Kierkegaardian Mastered Irony: A Critical Overview

In *The Concept of Irony*, Soren Kierkegaard has discussed on the ideas of mastered irony. In Kierkegaardian view, an ironic work must both contain and maintain the two sides of the issues and leave these issues unresolved. In such type of work, contradictory ideas are presented in a controlled manner. These controlled thematic dialectics work as the constitutive elements of ironic work. There is not any resolution. The issues handled by the writer are concealed. In *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, Hermann Diem describes the "ironic method" as a "dialectical dialogue", and behind his ironic stance the speaker "conceals his own positivity" so that the listener is "free to work out his own answers and the ideality of his existence is awakened" (19-20).

Kierkegaard has used this term to describe his own method of presenting the contradictions and leaving these paradoxes unresolved. He has modeled his concept of mastered irony on the method of Socrates. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard cites Socrates as the first person who "introduced irony into the world and gave a name to the child" (134). Socratic irony for Kierkegaard is a "dialectic in constant movement", which represents not a "negative" rhetorical strategy but rather an instance of "inclosing reserve", that is, a means by which Socrates could keep his inner self hidden as he communed with the outside world: "he began by closing himself off from men, by closing himself in with himself in order to be expanded in the divine, who also began by closing his door and making a jest to those outside in order to talk in secret" (135). Socratic technique of questioning and concealing the actual answer helps his listeners to interpret the issues on their own desires and needs.

Handling such type of ironic vision is very risky and, that is why Kierkegaard focuses that an ironic author must master over his irony which he has coined as mastered irony. To master over his irony, a writer must deliberately organize the contradictions without any resolution. So, the intended meaning of the text emerges as a product of differential play of these contradictory materials. An ironic author's task is to present contradictory materials without any final decision. The meaning comes not from the one or other side of contradictions and it also does not come from the facial blending of two sides but the intended meaning comes from the dynamic interplay of paradoxical materials. The vision of the writer emerges from the dialectical tensions between its contradictory ideas. When the tension remains unresolved, the vision cannot be easily paraphrased. The meaning comes indirectly from unresolved tension. If so the meaning remains in motion, or in action, or in play. The vision comes through the interplay of its thematic dialectic. As a result, the vision of the ironic writer becomes infinite in Kierkegaardian term. When meaning remains in motion, it gives dynamic energy to the writer and his text. That dynamic energy constitutes the "freedom" Kierkegaard has in mind when he writes in *The Concept of Irony*: "Irony renders both the poem and the poet free; for this to occur, however, the poet must himself be master over irony" (336). Then the work's governing vision, complex and unstable, does not reside in the text so much as it emerges from the tension produced by the contradictory thematic material.

When the vision of the writer becomes unstable and complex and does not reside in the text, it exists outside the text, actually in the readers. The readers of the text must contend privately and personally with the text's unresolved tensions in accordance with their own needs. By focusing upon the readers, an ironic author leaves the issues outside the text for resolution. By thus forcing itself upon the text's

readers, who exist outside the text, mastered irony in Kierkegaard's conception returns that text to reality or to what he calls actuality. In *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard writes: "Irony as a mastered moment exhibits itself in its truth precisely by the fact that it teaches us to actualize actuality, by the fact that it places due emphasis on actuality" (340). So mastered irony is truth made active. The reader's interpretation or truth is text's truth.

Kierkegaard's ironic method can be found in his two-volume work, *Either /Or*. This text consists of two contrasting volumes. The first part of *Either/Or* describes aesthetic existence of life. It is known as a life of sophisticated alienation in which the fear of death is neutralized. The non temporal consolations of aesthetic appreciation and sensuality work together for neutralizing the fear of death. The second section of the volume *Either/Or* is written in direct response to the former. It describes what Kierkegaard calls ethical existence of life. It is a life characterized by intense inwardness and moral commitment. In Kierkegaard's vision, the purpose of presenting part two is not to refute part one. He sets the two sections against one another in an act of sustained irresolution. For this to occur, Kierkegaard hides invisibly himself behind his fake spokesmen. He allows each of them freely to articulate his own representative worldview. The two sections taken together contradict one another. The worldview expressed in each also contradicts one another in such a way that the readers are forced to choose between them. This final movement represents the heart of Kierkegaard's whole method of mastered irony. In *Either/Or*, he has offered this explanation of his technique: "There is no conclusion and no final decision is an indirect expression for truth as inwardness and in this way perhaps a polemic against truth as knowledge" (355). The truth he cares about most is inward truth.

In this regard, Kierkegaard's method focuses upon the inward truth of an individual. His indirect expression for truth as inwardness without any final conclusion and decision can apply to the individual readers. Kierkegaard generates such kind of private or personal truth by forcing upon his readers through the process of self-questioning and self-reflection. This subjective awareness of the readers goes against objective truth and can be applied to an individual existence. What individual interprets the text is the truth for him and it differs from individual to individual. As his false narrator declares at the close of *Either/Or*: "Only the truth that edifies is truth for you." (356)

Kierkegaard sets his ideas in direct opposition to the dialectical method of Friedrich Hegel. In Hegel's dialectical method, antithetical ideas could be made consistent with the demand of higher truth. Both Kierkegaard and Hegel foreground the dialectic path to truth, but they differ on several key points. In Hegelian method, every thesis has its own antithesis. In this dialectical method, the two concepts of thesis and antithesis do not refute one another out rather they are resolved by a synthesis of the two concepts. Synthesis produces another new idea and has its own antithesis and so on. But Kierkegaard's dialectical method counters Hegelian method at the point that authentic dialectical truth is that which does not synthesize. In his method, the dialectical truth does not resolve. In Kirekegaardian view, truth does not consist in an abstract synthesis of opposites. But the truth for him lies in the private and personal contemplation of irreducible contradiction. Truth consists in individual's direct confrontation with an unresolved tension. Kierkegaard's focus is on the existential notion of truth founded on fluctuating tension. So for him truth must remain unfinished and unresolved as long as it is deemed to be a living truth.

In Kierkegaard's dialectical method of mastered irony, paradoxes and ambiguities are forced into resolving for themselves. To do so, readers are indirectly cast into a mode of self –evaluation in the first person. All the truths are personal and subjective. Instead of singular truth, he focuses on the plural truths. To the readers, only the way to accomplish the resolution is through self-reflection. This device of mastered irony inspires the readers in the process of existential self-questioning. In an ironic work, the paradoxes must be presented in an unresolved manner for the individual interpretation. For this to occur, an ironic author must master over his irony which Kierkegaard has termed as mastered irony.

The ironic authors, who have such dialectical vision of mastered irony, do not offer any final resolution. Such vision helps them to conceal their intended meaning. They leave their paradoxes unresolved so that the readers can interpret their text as they feel being between these unresolved contradictions. The text's message goes directly to the readers. What individual reader interprets the text becomes the intended meaning of the text and it differs from one reader to another. This dialectical vision is more implicable to such writers who believe in multiple truths or meaning. Not to offer any final decision is to leave the text and its reader free for individual judgment of the text. Any individual reader can interpret the text through self- reflection in first person. By leaving the text for free judgment this dialectical vision helps the writer to secure their freedom. Such type of work embodies multiple truths or meanings. What is true for one reader may or may not be true to another.

In this dialectical method of Kierkegaardian mastered irony, two sides of issue are presented into a controlled manner. The ironic author's vision emerges indirectly from the unresolved tension triggered by the interplay of the thematic dialectic. The readers, being between these tensions, give the meaning. The ironic authors who write

guided by such dialectical vision have not any control over their text. These writers only offer two sides of issue but do not support any side. They do not blend these issues for final outcome but leave these contradictory materials into a constant motion or play. It provides a dynamic energy both to the writer and their text. If so, the text's message also remains in dynamics or in play. In a sense, dialectical vision of Kierkegaardian mastered irony helps the ironic writers to conceal their inner vision and leave their text for individual interpretation to render multiple truths.

John Updike, as an ironic author employs a similar strategy of mastered irony in his novel *Rabbit, Run* whose inspiration can be traced directly to Kierkegaard. Once, Updike has declared: '"I thought of all my fiction as illustrations of Kierkegaard"' (Quoted in Boswell, 7). This analysis attempts to demonstrate how and why Updike in his novel *Rabbit, Run* uses this Kierkegaardian method of mastered irony. His work is ever energized by a sustained play of the thematic tension that he calls the *yes-but* quality of his writing. This *yes-but* quality describes not so much the critical reception of the work as its thematic core: his novels affirm even as they question. '"I meant my work says yes-but"', he once clarified; '"Yes, in *Rabbit, Run*, to our inner urgent whispers, but- the social fabric collapses murderously"' (Quoted in Boswell, 7). In still another instance, he has made overt the connections between his own conception of the *yes-but* and Kierkegaard's *either/or*: '"Both the 'yes- but' and the 'either/or' imply there are two sides to things, don't they? So to that extent it is Kierkegaardian, and no sooner do you look at one side than you see the other again"' (Quoted in Boswell, 7). The unresolved quality of this dialectic constitutes, for Updike, its human quality, for a human being free of tension ceases somehow to be human.

Taken all together, these elements from the basis of Updike's own conception of mastered irony, a vision whose chief purpose, for Updike, is to inspire in the reader the process of existential self- questioning. Updike conveys his message in *Rabbit, Run* ironically without attributable grounds. He offers the only place for the dialectical tensions to resolve themselves is within the reader. The only way for the readers to accomplish this resolution is through self- reflection. As a successfully ironic author, Updike deliberately organizes the contradiction of the church of the female flesh and successfully provokes a moral debate about Christianity, God, faith, spirituality, sexuality, immorality, value of goodness and correct behavior in his novel, *Rabbit, Run*, by using Kierkegaardian dialectical method of mastered irony. He is able to spark this debate by affirming paradox and ambiguity through his dialectical vision of mastered irony. Forced into resolving those paradoxes and ambiguities for themselves, Updike's readers are indirectly cast into a mode of self- evaluation in the first person.

Kierkegaardian Mastered Irony in Updike's *Rabbit, Run*

In Kierkegaardian view, a successfully ironic work contains and maintains a species of controlled dialectical tensions between its contradictory, constitutive ideas. A literary work's message is not represented by one or the other of the dialectical units, nor it is produced by facial blending of the two; rather an ironic author's vision comes from the dynamic interplay of paradoxical materials. To handle such unresolved contradiction, an ironic author must master over his irony that is what Kierkegaard has coined as mastered irony. In *Rabbit, Run*, John Updike employs this similar strategy of mastered irony whose inspiration can be traced directly to Kierkegaard. This is what this analysis is set to prove.

In *Rabbit, Run*, Updike's character, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, is a man in the middle, a middle- class father sandwiched between the competing demands of sensuality and society, the sacred and the profane. Because of this vitality, arises from the tension of his middle position, Rabbit can only maintain it by moving, as in a game of fast break, back and forth from one goal to the other, never resting on one side. This back-and-forth movement lies at the centre of Updike's insistence in the novel's thematic dialectic as a constitutive element in terms of Kierkegaardian mastered irony.

At the beginning, the tension between the families produced, ironically, vitality and growth. Recalling this episode years later, Rabbit tries to walk along this strip, which to him feels "slightly precarious […] like treading the top of a wall" (23). To maintain his balance, he must keep treading swaying back and forth in perpetual motion. In a sense, he walks precariously along the top of this wall through out the rest of the novel. Numerous things, all of which can be divided up into two discrete groups, a right and a left side, an either and an or, a yes and a no. On the yes side of the dialectics, Updike has placed such issues as instinct, sensuality, biology, subjective faith, desire, inwardness, and freedom. On the no side he has gathered the law, marriage, social custom, responsibility, secular reason, outwardness, and

captivity. This thematic dialectic can be read according to Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical spheres. Although a brief glance at the above two sided division might lead one to assume that the yes side refers to the aesthetic sphere- the sensual and desire- where as the no side suggests the ethical- the restrictive, the rule -obsessed and responsibility. In fact, both Kierkegaard and Updike are determined to overturn this surface dichotomy. Like Kierkegaard, Updike associates yes to inwardness, freedom, and desire and no to so-called objectivity, responsibility, and the secular social order. Kierkegaard explores these spheres of existence most extensively in his earlier work, *Either/Or*. In his work, Kierkegaard affirms that the aesthete moves the world at the expense of him/herself; the ethical individual saves himself in possible opposition to the world around him or her.

Harry Angstrom is not a thinker. However, he is always sure of what he feels. Harry's action in *Rabbit, Run* begins on a basketball court. Dressed in business suit and smoking a cigarette, Rabbit represents in this introductory sequence the solid citizen of 1950s America. He is a twenty- six- year- old father and husband locked into a meaningless, white-collar job he can neither embrace nor dismiss, at least not without unraveling the intricate social net into which he has been trapped. Conversely, the basketball game he watches represents everything his current social situation denies. Here, Rabbit gets to witness both freedom of instinct and excellence. Here comes contradiction in his outwardness and inwardness, both of which are evoked by an activity that, for him, has intense, inward meaning.

In the novel, Updike uses references to clothing as a means of defining the social roles forced upon Rabbit and his reactions to them. In the beginning, Rabbit is introduced as a seller of Magipeel kitchen peelers. It is his social role and such role is indicated by his standard business suit. But the nostalgia of his past glory as a basketball star energizes him to take off his business coat and he participates in the basketball game with the children. His societal identity rejects the game with the kids but his inner-certainty enables him to play.

Here, Updike organizes the dialectics of Rabbit's outwardness and inwardness which Rabbit tries to overturn. Kierkegaard's dialectical vision of mastered irony, talks about overt connections between two sides of issue which are presented into a controlled manner. Bringing the same notion of Kierkegaardian dialectical vision, Updike draws overt connections between Rabbit's inner-self and outer-self. Taking off his coat, Rabbit participates in the game to overcome his outer-self as a businessman. To gain his lost old time youthful freedom and athletic heroism, he manages his participation in the game with the small kids. Updike deals with Rabbit's actions as:

> Rabbit takes off his coat, folds it nicely, and rests it on a clean ashcan lid. Behind him the dungarees begin to scuffle again. He goes into the scrimmaging thick of them for the ball, flips it from two week grubby-knuckled child's hands, has it in his own […]. His arms lift of their own and the rubber ball floats toward the basket from the top of his head. (7)

Rabbit feels some release from his social restriction, caused by his occupation, in the game which provides certain grounds in his quest for something which is lying inside him.

This inward significance is in part a product of nostalgia, as the reader is quickly informed that Rabbit was once a high-school basketball star.Yet basketball also affirms an intrinsic uniqueness that his job as a demonstrator of kitchen gadgets would dispel. Witnessing this pick-up game of basketball, Rabbit remembers his own excellence. The mere feel of the basketball: “makes his whole body go taut, gives his arms wings” (7). His own skill, which he regards as a natural part of him, he sees reflected in one of the boys on the court. “He’s a natural”, Rabbit thinks, “the way he moves side-ways without taking any steps, gliding on a blessing: You can tell” (8). The basketball game with the boys is a gift and blessing for him. This is his honor which is denied in his current social order. He is caught between the dialectics of restriction and blessing. Still in his suit, Rabbit leaves the game.

This is an outward manifestation of the depersonalized middle-class world. He is caught into the social restriction. He starts running in exuberant affirmation of what he all at once recognizes as his special inner blessedness. He even decides to quit smoking. He quits smoking not out of cowardice but out of his own inner-faith. When Janice asks, “Harry, do you have a cigarette?” he replies, “I am giving it up”, to which his wife responds, “Holy Mo. You don’t drink, now you don’t smoke. What are you going, becoming a saint?”(11-12). Perhaps, not a saint but at least an ethical individual in the Kierkegaardian mode, a person passionately and infinitely interested in his own existence. His decision to quit smoking is his ethical side of life in Kierkigaardian term. Dressed in his suit, demonstrating the Magipeeler as a responsible worker, Rabbit is an aesthete hiding from himself. Updike, here, using Kierkegaardian dialectical method of mastered irony, presents dichotomy between Harry’s ethical and aesthetic spheres of life-as a demonstrator in the Magipeeler and as an instinctually freeman. His aesthetic side of life denies his business suit: “He wonders if he should remove the Demonstrator badge from the lapel but decides he will wear the same suit tomorrow” (11). Now after touching the basketball and, “reaching down through the years to touch this tautness”, he chooses himself in his temporal condition (7).

This choice of Rabbit should not be confused with the Socratic dictum to *know thy self*, which Updike ironically deflates by placing it in the mouth of Jimmy, the big Mouseketter from the famous Walt Disney program of the 1950s. According to Jimmy, Socrates’ dictum simply means “be what you are. So: Know Thyself. Learn to understand your talents, and then work to develop them; that’s the way to be happy” (12). With this interpretation, Rabbit seems to be in agreement, for he calls Jimmy’s advice, “that was good” (12). One may even imagine the excellence-minded Rabbit advocating Jimmy’s idea that God “gives to each of us special talents”; which we must “work to develop” (12). However, Rabbit most admires about Jimmy’s performance is its phoniness. Jimmy concludes the lesson with a wink, representing for Rabbit, Jimmy’s free admission that “it’s

all a fraud, but what the hell, making it likable. We're all in it together; Fraud makes the world go round" (12). But behind this fraud lies the "enemy- Walt Disney or Magipell Peller Company-the base of our economy. Vitaconomy, the modern house wife's Password, the one-work expression for economizing vitamins by the Magi Peel Method"(13). In other words, Rabbit recognizes that Jimmy is being ironic.

For Kierkegaard, irony and Socrates are never very far apart. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, he directly cites Socrates as the first person who "introduced irony into the world and gave a name to the child" (134). Socratic irony for Kierkegaard is a "dialectic in constant movement", which represents not a "negative" rhetorical strategy but rather an instance of "inclosing reserve" (140). This is a means by which Socrates could keep his inner self hidden as he communed with the outside world. Kierkegaard conflates Socratic irony with his own notions of inward subjective faith. Similarly, Updike, perhaps drawing directly from these same pages of *The Concept of Irony*, combines Socrates, irony, and inner faith. According to this reading, Jimmy's Socratic advice to "be what you are" is in fact an admonition to practice ironic inclosing reserve. In such practice, one attempts to be something outwardly while closing oneself in. Updike's mysterious quester Rabbit attempts to be a demonstrator wearing his suit outwardly while closing his self as a basketball star. Jimmy's invocation of God is an aesthetic God, a God of atemporal being and despair. The mere mention of this God nevertheless causes Rabbit and Janice to "become unnaturally still; both are Christians. God's name makes them fill guilty" (12). Hence, Jimmy invokes this God ironically, "just to these outside in order to talk in secret" (13). Hermann Diem, in his introduction to Kierkegaard's work, describes "ironic method" as a "dialectical dialogue", and, behind his ironic stance, the speaker "conceals his own positivity." So, that the listener is "free to work out his own answers and the ideality of his existence is awakened" (19-20). Similarly, Rabbit works out his own answers to Jimmy's ironic lesson, awakening, in the process, the ideality of his own existence.

Rabbit first learns that his social identity as a Magipeel demonstrator is a fraudulent mask that merely serves to conceal his inward, existential identity. This mask is a social role, his responsibility that distorts the way he views himself. Being made aware through Jimmy's dialectical irony of the obfuscating nature of that mask, Rabbit begins to disclose the authentic self that lies below. That is the second outcome of Rabbit's dialogue with Jimmy. He recognizes his Magipeel identity as a fraud and so finds himself face-to-face with his authentic identity. The disclosure of the authentic self produces in him the sensation that gives him his name-angst.

Unlike fear, anxiety has no target and no observable cause. For Heidegger, "anxiety reveals the nothing man himself immediately demonstrates when anxiety has dissolved" (550). Building on Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Paul Tillich argues that anxiety also reveals the opposite of the nothing. As Tillich explains: "In order to be aware of moving toward death man must look out over his finite being as a whole; he must in some way be beyond it" (190). Trapped between the simultaneous and dual awareness of its own finitude and infinity, the being in ontological self-awareness experiences a nameless feeling of angst at the irreconcilable fact of this paradox, a paradox that has nothing as its source.

Just so, Updike dialectically depicts Rabbit's own anxiety as a feeling of entrapment between the irreconcilable possibilities of finitude and infinity, confinement and freedom, decision and potentiality. Everything around Rabbit suddenly seems stifling and oppressive. The small apartment he shares with his wife and baby is suddenly said to "cling to his back like a tightening net" (17). His wife Janice's simple request for him to pick up a pack of cigarettes makes him feel that "he is in a trap; it seems certain" (180). The complex traffic arrangement of the city as he feels "threatens him"; and begins to feel "like a part of the same trap" (28). When Ruth says him "come on" […] "Get into bed", again Rabbit "senses the trap" (81). Yet all these apparent causes for Rabbit's anxiety are really just surrogates,

for in fact, the source of his dread lies nowhere. These apparent finitude and confinement dialectically leads him to freedom and finally dissolves in nothing.

More important, the moment Rabbit does act upon his freedom, he turns his angst into guilt. His decision to leave is a leap from anxiety. It is the recognition of freedom's possibility, to guilt, the attainment of freedom itself. This guilt refers to our acceptance of the total freedom made manifest through the disclosure of angst. He is also anxious about this fearful desire of freedom because he realizes that, as a free being, he is the only agent who can stop himself from claiming that desire. Updike renders Rabbit's decision to abandon his wife and family as similar leap from anxious in a sense to guilt-laden sinfulness. Rabbit simply feels trapped, decides to act, and enters into a state of guilt and sinfulness. When Rabbit tries to get out of Mt. Judge, he finds himself unable to recall the feeling of tautness recovered during his basketball game, or the nostalgic image of Nelson being fed happily in his old childhood home:

> He imagines himself about to shoot a long one-hander, but he feels he's on a cliff, there' an abyss he will fall into when the ball leaves his hands. He tries to recapture his mother and sister feeding his son, but the boy is crying in backward vision, his forehead red and his mouth stretched wide and his helpless breath hot. (26)

The abyss here suggests the cliff from which, in Kierkegaard's striking figure, '"Freedom looks into its own possibility"' and returns as '"guilty"' (Quoted in Boswell, 37). Indeed, every pleasant thing Rabbit tries to think of dialectically turns back upon him and announces his guilt.

In their non-specificity, the two dynamics of ontological conditions of anxiety and guilt-what both Kierkegaard and Updike offer- would be insurmountable but for the way out.

That is the way of faith. Without faith, anxiety leads to despair. At the gas station, an old man tells a very lost Rabbit: “The only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you’re going before you go there” (31). His complicity with despair is further signaled by the whisky Rabbit smells on his breath. “Everyone who tells you how to act”, Rabbit thinks, “has whisky on their breath” (31). The old man’s advice is aesthetic because it is nominally objective and therefore applicable to all which is always, in both Kierkegaard and Updike, associated with despair. Within the scope of Updike’s narrative, the advice corresponds to the aesthetic component of Jimmy’s admonition to “be what you are”. Later Rabbit will find he cannot “think past, his smugness, his solidity, somehow”, for in offering such practical, self-sufficient advice the old man mocks “the furtive wordless hopes that at moments give Harry a sensation of arrival”(39). Instead, Updike, through Rabbit, dialectically affirms the ethical and subjective truth of inner certainty, what Rabbit calls his “instinct” (39).

The dynamics of Kierkegaardian faith get played out in the concentrated allegorical episode that follows Rabbit’s encounter with the old man. Throughout his journey he tries to avoid cities, which he feels want to trap him in a net similar to the one back at home. He imagines, he “is being drawn into Philadelphia” (27). And so, he turns south and then west, back towards Mt. Judge, from whence he came. He wants to avoid Baltimore and Washington, “which like a two-headed dog guards the coastal route to the south” (34). But, in fact, the trap he wants to escape is everywhere. The more he tries to avoid the trap the more he senses the same trap again. Even the map he consults becomes “a net he is somewhere caught in”, because the map holds out the promise of self-sufficiency and practicality (38). It causes despair.

Against the despair-producing information provided by the map, he pits his instincts or his inner certainty. The novel clearly affirms these instincts as superior to practical advice.

At the turning point of his first run, Rabbit turns down a dark country road. “Though his instincts cry against it”, he follows this road anyway, deciding that there “is this quality, in things, of the right way seeming wrong at first” (37). Finally, the chosen road “climbs and narrows; narrows not so much by plan as naturally” (37). The deeper he goes the more he feels that natural world, the opposite of the cities that would entrap him, is becoming yet another trap. Updike dialectically presents such dynamics of faith in his character, Rabbit, whose escapement from the trap results nothing other than into the same trap itself.

Updike presents Rabbit as a developing character, who in Kierkegaard's conception inhabits the aesthetic sphere of life where individuals focus on personal satisfaction. Guided by his aesthetic sphere of life, he tries to overturn the ethical boundary. For his personal satisfaction, Rabbit runs form his home and happen to meet with Ruth to whom he tries to seek his inner-freedom for which he is questing as something. But Ruth personifies nothing and his quest for something, paradoxically, ends in that very nothing. In Kierkegaardian mastered irony, such type of paradoxical quality provides the dynamism between its two sides of issue and meaning comes out from the dynamic interplay of such contradictory materials. Here, in *Rabbit, Run*, Updike presents the dialectics between something and nothing guided by Kierkegaardian mastered irony. When Rabbit meets Ruth, he sees her as a friend in his search for something but Ruth believes in nothing. Dealing with Rabbits activities with Ruth for the betterment of his questing spirit, Updike writes:

> He locks her against him, crouches, and presses his parted teeth into the fat hollow at the side of her throat. Ruth tenses at his threat to bite, and her hands shove at his shoulders, but he clings there, his teeth bared in a silent exclamation crying out against her smothering throat that it is not her body he wants, not the flesh and bones, but her. (82)

All of the Rabbit's activities signify his urge for his freedom or inner-certainty. Guided by his aesthete, he tries to ignore his social responsibility. Confronting with such dialectics, he is heading towards the mode of experience and maturation as a developing character.

Rabbit who returns to Mt. Judge endowed with the faith of repetition is essentially the same complex character who prevails throughout the rest of Rabbit Angstrom-both a good thing and a bad thing. Actually, his two shortcomings are his selfishness and his hardness of heart. Throughout *Rabbit, Run*, his selfishness is not only well documented but also repeatedly commented upon. At one point Eccles tells him: “The truth is you’re monstrously selfish. You’re a coward. You don’t care about right or wrong” (140). His lover, Ruth, echoes this sentiment when she observes as: “he just lived in his skin and didn’t give a thought to the consequences about anything” (154). Janice’s mother calls him “spoiled” while his own father thinks he is “the worst kind of Brewer bum” (169). Rabbit’s hardness of heart is equally well documented. Upon returning to Janice after his abandonment, he learns from her that she had not done anything about paying the rent on their old apartment. Hearing this news he tells her: “The trouble with you, kid, is you just don’t give a damn” (224). In the scene devoted to Becky’s funeral, Rabbit turns to the gathering, and snaps, “Don’t look at me […] I didn’t kill her” (302).

In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard talks about two spheres of life-ethical and aesthetic. In ethical sphere, he locates society, religion and outwardness and in aesthetic sphere, he places freedom, inwardness and desire. Kierkegaard presents such issues in a controlled manner and leaves unresolved so that the vision comes out form the dynamic interplay of such dialectics. Updike, in *Rabbit, Run*, also conflates the dialectics of society of religion and morality. With the guidance of Kierkegaardian dialectical vision of mastered irony, Updike draws the contradictions of spirituality and morality. Rabbit is the only character whose religious sense is in fact spiritual but he distastes his existing Christian society. His spirituality

differs from seeming outer religion. Yet he is at once better and worse, more or less moral, than other characters. Eccles is a Christian minister but his religion is restrictive so that it is not his spiritual morality. Once Eccles tells to Rabbit: "Christianity isn't looking for a rainbow. if it were what you think it is we'd pass out opium at services. We're trying to serve God, not be God" (139). But, unlike Eccles, Rabbit's faith in God only concerns no one other than himself and God, and has no influence on his human relationship. This distinction between the religious and the moral mystifies the other characters in the novel. At one point, Jack Eccles angrily takes Rabbit to task for his apparent insensitivity to moral problems: "You worship nothing except your own worst instincts" (140). But, it is true only in terms of Eccles's ethical humanism. Eccles's religious belief is his social role. But Rabbit's belief in God is his aesthetic sphere. Rabbit also concerns with morality as any character in the novel which seems immoral in terms of his social boundary. Morally, the world of *Rabbit, Run* is one in which inner-freedom is restricted. It is the confrontation with this world that forces Rabbit to turn inward for guidance. Still, he continues to live in the external world. So he is caught between the demands of two different but equally unsatisfactory moralities-his religio-socio codes and inner-certainty. Confronting to the first, he violates the integrity of his subjective existence; but following the second, he creates social havoc and faces a spiritual dilemma. Updike, in *Rabbit, Run*, deals with Rabbit's problem of faith and the difficulty of moral decisions and dramatizes a moral dilemma through the complexities of sexual love with which Rabbit takes as a path of salvation.

The tension in Rabbit between his sense of responsibility and his selfishness reflects his dialectical condition. At the end of the novel, Rabbit tries to determine his

course:

> On this small fulcrum he tries to balance the rest, weighing opposites against each other: Janice and Ruth, Eccles and his mother, the right way and the

> good way, the way to the delicatessen-gaudy with stacked fruit lit by a naked bulb-and the other way, down Summer Street to where the city ends. (314-315)

The novel concludes as it began, with Rabbit, intimidated by reality, attempting to escape from it. This immature Rabbit still has a long way to run.

Yet some characters within the novel appreciate him. Eccles despite his reservations about Rabbit's sinfulness, still declares, "Harry is in some respects a special case" (159). Rabbit repeatedly insists, "I'm lovable", and he is not often contradicted. "Oh all the world loves you", Ruth tells him, then adds "What I wonder is why?" (149). Rabbit's answer is "I'm a mystic […] I'm a saint […] I give people faith" (150). Here his hardness of heart and the motions of grace stand opposite one another as balanced equals. So balanced are they in Rabbit that they become intimately dependent on one another. As Updike tells Jeff Campbell:

> There's a way in which hardness of heart and the motions of grace are intertwined. I was stuck as a child, and continue to be stuck, by the hardness of heart that Jesus shows known and then in the New Testament advising people to leave their families, driving the money-lenders out of the temple in quite a fierce way. And I think there seems to be an extent to which hardness of heart is tied in with being alive at all. (Quoted in Boswell, 43)

The grace is inextricably tied to the unsympathetic selfishness. Like all things in this zigzagging novel, every yes has its no, every either has its or. Such judgments of Rabbit must be taken him as an appealing character of vitality and charm. These two qualities of Rabbit are the product of Updike's dialectical vision.

Yet, Rabbit remains far from being ready for the demands of the ethical sphere. Near the end of the novel, the confused Rabbit, once again on the run, allays his guilt:

> Two thoughts comfort him; let a little light through the dense pak of impossible alternatives. Ruth has parents, and she will let his baby live, thoughts that are perhaps the same thought, the vertical order of parenthood, a kind of thin tube upright in time in which our solitude is some what diluted. Ruth and Janice both have parents […] Nelson remains. (314)

Rabbit's two thoughts, which provided some consolation, indicate his inchoate double vision. Through acceptance of their duties in society, especially parenthood, human beings create order within the surrounding chaos and end in a sense transcend the limitations of the finite. Yet, maturing remains an ongoing challenge. At the cemetery when his daughter's tiny casket is lowered into the ground, he panics and flees again. Understandably, he has difficulty accepting the infant's death and his responsibility for it. Rabbit recognizes that his desertion of Nelson "is a hardness he must carry with him" (314).

Rabbit's role as mystic does make a tidy parallel with this curious reading of Christ's earthly mission, which is not to say that Rabbit is a Christ figure. Rather, he operates as an ironic Christ- like saint, just as Janice rightly surmises early in the novel. Ruth calls him a "Christian gentleman" (17), and Eccles calls him both "a good man" and "a mystic". When Rabbit compares himself to Jesus, Eccles points out instead that Christ "did say […] that saints shouldn't marry" (134). Rabbit also identifies with the Dalai Lama, who, on the evening of Rabbit's flight to West Virginia, has escaped the invading Communist Chinese:

> He adjusts his necktie with infinite attention, as if the little lines of this juncture of the Windsor Knot, the collar of Tothero's shirt, and the base of

> his own throat were the atoms of a star that will, when he finished, extended outward to the rim of the universe. He is the Dalai Lama. (52)

Here, Rabbits saintliness, his godliness, is solipsistic. Updike conflates these two opposing concepts, solipsism and saintliness, dialectically with the guidance from Kierkegaard. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard outlines the “paradox of faith” by which “inwardness” takes precedence over “outwardness” and subjective existence surpasses in importance the dictates of human- constructed ethics (53). It is this version of faith that Updike draws upon to develop his portrait of Rabbit, the saintly rake.

Updike's Rabbit lives in a confusing world of repetitions, doubles and dichotomies. In Kierkegaardian dialectical vision of mastered irony, such dichotomies are left to settle themselves. Adopting the similar strategy of mastered irony, Updike presents confusions and dichotomies in Rabbit's life and lives these tensions without any final decision. Being disturbed by the activities of his wife, he abandons her. When Rabbit comes home after his duty; "the door is locked" (10). He is so confused when "he opens the door he sees his wife sitting in an armchair with an old-fashioned, watching television turned down low" (10). The negligence of his wife to settle the house hold activities disturbs him. In his closet, Rabbit observes Janice's negligence:

> It seems to him he's the only person around here to cares about neatness. The clutter behind him in the room- the old- fashioned glass with its corrupt dregs, the chock-full ashtray balanced on the easy- chair arm, the rumpled rug, the floppy stacks of slippery newspapers, the kid's toys here and there broken and stuck and jammed, a leg off a doll and a piece of bend cardboard that went with some breakfast-box cutout, the rolls of fuzz under the radiators. (17)

Such negligence of his wife causes him to leave. Once he leaves his pregnant wife but chooses another, Ruth, a prostitute. But when he listens the news about Becky's birth, he leaves Ruth and chooses Janice. Again, being disturbed by his wife's cold and passive role in sexual intercourse, he leaves her and goes to Ruth's apartment. Once again, he comes to Janice in Becky's funeral but immediately runs and goes to Ruth's. Such Rabbit's back and forth actions provide repetitive quality in the novel. There is not any final decision about his confusions. In his confusion he is seeking for something. He is heading toward maturity through which he is seeking intense spiritual side of his life. He tries to be released form his tensions for his physical and spiritual blessing.

Against Rabbit's positive, redemptive openness to the world and to his own specialness- against Rabbit's insistent yes to life- Updike pits a series of negative characters whose role is to say no. The two most prominent of these are Ruth and Eccles-one is a prostitute and one a minister. Ambiguously, Updike hedges his bets with a pair of characters who provided the novel's *no-but* equilibrium. Ruth is consistently associated with the nothing. When Rabbit asks her what she does for living, she answers, "Nothing". On his way back to Ruth's, Eccles asks where he is going and Rabbit replies, "Nowhere" (106). Ruth's last line in the novel is "No" (314).

Rabbit is Updike's mysterious quester. He is questing for something. But that something turns out to be a woman who personifies the nothing. Unlike's Rabbit, who feels that there is "something that wants to find it", whereas, Ruth believes in nothing. Ruth also serves to put a necessary check on Rabbit's reckless search for the something. For often, Rabbit runs for searching the something in places where that something is not lurking- as in sex and sport. For Ruth, sex has "no mystery" (152). But Rabbit resists the lesson as much as he once felt as a basketball star. He resists it because he has confused the two activities- sports and sex. Updike, dialectically, draws overt connections between Rabbit's love of sport

and his valorization of sex as a path to salvation. Early in the novel, Rabbit recalls, “the high perfect hole” of the basketball rim with its “pretty skirt of net” (40). The connection between sports and sex comes when Rabbit remembers both his old basketball glory and an old lover named Mary Ann. Having seduced her on the same evening as his first triumph on the basketball court, he finds that “the two kinds of triumph”- sexual and athletic- “were united in his mind” (205). Both the empty space of the basketball net and the female sexual organ become, for him, sites of transcendence, places where he can locate the something.

Rabbit’s faith in sex as a path to grace inspires him to ritualize his first sexual encounter with Ruth, what Edward Vargo calls, a “rite of preparation” (61). He cleans her, removes her rings, and forbids her to use contraceptives, and so on. Vargo feels that Rabbit uses this act to pursue some sort of transcendental communion. Yet, Rabbit is also searching for something that wants to find it. By ritualizing the act, he hopes to turn it into another arena in which he can recover that lost sense of triumph. He even imagines that she has become “his friend in this search” (88). But sex turns out not be a path to that something, for “everywhere they meet a wall” (88) that obstruct their search. The search ends not in triumph but in despair:

> He looks in her face and seems to read in its shadows and expression of forgiveness, as if she knows that at the moment of release, the root of love, he betrayed her by feeling despair. Nature leads you up like a mother and as soon as she gets her little contribution leaves you with nothing. (89)

Updike explores this version of Ruth’s nothing as a viable and integral part of the novel’s overall dialectical vision. One of the novel’s dialectical vision with which Updike is dealing, is that beneath the basic goodness of God’s creation- life-lies the nothingness of death. If Harry, who for Mrs. Smith is a “gift of life”, is the exemplar of the something aspect of creation, then Ruth is the prophetess of the nothing aspect of death. Late in the novel, Ruth

calls Rabbit, “you’re Mr. Death himself. You’re not just nothing, you’re worst than nothing. You’re not a rat, you don’t stink, you’re not enough to stink” (310). Rabbit is both Mr. Life and Mr. Death, a something and a nothing, a yes and a no.

Rabbit’s dream of lovely life eclipsed by lovely death articulates this Updike’s dialectical vision. In the dream Rabbit sees “two perfect disks, identical in size but the one a dense white and the other slightly transparent, move toward each other slowly; the pale one is directly above the dense one” (289). The bright disk symbolizes the sun and life, while the transparent disk symbolizes the moon and death. Though the sun is stronger, the moon manages to cover the light of the sun. As dream suggests, life is an eclipsing of death and vice versa. For every something has a nothing. This dialectical vision represents, when Updike in *Rabbit, Run* says, “the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity, the going through quality of it, the passage into death and suffering that redeems and inverts these things, like an umbrella blowing inside out” (243-244). The nothing is there but it is redeemed by the something that lies at its back. Ruth represents one part of this and the dream outlined above represents another-the *yes* and *no*.

This *yes*- and- *no* dialectic of divine order owes its genealogy to Karl Barth. In keeping with this Barthian model, Updike also links his dialectic to two of Barth’s other characteristic ideas, the *creatio ex nihilo* and the “Wholly Other” God. In *Dogmatics in Outline* Barth insists, “God is not only unprovable and unsearchable, but is also inconceivable”, and, he also argues that “He who is called God in Holy Scripture is unsearchable-that is, He has not been discovered by any man”; rather, all knowledge of God in Barth’s terms is the result not of human investigation but of revelation: “He who has hidden from us has disclosed Himself” (38). According to this theory, theology only has relevance to the faithful, in which both Barth and Updike would agree.

By failing to appreciate this Barthian conception of the ministry, Eccles secures his role as the novel's negative character. Eccles is a man without faith. He is a believer in human solutions and conventional ethics. His own name hints at Updike's ironic strategy; Rabbit's outwardly animalistic and sensuous demeanor conceals an intensely spiritual man, while minister's ecclesiastical surface conceals an almost pagan unbeliever. Whereas, Rabbit is a Knight of Faith, Eccles is a pastoral shepherd. Updike reinforces these symbolic associations by connecting Eccles with the earthly color green. Eccles drives a green car; his wife Lucy has green eyes. Moreover, the green of the rectory lawn, the living room's heavy green furniture, and the green alleys of the golf course are associated with Eccles. Similarly, he feels, "most at home in public places", for there he can concern himself with "external circumstances", with the immediate and the temporal (178). He himself frankly admits (third person transcription), "He doesn't, he doesn't believe anything" (161). In fact, the only father he looks to his own earthly father, the "real father he has been trying to please all his life" (160).

According to Kierkegaard, such faithless piety is "simply comical" (141). Kierkegaard maps this idea in *The Concept of Anxiety*. There is something comical about Eccles. Primarily, Eccles is misguided: he simply does not understand his job as a minister as Updike and Barth would define it. Kruppenbach, the character whom Updike has presented as Barthian model, apprises Eccles of this job description (91). To Eccles's psychological/ sociological assessment of Rabbit's predicament, Kruppenbach declares:

> Do you think this is your job, to meddle in these people's lives? I know what they teach you at seminar now: this psychology and that. But I don't agree with it. You think now your job is to be an unpaid doctor, to run around and plug of the holes and make everything smooth. I don't think that. I don't think that's your job. (175)

Both Kruppenbach and Barth also agree as to what Eccles's role should be. Kruppenbach thunders:

> There is your role: to make yourself an exemplar of faith. There is where comfort comes from: faith, not what little finagling a body can do here and there, stirring the bucket. In running back and forth you run form the duty given you by God, to make your faith powerful, so when the call comes you can go out and tell the, 'yes, he is dead, but you will see him again in Heaven. Yes, you suffer, but you must love your pain, because it is Christ's pain'. (176)

Eccles is ridiculous- or, as Kierkegaard says, simply comical- yet he is nevertheless an apt figure for a church. In Updike's terms, church has abdicated its primary role as witness to another world.

In trying to police Rabbit's behavior, Eccles says nothing to Rabbit that Rabbit does not already know. Krupppenbach himself points this out when he says to Eccles: "Anything else we can do or say any one can do and say; they have doctors and lawyers for that" (176). Indeed, the first time he meets Eccles Rabbit observes: "He doesn't seem to know his job" (107), while Mrs. Springer rightly asks, "well if the world is going to be full of Harry Angstroms how much longer do you think they'll need your church?" (159). Eccles's wife, Lucy, informs Rabbit that Eccles does not like the presence of women in his church. About Eccles and Christianity as a whole she says: "He doesn't really think they even ought to come to church. They bring a smell of babies and bed into it. That's not just in Jack; that's in Christianity; it's really a very neurotic religion" (247). So, although Kruppenbach's sermon has Barthian source, it does not serve as a plea for Christian salvation. Rather, it serves as a clue to how Eccles is responded as a minister. This Eccles's ambiguity about ministry can be seen as an Updike's invocation of mastered irony.

In the novel, Updike presents Rabbit as a Christian man. In the beginning, when Rabbit informs Janice that he has decided to quit smoking, she sees him as a saint. Ruth, Rabbit's lover, says, "You're a Christian gentleman" (71). When Rabbit says to Eccles, "I quit smoking", Minister Eccles says, "you're a better man than I am" (106). Rabbit believes in God. When Eccles asks, "Do you believe in God?" he replies, "yes" (111). Lucy talks about Rabbit with Eccles and says, "He's not even in your church" and in response to her, Eccles says, "Any Christian is in my church" (173). But, ambiguously, Rabbit abjures the path of Christianity and seeks an easier piety in the church of female flesh. In his first run, Rabbit falls to encounter with Ruth. Being fascinated by her attractive body, he feels some release from his tensions. Their love making seems satisfactory to both of them. "In the space of a breath goes to her and picks her up, great glistening sugar in her sifty-grained slip, and carries her to the bed, and lays her on it" (84). After such actions, "He goes to the window […]. There is only the church across and way, gray, grave, and mute" (84). The sight of the church makes him guilty and turns to Ruth for release, and, "he makes love to her as he would to his wife" (87).When they are making love, "Church bells ring loudly" (93). Inside the room he is seeking release in church of female flesh but outside the room bells of church are ringing and being with the prostitute he ambiguously vows: "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 others" (93).

Rabbit believes in God but feels being released through sex with Ruth who does not believe in God. For him, sexual transgression is both physical and spiritual blessing. Paradoxically, he equates the salvation with sexual ejaculation. At the hospital he wants to see his wife, Janice, instead of newborn baby and kisses her. Being in Eccles's house, fascinated by Lucy's attractive body, he lures into her: "He watches the backs of her legs; the white tendons behind her knees jump as she assembles things at the counter" (214). When Rabbit observes silent smile in Lucy's face, he thinks, "she wants me" (217). At the time of

their departure, “he looks up from the toenails to Joyce’s watching face and form there to her mother’s bosom, two pointed bumps under a buttoned blouse that shows through its summer weave the white shadow of the bra” (219). Rabbit’s desire of female body can be observable at the scene, the first home day back from the hospital, in which Janice suckles her baby:

> When he sees her naked, naked all but for the elastic belt that holds her Modess Pad in place, her belly shaved and puffed and marked with the vertical brown line only mothers have, his whole stomach stirs at the fierce sight of her breasts, braced high by the tension of their milk, jutting from her slim body like glossy green-veined fruit with coarse purple tips. (240)

Janice has just delivered a baby some days before and her wounds are not totally cured but, “he wants her-just a touch, he knows she’s a bleeding wound, but just a touch” (241).

Rabbit always worships female bodies. His worshipping to God is, actually, the worshipping to female flesh. His ambiguity about Christianity can be seen in the scene of Eccles’s church. Rabbit goes to the church for Sunday prayer. He takes his sitting position and prayer begins but, “the head in front of him takes his eye” (242). He begins to observe the back of the women, who is sitting in front of him and his prayer goes towards her:

> A woman in a wide straw hat, she is smaller than average with narrow freckled shoulders, probably young, though women tend to look young from the back. The wide hat graciously broad casts the gentlest tilt of her head and turns the twist of blond hair at the nape of her neck into a kind of peeping secret he alone knows. Her neck and shoulders are given a faint shifting lambency by their coat of fine white hairs, invisible except where the grain lies with the light. (242)

Later, he recognizes that “she is Eccles’s wife” (243). She does not move back to him and he thinks, “there is something sexed in her stillness in the church, in her obedience to its man-centered, rigid procedure” (244). In their returning back from the church, Rabbit and Lucy flirt. Lucy, criticizing Christianity, says, “It’s really a very neurotic religion” (247). In the way back to his home, he thinks, “Eccles’s wife had jazzed him up”, and, “he reaches his apartment clever and cold with lust” (249).

Back at home he tries to transfer his lust to Janice. He persuades Janice to “have a drink”, but in response, Janice says, “what did they tell you at church? Go on home and get your wife soused?” (251). Lustful Rabbit hopes “to possess her”, and, “hovers near her like a miser near treasure”, and, “his lust glues them together” (251). In bed, “he rubs her back, first lightly, than toughly, pushing her chest against his, and gathers such a feel to strength from her pliancy that he gets up on an elbow to be above her” (253). Being oppressed, Janice says, “You’re just using me”, but to persuade her for intercourse, Rabbit only demands, “Roll over” (255). Rejecting his proposal, she says, “I’m not your whore” (256). Such word offends him and being full with lust again he runs.

Despite his lustiness, “there’s that in women repeals him: handle themselves like an old envelop; tubes into tubes, wash away man’s dirt-insulting, really” (90). The juxtaposition of insulting and really reflects his discomfort with reality. In response, Rabbit attempts to escape from reality. Even Rabbit's religion is marked by squeamishness: “Harry has no test for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity” (243).

Now, in the final section of *Rabbit, Run*- which deals with the death of the Harry’s baby- Updike merges two ideas irony and inwardness with Kierkegaardian concept of ontological guilt to produce an unsettling ambiguity. Guilt for both Kierkegaard and Updike is, like anxiety, an ontological category. These ideas make the sense that ontological guilt in Kierkegaard’s conception is tantamount to self-responsibility. Self-responsibility therefore

inspires willful self-assertion. In fact, the two concepts, guilt and freedom, function as contingent ideas that constitute one more inextricable contradiction of *yes/no*. Kierkegaard maps out the relationship between these concepts in *Either/Or*: “The greater the freedom the greater the guilt, and this is one of the secrets of blessedness, and if it be not cowardice, it is at least faint-heartedness not to be willing to repent the guilt of the forefathers; if not paltriness, it is at least pettiness and lack of magnanimity” (222). By guilt of the forefathers, Kierkegaard means hereditary guilt or ontological guilt.

In the episodes relating to the death of the baby, Becky, Updike explores the ramifications this hereditary guilt has on the two-part process of assigning blame and receiving forgiveness. He foreshadows Becky’s death some seventy pages before the death itself. This foreshowing occurs during the scene in which Rabbit sexually humiliates Ruth. Late in their affair, he senses and says, “I saw you that way to night and it put a wall between us and this is the one way through it” (193). Ruth sneers back and says, “That’s pretty cute, you just want it, really” (193). He has yet to accept the truth that it actually leads to nothing that Ruth believes in. Ruth’s and Rabbit’s first sexual encounter directly evokes Barth’s nihilism. Ruth gets pregnant, but Rabbit foreshows Becky’s death and says, “I’ve killed her” looking down at Ruth, Rabbit thinks afterward, “it’s ridiculous, such a thing wouldn’t kill her, it has nothing to do with death; but the thought paralyzes him” (199). Later in the hospital waiting room, he observes that his lust “will be a monster”. Presenting this contradiction between his lust with Ruth and baby’s death Updike writes:

> His life seems a sequence of grotesque poses assumed to no purpose, a magic dance empty of belief. There is no God; Janice can die: the two thoughts come at once, in one slow wave. He feels underwater, caught in chains of transparent slime, ghosts of the urgent ejaculation he has spat into the mild bodies of women. (204-205)

From sex and death Updike moves to sex and death and guilt. As Rabbit rushes to the hospital to see his new daughter, he feels his sin: “He is certain that as a consequence of his sin, Janice or the baby will die. His sin a conglomerate of flight, cruelty, obscenity, and conceit; a black clot embodied in the entrails of the birth” (203).

For Updike, this hereditary sin is an inescapable fact of existence. Updike writes these two opposing doctrines dialectically. The image of original sin, a black clot attached to the entrails of birth, is intimately bound up with sexuality and carnality, both of which serve as paths to the nothing. Because the body dies, the body must carry the burden of corruption and guilt. It must fight for its survival amid the fallen out world that has emerged from nothing. Updike marks an irreconcilable split between the fallenness of the outer world and its ceaseless activity and the essential innocence of inwardness. The actions of outer world are best controlled by policemen, lawyer, and doctors and inwardness is the seat of faith and desire. So, Rabbit’s condition that the baby will die as a consequence of his sin is both accurate and elusive. First, after a service at Eccles’s church, Rabbit makes the arrogant assumption that Lucy Eccles has made him a proposition. Although he is forcefully spurned, he nevertheless, “reaches his apartment clever and cold with lust” (249). Back at home his lust, which he transfers to Janice, becomes “a small angel to which, all afternoon tiny lead weights are attached” (249). This angel of lust, cold and clever, hovers over the apartment. In bed with Janice, Rabbit persists with his confused sexual impulse which offends her and spurned by Janice-his second rejection that day-he runs again.

Now, Updike shifts his narrative to the paradox of blaming. After Rabbit’s exit, Janice gets drunk and accidentally drowns her own infant daughter. Here, the narrative’s causal chain begins to unravel. Certainly, Rabbit’s abrupt, childish exit inspires Janice’s drinking, yet is it the cause? Or is the cause Janice’s won drunkenness which precipitated Rabbit’s first childish exit? Or are both to blame? Her mother hints at this later possibility. When Janice

reveals to her that Rabbit has left her again, Mrs. Springer snaps: “First time I thought it was all his fault but I’m not sure any more. Do you hear? I’m not so sure” (268).

Moreover, Rabbit seems to have brought home from church the threat that keeps Becky crying all the day, the threat does not leave with him: “But something whose presence she feels on the wrinkled frightens her so that she draws back and goes into the other room to be with the children” (264). This other person is distinct from her husband: “There is another person in the apartment she knows but it’s not Harry and the person has no business here anyway” (267). This other person clearly refers to the small angel of lust whose presence so disturbs Becky and Nelson and caused Becky’s death. But who, exactly, is this other person? Janice provides a confusing hint as she clutches the water-logged corpse of her infant daughter: “She seems to be clasping the knees of a vast third person whose name, Father, Father, beats against her head like physical blows” (271). Is it God, then? Updike presents paradox of the existence of God. Taking Kierkegaard’s dialectical method, Updike shows that the creator God is also, paradoxically, the God of death itself.

The novels final merely thirty pages read like a litany of blame. Lucy Eccles is the first character to point the finger at Harry when she tells her husband: “Well, he as good as did. Runs off and sends his idiot wife on a bender, you never should have brought them back together” (273). Eccles sees Harry as a Christian, but Lucy objects him: “If he’s a Christian thank God I ‘m not one. Christian. Kills his baby and that’s what you call him” (273). Interpreting this as an accusation leveled at him, Eccles asks her: “So you’re saying I really killed the baby” (273). Indeed, when Rabbit calls him, Eccles breaks the news of Becky’s death by saying, “a terrible thing has happened to us” (275). Even Mr. Springer admits that he, too, must shoulder some of the responsibility: “I won’t say I don’t blame you because of course I do. But you’re not the only one to blame. Her mother and I somehow never made her feel secure” (280). Finally, when Rabbit pulls the plug from the tube in which Becky had

drowned, he thinks, “how easy it was, yet in all His strength God did nothing, just that little rubber stopper to lift” (284). So, even God, that majestic, Updike paradoxically presents, is to blame. Here Updike, encounter a dialectical anti-theology that borders on existential atheism.

But the novel does not end with this paradoxical blaming-and-absolution of God. Left alone in this God-created yet curiously God-abandoned universe, Updike’s characters must face the ramifications of the mess they have both inherited and made. Harry’s old coach, Marty Tothero provides perhaps the novels final word on the inescapable constructedness of earthbound ethics. Updike dialectically presents old

Tothero as a life-giver, even though, his capacity in this regard has been considerably vitiated. Tothero’s coaching strategy aligns him more with Kruppenbach than an Eccles. Tothero puts it, a good coach has his most “solemn opportunity” in developing the hearts of his players: “Give the boys the will to achieve. I’ve always liked that better than the will to win, for there can be achievement even in defeat. Make them feel the, yes, I think the word is good, the sacredness of achievement, in the form of giving our best” (64). So Tothero is a reliable when he warns Rabbit: “Right and wrong aren’t dropped from the sky. We, we make them, against misery. In variably, Harry, invariable […] misery follows their disobedience. Not our own, often at first not our own. Now you’ve had an example of that in your own life” (286). Updike paradoxically presents the effectiveness of sport rather than Christianity for the development of human heart. To Eccles, a minister, Christianity is the only way for forgiveness. He says:

> Harry, it’s not for me to forgive you. You’ve done nothing to me to forgive. I’m equal with you in guilt. We must work for forgiveness. We must earn the right to see that thing behind everything. Harry, I know that people are brought to Christ. I’ve seen it with my eyes and tested it with my mouth.

> And I do think this. I think marriage is a sacrament, and that this tragedy, terrible as it is, has at last united you and Janice in a sacred way. (289)

Presenting the dialectics between sport and religion, Updike evokes ambiguity about Christianity.

Kierkegaardian mastered irony is a dialectical vision in which tensions and confusions are presented without any attributable ground for resolution. Such confusions are resolved themselves through the dynamic interplay between its two sides of tension. Being inspired by Kierkegaardian dialectical vision, Updike in *Rabbit, Run*, presents the confusions about past versus future and growth versus stagnation. The scene at the hospital, Rabbit confronts with such tension. At the hospital, he meets his old basketball coach, Marty Tothero who is; somehow, near death and at the same place Janice has given birth to his daughter, Becky. Here, Tothero symbolizes the past and newborn infant Becky symbolizes the future. The symbol of the past is near death; the symbol of the future has just been born. Rabbit informs Tothero the news about his newborn baby: "My wife's had her baby" (220). He delivers the news of his future to his old coach who is the symbol of his past. Confronting with past and future at the same time, he begins to wonder:

> He […] goes toward the bed with blank momentum; the sight of the old man lying there shrunken, his tongue sliding in his lopsided mouth, has stunned him. Tothero's face, spotted with white stubble, is yellow in the pillows, and his thin wrists stick out from candy-striped pajama sleeves beside the shallow lump of his body. (220)

Both Becky and Tothero signify Rabbit's struggle to hold onto either the past of to let go and make a play for the future. Here, Tothero stands as stagnation and Becky stands as growth. Tothero, who personifies Rabbit's inability to grow but Becky represents his chance at

maturity and hope. Updike, dialectically, organizes the contradictions between stagnation and growth or past and future to which Rabbit wants to overturn. That is why; he chooses the future which leads him toward his search for something.

The novel's disturbing ending, then, emerges form this irritating unwillingness to offer any simple resolution, be it Christian or nihilist. Despite the numerous assignations of blame, Rabbit alone understands that his own guilt is insoluble. Rabbit begins to realize this inevitable fact just before the funeral when, viewing his reflection, he thinks of himself as "a smudge on the glass", and, "he wonders why the universe doesn't just erase a thing so dirty and small" (295). With this realization, Rabbit accepts not only the inevitability of his guilt but also his helplessness in the face of the divine. He realizes that "the world never stops; there is never a gap in its thickness" (300). At the funeral home, Rabbit alone able to feel the possibility of the eternal life promised in Eccles's eulogy. Though Eccles does not believe the words he utters, he speaks directly to Rabbit when he asks God to "give us Grace, we beseech thee, to entrust the soul of this child to thy never- failing care and love, and bring us all to the heavenly Kingdom; through the same thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord" (301). Rabbit recalls Eccles's line and looks up: "The sky greets him. A strange strength sinks down into him. It is as if he has been crawling in a cave and now at last beyond the dark recession of crowding rocks he has seen a patch of light" (302). Light appears to Rabbit with the promise of repetition. His ontological guilt is expiated. Having been forgiven, he imagines himself free of the delicate causal chain that has tied him to the death of his daughter.

To compound the apparent callousness of this scene, Updike has Rabbit add: "You all keep acting as if I did it. I wasn't any where near; she's the one" (302). Here Rabbit wants the members of this congregation to know that their earthbound interpretation of the event's complex casual chain does not necessarily square with his spiritual interpretation of the same. According to the later, Rabbit is guilty through the agency of original sin that black

clot attached to the entrails of birth. In dialectical opposition to this version of the tragedy stand the hard, nominal facts: Janice dropped the baby, which by the implacable laws of physical reality, resulted in death. Rabbit's ecstatic vision of the sky's greeting makes manifest to him this hard distinction between spiritual and physical law. Here Updike presents this dichotomy between physical and metaphysical law. By realizing his helplessness in the face of his own original sin, Rabbit has been forgiven for his spiritual part of the death. Once he has separated the metaphysical dimension of the accident from the concrete facts, Rabbit understands clearly his part in the physical act itself. He was nowhere near the bathtub. This same spiritual truth Rabbit hopes to impart to Janice when he announces to all assembled, "she's the one". Although Janice was in fact there, her part in the death does not necessarily constitute her guilt. Rather she was merely one element in a string of physical events.

But this final consoling gesture fails. Unable to make clear to those around him this inward, ethical truth, he finds himself the still centre of a shocked gathering. Properly humiliated, Rabbit takes off again up the mountain that separates Mt-Judge and Brewer. Finally, Rabbit has moved into the middle across which he has been zigzagging for the duration of the whole novel. But this middle is no comfort either. Here he is struck by the terrifying fact of his dialectical situation: "He obscurely feels lit by a great spark, the spark whereby the blind tumble of matter recognized itself, a spark struck in the collision of two opposed realms, and encounter a terrible God willed" (305). The two realms are the realm of life and its dark underside, death.

The dialectic he confronted at the top of the mountain has no resolution. It is the result of Updike's use of Kierkegaardian dialectical method of mastered irony. Rabbit is left once again with his fluctuating inner certainty. "Goodness lies inside", he reasons, "there is nothing outside, those things he was trying to balance have no weight" (301). Yet, even that

inner goodness, that inner certainty, might not be enough in a world where most problems are insoluble. After Ruth informs him that she is pregnant, he tries to convince her to keep the baby, though he cannot explain why she should: "I don't know. I don't know any of these answers. All I know is what I feel right. You feel right to me. Sometimes Janice used to, sometimes nothing does" (312). As Ruth has understood all along, nothingness is also a possibility. Even his precious subjectivity is itself subject to the something- verses-nothing dialectic he encountered on that mountain. Evoking basketball analogy, Rabbit experiences this final, perplexing realization:

> He feels his inside as very real suddenly, a pure blank space in the middle of a dense net. I don't know, he kept telling Ruth; he doesn't know, what to do, where to go, what will happen, the thought that he doesn't know seems to make him infinitely small and impossible to capture. Its smallness fills him like a vastness. It's like when they heard you were great and put two men on you and no matter which way you turn you bumped into one of them and the only thing to do was pass. So you passed and the ball belongs to the others and your hands were empty and the men on you looked foolish because in effect there was nobody there. (315)

Passing the ball, like casting every care on God, is a gesture of faith, a recognition of despair in the face of irreconcilable conflict. Yet whereas at the funeral Rabbit feels that such a gesture can save him, here he recognizes that it also erases him. Between these two poles of thematic dialectics-the *yes* and the *no*, the *either* and *or*-the self is both something and nothing.

Here, Updike brings to a culmination his strategy of mastered irony. Like, the Socratic irony of Kierkegaard's early work, *Rabbit, Run* does not end in the immediate unity of what was said, but rather inconstant ebb. Yet this constant ebb, in both Socrates and

Updike, possesses forward movement and heads somewhere. And that forward movement finally reaches in nothing and with nobody. The promise of resolution has been shown to lead to nothing. In *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard writes of Socrates: "The more Socrates undermined existence, the deeper and more necessarily must each particular utterance gravitated towards that ironical totality which, as a spiritual state, is bottomless, invisible, and indivisible" (56). Socrates, practicing inclosing reserve, resides in that empty space. While the discourse that ironically represents his genuine thinking can only lead to the absence. Confronted with that nothingness, that absence, the reader is left with little recourse. *Rabbit, Run* ends in just such an empty space. Updike ends the novel by having Rabbit run away once again-this time, however, from the reader. The conflicts raised in the novel are deliberately left unresolved.

Conclusion

Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom is Updike's mysterious quester. Never a thinker but a strong believer of what he feels; he is searching for something that wants to find him. Being disturbed, he runs from his home abandoning his pregnant wife, Janice and his son, Nelson for his quest. He abjures the path of Christianity and seeks an easier piety in church of the female flesh. He believes in God but he equates salvation with sexual ejaculation. He goes to the female bodies and sees every woman he meets in sexual terms, and he uses the exhilaration he feels in sex as an attempt to come closer to the meaningful, intense, spiritual side of life that he is seeking as something. He seeks some release from his tensions in Ruth's body who personifies nothing and his search ultimately ends in that very nothing.

Rabbit always believes that instead of Christianity such sexual transgression is both physical and spiritual blessing for him. As a successful ironic work, Updike's *Rabbit, Run* deliberately organizes the contradiction of the church of the female flesh and successfully evokes the paradox of Christianity, sexuality, immorality, faith, God, value of goodness and correct behavior. Updike is able to spark these debates by affirming paradox, ambiguity and contradiction. Yet the paradoxical quality of experience that inspire Updike's novel, *Rabbit, Run*, is his adoption of Kierkegaardian dialectical strategy of mastered irony which presents the two sides of issue and then leaves this paradox unresolved so that the intended meaning emerges as a play of contradiction.

According to Kierkegaardian strategy of mastered irony, a successfully ironic work contains and maintains a species of controlled dialectical tension between its contradictory ideas. These contradictory ideas work as the constitutive elements of a literary work. This idea is theorized in *The Concept of Irony*. This work by Kierkegaard makes the point that a literary work's message is not presented by one or the other of the dialectical units; nor is it produced by an easy blending of the two. Moreover, the ironic author's vision emerges

indirectly from the unresolved tension triggered by the interplay of the thematic dialectic. The vision of the writer is concealed and goes outside the text, to the readers. The readers interpret the work as their needs through the process of self- questioning and self-reflection in the first person. The truth or meaning for reader is the text's truth.

Here, in *Rabbit, Run*, Updike brings to a culmination of the Kierkegaardian dialectical method of mastered irony. Adopting this method, he presents a sustained play of the thematic tension that he calls the *yes-but* quality of his writing. In the novel all of the Rabbit's aesthetic *yes* has its own ethical *but*. *Yes* side of Rabbit's inwardness compels him to run for his search and his ethical outwardness always says *but*. His inner freedom carries him to the female bodies but his societal restriction or religion rejects it. Rabbit tries to seek his something in the flesh of Ruth but happens to meet with nothing. Updike's another character Eccles's behavior as a non-believer in anything being a Christian minister also provides the paradoxical quality in the novel. This *yes-but* provides a paradoxical quality in the novel and all the conflicts and ambiguity about Christianity and morality raised in the novel are deliberately left unresolved for individual interpretation.

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