

The poetry of john updike essay examples

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



In this day and age, humanity is rubbed raw of cynicism. The information age is taking our world to greater heights and banishes all mysteries left in the world—and in such haste. In the mad rat race, people have grown weary and look at our reality as a dull brick wall devoid of any meaning and wonder. Once upon a time, the horizon promised exotic islands, unseen civilizations, treasures waiting to be unearthed. The only place where these seem to exist are places of fiction and fantasy. So where does a writer of literary realism such as John Updike belong, if our realism truly is robbed of meaning? With his poetry, Updike insists that the world has not lost its wonder—we simply forgot how to find it.

Updike was born on March 18, 1932 in Shillington, Pennsylvania. His mother was also a lover of literature and he grew up on the books she had. She was also dreamed of becoming a writer. Eventually he graduated with flying colors and entered Harvard University in Massachusetts. By 1954, he was already published in the New Yorker: “ Friends from Philadelphia”. He was then able to publish his first book—an aggregate of his poems—entitled “ The Carpentered Hen and Other Creatures” in 1958. His poetry here reflects the style of light verse; the meticulous use of rhythm in words and lines and identification with his audience using references to pop culture and familiar advertising language. Although after his first collection of poems, his use of light verse dwindled as seen in “ Telephone Poles and Other Poems” (1963), “ Midpoint” (1969), and “ Tossing and Turning” (1977). He not only focused on poetry but also expanded his literary domain with novels. One of his most critically-acclaimed series was started with “ Rabbit, Run” (1960). This spoke of a retired basketball player who faced the problems of a typical middle-

class American. How he managed through these problems was chronicled in the series. More of his major novels include “ Couples”, “ Brazil”, and “ Bech at Bay”. He also expanded in the style of short stories that were compiled in “ Pigeon Feathers”, “ Museums and Women” and “ Bech is Back”. He also received recognition for his works through the Pulitzer Prize and the National Books Critics Circle Award which he was awarded twice.

“ Not Cancelled Yet” is a brief poem of Updike’s. He claims that one day, given that he “ plays his remaining cards right”, he hopes to be placed on a postage stamp. He understands that once this day arrives, he would no longer be around to see it. It is an odd ambition, to be honest. But pausing for a while to consider what it means to be on a stamp. A person who wishes to send mail—perhaps a greeting, an important package, a regretted birthday card or a letter of condolence—would need to use a stamp. Hardly do they mind who is on the stamp itself as most are more focused on sending their message. But this stamp in particular would be the one who safely ensures that the message is carried through. One may even consider it as a vigilant carrier. It sees the world as the message sees it: perhaps from Ohio to Illinois to Bangkok to Berlin. The stamp would meet various mailmen who’ll pass it along from this person to that, from here to there until it finally reaches its destination. Wouldn’t that be a sweet dream, to keep travelling the world while carrying a message that is vital for the sender and the recipient; to accompany a child’s drawing or lover’s distant voice to his loved one, all the while watching the world pass by? One interesting point is that he claims his favorite part is the box. Out of all the parts of his journey that he could’ve chosen, it was the box. Here is where the message waits with all

other pieces of mail and the only glimpse of the outside world is seen along with “ a flickering of fingers, letting go”. How come out of all the parts of his journey, he chooses the interminable wait where the only change of scenery is when the mail sits and waits to be delivered? There is one crucial detail left behind about the journey: it takes place with the mail inside a pouch or held by a hand. Yes it will journey from Ohio to Illinois to Bangkok and to Berlin, but with only the inside of the pouch to gawk at. The box is the only glimpse of the outside world that the stamp can see.

Yet another brief poem of Updike’s is “ 61 and 2/3”. This is where the imagery of his language has highlighted the most. He speaks of the perfect end to August, watching schoolgirls and their recent tans and the curbside upon which they stay. If we were to imagine this scene, it wouldn’t take more than a moment. Looking out the window or while having tea at the porch, this is but a scene laid out: quite literally an image. And yet it is remarkable how well he is able to describe it. It wasn’t described as say, a biologist or a forensic scientist would have done it. This image was not taken down in accuracy. It is also unlike how painters would render a scene. Realist painters would squeeze every excruciating detail they can manage to bring to the canvas. But here we have a realist writer rendering a scene. How could one use so little words that convey so much? This is where the craftsmanship of a writer is seen. In describing the maple, he says “ that in its globular cloud of green cumulus holds now an arc, a bulge of rouge, held up to the bored blue sky like a cheek to kiss”. He didn’t say that autumn was fast approaching or the maple is thick and leafy. He painted a picture that triggered a sense of wonder, which gave meaning to what seems to be a

simplistic image. He wrote not only of what he saw but also of what he felt. Schoolgirls on the curbside next to a maple tree during late August as seen by a man who is sixty-one and two-thirds of a year old seems to be of little value, until he wrote it in such a style. Using language, he not only showed a typical scene often found in many a town, but he gave it life and meaning.

The third poem that is to be discussed now pertains to death. “Perfection Wasted” is structured in such a way that it is one entire chunk of words. It talks about what one loses in death that is often forgotten: one’s uniqueness or as he calls it, “ceasing of your own brand of magic”. Death is often spoken of with such finality and loss and most of all, sorrow. But in this poem, he seems to speak of it as an afterthought; as if he has already been told of all the cliché issues people have with passing over. It is quite interesting to put oneself on a stage and declare that your entire life is a performance that has no gala or second or third showing. It is a one-time performance and your entire audience is the people you’ve met, touched, hurt, and lived life with. Upon your death, no one else will be as you are now. No one else can make exactly the same jokes or speak the same way or make the same interesting notions. People only realize this when beloved celebrities or artists or prodigies pass on. They suddenly realize what a huge loss it would be. But not once have people considered their own selves. Are we not also as unique as our thumbprint, never to be repeated in any age or era? We may not have the prestige of the great ones, but we are no less exceptional. The poem emphasizes how as ephemeral we are, we are also as unique. The perfection that the title refers to is not perfection based on external standards. It refers to the perfection of being oneself. In living our

lives as we are, we leave a legacy that is uniquely our own; never to be imitated or replicated in this life or the next. And death brings this perfection to a waste.

The final poem also speaks of death but of a loved one. “ Dog’s Death” is a narrative and imagist poem about their puppy’s death. Once again, the title is self-explanatory. This poem is structured evenly; four lines per stanza. It was also described the dog’s slow death in careful images. The death of a dog may seem insignificant to others, but to the persona and his family, the dog wasn’t just a pet; it was a loved one. The loss of an innocent life due to circumstances is certainly a tragedy worth remembering.

These four poems are unified by the language Updike used: imagery. Instead of riddling his poems with enigmatic and ambiguous expressions, he touched the hearts of his readers through drawing the most vivid pictures of even the simplest scenarios with concise language. He gave meaning to these situations that are otherwise overlooked and forgotten. Such themes reflect the genre of literary realism, where even our dull reality gains value as long as one takes the time to realize it.

Let us take “ Dog’s Death” under greater scrutiny. From the first stanza, the persona seems to refer to the death in retrospect. It seems to be he was tracing what had transpired for their dog to have died so suddenly and without warning. It also discusses the dog’s innocence; ignorant of the possibilities of imminent death. The second part talks of the family’s ignorance. Who would’ve thought that while playing with their beloved pet, he was already on his way to the grave? Certainly if they suspected the

dog's erratic behavior, maybe they would've averted the tragedy. The two following stanzas embody the family's shock at the sudden change of events. What was once their cheerful playmate suddenly turned into a corpse. It was difficult for the persona to comprehend how the death happened given that they showered their dog with as much love as a family could give. They did what they could and tried to bring him to vet but to no avail. The final stanza was the most heartbreaking because of the irony of the dog's death bringing it to commit its first act of obedience: leaving its dirt on the newspaper. This was met by a resounding repetition of the term "Good dog".

This narrative of a simple tragedy that had little to do with the greater scheme of things is a commonplace event. Meaning, the audience would be able to identify themselves with the piece. In the aspect of figurative language, it was filled with irony. Imagine speaking to someone who was already at the verge of dying without even knowing it. That was how the persona felt when he reminisced the final days of their beloved dog. Knowing how much the family loved their dog and cared for it, they surely would've done what they can to avert its death. But it happened too late. Another example of irony was the ending, where its final moments were riddled with shame as the dog crawled around, leaving a trail of muck. But instead of feeling repulsion, the family met it with a grimace since the muck fell unintentionally on a newspaper.

As a writer in the genre of literary realism, John Updike was able to embody the genre in this particular poem. The persona, the family or even the dog

wasn't described thoroughly. Not a glimpse of individuality or fantasy was seen. It's as if almost anyone who reads this piece will be able to relate to it which embodies realism. Everyone in this reality is capable of experiencing this slice of tragedy in their lives. Updike did not intend to blow the piece to grandiose proportions; rather, he preferred that it would be as commonplace as commonplace can be. The beauty of the poetry can be found in the eyes of each reader. Not everyone will visualize a terrier or a husky or a German shepherd. Each will dredge a nostalgic memory and identify themselves with this poem. Perhaps theirs died immediately or was diagnosed with cancer and died slowly and painfully. In one piece, a thousand people trigger their memories and are instantly transported to a time when they saw innocence lose life. Immediately, we see that even a simple event such as this can mean so much to so many. This is what literary realism is about: to appreciate the beauty of life even in the most unremarkable and most common events. By using his distinct style of imagery, Updike is stirs a long-forgotten memory in each of us: each unique and personal. With his language, he is able to invoke a sense of loss even with the simplest scenarios.

John Updike is a writer of literary realism which he showed throughout his life with his various published works: novels, poems and short stories. In his poetry, he uses various imagery devices that lead to a more vivid representation of his metaphors. In the poems discussed in the previous sections, certain themes and motifs keep recurring. He enjoys taking the usual ideas and images that people see each day and shows them to us in a different light. With his skill in writing, he bares to us the reality of our lives

and reminds us that there is so much more than what meets the eye; so much more than just the accurate display of an image we always see. Would one ever consider what a postage stamp journeys through? Most of hardly even glance at the stamp as for us, it is a matter of very little consequence. John Updike lived in a time where the information age was starting up and the world was beginning to sprint. The reality we lived in and the meaning it holds is left behind. No wonder so many adults now run around their lives, taking care of what they think needs to be taken care of without any sense of fulfillment or meaning. In this pacing, people have long forgotten to stop and look and wonder. Updike takes us to pause for a moment and gently reminds us of what it means to look beyond what is seen.

One of his most crucial themes is the use of imagist language. If we were to take realism as an art movement, certainly the main goal is to render images of our lives in the most accurate way possible. This is not an art filled with fantasy places or make-believe. It is not hard to believe that most readers would find this less enticing and difficult for writers to explore. But John Updike's language takes this movement to a different perspective. He transcends the idea of having to render the image accurately; one must also give it meaning and wonder. Poetry does not need obfuscating words or ambiguous references to be profound. He takes a regular scenario—the death of a puppy, a stamp on a mail in a mailbox or little girls idling before school starts—and writes them in such a manner that makes one stop and think. If these scenes were to play out in front of you, you'd most likely shrug and move on with your day; hardly even remembering it happened. Or perhaps you'd take a conventional perspective on things, " Poor little

doggy”, and move on. John Updike’s poetry reminds us that although our reality lacks unicorns and dragons and beanstalks that lead to giants’ kingdoms, there is still so much left to ponder about. Wonder can be found even in the most mundane places as long as one has the proper instrument that can reveal it. This instrument is his style: imagery. Using his deft words, he paints a picture in our minds, dashes it with thoughtfulness and wonder and leaves us to give it meaning and value. This actually is one of the main goals of poetry: to take an idea that has long been molded into convention and norms and break it free from these bounds. It makes us realize how much we’ve been sorely missing.

Literary realism is certainly a difficult genre to write about. Most readers often turn to literature to escape the blindingly mundane reality that we live in and would be very disappointed if their escape reminds them of what they are escaping from. But John Updike is able to use his narrative language along with his skilled imagery to bring wonder and meaning from the simplest to the uncomfortable and even to the most devastating moments in our lives. He is able to remind us that even as we gaze upon our every day, we should not let it lose meaning. It only takes the right angle to glimpse the wonder it holds, no matter how simplistic it may seem. The image he portrays to us is not only an accurate rendition of what we see but also a reminder of how it makes us feel—something which most have forgotten to do in this day and age.

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