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## **“Ah: runs. Runs”: The Principal Theme Symbolized in a Minor Character in *RABBIT, RUN***

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One of the most important twentieth-century American novels, John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* is the story of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom running away from his wife, children, responsibility, conventional society, and the town in which he was born and lived most of his twenty-six years. As Harry's story, it is Rabbit who carries the burden of the book's principal theme. Rabbit begins running, literally and then metaphorically, within the first few pages: He picks up his coat, carrying it in one hand “like a letter” (Updike 6) after a pick-up basketball game, and runs up an alley, past a deserted ice plant to Wilbur Street, and then home. In the ensuing three hundred pages Harry seldom stops running. Rabbit runs from Janice shortly after she asks him not to (12) and impulsively lights out for the south where he hopes to find “orange groves and smoking rivers, and barefoot women” (26). He doesn't reach his destination, but rather dead-ends, forlornly, on a lover's lane in West Virginia, before he returns to Mt. Judge, only to “run” into the arms of another woman, Ruth, a casual prostitute (57–91). From there, Rabbit “runs” back to Janice, then back to Ruth, and then, simply, runs, furtively, until the last page and line of the narrative, whereupon he runs off in to a then unknown future—“Ah: runs. Runs” (325). Though the book's principal theme is well-known, the theme is also embodied by the portrait Updike paints of one of the minor characters, Coach Tothero. Although a number of critics have commented on one or another of the similarities drawn between Rabbit and Tothero, few have exhausted the rich vein of layered features they share, including allusions to the principal theme.

Peggy Armstrong has analyzed the relationship between Harry and his old basketball coach, Marty Tothero, but has not extended the comparison far enough. As she notes, Updike sums up their symbolic unity when Harry tries on one of Tothero's shirts at his urging: They wear the same size and Tothero comments, "Mine! Mine exactly" (52). The fit confirms Tothero's earlier recognition: "You and I are two of a kind" (51). Armstrong goes on to conclude that Updike uses Tothero's physical appearance to mirror Rabbit's emotional state—disheveled, disarrayed, deteriorated. Wilhelm agrees that the Tothero who clothes Rabbit in the Sunshine athletic club is a shrunken figure compared to the coach who oversaw Harry's greatest achievements. Yet Tothero, as a character, stands for more than this simple accord. Wilhelm recognizes, as Armstrong perhaps does not fully acknowledge, that Tothero offers Rabbit a broad, open window into his own failure. Tothero, perhaps like a number of the other secondary characters in *Rabbit, Run*, is himself running. Updike offers the evidence obliquely but clearly, starting with Harry's adornment in Marty Tothero's shirt—a symbolic reminder of the "giant step" Rabbit is taking with the "frightening potential" that he is heading toward the ruin Tothero's life foreshadows (Wilhelm 88). Updike is thus inviting us to pursue the novel's principal theme through his detailed textual portrait of Marty Tothero.

We are first introduced to Tothero when Harry pulls up in front of the Sunshine Athletic Association in his car and attempts to sleep until his old coach arises. Waking, he sees Tothero walking away from him down the alley; Rabbit jumps from his car, puts on his coat, "and runs after him" (Updike 44), thereby connecting the primary theme to his old mentor. As Harry tells him when Tothero asks about his home life, "It was no good. I've run out. I really have" (45). Harry tells Tothero he needs a place to sleep, and Tothero leads him to the clubhouse saying, "Here's my mansion" (47), although Tothero is married with a wife left at home—just like Harry. Tothero, too, has run away, as his bureau, cleverly made of beer cases, confirms: "shirts in their laundry cellophane, folded undershirts and shorts, socks balled in pairs, handkerchiefs, shined shoes, and a leatherbacked brush with comb stuck in the bristles" (47). Provisioned like a traveling salesman on an extended route, Tothero has tried to make the Sunshine athletic club a home away from home, as Harry will soon try to do by moving in with Ruth.

Further similarities abound. Harry, who calls Janice "dumb" repeatedly, justifies running away from his responsibilities by blaming his wife.

Tothero, likewise, describes the source of his own marital disenchantment as his wife's inadequacy: "But do you know when it began? It began with her skin. One day in the spring, in nineteen forty-three or four. . ., without warning it was hideous. It was like the hides of a thousand lizards stitched together" (Updike 56–57). Tothero, urging Harry to get dressed so they can all dine together, exclaims, "Oh, Harry, you can't understand an old man's hunger, you eat and eat and it's never the right food" (51). But Harry—voracious in his questing flight—gives the lie to this disclaimer that he doesn't understand. Harry eats up space, experience, other people; and in succeeding volumes, like *Rabbit Is Rich*, he literally eats—seemingly just like Tothero, never getting enough.

Easy comparisons continue as Tothero, seeing a woman on the side, introduces Harry to Margaret and her acquaintance, Ruth, who will shortly become Harry's woman on the side (Updike 57). Updike reinforces the unity between them again when Harry observes that "Margaret is just another Janice" (57). As the four consume a meal at a Chinese restaurant Updike uses Tothero's and Rabbit's reminiscences to cement the relationship each shares with the principal theme. Lauding his old coach's contribution to his basketball development, Tothero declines the compliment and says, "I had nothing to teach you. I just let you run" (61). Expounding on what he did teach Harry, Tothero observes he made Harry "Run, run, run. Run every minute [their] feet are on the floor. You can't run enough" (65). Ostensibly musing about winning at basketball, coach Tothero's comment appears to sum up Harry's attitude toward life: "You can't run enough."

In the end, Tothero is pulled back by circumstance—his two strokes—into reconnection with his wife at the same time Harry is reuniting with Janice over another physical event in the same hospital—the birth of baby Becky (223–28). It is apparent by now that Tothero and Rabbit are, indeed, "two of a kind." Updike, however, is not finished developing his portrayal of Rabbit's aging doppelganger. Encountering Harriet Tothero in the hospital, who like Janice was the subject of a husband's infidelity, Harry is reminded that his old coach was "such a windbag, such a speechifier, that the stain of his own actions slid from him, oil off a duck" (223). Rabbit, too, is depicted throughout the novel as a man who bears no shame for running. Shortly after seeing Tothero lying debilitated in the hospital, Harry goes to see Janice and resumes blaming her: for being nothing more than a drunk watching television; for calling Ruth a "prostitute" rather than simply a woman who "sleeps around"; for not making sure the rent on their

apartment was paid in his absence; for not knowing what happened to their apartment and furnishings (226–27).

Updike's attribution of common traits and thematic unity between Marty Tothero and Rabbit reaches its perigee here. Janice, choked by thinking about how Harry has treated her, reflects on Revered Eccles' helpfulness—to which Rabbit replies, "He makes me nervous" (Updike 226). Janice, dismissive, says, "Oh, everybody makes you nervous" (226). Rabbit, firmly voicing the symbiosis with Tothero, rejoins, "No, that's not true. Marty Tothero never made me nervous" (226). And, why should he? The old coach shares so many traits with him, embodies reflections of his own desires, and epitomizes Updike's principal theme. Perhaps Tothero sums up the basis for their underlying thematic harmony in apt athletic metaphor when Updike has him say: "You and I know what the score is, we know—" (51). Ah: run. Runs.

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