Techniques of characterization in john updike's 'rabbit, run'

When Harry ‘ Rabbit’ Angstrom returns to Brewer to seek the help of his old high school basketball coach Marty Tothero in John Updike’s ‘ Rabbit Run,’ a third-person narrator establishes the scene “ Rabbit glances up hopefully at the third-story windows but no light shows” before we are introduced to Tothero via free indirect discourse and are made privy to Rabbit’s thoughts without being placed explicitly inside his head: “ Tothero, if he is in there, is still asleep”; this is Rabbit’s assumption. Tothero is only hinted at, and is initially characterized as an abstraction. Moreover, greater emphasis is placed on the importance of Rabbit’s need to meet with Tothero than on the importance of establishing Tothero as an individual person “[Rabbit] doesn’t want to sleep so heavily he will miss Tothero when he comes out. …He must not miss Tothero.” Tothero’s character is therefore established first by his relationship to Rabbit, before Rabbit even meets with Tothero himself. That Tothero is Rabbit’s old teacher is not evident until, once again via free indirect discourse, the observation is made that “[Tothero] has the disciplinarian’s trick of waiting a long moment while his words gather weight.” Up until this point he is characterized almost entirely through Rabbit’s eyes, but when Tothero speaks he reveals a deeper characteristic; that is, a calm sense of reason: “ That doesn’t sound like very mature behavior,” he says of Rabbit’s decision to leave his home; and of Janice’s out-of-control alcoholism he says: “ Perhaps if you had shared this pleasure [of drinking with your wife] she could have controlled it”; and when Rabbit calls Janice “ dumb,” Tothero replies: “ Harry, that’s a harsh thing to say. Of any human soul.” In spite of this apparent level-headedness, Tothero later contradicts his own advice when he makes even worse comments about women. And further, in spite of the advice he gives Rabbit and the way he

chastises him for his decision to leave Janice, he later tells him to " do what the heart commands. ...The heart is our only guide." Following his heart, however, is exactly what Rabbit has done; it is exactly what brought him to Tothero in the first place. This almost hypocritical contradiction between a sense of reality and a sense of idealism is the essence of Tothero's character, but we do not realize as much until we reconcile Rabbit's perception of Tothero with the things Tothero actually says and does. When he speaks, and we are free from Rabbit's pre-conceived perception of him, Tothero reveals the sense of reason and fairness that, we understand, made him so good at his profession in the first place. But on some level he considers himself to be a failure. This perception of himself is revealed by way of his dialogue, not so much through what he says but rather by what he doesn't say: " I can't tell you how much it means to me that you came to me when you needed help, [Harry]. ...All those years, all those boys, they pass through your hands and into the blue. And never come back, Harry; they never came back." Though he notes that his former students never come back, he relates this back to himself, and there is a measure of self-blame in his words, the implication of which is that he is unable to make those boys come back or give them a reason to do so; and of course this is the case, for they are a symbol of the past and the past can never return. Still, he tries to reclaim an era that is long gone: " Rabbit waits and then realizes Tothero wants to see him undress. ...Why watch? Suddenly Rabbit knows. It takes Tothero back in time." Furthermore, Tothero's status as a failure is exemplified when, in the Chinese restaurant, he attempts to dispense to Rabbit, Ruth and Margaret his personal philosophy on teaching. " The coach is concerned with developing the three tools we are given in life: the head,

the body, and the heart," he says. But these words, which are the end-product of years of experience in teaching and thus of years of accumulated wisdom, become the butt of one of Ruth's jokes, and, worse, they cannot even hold Rabbit's attention. " Won't you bear me out, Harry?" Tothero asks. " Yeah, sure," says Rabbit, " just yesterday " " Second – let me finish, Harry, and then you can talk." Ultimately he finishes what he wants to say, but as soon as he is finished, Ruth changes the subject to talk about Rabbit. But there is another side to Tothero: " What is [this girl business], yes, what is it? Cunt." He is a crude man as well as a teacher, and Rabbit, after his escape from Janice, is the product of these qualities of Tothero when they work in tandem: he teaches Rabbit to be crude. After his outburst above, "[Tothero] seems amazed to hear himself say such an abrupt ugly thing. Yet he's also watching [Rabbit] as if this was some sort of test." Although he does not teach Rabbit to be as crude as he is in this scene, he does familiarize Rabbit with his habit of womanizing. Notice that although his language does not delve again to such levels, his treatment of women certainly does: " I have an acquaintance," he says, " a lady-love perhaps, whom I stand to a meal once in a blue moon. But it's nothing more than that, little more than that." Later he tells Rabbit that " a young woman has hair on every part of her body. ...They are monkeys, Harry. Women are monkeys." All this despite his assertion that " it makes me happy, happy and humble, to have, as I do, this very tenuous association with her." And just as Tothero's womanizing is the flip-side of his sense of reason, so too is his physical appearance haggard, old – the flip-side of his ' young at heart' desire to reclaim the past. He looks " stranger than Rabbit expected. He looks like a dwarf." He is hardly the image of a sports coach enamored with his basketball players, but he is

entirely the image of an aged sports coach enamored with a player who has returned to him. Tothero, then, is characterized by the contradictions between reason and passion, between the past and the present, between the reality of his existence and the way Rabbit sees him, and between reality and the way he sees himself. His dialogue reveals a man of wisdom even though the words he uses are undeniably harsh; his actions reveal a man of tolerance and temperance even though he has sunken into petty indulgences and pleasures; his physical appearance shows a man who has not aged gracefully even though he still thinks of the boys he has taught and insists on watching Rabbit undress as though he were in a locker room; Rabbit's early admiration of Tothero gives way to weariness of the man even though Tothero gleefully dispenses advice to Rabbit as though he were still a teacher. Tothero is characterized as much by what he does as he is by what he once did, and as much by why he does it as he is by the reasons why Rabbit thinks he does it. His characterization springs from the discrepancies between his words and his actions, and the way in which Rabbit responds to those words and actions. He is a mentor to Rabbit – or he was, but now he is tainted, and he teaches Rabbit lessons and fosters behavior that are not appropriate in terms of mending Rabbit's failed marriage. Reverend Eccles more or less has the same effect on Rabbit, although he at least tries to help Rabbit solve his problems rather than transplanting him into an entirely new situation in which he must face an entirely new series of obstacles. " You never knew what Eccles was really meaning," we are told, once again via free indirect discourse from Rabbit's point-of-view; " you had to take what you wanted to." Eccles, like Tothero, is characterized via Rabbit's perceptions of him, but to a lesser degree. He is more often characterized by

his wife’s perceptions of him, and by his own actions and his own dialogue than by anything else. Yet, because other characters including Rabbit and Lucy Eccles do not understand or comprehend some of Eccles’ more eccentric actions, he is able to retain an air of mystery, and thus an air of superiority “[Eccles’] whole game is to get [Rabbit] out into the open where he can be manipulated.” Therefore, if his motives remain obscured, he is superior to those who cannot grasp them – that is, everyone except Fritz Kruppenbach, whom he turns to for advice, and even then Eccles regains some kind of superiority when he turns down Kruppenbach’s invitation to pray, on grounds of anger and, as a result, “ hypocrisy.” However, when we are privy to Eccles’ own thoughts, we realize that his confident and jolly faade belies his self-doubting essence: “ With his white collar he forges God’s name on every word he speaks. He steals belief from the children he is supposed to be teaching. He murders faith in the minds of any who really listen to his babble. He commits fraud with every schooled cadence of the service, mouthing Our Father when his heart knows the real father he is trying to please, has been trying to please all his life, the God who smokes cigars.” Indeed, the only other person to whom this ‘ inner Eccles’ is visible is Lucy, who, even if she does not understand why her husband does the things he does – for instance, why he would rather play golf than make phone calls to members of his congregation – at least understands that certain things are important to him. She tells Rabbit that Eccles’ help in sorting out Rabbit’s marital troubles “ is the first constructive thing he thinks he’s done since he came to Mt. Judge” and that “ to hear him talk, the whole thing was on his shoulders.” Eccles works on his own agenda: he has no fixed schedule, he drifts in and out of peoples’ lives as he pleases, and he works for his own

aims, though they are always well-intentioned. He appears, at first, to be flawless. However, almost all of his failings, such as they are, are embodied in his wife. She remarks on his physical stature: that he has gained weight and lost hair, that he is getting older since he started helping Rabbit. She criticizes his behavior around their daughter Joyce, reading poetry to her that she deems unsuitable. If Eccles himself appears to the outside world as a man with no flaws or misgivings, then his wife reveals those flaws to Rabbit and to us, while Eccles' own thoughts reveal his misgivings to us, but not to Rabbit; even though we eventually learn the motives that drive him to do what he does, to wear a mask of joviality, to strive for good and to help others, he still maintains his air of mystery and thus his superiority to the world around him. In this way, Eccles is characterized both by what he does and by how and why he does it. But, although Rabbit can easily see the ways in which Eccles helps him – by setting him up with a job with Mrs. Smith and by focusing so much attention on his family in order to fix Rabbit's marriage – his motives are only hinted at in observations made by Lucy, and are then filtered down to Rabbit from Lucy's point-of-view, with its bias against Rabbit fully in check. We are never given a completely accurate portrait of Eccles: he is one-half the product of his own work and one-half the product of his wife, characterized as much by his actions as by his wife's re-telling of possible motives for those actions. Where we could hold a fair and balanced view of Tothero by comparing what he said and did with the intentions behind what he said and did, we cannot hold such a view of Eccles because he is characterized in such a way that his true nature is tainted by the biased perspective on his character held by his wife, who wishes he would focus less attention on Rabbit. Eccles' characterization is a jigsaw of obvious actions

and not-so-obvious interpretations of those actions, of impressions he makes on Rabbit and of impressions he makes on others who then share them with Rabbit. Eccles, essentially, is semi-real and semi-mythic – which is what Tothero once was, but is no longer. If the novel is essentially about the decisions Rabbit must make with regard to two possible lives – a life of simple but imprisoning domesticity represented by Eccles and Janice, and a life of complex but liberating impulses represented by Tothero and Ruth – then Rabbit is a combination of both men and the product of both women, alternately domestic and impulsive as the circumstances demand. Rabbit himself is characterized not only by way of his own actions and by other characters' impressions of him, but also by way of other characters' actions and his impressions of other characters, and how those actions and impressions relate back to his character. Perhaps in foreshadowing of Rabbit's final choice between these two lives, he is characterized twice in terms of the similarities and differences between himself and between Tothero and Eccles, respectively. " Hit me," he orders Ruth, " come on. You want to, don't you? Really pound me," to which she replies, " That's what poor Maggie has to do for your old bastard friend [Tothero]." Later, Lucy Eccles tells him, " It's the differences between you [and Eccles] that I notice. …Like the fact that you're not afraid of women." But of course he is, in some sense, afraid of women; he runs from Janice three times, the final time being when she ' hits him' – not physically, but nevertheless she strikes out against him in a way that really hurts, when she kills their daughter. And if Rabbit is drawn one way by one of these choices, and is drawn another way by the other choice, then his character is revealed by contrast in his environment: we watch how he behaves in one environment, then watch how he behaves

in the other, and compare and contrast the two. When he first leaves home and steps into the car and drives, it appears to be an act of foolish impulse – but as Rabbit grows more and more comfortable in his solitude, away from Janice and away from home, we realize that this is something he needed to do and that it makes the most logical sense given the circumstances he was in. Even Eccles agrees with this: " If I were to leave my wife," he says, " I'd get into a car and drive a thousand miles." However, when Rabbit returns to Brewer and to Tothero and leaves his solitude in the past, we realize that he is making an illogical choice based on what he supposes he ought to do – " That's what I did!" he tells Eccles, before adding: " I drove as far as West Virginia. Then I thought the hell with it and came back. …It seemed safer to be in a place I know." This retreat from a life away from domesticity, however, is the same kind of safe, complacent choice he was making when he was with Janice – even though, this time, he is doing what he supposes he ought to do in terms of being impulsive rather than being complacent. This contrast between two environments – and between one person behaving in two different ways in both of those environments, albeit with the same goal of finding some kind of meaning in both of them – ultimately reveals a character who cannot be happy in an environment that does not change, to the point where he will consciously change that environment, even to the extent of sabotaging it. " I played first-rate basketball," he tells Eccles, " And after you're first-rate at something… it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate. And that little thing Janice and I had going, boy, it was really second-rate." Nowhere is this self-destructive impulse more obvious than in Rabbit's behavior in Club Castanet: " Come on, Ruth," he says, and he suggests that they leave. She protests, " I'm happy." " Come on," he insists,

and he heads out the door with Ruth in tow, with complete disregard for her happiness, just as he headed out the door of his own home with complete disregard for the happiness of his wife. And earlier, in an entirely calm and serene moment in which he and Ruth are atop the mountain overlooking Brewer and “ he clasps her tighter and feels better,” he breaks the spell between them with an inappropriate question “ Were you really a hooer?” – undoubtedly the product of Tothero’s re-education of a boy whom he says is “ so innocent.” Rabbit even goes so far as to take his newfound life and compress its essence into a catch-phrase that sounds like wisdom but is, instead, only characteristic of his hedonism: “ If you have the guts to be yourself,” he says, “ other people’ll pay your price.” Rabbit, then, is characterized primarily by his actions when he is placed in unfamiliar circumstances – his desperation for something meaningful brings out his character, for better or worse as those circumstances may be. Rarely is he characterized directly through his dialogue, for he rarely speaks his mind; although when he does speak his mind, as in the above comment, it is all the more potent for his otherwise reserved words. Rarely, too, is he characterized by way of other characters’ comments about him. “ You’re so smug, is what gets me,” Ruth tells him, but he simply remains silent and stares at her, and it is this action, rather than Ruth’s comment, that characterizes him: at this point we know he is smug, but we have yet to see how he will respond to someone who calls him smug. He responds, again through free indirect discourse, with the thought that “ the blue of her irises has deepened inward and darkened with a richness that, singing the truth to his instincts, disturbs him.” This characteristic response is built upon later in the novel with the third-person narrator’s observation that Rabbit “ hates

being disliked.” But such comments and observations are few and far between. Rabbit is more a man of action than a man of words and explanations, characterized first by what he does and then, later, when his motives are revealed or hinted at, he is further characterized by why he does it. More than that, it is this ‘ why’ that drives Eccles to help Rabbit, and it is this notion of ‘ doing things’ that attracts Tothero to him – and so we have a perpetual circle of action and motive and action and motive in which both Tothero and Eccles are drawn to Rabbit and, at the same time, they fuel him with their ideas, and likewise, he fuels them to continue their pursuit of him, and so the circle goes. Tothero is characterized not only by the way Rabbit sees him or by the way Rabbit’s perception of him reconciles with the reality of his existence, but also by the way Rabbit contrasts him with Eccles, and thus he is further characterized in the way his opposition to Eccles’ altruism fuels Rabbit to continue following in Tothero’s footsteps so that Eccles will continue to have reason to enter into Rabbit’s life. Similarly, Eccles is characterized not only by the way Rabbit sees him or by the way Lucy’s perception of him (as conveyed to Rabbit in conversation) reconciles with the reality of his existence, but also by the way Rabbit contrasts him with Tothero, and thus he is further characterized in the way his opposition to Tothero’s impulsiveness fuels Rabbit to heed some of Eccles’ warnings so that Tothero and his world, of which Ruth is a part, will continue to have an effect on Rabbit’s life, once again so that the process of healing will take longer; and all this occurs in the first place because Rabbit, requiring an environment that constantly changes, cannot survive in a life in which the process of healing is complete. Tothero and Eccles are characterized by their opposition to each other and the way this opposition reflects back onto

Rabbit, while Rabbit, on the other hand, is characterized by the contrast between the way he acts while in Tothero’s natural environment of impulse with traces of domesticity still lingering in him, and then in Eccles’ natural environment of domesticity with traces of impulse still lingering in him. Two men in possession of two differing ideologies help to shape one man in search of his own ideology and, as a result, they both affect – and are affected by – the selective elements that he takes from their respective characters in order to forge the personality of a character that is altogether his own.