

**TRADITIONS OF PURITANISM IN THE MID-20TH CENTURY AMERICAN NOVEL: LEGACY,
DIALOGUE AND DEBATE**

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Abstract. The paper explores the evolution and transformation of Puritan ethical and moral principles in the mid-20th century American literature as represented by novels of John Cheever and John Updike providing both idealized and revisionist insight into traditional Puritan values that form the foundation of American culture. The key tenets of Puritanism underwent profound rethinking and revision throughout the history of American literature. The interpretation of the worldly asceticism concept in the new historical context is discussed as the key component in the revision of Puritan legacy. The analysis of alternative perspectives on desacralization of daily life in the works of Cheever and Updike reveals different paths they take for a continued dialogue with the tradition. John Cheever is nostalgic about the long lost simplicity and meaning of the bygone life, while John Updike turns to Karl Barth's theology to prove the moral ineptitude of worldly asceticism in the modern world.

Key words: tradition, Puritanism, worldly asceticism, John Updike, John Cheever.

Introduction. The ethical dimension has always largely defined the American literature which has evolved historically under the powerful influence of the Puritan teaching. The doctrines of Providence, Calling, personal salvation, America's divine mission, and the New Adam expounded in the works of William Bradford, Increase and Cotton Mather, John Winthrop, Jonathan Edwards and other Puritan theologians and preachers, provided the foundation for the fledgling American culture. The secularized equivalents of the Puritan concepts were promoted by Benjamin Franklin in the *Poor Richard's Almanack* and his *Autobiography* that granted ethical approval to "the self-made man" and rationalized the moral qualities of honesty, modesty, chastity, industry, punctuality, diligence, moderation, etc. that invariably helped achieve success, prosperity, self-respect and dignity. The Romantics, and New England Romantics in particular were repulsed by the Puritan narrow-mindedness, intolerance, utilitarianism and abstinence from the joys of life. Ironically, writers of the Romantic Age, in many ways, followed faithfully in the steps of the Puritan philosophical legacy that manifests itself in the quest for the ultimate moral truth, in the doctrine of providence in the works of Thoreau and Emerson, in Hawthorn's poetics of introspection, and in the emblematic style of Melville.

Also evolving is the New Adam, who comes into conflict with the contemporary society and like Natty Bumppo finds refuge and comfort in the natural world or, like in Melville's novels, turns into a noble savage.

In the second half of the 19th century, "the New Adam" Huckleberry Finn dreams of fleeing to a free territory to escape civilization, whereas the novels of William Dean Howells cast considerable doubt on the idea that virtue and pragmatism can help anyone to succeed. In the early 20th century, a free and enterprising individual – a personification of the Adam idea – becomes the object of severe criticism in the works of Ring Lardner and of ironic explication by Francis S. Fitzgerald. However, the mid-century American novel sees the return of the protagonist to the "innocent" condition in the form of social infantilism embodied in Holden Caulfield and the characters of Beatnik novels. This development comes with renewed interest towards Puritan religious precepts, ethical and moral values that in a time of deepening spiritual crisis and the growing need for some firm moral ground are reassessed, if somewhat idealized, in the new historical context.

Materials And Methods. Sacvan Bercovich argues that the rhetoric of America's colonial sermons and histories, founding documents contribute to transform the most critical energies into affirmations of the American way [1]. Max Weber stresses the idea of assured salvation as a result of doing your duty in following your worldly calling which Puritanism regards as the ultimate moral objective of a decent human life [2]. Both approaches applied to literature can give a convincing perspective of a dialogue between past and present.

Results. The analysis has demonstrated that the works of Cheever and Updike reveals different ways of revision of the Puritan tradition. John Cheever stresses the loss of simplicity and meaning of the bygone life, while John Updike proves the moral ineptitude of worldly asceticism in the modern world.

DISCUSSION. A good illustration of the revision is offered by John Cheever's dilogy about the Wapshots, especially *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957) which elegizes the vanishing traditional community of New England fictionalized into a patriarchal town of St. Botolphs and its old-timers. Written as a novel of manners, it examines the fundamental gaps between the modern way of life and the moral maxims that underpin the code of conduct of Leander and his Cousin Honora Wapshot, tow eccentric and worn fragments of the past. As a telling insight into Honora's character, the author intimates that the house cook continues to endure her grumpy ways not because she depends on or loves her cantankerous mistress, but because "she seems to recognize in the old lady <...> some naked human force" [3, p. 39], or, in other words, Honora's commitment to the prescripts of her ancestors. She is religious and independent, utterly intolerant of inaction and complacency. Fully abiding by the Puritan doctrine of hard work as the God-given

overarching purpose of human life, Honora forces her nephews Moses and Coverly to make their own living and way in the world by threatening to cut them off otherwise, relenting only when they settle down and provide the family each with a son. The ironic overtones in the portrait of the eccentric old lady reveal the author's perspective, in particular with regard to the Calvinist principles of a decent life focused on achieving and anticipating the everlasting bliss in the next world: "Her life had been virtuous, her dedication to innocence had been unswerving and she had been rewarded with a vision of life that seemed as unsubstantial as a paper match in a fairly windy place" [3, p. 75]. Honora herself clearly has Cheever's sympathies and in many ways resembles Betsey Trotwood from Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*. She has the same innate common sense, kindness and resolution when she has to act against all conventions. Leander is portrayed both directly, through the descriptions provided with a good deal of subtle irony by the narrator, and indirectly via his diary written in a clipped dry tone that alludes to the rhetoric of the early Puritan memoir writers. He talks about the St. Botolphs of the old times, the lost respectability and dignity of the people back then, their noble manners and the eradicable sense of duty. The diary marks all the formative steps that Leander had gone through as he learnt and lived the lessons of Benjamin Franklin. A flashback childhood story gives a detailed account of how Leander, who was trying to earn money to buy a two-volume encyclopedia, bought an ailing calf, nursed and nurtured it and then sold at five times what he originally spent on the animal. When he finally got the encyclopedia he felt a wonderful "joy of learning" [3, p. 110]. While this episode can be viewed as vividly illustrating the Puritan ethos of the bourgeois entrepreneurial spirit, for which the most important criterion of usefulness of "a calling and thus its favour in the sight of God <...> is found in private profitability" [2], it can be equally approached as its explicit reinterpretation. Leander's life story also reflects some other aspects of the worldly asceticism such as condemnation of dishonesty in business and pursuit of riches for their own sake, love of luxury or any irrational activity that lacks utility. The figures of Honora and Leander are also associated with the motif of profound loneliness, which, however, is not related to any social or psychological alienation intrinsic to the consumer society. This feeling of inner loneliness is part their consciousness shaped by the traditional Calvinist culture where an individual is bound to tread the path of his or her life alone to meet their destiny. On the other hand, the loneliness experienced by Leander's sons in a big city is of a different kind; it stems from alienation produced by weakening family and personal bonds between people in the postindustrial era. That is why Coverly is unable "to create or build some kind of bridge between Leander's world and that world where he sought fortune" [3, p. 118]. Coverly encounters the modern world of business where profit and prosperity have long lost their religious and ethical meaning in as much as people lost their value as individuals.

Unlike his brother, Moses finds himself in a place inherently at odds with Puritan morality that adamantly denounced any vestige of aristocratic lifestyle. In the words of scorching sarcasm, Cheever depicts the pretentious castle of Justina Wapshot Molesworth Scaddon, Leander's ancient cousin and widow of a five-and-ten-cent-store millionaire. This crumbling property called Clear Haven where the mode of life is defined by ostentatious luxury and unbridled avarice that were condemned by the Puritan worldly asceticism as the pursuit of wealth for its own sake.

Coverly and Moses do their best to live by the rules of Leander's world, but that world has long vanished and its laws and values are irrelevant in the modern age. Leander is well aware that he cannot adapt to the new ways of the time and even attempts to take his life which lost its true meaning. What is left is the habit, the seeming significance or the "emblematic" quality of the daily routine. He faithfully maintains all the accustomed rituals like skating on Christmas Day, wearing a frockcoat at dinner, lapel flowers, etc., while feeling that the bond with Providence that filled each and every of these small motions with a higher evocative meaning has been severed. It is quite symbolic that he can never find the Bible among his books. The nostalgic note in this novel of manners eventually rises strongly above the comic and ironic motifs turning *The Wapshot Chronicle* into a requiem for the virtues of the Puritan New England.

Whereas Cheever laments the erosion of morals and daily sacrality which used to be a treasured part of New England's lifestyle, John Updike seeks the roots of the spiritual crisis in the decline of the religious faith and the weakness of the modern Christianity. In his article "The Future of Faith" the writer concludes that "its perilous, marginal, mocked existence serves as an image of our own, beneath whatever appearance of success is momentarily mustered" [4]. Corroborating Updike's own claim to being a religious writer [5], scholars of his work as well as religious media reviewers emphasize that in his books "religion seems to overpower everything" [6]. On his God-seeking journey, Updike changed churches he attended as a parish member as well as persistently addressed religious issues on the pages of nearly every of his books through philosophical debates carried out by their characters confronting each other as members of various Christian denominations. But unlike his novels of the 1980s and 90s, *Rodger's Version, S., In the Beauty of the Lilies* and others, where the search for God becomes central, the early works focus on the relationship between religion and morality that Updike is so anxious to explore. A highly detailed juxtaposition of the divine and human worlds is powerfully presented in *The Centaur* (1963). The reference to the Greek rather than biblical mythology adds yet more emphasis to the main idea of the novel set forth in the first epigraph quoted from Karl Barth, a most influential neo-orthodox theologian of the 20th century: "Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth" [7, p. 3]. The dual universe of the novel is built around multiple parallels between the characters and the Olympians with their weaknesses, passions and vices creating a fully dimensional stereoscopic picture of the modern age when the traditional ethic based on firm faith in divine providence pursuing its unfathomable purpose without ever releasing control of human actions and thoughts, has lost its motivational power. Moral conduct is shown to be something that can arise from true human sympathy rather than from the dogmatic Presbyterian penance and self-

improvement in the hope for salvation, and from the intuitive and emotional perception of the reality as it is rather than from the adherence to the Puritan ideal of a rationally organized life. It is symbolic that the title character Centaur – Coldwell “born a Republican and a Presbyterian, <...> became a Democrat and a Lutheran” [7, p.133]. Contrasted with him are Reverend March and Luis Zimmerman, the school principal and a Reformed church elder, who are shown in the novel to be blatantly licentious as if to mock the Puritan denunciation of carnal pleasures. Caldwell associates both of them and Calvin “with everything murky and oppressive and arbitrary in the universal kingdom” [7, p. 174]. The interest Updike took in Karl Barth’s theology which has its roots in “The Institutes of the Christian Religion” by John Calvin was not accidental. It was based on the unconditional acceptance of the fundamental “Sola Fide” (by faith alone) doctrine, on the one hand, and the obvious moral failure of the worldly asceticism concept in the modern context, on the other. From Barth, Updike took the idea that the human world was abandoned by God and there is a chasm between God and man and any attempts to bridge it through religion or self-righteousness are directly condemned by God. The novel *Rabbit, Run* (1960) has quite a few pages devoted to a sympathetic Jack Eccles, an Episcopal priest, who goes very much out of his way, albeit to no effect, to persuade the protagonist Harry Angstrom to return to his family. He has soul-searching conversations with Harry, plays golf with him, invites Harry to his place, and even tries to put some pressure on him through his parents, etc., as Eccles firmly believes that it is his pastoral duty to do so. The clergyman is painted with accentuated comic strokes with his ill-timed laughs and snorting, shriek arguments with his wife in front of others and a face constantly alive with funny grimaces. All his features, gestures and manners combine to exhibit “something friendly and silly about him” [8, p. 102]. Eccles is confident that his mission as a minister is to provide comfort and unwavering support for his parish community at a hard moment. He puts all his boundless energy into saving Harry who he believes is headed downhill towards disaster. He even turns for help to the minister of the Lutheran church to which the Angstrom family belongs. Reverend Kruppenbach is the complete opposite of Eccles. “He is a man of brick.” [8, p. 169]. Chiding Eccles for his pointless fussing around and meddling in other people’s lives, Kruppenbach literally quotes Karl Barth when he says that “If Gott wants to end misery He’ll declare the Kingdom now<...> There is where comfort comes from: faith, not what little finagling a body can do here and there” and the duty of a minister is “to make your faith powerful”<...> “There is nothing but Christ for us. All the rest, all this decency and busyness, is nothing. It is Devil’s work” [8, p. 170-171]. This understanding of the essence and role of faith is perfectly in line with the inherently Lutheran idea of quietism which, according to Updike, “mitigates against trying to change the world, instead trying to find a peaceful, satisfactory place within the world that exists <...> You have to accept the world as it is” [9]. The sacrality for Updike can be achieved not through observing the long established rituals and everyday norms with which Reverend Eccles is struggling to reconcile Harry, but by exploring one’s true human identity. Harry hears it on television that the path to happiness lies through knowing oneself, preserving and developing one’s unique personality. The Rabbit seems to feel the evasive link that ties him to heaven and yearns to discover whatever is hidden behind “the un-grandest landscape in the world” which provides a fitting backdrop for the drab commonplace existence of the frustrated protagonist. While his edifying impulse makes Harry stand out against the gray crowd of other Pennsylvanian backwater dwellers, it also debunks the illusion of the “heavenly kingdom” preached by the energetic Edwin Conner from Updike’s previous novel “The Poorhouse Fair” (1959), in which he, like John Winthrop, talks about visions of a future “City upon the Hill” where “each man will know himself –without delusions, without muddle, and within the limits of that self-knowledge will construct a sane and useful life <...>And this heaven will come to *this* earth...” [10, p.107]. However it is not the idealized concept of a rational life, which Updike believes, have been monopolized by modern science taking it over from Puritanism, but the vague sense of the supernatural that has the power to dispel the “inner darkness” so much deplored by the Rabbit. Updike says that “against the terrific tide of rational disbelief must stand an inner sense <...> of one’s life being shaped, broadly, by transactions with the supernatural”[4].

Conclusion. To summarize, such position definitely echoes the Puritan ideas that only a life pervaded with self-reflection can be regarded as a way to rise above the *status naturalis* [1].

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