

ANALYSIS

The Witches of Eastwick (1984)



John Updike

(1932-2008)

INTRODUCTION

This is the best novel by John Updike, his most dynamic and resonant--a unique blend of Realism, Expressionism, satire and religious allegory. *The Witches of Eastwick* also has a comprehensive vision not attained in his other works. Updike makes the most of his talents in this novel while also exposing his limitations more clearly than before.

Hawthorne introduced *The Scarlet Letter* by explaining that it originated “somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.” Eastwick floats near the literal towns of Old Wick, Wickford and Warwick, Rhode Island. “‘The fag end of creation’ and ‘the sewer of New England,’ Cotton Mather called the region.” The wicks were for the wicked. Rhode Island was “settled by outcasts like the bewitching, soon-to-die Anne Hutchinson”--rebels cast out of Massachusetts by the Puritans--a refuge for “Quakers and Jews and antinomians and women”: “The air of Eastwick empowered women.” The island metaphor in Rhode Island (1) separates--liberates--the characters and the author from Puritanism; (2) dissociates them from society and its morals; (3) isolates them in their narcissism and associates them with Satan; (4) while in the end offering small hope with a reference to Hope Street in Providence.

1

The first of the three sections of the novel, “The Coven,” is introduced with old quotations attributing characteristics to Satan that apply as well to Darryl Van Horne, the hero of this story. The Devil comes from New York City to “Nowheresville” and moves into the old Lenox place, which is an island when the tide is high. With enthusiasm he refers to his place as “hell.” The Lenox family has a local history, while also bringing to mind Lenox, Massachusetts, once the home of writers who influenced Updike--Edith Wharton and Hawthorne, as well as Melville. By the end of the 20th century the old New England aristocracy, social and cultural, has been replaced by all that is personified in Darryl Van Horne, a hedonist with no wife, no family, no authenticity, no class, no taste, no integrity and no morals. New England has gone to hell and Satan takes the form most seductive to modern witches: He is a rich horny devil from New York who likes women and appreciates ugly Postmodern art.

The novel opens on a comical note with three feminist New Women focused on Satan as the New Man, intrigued by the “rumor of a homosexual come up from Manhattan to invade them” because “things got too hot for him where he was.” The strongest of the three women, Alexandra is “already dilating, diffusing

herself to be invaded. A tall dark European, ousted from his ancient heraldic inheritance, travelling under a curse..." These modern witches are romantics bewitched by outdated traditions of Old Europe, attracted by aristocracy and power. Though they feel advanced, they are more antiquated than Victorian ladies. At first their being witches seems merely a metaphor, but then they reveal supernatural powers, mainly to cast spells. The novel is set during the 1960s-70s when many radical Feminists were identifying with witches and declaring themselves witches. Updike gleefully takes their word for it in this novel and adopts the perspectives of Feminist witches in order to satirize them, which is cleverly disarming and apt, since in secular America "nobody believes in witches" and witch hunting is politically incorrect. The satire and the tensions in *Witches* between belief and disbelief produce ironies and intellectual complexity beyond what Updike had attained before.

His talent for realistic description in detail makes the witches convincing in physical terms. Several of his similes and metaphors render them with the vivid precision of an Impressionist painter and occasionally as an Expressionist in the Modernist tradition: "freckles the cedar color of pencil shavings"; "her freckled face, gleaming knees, perfect as eggs"; "her lips spreading like cushions sat on"; he "rotated on the point of her tongue as on a spit." Throughout the book the witches "fly" about and "cackle" and "hiss" as women might without supernatural powers. Many readers can identify with "one of the liberations of becoming a witch"—"that she had ceased constantly weighing herself." Other women in Eastwick also are witches "on a different wavelength from Jane, Alexandra, and Sukie." And other women in town, influenced by the supernatural witches, become witches merely in the sense of bitches.

When the most powerful witches read each others' minds or cast a spell, it seems natural, and what we expect from the horror genre. Updike is able to create a convincing supernatural dimension in this novel during a secular period hostile to all transcendence, religion in particular--what he calls "this hazy late age of declining doctrine." His Satan and his witches are both realistic individuals and archetypal monsters larger than life, giving this novel a dynamism and moral force lacking in his other fictions. "If Alexandra was the large, drifting style of witch, always spreading herself thin to invite impressions and merge with the landscape, and in her heart rather lazy and entropically cool, Jane was hot, short, concentrated like a pencil point, and Sukie Rougemont, busy downtown all day long gathering news and smiling hello, had an oscillating essence." Alexandra grew up in the far West and may be a decadent reminder of the heroic Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather. She wears men's pants and is the strongest witch, Sukie the softest and Jane from Massachusetts the cruelest, the one closest to Van Horne the Devil.

The first section of *Witches* is like the first panel of a medieval triptych, profane rather than sacred, replacing the traditional three graces with three witches: "The three women drew closer to form, like graces in a print, a knot." Published six years after the sensational popular success of John Irving's satire of radical Feminism *The World According to Garp* (1978), Updike's satire is not directed at the fanatics who hate men and want to kill them, as in *Garp*, it is about the Feminists who enjoy using men and want to control them. They too are "Angrier than anybody else." Irving remained a humanistic feminist, having criticized excesses, whereas Updike makes liberal stock responses in support of women and sides with women most obviously by making Satan male, while at the same time he depicts Feminism in the broad popular sense of the "women's movement" as a cancer that is destroying society. Literal cancer is a motif in the novel, the three witches fear they have it and for revenge they murder a younger witch with cancer by casting a spell on her: "Irritation, psychic as well as physical, was the source of cancer."

All three witches are women "who experienced similar transformations in their marriages" and feel "empowered" by attaining total independence, including independence from all moral restraints. They feel justified by their anger and righteous in revenge. Alexandra keeps her former husband in a jar "reduced to multi-colored dust, the cap screwed on tight. Thus she had reduced him as her powers unfolded... Her former lord and master had become mere dirt." Jane Smart sprinkles her ex-husband on food as a seasoning, for "piquancy," and "Sukie Rougemont had permanized hers in plastic and used him as a place mat." Sukie's husband deserved such a fate because "He had hated uppity women." The witches loathe "disgusting male chauvs" while behaving as disgusting female chauvs.

The three are "full of the belief that a conspiracy of women upholds the world." However, as witches, they subvert rather than uphold: "The three of them all had children they should be tending to"; one stops

“kissing the brats good night”; Jane slaps her daughter for asking if she is drunk again and they all resent their children: “God, don’t children get in the way? I keep having the most terrible fights with mine. They say I’m never home and I try to explain to the little shits that I’m *earn-ing a liv-ing*.” These radical Feminist mothers feel deprived of a right to be free. “This was an era of many proclaimed rights, and of blatant public music...and wherever two or three teen-agers gathered together the spirit of Woodstock was proclaimed.” According to Van Horne, “the commercial interruptions and the constant switching back and forth between channels had broken down in...brains the synapses that make logical connections, so that Make Love Not War seemed to them an actual idea.”

In the form of daring Darryl Van Horne, Satan is hip. He is also said twice to resemble a professor full of theories, recalling similar professors in Hawthorne and Melville. Van Horne turns the old Lenox mansion into Wickedstock and all three witches lust after him as a charismatic horny male with a hot tub: “Female yearning was in all the papers and magazines now; the sexual equation had become reversed as girls of good family flung themselves toward brutish rock stars, callow unshaven guitarists from the slums...somehow granted indecent power, dark suns turning these children of sheltered upbringing into suicidal orgiasts.” Van Horne blows his own horn, the three witches are enchanted, anticipation builds, metaphors accumulate, everybody gets naked and the first third of the novel climaxes in a hot tub orgy. After that, because Updike depends so much on sexual anticipation for suspense, as distinct from plot, the narrative loses its primary tension and tends to go limp.

For readers past adolescence the graphic sex in Updike too often seems gratuitous, whereas here the orgy does have literary values in symbolism and characterization. The main interest is psychological rather than pornographic. A vision of human beings as animals in the tradition of Naturalism is conveyed throughout the book by a motif of monkey similes and by four-letter words. Van Horne is hairy and brutish “and his cold penis hurt, as if it were covered with tiny little scales.” He is obsessed with development, especially generation of energy. He embodies excessive male preoccupation with economic and political power, as expressed in the Vietnam War, land development and despoliation of the environment. In the orgy scene, however, he is passive, as if he does not really feel passion for the women, who play together erotically and then turn to him for diversion. The pursuit of physical sensations without emotional depth makes the sex mechanical--another Postmodernist motif: “Her heart felt light like a small motor”; Van Horne discusses the female body as “machinery”; “Van Horne’s penis floated like a pale torpedo, uncircumcised and seriously smooth, like one of those vanilla plastic vibrators that have appeared in city drugstore display windows now that the revolution is on and the sky is the limit.” Van Horne uses all his artifice to seduce these modern witches and use them, then he torpedoes their fantasies and abandons them like the stock villain in an old romance.

The witches discuss the fascinating New Man while agreeing that “Men aren't the answer, isn't that what we've decided?” Soon they realize that, on the contrary, “they were themselves under a spell, of a greater.” Here again Updike is a humanistic feminist himself in attributing the greatest evil power to the male. Under his spell, the witches overlook Van Horne’s revolting characteristics: hairy, unwashed, swarthy, coarse, obscene, snobbish and insulting, with “typical New York pushiness.” He drools and spits, is always wiping spittle from his lips, his “glassy left eye drifting outward toward his ear,” and his “hands were eerily white-skinned beneath the hair, like tight surgical gloves.” He is cold, even his semen is cold, and yet after sex he makes the witches feel burned. His lack of integrity is manifest in “a constant slipshod effort to keep himself together.” Yet he is magnetic to the witches. Alexandra hates him yet anticipates falling in love with him—“the devil was getting into her.”

Jane reminds Alexandra that “A man can be just a person too, you know.” The witch replies bitterly, “I know that’s the theory, but I’ve never met one who thought he was. They all turn out to be men, even the faggots.” In dehumanizing men she has dehumanized herself: This is the devil in her. She feels her tongue is “forked.” To become a witch is to acquire power at the cost of dehumanizing yourself and losing your soul. The witches are attracted to Van Horne by his power, status and values because they have become female versions of him. “As Alexandra accepted first one and then several lovers, her cuckolded husband shrank to the dimensions and dryness of a doll.” In turn, Van Horne makes dolls of the witches, and they one of him: “The three women played with him together, using the parts of his body as a vocabulary with which to speak to one another.”

While appearing passive, Van Horne manipulates the women, reversing gender roles. He sets them to wondering which one of them he wants, setting forces in motion that lead to murders and suicide. As the witches begin to feel competitive and resentful, they become deadly: Jane's "regally lazy powers stretching there like a cat's power to cease purring and kill"; "Alexandra danced from crab to crab, crushing them." Later, by force of will, Alexandra kills a puppy whose yipping irritates her, then a squirrel that "dropped like an instantly emptied sack.... Alexandra felt no remorse, it was a delicious power she had."

The witches detest all the other women in town. They mock them, call them hideous, gossip and cast spells on them. They rationalize that their adultery is good for marriages: "Coming between men and wives...was the price they must pay... It was womanly, to want to heal." Wives are to blame: "Alexandra's lovers...had tended to be odd husbands let stray by the women who owned them." Adultery is a game: "Being a divorcee in a small town is a little like playing Monopoly; eventually you land on all the properties." In 1692 people in Salem saw witches everywhere. In the late 20th century, Updike sees adulterers everywhere. His witches are sometimes conscious of being agents of Satan: "Once a week he came and pumped away at her... Adultery had been a step toward damnation for him, and he was honoring one more obligation, a satanic one."

John Updike attended a relatively traditional Congregational Church. For the most part in New England, by the 19th century Unitarianism had replaced Puritanism. Unitarianism persists today as a flaccid dilution of Christianity comfortable to liberals. In "The Celestial Railroad" (1843) Hawthorne satirized the Unitarians as so morally lax they are railroading people to Hell. Updike represents all of organized Christianity today by introducing Satan in a Unitarian Church: "He said being in a church, even a Unitarian one, gave him the creeps." Yet he joins the church choir, ends up replacing the minister in the pulpit and gives a sermon as the climax of his performance in Eastwick. He is "a bearish dark man with greasy curly hair half-hiding his ears and clumped at the back so that his head from the side looked like a beer mug with a monstrously thick handle.... He was in truth a monster."

Updike's representative liberal minister is Ed Parsley, whose last name is a mere garnish offering little nourishment. Reverend Ed has a "sense of displacement and inadequacy" in the present culture and is fighting dismissal as "a shrill and ineffectual liberal, the feckless agent of a nonexistent God." He "hated being respectable... He thought it was a sellout." He tries to be relevant by acting informal—"Just call me Ed"—by "organizing peace marches and vigils and read-ins," by proposing that his church become a residential sanctuary for "the hordes of draft evaders" and by having sex with parishioners, including Sukie the witch and maybe Jane too. Reversing roles, the witches "minister" to him. Pastor Ed Parsley is more promiscuous than Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* and his aura "emanated in sickly chartreuse waves of anxiety and narcissism."

The second panel of *The Witches* triptych is "Malefica"—evil doings. The syllable *male* in the title is a reminder that Satan is behind it all. Encouraged by his lover Sukie, who wants to get rid of him so that she can turn her attention fully to Van Horne, Reverend Ed abandons his ministry in effect to Satan. His wife Brenda says "his leaving was the best thing ever happened to her." In Eastwick the *Bible*, the word of God, has been replaced by the *Word*, a gossip newspaper edited by Clyde Gabriel (the archangel who blows a heavenly horn, in contrast to Van Horne), whose reporter is Sukie the witch. Gabriel remarks to his wife Felicia, "I'm not sure the Unitarians care that much about God." Felicia is a Feminist too, "like Ed in a way, all causes and no respect for actual people around her." In town "they call her a witch." Clyde is seduced by Sukie, who with Jane's help casts a spell on Felicia "for fun." Sukie "likes men to be down." Her spell increases the worst tendencies of Felicia—as in comparing her husband to Hitler—so much so that Clyde finally smashes her skull with a poker. Then he hangs himself, becoming the community scapegoat: "Clyde Gabriel had let horror into the town." Reverend Ed joins the anti-war movement, runs off with a teenage activist and blows himself up in a row house in New Jersey trying to make bombs.

The witches discuss who should replace Reverend Ed as minister. His wife Brenda has applied even though she is not ordained, a response to the national policy of Affirmative Action for women at that time: "But can she preach? You do have to preach," says Jane. "Oh I don't think that would be a problem," says

Sukie. "Brenda has wonderful posture." What matters is not competence but posture, as when they selected Reverend Ed. Unlike Hawthorne, Updike is not a feminist in response to the idea of women becoming ministers based on their gender. He depicts Brenda just as she is described by Jane the witch: "She is a ridiculous vapid woman."

Two of the witches acknowledge, "Now two people are dead and two children are orphans because of us." Yet they go right on to cast a spell that kills the younger witch Jennifer Gabriel. The competition among the witches to be chosen by Van Horne is dramatized by their playing tennis under artificial cover, making nonsense of it all by using their supernatural powers to manipulate the game and foil their opponents by trickery. They play petty games: "In Van Horne's realm they left their children behind and became children themselves." Sukie "while stoned was not above sucking her thumb." Sukie resembles Irving's diapered Pooh Percy, the fanatical Feminist who murders Garp.

3

The last panel of the novel, "Guilt," begins with a quotation pointing out in advance that witches feel no guilt. They are sociopaths. Two of the three Eastwick witches seem to feel a little guilty in passing, but not enough to restrain them. As a realtor Sukie profits from the murder and suicide of the Gabriels that she caused, by selling their house. She thinks she also has Van Horne in her pocket, until he shocks all three witches by announcing that he has married young Jennifer. Alexandra tosses a drink into his face and "Jane Smart hissed at Alexandra's side." The older witches are too vain with power to have foreseen that the horny devil might hook up with a younger body. Satan feigns confusion: "We thought you'd be pleased as hell... How fucking bourgeois can you get?"

As another current example of malefica in society, Updike refers to an attempt by Feminists to impose censorship by law in the United States in 1983-84. This news may have provoked him to write *The Witches of Eastwick*. Radical Feminists were able to get ordinances passed in several cities against whatever they considered demeaning to women (which would have included much of Updike's writing including *Witches*), allowing Feminists to sue for damages and to throw men in jail: Sukie is one of the Feminists who like porn, whereas Felicia "actually wants poor Gus Stevens put in jail for having this magazine on his rack that his suppliers just brought for him... She wants you [Van Horne] put in jail, for that matter, for unauthorized landfill. She wants everybody put in jail and the person she really has put in jail is her husband."

Updike seems closer to the editor Gabriel than to any other character and like him appears to be "looking for the old-fashioned heavenly God." Gabriel's wife Felicia the do-gooder embodies liberal excesses that Updike detests and he makes her a scapegoat so dehumanized that the reader is likely to feel gratified when Gabriel bashes her brains out. We agree with the witches that she was a "vile" woman. Updike induces identification with evil just as he induces carnal feelings in his sex scenes. The implicit morality of the novel is subverted by its tone when the reader is induced to enjoy promiscuity, adultery and murder. Updike does not establish consistent moral distance. The only character who might have provided a reliable moral perspective turns out to be a murderer.

Another moral objection to the novel is that to say as Updike does that misbehavior and crimes were caused by "spells" cast by witches is to absolve criminals from responsibility for their own actions, a rationalization for evil that is characteristic of liberals. "Once you've established in your own mind that you're innocent," Jane said, "you can get away with anything." During the witchcraft trials in 1692 citizens of Salem used this accusation of "spells" against their neighbors, causing some to be accused of witchcraft. Perhaps this weakness in his novel explains why Updike does not even mention the famous trials, which led to the hanging and pressing to death of those convicted. He substitutes a parallel that contrasts the burning of witches in Europe in the past with current indulgence: "If the world burned them alive in the tongues of indignant opinion, that was the price they must pay." Today, witches roam free.

As he seduces them into his hot tub, Satan pretends to be a Feminist and defends witches by claiming that historically "the whole witchcraft scare" was a plot by male doctors "to get the childbirth business out of the hands of midwives." Updike allows this falsehood to stand as if Satan is truthful. And he concludes

his first chapter by adopting the perspective of Alexandra the witch on the Puritans: "Those old ministers and naysayers and proponents of heroic constipation who sent lovely Anne Hutchinson, a woman ministering to women, off into the wilderness to be scalped by redmen..." To avoid "heroic constipation" Updike agrees with Alexandra--Let's have an orgy.

Not until 100 pages later is this generalization made: "Witchcraft, once engendered in a community, has a way of running wild, out of control of those who have called it into being, running so freely as to confound victim and victimizer." The last phrase adds moral confusion, suggesting that somehow the murder victims in this story are actually victimizers and the witches victims--which to a degree they are--of Van Horne, by their own choice. Updike then adopts the perspective of Brenda Parsley the acting minister, after previously discrediting her: The recent deaths in town have changed Brenda. No longer vapid, now she asserts the reality of evil--speaking for Updike. As a Feminist and "religious liberal" Brenda identifies with "Our own dear valiant Anne Hutchinson," who "believed in a covenant of grace, as opposed to a covenant of works, and defied--this mother of fifteen and gentle midwife to sisters uncounted and uncountable--the sexist world-hating clergy of Boston in behalf of her belief, a belief for which she was eventually to die." Brenda makes Hutchinson a feminist Christ.

But then Brenda becomes unreliable again, as measured against Updike's tone and thematic implications elsewhere, with indignant overstatements and partisan bombast. The tone becomes satirical again as Brenda rants against the Vietnam War, "fascist politicians and an oppressive capitalism" that is "anti-ecological." She sounds so much like Felicia the reader wonders if Updike will bash her brains out with an altar candlestick. Then she becomes reliable again by calling the community "guilty of overlooking evil brewing in these very homes of Eastwick." Updike requires the reader to try to identify which of Brenda's moral views might be his own. Unlike most Postmodernists, he at least has a moral sense, but it plays hide and seek as he keeps his options open and avoids pinning himself down to a principle. His moral equivocation is also expressed by excluding from evidence in his novel the factual reasons for the exile of Anne Hutchinson, as recorded for example in the *Journal* of Governor John Winthrop:

1. She was preaching civil disobedience to the government and laws of the newly established colony at a time when its survival depended upon social unity and mutual sacrifice.
2. She refused to stop, kept breaking the law and encouraging her followers to do so.
3. She was not remorseful, a requirement for mercy in courts of today.
4. Like Hester Prynne, she displayed "pride of spirit" and "gloried in her sufferings"--in the words of Governor Winthrop--setting an example of defiance to her followers by playing martyr.

Updike gives the false impression that the reasons for her exile were "sexist" and motivated by the greed of male doctors. He ignores history and gives the argument to Satan and the Feminists. Anne Hutchinson was the first American liberal: she argued that (1) she had the Truth within her; that therefore (2) she was obliged to do what felt right to her regardless of society and its laws, and that (3) she was a saint by virtue of her faith *regardless of her works*. This philosophy, called Antinomianism, is the basis of liberal and Romantic morality in American cultural history. The Antinomian tradition of civil disobedience includes Natty Bumppo, Emerson, Thoreau, Huck Finn and Martin Luther King, Jr. In this tradition, everything depends upon the character of the individual concerned. Collectively, between the 1960s and the late 20th century the tradition degenerated into mindless leftwing protest.

Updike refers to the "soft-hearted Indians" as if unfamiliar with the atrocities committed by both sides in early New England. Likewise his implicit endorsement of lovely "bewitching" Anne Hutchinson disregards facts and identifies her as an Antinomian liberal like her who exiled his novel to Rhode Island. His witches too are Antinomians like Hutchinson--feeling righteous and entitled and doing whatever feels good to them. Updike ignores the trials of 1692, the witchcraft history most pertinent to his story, because that would expose him as being on the side of the witches--a liberal rebelling against Puritanism in favor of "happy"

nature and dancing naked in the woods. He is morally evasive in his novels because he often has mixed feelings, especially about adultery. Updike is in the hot tub with Satan.

Another complication is Postmodernism, which Updike both attacks and exhibits. His attack is most obvious in his disgust for Pop Art, which is promoted and collected by Van Horne at his mansion: "A giant hamburger of violently colored, semi-inflated vinyl. A white plaster woman at a real ironing board, with an actual dead cat from a taxidermist's rubbing at her ankles.... A neon rainbow, unplugged and needing a dusting... A naked woman on her back with legs spread; she had been concocted of chicken wire, flattened beer cans, an old porcelain chamber pot for her belly, pieces of chrome car bumper, items of underwear stiffened with lacquer and glue." Postmodern Pop Art is unnatural, artificial and dehumanizing, which leads to the degradation of women and society.

Van Horne's hallway displaying such "permanized garbage" leads to the moral decadence represented by his black bedroom, hot tub and entertainment center. All three witches are "artistic" but mediocre. Updike implies that they are able to take themselves seriously because aesthetic standards have been abandoned along with moral standards. He contrasts popular garbage and mediocrity with true art through references to works by Rodin, Cézanne and Giacometti, which are major yet unfamiliar to most readers today. In the future, half a dozen references to lesser artists will mean no more to readers than his references to Ralph Nader and Archie Bunker. Ephemeral references, especially to products and popular culture, are a characteristic of Postmodernism, evidence of insularity and lack of a transcendent historical perspective. Many of Updike's allusions are inorganic distractions that show off his taste while cutting him off from readers on his private island of erudition.

Witches is also Postmodernist in its cynical pessimism: in the conflict with religion "science was winning"; "we never look forward to dreams"; "every year [living] does feel...more of an effort"; "that same curious hollowness we all feel now"; "she realized that the world men had systematically made was all dreary poison, good for nothing really but battlefields and waste sites"; "marriage is like two people locked together with one lesson to read, over and over, until the words become madness"; "Boredom in a wife is part of the social contract"; "Lonely as a married couple." In this suburban vision, all the married men are committing adultery with divorced witches. God quit, Satan won. Updike displays no more faith than Reverend Ed. His novel is Postmodernist in its alienation, in having a weak ending, and in containing no likeable characters except dead soldiers, though there is a man named Osgood (Oz good) who is said to be "wonderful"--a craftsman on *Hope* Street in Providence.

The climax of the plot is like the punchline of a joke on the witches: "He's left. He's skipped... Our redeemer from Eastwick *ennui*. And he's taken Chris Gabriel with him." Turns out Satan is a bisexual who married Jennifer to "cinch his hold on" her brother Chris. Then he used the three witches to get Jennifer out of the way so he could run off with him. "Chris had been in Boy Scouts but that had been years ago and there had been a scandal with the scoutmaster that had broken up the den." Chris has said that "the gays control all the fields he's interested in--window dressing, stage design." Updike set up this outcome at the beginning with the rumor that Van Horne is "homosexual." He refers to homosexuals several times as "fags" and "faggots," as when a witch mentions "the slave-fashions sadistic fags wish upon us." Both the plot and the tone of the novel imply that the increased power of homosexuals has contributed to cultural decadence. Just as Chris "broke up the den" as a Boy Scout, he and Satan break up the coven of witches and some families in Eastwick.

Alexandra gets remarried, to a ceramist from Taos out West who fits her image of "her ideal man"--sacrificial, with delicate feet "overlapped and pegged" as on a crucifix. Poor guy. Even "dear angry Jane" gets another man, "scratching and singeing with her murderous tongue." Sukie becomes editor of the *Word* and "now rapidly writes paperback romances." These final developments are surprisingly abrupt, yet they are related at a length that makes the ending drag with exposition and no drama. Before departing, Van Horne gives a sermon in the church about how he could have done a better job creating the universe than God, emphasizing how vicious everything is. The sermon is too long, redundant and undramatic, since it has no effects on the plot or the other characters.

Updike has little sense of dramatic timing or pace. In one scene it takes 3 pages for Alexandra to wade across a tidal inlet, to no purpose except to describe her in underwear. Near the end of the novel, he stops the narrative momentum cold for another 3 pages in order to render Jane playing the cello, apparently intending to dramatize a transcendent experience of some kind. However, he does not try to evoke feelings in a reader, instead he relies on displaying his knowledge of musicology in a deluge of technical details that probably would even bore a cellist.

PROSE STYLE

Style is what made the career of John Updike. In *Witches* most of his similes and metaphors enhance his Realism by rendering perceptions and sensations vividly, adding to the “illusion of real life” in the tradition of Henry James: “The dog’s glassy black eyes looked polished, they were trying so hard to understand”; “He seemed to be sinking, clutching his steel desk like an overturned rowboat”; “like an eddy of weary eyesight”; “condoms like small dried jellyfish corpses”; “Lightning kept taking her photograph”; windows “like costume jewels hung on a child”; “Felicia seemed diaphanous, an image of a woman painted on tissue paper that might blow away”; “She could feel the hair of her single thick braid heat up like an electric coil”; “He was like opening the door of a refrigerator with something spoiling in it”; “The buttocks suggested two white motorcycle helmets welded together”; “The martini was the slippery color of mercury and the green olive hung within it like a red-irised reptile eye”; “The fetus hung disgustingly in Alexandra’s mind’s eye-- a blunt-headed fish, curled over like an ornamental door knocker.” This is the figurative language of a poet and of a painterly writer in the tradition of Impressionism.

Updike renders voices with sometimes extravagant Expressionism: “The distant voice had shrunk itself to the size of a dot, to something mechanical like a dial tone”; “she shouted in a hollow man’s voice, as if she were a ventriloquist’s dummy”; “Her voice bristled like a black cat’s fur”; “Jane’s voice was ice, dark ice with ash in it such as freezes in the winter driveway”; “a younger, lighter voice, with a tension of timidity in it, a pocket of fear over which a membrane pulsed as at a frog’s throat”; “Her own voice was like a tarpaulin or great drop cloth which in being spread out on the earth catches some air under it and lifts in a bubble, a soft wave of hollowness”; “pressed down on her voice; the air caught under the tarpaulin was growing, struggling like a wild animal made of wind.”

At times an image is so detailed and hallucinatory it assumes exaggerated but irrelevant importance: “bushes sprang up sharp in the illumination like the complicated mandibles and jointed feelers and legs of insects magnified.” Updike sometimes elaborates too much, adds too much detail, loses the vivid economy of the Impressionist and seems to parody himself: “the relentless smile of one who knows he is in the wrong place, on the wrong platform of the bus station in a country where no known language is spoken”; “The smoke lifted to the ceiling and hung like a cobweb on the artificial surface, papery plasterboard roughed with a coat of sand-impregnated paint to feign real plaster”; “two dark swirls of hair on his back suggesting to her eyes butterfly wings (his spine its body) or a veneer of thin marble slices set to the molten splash of grain within made a symmetrical pattern”; “an immense slick slope of depression was revealed as if by the sliding upwards of an automatic garage door, the door activated by a kind of electric eye of her own internal sensing and giving on a wide underground ramp whose downward trend there was no reversing, not by pills or sunshine or a good night’s sleep.”

It is surprising to see a poet mixing metaphors: “her little pushy monkey-face bright as a new penny”; clouds are “scuds of paler gray, in the shape of geese, of gesticulating orators, of unraveling skeins of yarn, were travelling rapidly.” Occasionally his metaphors are so complicated they stop the narrative while the reader tries to figure them out: “hate wields scissors only and is impotent to weave the threads of sympathy whereby the mind and spirit do move matter”; she “saw an iridescent zigzag, as if a diamond on an unseen hand were etching darkness in electric parallel with Sukie’s darting thoughts”; “a ghostly afterimage, a rectangle of extra pallor as on an envelope so long stored in the attic that the stamp has flaked off without being touched.” In some cases an Expressionist simile has a magnifying hallucinatory effect evoking the monstrous as a motif in the novel: “her left leg showed a livid ripple of varicose vein, a little train of half-submerged bumps, like those murky photographs with which people try to demonstrate the existence of the Loch Ness monster.”

Michael Hollister (2015)