

## 0. Introduction

John Updike is sometimes called “a gifted stylist with little to say”(Schiff, 1995: 531). So far, Updikeans, including myself, seem to have concentrated on proving that Updike does have much to say, and have made light of the side of a gifted stylist. Once we turn to his style, we notice that it is elaborately built and has a great effect on our response to the novel. In this paper, I analyze Updike’s style in *Rabbit, Run*, one of his famous novels, and examine how his style has an effect on readers.

Geoffrey Leech has introduced a method of analyzing style in fiction by giving a checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories, suggesting a “selective use of the checklist in order to bring to the attention what appear to be the most significant style markers of each” (Leech, 1981: 82). Two items, the tense of verbs and figurative language, seem to me the most significant style markers of *Rabbit, Run*.

## 1. Tense of verbs

When we read *Rabbit, Run*, the most conspicuous feature of the style is the tense of verbs. Almost the whole novel is written in the present tense, which is unusual in fiction. Novels are usually written in the past tense, for, if I borrow J. Hillis Miller’s expression, “in many novels the use of the past tense establishes the narrator as someone living after the events of the story have taken place” (Miller, 1982: 177). Why did Updike use the present tense? I will seek an answer by examining some passages from the novel and taking the effect into consideration.

### 1.1. Use of present tense in *Rabbit, Run*

The novel begins:

Boys are playing basketball around a telephone pole

with a backboard bolted to it. Legs, shouts. The scrape and snap of Keds on loose alley pebbles seems to catapult their voices high into the moist March air blue above the wires. Rabbit Angstrom, coming up the alley in a business suit, stops and watches, though he's twenty-six and six three. So tall, he seems an unlikely rabbit, but the breadth of white face, the pallor of his blue irises, and a nervous flutter under his brief nose as he stabs a cigarette into his mouth partially explain the nickname, which was given to him when he too was a boy. He stands there thinking, the kids keep coming, they keep crowding you up.

As Hillis Miller points out, novels are usually written in the past tense. Following is the same paragraph rewritten in the past tense.

Boys were playing basketball around a telephone pole with a backboard bolted to it. Legs, shouts. The scrape and snap of Keds on loose alley pebbles seemed to catapult their voices high into the moist March air blue above the wires. Rabbit Angstrom, coming up the alley in a business suit, stopped and watched, though he was twenty-six and six three. So tall, he seemed an unlikely rabbit, but the breadth of white face, the pallor of his blue irises, and a nervous flutter under his brief nose as he stabbed a cigarette into his mouth partially explain the nickname, which had been given to him when he too was a boy. He stood there thinking, the kids kept coming, they kept crowding you up.

Thus compared, the difference is clear. The original gives us the feeling of being there, the feeling of watching live performances in front of us. That is the effect that Updike aimed at.

## 1.2. Effect on readers

Updike originally imagined the opening scene just like one in a movie. On this point, the author himself writes as follows:

It was subtitled, in my conception of it, "A Movie"; I imagined the opening scene as something that would

happen behind credits, and I saw the present tense of the book as corresponding to the present tense in which we experience the cinema. There is no real past in the movies; things happen, one after the other, right there in front of us. (Updike, 1990: 1)

When the last novel of the Rabbit tetralogy was published, the author himself contributed an article on the tetralogy under the title of “Why Rabbit Had to Go.” Here he retrospects to when he wrote *Rabbit, Run* and gives the reason for using the present tense. As he mentions, he had a conception of it being like a movie. He continues as follows:

I discovered as I began to write how *delicious* the present tense is. Instead of writing “she said and he said” it’s “he says and she says,” and not “he jumped” at some past moment, but “he jumps,” right now in front of you. Action takes on a wholly different, flickering quality; thought and feeling and event are brought much closer together. (Updike, 1990: 1)

In this way, he realizes the effect of the present tense, and we readers also realize the effect. Reading passages in the present tense, we feel as if we are watching a film, and we have the feeling of experiencing the same events just as Rabbit does. By using the present tense, Updike succeeds in drawing readers quickly and deeply into the plot.

## **2. Figurative Language**

### **2.1. Characteristics of Updike’s figurative language**

Another characteristic of Updike’s style is the use of figurative language. Updike’s skill in figurative language has been acknowledged by critics, and it is considered one of the sources of his “beautiful” style. He uses strange and interesting metaphors and similes. In the first paragraph quoted above, two metaphorical expressions are used. The first is in the second sentence: “The scrape and snap of Keds on loose alley pebbles seems to catapult their voices high into the moist March air blue above the wires.” Logically it is a strange sentence. “The scrape and snap of Keds” do not catapult their

voices high. In a normal way, it might be written as: "Each time their Keds scrape and snap loose alley pebbles, their voices seem to be catapulted high into the moist March air blue above the wires." It is less strange but less interesting. The original gives us a vivid image and stimulates our senses.

The other metaphorical expression is in the last sentence: "He stands there thinking, the kids keep coming, they keep crowding you up." This sentence expresses Rabbit's sense of ageing. In his high school days, he was a star basketball player. He set a scoring record twice. Still now, he feels he is a boy, as if he were a fellow player of the kids, and in the next scene, he asks the boys to let him join the game. Although he is only twenty six, he seems an old man to the boys playing basketball in the alley. Years slipped by. He senses the gap between him and the kids. He has become an old man without noticing it. As younger generations have aged, Rabbit himself has become older. As they get his place as a boy, Rabbit has to give it up and go on to the next stage. Updike describes this feeling as "the kids keep coming, they keep crowding you up." The feeling of being pushed by a crowd of young boys is conveyed. Ineluctability of growing old is vividly expressed.

Both examples show some characteristics of Updike's metaphor. He tries to describe a whole scene with a metaphor using a movement. And he uses words that stimulate our five senses. In the first example, "scrape" and "snap" work on our hearing, "catapult their voices high" does too. "The scrape and snap of Keds on loose alley pebbles" also works on our sight, and "the moist March air" works on our touch and perhaps on our smell. In the second example, as I mentioned before, it stimulates our touch.

When Rabbit goes out of home the second time, his wife Janice drowns her sorrow. She drinks several glasses of whisky one after another and becomes intoxicated. When their baby daughter Becky dirties her diaper, Janice tries to wash her in a bath tub and drops her into the water. Next day, from a drugstore, Rabbit calls Reverend Eccles, who has taken care of the couple, and hears the shocking news. After he hangs up the phone, the pain gradually rises in his chest. The next example is in a scene describing his pain.

When you twist a rope and keep twisting, it begins to lose its straight shape and suddenly a kink, a loop leaps up in it. Harry has such a hard loop in himself after he hears Eccles out. He doesn't know what he says to Eccles; [. . . ] He steps into the sunshine outside the drugstore swallowing, to keep the loop from rising in his body and choking him. (269-70)

Not a sharp pain, but a dull but enormous one swells in his body. "A kink" in the quotation means the pain. Updike does not simply use the metaphor "kink" but describes how the kink is made. The casual action of twisting a rope makes a kink suddenly. Also here, Updike displays a metaphor related to a movement. It conveys a feel of a rough rope and stimulates our sense of touch. We readers experience the same kink as Rabbit does.

A further example is in the next quotation:

Why was he set down here, why is this town, a dull suburb of a third-rate city, for him the center and index of a universe that contains immense prairies, mountains, deserts, forests, cities, seas? This childish mystery—the mystery of "any place," prelude to the ultimate, "Why am I me?"—ignites panic in his heart. Coldness spreads through his body and he feels detached, as if at last he is, what he's always dreaded, walking on air. [. . . ]. He is no one; it is as if he stepped outside of his body and brain a moment to watch the engine run and stepped into nothingness, for this "he" had been merely a refraction, a vibration within the engine, and now can't get back in. (284)

Rabbit, with his wife and son, is walking over to their apartment to get clothes for the baby's funeral. While walking, he considers the meaning of his existence. *Rabbit, Run* describes a young man who runs about seeking for a true place to live and a way of living for his self-realization. This passage describes a Rabbit who has lost his identity and is in a dangling state. His soul is separated from his body, and is watching his own body from the outside. His body is like a mere machine without soul although it keeps on moving. Here, Updike uses a simile: "it is as if he stepped outside of his body and brain a moment to watch

the engine run and stepped into nothingness.” To describe his leading character’s dangling state, the author adopts a simile of action, which effectively evokes Rabbit’s strong anxiety. We feel the same anxiety as Rabbit feels.

## **2.2. Effect of the figurative language**

So far, I have shown several examples of Updike’s figurative use of movement. By describing some movement, the author succeeds in conveying vivid images and stimulating the readers’ senses. The metaphors and similes related to movement have greater effect when workings and situations of mind and emotions are described. We cannot see the workings of the mind. Updike concretizes them into the workings of a tangible, visible thing. It helps us understand the character’s mind clearly. We experience the same thing as the protagonist does. And it helps us to empathize with him. In this sense, Updike’s figurative language is very effective.

## **3. Figurative language of “net”**

Among many metaphors and similes employing a movement in *Rabbit, Run*, the most effective and significant one is that of the “net.” Images of the “net” are repeatedly used. They have a great significance in the novel since they are connected with the most important theme of the novel and establish atmosphere. Here I will present some examples and then explain what the net represents in the novel.

### **3.1. Examples of the metaphors and similes of “net”**

The image of the net appears for the first time in the following quotation:

He goes to the closet and takes out the coat he hung up so neatly. It seems to him he’s the only person around here who cares about neatness. The clutter behind him in the room—the Old-fashioned glass with its corrupt dregs, the choked ashtray balanced on the easy-chair arm, the rumpled rug, the floppy stacks of

slippery newspapers, the kid's toys here and there broken and stuck and jammed, a leg off a doll and a piece of bent cardboard that went with some breakfast-box cutout, the rolls of fuzz under the radiators, the continual crisscrossing mess—clings to his back like a tightening *net*. He tries to sort out picking up his car and then his kid. [ . . . ]

The problem *knits* in front of him and he feels sickened by the intricacy.

Janice calls from the kitchen, "And honey pick up a pack of cigarettes, could you?" in a normal voice that says everything is forgiven, everything is the same.

Rabbit freezes, standing looking at his faint yellow shadow on the white door that leads to the hall, and senses he is in a *trap*. It seems certain. He goes out. (14-15) (*Italics mine*)

Just before this scene, Rabbit and his wife Janice have a quarrel. The cause of the quarrel is Janice's slovenly house keeping and Rabbit's impatience with it. However, the root lies deeper. It is rooted in the difference between their ways of living. Rabbit had been a star basketball player in his high school days. When playing basketball, he had fully demonstrated his ability and felt the significance of his existence. Now, after eight years have passed, he is a salesman of kitchen gadgets and is leading a routine life. At the beginning of the novel, he plays basketball with some boys, and it reminds him of his glorious past and a quest of identity. On the other hand, Janice is satisfied with the real, material world. She never thinks about her way of living seriously and does not understand her husband's quest in life. Rabbit too may have been satisfied with his routine life until yesterday, and made no question of his way of living. But now, his quest is awakened, and he feels the world he lives in is "a tightening net." In the passage, not only "net," but also "knit" and "trap" are used. A net is knitted, a trap is sometimes made of a net, and his nickname is "rabbit." Harry Rabbit Angstrom feels trapped and hunt down with a tightening net.

Following this scene, he drives his car to the south to escape from the net of everydayness. Nevertheless, however far away

he drives, he cannot escape from the net:

The land refuses to change. The more he drives the more the region resembles the country around Mt. Judge. The same scruff on the embankments, the same weathered billboards for the same products you wondered anybody would ever want to buy. At the upper edge of his headlight beams the naked tree-twigs make the same *net*. Indeed the *net* seems thicker now. (34) (*Italics mine*)

He loses his way and buys a map. In the map, he discovers a net:

He burns his attention through the film fogging his eyes down into the map again. At once "Frederick" pops into sight, but in trying to steady its position he loses it, and fury makes the bridge of his nose ache. The names melt away and he sees the map whole, a *net*, all those red lines and blue lines and stars, a *net* he is somewhere caught in. (36) (*Italics mine*)

Here, he sees the map as a net. It means not only that many lines in the map looks like a net, but also that what the map represents, namely, the real world is a net. The phrase of "red lines and blue lines and stars" seems to suggest the Stars and Stripes. In other words, however far he drives, he cannot escape from the net, because the whole America is the net itself. After this scene, he tears the map up and throws it out of the car window as if he could reject the net by doing so.

In the three examples cited above, Rabbit feels that a "net" confines him and deprives him of his freedom. In contrast, the next example shows a "net" representing security. Since he fails to find his true place to live although he drives all night long, Rabbit returns to his hometown Brewer at dawn. Stopping his car, he imagines how people around him behaved during the night without him:

He feels the faded night he left behind in this place as a *net* of telephone calls and hasty trips, trails of tears and strings of words, white worried threads shuttled through the night and now faded but still existent, an invisible *net* overlaying the steep streets and in whose center he lies secure in his locked hollow hutch. (41)



(Italics mine)

While driving, he has had a fear of being caught by a net. Now, however, he feels relief in the center of the net. Here Updike shows that a “net” means a network of human relationships. Rabbit thinks that the people he left behind were anxious about him and looked for him during the night. The feeling of being concerned temporarily makes him feel a sense of real existence. Failure to find the place to live has thrust him into a dangling state. He wants security now. Therefore he is relieved to be in the center of the net.

Furthermore, in the next example, Rabbit wants to be caught by a net.

“O. K.” Springer hangs there, expecting some kind of congratulation. “Why don’t they just lock me up?” Harry adds.

“Harry, that’s a very negative way to think. The question is, How do we cut the losses from here on in?”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” It disgusts him to feel the *net* of law slither from him. They just won’t do it for you, they just won’t take you off the hook. (287-88)

(Italics mine)

After the baby’s death, Mr. Springer, Janice’s father, goes to talk to the coroner, and confirms “there won’t be a manslaughter charge.” Since the accident occurs while he is out, Rabbit will not be charged. However, he feels guilty and wants to be locked up. He is willing to be caught in the net.

This scene appears just after the scene in which Rabbit goes back home to take funeral clothes, from which I have quoted above. Here he has lost his identity and is in a dangling state. He does not know what to do, how to live. He needs some anchorage, even if it is a net which deprives him of his freedom.

The metaphor of a “net” appears again in the final scene of the novel.

He feels his inside as very real suddenly, a pure blank space in the middle of a dense *net*. I don’t know, he kept telling Ruth; he doesn’t know, what to do, where to go, what will happen, the thought that he doesn’t know seems to make him infinitely small and impossible to capture. Its smallness fills him like a vastness.

(308-09) (*Italics mine*)

After leaving the funeral, since nobody understands him, Rabbit visits Ruth's apartment. Ruth was his mistress with whom he lived for three months until Janice's delivery of Becky. He knows that Ruth is pregnant and asks her to have the baby. She urges him to choose either her or his wife, but he cannot choose one. He has not established his way of living and does not know what is the most important. He has nothing to rely on when he must make a crucial decision. Therefore he feels his inside is "a pure blank space in the middle of a dense net." "A dense net" is a complicated world around him. Although he is caught somewhere in the net, he is not connected with anybody there. He has neither anything to rely on nor anybody to ask for help.

### **3.2. What the "net" represents**

As I have shown, the "net" represents the outer world surrounding Rabbit. Why did Updike use a "net" to represent the world? When we consider the background of the novel, we realize that the "net" is a good metaphor to convey the atmosphere of America in 1950s. The novel *Rabbit, Run* is set in 1959. After World War II, the United States of America became the richest country in the world. In addition to the development of modern industry and technology since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the growth of munitions industry during World War II and the Cold War enabled the nation to become an "Affluent Society." It was realized by mass production and mass consumption which had been enabled by technological innovation. However, not only merchandise but also human beings came to be organized as cogs in the course of production and consumption. As their income and circumstances were standardized, the pattern of consumption was also standardized. Highly developed advertisements decided the pattern of consumption and the way of living, and even the pattern of thinking. Culture was standardized, individuality was lost, and materialism prospered. Conformity became stronger and individuals felt anxiety about departures from it.

America, which had been one of the advanced countries until

World War II, became one of the two hegemonies in the world after the war, along with the Soviet Union, and came effectively to rule the world as the leader of free nations. The world was divided into two sides, the East and the West, and the fear of a nuclear war fostered anti-Communism across the nation. Then appears Joseph McCarthy, and a social phenomenon called McCarthyism exerted a powerful force on the society. Cruel attacks on people with different opinions intensified the people's fear, and public opinion became extremely intolerant of Communism. Thus in America in a 1950s, a great number of people felt anxiety in the climate of Conformism and anti-Communism under the Cold War, although they realized a more affluent society than they had ever experienced before.

Updike's "net" represents such an uncomfortably strained society. It represents the network of human relations and the social system. A "net" is useful, so long as we are satisfied with and follow the system. However, once we have a question about it and try to oppose it, we feel the net is a trap. When his quest is awakened, Rabbit finds himself caught in the net. His present place, marriage life with Janice, is somewhere in the net. It is not his true place to live. He has to escape from the net before it tightens and deprives him of his freedom completely. He starts to run. In this way, the metaphor of a "net" is central to the novel.

#### 4. Conclusion

Updike wrote *Rabbit, Run* in the present tense, aiming at a novel like a movie. He succeeded in it. We readers feel that the action is being played out in front of us, and that we are experiencing the same events as the characters. It helps us enter into the plot quickly and deeply, and feel empathy with the characters. And Updike's metaphors of movement are effective to describe the character's inner world. We can understand the invisible things by reading the metaphors of visible things moving. In this way, the two conspicuous features of Updike's style in *Rabbit, Run* are both successful in drawing readers into the plot and helping them understand the characters' mind. In particular, the metaphor of the "net" works as a vehicle to

convey the anxiety in the 1950s. It permeates and controls the whole novel. A “net” makes us feel anxiety about being trapped. We share the anxiety with Rabbit. Updike’s virtuosity is shown here.

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## Notes

John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (New York: Knopf, 1987, first published in 1960), 3. All the quotations of *Rabbit, Run* are from this edition, and for further quotations, only page numbers will be put in parentheses.

Schiff cites David Lodge’s and James Wood’s remarks to discuss Updike’s style: “David Lodge remarks that Updike’s ‘gift for coining metaphors and similes enlightens and enlivens without cloying,” “The key to understanding Updike’s style, according to James Wood, is his use of metaphor: ‘Updike’s metaphors [ . . . ] are in fact the fluid in which he swims into a novel.” David Lodge, “Rabbit Reviewer,” review of *Hugging the Shore*, in *Write On* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 203 and James Wood, “The Professional Image,” review of *Odd Jobs*, *TLS*, 24 January 1992, 21 qtd. in Schiff, 1995.

As for the social situations of America in 1950s, I refer to the following materials: The Japanese Association for American Studies ed., *Genten America-Shi* (A History of America Based on Primary Sources)(Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1981) VI, Tadashi Ariga et al. ed, *America-Shi* (A History of America)(Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1993) II, Nagayo Honma, *Utsuriyuku America* (Changing America) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1991), David Halberstam, *The Best & the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

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