

J. K. DWORAK

HUMAN STRUGGLE TO EXPERIENCE KIERKEGAARDIAN STATE  
OF GENUINE HUMANNESS IN UPDIKEAN WRITINGS

**Abstract.** The article considers the reflection of existential struggle of the despairing selves to experience genuine humanness in a fiction text. The author studies the works of J. Updike, a prominent modern American writer, and S. A. Kierkegaard, an outstanding Danish philosopher, whose philosophical theory of human growth and corruption is widely echoed throughout Updikean writings.

**Keywords:** John Updike, human condition, perspective, Søren Kierkegaard, theory of man and corruption, irony.

И. К. ДВОРАК

ОТРАЖЕНИЕ ПОПЫТКИ ОБРЕТЕНИЯ ПОДЛИННОЙ ЧЕЛОВЕЧНОСТИ  
ПО КЬЕРКЕГОРУ В ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ ДЖ. АПДАЙКА

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается отражение в художественном тексте экзистенциальной борьбы личности в попытке обретения подлинной человечности. Исследуются произведения Дж. Апдайка, выдающегося американского писателя XX в., и работы известного датского философа С. А. Кьеркегора, чья теория человеческого роста и разрушения оказала значительное влияние на творчество Дж. Апдайка.

**Ключевые слова:** Джон Апдайк, человеческое существование, перспектива, Сёрен Кьеркегор, теория разрушения человека, ирония.

1. Preliminary reflections

Being a citizen of the global village of the XXI century, does pose an unprecedented challenge for anyone concerned with the fundamental question as to the purpose of individual existence, which seems to have lost its inherent value and meaning. In the era of the unparalleled scientific and technological development aimed at the continuous improvement of the quality of life and its prolongation, the suicide rate is on the increase, taking the toll of 800 000<sup>1</sup> prematurely lost lives a year. Although it can be claimed that there are no long-term effective preventative measures against the spiritual malaise of the present age, the tools that are needed for a winning battle with the existential angst are widely available to so many and, yet, recognised by so few.

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<sup>1</sup> First WHO Report on Suicide Prevention

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/suicide-prevention-report/en/>

Accessed on March, 15<sup>th</sup> 2015

It is widely known that, as one of the most influential psychologists, in his *The discovery of being. Writings in existential psychology* (1958), put it: *The human being cannot live in a condition of emptiness for very long: if he is not growing towards something, he does not merely stagnate, the pent-up potentialities turn into morbidity and despair, and eventually into destructive activities* [3, p. 22].

May's notion of the aforementioned *condition of emptiness* may be said to be interrelated with human inability or, rather, lack of conscious effort and willingness to acknowledge that, as John Updike once stated in one of the interviews: *Un-fallen Adam is an ape..., that to be a person is to be in a situation of tension, to be in a dialectical situation. A truly adjusted person is not a person at all-just an animal with clothes on or a statistic....Every human being who is more than a moron is the locus of certain violent tensions that come with having a brain....You have really been locked out of the animal paradise of unthinking reflex* [9, p.14].

Thus, it is the existential striving that constitutes the conceptual focal point of Updikean writings who commented: *My books feed...on some kind of perverse relish in the fact that there are irresolvable problems. There is no reconciliation between the inner appetites and the external consolations of life.....There is no way to reconcile these individual wants to the very need of any society to set strict limits and to confine its members* [5, p. 16].

Or is there? Is there really nothing that could be done to win the battle of existential becoming taking place behind every pillar of human endeavour? The author once again provides the clues, addressing the controversy around his writing: *Even though my books strike many people as immoral or morally useless, to me they are really moral investigations of how we live.... I came to the decision to write about the imperfect world-a world that is fallen. That's why many people find my books so depressing. But for me it isn't depressing to say that the world is imperfect. Here the work begins: One confesses this imperfectness...and starts to think what...to do with the world in this condition* [6, p. 174].

The answers to the aforementioned probing question of *what to do with the world in this condition* and oneself might prove instrumental for those struggling with the modern representation of the Socratic dilemma of *be or not to be* and could, thus, be considered a matter of life-saving significance. At this point, however, a vexed question arises: Where to source them from and how to arrive at life-changing conclusions? Updike himself comes to rescue sharing the experience of his own existential crisis of 1955 when, as *a nervous newcomer to New York City, husbandhood, and paternity*, he was fighting for his own identity and the redefinition of his place within the framework of the cosmic reality. It was Kierkegaardian *Fear and Trembling* that, as Updike claimed, had led to *a secret twist inside [him], a precarious tender core of cosmic defiance...*[1, p.7]. What, then, is the secret of the powerfulness of Kierkegaard's philosophy whose own existence was highly troubled? It

might have been the tidal waves of his journey through the vast ocean of life experience that bore a deeper understanding of man's nature and resulted in the clarified vision of the meaning of human existence as such and the identification of its prime constituents.

At this point a brief analysis of the fundamentals of Kierkegaardian theory of man and human corruption is needed since, as the tool of ethnographic investigation of the literary case studies, representative of the universalized wealth of human experience, it does shed illuminating light on both the factors fostering spiritual growth and causes of spiritual decline, signalling preventative measures that might potentially be taken against the currently pervasive deterioration characterizing the condition of modern day spirit.

## **2. Kierkegaardian theory of man and human corruption**

The most fundamental question as to the compositional nature of human beings begs to be raised now as the basis of further philosophical inquiry into the notion of humanness and its attainability. What, then, does it mean to be a man? To Kierkegaard, as he clarifies in his *Sickness unto Death* (1849): *Man is a spirit....Spirit is the self....The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for] that the relation relates itself to its own self: the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and finite, of the temporal and eternal, of...possibility and necessity.... A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self. In the relation between the two, the relation is the third term as negative unity, and the two relate themselves to the relation....If on the contrary the relation relates itself to its own self, the relation is then a positive third term, and this is the self* [2, p.146].

As the philosopher rightly points out, it is the spirit itself, along with the faculties of conscious cognition, knowledge attribution and processing with the consequential freedom of will that distinguish the representatives of the human race and comprise the notion of realizable humanness. It, therefore, is the very existence of the potentiality of becoming a fully-fledged human being that is a factor necessitating taking the reins of one's becoming, with the acknowledgement of full accountability for both its quality and developmental direction. As Kierkegaard himself noticed: ...*to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession made to man, but at the same time it is eternity's demand upon him* [2, p. 154]. It is not surprising then that the very recognition of this enormous burden of responsibility may, as it frequently does, prove counter-productively overwhelming. The awareness of the determinants governing the achievability of the notional realisability in question may be said to depend on the extent, intensity and character of the fusional interplay of the aspectual dialectics of *finiteness and infiniteness, temporality and eternity*, co-shaped by the dimension of philosophical *possibility and necessity*, is, thus, of crucial significance in the battle of existential

becoming. What, then, is Kierkegaardian balancing synthesis of the previously mentioned complementary pairs in relation to the attributional consciousness of being, knowledgeability and free will in the pursuit of multi-faceted humanness in the predominantly dualistically-oriented world? The transcending potential of the human faculties, the manifestation of the *infiniteness and possibility* as spectral denotation, enables one to envision the kaleidoscopic potentialities of being, fuelling the process of individual identity-recognition and, thus, the crystallization of the *eternal* in the form of the existential pre-dispositional essence to be realized. The aspects of philosophically-defined *finiteness* along with *necessity*, representing the limiting reality of becoming in the form of Updikean *external consolations of life* in the *temporality* of frequently harsh transient circumstances of living, are of doubtlessly equally valid importance. It needs to be noted, however, that any form of dialectic imbalance is potentially corrupting as, if not addressed and acted upon, it may result in an unrealised semi-human, angst-ridden and both literally and/or figuratively pre-maturely lost existence.

As beings in a state of constant becoming, living in the fluctuant world highly characterizable by Greek *panta rei*, the citizens of the planet are inherently responsible for continuous re-assessment of the dualistically-oriented balancing to maintain the constituents of the human existence and, thus, humanness as such, in a symbiotic spiritual growth-ingraining relation. Once again, both consciously acknowledged realization as well as subconscious premonition of such existential responsibility does put an enormous psychological strain, causative of anxiety, spiritual lethargy and/or despair with the latter one also referred to as Kierkegaardian *qualification of spirit* despairing out of...*a disrelationship in a relationship which relates itself to itself* [2, p. 147]. Whatever the source, existentially-motivated anxietal despair manifestation does come in various forms which might be claimed to stem from two main categories, namely that, as Kierkegaard puts it, of *weakness* and *defiance*, the subject matter of the considerations to follow.

What, then, is termed by the *despair of weakness* and what are its origins? In his *Sickness unto Death* (1849), the philosopher qualifies it as the *despair over the earthly...[when] the self coheres with the other, wishing, desiring, enjoying, etc. but passively..., [finding it] too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier to be an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd* (1968:167), hence concluding that ...*the majority of men do never really manage in their whole life to be more than they were in childhood and youth, namely immediacy with the addition of a little dose of self-reflection* [2, p. 167]. Kierkegaardian perceptiveness seems to be of timeless adequacy, gaining its momentum with the passage of time. This type of despair, born out of the domineering dialectical *finiteness* and *necessity*, resulting in the unidentified *eternal* quintessence of being, may reveal itself in the despairoper's craving for existential withdrawal, passivity or its seemingly oppositional compensatory behavioural consumptionism of those, as Kierkegaard notices, who: ...*by work and busy occupations as means of distraction...sink the soul into obscurity..., seek[ing] forgetfulness in sensuality,*

*perhaps...debauchery,...desperation...to return to immediacy but constantly with consciousness of the self...[they] do not want to have* [2, p. 199].

The notion of the *despair of defiance* appears to be on the other end of the spectral pole, defined by Kierkegaard as *the despair of willing despairingly to be oneself... [through]...building castles in the air* (1968: 203) and, hence, culminating in a *fantastic existence* of a despainer who may still ...*be perfectly well able to live on, to be a man,...to occupy himself with temporal things, get married, beget children, win honour and esteem and perhaps no one notices that in a deeper sense he lacks a self* [2, p. 165]. It is evident, then, that the driving force behind such a defiantly despairing self takes its origin from the dialectical balance disruption ascribable to the overpotency of Kierkegaardian *infinity* and *possibility* which, when combined with the overpowering temporality, may lead to the distorted vision of one's identity, blinding one to disastrous effects of the misdirected aim of their subconscious existential striving. At this point, however, a qualitative question, posed by Kierkegaard himself, regarding the nature of despair arises: *Is despair an advantage or a drawback?* As the philosopher continues: *Regarded in a purely dialectical way it is both...* [2, p. 162] since it:...*must be viewed under the category of consciousness: the question whether despair is conscious or not, determines the qualitative difference between despair and despair. In its concept all despair is doubtless conscious; but from this does not follow that he in whom it exists ...is himself conscious of it. It is in this sense that consciousness is decisive* [2, p.148].

If left unattended, despair may prove fatal, turning to spiritual morbidity and death. Since, however, the faculty of consciousness which, when exercised with volition, does validate despairing as growth-ingraining indispensable in the constructive processing of the existential becoming, sensitising to the experienced desynchronizing imbalance in the previously analysed attributional dialectics in need of re-prioritization. As such, despairing self is an invaluable diagnostic tool of existential investigation and, potentially, spiritual rebirth. Hence, Kierkegaardian notion of ironic stance. As the philosopher points out: *Most men are subjective towards themselves and objective towards all others...but the task is precisely to be objective towards oneself and subjective towards all others...*, (qtd in Mullen; 1981: 39), what can, in turn, be achieved through skilful use of irony which:...*limits, renders finite, defines, and thereby yields truth, actuality, and content; it chastens and punishes and thereby imparts stability, character, and consistency....He who does not understand irony...lacks...what might be called the absolute beginning of personal life* [4, p. 39].

The ironic stance, with its objectifying potential, may, then, serve as a facilitator of the aforementioned re-focusing re-prioritization by changing perspectival outlook on the directional depth of one's existential endeavour, necessary for attitudinal modification in the continual re-adaptation to the rapidly changing external circumstances of living and the expanding internal wealth of experiential becoming.

This brief analysis of the core notions of Kierkegaardianism does, hopefully, illustrate that the philosophy touches upon the most intimate corners of human heart, mind and soul, making it universal and, hence, applicable to all representatives of the human race striving for the realization of their existential becoming and humanness as such.

### **3. Updikean application of Kierkegaardian existentialism and the art of living**

Incalculable numbers of thinkers through the history of humankind have pondered the fundamental notion of existential fulfilment, so often misdefined in terms of consumerism. It was John Updike who pointedly remarked: *When we try in good faith to believe in materialism, in the exclusive reality of the physical, we are asking our selves to step aside; we are disavowing the very realm where we exist and where all things precious are kept—the realm of emotion and conscience, of memory and intention and sensation* [6, p. 250].

Updikean literary oeuvre offers a shelter for the bailed meaning-deprived spiritual selves inhabiting the world of pervasive overconsumption, multi-faceted soul exploitation, instantaneous happiness or gratification and existential purposelessness. As the author in his *Self-Consciousness* (1989) contemplates: *Perhaps there are two kinds of people: those for whom nothingness is no problem and those for whom it is an insuperable problem, an outrageous cancellation rendering every other concern...negligible* [8, p. 228].

Targeting those battling existential meaninglessness, he skilfully tried to convey the message characteristic of all of his writing, namely that, as one of his characters puts it, *life...is a strange gift, and [even though we may not] know how we are supposed to use it,... it's the only gift we get and it's a good one* [7, p. 224].

As his characters are portrayed to be reflective of the ordinariness of the commonality and the simultaneous extraordinariness of the inextricably human experience on the existential journey of becoming, the philosophical interpolations of Kierkegaardian thread of conceptual reasoning, enriching the performative function of the reading experience, are largely centred on the manifestation and interplay of the dialectical pairs of the developmental attributes pertaining to the notion of genuine humanness. Hence, *Rabbit, Run*'s messages *Know Thyself, as a wise old Greek once said.... It means be what you are.... Learn to understand your talents, and then work to develop them. That is the way to be happy* [7, pp. 9-10], counteracted by the revelatory statement of Updikean landmark protagonist: *If you have the guts to be yourself, other people will pay your price* [7, p. 149].

This, in turn, can be taken as illustrative of the indispensability of the synergistic relationship between Kierkegaardian *eternal and temporal, finite and infinite* and, thus, *possibility and necessity*, denotative of the paradoxical dualism underlying every aspect of human endeavour. As the author once admitted, his: ...*work says 'Yes, but'*. *Yes, in Rabbit, Run, to our inner urgent whispers, but-the*

*social fabric collapses murderously. Yes, in The Centaur, to self-sacrifice and duty, but-what of a man's private agony and dwindling? No, in The Poorhouse Fair, to social homogenization and loss of faith, but-listen to the voices, the joy of persistent existence. No, in Couples, to a religious community founded on physical and psychical interpretation, but-what else shall we do, as God destroys our churches?* [6, p. 33].

The explorative analysis and interpretative evaluation of the agentural motivations of Updikean protagonists as *homo sapiens* representatives, the case studies for the qualitative investigation of their behavioural representations and consequential existential implications, is intrinsically impregnated with a lasting potential to lay the foundations for a novelized strand of 'Updikean-Kierkegaardian existential art of living' that could prove critical in fighting off the spiritual malaise of the present age.

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