Existentialism in *Rabbit Run*

**Abstract:** *Rabbit, Run* is a realistic novel written by American writer John Updike, which reflects the middle class life and social background of America during 1950s. And in this work, the author adds some reflections on arts, sex, religion and existentialism. The character “rabbit” is an anti-hero, whose six times of running reflects the idle and meaningless life of American middle class young men during that period. The paper will analyse the existentialism in the novel and endeavors of the modern people to build up self-identity.

**Keywords:** *Rabbit, Run* novel.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

1.1 **Introduction of the author and the work**

**Introduction of John Updike**

John Updike was born in 1932, grew up in Shillington, and lived through the Great Depression and World War. Updike’s father was a worker and later became a preacher, his mother got a great sense of literature. Tough as the life, Updike benefited from the parents and this laid the foundation of his later literary career.

The theme of John Updike was about the middle class life of American and Christian lived in suburban area, and his tone was usually exquisite and ironic, so that he was classified as a writer of New York school, but his creation and works transcended this particular style definitely. The four books of rabbit gave the readers a panorama of American middle class life and led readers to ponder over the spiritual dilemma and salvation of the lost American. From Updike’s view, the sex, the death and all the turbulence of middle class can be seen as a kind of corruption of evolution. The ancestor of middle class was puritan, who owned the middle income, lived in middle houses and possessed power and influence, and thus, the holder of views on value and morality. However, the power faded away from this class gradually and their standards could no longer represent American. At last, they were lost in the state of material abundance and spiritual emptiness. John Updike was a good observer of this phenomenon and tried to depict the dilemma of middle class American with the pen of existentialism.

1.1.1 **Introduction of the Work**

The background of *Rabbit, Run* was the United States in 1959, the character Harry joined the army after high school at the cost of losing his girl friend Ann, So he was lost in sadness and married a rich girl who was pregnant when they had nothing to prepare. After some years of idle life and work, he escaped from his wife, his mistress, his coach, and his wife for second time, the grave, and last, his wife. All together, he escaped for six times. It was the war and the meaningless life that led him to the disaster, while he couldn’t rebel it fiercely but just to avoid the problems and truth in a mild way.

And about the character of Harry, Updike used the image of rabbit to symbolize him. On the one hand, rabbit meant that he was always willing to run away, and on the other hand, the author tried to show that Harry was an ordinary person like all the people in the society during that period. Actually, Harry was an anti-hero with a weak, mediocre and kind character. He sought to build up his self-identity for several times, but he kept failing all the time. During these failures, he realized that people were not responsible for the tragedy and existence itself was a tragedy. This can be seen as Harry’s speculation on existentialism, he thought that people were living meaninglessly in a meaningless world.
What’s more, the author depicted the background of the society in a realistic way, during 1950s, radio, TV and magazines began to prevail, many people were addicted to these newly sprung mass media. And Harry’s wife was a TV addict and a drunkard, which was made a part of reason for Harry’s escape. Actually, Updike meant to use this broad social phenomenon to hint the root of the tragic ending of the characters both in this novel and in the society. Besides, the story happened in 1959, which was a turning point of the decade. This design of the backdrop stressed the sense of spiritual turbulence, alienation, the sense of anxiety before the doomsday.

1.2 Introduction of Existentialism

Existentialism is a chiefly 20th century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines, but centering on the analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad. Although the existentialists hold the view that both people’s living and the universe are meaningless, they think highly of people’s free will and individuality and believe that people could build up their identities and lead a meaningful life. Besides, the essence of existentialism lies not in analyzing the plight of a certain group of people but in reflecting the falling of human nature and the problems of the whole era, in this sense, the readers could not split themselves from the pains and anxiety of the characters in the novel, on the contrary, they would see the despair of all the human beings in this era (Yang 88).

2. The background of Existentialism in Rabbit Run

The story of rabbit happened during 1950s in America, during this time, the world and American changed a lot from every aspect of life.

First of all, existentialism took on its full shape after the end of World War II, people’s ideal life has been shattered by endless wars, such as the Korean War and the Vietnam war. The character Harry also felt lost and irritated after coming back from Korean War, the war deprived him of his girl friend Ann.

Secondly, the society of 1950s also developed at the cost of environmental degradation and people’s nostalgic mood of thinking about the past years, the bad smell and the ruined environment around his home often reminded Harry of the satisfying environment of his childhood. And this was also a reason why Harry escaped.

Thirdly, 1950s saw the rapid growth of commodity economy. Harry was a salesman who was familiar with the tricks of the society. “Walt Disney or the magipeel peeler company, admitting it’s all fraud but, what the hell, making it likable. We ‘re all in it together. Fraud makes world go round. The base of our economy. Vitonomy, the modern housewife’s password, the one-word expression for economizing vitamins by the magipeel method” (Updike 117).

Last but not least, the development of society showed its great impact on modern people with the emergence of mass media and the decadence of popular culture. In this novel, Harry couldn’t communicate with his wife well because she immersed herself in TV sets and alcohol all day so that he tried to run away from her and find a mistress to get comfort. This was also the true scenes of American middle class life during that period.

3. The Essence of Existentialism in Rabbit Run

3.1 The Death of God

In the story, Harry married Janice after they fell in love for only a few months and had a baby. However, the life was not that happy as they imagined, Harry couldn’t put up with the lifestyle and consumption concept of his wife Janice and then he ran away and turned to the prostitute Ruth. In addition, the location of Ruth’s home was very important, it was located opposite the church.

In some sense, all of these sets had the metaphor meaning with the Bible. First of all, Harry and Janice got a baby before they got married, which was similar to Adam and Eva who stole the forbidden fruit in the Eden, and they were punished for their behavior. Similarly, Harry and his wife also got punishment in their life, they had a barrier in communication and they lost one of their children (Wang 78). Secondly, the prostitute Ruth bore some relations with Satan in the Eden, who seduced the couple to eat the forbidden fruit.

In this story, Ruth was also a figure like Satan, when Harry felt ill at ease in his own marriage, she seduced him to her place, and her attitudes towards religion and faith shook Harry’s faith towards God. “Her building is brick like all the others on the west side of the street. Across the way a big limestone church hangs like a gray curtain behind the street lamp. They go in her doorway, passing beneath stained glass”. (Updike 173) From this setting, the readers could find that Ruth lived at the opposite side of the church, and the church’s gray color seemed discord with the colorful modern life of people, just like that the way Harry and his mistress chose was that with the stained glass, this was the metaphor of their indulgent lifestyle. And then, the church appeared again after they had affairs, in this part, Harry suspected himself for his faith. “Church bells ring loudly. He moves to her side of the bed to watch the crispy dressed people go into the limestone church across the street, whose lit window had lulled him to sleep”. (Updike 208) “The thought of these people having the bold idea of leaving their homes to come here and pray pleasures and reassures rabbit, and moves him to close his own eyes and bow his head with a movement so tiny that Ruth won’t notice. Help me, Christ. Forgive me. Take me down the way. Bless Ruth, Janice, Nelson, my
mother and father, Mr and Mrs. Springer, and the unborn baby. Forgive Tothero and all the others. Amen” (Updike 209). From this thinking, Harry was frightened that his faith was no longer pure, but seeing that all the hypocritical creatures entered the church to pray, his uneasy heart was appeased and he also began to pray falsely. However, in the second half of this novel, the readers could find that God didn’t forgive him and give him blessing for his unborn child dead at last (Song116).

3.2 The Plight of People

The people living in a world of existentialism are bound by the sense of alienation, loneliness, conflict with others and surroundings, ineffective communication and sense of disorientation.

Like the hero Harry in the novel, the environment and the people around him gave him a strong sense of alienation and disorientation (Bellis 54). As a salesman, he didn’t agree with his wife’s concept of consumption and he saw the consumption trick of the age. And as a husband, he couldn’t stand with his wife’s life style and attitude towards their marriage, Janice’s addiction to the alcohol made him feel ill at ease and his attitude towards her made her drink more and ignore the family and the housework. When he came home, “the door is locked. In fitting the little key into the lock his hands trembles, pulsing with unusual exertion, and the metal scratches. But when he opens the door he sees his wife sitting in an armchair with an old-fashioned, watching television turned down low” (Updike 11). “He is careful not to kick the wire, which is plugged into a socket on the other side of the door. One time Janice, who is especially clumsy when pregnant or drunk, got the wire wrapped around her foot and nearly pulled the set, a hundred and forty-nine dollars, downsmashon the floor. Luckily he got to it while it was still rocking in the metal cradle and before Janice began kicking out in one of her panics. What made her get that way?” (Updike 13). And last, his escape and his wife’s addiction became a vicious cycle. As to his religious belief, his faith was shaken by the priest and prostitute as a Christian. When asked his belief, “He wonders if he’s lying. If he is, he is hung in the middle of no where, and the thought hollows him” (Updike 220).

As to Janice, she also felt a lack of faith and rootlessness in the unfathomable world, she begged her husband for not leaving her and regarded him as the spiritual support of her, so that she forgave him again and again even when he betrayed her. However, she didn’t realize that her support was just an imagined one, because Harry himself didn’t have his own firm faith.

And the most ironic part was the priest didn’t even love his work, he just got the job as a priest from his father.

Above all, the readers could reach the reality that the so-called faith of American middle class was just a spiritual placebo and a hypocritical salvation. In fact, the secular life was the only thing the people pursued during the God dead age, and this was the plight of the human kind.

3.3 The Ultimate Orientation of Existentialism

In the era that Godot won’t come, the ultimate orientation of existentialism may lead to one’s self-salvation. In Rabbit, Run, people seemed to pray meaninglessly when they felt desperate in their life. Definitely, God wouldn’t come to them.

Ruth thought about God when she was lost in pain because of Harry’s leaving even though she was not a christian. “When the door closes the taste of seawater in her mouth is swallowed by the thick grief that mounts in her throats so fully she has to sit up to breath. Tears slide from her blind eyes and salt the corners of her mouth as the empty walls of the room become real and then dense. It’s like when she was fourteen and the whole world trees sun and stars would have swung into the place if she could lose twenty pounds what difference would make it make to God who guided every flower in the field into shape? Only now it’s not that she’s asking she knows now that’s superstitious all she wants is what she had a minute ago him in the room who when he was good could make her into a flower who could undress her of her flesh and turn her into sweet air sweet Ruth he called her and if he just said ‘sweet’ talking to her she might have answered and he still be between these walls” (Updike 451). However, this grief and so called superstitious didn’t help and Harry left her. In some aspect, Ruth’s self-salvation came when she realized that he didn’t belong to her even she had their baby.

Harry’s self-salvation also came after he was abandoned by God. Even though he prayed to God to bless his little baby, his daughter dead miserably at last. “Rabbit wants to cry out, it seems indecent, for the undertaker to be taking such a tiny body, that they ought to bury it in its won simplicity, like the body of a bird, in a small hole dug in the grass. But he nods. He feels he will never resist anything again” (Updike 643). After a series of despair, he turned to his self-consciousness. In other words, rabbit’s process of escapes was also the process of awakening of self-consciousness and the process of finding out a right way. When he escaped from the grave, he had a strong will to find his own way and succeeded in some sense. “His heart lifts with hope: he was right, he is near a road. He hurries on, scrambling wildly, expecting the road to appear with every step, its white posts and speeding metal to gleam”. (Updike 708) At last, he found the right way and the light, running away from the things and people that didn’t fit in with him. “The light widens enough for him to spy off to his right a nest of old tin cans and bottles sunken into the needless. He is safe. He
strikes the road. He jacks his long legs over the guard
fence and straightens up. Gold spots are switching on
and off in the corners of his eyes. The asphalt scrapes
under his shoes and he sees entered, panting, on a new
life. Janice and Eccles and his mother and his sins seem
a thousand miles behind” (Updike 710).

All in all, it is rabbits nature to be alert and good at
running. Rabbit is very alert about the consumption
traps of the society, the bondage from others and the
hypocrisy of the middle class American. So that he runs
endlessly to avoid the things that bond him. And it is
during this course he builds up his self identity and
consciousness. Even though this kind of rebellion is not
very mature, it has an active meaning in some aspect
and demonstrates the essence of existentialism: caring
about personal free will and encouraging people to save
themselves. Just as Rabbit’s feeling at last. “Goodness
lies inside as very real suddenly, a pure blank space in
the middle of a dense net” (Updike 731).

CONCLUSION

Above all, the anxiety and endless escapes reflect
not only the uneasiness of American middle class
during 1950s, but also the current situation of our
society. In a broad sense, the issues of pressure,
responsibility, the self consciousness and the faith have
become the eternal themes of human beings. Thus, in
the era of spiritual crisis, the ultimate orientation of
existentialism gives people a solution. That is to say,
people should care about their self consciousness to
save themselves in the modern waste land. To seek, to
fight, to try every effort to run away from the spiritual
plight. John Updike gives the reader a strong sense of
alienation and losing of Eden, but then, a path of self
awakening. In today’s society, people still have to face
a series of problems and choices, such as epidemic,
unemployment and mental anxiety, how to find the
meaning of existence, how to deal with the relationship
between self, others and society, and how to establish
identities is still an important issue worth thinking
about.

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