

Updikian Manipulation of Setting in “Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories”

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The second collection of short stories written by the American short-story writer John Hoyer Updike (b. 1932), entitled “Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories” and published in 1962, employs the technique of the double setting — or the juxtaposition of two different settings in the same narrative — to express symbolically the predicaments and psychological state of the characters delineated, to comment on a number of social and religious issues, and to provide a repeated structural pattern as a unifying device in the book as a whole.

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Introduction

Before analysing the individual stories of the collection, a word should be said about the epigraph which Updike attaches to the volume. It is a quotation derived from “A Report to an Academy” by an Austrian novelist, Franz Kafka (1883–1924), where the speaker is reporting to an audience about a strange metamorphic experience that had turned him from an ape into a human being. There were times, he says, when he remembered his former animal existence and could have reverted to it, but he chose not to because he found the human world more convenient:

I felt more comfortable in the world of men and fitted it better; the strong wind that blew after me out of my past began to slacken; ...even if my strength and my will power sufficed to get me back to it, I should have to scrape the very skin from my body to crawl through (John, 2018).

The speaker’s current setting — the human world — is presented as a “comfortable” world that admits progress and allows him to spur onwards. This setting is juxtaposed against that of the speaker’s pre-metamorphic existence which is presented as a remote world of gust which, though retrievable at first, denies him access as the opening between the two worlds gradually shrinks. Kafka uses the double setting as a symbolic expression of the inner conflict

going on within the mind of the speaker, who oscillates between the animal and the human worlds, or, to put it more symbolically, between humanity and animosity. The narrowing gateway in between could also be interpreted as the speaker's diminishing desire to restore the inferior life he left behind. Updike's choice of this particular excerpt strikes just the right key note to his own use of the double setting in *Pigeon Feathers*. Like Kafka's speaker, the protagonists in this work are often caught between two worlds and, more often than not, they develop a nostalgic feeling for one of these worlds and a conflicting desire to stay in the other. Two settings, therefore, are manipulated by the author to symbolise this psychological state of mind.

In "Walter Briggs", the first story in the collection, Jack — an American middle-class clerk — is driving his family back home from Boston. It is night, the journey takes long and the silence begins to get on the nerves of Jack and Clare, his wife. The two try to get away from this depressing time by remembering the first months of their marriage when they worked at a YMCA camp. Among the people they recall is a fat man called Walter, who used to play bridge. His last name, however, has eluded their minds. They spend the rest of the journey attempting to recall his last name.

The narrator remarks that Jack and Clare often engage in this sort of name-recalling game; it was one of their few plans for whiling away the time. Not that the name is important in itself. In fact, success at recalling the name would serve no practical purpose for the couple. What compels them to jog their memory in such situations is the sense of unity that the act lends them. Here are they both wrapped in a mutual endeavour at something that brings the couple closer together, away from their present sense of alienation, and into the social arena. In a comment on "Walter Briggs", Robert Detweiler observes that the name which the husband and wife try to remember is the cryptic key that opens the shared life of the past. That, in turn, is significant, not because the events were anything but commonplace but because they were shared (Robert, 1972).

In order to intensify this dichotomy between the happy past and the sordid present, Updike makes the ride back home and the desolate setting symbolically represents the couple's condition:

The superhighway made a white pyramid in the headlights; the murmur of the motor sounded lopsided, and occasionally a whiff of gasoline haunted the car's interior (12).

It is Jack and Clare's interior, so to speak, that has been haunted by the gloomy setting outside. Against this setting is the one they reconstruct, a summer resort at "Arrow Island" (12), a "row of tents" (13), and "a YMCA family camp on an island in a New Hampshire

lake” (13). Even when they arrive home, they do not find what compensates those happy days of the past (Perisho, 1991; Raman, 2015; Selden, 2016):

Downstairs, the two adults got the ginger ale out of the refrigerator and watched the midnight news on provincial television, Governor Furcolo and Archbishop Cushing looming above Khrushchev and Nasser, and went to bed hastily (14).

The setting in the second story, “The Persistence of Desire”, is very clearly manipulated by Updike to reveal the protagonist’s emotional dilemma. Clyde Behn, married and father of two children, runs into Janet, a lady he used to love many years ago. This unexpected meeting has an oculist’s clinic for its setting. Clyde’s sight problem, together with his need for eye-glasses, corresponds to his problematic affair with Janet and his wife and to his need for a clearer insight and readjustment. When he and Janet are temporarily left alone inside the clinic, he recklessly approaches her, takes her hair into his hand and puts it to his lips. The ensuing conversation between them clearly reveals his present emotional maladjustment, his being torn between his duty towards his wife and children and his persistent desire for Janet:

“Don’t you love your wife?” she asked.

“Incredibly much,” he murmured into the fine neck-down.

She moved off, leaving him leaning awkwardly, and in front of the mirror smoothed her hair away from her ears (23).

When afterwards he expresses his wish to see her regularly, she tries in vain to dissuade him from such a futile attachment and to focus his attention on the incongruity of his statements, remarking (Charles, 2015; Eric & Malcolm, 2016; Joyce, 2016):

“Clyde, I thought you were successful. I thought you had beautiful children. Aren’t you happy?”

“I am, I am; but” — the rest was so purely inspired its utterance only grazed his lips — “happiness isn’t everything” (24).

His inability to focus on either his duty or desire constitutes the major problem in his life. The result is a blurring vision of his present and future (Arthur, 2015). This inner conflict is effectively echoed in the setting itself, Doctor Pennypacker’s clinic, which smelled of linoleum, a clean, sad scent that seemed to lift from the checkerboard floor in squares of alternating intensity; this pattern had given Clyde as a boy a funny nervous feeling of intersection, and now he stood crisscrossed by a double sense of himself (17).

Literally, the lack of insight and inner vision that makes him indeterminate and unable to direct his sentiments is physically expressed through his inability to see clearly after he takes his medication:

Thus, Clyde was thrown out into a spoiled world where things took away his attention. He went down the hall in his sunglasses and he was told by the secretary that he would receive a bill (25) (Steve, 1991; Updike, 2017).

Janet slips a folded letter into his shirt pocket and takes her leave. This fills him with a sense of pride and hope:

He had not expected to be unable to read her note. He held it at arm's length and slowly brought it towards his face, wiggling it in the light from outdoors. Though he did this several times, it didn't yield even the simplest word...He tucked the note back into his shirt pocket and its stiffness there made a shield for his heart. He became a child again in this town, where life was a distant adventure, a rumor, an always imminent joy (26).

Two settings are simultaneously present in this description. The first is the actual and mundane setting that Clyde finds himself in after leaving the clinic. However, Clyde's desire not to face the bitter truth that Janet is gone, transforms this reality into an imagined juvenile scene of joy. As in "Walter Briggs", Updike gives a symbolic dimension to the journey made by his protagonist. As Clyde travels from Massachusetts, where he lives, to his birthplace in Pennsylvania where he can have his eyes examined, he moves from his sense of the present to a dream of his past, which represents his childhood and his cherished affair with Janet. Having failed to read the note and achieve a serenity of vision, Clyde resorts into a better realm allowing his wishful fancy to dictate an unreal setting upon the actual one. The reader is left to wonder whether Clyde's eyesight would improve in time and whether he would be able to reconcile his desire with his persistent desire.

The next story, "Still Life", explores the futile relationship between Leonard Hartz and Robin Cox, two students of fine arts who are sharing a course in painting at the Constable School in England. Their relationship does not go beyond friendship and never matures into love, despite their inner and unrevealed wishes to become lovers. Even when Leonard burns with jealousy at another student's attempts to socialise with Robin by asking her to pose for him in the nude, he takes no practical step, but continues to idealise her in his dreams.

In this sense, their relationship becomes itself a piece of still life, set against the real world of flux that the two inhabit. The setting is quite telling. Leonard spends his time drawing the statuary pieces housed by the art school museum. These classical statues, the reader is told, "stormed down corridors and gestured under high archways in a kind of petrified riot" (27).

He especially liked to be in “the Well” (28), which is the sky-lit basement of the museum. Against this setting of still life drummed the busy outside world of reality, a world of “store fronts”, “chemist’s shops”, “drugstores”, “tea parlors” and “luncheonettes” (28). Whenever Leonard leaves the museum, the smell of turpentine, associated with painting and his art school, keeps “lingering in his head” (28). He visualises his school as an “impregnable ... armada of great gray sails” (30). As is the case with Clyde in “The Persistence of Desire”, this imagined setting helps him achieve security, peace and a feeling of fixed tranquillity not threatened by mutability. His desire to remain in this unchanging condition is countered by Robin’s wish to turn away from “these wretched things [the statues]” and come to terms with the practical world (31).

“Should Wizard Hit Mommy?” is Updike’s attempt to apply setting symbolism to a tale which evokes a child’s make-believe world of fairy tales (Raman Selden, 1989). The story examines another aspect in the life of the couple already introduced in “Walter Briggs.” Jack is telling Jo, the daughter, a bedtime story “out of his head. This custom, started when she was two, was itself now two years old, and his head felt empty” (57). The basic linear narrative structure that Jack follows in all his stories is Roger’s quest for a wizard, the wizard’s help and Roger’s joy at solving his problem (Ibid). The setting is always “the deep dark woods” (28) and the only variation that Jack introduces to avoid monotony is the second name of the animal protagonist (Roger Skunk, Roger Fish, Roger Squirrel, Roger Chipmunk, etc.).

An Updikian contribution to this conventional fictional story-within-the-story technique is the parallelism he draws between the setting of the frame narrative and that of the narrative within it. The setting of the former is the “deep dark woods” (58) where Roger Skunk lives. A wise owl instructs Roger to “Go through the dark woods, under the apple tree, into the swamp and over the crick [river]” (59) till he gets to the dwelling place of the wizard who can solve the skunk’s bad-smelling problem. Following the owl’s directions, Roger at last arrives at the wizard’s “little white house” (59). With his magic wand, he turns the skunk’s bad smell into the scent of roses. Only now do the other animals approach and play with the poor creature.

At this point in Jack’s story, the narrator interrupts and returns to the frame setting, Jack’s house, where Clare, Jack’s wife, is moving some furniture downstairs. When Jo is finally fast asleep, Jack goes downstairs to find his wife painting the furniture white. In the closing sentence of the story, we are told that “though he ... had felt his wife’s presence in the cage with him, he did not speak with her, work with her, touch her anything” (62).

By linking these two settings to each other, the reader could account for this unexpected and anticlimactic attitude of the husband towards his wife. Like Roger, Clare had sensed her

husband's repulsion, and her determination to paint their furniture white expresses her will to alter her state and win Jack's favour, as Roger altered his own and became approachable. The white-colour symbolism does not just signify Clare's attempt to purge herself of any blemishes that may have been responsible for her alienation; it further echoes the colour symbol used in Jack's story, since both houses — Jack's and the wizard's — are painted white.

It is in "Pigeon Feathers", the title story in the collection and the one that earned him great recognition at the time, that Updike effectively makes the double setting most expressive of the theme of this theme of alienation (James Yerkes, 2017). The plot is riveted on the character of the fourteen-year-old David Kern, who is caught up in the spiritual web of religious faith and doubt. After the Kerns moved their residence from the urban city of Olinger to a rural district in Firetown, David finds it hard to acclimatise to his new surroundings. He feels torn between nostalgic wishes for his birthplace and the necessity of adjustment:

When they moved to Firetown, things were upset, displaced, rearranged. A red cane-back sofa that had been the chief piece in the living room at Olinger, was here banished...The blue wing chair that had stood for years in the ghostly, immaculate guest bedroom ...was here established importantly in front of the smutty little fireplace that supplied, in those first cold April days, their only heat (84).

The story could be approached autobiographically, for the author himself suffered from a similar change during his childhood years when the Updikes were forced by abject poverty to move from Shillington in Pennsylvania to a farm owned by Mrs Updike's parents.

As Charles Thomas Samuels explains, Shillington is generally rechristened in John Updike's fiction as Olinger, an onomastic symbol of his nostalgia (O-linger) (Charles Thomas Samuels, 1969). Though this may be true of the setting descriptions in Updike's other works, it is in *Pigeon Feathers* that the stories "particularly those involving childhood recollections of Olinger, Pennsylvania and expatriate days in England, have a greater sense of personal involvement than is common in his work" (Eric & Malcolm, 1971).

However, David's attitude towards God cannot be justified biographically or said to represent Updike's religious views. Updike's faith, as Joyce Carol Oates stresses, is unshakable, which, judging from observations and explanations existed in his writing, in a way amuses and alarms him, but his sympathies are with those who have given up hope of salvation, wanting to be apparent in their own lives (Joyce Carol Oates, 1975).

Equally, Joseph L. Price maintains that Updike continued the tradition of skilled twentieth-century poets and novelists who were recognised as Christian (Joseph). Thus, to David, Firetown was not a welcome change and he was glad for wasting time in Olinger and for the delay of riding into the heart of the dark farmland (99). Actually, being in two places, as Robert Detweiler observes, precipitates an alienation that finds expression in a religious dilemma (Detweiler).

The reason that made this shift from city life to country life engender a sense of alienation in David is also explained by Detweiler, noting that one is occupied to avoid a thought of death in town while in country, one is close to what should be the healing power of nature (Ibid).

Such dark and sinister thoughts of death are reinforced by David's father's atheistic and scientifically bent arguments with the boy's orthodox mother:

"Elsie, I know. I know from my education that the earth is nothing but chemicals. It's the only damn thing I got out of four years of college. So don't tell me it's not true."

"George, if you'd just walk out on the farm, you'd know it's not true. The land has a soul."

"Soil has no soul," he said enunciating stiffly, as if to a very stupid class. To David he said, "You can't argue with a femme. Your mother's a real femme. That's why I married her, and now I'm suffering for it" (87).

Bewildered by the absence of certainty, the boy looked up the word "soul" in his grandfather's unabridged copy of Webster's Dictionary, but the definition only "shingled a temporary shelter for him" (90).

Unconvinced by the traditional ecclesiastical teachings at church, David confides to his mother the doubts he harbours about the existence of God, heaven and the after-life. He had asked, he explains, Reverend Dobson about what heaven is like, and the minister's reply was that heaven is like a man's goodness living after him. The answer tortures the young boy, who tells his mother:

"Well, don't you see? It amounts to saying there isn't any heaven at all."

"I don't see that it amounts to that. What do you want heaven to be?"

"Well, I don't know. I want it to be something. I thought he'd tell me what it was. I thought that was his job"

"David," she asked gently, "don't you ever want to rest?"

"No. Not forever."

"David, you're so young. When you get older, you'll feel differently" (97).

No verbal catechism or argument, however, would put him in the proper religious frame of mind. It is only after he shoots the pigeons in the rafters of the barn because his grandmother complained that they are becoming a nuisance, he experienced a spiritual rebirth:

While burying the pigeons, David examines them and notices the wide variety of patterns and colors, as well as the shape of the feathers. He feels that God, who had used such skills and energy in creating such insignificant creatures would certainly permit David himself to live forever (Paul, 1964).

The double setting in “Pigeon Feathers” becomes a comment on the duality of human perception. David, argues Bill Rankin, eventually achieves “the most that a Christian could hope for, a sense of the sacred within the mundane” (Bill Rankin, 2018). In other words, the barn with its birds is set against the entire mundane setting to offer David’s soul a glimpse and a sort of spiritual gateway to heaven and salvation.

A story that involves a much broader shift in setting is “Home”, which tells of Robert, a young American teacher of mathematics, who travels with his wife and baby from England, where he has been working, to Pennsylvania, where he was born and bred. The cultural gap between the two English and American settings imposes its presence upon Robert, shocks him and proves — as is the geographical distance between the two countries — that it is too wide to bridge. Contrary to the pleasure one usually feels when returning home, Robert is far from experiencing any positive emotional attachment to his homeland.

The double setting in “Home” is then given a cross-cultural dimension. America, it should be remembered, is Robert’s as well as Updike’s native land. By unconventionally and ironically presenting the protagonist’s arrival home as a disillusioning and alienating experience, the author was probably harping on the theme of the difference between America’s appearance and reality (Perisho, 1991). This difference was greatly widened by the Cold War era, whose grievous impact Updike frankly reflected in his works. D. Quentin Miller draws attention to the fact of Updike’s use of Cold War tightness as a cultural reality and as a metaphor of the domestic life affecting the psychological security of characters to reveal the essential conflict of his fictional world (Quentin Miller, 2017). That fact hits Robert, who, as the protagonists discussed above have done, immediately falls back on his fancy and wishful thinking to envelope the sordid reality with happier dreams of a conjured past:

And then America. Just the raggie -taggle of traffic and taxis that collected at the west end of the Forties when a liner came in In the year past, a sight of one of the big glaring cars assuming its way throughout the Oxford lanes had been an animate flag to him, a trumpet blown across a field of grain, and here they were, enough of them to create a traffic jam, beeping to each other (106).

Taking into consideration the fact that Updike's work in general "expresses hostility to modern America (Samuels)", one could fairly conclude that although the new American setting introduces Robert to new ideas and feelings, the change is for the worse. Updike has never been a jingoist or a patriot, as he confesses in an interview with Dwight Garner from the cyber-magazine, *SALON*. When asked about his opinion of a character in his fiction, Updike explains that he did kind of like Reagan. He's patriotic and he likes all presidents. I must say that I don't like it. I find it un-American and creepy. This kind of politics of resentment (Dwight, 2017).

Updike considers American jingoists in general as people who "kind of go for more pow, more zap (Ibid)".

Like the setting shift in "Pigeon Feathers", America works a corruption into Robert's mind-set: "Both he and the land," the reader is told, "were altering. The container [Robert's mind] was narrowing; the thing contained was growing impure" (110).

"You'll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You", Updike's next story, is unique in its anthropomorphic approach to setting. Ben, the ten-year-old Olinger boy hero in the narrative, is overwhelmed with excitement by the dazzling carnival that has just arrived in town. Taking fifty cents from his poor parents, he rushes out to enjoy his time at the carnival and buys some cotton candy, but he is soon prevented from playing a gambling game and is told by one of the attendants to go back home.

On his way to the carnival, Ben is aware of two worlds. The first is the one he yearns to join and it is described as a realm of "pink", of "merry-go-round", of "Whirlo-Gig", "Ferris wheel" and "a stage of strung lights" (120). The other is the one he leaves behind and it comprises his home and the surrounding neighbourhood, described as a world of "empty darkening streets" (120) and houses in black forbidding shadows like the teeth of a saw (121). The last simile does not only reveal an exuberant imagination on the author's part, but is also telling in the connotations its tenor makes in presenting the boy's vision of his native town as an agent of torture. Moreover, the image of the saw also draws a dividing line between the two conflicting and widely differing settings. The image returns at the end of the story where Ben, rejected by the adult world of the carnival, returns home:

The spangles, the splinters of straw and strings of light, the sawtooth peaks of houses... are hung like the needles of a Christmas tree with the transparent, tinted globes confusing his eyelashes (124).

The ambivalent effect of the double setting is further enhanced here by the paradoxical nature of two other similes. One compares the world to a Christmas tree, which is both fragrant and

prickly; the other, which closes the story, presents it anthropomorphically as a coquette, who is attractive but insolently denying. Though the final sentence might sound too moralising to a modern reader, it does contribute to the idea of duality in the nature of the carnival setting.

Updike lends his use of the double setting to a cosmic dimension in “The Astronomer”, a story about a young man named Walter and his wife who are visited by Bela, a Hungarian astronomer whose acquaintance they had made during their college days. The presence of the astronomer in the couple’s riverside drive cozy apartment, with his firm belief in an Einsteinian universe and his atheistic views, poses a dire threat to Walter’s recent attempts to reconstruct his religious faith in a divinely ordered universe. The negative impact of Bela’s visit on Walter is expressed clearly in the story, "I thoroughly constructed within myself wasting my prayers and my churchgoing ... all fell to the thinnest filament of illusion" (127).

This transformation in Walter’s feelings and beliefs is soon reflected in the setting. The very apartment, his home, which he has so much cherished, is soon viewed in a corresponding manner into a miniature universe governed by nothing but blind despiritualised forces of chaos. He sees the kitchen utensils lying on the table as a microcosm mirroring the larger universe, or the macrocosm, as described by modern theories of physics and astronomy:

On the table, the cups and glasses broken into shards by shadows, the brown dregs of coffee and wine, the ashtrays and the ashes were hastily swept together into a little heap of warm dark tones distinct from the universal debris. ... In memory, perhaps because we lived on the sixth floor, this scene — this invisible scene — seems to take place at a great height, as if we were the residents of a star suspended against the darkness of the city and the river (129).

Moving from these cosmic heights down to a mundane setting, Updike concludes his use of the double setting with “A&P”, the most popular and most anthologised piece from *Pigeon Feathers*. The action is narrated by Sammy, a checkout clerk working at a store in the A&P market in an unnamed Massachusetts town north of Boston (The expression). One Thursday afternoon, three girls walk into the store barefoot and in swimming suits — a conduct considered indecent and disgraceful in this part of town. The three girls, however, do not see things this way; they are the daughters of some wealthy summer residents from the Point at the beach that lies five miles from the marketplace.

Just when the girls approach Sammy’s checkout to pay for their purchases — a moment the boy has been waiting for eagerly and impatiently since they stepped in — Lengel, the store manager, bursts on the scene and reprimands the girls for their indecency, asking them to cover their bare shoulders and wear shoes. Embarrassed at what they take as a public humiliation, the girls flush. Sammy, unable to curb his anger at his boss, immediately rises to

the occasion by casting his apron and bow tie on the desk, stepping forward and announcing to Lengel his decision to leave:

“Did you say something, Sammy?”

“I said I quit.”

“I thought you did.”

“You didn’t have to embarrass them.”

“It was they who were embarrassing us” (135).

To Sammy, girls are both superior and victims who do not deserve Lengel’s reproach. By making such a rash decision to quit, he imagines himself a knight in shining armour, coming to their rescue. However, he is soon disappointed after he goes out of the store and finds no sign of the girls. They left without even thanking him for his initiative. After all, he was the only one at the store to speak for them.

Updike manipulates the two contrasting settings of the story to reveal the social variance that exists between the wealthy class of the Point and the beach on the one hand, and the working class of the market area on the other. The mere presence of the three girls in the wrong setting is a displacement that cannot pass unnoticed and unexposed. Even Sammy is aware of what consequences this displacement might bear, as he himself observes:

You know, it is one thing to have girls in a bathing suit down on the beach, where nobody can look at each other much anyway, and another thing in the cool of the A&P, under the lights, against all those arranged packages, with her feet paddling naked over the checkerboard cream and green rubber tile floor (132).

Actually, this part of the town represents a relic of the traditional past. Ellen Sheppard observes, “The A&P was perfect to symbolize society's structure in the past, built to guide people in one direction without requiring much thought” (Ellen Sheppard, 2018).

Various motives could have conspired to lead Sammy into this decision: his teen-age desire for the girls’ attention, his boredom with his mundane and poor community or simply the typically adolescent and unmotivated urge to rebel against conventional mores. Whatever the case, it is obvious that he experiences a conflict of emotions, and that the two different settings of the story are clearly employed to probe these conflicting forces in his behaviour and to probe the essential social issue of the distinction between the wealthy and the poor.

With “A&P”, Updike could be said to have effectively utilised the literary and symbolic potentialities of the double setting. A study of the settings in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* shows a full command of the language as well as a brilliant, imaginative and creative



ability for descriptions. More significantly, however, is his manipulation of the double setting to reflect and probe a number of psychological, social, political and religious issues.

Finally, it is this Updikian manipulation of the double setting that accounts, at least in part, for the elaborate depictions in his fiction — depictions which are considered by some critics as follies on the author's part, as Oates, commenting on such critics' views, observes that what some critics dislike in Updike is his trend towards detail for its own sake. One is sometimes given the setting at too great a length a the external circumstances of the visual world can be an exhausting burden (Oates).



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