runs. Runs'" (42).

Leaving home to go after his son, Rabbit comes across another scene that precipitates his impulsive actions. He is already carrying the remainder of the effect of the earlier blend and the desponding scene of mediocrity in his household ended in a pregnant Janice asking him to buy her a pack of cigarettes on the way back home. Reminiscing about his childhood, he sees his son being fed at the table in his father's house and thinks "this home is happier than his" (Updike 24). This scene depicts his utter contempt for and great dissatisfaction with the way things stand in his life. Given the fact that he is a failure as an individual in a capitalistic society, a fact that is at odds with his competitive spirit, his frustration and his willingness to break away are clearly understandable at this point. Ironically, however, when he tries to run, he has got no plan whatsoever for what he is to do with his life as depicted in the metaphor of the highway along which he drives. His inability to read the map on the road and his consequent return to the city he knows foreshadow his inability in mapping out his future destiny in life. The old man at the gas station foresees his failure and admonishes him: "The only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you're going before you go there" (Updike 31). This is more than true in Rabbit's case. The only thing he knows is that he wants to be first rate again. His lack of a plan is in part due to the fact that his cognitive worlds are not properly fine-tuned, and he is, therefore, incapable of setting logical long-term plans. As an agent in a capitalistic society, what he is offered is just short-term planning, which would get along very well with the current immediacy of his era. Not knowing how to fight or flee the constraints imposed upon him by society, Rabbit is unable to understand that obligation worlds restrain him to a greater degree than what he believes. This, in addition to his inability to plan any future possible worlds, results in his consequent confusion and surrender, depicted in his return.

Having failed in his planless mission, Rabbit returns to his hometown, but abstains from going home. Symbolically, this return is one to the past where his possible worlds abound in their counterfactual conditions, haunt his actual world, and, hence, deny him the possibility of moving forward by keeping him in a state of paralysis. If we apply here Nilges's definition of the neoliberal novel, the *Rabbit* series can be classified in the category of novels "that reproduce the symptom (a lack of time and futurity, seeking refuge in the past in the absence of

being able to imagine the future as difference)” (371). Rabbit’s return to the past is not an attempt to see where he went wrong. It is, rather, a celebration of long-lost glory by replacing progression with regression. Rabbit will hence seek out momentary solutions in dealing with the festering sore in his life by resorting to what he deems his right as an individual in a liberal society.

Overall, the only thing he finds rebellious is running away from his home and responsibilities as immediate causes of his entanglement. Retaining a patriarchal role, however weak and inefficient, he is attracted to a prostitute with whom he lives for a while, considering himself happy. This relationship for Rabbit, who is endowed with “a very human desire of spiritual regeneration” (Gallo 50), is an instance of resorting to counterfactual, impossible worlds instead of realistically attempting to find some sort of solution in the actual world. Rabbit’s vacillation between his wife and Ruth stems from the conflict between social morality – which dictates that Rabbit returns to his wife – and the contrary feeling of happiness with Ruth. In his relationship with Ruth, Rabbit creates a counterfactual world in the form of a blended space with two Janices: a non-complying, diffident Janice whom he has deserted but keeps remembering and a fake but desirable Janice whom he finds in the person of Ruth. This short-term relationship bestows temporary psychological relief from the constraints of a capitalistic world in which dissolution of once powerful, but presently frail institutions provides the individual with the chance to come across his real self. Though his wish for self-actualization never really materializes, Boswell contends that Rabbit is worthy of respect for the answers he works out during his quest:

What are some of the answers Rabbit works out? First he learns that his social identity as a MagiPeel demonstrator is a fraudulent mask that merely serves to conceal his inward, existential identity. This mask is a social role, a *way to be*, that distorts the way he views himself. Behind this mask, Rabbit cannot properly access his authentic self. (33, italics in the original)

Albert E. Wilhelm has an interesting theory about Rabbit’s escape from being institutionalized. He associates his degree of freedom from constraints with the motif of clothing. He draws on the various forms and significations of clothing Rabbit uses, as a MagiPeel demonstrator or when borrowing Tothoro’s clothes, and refers to Rabbit’s stripping his clothes away at Ruth’s place as an action with

which “he completely casts off his clothing and previous social roles” (Wilhelm 88). The job Rabbit finds later on, as a gardener for Mrs. Smith, is not provided by any institution, a fact that culminates in his being content. This newly founded heaven, however, is but a castle built in the air since social ties are more binding and deeply rooted than Rabbit thinks.

In his relationship with Ruth, which is satisfying as in it Rabbit experiences momentary relief from punching the time clock by shaking off the shackles of institutions, he is never released from an internalized feeling of guilt forced upon him by the morals of the society. The reason for such a feeling of guilt can be better understood in the light of Foucault’s biopolitics. In a Foucauldian society that functions on the basis of biopolitics, Rabbit’s defiant gesture of abandoning his household and responsibilities is a symbolic denial of one’s belonging to institutions that oblige their members to fulfill certain expectations. The disharmony that is created by Rabbit’s non-compliance in the community through his rejection of his responsibilities as a father and a capitalist agent will meet maximum communal efforts to contain it. Interestingly, the community members will do whatever in their power to bring the lost sheep back to the herd, for they deem it to be the right thing to do, which is more an effect of the internalization of the standard criteria dictated through biopolitics than the result of logical decision making. Samuels points out that the pettiness and superficiality of these communal efforts highlight the Updikian representation of “the world’s poverty” as “[t]hroughout the book, respectable people deplore the hero, calling him a deserter and whoremaster; but what is their respectability?” (39). The point is, Samuels asserts, that although “society conspires to rout the Rabbit in Angstrom, it wishes merely to drive the beast underground” (39). Since other members of the society are also inflicted with the same ideologies, they fail in their attempts as rational agents. A good example of such a character is the Reverend Eccles. “Though a churchman,” Samuels concludes, “Eccles is even less capable than Rabbit of accepting life or of finding comfort in orthodox Christianity” (40). Ironically, in his attempts to bring Rabbit back to his family and community, Eccles approves of what he is doing and encourages him to pursue his freedom.

Such societal confusion of criteria can be partly accounted for through elaboration of the inherent contradictions within the very premises of a liberal society in the age of governing through biopolitics. Infected with imbalances in policies, plans, and activities, liberal capitalistic society helps construct false

possible worlds, counterfactuals that seem to be real. In other words, by focusing on the individual's right to pursue his dreams, liberal ideology promises great freedom that can never be attained because characters' subworlds – their wishes, hypotheses, obligations, dreams, etc. – which are different from character to character and from situation to situation, oppose each other as well as the actual world. In so doing, liberalism gives way to subverted ideologies and impedes the formation of genuine (Levinasian) *I–Thou* relationships encouraging, instead, the Machiavellian use of others to one's own benefit.

Rebecca June's birth culminates in a sort of fragile and temporary reconciliation, and the young Angstrom family is reunited. Rabbit leaves his shelter of love with Ruth and joins Janice; the return is in a sense an acknowledgment of the relationship being counterfactual and hence tenuous. He, in fact, feels blessed and forgiven because he is taken back by the community. Things are fine for a day or two before Janice comes home and then everything starts falling apart once again. Subsequent to his daughter's birth, Rabbit is once again restricted to the position of a capitalistic agent and starts working as a used car salesman in Janice's father's business where he is morally abused because he has to lie. He is offered new clothes, "dresses in his new pale-gray suit to sell cars" (Updike 241), is institutionalized once more, and is, therefore, back to where he started. This newly acquired position is again at odds with the imaginary world of his dreams and, hence, does not last long. Misinterpreting the minister's wife's invitation for a cup of coffee as an invitation for a sexual liaison and hence being rejected, he goes home full of desire. Janice's rightful abstention causes him to get her to drink, an action which results in her loss of consciousness and the subsequent drowning of her baby. This can be read as a genuine instance of existential absurdity where one's actions provoke certain responses from which there is no escape. Rabbit's liberal attitude, however, has blinded him to this fact, so much so that he feels himself innocent. Guilty as he is, it comes to the reader as shocking how he manages to condemn and forgive Janice for drowning their baby at the cemetery before he runs away again. The effect of such a verbal assault is rendered more effective by his earlier confession to Janice that "[i]t wasn't your fault . . . It was mine" (Updike 285). Rabbit's final outbreak, Wilhelm concludes, happens through the symbolic tearing away of the clothing depicted metaphorically by his last run, depicted in *Rabbit, Run* in the cemetery scene. In the subsequent novels of the series, however, Rabbit will continue to run, fail to run, or aspire to run.

## Conclusion

The protagonist of Updike's novel is a dreamer in search of materializing counterfactual conditions. His actual world is surrounded and affected by his looming counterfactual dream world surfacing through the regressive plot of his narrative. There is, however, some sort of equilibrium between this actual world and the projected possible worlds. In the case of *Rabbit*, this balance is very tenuous. His inability to form logical long-term intention worlds results in his resorting to counterfactual thinking, which in turn causes greater imbalance. These counterfactual wish worlds overshadow his other worlds and extend well beyond the socially approved obligation worlds. This situation largely originates in his status in a capitalistic, liberal society in transition toward a neo-liberal, market-dominated one which promises great possible worlds, without limitations, yet fails to live up to expectations while simultaneously encouraging individuality to an extent that genuine relationship is replaced by the search for immediate gratification and self-interest. Under such circumstances, the individual caught within the web of capitalistic dominance tends to rebel and *run* for his own freedom. In his *Rabbit* novels, Updike portrays one of the most memorable "rebel-victims" in American fiction. He renders masterly the tension between the possible world (wish world) and the actual world of his protagonist "running" until the final stop: death. It is this tension – epitomized in the metaphor of "running" – that humanizes our rebel-victim.

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# PROPAST LIBERALIZMA: MOGUĆI SVJETOVI U ROMANU *RABBIT, RUN* JOHNA UPDIKEA

## Sažetak

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Roman *Rabbit, Run / Bježi, Zeče, bježi* Johna Updikea, govori o ljudskom postojanju ili „ljudskom stanju“ u društvu kojim vlada kapital i zahvaćeno je tranzicijom prema neo-liberalnoj državi. Pripovijedanjem o neposrednim iskustvima glavnog lika i prikazujući ga zaokupljenog željom i svjesnošću, narativ ocrtava konfuziju u koju zapada u potrazi za samoaktualizacijom kao nešto inherentno kapitalističkom sustavu. Primjenom teorije mogućih svjetova, dolazi se do zaključka da neravnoteža između protučinjeničnih „mogućih svjetova“ Rabbita i njegova stvarnog svijeta dovodi do neuspjeha njegove potrage. Previše mogućih svjetova u svom protučinjeničnom stanju proizvodi neku vrstu kontrastvarnosti u kojoj ima previše svjetova mašte/želja, a malo svjetova obveza, što vodi neizbježnim posljedicama kojima svjedočimo na kraju prve knjige *Rabbit tetralogije*.

**Ključne riječi:** John Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, kognitivna poetika, neposrednost, mogući svjetovi nasuprot stvarnom svijetu, konceptualno miješanje, neoliberalizam