

A.B.M. College, Golmuri

English Core

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SHOULD WIZARD HIT MOMMY

- John Updike

Brief Biography of John Updike

John Updike, in full John Hoyer Updike, (March 18, 1932 – January 27, 2009), was an American writer of novels, short stories, and poetry, known for his careful craftsmanship and realistic but subtle depiction of “American, Protestant, small-town, middle-class” life.

Updike grew up in Shillington, Pennsylvania, and many of his early stories draw on his youthful experiences there. He graduated from Harvard University in 1954. In 1955 he began an association with The New Yorker magazine, to which he contributed editorials, poetry, stories, and criticism throughout his prolific career. His poetry—intellectual, witty pieces on the absurdities of modern life—was gathered in his first book, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures* (1958), which was followed by his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair* (1958). *Rabbit, Run* (1960), which is considered to be one of his best novels, concerns a former star athlete who is unable to recapture success when bound by marriage and small-town life and flees responsibility. Three subsequent novels, *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990)—the latter two winning Pulitzer Prizes—follow the same character

during later periods of his life. *Rabbit Remembered* (2001) returns to characters from those books in the wake of Rabbit's death. In response to the cultural shifts that occurred in the United States after the September 11 attacks, Updike released *Terrorist* in 2006.

While he experimented with several literary genres including criticism, article writing, poetry, playwriting, and even genre fiction, Updike became a mainstay in the American literary canon for his observation of the sexual and personal neuroses of small town America. His most renowned antihero-type characters, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom and Henry Bech, embodied, respectively, the average post-war Protestant suburbanite and the struggling writer.

Characters

1. Joanne: a four-year-old girl lovingly called as 'Jo'.
2. Jack: Father of Joanne
3. Clare: Wife of Jack, mother of Joanne.
4. Skunk: a baby creature with a bad smell.
5. Mother Skunk: Mother of baby Skunk.
6. Owl: a wise creature that solves the problems.
7. Wizard: A magician.

Summary

Jack was the father of two little kids – Jo and Bobby. His wife Clare was carrying their third child.

Jack would tell a story to his daughter Jo out of his head in the evenings and for Saturday naps.

This custom of story-telling began when Jo was two-year-old and it was continuing for the last two years. Each new story only differed a bit from the basic tale. There always was a small creature, usually named Roger, for example, Roger Fish, Roger Squirrel, Roger Chipmunk etc.

He always had some problem and he would go to the wise old owl. The owl would tell him to go to the Wizard, who would perform a magic spell that solved the problem. The Wizard in turn would demand in payment a number of pennies greater than the number Roger creature had.

But at the same time he would direct the animal to a place where the extra pennies could be found. Then Roger would become so happy that he played many games with other creatures.

Roger then would go home to his mother just in time to hear the train whistle that brought his daddy home from Boston. Jack then would describe their supper, and the story was over.

Jack found this story-telling session especially tiring on Saturday, because Jo never fell asleep in naps any more. One Saturday Jack asked Jo about whom the story should be today. Roger

Skunk, she said firmly. A new animal; they must talk about Skunk at nursery school. Jack started the story of the tiny creature Skunk, who lived in the dark deep woods. His name was Roger Skunk and he smelled very bad. He smelled so bad that other animals of the jungle would not play with him. They would run away and Roger Skunk would stand there all alone.

Roger Skunk went to the wise old owl and told his problem. The owl asked the Skunk why he did not see the Wizard. Then he went to the Wizard and told that he smelled very bad and all the little animals used to run away from him. The wise owl had told wizard that he could help in that manner. The Wizard took his magic wand and asked Roger Skunk what he wanted to smell like. Roger Skunk told him that he would like to smell like roses. The Wizard chanted and Roger

Skunk started smelling like roses. The Wizard asked Roger Skunk to pay seven pennies. Roger Skunk said that he had four pennies only and he began to cry. The Wizard directed Roger to go to the nearby magic well and he would find three pennies there. Roger Skunk took out three pennies from the well and gave them to the Wizard. Now all the other animals gathered around him because he smelled so good. They played various games and laughed. It began to get dark so they all ran home to their mummies. Jo thought that the story was all over.

When Roger Skunk went home his mummy said that the smell was awful. She asked who made him smell like that. Roger Skunk said that the Wizard did so. She said that they were going right back to that Wizard. He said that all the other animals would run away with his bad smell. But his mummy said she did not care. He should smell the way a little Skunk should have smelled. So she took Roger with her and went to the Wizard. When the wizard opened door, she hit him with her umbrella and explained how the wizard's magic infuriated her. The wizard spelled another magic and Roger smelled as foul as he did earlier. But she was displeased with this new ending and wanted her father to make the wizard hit Roger's mommy. But Jack was not ready to make any change as he thought Joe should accept him without questioning. Jo protested but Jack said that it was daddy's story. He said then Roger Skunk and her mummy went home. They had supper and when Roger Skunk was in bed, Mommy Skunk came up and hugged him and said she loved him very much. He told her that the story ends there.

Jo asked her daddy if the other animals ran away from Roger Skunk. Jack said no, they finally got used to the way Roger Skunk was and did not mind it at all. Jo commented that she was a stupid mummy. He asked her to have a long nap as her brother Bobby was also sleeping. Jo told him that she wanted him to tell her the story the next day that Wizard took that magic wand and hit that mummy, right over the head. Jack said that it was not the story. The point is that the little Skunk loved his mummy more than he loved all the other little animals. Moreover, she knew what was right. But Jo insisted that tomorrow he should say that the Wizard hit that

mummy. Jack said that he would see and asked her to sleep.

He closed the door and went downstairs. Clare was striking the chair rail with a dipped brush.

Above him footsteps vibrated. These were Jo's footsteps. He threatened to beat her and then the footsteps slowed down. Clare observed that it was a long story. He simply said "the poor kid". He watched his wife working hard on the wood-work. She was doing painting work. Thus the writer displays adult authority on one hand and the child's inquisitiveness on the other.

Gist of The Story

- ☐ The chapter captures a very sensitive reaction of a small girl to an important aspect of the story that her father narrates to her.
- ☐ The story reveals the worldview of a little child to a difficult moral question that shows her mental or psychological richness.
- ☐ Jo is a little girl of four years. She is engaged in a story session with her father.
- ☐ Jack, the father used to tell her a story every evening and especially for Saturday naps Jo feels herself involved with the characters and the happenings.
- ☐ The story always had an animal with a problem. The old owl advises him to visit the wizard who would solve the problem.
- ☐ Skunk's problem- he smelt bad, visited the wizard who changed it to the smell of roses.
- ☐ Skunk's mother was unhappy with it and took him back to the wizard. She hit the wizard and asked him to restore the original smell. She wanted her son to keep his identity of a skunk and wanted his friends to accept him for himself. So the wizard changes him back to smell like a skunk.
- ☐ After hearing the story of Roger Skunk Jo was not happy with the ending.

- She wants her father to change the ending. She wants the wizard to hit the mother back and let Roger be which her father was not ready to do to establish his authority. This raises a difficult moral question whether parents possess the right to impose their will on their children.
- Her father finds it difficult to answer her question.

Themes

➤ Generation Gap

Jack and Jo represent two distinctly different generational perspectives. For the father, the moral of his story is that Mommy Skunk “knew what was right.” For his daughter, Mommy Skunk does not know what’s right; she is looking out for herself and not for child. Jack was raised in a traditional and conservative society. Many of the conventions he was raised to believe are “what was right” are beginning to transform, face change, reveal their flaws or get called into question. The generation evolution is situated in the way the two characters’ view the moral of the story as distinctly different, with one view right and one view wrong.

➤ Changing Gender Roles

One of the underlying themes driving the anger that seems to be seething below the pleasant surface of Jack is one of those assaults on convention and tradition. Jack is situated as the product of traditional nuclear family with a stay-at-home mom and a dad who goes off to work every morning and returns in the evening; a world where gender roles were starkly drawn and rigidly reinforced. The central symbol of the changing gender roles is the image of his wife Clare wearing one of his old shirts over a maternity smock as she is moving around heavy furniture and doing the “man’s job” of painting the interior of her home. All while Jack is upstairs telling a

story to his daughter in a ritual that he seems to be locked into without the ability—as the man of the house—to assert his dominance and construct a hierarchy of patriarchal roles.

➤ Bullying

Jack's story is about bullying, but it is more complex than it might seem. The reference to Jack "remembering certain humiliations of his own childhood" as he tells of the other woodland characters refusing to play with Roger Skunk takes bedtime tale out of the realm of allegory and makes it directly autobiographical. But there is still an allegorical element to the story because ultimately Mommy Skunk can be viewed as much as a bully as the woodland creatures. She never once takes her son's desires (or happiness) into consideration and instead bullies him into revisiting the wizard to go back to the way he was, thus ensuring his unhappiness. Of course, to Jack this is the action of a mother showing she knows what is best, but his knee-jerk response to his daughter's accusation that Mommy Skunk is "stupid" can be seen as a revelation that Jack is himself in denial about how maternal bullying.

Questions & Answers

1. What was Roger Skunk's problem?

Because of Roger Skunk's foul smell, none of the other little creatures played with him. He used to face a lot of humiliations from other tiny animals. They used to call him "Roger Stinky Skunk" and they ran away from him. Roger was left alone every time.

2. How did the wizard manage to help the Skunk?

The wizard took out his magic wand and asked Roger Skunk what he wanted to smell like. When Roger said that he wanted to smell like roses, the wizard chanted

some magic words and fulfilled Roger Skunk's wish. He was happy that all the other little animals played with him, now that he did not smell bad.

3. What had upset Jo about the Skunk's story?

While Roger Skunk was very happy about his own transformation, his mother felt that her baby should smell like a little Skunk and not like roses. So, she took Roger Skunk back to the wizard and hit the wizard over his head with an umbrella. She told him to make Roger Skunk smell bad again. Jo was worried that now that Roger Skunk smells bad again, no animal would play with him. She wanted the wizard to hit mommy back and refuse to change Roger Skunk.

4. How did Roger Skunk find the extra pennies?

The wizard asked Roger Skunk to go to the end of the lane and turn around three times and look down the magic well and there he would find three pennies. Roger followed the instructions, collected the money and handed it over to the wizard as the price for fulfilling his wish.

5. Why was Roger Skunk's mommy not happy with the change?

Roger Skunk was eager to change his foul smell into a pleasant one. So, he went to the wizard and asked him to make him smell like roses. This change made him acceptable to his friends but his mommy felt that he smelt awful. According to her, a skunk should smell like a skunk and not like roses. Also, she loved him for what he was and did not want him to change even a bit.

6. Why does Jack insist that the end of the story was justified?

Jo felt bad for the skunk for not having any friends and wanted him to smell like roses as only then other animals would play with him. She did not want the skunk to be humiliated and rejected for his foul smell. But Jack wanted to tell Jo "something true, something she must know". He was adding autobiographical details to the story and wished to teach Jo to accept herself as she is. He had been taught by his mother to be comfortable in his own skin and that is exactly what he wished to pass on to his daughter. He refused to change the end of the story as he insisted that the skunk's mommy loved him more than all the other animals and accepted him for what he was.

7. What similarity did Jack find with the skunk?

Roger Skunk was humiliated by all other animals because he smelled really bad. None of the little creatures would play with him and he was boycotted by his peers. Roger Skunk used to cry as he felt lonely and embarrassed. Jack had faced similar kind of situations in his childhood. He also defended Roger's Skunk's mother as if he was defending his own mother.

8. What story did Jo want to hear the next day?

Jo wanted to hear the same story with a different end where the wizard hit the mommy back with his magic wand. She wanted a happy ending in which Roger Skunk would get to play with his friends.