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JOHN UPDIKE'S "THE POORHOUSE FAIR": NOVEL OF FAITH AND DOUBT

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ABSTRACT

John Updike (1932-2009), a leading literary figure of 20th century America, a multidimensional writer—poet, novelist, short stories writer, critic, and essayist, etc. author of more than sixty books—twenty four novels, ten collection of poetry, eighteen shot stories, fourteen books of essays, and criticism, and several children books, his name and fame as a major literary voice rests on his striking novel *The Poorhouse Fair* which captures the ethos of the then time. He was the recipient of a number of prizes—The American Academy of Arts and Letters, National Book Award, Pulitzer Prizes, Ambassador Book Award, etc. Like other great writer Updike has very deep understanding of sense and sensibility that makes him able to know the demanding needs of his nation—social, political, religious, trends and movements of every age and their origin, the behavior and mindset of people from any part of country, nature of culture and society, he/she must have a detailed and comprehensive knowledge of great literature written in the United States of America. *The Poorhouse Fair*, John Updike's debut novel treating society on a wider canvas, published in 1959. It is he who inaugurates his experimentation with the form of the novel. Hitherto his popularity had rested on a handful of short stories published in the New Yorker. To Updike, "My sense of myself was of a sort of a sprinter", he confessed in an interview, years afterwards. He was a novice in novel writing. Writing a novel was a trial of his resources as is evident in the brevity of this opening address. It was a highly volatile and impressionable age of America. So *The Poorhouse Fair* has to be treated as a product of its milieu—the American fifties.

Key words: poorhouse, fair, sense and sensibility, other-directed, milieu

John Updike's *The Poorhouse Fair* is based on the concept of other-directed. It is story of lonely crowd. It pictures a society scientifically structured, highly mechanized and a sterile future welfare state. Its artistic purpose does not interfere in any way with the projection of fictional time into future. It aims at the slavishly conformist state to which America has fallen. So the novel tries to prescribe the remedies for the society itself. John Kenneth Galbraith, the economist and prolific writer, Updike's contemporary, commented on the wholesome nature of post war American society in

'The Affluent Society' (1938). He warned the America and the Americans about the danger involved in misreading social implications. He remarks:

The rich man who deludes himself into behaving like a mendicant may converse his fortune although he will not be very happy. The affluent contry which conducts its affair in accordance with rules of another and poorer age forgoes opportunities. And in misunderstanding itself it will, in any time

of difficulty, implacably prescribe for itself the wrong remedies (Galbraith 16).

The influence of Galbraith's warning is seen in Updike's novel *The Poorhouse Fair*. The 'society' (High 195) John Updike portrays in the novel is a highly organized and well-ordered 'affluent society'. Even the poorhouses are perfectly managed aiming at health, hygiene and longevity of the inmates, resorting to update health care. The spirit is altogether forgotten in attempts to reinforce the body. Consequently, in due course it leads to disintegration and chaos. The setting of the novel, the Diamond County Poorhouse, is a poorhouse for the aged in a future welfare state. It is surrounded with shallowly concave farm plains tilled in scientifically, small hills, typical of New Jersey and presiding above, a ribbed sky, pink betokening rain. The Poor Home is getting ready to welcome visitors for its annual Fair. People are excited to mingle with different generation. The place becomes a convenient sociological terrain for the interaction of the opposites—the old and the young, America's past and present, the inner-directed and the other-directed, theist and atheist. The fair is organized for a single day from morning to evening—the day set apart for the Poorhouse Fair. They come from the nearby town to visit the House on this day. And the old display and sell the fruits of their labours through the year: hand-made quilts, hand-carved toys and other artistic or useful things.

The story of the novel is divided into four parts. Preparation for the fair followed by fireside discussion among the old men after lunch, the order of Stephen Conner, a twenty five year young and the protagonist of the novel, for the cleaning of heap of earth and stones caused by the demolished wall, and finally is the fair. The preparation for the fair in the story is the first part. The old inmates of the poorhouse setup booths fix coloured lights and arrange their wires in the lawn despite the clouded skies threatening heavy rain. The very opening scene of the novel shows the strong dislike of the inmates for their new administrator—Stephen Conner. Conner has placed name tags on their chairs. This causes the antipathy of the inmates and gives vent to their rebellious spirit. They felt that they are managed by the administrator. It can be made out in

Gregg's explosive reaction: "What birdbrain scheme is this now of Conner's? Is he putting tags on us so we can be trucked off to the slaughterhouse?" (Updike 4). Later the soft drink for the fair arrives in the morning, and the truck driver, goaded on by Gregg, a poet and the man of passion, and his old inmates, backs the truck right in the poorhouse wall demolishing a part of it. At the end the old men disperse as the rain begins to pour at that moment.

Rain is the breakthrough of the second movement in the story that begins with the fireside discussion among the old men after the lunch. Hook, one of the major characters of the novel and a ninety four year old man of thought, shares nineteenth century political reminiscences with younger old men like Lucas—man of flesh and Gregg—a poet and man of passion (ibid146). He gets undivided attention of the whole company. Meanwhile, Conner, the prefect of the poorhouse, enters uninvited into their discussion which gradually develops into a debate between Conner and Hook on religio-political issues. Conner is an atheist. He believes neither God nor Heaven. He believed in perfect state of existence on this earth in a scientifically structured community. The inmates are shaken in their faith. The discussion embarrasses them a lot. It is the arrival of the band from the town which interrupted their discussion. They feel thankful to it. The musicians play indoors. Later, as the rain stops, they go ahead with plans to hold the fair.

The third part of the story starts with Conner's instructions to Lucas. Conner orders the cleaning of the heap of the earth and stones caused by the demolished wall. He loves 'cleanliness' (ibid 101). He wants the repair done before the fair begins. Some are carrying the stones; Conner himself handles the wheel-borrow but Gregg who is slightly drunk, shows a rebellion. Gregg deliberately aims a stone at the prefect which hits him on the legs and back consecutively. Conner backs out alarmingly. But the old people, men and women alike, as though caught by some mass hysteria join in the acting letting out their dormant animosity. Conner is humiliated without hurt. He reaches the safety of his room. Hook was suspected of the attack. Though Hook was not in the vicinity when

the pelting took place yet in Conner's mind he was the instigator. Authoritatively, he asked:

What made them do it? My patience is not limitless. Any repetition of mass defiance, and there will be measures taken. I promise that. In the meantime I suggest, Mr. Hook, that you yourself stop endangering your own health and the safety of the wooden buildings with cigars and matches? More than suggest it, I order it (ibid 108).

Last but not least, fair is the last part of the story. It is the time for mingling. The young and the old visitors from the town come first to the fair having needs and thoughts. The old come for talk; and the young for candy. The younger generation has nothing to do with the 'concept of America'. It is dead in their 'skulls' (ibid 127). They are here in the recollection of an older America, 'the America of Dan Patch and of Senator Beveridge' (ibid 126). The young visitors have no vision of the past. They talk on the present; try to construct new sagas; create instant history in the absence of visions of the past. In instance of this is given in the vulgar story they religiously recount about a pregnant girl and her escapades.

The arrival of the night brings conclusion to the Fair and the story. In the silence of the band the visitors are getting the thoughts of disperse. It is not true that everyone is going home. The adults form group of three and four just to warn each other. The principal characters are back with their usual occupations. Conner has recovered from the shock and is back at his desk. The old Hook remains unsleeping and has feeling of some urgency to talk to Conner for whom he feels sympathy. An intimacy takes place in their heart. A sigh of satisfaction reflects on Hook's face. It was the satisfaction of religion over modern and scientifically structured world. The story ends with 'what was it?' (ibid 147)

To begin the discussion of the characters of the novel it would be appropriate to outline the novelist's presentation. Broadly speaking, he creates basically two types of 'characters' (High 196), two contrasted sociological types—'inner-directed' and the 'other-directed'. The inner-directed symbolizes the men of older America, men of faith and vision, are represented in the novel mainly by John F. Hook,

Mendelssohn, and their associates, through some of the other old inmates, are sometimes prone to the temptations of the culture of consumption and leisure. But Hook, represented as autonomous individual, is free of anxieties, not losing his bearings in the midst of temptations. On the other hand, it is, other-directed people who represent America of the future, presented in the novel chiefly by Conner—the administrator of the Poorhouse, Buddy—Conner's assistant, Dr. Angelo of the West Wing, and insensitive young visitors to the fair. To Conner, 'heaven means a scientifically structured, well-ordered, healthy and homogeneous community on this earth itself. He is a non-conformist; he thinks of the welfare of the community where he lives. He, too, asks for the same conformity from the people under his charge. It would be right to say that Conner is a rational thinker with a scientific approach to an irrational world. So we find the conflict, the conflict of religion and faith, between the young administrator and the old inmates in the story. John Updike tactfully succeeds to establish the conflict between America's individualistic past and the conformist present, the older and the younger generation, the inner-directed and the other-directed men through the characters of the novel.

The novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, opens instantly with the inmate, Hook's discovery of evidence of Conner's attempts to order the world:

What is this?

What is what?

Why, look.

Onto the left arm of the chair that was customarily his in the row that lined the men's porch the authorities had fixed a metal tab, perhaps one inch by two, bearing MR, printed, plus, in ink, his latter name (ibid 3).

The above lines show the 'Linnaean Classification' (ibid 4) of seats and chair. It is presented directly at odds with the realities of life. The chair or seat is chosen by its convenience to the user in which there is no right or wrong chair. Confusion of ownership for the chair takes place and sets the conflict between the ideal and the real, between the what should be and what is, between the artificial order of soybean plastics and the natural and organic

order of personal craftsmanship, and between the man who is a part of the wholeness of life and the man who is apart from it. Here, John Updike skillfully selects the registers of the arguments that might have the ring of the cliché, but the sources of the argument are certainly human community. It proves unlikely source for the workings of his empirical philosophy. He is willing to make adjustments in his behavior looking up the 'radar screen'. He represents the evolving new type whose organ of gregariousness is overdeveloped while the rugged individualistic traits have dwindled out of sight. In fact, these type of conformists have appeared occasionally in American history. Emerson and Thoreau have already raised their voice against this type of trait of character more than a century ago. But in the 1950s, conformity has become the norm while it had been an exception in the earlier century. Conner never really acts in the world. The first introduction to his character is well illustrated here:

Conner's office was approached by four flights of narrowing stairs, troublesome for these old people. Accordingly few came to see him. He intended in time to change this; it was among the duties of the prefect, as he conceived the post, to be accessible (ibid 11).

It had not been he but his predecessor Mendelssohn who had chosen to centre the executive in the copula. He brings no changes and remains isolated in his own world of the poorhouse. Conner thinks of 'no one—as God' (ibid 12). He has lost all senses of omen. Broadly peaking, Conner is the lover of purity and cleanliness. He wants 'things clean' (ibid 51). His strong desire, somehow, creates a tension between the ideal and real world; leads to impurity and disorder to erupt from beneath. This is well seen not only on the inmates; attack on their leader, but in the motif of underlying imperfection that runs through the novel. Deliberately, it was Billy Gregg, a seventy year old retired electrician who flipped one stone that struck Conner's his left thigh unhurt and expecting such errors from feeble man like Gregg, he automatically bent to retrieve it, and Gregg threw another one which stung Conner's lock. Conner got frightened and felt a sort of opaque menace.

Although the hatred for the prefect dominates the story, the old people dare not deny his commands. The first real instance of this motif, after Conner's comment on Lucas, concerns a badly distorted by a car accident. The lame cat is called disturbance of accustomed order (ibid 38) whose presence flaunts Conner's authority. Conner realizes how badly he has misjudged the man. The responsibility of the distrust he bears these powerless old people was borne upon him. He wishes some feasible way of discontent himself; tries to compress all the affection and humility he feels into the gentle-spoken, "I'm afraid it's beyond help" (ibid 43). Finally it is Buddy, an assistant of Conner, shoots the cat. And Conner does not regret about ordering the cat killed. His thoughts for cleanliness get strengthened:

The world needed renewal and this a time of history when there were no cleansing wars or sweeping purges, when reform was slow ---- chemical earth (ibid 51).

So the gunshot ringing out pleases the rebel in Connor. Being an idealist, he is anxious to make space for the 'crystalline erections' (uplike: 51). He thinks certain would arise, once his old people are gone. Conner's rationalizes are once again shattered by the chaos revealed when the wall is broken:

"For the wall, so thick and substantial, was really two shells: what superposed the people standing in silence was that of the old masons had filled the center with uncommented rubble, silvers of rocks and smooth fieldstones that now tumbled out resistlessly" (ibid 51).

Unquestionably. the novel, *'The Poorhouse fair'* inaugurates Updike's search for identify—identity of Updike himself to some extent. At the end of the novel while Hook is searching for the 'fifth shadow of advice he must: impart' to Conner, we recognize the author and his search, for researcher like me it is somewhat wore; it covers the first landmark in the search, for he recognizes the novel as a 'bond' between the two contrasted worlds—the past and the present and a 'testament' to the fact that the author has partaken the existence of both.

As a result, the novel leaves footprint on time with this fictional projection into future and brings to light the subtle and delicate nuances of fiction and reality. The novel serves its purpose of sounding a prophetic warning against the dangerous trends in society, which carries to an extreme might eventually produce a sterile, mechanized and dehumanized society, it is an experimental novel—experiment with form.

Searchingly, *The Poorhouse Fair* is clearly a product of its socio—cultural environment. The conflict between the young administrator and the old inmates of the poorhouse is symptomatic of the greater conflict between America's individualistic past and conformist present, between the culture of labor and production of and that of consumption and leisure and between inner-directed and other directed men (Cuddon 294-95). The solution to the problem is to be found in 'autonomous individuals, who can waive aside temptations and cope with a world of vast choices. A proper historical perspective human vision, insight into human nature, and compassionate understanding of the spiritual needs are the qualifying marks of the 'autonomous individuals' who by establishing meaningful relationships would seek out solution to the problems, the novel's spinal three words – 'what was it?' (ibid 147), put nonetheless a final definition on the surface aspects of such a rational solution. Finally, the novel ends on a note of ambiguity. And ambiguity or paradox is the hallmark of a successful modern novel. Thus ambiguity reflects the complication of modern life. This is how Updike also captures the ethos of modern life: What was it? (ibid 147)

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