

## ANALYSIS

### “Pigeon Feathers” (1962)



John Updike

(1932-2009)

The spiritual dimension in Updike’s fiction is merely intellectual from the start. “Pigeon Feathers,” originally published in the *New Yorker* and the title story of a collection (1962), tells of a boy like himself who has a paranormal experience: “He, lying sick with the measles, had seen a black rod the size of a yardstick jog along at a slight slant beside the edge of the bed and vanish when he screamed...”

Despite this experience he loses his religious faith after reading H. G. Wells. He is influenced to become scientific also by his father, a teacher like Updike’s father, whereas his mother is an environmentalist who moves them all onto a farm and declares, “The land has a *soul*” The trouble is, she is influenced by “organic farming nuts” who want to return to the Dark Ages. Her hysterical predictions of catastrophe satirize the green movement and become both apocalyptic and Puritanical. His mother instills in the boy such fear of extinction he feels betrayed by everyone around him because their claim to have faith in an afterlife is so diluted by doubt and evasion that by now it has become a lie. Consequently, “he needed to begin to build his fortress against death.” This he accomplishes by shooting half a dozen pigeons that had become pests in the family barn.

The boy kills the pigeons one after another, at intervals. The birds do not fly away in a burst of thrashing wings as most pigeons today would do after the first shot. Updike’s pigeons hang around. Passenger pigeons hung around and they went extinct long ago. Updike’s distance from Nature is evident in the admission that “He had never seen a bird this close before.” Even though he lives on a farm. The beauty of the dead pigeon feathers brings out his “feminine” sensibility, then his masculine ego concludes “that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever.” Updike sees God as a fellow artist, in a sort of David and Goliath relationship. Ironically, the Updike boy’s faith is just as egocentric as the diaries of many of the old Puritans he disdains.

Updike's feminine sensibility does not access the spiritual dimension of his paranormal experience. He does not attain faith in an afterlife by mystical union like Whitman, nor by intuition like Hawthorne, nor by ecstasy like Dickinson. His head builds his "fortress against death" on the foundation of reason--the old argument from design, evident to the boy in the intricate unique variations in pigeon feathers. Updike does not try to evoke a transcendent experience here. Apparently he cannot do that because he has never had one. To be sure, pigeon feathers are metaphors of transcendence in the archetypal space of Sky. But unlike the pigeons in flight at the poignant conclusion of "Sunday Morning" by Wallace Stevens, Updike's pigeons are dead. Some 20 years later in *The Witches of Eastwick*, the forces of evil are prevailing everywhere, the forces of good are enfeebled and God is gone. Throughout all of his writing Updike is trying--often too hard--to revive those birds.

Michael Hollister (2016)