

26 John Updike

I ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Updike was born in Shillington, Pennsylvania in 1932, the only child of a not very wealthy family. He was educated at Harvard University, where he graduated *summa cum laude* in 1954 and he received a Knox Fellowship to study at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford, England.

Before he published his first book *The Carpentered Hen and Other Farm Creatures* (a collection of witty and satirical poems) in 1958, his stories had already appeared in *The New Yorker*, of which he was a member of the staff from 1955 to 1957. In 1959 he published both *The Same Door*, a collection of stories, and *The Poorhouse Fair*, a rather bizarre novel about conflicts in a poorhouse. *Rabbit Run* (1960) evokes a world of total negation and moral confusion. *The Centaur* (1963) is a rather ambitious novel, which won the National Book Award. *Couples* (1968) is a novel discussing middle class community sex. *Beck: A Book* (1970) is a collection of stories that dwell on the problems of writers. *Rabbit Redux* appeared in 1972 and his third Rabbit novel *Rabbit is Rich* in 1981. It won the Pulitzer Prize and some other literary awards. Two of his more recent novels are *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) and *Roger's Version* (1986).

Updike's style is at all times precise and controlled. Some critics contend that it is exaggerated at the expense of character and clear motivation, but Updike is always extremely readable.

II HIGHLIGHT

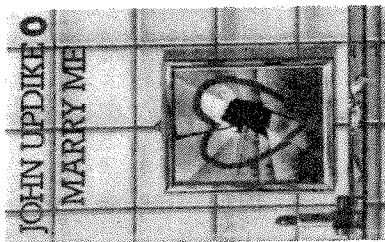
Marry Me

Introduction

In *Marry Me* John Updike describes in detail the messiness of an extramarital affair. In the first four parts of the book he observes sharply the moods and perspectives of each of the main characters. Part five shows clearly the opposition between dreamworld and reality, an opposition which has been latently present in the whole book.

Some critics call *Marry Me* a morality, an allgory of sex and sin. They see Jerry and Sally partly as prototypes set apart from reality, even call the affairs of Sally and Jerry and Ruth and Richard an elaborate joke about the dead end of the Puritan spirit.

The time is 1962, the first year of the Kennedy administration. For Jerry, who lives on the coast of Connecticut, not far from New York City, this means that he lives in the twilight of the old morality. For him sex and religion are central issues. Jerry, an ever-doubting character, cannot come to the decision to break off his marriage,



although he reproaches his wife Ruth for lacking the courage to grasp life. Jerry sees his affair with Sally as a pleasant illusion which will be blown up the moment it gets out into the open. He hopes that Ruth and Sally between them will work out a solution. He is a complex character, as opposed to Ruth. For her an affair is an episode that is finished without having any consequences. Jerry on the other hand needs reassurance that he is doing the right thing. For him this reassurance is the meaning of religion and sex, and he sometimes cannot distinguish between the two.

Summary

The stretch of Connecticut beach near Greenwood is relatively quiet. Sally Mathias is there in a dune, waiting for Jerry Conant. Since the beginning of their affair he has changed; he is always hurrying, he has a feeling of youthfulness and he has given up smoking. When he arrives they find a quiet spot where they can drink Jerry's wine and make love. They talk about their marriages and children. Jerry remarks that he married Ruth because he expected she would make a good wife. The next day they continue their discussion on the phone. Sally feels as if Jerry has robbed her of her joy in her children. She blames him for acting like a husband. Richard, her husband, has only wanted to be her lover. When Jerry tells her that he has to go to Washington on business for two days, she feels almost deserted. Jerry is a designer and animator of t.v. commercials. Sally considers flying to Washington herself, as she did once before, a not altogether happy memory. Posing as Jerry's wife had not gone too smoothly. But she makes up her mind to go. She leaves the children in the care of Josie, her babysitter, and takes a plane. She meets Jerry when he is finished with his day's work. Sally phones Richard and tells him that her car has broken down so that she will have to stay with friends. After a night of love-making Jerry has to go back to his work. Sally walks through Washington until it is time to meet Jerry for lunch. Together they visit the National Gallery. Afterwards Sally refuses to help Jerry to buy presents for his children. At three o'clock they leave for the airport, where they hear that there is a strike. Jerry worries whether Sally will be home in time. Although they have been very careful so far, they now give up all pretence and no longer care if people realize that they are not

husband and wife. The 4.14 flight is full which means that they will have to wait at least until 5.15. But this plane is also booked up completely. In order to kill the time they take a walk, during which Sally confesses to Jerry that she has loved him for years. Jerry tells Sally that due to the old morality he cannot make the decision to leave his wife, Ruth, but that at the same time he wants her as a wife. Sally accuses him of torturing both Ruth and herself.

Fed up by their long wait Jerry tries to rent a car, but they have all been hired. When finally a car arrives, a man called Fancher offers to share the expenses, much to their dislike, because they want to travel alone. When Jerry leaves to catch the airline tickets he hears that there will be a plane after all and they can board a small DC 3. By that time Sally is so tired that she falls asleep immediately.

Sally gets home just before midnight. She and Richard hardly exchange a word before he leaves for his office in the morning. When Jerry got home, Ruth had been rather depressed, because their son, Geoffrey had broken his collarbone.

The second part of the novel begins when Ruth is looking at a photograph of the Conant family in 1961. She feels that she has betrayed her father. She, the daughter of a Unitarian minister, has lost her faith. She and Jerry were both students at an art school in Philadelphia. After art school Jerry became an unsuccessful cartoonist and then a successful animator of t.v. commercials. Ruth became a housewife and a mother. The baptism of the children was a sore point. Their first child was baptized by her father, the second one was baptized a Lutheran, in the church to which Jerry belonged. The third one was not baptized for two years, because his parents could not decide which church.

Another photograph from 1958 or 1959 shows Jerry, on the day when the Conant and the Mathias families had gone mulling together. In Ruth's opinion the Mathiases are excessive, both too generous and too greedy. Richard drinks and smokes too much. He is rich and does not work very hard. Sally is too flashy and visible. The boat trip, however, was a success, but there were no more trips that summer. In the next winter the Mathiases separated, but made it up again in the spring. At parties Richard always comes to talk to Ruth, but also strokes her buttocks. Jerry hates Richard for this and Richard in return scorns Jerry's religiosity. On several occasions Ruth had refused Richard's invitation, but one afternoon he had called on her and they made love, the first time a thing like that happened in Ruth's marriage. After this they met more often. After a long summer Ruth had broken off the affair when Jerry almost overheard a telephone conversation. Richard had threatened to betray her, but that danger passed.

Now in the first year of Kennedy's presidency, Ruth feels free, although she considers the end of her affair with Richard a failure. Ruth is sure that Jerry suspects what has happened because of the way he talks about Richard. He also wants to know what she thinks about Sally. Later it is easy for Ruth to say that she should have known about Sally and Jerry, because all the signs of Jerry's obsession with her were there. After Jerry has been to Washington for two days, the visit on which Sally followed him, he asks Ruth for a divorce. He suggests that their marriage might be a mistake and that he is not the right man for her. He tells her to think things over and takes the children out bowling.

While they are gone Ruth drinks a lot, but this solves nothing. That night Jerry takes

her to a restaurant, where she asks him who it is and she is not surprised to hear Sally's name. Ruth confesses that she, too, has had an affair, but she does not reveal Richard's name. She decides that she wants to talk to Sally. From the restaurant they drive to the beach, where Jerry embraces and kisses Ruth saying that he cannot give up either her or Sally. She makes him promise not to decide about leaving her until the end of summer, giving up Sally in the meantime and trying it with her. The next day she goes to see Sally. For a time the conversation is not hostile, each of them explaining her feelings about Jerry, but Ruth becomes emotional when she says that Jerry needs her and the children. Then they realize that they are enemies. Ruth again suggests that Sally give Jerry up until September. If he still wants her then, he can have her, she says. Sally thinks about this before getting angry and tells Ruth that she and Jerry can do as they please.

Back home Ruth tries to reach Jerry on the phone, but his line is busy for a long time. When she finally reaches him, he admits that he has been talking to Sally and that he is still unable to decide between them. He thinks it is ridiculous to break up two functioning households. Before going home he meets Sally and says that he cannot meet her again unless he has a divorce first. Sally reproaches him for giving in to Ruth, which makes Jerry start crying.

On Sundays many families in Greenwood get together on the beach for dances, tennis and other activities, and also the Conants and the Mathiases are present on the following Sunday. Ruth watches Sally all the time. Neighbours seem to know about the situation, it appears, and women begin to assume the position of elderly sisters in whom one can confide. But Ruth can only discuss her problems with Jerry, and strangely enough, as a result of their changed relationship, their sex together improves.

In August Ruth finds out that Jerry has betrayed their bargain by calling Sally on the phone repeatedly. Ruth says she will not accept these phonecalls and threatens to go to the Mathiases the next time she finds out. This happens a few days later, but Ruth cannot find a babysitter and has decided to let it pass when a thunderstorm chases people off the beach and she has a sitter after all. But then she becomes indecisive, and thinks of going to talk to Richard alone, instead. She drives around for a while not certain what to do when suddenly her car skids on a treacherous piece of road. The car is a write off, but Ruth climbs out of it without serious injuries. A young policeman who takes her statement refuses to let her walk home alone, and so Ruth phones Richard, who agrees to come over and take her home. In his car she bursts into tears and she begs Richard to take her home, much to his disappointment. Back home she calls Jerry who comes home early and wants to see the wrecked car. He thinks she has caused the accident deliberately.

A few days after the accident Sally takes her children and goes to Florida to stay with her brother. From then on Jerry does nothing but sit and stare and drink. Ruth calmly tells him to make up his mind whether to stay with her or to go to Sally when she comes back, because it is now the end of September, but he cannot. Ruth even goes so far as to tell the children that their father is going to live with Mrs Mathias. Charlie, the eldest, takes it very badly, but Jerry calms him down. Then he phones Sally to tell her that he cannot come to her. Also during the next few weeks Jerry does not come to any decision. Ruth wants him to stop thinking about Sally, so that

he can make love to her without having Sally on his mind.

One evening they meet the Mathiases at a dance. When Jerry and Sally dance together, everyone watches them. Ruth is unable to stand this and she demands that Jerry takes her home. It makes him furious and he drives dangerously fast. Again he tells her that he has to leave her because he cannot forget Sally. But when Ruth wants to discuss the details of the separation, Jerry hesitates and says that he will only have Sally when it has all become definite. He does not relish the idea of starting to pack his suitcases either, but he does leave after all. He uses a cottage on the coast which belongs to the parents of some friends. The next day Ruth invites him over for lunch on some pretext and when he gets there Ruth feels erotic. Jerry takes her to the beach, where she tells him that her period is about four days late, but that she will have an abortion, because the alternatives would be uglier. Jerry blames himself for getting her into this situation, but Ruth feels that it was natural to make love as long as they lived together. Jerry declines Ruth's invitation to stay the night. The next morning she finds out that she is not pregnant after all. That same day Richard phones Jerry and suggests that it would be best if they arranged a meeting between the four of them. It is obvious that Sally has told him about the affair. Ruth and Jerry drive over to the Mathiases, where they are received by Richard who has clearly had some drinks. He proposes a toast to himself and considers the others rude when they do not drink. He accuses Jerry of putting Sally through hell by not breaking off the affair or running away with her. He also proposes to draw up some sort of contract, but then Ruth decides to fight for Jerry because she does not like the Mathiases. Richard is slowly getting very angry and Sally accuses Ruth of contemptible behaviour by not letting Jerry go when he had made up his mind. Ruth nicely remarks that Jerry has never made up his mind about anything. After a few more threats from Richard which makes it clear that it will be impossible to reach any sort of agreement, Jerry takes Ruth home and stays with her during the night.

The next morning Richard comes to their door and makes three statements. The first one is that he intends to live in his house, so that Sally and Jerry will have to find somewhere else to live. The second one is that he agrees to divorce Sally if Jerry promises to marry her. And the third one is that if Jerry does not make this promise, Richard will sue him for alienation of affection. He advises Ruth to take the advice of a lawyer and takes her with him to find one. When they have left Jerry goes to see Sally. When Richard comes home he starts making all kinds of sarcastic remarks, so Jerry takes Sally out. They have a look at the house of a painter which they could rent and which is quite convenient and not too expensive, but Jerry is suddenly sure that he has lost his nerve to make the decision to marry Sally. During a walk on the beach Jerry tells her his decision. Sally does not fight it and she returns his letters. When they meet Richard, Jerry cannot deny Richard's remarks that he has no guts. Again Richard threatens to make him pay, adding that he has not decided what to do with Sally.

Driving back home Jerry feels free. He leaves Ruth a note that his marriage to Sally is off and drives to his office in New York. That evening the Mathiases visit Ruth. Sally urges Ruth not to take Jerry back, exclaiming what a bastard he is. Richard now has to make a decision, whether to carry out his threats or not. Jerry and Ruth

follow the advice of Richard's lawyer and travel to the south of France, where they intend to do a lot of painting.

They return to Greenwood after three months. At a party Jerry meets Sally again and he talks to her for a while, but then Sally ends the conversation on the pretext of being concerned about her reputation.

III SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The Coup (1978)

The scene of this novel is an imaginary country in Africa called Kush. It is landlocked, and because of its geographical position just south of the Sahara, its main problem is drought. It is an Arabian country with the Islam as its official religion. Colonel Hakim Félix Ellelou, a former soldier in the French colonial army and before that a student at a small college in America, has become the dictator of Kush. Although in name his policy is a kind of Islamic marxism, General Hakim leads a life of luxury with his four wives and his air-conditioned silver Mercedes while his people are starving. To show his hatred of America he has had Soviet missiles installed along the borders of his country. He does his utmost to stop American influence, and he even refuses the food America sends to his hungry people. But in spite of Colonel Hakim American influence grows steadily stronger, culturally and technically, until Colonel Hakim has to go into exile when a revolution breaks out. When he has left it rains for the first time in five years. Hakim has nothing better to do than to write his memoirs, which he does in the style of John Updike.

Rabbit is Rich (1981)

This is the third of John Updike's romances with Harry Angstrom (Rabbit) and is sometimes considered the best. The first two were *Rabbit Run* (1960) and *Rabbit Redux* (1972). Together these books form a trilogy of American reality: a reality of broken marriages, problems with children, life in American towns, social and economic questions and a lot of sex. Harry Angstrom, forty-six, a mediocre and colourless figure, has taken over the Toyota agency from his father in law in a middle-sized town called Brewer in an area full of fast-food restaurants, shops, car parks, and garages. The title of the novel refers to the eight hundred dollars profit Harry makes on every sale. The once athletic Rabbit now weighs two hundred and twenty pounds and his waist is forty-two inches. He watches with pleasure the line up in front of his gas station (it is the first oil crisis). He has been reconciled with his wife Janice, who when drunk accidentally let their daughter Rebecca drown in the bathtub, but their relationship cannot be called happy. They disagree about their son Nelson who has dropped out of high school, and who has made a girl pregnant but sleeps with her friend, and about Charlie Stavros, the sales manager of the Toyota agency and once Janice's lover, whom Harry wants to replace. Harry is

