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JOHN UPDIKE'S THE CENTAUR: NOVEL OF "A MISPLACED MAN"

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ABSTRACT

John Updike (1932-2009), a prolific and multidimensional novelist, poet, short stories writer, critic, essayist, and above all a genuine painter, wrote his National Book Award awarded novel, *The Centaur* (1963). It is a story of three days of crisis in the lives of George Caldwell, mythologized as Chiron, a school teacher, and the hero of the novel, and his fifteen-year-old son Peter presented as Prometheus in the novel. The psychological tangle between artistic son and clumsily affectionate father is resolved in the novel in which the whole life of an American small town is brilliantly evoked. Here is the real texture and strength of contemporary American writing. *The Centaur* makes it clear that Updike is now one of the best, if not the best, of the American prose writers at work today. The novel begins with mythological characters in a realistic setting. George Caldwell [Chiron], teaching in a high school science class at Olinger, is shot in the ankle with an arrow by one of his students named Deifendorf.

Key Words: Prolific, Chiron, Prometheus, Centaur, Caldwell.

The novel is a long dreaming back as Peter Caldwell, with his black mistress in a loft in New York City, tortures himself with doubts "was it for this that my father gave up his life?." It dramatizes the theme of self-sacrifice intended to result in the freedom of the artist. The story develops through mythical terms. A centaur is a mythical demi-god, with the upper body of a man and the lower body of an animal. It recounts the story of a small town of high school teacher, George Caldwell who, as an impulsive Christian, leads a life of docility and utter suffering. He bears his share of privation calmly and bravely. He is sick in body and is constantly haunted by the possibility of impending death which permeates the whole novel:

> I can feel the damn thing, I can feel it in me like a clot of poison. I can't pass it . . . I can feel it in me like a poison snake wrapped around my bowels . . . I know where I got it . . . The damn kids. I've caught their damn hate and I feel it like a spider in big intestine. (46-47)

When an X-ray report clears that he did not suffer from Cancer but from Mucinous Colitis, out of love he gives up his precious life for the release of his fifteen-year-old son, Peter Caldwell, a would-be artist who need liberation for his artistic talent to shine because his arms are fastened to a rock. Now the adult Peter, perhaps as a mark of tribute of his great father who was always doing good deeds without the hope of any reward, narrates the three days of crises in their lives of his sleeping Negro mistress, Penny Fogleman, lying in bed with her. Both father and son display unspoken love for each other.

It is clear that myth is the vehicle and tenor of the novel. The use of myth indicates that the past is still glorious and relevant today and can be lived meaningfully. In other words, apart from the

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adoption of a dramatized cosmic frame work for human life, myth points us back to the past, to the re-actualization of the already realized, to the reaffirmation that those conditions still obtain. And, as Robert Detweiler points out, "Updike uses classical myth to shape a Christian – informed vision of life" (Detweiler 91). Logically, by setting off *The Centaur* against Updike's erotic novels—*Couples*, *A Month of Sundays* and *Marry Me*, we may observe how the author designates Agape and Eros as the two alternative pathways that connect the dualistic realm of reality. Moreover, in the novel, duality works in the opposite direction, by means of the Centaur symbol. Although he is, below the waist, a dung and semen-spewing animal, with his horses body the very symbol of potent lust, Chiron nonetheless fends off Venus's attempted seduction: "Have you ever wondered, nephew, if your heart belongs to the man or the horse?" He stiffened and said, "From the waist up, I am told, I am fully human".

That George Caldwell is Chiron is obviously suggestive of the dualistic human nature – part human and part divine:

> How strange he had grown! His top half felt afloat in a starry firmament of ideals and young voices singing; the rest of his self was heavily sunk in a swamp where it must, eventually, drown. Each time the feathers brushed the floor, the shaft worked in his wound. He tried to keep that leg from touching the floor, but the jagged clatter of the three remaining hooves sounded so loud he was afraid one of the doors would snap open and another teacher emerge to bar his way. (8)

Freed from Eros, Caldwell may assert his above-the-waist identity, a mind and spirit capable of Christlike wisdom and selflessness. Contrarily, Piet Hanema in *Couples* thinks oral-genital sex "scared" because it resolves the duality that normally divides one's being, uniting the spiritual being above the waist with the animal below. She says: "They move in the brain court. We set our genitals mating down below like peasants, but when the mouth condescends, mind and body marry. To eat another is sacred".

Speaking the truth, Caldwell's suffering is genuine. Hence he in the figure of Chiron demonstrates the paradox of man. Peter is Prometheus and the stolen fire is his artistic talent. Other characters too have their referents in Greek mythology. Both the story of Prometheus and of the sin of Adam deal with man's acquisition of forbidden knowledge and the price to be paid for what may be termed reason or "manipulative intellect." Both attempt to make sense of man's dual nature. The novelist's very use of an extended mythic parallel throughout a novel that is, on the surface, realistic is one more attempt to bring the spiritual into the ordinary and give it meaning and dimension, to "soften the edges" of cold reality as presented in *Rabbit, Run.* Updike has appended an index of Greek characters at the end of the novel for the benefit of the reader. Caldwell, according to Jack Richardson points out that the protagonist while portraying as Chiron "yields his immortality to expiate the sins of Prometheus, so that the father accepts death as a sacrifice to his artist son". He further says, "the various levels of the story, mythic and realistic, allegorical and literal, collide in this novel" (Richardson 48).

Justifying with mythical traits, Updike makes full use of the Chiron myth implications for the Christian imagination. To see the earth in the light of heaven is Updike's purpose in the composition of *The Centaur*. Under the circumstances, it cannot be overlooked that the particular myth illustrates the theme which echoes the central motif of the Christian story: a blameless life freely offered in order to expiate sin against the divine order. Such is the sacrifice made by Chiron and Peter as Prometheus. Updike sets their story in the context of sacrifice and atonement and thus is liable to raise the question of the purpose of existence and nature of the universe. George Steiner critically points out and writes about *The Centaur*, "is tiresomely obvious. . . . It is of course the gap between formal, technical virtuosity and the interest or originality of what is being said" (Steiner). Yet Updike often writes about man's search for personal immortality. He sometimes takes Protestant Christianity with ruthless seriousness. He wills to try to understand life in American small towns and suburbs as it is now lived.

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As a matter of fact, Updike begins with images of path being destroyed by mechanics, and reflects on the interaction of men, machines, and nature; he next finds images for a contemplative view of the world, he confronts death and last of all he confronts evil and finds an image for immortality. He seems to be struggling to find images like J.D. Salinger in a more precious way, for that deep, serene, perennial way of looking at life which the secular, active West has lost.

In fact, through the myth, Updike introduces his religious preoccupations in the novel, for what primarily prompted him to use the myth was its thematic dimension, though the myth operates on other levels too. Updike himself makes this clear in an interview:

> I was moved, first, by the Chiron variant of the Hercules myth – one of the few classic instances of self-sacrifice, and the name oddly close to Christ. The book began as an attempt to publicize the myth: a correlative of the enlargening effect of Peter's nostalgia, a dramatization of Caldwell's sense of exclusion and mysteriousness around him, an excuse for a number of jokes, a serious expression of my sensation that people we meet are guises, do conceal something mystic, perhaps prototypes or longing of our minds. (*Paris Review* 96)

Updike presents the sympathetic portrait of a devoted but misplaced man in this novel. Caldwell is helpless and inadequate, caught up in a profession for which he is temporarily ill fitted and in economic circumstances which gave him no choice but to continue. Updike tells of the failure of thousands like him in American schools. He is half-bad, half-good, half-beast, and half-god. The author's choice of name Caldwell (called well) is quite suitable to his character of the protagonist in the ways of his life style, code of conduct, his nature and the sacrificial love in his life. This philosophy is illustrated through extensive use of metaphor which makes the author's point almost too well. In such a novel in which simultaneous perspective or double focus in theme and structure is achieved through the merger of fact and fiction, myth and reality, ideality and drab level, past and present, mundane and spiritual, human and divine, Updike's major preoccupations – Sex, Religion and Art – form an organic whole. The association of these three elements is made possible through the Tree – metaphor which functions as one of the controlling images of the novel. In the context of Sex, Peter's beloved, Penny (Pandora) becomes a tree in his dream. According to Edward Vargo, "though the tree – metaphor contains elements of Freudian sublimation of repressed sexual desire, it also operates within the context of dream to bring Peter to a kind of celebration of the mystery of human love" (Varo 96). Then the tree is transformed into a symbol of Art which is the solidification of Time – "this potential fixing of a few passing seconds" (59). Religion is seen as the fruit of pain calmly endured and of self-sacrifice:

> A tree of pain takes root in his jaw . . . Truly, the pain is unprecedented; an entire tree rich with bloom, each bloom showering into the livid blue air a coruscation of lucid lime-green sparks . . . Caldwell recognizes the pain branching in his head as a consequence of some failing in his own teaching, a failure somewhere to inculcate in this struggling soul consideration and patience; and accepts it as such. The tree becomes ideally dense; its branches and blooms compound into one silver plume, cone, column of pain, a column whose height towers heavenward from a base which Caldwell's skull is embedded. It is pure shrill silver with not a breath, not a jot, speck, fleck of alloy in it. (196-97)

Tree becomes the symbol of Calvary on which Christ was crucified. At the time of His crucifixion Christ is said to have said: "for others sake this great reward I yield". Caldwell also sacrifices himself for others. Thus his sacrifice becomes essentially Christian and takes on a redemptive note. Hence Updike shows that man achieves goodness by wanting the freedom of others and by unselfish love. In Caldwell's case, "only goodness lives. But it does live" (267). Broadly speaking, Updike uses sex freely and openly in his novels. He becomes so vividly graphic in his description of sex that it has led some critics even to resent it. But Updike justifies his

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presentation of sex in his novels by affirming that it forms an integral part of the whole architectural design of the novel. That is to say, it does not serve as an ornament but it is subtly drawn into it. However, the use of sex is as candid as one finds in the preceding novel. *Rabbit, Run*. It is explicit throughout:

> But my lady: below the waist, I am fully animal . . . The towel fell. Her breasts were tipped with desire. Do you think you will rupture me? Do you think us women so negligible? We are weak in the arms; but strong in the thighs. Our thighs must be strong; the world is rooted between them. . . Men are reeds; they no longer fill me. Come, Chiron, don't insult your lady. Disrobe of wisdom; you will be wiser when we rise. (30)

Or

> . . . my fingers probed the crevice between her thighs and my little finger, perhaps, touched through the muffle of faun-feeling cloth the apex where they joined, the silken crotch, sacred. Peter, no, she said, still softly, and her cool fingertips took my wrist and replaced my hand on my own leg. I slapped my thigh and sighed, well-satisfied. I had dared more than I had dreamed. So it surprised me as needless and in a shy way whorish when she added an outer explanation; as if, if we were alone, the earth would sweep up and imprison my forearm. (111)

The book is replete with passages of such vivid description putting emphasis on the motif and characterization in the novel.

Though there is no scene of actual love-making or oral-genital contact in *The Centaur* as we find in *Rabbit, Run* or in *Couples*, yet we find scenes of seduction. Two of them are performed in the open class before the teacher Caldwell—one is the seduction of Iris Osgood by Zimmerman [Zeus], the principal of the Olinger high school and the other is of Becky by Deifendorf [Hercules]. Caldwell suffers this humiliation which is in keeping with the story of humble man subject to a series of mortifications and misfortunes, which ultimately result in humility and modesty. Though he registers his protest against the mocking of his authority and dignity by hitting Deifendorf with the same steel shaft with which he received a wound in his ankle for no fault of his own, he nonetheless treats him rather affectionately later in the novel. He also does not bear contempt against Zimmerman who constantly keeps him at his wits' end and is always unkind to him. In fact, Caldwell maintains his stead-fast course among disintegrating surfaces. Moreover, his humiliation leads him to withdraw from this mundane world. He gradually feels himself alien to it. His isolation turns into inner torment and finally becomes a part of his selflessness. Actually, it is his humility, a state of nothingness, in religious terms that enables him to submit himself to the Christian self-sacrifice.

The attempted seduction of Chiron-Caldwell by Venus-Vera is of profound significance in the sense that it reveals his aloof and selfless personality. In the novel, sex is equated with love. And, "Love has its own ethics, which the deliberating will irrevocably offend" (31). But the notion of sex is as varied as human beings are. Venus and Chiron present divergent views. For Venus, sex as love operates on a very superficial level; it is no more than the mere sexual fulfillment. For Chiron, it demands a certain moral propriety and a code of conduct in the religious sense. Venus commands Chiron, her kin, to make love to her. But he, warned by a thunder, resists the temptation of seduction on two grounds that it would amount to incest and that it is day. In contrast to Chiron, incest bears no moral rectitude for Venus who views it in the evolutionary and historical perspective: "it always is: we all flow from chaos" (30). But Chiron's objections are rooted in ethics and religion. In religion, it is common knowledge that incest is a heinous crime and love-making in light is completely forbidden. Hence a man who transgresses God's commands commits sin and is liable to serve punishment if not necessarily now at least surely in the afterlife. At the end of the encounter in Arcadia, Chiron as Caldwell has a feeling that he has somehow dispersed "the God who never rested from watching him" (31). Significantly, he had heard a thunder behind. Hook in *The Poorhouse Fair* and Piet Hanema in *Couples* feel the same way that some invisible

power is always watching their activities. Like Rabbit, Caldwell does attempt to love yet his intentions are far from fulfilled in a world apparently devoid of meaning. To Caldwell, it's is no "Golden Age", that's for sure. It is rationalism, in the form of his principal Zimmerman that appears to have provoked his opinion. Significantly, though, Caldwell is not wholly alienated and in a sense is not a full participant in the "absurd". As a teacher he is very much a part of society. It is his son Peter, who sees the absurd, the disparity between his father's intentions and the reality he encounters: "Oh Daddy", Peter snaps, "you're ridiculous. Why do you make such a mountain out of a molehill? Zimmerman doesn't even exist in the way you see him. He's just a slippery old fat-head who likes to pat the girls" (189). As his father's critic, he sees him as "silly" but fails to see himself mirrored in his father in his own idealistic approach to life.

On the other hand, as Venus appears unscrupulous, she has no such fear of her actions being watched: "Good: the gods are asleep. Is love so hideous to hide in the dark?" (30). She acts like Lady Chatterley in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* because she is ready to play a second fiddle to any man who has "the massive potency of a stallion" (25). She thinks that sex is the only pleasure the "Fates" forgot to take from them and they should not deny it. But she considers wisdom inimical to its free enjoyment. As Chiron is renowned for his scholarship, she fears that his scholarship might prove a bottleneck in her sport. This is why she asks him: "Disrobe of wisdom; you will be wiser when we rise" (30). But in her own words, he [Caldwell] does not like women. Caldwell's wife Cassie echoes Venus: "If there is anything I hate it is a man who hates sex" (65). Thus his distaste of women is suggestive of estrangement of sex in him and in turn his exclusion from the material world. As a matter of fact, it is an aspect of his selfless personality. And perhaps linked with it is his perception of all women kind:

> Shallow, narrow and selfish. Selfish. Too easily seduced, too easily repulsed, their wills wept self-indulgently in the web of their nerves and they left their dropped fruit to rot on the shore because of a few horsehairs. So seen through one side of the prism he had made of the tale, taunting small faced goddess before him was to be pitied; and through the other, to be detested. In either case Venus was reduced. . . The linden has many healing properties: a deferential rebuke if she chose to accept it; otherwise a harmless medical truth. His long survival had not been attained without a courtier's tact. (24-25)

Now it is evident that the Venus concept of sex is completely earthly and the irony is that she is sterile. Chiron-Caldwell's approach to sex is diametrically opposed to that of Venue—wholly religious, of much deeper significance and a mirror of the own divinity. The threat and presence of death, as in *The Poorhouse Fair* and *Rabbit, Run*, also finds a consistent pattern working in this novel. The presence of Peter's father is, in fact, to him that of a god with a very tenuous earthly existence. The novel defines the relationship between man and death or nothingness. *The Centaur*, if *Rabbit, Run* dealt with man in the aesthetic sphere, is a parable of the man of action, and in this sense is a partial answer to the question of how one fills the void.

Another variation on the use of sex in the novel is presented through the Reverend March, the Calvinist minister. Unlike Caldwell, he does not regard sex as something sacred and ennobling but holds an entirely commercial view regarding it. He looks at women in terms of the consumer products which can be easily bought at one's sweet will. In his opinion, the value of women is totally dependent on the male perceiver: "they will sell for any price—a candy bar, a night's sleep. Their value is not present to themselves but is given to them by men" (213). Having been force to perceive this, he is slow to buy. Thus he reduces human beings [women] to insignificance, to objects of saleable commodity. His lack of respect for human dignity is just reflection of his dead faith which is described in the novel as follows:

> Though his faith is intact and as infragible as metal, it is also like metal dead. Though he can go and pick it up and test its weight whenever he wishes, it has no arms with

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> which to reach and restrain him. He mocks it. (214)

As Reverend March's faith is unshakeable, he betrays and mocks it. Naturally a man with a faith "like metal dead"—metal being the symbol of commerce and industry –finds his opposite in sexually barren Vera Hummel, the gym teacher. In his case a barren faith attracts a barren sex. His materialistic outlook of sex exposes his hypocritical Calvinistic faith which is detested by Caldwell, a Lutheran. Consequently Rev. March feels himself ill at ease in Caldwell's presence and avoids religious discussion on the pretext of shortage of time. In contrast to Rev. March, Caldwell's strength of faith obviously lies in his lack of interest of sex.

The most significant point of view about sex is that of Peter who links it with adolescence and innocence. As he does not perceive sex in terms of valuing or pricing, he functions as a counter-point to the Rev. March. Unlike his father, Peter is excessively drawn to the magic of sex which transports him to dream world where his sexual desires find complete fulfillment and the effect is ameliorative on him. He gets exasperated at his father's inability to understand sex the way he does. Whereas Caldwell is scared, of being fired, at seeing Mrs. Herzog, a member of the school Board, coming out of Zimmerman's room, Peter looks at this episode from a different angle. When his attempt to remove the unfounded fear of his father is of no avail, he realizes that his father lacks the vision of the obvious: "that women who run for the school Board are beyond sex that sex is for adolescents" (189). "Beyond sex" does not actually suggest sexual impotence of any sort but implies that it has ceased to mean anything to women like Herzog. Rather it is purely mercenary and a tool for social prestige and upliftment.

However, Peter sees sex as "sheltering love" in the figure of Penny, a fellow student, who is the soothing influences on him and opens for him her own sexuality. For him, it takes on a sacrificial note: "And there was that in Penny . . . a sheltering love . . . she would sacrifice for me. And I exulted through my length as I wonder why. This was a fresh patch of paint in my life" (50). In fact, what is detachment in the father becomes a means of exaltation in son. As he learns the life-giving potential of self-sacrifice from his father, he learns the life-giving potential of love from Penny. Naturally, he seeks the permanence of love:

> That was it, yes; and in the dream it didn't even seem strange. She becomes a tree. I was leaning my face against the tree trunk, certain it was her. The last thing I dreamed was the bark of tree: the crusty ridges and in the black cracks between them tiny green fleck of lichen. Her. My Lord, it was her: help me. Give her back to me. (49-50)

Although, Peter, a professed atheistic communist and secular humanist, believes that he can find fulfillment in human love, his atheism does not prevent him from praying for the immortality of love. He even asks Penny to pray, and he himself prays, for the survival of his father who is carrying death in his bowels and which seems imminent. His prayer exhibits his essentially religious sensibility. It is relevant here to quote the remarks of Joyce Carol Oates in this context. She writes:

> In asking of love that it be permanent Updike's characters assert their profoundly and historically-oriented religious temperament, for not many religions have really promised on immortality of the ego let alone the theistic mechanism to assume this permanence. In Updike, Eros is equated with life itself, but is usually concentrated, and very intensely indeed, in terms of specific women's bodies; when they go – everything goes. . . Peter discovers in kissing his girl, Penny that at the center of the world is an absence: when her legs meet there is nothing. Because he is an adolescent and will be an artist, Peter still values this 'nothing' and equates it with innocence. He experiences, his own artistry through this equation, as Chiron-Caldwell experiences his own divinity by simply accepting, as an ordinary human being, the fact of mortality. (Oates 466)

Since Peter is an artist in the making, it is not through prayer that he would make love, both sexual and familial, permanent but through art which, for

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him, radiates the innocence and hope, that of seizing something and holding it fast. He feels himself ignorant and impotent in the present but mighty in the dimensions of the future. He finds refuge and support in art. Hence he must proceed as an artist to capture the flux of unidentifiable things, to break the bonds of infinitude, to make both sex and Nature, though touched by death, beautifully, to give permanence to ephemeral time, and above all, to bridge the gulf between the inconceivable Heaven and the conceivable Earth as he is a creature between the boundary of the two. In turn, he will fashion forth his own world of beauty and useful truth with artistic symmetry. In Vargo's opinion, "Art is the ritual by which Peter will achieve eternal mythical present" (Op. Cit., 96). Though Peter, in his own eyes, is the end of a classic degeneration: priest, teacher, artist, yet, of him, in the words of G.W Hunt, "Art alone seems the bridge of permanence, the fixity of time, the conquest, though partial, of Nature and pastime" (Hunt 52). This fact is also reflected in Peter's desire to become a painter as painting is the most concrete and visual of all the arts. However, his admission that he is still a second-rate expressionist painter in a Manhattan loft is surely not an indication of his artistic failure and the failure of his father's sacrifice for him but reveals his modesty, a feature he shares with his father. After the metaphorical death of his father, Peter ruminates over his life of "half-Freudian and half-Oriental-Sex mysticism" and wonders, "Was it for this that my father gave up his life?" (224). This ambivalence is in keeping with Updike's view that a novel should be as mysterious as life is. Beside, Peter's reflection allows him through the narration of the story to reenact the past which was resonant with metaphor and which is fully capable of giving meaning to the present and illuminating the future which is his domain. He hopes that there will be a city of future where he will be free. Unlike Deifendorf who had something concrete to give to Caldwell—the breast stroke and twenty two free styles, it is in the realm of future that Peter hoped to reward his father for his suffering. Peter links the future with the air "which he is able to seize in great thrilling condensation with him" (98).

However, the spotlight on Religion, as already noticed, is focused through Caldwell. Like Rabbit, he shows distaste for the darker aspect of Christianity: "Born a Presbyterian, Caldwell became in the Depression a Lutheran, like his wife, and, surprisingly in one so tolerant, sincerely distruster the Reformeds, whom he associated with Zimmerman and Calvin, whom he associates with everything murky and oppressive and arbitrary in the Universal kingdom" (210). As a minister's son, Caldwell believes that God has made man as the best living thing in His Creation, and that Jesus Christ in the only answer. He says:

> Christ, the only place I can go if I leave this school is the junkyard. I'm no good for anything else. I never was. I never studied. I never thought. I've always been scared to. My father studied and thought and on his deathbed he lost his religion. (225)

Caldwell's father lost his "religion" because he failed to affirm God beyond reason. In other words, he could not turn himself from the flux of phenomena, towards the centre of soul, by putting aside all concepts and images. In contrast to his father, Caldwell affirms the primacy of faith over reason by drawing his attention from the multiplicity of the phenomenal world, with its image-making, its logical reasoning and discursive thinking. Above all, Caldwell further extends the faith of Hook and Rabbit. That is to say, Caldwell demonstrates that reason, as it attempts to disprove the existence of God, is detrimental to faith which needs no validation other than itself. Then, for him, like them man's intuitive thirst for immortality demands a belief in God who should not be seen in the manner of created things. This fact is clearly brought out by Caldwell's remark about his father's loss of religion. Caldwell, in a world of technology characterized by shoddy workmanship that parallels the soybean plastics of *The Poorhouse Fair*, has his existential crisis in the face of the endless zeros of a science lesson that he is teaching. The sky, a reflection of the frightening infinity generated by the world of science in which God [in this case Zeus] is dead, is described later in terms of its tenuous weight and menace, for God's mercy is at an infinite distance.

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The father-son relationship is inversed in the following novel, *Of the Farm*, in which the mother sacrifices herself for the freedom of her thirty-five year old son who is a failed poet. Unlike *Of the Farm*, Peter's attachment to his mother is not a strong motif of Updike's third novel *The Centaur* because the focus in the novel falls on father-son relationship and as a result the mother-son relationship is pushed in the background. The adolescent Peter wants freedom for the vigorous flowering of his art. His father realizes his son's urgent need for freedom and consequently gives up his own priceless life. In so doing his father enteres a total freedom and Peter becomes a Prometheus unbound.

Searchingly, we find the autobiographical elements in *The Centaur*. It is a tribute to Updike's father, a high school teacher, who supports his son, wife, and her parents for many years on a meager salary. The characterization of his father, mother, and grandfather, the concentration of all their hopes on their one, artistically talented son, even the farm outside of the town where the family lives, all these aspects of the novel can be traced to Updike's past. The novelist has transformed this past skillfully into a mock epic, a novel that rests upon the fundamental disjunction between classical allusions on a heroic scale and mundane events. The narrative structure of the novel moves back and forth from classical myth to a literal realism in a way that may first be confusing, but ultimately enriches the novel, the narrator, who presents the novelist. Peter is an artist living in Greenwich Village, who remembers the events of three days during his adolescence. In this regard, this novel is in identical term with *Of the Farm.*

While digesting the novel, in course of time, the novel arises a number of questions such as: Can parenthood provide order out of chaos? Can it offer substitute religious order, an alternative, natural priesthood? These questions culminate in Caldwell's query "was it for this that my father gave up his life?".

No doubt, the novel deals with the artist's dependence on a framework of belief, a metaphoric vision, whether Christian or Classical. It is the work of art which Peter has created from his recapturing of his lost heroic vision for the space of time during which the novel is written.

Moreover, *The Centaur* seems to be a part of Updike's search for new dimensions in religion which will satisfy the needs of the neurotic individual. It stresses the confusion of our time, especially for the dedicated seeker of truth. It declares God's existence and, with optimism characteristic of the novelist in his writing career, sees hope in the perpetual cycles of life and death. In Caldwell the novelist has drawn a contrast to Rabbit of *Rabbit, Run*. Rabbit evades responsibility in his questing after truth while Caldwell tries to cope with life driving himself mercilessly in dedicated service to his profession, the community and his family till he drops dead. To Caldwell, "service is his way of life, his way of searching for his place in the cosmic design. His devotion to his disciples is a sacred duty; searching for truth is his second nature". But failure is Caldwell's most familiar experience. He fails in his communications with his wife and meeting the everyday needs of his son and to discipline his pupils adequately. He believes he has wasted his life in a profession for which he is unsuited. He accepts the role of the born loser, tormenting himself with his inability to find answers for philosophic questions most people don't bother to ask. His loyalty to others and to the pursuit of Truth proves superficial. Selflessly, he serves his profession, his pupils, his son and his wife. On the Christian touchstone standards he is successful; he lives by the law of love. Unlike Rabbit his search does not go wasted; for Caldwell becomes the "star" after his death, as his son visualizes him in the final surrealistic chapter of the novel. On the contrary, by the standards of modern society he is a misfit. In his own eyes he is hopelessly inadequate as husband, father, teacher and learner.

Outstandingly, Updike's *The Centaur* is about teachers and their modesty on the subject of teaching. Updike while penning this novel manages to play no less than five distance variations on the theme of pedagogy. First lesson concerns the theory of evolution, the second the myth of creation; the third consists entirely of mathematical drill, the fourth of the tutoring of dull girl for a quiz in geology, the fifth of commentary on a bright boy's faltering translation of Virgil. Optimistically, *The Centaur*

proclaims God's existence and visualizes hope in the perpetual cycles of life and death. Updike's vision of life in this novel holds hope for humanity, for death is not the end but an assurance of eternal life and though man is only a part of God's vast design his is significant and Caldwell's life bears testimony to this fact.

In the novel, he repeatedly refers to ignorance: "Ignorance is bliss" (180), "Heaven protects the ignorant". On the religious level ignorance is a form of awareness which is not that of intellect but which alone can lead men to deeper truth. Through his ignorance Caldwell exhibits a state of stillness and passivity, a state much desired in the religious realm.

As "in the upright of his body sky and Gaia mated again" (267), Caldwell embodies the epigraph of the novel, taken from the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, which indicates the religious import of the novel. As the kingdom of heaven lies inside, it cannot be conceived but it can be experienced intuitively through faith. However, heaven can also be realized by shedding the earthly body to dust of which it is made up. Caldwell transcends the mundane qualities inherent in man through death and enters a "total freedom" by giving his life to others. It must be pointed out that there is a difference between Chiron's acceptance of death and that of Caldwell's. Chiron seeks release from pain through death. Caldwell accepts a little of pain that is death. Only this way does he become the redeemer of Peter. Herein lies the significance of Caldwell's sacrifices. The theme of sacrifice is beautifully brought out in the following lines:

> While each cell is potentially immortal, by volunteering for a specialized function within an organized society of cells, it enters a compromised environment. The strain eventually wears it out and kills it. It dies sacrificially for the good of the whole. These first cells who got tired of sitting around forever in a blue-green scum . . . Let's get together and make a volvox. (41)

Thus Caldwell's own significant role in the scheme of life is obvious. His altruism becomes meaningful because he believes in God. And a do-gooder just lives on the surface of decency if he does not believe in God. His moral efforts are thus reduced to mere "busyness". In Updike's fiction, the key to goodness is faith. However, Caldwell's sacrifice also asserts religion's claim that Time has been conquered in Jesus Christ in whom the Creator and His creation merge. On the other hand, through Peter, the novel asserts the possibility and hope that Art can become a means of salvation for mankind if life is beautifully and faithfully presented in artistic terms so that Nature might accept it. The novel's movement between religion and art gives it an ambiguous quality, in Updike's words, a yes-no quality. This novel is certainly an advance on the preceding two novels—*The Poorhouse Fair* and *Rabbit, Run*—in that Updike for the first time talks at length about Art, and for the first time Updike's major preoccupations—Sex, Religion, and Art—combine into a whole. In the first novel, the focus falls on Religion, Sex and Art are cursorily treated. In the second novel, Sex mingles with Religion, though the novel remains largely theological in its dimension; and Art finds no mention at all. However, it is *The Centaur* that the machinery of Classical myth has been so effectively employed that it has become a real work of art. Moreover, the prose is fresh and sharp in comparison with earlier novels.

Finally, Caldwell, saying goodbye to everything, tidying up the books, readying himself for a change, a journey—there would be none, answering the question of the preceding novel *The Poorhouse Fair* 'After Christianity, What?', accepts death. We succeed to search the answer of the question and it is Christianity itself and next to none.

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