September 28, 2021 [Vol. 32(3)]
P-ISSN: 1680-8738; E-ISSN: 2663-547X

مجلة كلية التربية للبنات
مجلة فصلية علمية محكمة في العلوم الانسانية والاجتماعية تصدرها كلية التربية للبنات-
جامعة بغداد-العراق
Journal of the College of Education for Women
A Refereed Scientific Quarterly Journal for Human and Social Sciences Issued by the College of Education for Women-University of Baghdad-IRAQ

Received: July 26, 2021
تاريخ الإستلام: ٢٠٢١/٧/٢٦
Accepted: August 28, 2021
تاريخ القبول: ٢٠٢١/٨/٢٨
Published: September 28, 2021
تاريخ النشر الإلكتروني: ٢٠٢١/٩/٢٨
DOI: https://doi.org/10.36231/coedw.v32i3.1523

The Role of Binary Settings in John Updike's Short Stories: A Structuralist Approach

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Abstract

John Updike's use of setting in his fiction has elicited different and even conflicting reactions from critics, varying from symbolic interpretations of setting to a sense of confusion at his use of time and place in his stories. The present study is an attempt at examining John Updike's treatment of binary settings in Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories (1962) to reveal theme, characters' motives and conflicts. Analyzing Updike's stories from a structuralist's perspective reveals his employment of two different places and times in the individual stories as a means of reflecting the psychological state of the characters, as in "The Persistence of Desire", or expressing conflicting views on social and political issues, as in "A&P" and "Home", or commenting on religious issues as in "Pigeon Feathers." The study also examines Updike's use of setting as a structural device to provide unity to the diverse stories in the collection. The study concludes that binary settings provide structural unity to the stories in the collection and add a psychological dimension and depth to the characters.

Keywords: binary settings, John Updike, Pigeon Feathers, structuralism

ازدواجية المكان والزمان في قصص ابدايك: دراسة بنيوية

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المستخلص

أثار استخدام جون أبدايك للازدواجية في رواياته ردود فعل مختلفة بل وحتى متضاربة من النقاد، تراوحت ما بين كونها تفسيرات رمزية إلى الشعور بالارتباك عند استخدامه للزمان والمكان في قصصه. لذا يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة استعمال الكاتب (جون ابدايك) للازدواجية في مكان وزمان المشهد القصصي في مجموعته القصصية الموسومة (ريش الحمام و قصص أخرى) والتي نشرت عام ١٩٦٢. إن استعمال ابدايك لهذه الوسيلة يعود الى حرصه على ايصال فكرة القصة وملابساتها ودوافع شخصياتها الى القارئ، فيقوم بتقديم زمانين ومكانين مختلفين في كل قصة وذلك لتجسيد الحالة النفسية للشخصيات، كما هو الحال في قصته (الرغبة الملحة)، وربما يحاول التعبير عن تضارب وجهات النظر حول المسائل السياسية والاجتماعية، وهذا ما يعكسه الكاتب في قصته (أي و بي) و (الوطن)، وقد يتطرق للقضايا الدينية كما في (ريش الحمام). ويهتم البحث أيضا بدراسة توظيف ابدايك لازدواجية مكان وزمان المشهد القصصي بوصفها أداة لتوحيد هيكل مجموعته القصصية. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن استعمال المكان كصيغة تركيبية تسهم في توحيد القصص المختلفة في مجموعته القصصية. كما ان استعمال ازدواجية المكان والزمان تسهم في إضافة بعد نفسي وعمق للشخصيات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ازدواجية المكان والزمان، البنيوية، جون أبدايك، ريش الحمام

1. Introduction

The second collection of short stories written by the American short-story writer John Hoyer Updike (1932-2009), titled *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* and published in 1962, employs the technique of juxtaposing two different settings in the same narrative. Such a technique helps 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 collection as a whole.

The problem this study is concerned with is the confusion that a number of critics and readers face when grappling with Updike's use of setting in his literary works. His use of setting in his fiction has often been considered by some critics to be a weakness on the author's part for its overuse of details. Oates (1975), commenting on such critics' views, observed that "what some critics dislike in Updike is this tendency towards details for its own sake … one is sometimes given the setting at too great a length …. The external circumstances of the visual world can be an exhausting burden" (p. 465). The present study is intended to vindicate Updike's use of setting against such criticisms, and justify his insertion of multiple settings in his works.

The questions that the present study poses are mainly what Updike's purpose of using two settings in his short stories is, what the role these settings play in the interpretation of the theme of the stories, and how this use of setting affects the analysis of the characters in the stories. By answering these questions, more insight would be gained into Updike's fiction. The significance of the study would therefore lie in clearing the confusion that critics and readers have encountered in Updike's works and in gaining a better understanding of his art.

2. The Theoretical Background

2.1 Previously Conducted Studies

Studies conducted on John Updike's fiction analyzed his use of setting in his novels as a means of reflecting the psychological state of the characters involved or reflecting the themes of the texts. In *The John Updike Ecyclopedia*, De Bellis (2000) said that setting, according to Updike, has an important place in literary composition stating that "writer needs to have setting in mind first" (p.174). De Bellis (2000, p.27) argued that setting lends a sense of universality to Updike's fiction.

In a doctoral dissertation examining Updike's use of setting in his fiction, K. L. Riley (1981) found that the objective location in his fiction corresponds to a similar subjective attitude in the characters or to themes that are in line with the location. By introducing this correlation between setting and character or setting and theme, Updike "moves beyond realism" (p.8).

Hartman (1987) similarly concluded her study of setting in Updike's fiction that there is an evident parallelism between theme and setting (p.181). According to Keener (2005), setting in Updike's fiction conveys "life's dualism" (p.27).

These studies do not, however, tackle the binary feature in the settings of Updike's short stories. It is the following analysis of John Updike's use of binary settings that this study focuses upon to show the role that location has in the interpretation of his fiction. The current study is a further step that draws attention to yet another characteristic of the use of setting in Updike's fiction, which is namely the juxtaposition of two settings in the same literary text and the function this technique serves in the story.

2.2 Binary Oppositions as the Adopted Model

When Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) discussed the concept of binary oppositions in *Course in General Linguistics*, he was mainly referring to the phonetic structure of words, which he termed "signs" (p.51). In his lectures on linguistics, his concern with binary oppositions was related to how meaning is inferred and assigned to lexical items. The literary implications of his theory of binary oppositions, however, is attributed to French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-

Strauss (1908-2009), who used Saussure's theory to interpret the cultural output including literature. Drawing on Saussure's linguistic tenets, Lévi-Strauss believed that every cultural output is a parole. By examining the various paroles of a given culture, one can arrive at the langue (or the underlying grammar) of that culture. Lévi-Strauss' application of Saussure's theory to mythology and his analysis of classical myths paved the way for the application of structuralism to literature. He achieved this by reducing stories to individual plot elements, which he called "mythemes", and which he regarded as the constituent units of the story, in line with the Saussaurean concept of the signifier. Afterwards, he tabulated these mythemes into binary oppositions that shed light upon the underlying themes, concepts and cultural dimensions of the tales. Lévi-Strauss (1955, pp.428-444) juxtaposed these binary elements which involved settings against one another in the analysis to contribute to his findings.

As applied to the analysis of literary texts, the concept of binary oppositions is central to the structuralism and the structuralist theory of literature. According to Cuddon (2013, pp.77-78), the term "binary oppositions" in literary theory is defined as components of the text that are juxtaposed against each other, either consciously or unconsciously by the author.

Examining these oppositions could reveal various underlying ideas and views related to aspects of the text, such as theme or characterization. These binary oppositions could comprise events, symbols, settings, diction, imagery, stylistic or rhetorical devices, ideas and any other textual elements. Culler (1975) argued that binarism is very essential to literary texts because "when two things are set in opposition to one another, the reader is forced to explore qualitative similarities and differences to make a connection, so as to derive meaning from the disjunction" (pp.17-18).

3. Methodology of the Study

The present study is qualitative. It examines the collection of short stories titled *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* and written by John Updike (1962). Nine stories from the collection are analyzed in addition to the epigraph attached to the volume.

Each individual story in the study sample is analyzed in terms of the time and place elements of the settings described in it to identify psychological state of the main characters in the story and to identify the type of relation that exists between setting and the ideals conveyed in the story. Binary settings in each story are juxtaposed and compared with each other to identify a corresponding binary opposition in the psychological state of the characters and a corresponding binary opposition in the ideas expressed in the story.

3.1 Data Analysis

3.1.1The Analysis of the Epigraph to *Pigeon Feathers*

Before analyzing the individual stories of the collection, a word should be said about the epigraph which Updike attaches to the volume. It is an excerpt derived from "A Report to an Academy" penned by the German-speaking Bohemian 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 (Kafka, 1985, pp.250-263). There were times, he stated, when he remembered his former animal existence, and could have reverted to it, had he chosen not to because he deemed human existence more convenient:

I could have returned at first … through an archway as wide as the span of heaven over the earth, but as I spurred myself on in my forced career, the opening narrowed and shrank behind me; 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; today it is only a gentle puff of air that plays around my heels; and the opening in the distance, through which it comes and through which I once came

myself, has grown so small that, 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. (Updike, 1962, p.8)

The speaker's current setting – the human world – is presented as a "comfortable" realm 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 initially retrievable, denies him access, as the opening between the two worlds gradually shrinks. Kafka used these two settings as a symbolic expression of the inner conflict within the mind of the speaker, who oscillates between humanity and animosity. The narrowing gateway in between could also be interpreted as the speaker's diminishing desire to restore the former inferior life he left behind. Updike's choice of this particular excerpt strikes just the right keynote to his own use of setting in *Pigeon Feathers*. Like Kafka's speaker, the protagonists, in this volume of short stories, are often caught between two worlds. They too develop a nostalgic feeling for one of these worlds, and a conflicting desire to cling to the other. Two settings; therefore, are manipulated by the author to symbolize this psychological frame of mind.

3.1.2 The Analysis "Walter Briggs"

In "Walter Briggs", the first story in the collection, Jack – an American middle-class clerk – is driving his family back home from Boston. The time of the setting is night, the journey takes long, and the silence begins to get on the nerves of both Jack and his wife Clare. The two make an effort at avoiding this depressing situation by reminiscing about the past and remembering the first months of their marriage when they worked at a YMCA camp. Among the people they recall during their conversation is a fat man named Walter, who used to play bridge. His last name; however, has eluded their minds, and they spend the rest of the journey trying to recall his last name.

The narrator of the story remarks that this is not the first time that Jack and Clare engage in this sort of name-recalling game: "This game … was one of their few devices for whiling away enforced time together" (Updike, 1962, p.12). Not that the name is important in itself, for in fact the success at recalling the name would serve no practical purpose for the couple. What compels them to jog their memory in such situations is, in addition to whiling away the time, the sense of unity that the act lends them. It helps them both wrap in a mutual endeavor at something that brings the couple closer together, away from their present sense of alienation, and into the social arena, no matter how virtually that would be, since the third party is not physically present. In a comment on "Walter Briggs", Robert Detweiler (1972) observed that the name which the husband and wife try to remember "is the cryptic key that opens the shared life of the past. And that, in turn, is significant not because the events were anything but commonplace, but because they were shared" (p.70).

In order to intensify this dichotomy between the pleasant past and the sordid present, the husband makes the ride back home. The 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 (Updike, 1962, p.12). It is Jack and Clare's inner emotions and thoughts that have been haunted by the gloomy setting outside. Against this setting is the one they reconstruct, a summer resort at "Arrow Island", a "row of tents", and "a YMCA family camp on an island in a New Hampshire lake" (Updike, 1962, pp.12-13). Even when they arrive home, they do not find what compensates those happy days of the past: "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" (Updike, 1962, p.14).

3.1.3 The Analysis of "The Persistence of Desire"

The setting in the second story in the collection, "The Persistence of Desire", is very clearly manipulated by Updike to reveal the protagonist's emotional dilemma. Clyde Behn, a married man and a father of two children, runs into Janet, a lady he used to love many years ago. This unexpected encounter has an oculist's clinic for its setting. Clyde's sight problem and his need for eye-glasses symbolically corresponds to his problematic affair with Clyde 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 and rashly 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 as a result of his state of being torn between his duty towards his living wife and children and his persistent desire for Janet. When she asks him, "Don't you love your wife?", he replies with a murmur "Incredibly much," and the narrator tells the reader that Janet, at hearing this reply, "moved off, leaving him leaning awkwardly, and in front of the mirror smoothed her hair away from her ears" (Updike, 1962, p.23), a sign of her realization that this affair is futile. When afterwards he expresses his wish to see her regularly, she tries in vain to dissuade him from such a fruitless attachment and to focus his attention on the incongruity of his statements, remarking, "Clyde, I thought you were successful. I thought you had beautiful children. Aren't you happy?", to which he replied "I am, I am; but … happiness isn't everything" (Updike, 1962, p.24). His answers to her questions indicate that he is not caught between the classical pleasant and unpleasant alternatives of a love triangle. His inner conflict is generated by two equally pleasant alternatives and his desire. This is because more love temporarily overrides his common sense and contentment, both of which comprise his duty as a husband and father. 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 (Mizener, 1962). 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, his present identity extending down from Massachusetts to meet his disconsolate youth in Pennsylvania, projected upward from a distance of years. (Updike, 1962, p.17)

Literally, this 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 dismissed into a tainted world where things evaded his focus. He went down the hall in his sunglasses and was told by the secretary that he would receive a bill" (Updike, 1962, p.25). 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. Just wet blue specks. Under the specks, however, in their intensity and disposition, he believed he could make out the handwriting – slanted, open, and unoriginal – familiar to him from other notes received long ago. This glimpse, through the skin of the paper, of her plain self-quickened and sweetened his desire more than touching her did. He tucked the note back into his shirt pocket and its stiffness there made a shield for his heart. In this armor he stepped into the familiar street. The maples, macadam, shadows, houses, cement, were to his violated eyes as brilliant as a scene remembered; he became a child again in this town, where life

was a distant adventure, a rumor, an always imminent joy. (Updike, 1962, p.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 assigns 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 dreamy vision of his past, which represents his juvenile years 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 impose and 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 duty with his persistent desire.

3.1.4 The Analysis of "Still Life"

The next story, "Still Life", explores the futile relationship between Leonard Hartz and Robin Cox, two students majoring in 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 wish to become lovers. Even when Leonard burns with jealousy at another student's attempts at socializing with Robin by asking her to pose for him in the nude, he takes no practical step to object or express his jealousy, but continues instead to idealize her in his dreams.

In this sense, their relationship becomes itself a piece of still life, set against the real world of flux where the two protagonists inhabit. The setting is symbolic. 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" (Updike, 1962, p.27). He especially liked to be in "the Well" (Updike, 1962, p.28), which is the sky-lit basement of the museum. Against this setting of still life drums the busy external world of reality, a world of "store fronts", "chemist's shops", "drugstores", "tea parlors" and "luncheonettes", and whenever Leonard leaves the museum, the smell of turpentine, associated with painting and his art school, keeps "lingering in his head" (Updike, 1962, p.28). He visualizes his school as an "impregnable … armada of great gray sails" (Updike, 1962, p.30). As is the case with Clyde in "The Persistence of Desire", this imagined setting helps him obtain security and peace and establish within himself a feeling of fixed tranquility 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 real and practical world outside (Updike, 1962, p.31). In an argumentative manner, he asks her, "Don't you like them? Don't you find them sort of stable and timeless?" to which she replies, "If these old things are timeless, I'd rather be timely by a long shot" (Updike, 1962, p.31).

3.1.5 The Analysis of "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?"

"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. Updike had already tried his hand at juvenile fiction in the same year in *The Magic Flute* (1962), an adaptation of Mozart's opera. "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" examines another aspect in the life of the couple already introduced in "Walter Briggs." Jack is telling his daughter, Jo, a bedtime story "out of his head. This custom, begun when she was two, was itself now nearly two years old, and his head felt empty" (Updike, 1962, p.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 having his problem eventually solved (Selden, 1989, p.61). The setting is always "the

deep dark woods" (Updike, 1962, p.28). The only variation that Jack introduces to avoid monotony is the last name of the animal protagonist in the story (Roger Skunk, Roger Fish, Roger Squirrel, Roger Chipmunk, etc.).

Updike's contribution to this conventional fictional story-within-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" (Updike, 1962, p.58) where Roger Skunk lives. A wise owl instructs Roger to "Go through the dark woods, under the apple trees, into the swamp, over the crick [river]" (Updike, 1962, p.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" (Updike, 1962, p.59). With his magic wand, he turns the skunk's bad smell into the scent of roses. Only at that moment do the other animals approach and play with the now pleasant-smelling skunk. 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, the reader is told that "though he … had felt his wife's presence in the cage with him, he did not want to speak with her, work with her, touch her, anything" (Updike, 1962, p.62). By linking the 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 favor, as Roger altered his own and became approachable. The white-color symbolism does not merely signify Clare's attempt to purge herself of any blemishes that may have been responsible for her alienation. It further echoes the color symbol used in Jack's story, since both houses – Jack's and the wizard's – are painted white.

3.1.6 The Analysis of "Pigeon Feathers"

It is in "Pigeon Feathers", the titular story in the collection and the one that earned the author great recognition at the time, that Updike effectively renders setting most expressive of the theme of alienation. 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 acclimatize 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, too big for the narrow country parlor, to the barn, and shrouded under a tarpaulin. Never again would David lie on its length all afternoon eating raisins and reading mystery novels and science fiction and P. G. Wodehouse. The blue wing chair that had stood for years in the ghostly, immaculate guest bedroom, gazing through the windows curtained with dotted swiss toward the telephone wires and horse-chest nut trees and opposite houses, was here established importantly in front of the smutty little fireplace that supplied, in those first cold April days, their only heat (Updike, 1962, p.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 (1969) explained, Shillington is generally rechristened in John Updike's fiction as Olinger, an onomastic symbol of his nostalgia "O-linger" (p.12). 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" (Mottram & Bradbury, 1971, p.257). However, David's attitude towards God cannot be justified biographically or said to represent Updike's religious views. Joyce Carol Oates stresses the fact that

Updike's faith is possibly unshakable … which, judging from observations scattered throughout his writing, in a way alarms and amuses him, but his sympathies are usually with those who doubt, who have given up hope of salvation as such, wanting instead to be transparent, artists of their own lives (Oates, 1975, p.461)

Equally, Joseph L. Price maintained that "Updike continues the tradition of accomplished twentieth-century novelists and poets who identified themselves as Christian" (Price, 2002, p.959). Thus to David, Firetown was not a welcome change, and he

was grateful for all the time his father wasted in Olinger. Every delay postponed the moment when they must ride together down the dirt road into the heart of the dark farmland, where the only light was the kerosene lamp waiting on the dining-room table, a light that drowned their food in shadow and made it sinister. (Updike, 1962, p.99)

As Robert Detweiler (1972) observed, "The resultant double perspective, the sense of existing in two places, precipitates for the hero of the story an alienation that finds expression in a religious dilemma" (p.64). The reason that made this shift from city life to country life engenders a sense of alienation in David, as Detweiler explained: "In the town … one is sufficiently occupied to avoid a contemplation of death. However, in the country, close to what should be the healing power of nature, one is drawn by the proximity of the soil to darker thoughts of death and decay" (p.64). 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." (Updike, 1962, p.87)

Bewildered by this 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" (Updike, 1962, p.90).

Unconvinced by the traditional ecclesiastical teachings at church, David confides to his mother the doubts he harbors 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 b 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". (Updike, 1962, p.97)

No verbal catechism or argument; however, would put him in the proper religious frame of mind. However, after shooting the pigeons in the rafters of the barn at his grandmother's complains 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 (Doyle, 1964, p.118)

The two settings in "Pigeon Feathers" become a comment on the duality of human perception. David eventually achieved "the most that a Christian could hope for, a sense of the sacred within the mundane" (Rankin, 2002). In other words, the barn with its birds is set against the entire mundane setting to offer David's soul a glimpse of and a sort of spiritual gateway to heaven and salvation.

3.1.7 The Analysis of "Home"

A story that involves a much broader shift in setting is "Home", which tells of a young American teacher of mathematics, Robert, 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 the geographical distance between the two countries indicates, 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:

Robert had determined to be not disappointed by the Statue of Liberty, to submit to her cliché, but she disappointed him by being genuinely awesome, in the morning mist of the harbor, with a catch in her green body as if she had just thought to raise the torch, or at least raise it so high (Updike, 1962, p.106)

The two settings in "Home" are 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, pp. 7-11). This difference was greatly widened by the Cold War era, whose grievous impact Updike frankly reflected in his works. D. Quentin Miller (2001) drew attention to the fact that Updike "was profoundly affected by the early Cold War ideology that pervaded" (p.2). This fact shocked Robert, who, in line with the behavior of the other protagonists discussed above, immediately falls back on his fantasy and wishful thinking to envelope the sordid reality with happier dreams of a conjured past:

And then America. Just the raggle-taggle of traffic and taxis that collects at the west end of the Forties when a liner comes in …. In the year past, the sight of one of these big grimacing cars shouldering its way through the Oxford lanes had been to him a breathing flag, a bugle blown across a field of grain, and here they were, enough of them to create a traffic jam, honking and glaring at each other (Updike, 1962, p.106)

Taking into consideration the fact that Updike's work in general "expresses hostility to modern America" (Samuels, 1969, p.10), 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 stated,

He did kind of like Reagan. He tends to like all presidents, I think. He's patriotic, right, and he will stick with the president. For myself, I must say, I don't much like it. I find it creepy and un-American, what's happening, as far as I can tell. This kind of politics of resentment (Garner, 2001)

Updike considered American jingoists in general people who "kind of go for more pow, more zap" (Garner, 2001).

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" (Updike, 1962, p.110).

3.1.8 The Analysis of "You'll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You"

"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 adult 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" (Updike, 1962, p.120). The other world is the one he leaves behind and it comprises his home and the surrounding neighborhood, described as a world of "empty darkening streets" and houses "that stand beyond the lot on all sides in black forbidding silhouettes like the teeth of a saw" (Updike, 1962, pp.120-121). The last simile does not only reveal an exuberant imagination on the author's part, but is also quite telling in the connotations its tenor makes by 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 variant 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 showing behind the scattered white heads scented sweetly with mud, are hung like the needles of a Christmas tree with the transparent, tinted globes confusing his eyelashes. Thus the world, like a bitter coquette, spurns our attempts to give ourselves to her wholly. (Updike, 1962, p.124)

The ambivalent effect of the two settings 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 moralizing to a modern reader, it does contribute to the idea of duality in the nature of the carnival setting.

3.1.9 The Analysis of "*The Astronomer*"

Updike lent his use of setting a cosmic dimension in "The Astronomer", a story about 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 felt the structure I had painstakingly built within myself wasting away; my faith … my prayers, my churchgoing … all dwindled to the thinnest filament of illusion, and in one flash, I knew, they would burn to nothing" (Updike, 1962, p.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 despiritualized 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, below our faces, 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. (Updike, 1962, p.129)

3.1.10 The Analysis of "*A&P*"

Moving from these cosmic heights down to a mundane setting, Updike concluded his use of setting with "A&P", the last story in the collection and the most popular and anthologized piece he composed. 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. One Thursday afternoon, three girls walk into the store barefoot dressed in swimming suits – a conduct considered indecent and disgraceful in this part of town for its violation of the chain store policy. 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 young man 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 and indignantly throws his apron and bow tie on the desk, stepping forward and announcing to Lengel his decision to quit:

"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." (Updike, 1962, p.135)

To Sammy, the 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 armor, 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 or for standing up for them. The fact that he was the only one at the store to speak for them was met with no sense of gratitude or reward.

Updike manipulated 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's one thing to have a girl in a bathing suit down on the beach, where what with the glare nobody can look at each other much anyway, and another thing in the cool of the A&P, under the fluorescent lights, against all those stacked packages, with her feet paddling along naked over our checkerboard green-and-cream rubber-tile floor. (Updike, 1962, p.132)

Though he played hero and sacrificed his job for the three girls, he realized the full import of Lengel's point:

What he meant was, our town is five miles from a beach, with a big summer colony out on the Point, but we're right in the middle of town, and the women generally put on a shirt or short or something before they get out of the car into the street … and if you stand at our front doors you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real-estate offices and about twenty-seven old free loaders tearing up Central Street because the sewer broke again. We're north of Boston and there's people in this town who haven't seen the ocean for twenty years. (Updike, 1962, p.132)

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 motive, 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 conduct and to probe the essential social issue of the distinction between the wealthy and the poor.

4. Conclusions

In the light of the foregoing stucturalist analysis of the binary settings in Updike's collection of short stories, the use of dual settings plays a major role in revealing the psychological state and the motives of his characters as well as expressing the themes in the stories and the tone of the author. These settings also serve as structural devices that lend unity to the various constituents within a single story. In the case of *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*, settings also provide unity to the various stories to bind them together as a coherent whole within the collection. From the epigraph to the book, the opening story of "Walter Briggs" to "A&P", the last story in the collection, Updike effectively utilized the literary and symbolic potentialities of setting in fiction. The structuralist approach above to the binary settings in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* shows a full command of the language as well as a brilliant, imaginative and creative ability for description, but it more importantly indicates Updike's application of the concept of binarism to the creation of setting in the stories and its employment as a vehicle to reveal and highlight theme and characterization. Binary settings become a tool in the author's hand to reflect and probe a number of psychological, social, political and religious issues.

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