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# *Racial tensions in Updike's Rabbit Redux*

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The story of Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom is set in Bréwer, Pennsylvania, between July and October 1969, a period when Americans had their attention captured by three major topics: man's landing on the moon, the nation's increasingly unpopular commitment to the Vietnam War and, at home, the racial uprisings which flared up every summer. It is in this context of space exploration, a prowess of American technology, and ruinously expensive war in the Far East that the problem of racial tension between Blacks and Whites is presented. Whereas man's first step towards the conquest of other planets already heralds the twenty-first century, the racial issue appears oddly anachronistic, an unsavoury hangover from the pre-Civil War era. As for the American involvement in Vietnam, it underscores the paradoxical situation of a country which claims to be the champion of democracy and freedom abroad, while part of its own population at home is still struggling to assert its rights to a share of the nation's wealth.

A terrifying picture of the tension between Blacks and Whites in the late 1960s emerges from Updike's novel. We shall see that various elements contribute to the overall effect: T.V. news about racial clashes, conversations in which

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several white characters express their points of view on Blacks, and last but not least, the surprising intimacy which both unites and opposes Rabbit, the white hero of the novel, and Skeeter, the young black Vietnam veteran and small-time drug-dealer who spends a few weeks in his home.

Television, the reader is told in passing, broadcasts abundant programmes about the Blacks' sad history of bondage and oppression: "Slave ships, cabins, sold down the river, Ku Klux Klan, James Earl Ray: Channel 44 keeps having these documentaries all about it" (112).<sup>2</sup> There is also televised news of racial conflicts which disrupt law and order in various parts of the country; one Friday evening on the six o'clock news, the anchor announces with unwittingly grim humour, almost in the same breath, "the round-up tally on summer riots, the week's kill figures in Vietnam, the estimate of traffic accidents over the coming Labour Day weekend" (176).

Another time, coming back home, Harry finds Jill, Skeeter and Nelson with their eyes riveted to the screen on which the announcer, "mouthing as rapidly as a vampire," rattles off between two commercials:

On the racial front, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights sharply charged that the Nixon Administration has made quote a major retreat unquote pertaining to school integration in the southern states. In Fayette Mississippi three white Klansmen were arrested for the attempted bombing of the supermarket owned by newly elected black mayor of Fayette Charles Evers brother of the slain civil rights leader. In New York City Episcopal spokesmen declined to defend further their controversial decision to grant two hundred thousand dollars towards black church leader James Forman's demand of five hundred million dollars in quote reparations unquote from the Christian churches in America for quote three centuries of indignity and exploitation unquote. In Hartford Connecticut and Camden New Jersey an uneasy peace prevails after last week's disturbances within the black communities of these cities. (194-95)

Later, one of Harry's neighbours, Showalter, incidentally mentions that a recruitment programme for Blacks has been implemented in the computer company he works for (248). The reader is thus reminded that regulations adopted by the federal government in 1968 required all institutions doing business with or receiving funds from the federal government to conform to Affirmative Action guidelines which imposed the adoption of positive measures to recruit minorities thus compensating for past injustices.

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<sup>2</sup>. All quotes from *Rabbit Redux* are from the Penguin edition, reprinted 1983. The novel was first published in 1971.

Since the Supreme Court's solemn rejection of the old doctrine of "separate but equal" facilities in 1954, much had been done indeed by the government to outlaw discrimination. The average white American, however, could not bring himself to consider the Blacks as equals. Earl Angstrom, Harry's father, represents a case in point. During the coffee break at the printing plant where they both work, Harry tells his father that one of the reasons why he does not come to visit his sick mother more often is that he does not want to leave Nelson, his thirteen-year-old son, alone in the house "with all these robberies and assaults all over the county" (145). Although Harry uses the non-committal pronoun "they" when speaking of the malefactors, Earl Angstrom does not doubt that "they" means the Blacks, for who else could come out into the suburbs and steal anything they can get their hands on? "It's these God, damn, blacks, is what it is," Earl Angstrom confides to Harry, and the old man launches into a passionate racist speech which sounds like a distant echo of Pap's in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*:

They can't do a white man's job, except for a few . . . so they have to rob and kill, the ones that can't be pimps and prizefighters . . . This country should have . . . shipped 'em back to Africa when we had a chance. Now Africa wouldn't take 'em. Booze and Cadillacs and white pussy, if you'll pardon my saying so, have spoiled 'em rotten. They're the garbage of the world, Harry. American Negroes are the lowest of the low. (145)

Earl Angstrom obviously expresses a point of view which is shared by many white Americans, even when they are not from the Southern states. One can easily imagine, judging from the accumulation of clichés about Blacks to be found in Earl Angstrom's speech, what stubborn opposition the policy of integration still met with in 1969 all over the country.

Later, when Harry has taken in Skeeter, his father feels obliged to tell him how worried he is "about this new development" (205). Although he is "no nigger-hater", and has been "happy to work with 'em," and would even live next to them if need were, Earl Angstrom warns Harry: "get any closer than that, you're playing with fire, in my experience" (205). What the old man finds particularly outrageous is the idea of a white girl having sex with a Black in his own son's house. "That menagerie over there, the way you're keeping it, is a desecration" (206), Earl Angstrom tells Rabbit. The neighbours, he goes on to add, will not fail to give him a piece of their minds when that black boy shows his face



outside. The subsequent events soon prove that he had rightly foreseen the Whites' reactions to the presence of a "Negro" in their residential suburb.

Janice, Harry's wife, seems hardly less hostile to the Blacks than her father-in-law. When she hears through her friend Peggy Fosnacht that Harry has taken in a Black, she immediately phones him at the printing plant to tell him that from now on all communications between them will be through lawyers. She was not too glad at the thought of Harry having an affair with the eighteen-year-old Jill but, though the pill was bitter to swallow, she could hardly complain since her husband was only paying her back in her own coin. With Skeeter, Rabbit appears to have overstepped the limits of decency. "You've taken a darkie into the house along with that hippie, you're incredible" (188), Janice now laments, trying to shame Harry with her insistence on the risks of exposing Nelson to contact with such immoral people as a hippie and, what is worse, "a darkie." The derogatory word "darkie" is loaded with contempt for the Blacks whom Mrs Angstrom clearly associates with lack of all moral sense if not with outright criminality.

Although Janice and Earl Angstrom are prejudiced against the Blacks, it is clear that their hostile feelings will never lead them to any act of physical violence. Harry's neighbours embody a far more hypocritical and dangerous kind of racism. One evening as he walks home from the bus stop, Rabbit is accosted by two men who introduce themselves as two of his neighbours. Both men are representative of a category of white Americans. Mahlon Showalter, a white collar, is in his forties and sells computers; Eddie Brumbach, a blue collar, works in the assembly shop of the local steel plant. He is younger than Harry, and an L-shaped red scar runs along one side of his face.

It quickly turns out that the neighbours' problem hinges on the presence of a Black in Harry's household. To begin with, however, Showalter carefully avoids the word "black". "I notice now," he tells Harry, "*he* (my italics) plays basketball with the boy right out front" (247). As Rabbit does not seem to understand and repeats the pronoun 'He?' questioningly, Showalter explains: "The black fella you have living with you". The smile on the man's face suggests that "the snag in their conversation has been discovered" (247). Brumbach, the more aggressive of the two — "the muscle," as Rabbit sees him — adds that his younger boy saw them (that is the white girl and the Black) "screwing right on the downstairs rug" (248). Rabbit's objection that it is the kind of thing you see when you look in other people's windows, touches off Brumbach's anger; the man steps in front of Showalter and addresses Harry threateningly: "Listen, brother. We're trying to raise children in this neighbourhood . . . This is a decent white neighbourhood . . .

that's why we live here instead of across the river over in Brewer where they're letting 'em run wild" (248). As Rabbit's eyes unwillingly fix the ugly scar on Brumbach's face, the Vietnam veteran makes it clear to him that if he fought and got wounded, it was so that he could "have a decent life here" (250), which amounts to saying that he wants conventional segregation enforced in his neighbourhood. In Vietnam he fought beside Blacks and there were no problems; "because we all knew the rules," Brumbach explains. Anyone who didn't, he adds as a warning to Rabbit, "Sometimes just by mistake they got fragged" (249).

Although Showalter — "the negotiations" — boasts his open-mindedness, he is just as prejudiced against the Blacks as his companion. His little speech begins with a declaration of good intentions towards the Blacks: "White neighbourhood isn't exactly the point, we'd welcome a self-respecting black family, I went to school with Blacks and I'd work right beside one any day of the week," but it ends with the sad conclusion that Blacks are not to be trusted: "the trouble is, their own leaders tell them not to bother, tell them it's a sell-out, to learn how to make an honest living" (248); in other words a self-respecting black family would be hard to find. "It's the girl and the black together" (249), "it's the circumstances of what's going on, not the colour of anybody's skin" (250), Showalter argues hypocritically, which account for his and Brumbach's decision to come to Harry "in all politeness" and persuade him that he should move the black out.

The message delivered by Rabbit's two neighbours is a nakedly racist threat and the ensuing arson of his house appears as an act of war on the part of people determined to punish a traitor, asserting thereby — or so they think — their white identity.

When Harry's house burns down, the police do not even consider the possibility that white people may have started the fire as a warning that they will not tolerate any "niggers" in their decent neighbourhood. Although there is no evidence against Skeeter, his guilt is taken for granted for the sole reason that he is black. The chief policeman who conducts the enquiry does not ask Rabbit if he suspects his guest of arson; what he would like to know is simply whether Harry has "any idea why he (Skeeter) set this fire" (281). The young Black makes a most convenient culprit: He was a little fish, a punk," the chief policeman tells Harry,

We hoped he would lead us to something bigger . . . Civil disturbance. The blacks in Brewer are in touch with Philly, Camden, Newark. We know they have guns. We don't want another York here, now do we? (281)



Whether Skeeter committed arson or not, the policeman cannot regard as altogether innocent a man who is undoubtedly in touch with black leaders responsible for civil disturbance in other larger cities.

In fact the only white characters who prove to be entirely free from racial prejudices stand outside the social framework either on account of their youth or because they have rejected the "System": the thirteen-year old Nelson is still a child, the eighteen-year-old Jill has run away from her rich family whose values and conventions she scorns.

Rabbit does not share Jill's pro-Black enthusiasm, yet he is far less prejudiced against the Blacks than most white characters, otherwise he would refuse categorically to give shelter to someone like Skeeter.

At the beginning of the book, after he has had a drink with his father at the Phoenix, Rabbit gets on a bus to go home. With the bus sequence the Blacks make their first, massive but anonymous, appearance in the novel. "The bus has too many Negroes," Harry thinks. They have grown noisier than they used to be when he was a tiny kid; but one must grant that they remember how to laugh. They have bushy heads, but "That's O.K." Harry reflects, "it's more Nature, Nature is what we're running out of" (16). Determined to be tolerant, Harry mentally acknowledges that being a Negro is a sad business for they are always underpaid. But then they are "certainly dumber" (17) than the Whites, Rabbit goes on to think. Yet to be fair he immediately concedes that "being smart hasn't amounted to so much, the atom bomb and the one-piece aluminium beer can. And you can't say Bill Cosby's stupid" (17).

Rabbit undoubtedly believes himself to be perfectly impartial and free from racial prejudices since he feels no hostility towards the Blacks. At the printing plant he works with two Negroes, "and after a while", he remarks, "you didn't even notice" (16). Yet his views on the Blacks' limited intelligence — that some coloured people are not stupid seems to be the greatest compliment he can pay them — prove that the myth of the white man's superiority is deeply rooted in his mind.

Beyond what the narrator ironically calls Harry's "educated tolerant thoughts" (17) a certain fear can be felt, a fear triggered off by the Blacks' increasing numbers, their noisy behaviour, but above all by the fact that they are different; for what one does not understand is always perceived as a threat. "They are a strange race," Rabbits thinks as he watches four black kids seated right under him, "Not only their skins but the way they're put together, loose-jointed like lions, strange about the head, as if their thoughts are a different shape and

come out twisted even when they mean no menace" (17). The very comparison with lions hints at some mysterious danger, and the suggestion is further reinforced by the simile which assimilates young Afro-Americans with seeds of some tropical plant surreptitiously invading what Harry considers as his territory: "It's as if, all these Afro hair bushes and gold earrings and hoopy noise on buses, seeds of some tropical plant sneaked in by the birds were taking over the garden. His garden" (17).

One Saturday during coffee break, Buchanan, one of the Blacks who work at the printing plant, approaches Rabbit in an engaging manner. Like everyone else at the plant Buchanan knows that Janice has deserted her husband and he feels for him. The brief exchange between the two men is an opportunity for Rabbit to realize that, although he has known Buchanan by sight and name for years, he "still is not quite easy, talking to a Black; there always seems to be some joke involved, that he doesn't quite get" (91). Rabbit is startled by Buchanan's direct questions — "Gettin' any tail?" (92), the Black asks him point blank — and by the abrupt phrasing given to a wisdom of the most practical kind. "Just 'cause your wife's gettin' her ass looked after elsewhere don't mean the whole world is come to some bad end," Buchanan philosophizes, "You should be havin' your tail, is all" (92). Though he feels embarrassed, Harry cannot doubt that the Black, far from intending to offend him, is trying to help him out of his depressive state. When Buchanan invites him to come to Jimbo's Lounge that Saturday night, Rabbit is, for the first time in his life, and almost against his will, drawn into something like a friendly relationship with a Black.

On entering Jimbo's Friendly Lounge where he finally decides to go for want of anything better to do, Harry receives an almost physical shock: all the people there are black; not a single white face catches his eye (102). Although no one threatens him, Harry feels in danger for the sole reason that he is the only White in a group of Blacks.

Black to him is just a political word but these people really are, their faces shine of blackness turning as he enters, a large soft white man in a sticky grey suit. Fear travels up and down his skin . . . Rabbit hangs like a balloon waiting for a dart . . . (102)

Harry's near panic is further conveyed through a series of similes associating the Blacks with aggressive animals or with wild beasts. The elderly woman (Babe) to whom Rabbit has been introduced is wearing a dress "the blood-colour of a rooster's comb" (103), the touch of her fingers on his hand is "reptilian cool"



(103), it "slithers nice as a snake" (104); as to the young man (Skeeter) who sits in the booth with her, his talk is so aggressive that Harry does not doubt but "he is among panthers" (104).

Although Harry, goaded by Skeeter's taunts, takes to his mouth the moist end of the joint Babe is offering him, he does not feel relaxed in the slightest for he mistrusts his black companions and suspects them of harbouring evil intentions toward him: "he is afraid of . . . being suddenly jabbed with a needle, of starting to hallucinate because of something dropped into his Stinger" (106).

It is only when Jill, a white girl, makes her appearance in the bar that Harry recovers some self-confidence: "With a white woman here he feels more in charge. Negroes, you can't blame them, haven't had his advantages" (112). Rabbit does not feel bellicose towards the Blacks, just somewhat patronizingly condescending. After a while his initial uneasiness and distrust dissolve under the combined influence of alcohol, marijuana and Babe's singing of the words of Ecclesiastes. Though fear remains, it is now mingled with joy: "Her singing opens up, grows enormous, frightens Rabbit with its enormous black maw of truth yet makes him overjoyed that he is there; he brims with joy, to be here with these black others" (111). Harry feels himself expanding "to include beyond Jimbo's the whole world with its . . . polychrome races" (117).

Contact with the Blacks then seems to have revitalized him; the lyrics Babe played on the piano a moment earlier have revived memories of "decades when Americans moved within the American Dream" (110) and her voice has called back to his mind the Lord's words of wisdom: "A time to be born, a time to die. A time to gather up stones, a time to cast stones away" (111). Paradoxically enough, it is not among white pals, but in a black bar, surrounded by people of another race, listening to an old entertainer who is also a prostitute and shares her joint with him, that Harry the outcast, the deserted husband, experiences a sense of brotherhood. "The whole episode," Judie Newman comments, "appears to celebrate both social and sensual reintegration, and a cyclic return to an original Golden Age."<sup>3</sup> This reintegration could only happen among Blacks because, unlike the Whites, they seem to form a closely-knit community capable of absorbing a new element, be it a white one, in "the liquid of laughter and tickled mutterings" (102) that flows with the music from the jukebox.

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<sup>3</sup>. Judie Newman, *John Updike* (Houndmills & London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1988), p. 50.

Yet Harry's sense of communion with the Blacks does not outlive the moment of elation experienced that Saturday night when listening to Babe's soul-stirring voice. Hardly has Harry agreed to Jill's request to have Skeeter in his house a couple of days that he feels terrified. "He is poison, he is murder, he is black" (185), Rabbit thinks, reflecting with horror that he will have to sleep with a potential murderer under his roof. A few weeks after his visit to the black bar, the idea of ever going to Jimbo's again merely frightens Harry for he knows that several Blacks, including Babe, have been recently apprehended in a police raid on the bar. With Skeeter in his house hiding from the police, he sees himself "sinking into an underworld he used to see only from a bus" (190).

Yet several incidents belie his view that all Blacks are potential robbers and killers. The night when he left Jimbo's with Jill, Harry realized that they were being followed by two young Blacks. Taking them for muggers he already imagined himself stabbed savagely and lying in his blood when the moonlight, falling on the hand of one of the youngsters, illuminated not a knife but Jill's pocketbook of pearls (122). The girl had left it behind at Jimbo's and Babe had sent the boys after her. Grim comedy is generated by the fear which seizes both Harry and the Blacks when confronted at night, in a deserted street, by an individual of a different race. For the black youths are indeed as scared as Rabbit who, mustering up his courage, bravely turns to face danger.

Rabbit's experience with Buchanan who makes a point of repaying the twenty dollars he borrowed from his new friend also demonstrates to the white man that he misjudged his black co-worker. When Harry sees Buchanan come over to him during the coffee break, he mentally prepares himself to resist the black man's appeals to his generosity. "If he asks more than twenty, let them riot in the streets" (189), Rabbit tells himself; but to his stupefaction he sees two ten-dollar bills in Buchanan's hand and hears the man call to him: "Friend Harry . . . never let it be said no black man pays his debts" (189-90).

Skeeter, one must admit, has little in common with Buchanan apart from the colour of his skin, and Harry's fear and distrust do not seem altogether groundless. Rabbit's reactions in the face of the young Black are strangely ambivalent: he feels physically uncomfortable, yet fascinated. He is aware of "the lustrous pallor of the tongue and palms and the soles of the feet, left out of the sun," and admires

the something so very finely turned and finished in the face, reflecting light at a dozen polished points: in comparison white faces are blobs: putty still drying. The curious greased grace of his gestures, rapid and watchful as a lizard's motions, free of mammalian fat. Skeeter in his house feels like a finely made electric toy; Harry wants to touch him but is afraid he will get a shock. (217)

Although Rabbit's relations with Skeeter do not take a homosexual turn, the reader feels that they could easily do so. One thing is certain: Rabbit's relationship with Skeeter is not exclusively governed by fear. If such were the case, he would turn the young Black in to the police instead of assisting him in his escape. When the fire is being investigated, Harry, who knows that the police are on the side of his white neighbours, drives the young Black to safety thus keeping him from falling victim to racist fury.

Yet while he behaves towards Skeeter as towards a friend, Harry does not trust him. When Skeeter sits up at the back of the car which has reached a lost country lane, "Rabbit waits for the touch of metal on the back of his neck. A gun, a knife, a needle: they always have something" (287). The white man cannot bring himself to think of a Black otherwise than as an embodiment of what he takes to be the characteristics of the whole black race. The same applies of course to the black man's point of view about the white man; the unavoidable consequence of this state of things being that mutual fear is never completely absent from the relationships between Blacks and Whites.

The irrational nature of this fear is clearly exposed in the passage when Rabbit, Skeeter, Jill and Nelson watch *Laugh-In*, their favourite television skit. Black Sammy Davis Jr and white Arne Johnson appear on the screen, sitting side by side on a park bench, staring at each other. "They are," the narrator comments, "like one man looking into a crazy mirror" (214). In other words, appearances are deceptive, there is ultimately no fundamental difference between Blacks and Whites. On the few occasions when Harry, Skeeter, Jill and Nelson laugh together, they acknowledge their common humanity, thus "rejoicing in brotherhood" (185). The house at such moments "is an egg cracking because they are all hatching together" (185). But despite fleeting moments of genuine communion, hatred keeps lurking in the heart of the Black, and the white man's sense that he belongs to a superior race remains latent, ready to emerge at the first provocation.

The third section of the novel is named after the young Black whom Harry met at Jimbo's on the night when he took Jill to his house. The young man is



known as Skeeter although this is not his real name. As befits a Black who rejects the whole white social system in a bulk, the young rebel never reveals his identity. Once Harry has reluctantly agreed to give him shelter for a couple of nights, Skeeter becomes the most important person of the household, the one around whom each person's life revolves. Although he has jumped bail and knows that the police is after him, the young Black makes no effort to ingratiate himself with Rabbit; his attitude is just as aggressive and provocative as when Harry first met him in Jimbo's. Hatred has taken full possession of his heart and driven out all kindness and tenderness. Yet the words Babe uttered a few weeks earlier at Jimbo's as she looked him in the eye still echo in the reader's ears: "Now you loves little Jill" (108). The boy's answer at the time had been "You can love what you don't like, right?" (108). In fact "don't like" is far too weak to convey the extent of Skeeter's passionate aversion for every single member of the white race, Jill included.

So far the Blacks have been considered from the Whites' point of view. From now on the reader is going to discover the Whites and their society as a young Black sees them. When Harry advises Skeeter to turn himself in to the police, hinting that they will certainly take into account his being a Vietnam veteran, the young Black addresses the older man condescendingly as though he were talking to a simpleton.

'It dawns upon me,' he says, 'that you have a white gentleman's concept of the police and their exemplary works. There is nothing, let me repeat no thing, that gives them more pleasurable sensations than pulling the wings off of witless poor black men. . . . Truly they are constituted for that very sacred purpose. To keep me off your back and under your smelly feet, right?' (180)

When Rabbit objects that this is not the South, Skeeter contends that the South is everywhere; are they not "shooting nigger boys like catfish in a barrel" (180-81) way up in Detroit, the black youth asks jeeringly.

As Skeeter's stay in Rabbit's house prolongs itself, the young man begins to educate his host out of the worst of his racism by administering him a course in Afro-American history. Through contact with Skeeter, Harry comes to an awareness both of his own exploited status and of his class hatreds. To make him imagine how a "Negro" feels, the young Black asks him how he himself feels about those Penn Park people with their mock-Tudor houses and glitzy Cadillacs — one for the husband, another for his wife. "I hate them" (215), Harry replies,

and the feeling "expands, explodes" as he remembers how, when he was a child, his parents would buy day-old bread because it was a penny cheaper, "and Pop's teeth hurt to keep money out of the dentist's hands, and now Mom's dying was a game being played by doctors who drove Caddies and had homes in Penn Park" (215). If Harry has a chance of figuring out the passionate rage Skeeter feels toward the Whites, it is only through his own resentment of upper-class people and their unbearable arrogance.

During his seminars, Skeeter reviews American history from a black perspective. "He teaches Rabbit, Jill, and Nelson that the concept of freedom in America is based upon a lie, a lie which speaks of rights for all men but continues to enslave the blacks."<sup>4</sup> After the Civil War, Skeeter informs his audience, four million freed slaves without property or jobs thought "the hallelujah days" (200) had come. "Forty acres and a mule," he goes on to say,

that was the most pathetic thing, the way those poor niggers jumped for the bait. They taught themselves to read, they broke their backs for chickenshit . . . And all this here while . . . the crackers down there were frothing at the mouth and calling our black heroes baboons . . . Baboons, monkeys, apes : these hopeful sweet blacks trying to make men of themselves, thinking they'd been called to be men at last in these the Benighted States of Amurri-ka. (200-01)

Skeeter's powerless fury at this evocation is so intense that he wants to cry, to yell. Yet, mastering his excitement, he announces that now comes the interesting part: "The Southern assholes got together with the Northern assholes," the young Black explains, and together they worked out a deal. "What's all this about democracy, let's have here a dollar-crazy . . . Capital versus labour . . . You screw your black labour and we'll screw our immigrant honky and Mongolian idiot labour" (201).

In the black man's history, the swindle election of 1876, which cheated the Democrat Tilden out of the Presidency, represents the true revolution; the episode which took place a hundred years earlier merely concerned "a bunch of English gents dodging taxes" (202), Skeeter argues. As a result of the great swindle of 1876, not only did the South get slavery back, it also got control of Congress back by counting the black votes that couldn't be cast since the Fifteenth Amendment granting freed men the franchise was not implemented in racist Dixieland.

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon E. Slethaug, "Rabbit Redux: 'Freedom is Made of Brambles,'" *Critical Essays on John Updike* (Boston, Massachusetts: G. K. Hall and Co, 1988), p. 250.



As he lectures on the black man's history, Skeeter feels so emotionally involved in the humiliations his ancestors had to put up with that tears come to his eyes and he starts weeping. Such is his frenzy of resentment against the Whites who exploited his forebears that he must transfer his hatred on to the only white male that happens to be at hand. Turning toward Rabbit, he can no longer hold his powerless rage in check: "If I had a knife right now," he shouts at his host, "I'd poke it in your throat and watch that milk-White blood come out and would love it, oh, would I love it" (202).

Forgiveness is a word which has been banned from Skeeter's vocabulary. The law of retaliation is his ruling principle. He can neither forget nor forgive the outrageous treatment which was for centuries the black man's lot. "[W]e were like faithful dogs waiting for that bone, but you gave us a kick, you put us down, you put us down" (203), Skeeter utters passionately, struggling to control his crying. The young man considers that being a Black has put him outside conventional social frames of reference, for the laws which protect the property-owning Whites are aimed at him. As Gordon E. Slethaug puts it:

He sees himself as wrongly discriminated against by those laws, consequently absolving him from any responsibility or guilt for the failure or success of that system. No matter what he does . . . he can not be blamed, for he is simply acting out the irresponsible role that society designates for him. If society has set him adrift in the first place, then he owes no allegiance to that society.<sup>5</sup>

The young Black's bitter, foul-mouthed monologues about race relations tend to prove that Rabbit was not mistaken in the first place when, at Jimbo's, he assumed from Skeeter's nasty remarks that there was "not only a history but a theology behind his anger" (108). Hatred is the key-word of Skeeter's religion, a religion which involves retaliatory rites. One evening for instance, Skeeter makes Harry read to him an excerpt from Frederick Douglass's account of his life as a slave. As Rabbit reads aloud how the young Frederick witnessed a slaveholder whipping the slavegirl Esther, Skeeter tears off his shirt, and starts playing out a psychodrama in which Jill, cast as the oppressed black woman, is sexually abused by the white man whose part he himself performs. "[T]he fellation," Edward P. Vargo writes, "becomes a ritual to humiliate the White and to atone for white racism."<sup>6</sup> Harry's presence makes the atonement all the more gratifying to Skeeter who, when Jill has run upstairs, stretches, naked, on the sofa to hear "with [his]

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<sup>5</sup>. Slethaug, *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>6</sup>. Edward P. Vargo, *Rainstorms and Fire: Ritual in the Novels of John Updike* (Port Washington, N.Y., London: National University Publications, Kennikat Press, 1973), p. 166.



pores" (243) the passage when the young Frederick fights back the merciless slavekeeper. Stirred by the ecstasy which Douglass felt as his nails drew blood from the white throat he pressed in his strong fingers, "Skeeter affirms his own excitement with frenzied yeses and masturbation."<sup>7</sup>

Another episode lays the stress on the degradation to which racial hatred, sadism and sex combined may lead. "You is a big black man sittin' right there. You is chained to that chair," Skeeter tells Harry, "And I, I is white as snow" (255). As to Jill, the young man goes on, "this little girl here" is black as coal. "An ebony virgin torn from the valley of the river Niger, right?" "Stand up, honey, show us your teeth", "Turn around honey, show us your rump" (255), Skeeter commands his white slave. Once more the psychodrama includes sexual intercourse with Jill who must submit to her master's fantasies. That Skeeter derives pleasure from such perverse games is unquestionable; but one would be hard-pressed to imagine what profit they could bring to his black brethren.

Although the young Black thinks of himself as racial avenger and redeemer, his retaliatory methods obviously serve no other purpose but to gratify a definitely sadistic streak in his nature. By imitating the slaveholders and taking pleasure in doing so Skeeter unwittingly demonstrates that will-to-power, cruelty and sexual sadism are universal and not, as he seems to believe, specific of and confined to the Whites.

Peace, justice, and brotherhood are certainly none of Skeeter's aims. Only destruction of the Whites can satisfy him; Jill represents his own contribution to the holocaust: he deliberately brings the girl back to the drugged stupor Babe had helped her to escape, and when Rabbit's house is burning gleefully abandons her to the flames on the grounds that taking care of "some whitey woman" is none of his business, "let Whitey take care of his own" (287). Though indignant at the thought that the Blacks were considered not as human beings but as meat, Skeeter treats the Whites — Jill in particular — with exactly the same lack of respect. "The thing about a cunt, man," he tells Rabbit, "it's just like a Kleenex, you use it and throw it away" (242). His anti-White racism turns out to be dehumanising since it deprives him of all pity, let alone tenderness, for little harmless Jill, or for Nelson for that matter.

"We black men," Skeeter proudly declares, "are the future's organic seeds" (237), "we are what has been left *out* of the industrial revolution, so we are the

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<sup>7</sup>. Ibid., p. 165.

*next* revolution . . . You know it. Why else you so scared of me, Rabbit?" (203). Yet the black prophet is no political leader, and Buchanan's remark: "The young ones like Skeeter, they say All power to the people, you look around for the people, the only people around is them" (116) appears to be warranted. In fact there is no need for Skeeter to call his brethren to a racial crusade for the heydays of white America are over and white supremacy is falling apart. Skeeter, Charles Samuels writes, "sees Vietnam as an apocalyptic result of America's evil, which will be succeeded by a 'great calm', and then by black hegemony."<sup>8</sup> The Vietnam war, Skeeter argues, is the product of America's capitalistic, imperialistic and racist tendencies. Vietnam, he explains, is "where the world is redoing itself . . . It is where God is pushing through . . . Chaos is His holy face" (226).

To his startled audience of three, the young man announces "I am *the* black Jesus" (183), "I am the Christ of the new Dark Age" (239). Skeeter lives in the delusion of grandeur as self-styled messiah, heralding the era of black hegemony which, he is certain, will arise out of the ashes of the old order. His identity as Christ — or should one say antichrist? — is stressed by Updike's imagery. Jill warns Rabbit that the police will "crucify" (181) the young Black if they catch him. When Skeeter takes off his shirt, Harry has never seen such a skinny chest "except on a crucifix" (241). Skeeter sees himself pursued by Herod-Nixon (195); at the end of the novel he promises to "return only in glory," and Galilee (288) is the name of the place where the fugitive gives Rabbit an ironic blessing. Skeeter's figure is indeed surrounded by a constellation of Christic images and references; there is nevertheless one capital difference between him and Christ: in his case hatred and contempt have replaced love and forgiveness.

During one of the "educational" sessions in which Skeeter keeps harping on his favourite topic, Harry complains: "Jesus am I sick of the word black . . . For Chrissake, forget your skin." (195) Stung to the quick, Skeeter snaps back: "I'll forget it when you forget it, right?" Men's inability to accept differences appears indeed to be the main cause of racial tensions. Instead of thinking in terms of individuals, people tend to think in terms of racial groups as though all the members of a group were cast in the same mould. This is true of Rabbit's father, of his neighbours, and even to a certain extent of Rabbit himself; it is also true of Skeeter whose hatred encompasses all human beings with a white skin.

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<sup>8</sup>. Charles Samuels, "Updike on the Present" in *Critical Essays on John Updike*, p. 65.

Confronted with an uncompromising exposure of the prejudices of each racial group, the reader wonders whether Updike considers the reluctant and short-lived intimacy between Harry and Skeeter as a first step towards a better understanding between Blacks and Whites that might eventually lead to the advent of interracial brotherhood.

In fact there seems to be little chance of a reconciliation between Blacks and Whites as long as men keep "passing on the blows,"<sup>9</sup> as long as they do not learn to break the cycle of retaliation. Inflicting on others the humiliations one has been subjected to can lead to nothing but an escalation in violence. Relationships based on fear and mistrust, on the nurture of past grievances and of a yearning for revenge can only bring about the kind of psychological disturbances Skeeter is afflicted with. The young man's dream of substituting black power for white power provides no solution to the problem of racial integration; the new age he heralds would merely see the replacement of one form of oppression for another. The pattern victim-victimizer would remain; Blacks and Whites would simply exchange roles. We are very far indeed from Martin Luther King's dream of interracial brotherhood!

Skeeter's relations with Harry, Jill and Nelson remind the reader of Melville's "Benito Cereno." Like Babo's, Skeeter's case points to the difficulty of asserting one's freedom and escaping the intolerable situation of a victim without ultimately becoming a victimizer. A moral question is raised which receives no clear-cut answer: must the Blacks' liberation unavoidably mean servitude or destruction for the Whites?



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<sup>9</sup>. The phrase is borrowed from Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*.