**The Curious Paradox of John Updike**

[[](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1598532502/ref=nosim/themill0b-20)](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1598532502/ref=nosim/themill0b-20)A critic once wrote of **John Updike’s** “seeming inability to write badly.” True enough: even when Updike’s prose is at its most trivial, its most self-satisfied, its most pornographic — and his critics will point out that it is often all of these things — it is always, from a technical standpoint, immaculate.

Given how difficult writing is, and given how much Updike produced in a legendarily prolific career that spanned more than half a century, it’s worth pausing to consider the remarkable fact of Updike’s talent. In terms of constructing beautiful sentences, Updike had few peers. Not just in the years after World War II, or in the 20th century, but in literary history. At a time when writing is spoken of with tedious frequency as a “craft,” Updike, in his metronomic virtuosity, is uniquely deserving of the term.

And yet, almost five years after his death, Updike’s critics often seem to outweigh his admirers, and their main complaint is that same virtuosity. Of course, Updike was subject to charges of favoring style over substance from the moment he was considered a major writer, but it’s the late-Boomer and early Gen-Xer audience that Updike really annoys. In a footnote to his new translation of **Karl Kraus’s** essays, **Jonathan Franzen** — the closest contemporary literature comes to a figure of Updikean stature — writes:

Updike was exquisitely preoccupied with his own literary digestive process, and his virtuosity in clocking and rendering the minutiae of daily life was undeniably unparalleled, but his lack of interest in the bigger postwar, postmodern, socio-technological picture marked him, in my mind, as a classic self-absorbed sixties-style narcissist.

Similarly, in a 1998 essay the late **David Foster Wallace** declared himself “one of the very few actual subforty Updike *fans*,” and then proceeded to savage Updike, concluding the essay by calling him an “asshole.” And the critic **James Wood** contended that Updike’s prose “confronts one with the question of whether beauty is enough.”

The Library of America has just released its two-volume edition of Updike’s [*Collected Stories*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1598532502/ref=nosim/themill0b-20) (nicely edited by **Christopher Carduff**), and while I doubt it will do much to improve the author’s sagging stock, at nearly 2,000 pages, comprising 186 stories published between 1953 and 2009, it offers ample opportunity for pondering Wood’s question, and the larger problem of John Updike: he was incapable of writing badly, but was he capable of writing, for lack of a better word, importantly?

Having read nearly 200 of Updike’s stories in rapid succession, I’m more sympathetic to the critics’ point of view than I had been. While not willing to go as far as Franzen, who argues that Updike was “wasting” his “tremendous, **Nabokov**-level talent,” I was surprised by how many of Updike’s stories impressed me while I read them, and how few left an impression. One can open the *Collected Stories* to almost any page and find a surprising metaphor, a lovely description, or a wry morsel of irony without remembering much of anything about story that contains it. The stories that I’d already read and admired, the ones widely regarded as Updike’s best — “Pigeon Feathers,” “A Sense of Shelter,” “In Football Season,” “The Persistence of Desire,” “The Happiest I’ve Been,” and, of course, “A&P,” for decades a stalwart of high school curricula — now strike me as a largely comprehensive list, in little need of emendation in light of Updike’s larger corpus.

The curious paradox of Updike is that he made art into a craft, but only rarely did he transcend craft to achieve art. In a sense, then, the answer to Wood’s question is that beauty is not enough, at least not the beauty of finely tuned prose and vivid images that was Updike’s specialty. Art requires the wedding of aesthetics and morals, and the case might be made that the morals are more important; few people would call **Dostoyevsky** a beautiful writer, but even fewer would contest that he was a great artist.

Still, Updike *was* capable of art, and if it is disheartening to see how much of that art is concentrated in the early years of his career, when his fiction focused on the still-vital memories of his Pennsylvania childhood — the caricature Updike, the one whose writing is full of explicit sex and overwrought descriptions of the female form, doesn’t show up until the early 1970s, and he is indeed trying — those earliest stories still possess a bracing sublimity. (Not that he never produced strong works later in his career; the stories tracing the collapse of the marriage of Richard and Joan Maple — in my opinion, Updike’s greatest work, stronger even than the Rabbit novels — continued well into his later years, but unfortunately, only the first of them appears in the *Collected Stories*. According to a textual note, the Library of America plans to publish the Maples stories, and the ones about Henry Bech, in a separate collection, an understandable decision that nevertheless weakens the volumes under consideration.)

To my mind, “The Happiest I’ve Been” is the finest of them all. The narrator, John Nordholm, (previously seen in “Friends From Philadelphia”) plans to drive with his high school friend Neil Hovey to Chicago, where he will propose to the girl he loves before returning to school in the east for spring semester. After saying goodbye to John’s parents, Neil reveals that he’d like to go to a New Year’s party in Olinger (the milieu of Updike’s early Pennsylvania stories) before they get underway. They go to the party, and from there to another girl’s house, where they pass the late hours. The night is evocatively drawn, but the crux of the story comes when John and Neil finally leave for Chicago at dawn. On the way to the interstate, they pass John’s house, which they left hours earlier, and Updike captures the oddity of this moment perfectly: “With a .22 I could have had a pane of my parents’ bedroom window, and they were dreaming I was in Indiana.”

They drive on towards Pittsburgh, and here, I’ll defer to Updike:

There were many reasons for my feeling so happy. We were on our way. I had seen a dawn…Ahead, a girl waited who, if I asked, would marry me, but first there was a vast trip: many hours and towns interceded between me and that encounter. There was the quality of the ten a.m. sunlight as it existed in the air ahead of the windshield, filtered by the thin overcast, blessing irresponsibility — you felt you could slice forever through such a cool pure element — and springing, by implying how high these hills had become, a widespreading pride: Pennsylvania, your state — as if you had made your life.

For anyone who has been young in America — for anyone who has been young — this passage needs no explication. It is beautiful, and it is certainly enough.

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