

# “TRISTAN AND ISEULT”: JOHN UPDIKE’S MEDIÉVAL METHOD OR AN ANCIENT MIRROR FOR MODERN MAN

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## ABSTRACT

Updike began to explore the Tristan legend after reading Denis de Rougemont’s books *Love in the Western World* and *Love Declared* which he examined exhaustively in the early 1960s and, although he did not wholly agree with the entire content of Denis de Rougemont’s thoughts, it left a very deep impression on him. Consequently, Updike uses the story of Tristan and Iseult in three novels and several of his short stories mostly to deal with the issue of conjugal infidelity and to present the traditional themes of the legend like self-affirmation, social marginalization, indecision, despair, sexuality, life, and death in contemporary settings.<sup>1</sup> In both his novels and short stories, Updike tries to modernize the legend dissecting marital conflict and generally showing adultery as the escape valve which will lead the lovers to the paradoxical world of unreal freedom where the mixture of intense passion and pain will finally threaten the family and the social order of the protagonists just like in the Tristan romances of old.

KEY WORDS: Adultery, race, isolation, fantasy, pain, barrier, relationship.

## RESUMEN

En la década de los sesenta, Updike empezó a explorar la leyenda de Tristán después de leer y examinar minuciosamente los libros, *El amor en el mundo occidental* y *Amor declarado*, de Denis de Rougemont y, aunque no estaba de acuerdo con la totalidad de lo expuesto en ellos, a Updike le impresionaron profundamente. Updike, por tanto, hace uso de la historia de Tristán e Iseo en tres de sus novelas y varios cuentos cortos con el fin primordial de tratar el tema de la infidelidad conyugal y para presentar los tradicionales temas de la leyenda como la autoreivindicación, la marginación social, la indecisión, la desesperación, la sexualidad, la vida y la muerte en el contexto del mundo moderno. Tanto en sus novelas como en sus cuentos cortos, Updike intenta modernizar la leyenda diseccionando los conflictos maritales y mostrando, por regla general, al adulterio como la válvula de escape que llevará a los amantes al paradójico mundo de libertad ficticia en el que la mezcla de intensa pasión y sufrimiento acabará por amenazar la vida familiar y el orden social de los protagonistas tal y como sucede en los antiguos romances de Tristán.

PALABRAS CLAVE: adulterio, raza, aislamiento, fantasía dolor, barrera, relación.



## I. INTRODUCTION

Evidence of Updike's use of the Tristan Legend as a kind of medieval mirror through which he could both explain the present and escape from it can be found by briefly looking into the first of his Tristan adaptations, "Four Sides of One Story" written in 1965 and collected in *The Music Room*, and the last, his novel, *Brazil* (1994), which may well be considered representatives of the rest. The former retells the story of Tristan and Iseult from a medieval and a modern perspective simultaneously by means of four letters written by Tristan, Isolde the fair, Isolde White Hands, and Mark. The letters reveal how Tristan's marriage is blocked in a painful and sterile stalemate because of his indecision to commit to either of the two Isoldes; they reveal also how Iseult, his lover, is seeing a psychiatrist; how Iseult, his wife, is worn out by the kids and household obligations while fearful that Tristan might abandon her; and how Mark tries to convince his lawyer that a magic potion will not hold up in court while, in the meantime, has his alchemists work on an antidote just in case. The latter, *Brazil*, set in modern day Brazil, retells the Tristan legend from the vision of the tragic story of Tristao Raposo, a young black slum-dweller, and Isabel Leme, the daughter of a wealthy, high-ranking politician. Updike updates the myth by substituting adultery for racial barriers and by turning the traditional magic element into a formula whereby Tristao is turned into a white man. In spite of the wide span of themes woven into *Brazil* (Isabel, for example, is bisexual, is raped and forced into prostitution, and is at one point involved in polygamy), the modernizing of the legend still contains the enduring truth that love paradoxically causes pain.

In as much as "The Four sides of One Story" and *Brazil* undeniably testify to Updike's medieval method, it is one of his less known short stories, "Tristan and Iseult" collected in *The Afterlife and Other Short Stories* (1994), I would like focus on to analyze Updike's view of the crisis of modern male/female relationships. *The Afterlife* is Updike's eleventh collection of short stories and his first after seven years and in it Updike records "the minute fluctuations of feeling that occur as people move bodily through time, falling in and out of love, suffering the usual mortal indignities, experiencing small joys and occasional moments of grace" (Parini 7). Updike concentrates his view on aging heroes, just as he was aging himself, to explore through metaphor their usual mortal indignities offering the reader, thus, instances of spouses quarreling, lovers parting, or lonely mature men holding stubbornly on to impossible fantasies. Updike's typical protagonist is often "a thinly disguised version of himself: fiercely alert to his surroundings, sensual, dependent on women, narcissistic, kindhearted" (Parini 8).

*The Afterlife* is composed of twenty-two stories in which Updike forces his main characters to confront life, love, and death in an intense manner, whether it be by real events or by imagined ones. In this sense, for instance, in "The Journey to the Dead," intimations of mortality are brought on to the protagonist very directly by placing him in the same room with a terminally ill friend and he is forced to consider the briefness of life and the terrible isolation the prospect of death brings on to the dying. Similarly, the protagonist of "Tristan and Iseult" fictitiously lives



intense love affairs through the fantasies he creates in his mind in daily-life scenarios.

## II. "TRISTAN AND ISEULT"

This peculiar and innovative adaptation of the Tristan legend is set in a dental clinic in an unknown location of the United States. Tristan, who is never referred to by name but as "Him," is an older man somewhere in his fifties and a client of the clinic, and has an appointment for a dental hygiene session. Iseult, who is never referred to by name but as "Her," is one of the many ladies who work as hygienists at the clinic. They are modern-day strangers with nothing in common whatsoever who happen to coincide for the length of a dental hygiene session but are not meant to be together nor even become acquainted except in Tristan's imagination.

The basic outline of the story, that extends to approximately four pages, is the following:

- Tristan muses while in the waiting room.
- Iseult arrives to fetch him and leads him to her room.
- The cleaning session takes place.
- Iseult informs Tristan of a bleaching method and they depart.

The briefness of the structure of the story would initially leave little room for much else to happen yet although we are apparently the witnesses to a mere dental hygiene session that offers no excitement or thrill apart from the doubtful expectation that a nerve might be hit, a gum scraped or a bad tooth signaled for extraction, something else and much more important is taking place that nobody but Tristan is aware of, a romance. A romance with all the ingredients needed to make it worth mention if only it were true beyond the limits of Tristan's mind.

In this retelling of the legend, Updike places the love affair strictly in the hero's mind, thus turning it into a personal fantasy where the borders between what the hero considers reality and what he considers fantasy are uncertain. Updike offers no background information at all regarding the protagonists. This Tristan and this Iseult are to each other just like the hundreds of people with no identity whom we cross on the streets, strangers. So it is that when Tristan first sees Iseult approach him in the waiting room he thinks of her as "a total stranger, as was always the case..." (*Afterlife* 148). However, we are told that for Tristan this sense of distance between them quickly vanishes because "as soon as she touched his mouth he knew he was at home, that she was a rare one, one he could trust not to hurt him more than necessary" (*Afterlife* 148). The way Tristan perceives he can trust Iseult, "not to hurt him," is somehow reminiscent of a mother's love and falls into line with one of Updike's main themes, mother as the centre of the universe.<sup>2</sup> Tristan's first contact with Iseult is here similar in form to that of tradition in that Tristan is put into Iseult's care for health but it is remotely different in substance for Updike's hero is

soothed and, at the same time drawn to Iseult, because of a motherly dimension which makes him feel safe and at home.

This modern hero of Updike is no young dragon-slayer, no fighter of giants, but an aging stranger who does not want to be hurt. However, he is not void of instinct and desire and knows that in the hinting of pain, rather than in the experience of it, there is a quickening sensation. For this reason Updike's Tristan describes the threat of pain as "a mystical spice" or a "Heaven-sent menace" that serves to engage people into relationships. Yet, the element of pain, so present, real and tragic in the Tristan tradition, marks further abysmal distance between Updike's hero and that of the romancers because within the four walls of the clinic room society is not a threat, family is not a threat, there is no fear of being judged, there is no room for trials and betrayals, there is no fear of death nor about what lies beyond death. This "threat of pain," this "mystical spice" is nothing but a concern for one's mouth. Updike's Tristan would substitute pain itself for the threat thereof and use this innocuous notion to intensify his fantasy while at the same time remaining safe for nothing really happens. Updike's Tristan is a platonic romantic who is happier with fantasy than with reality. Therefore there is no need for the materialization of harm, he doesn't want to be hurt, the hint is good enough. Consequently, the fact that there is no direct contact between hygienist and client because there is a protective barrier of plastic gloves and face mask and goggles that separate them is no obstacle for Tristan to inflate his fantasy and, in spite of the barriers, feel that "their bodies became more metaphor" (*Afterlife* 152). Moreover, Tristan turns the clinic room into an idyllic space where "Heaven here [the room] was a ceiling of acoustical tiles, perforated irregularly in order to entertain trapped eyes liked his," and "angelic music was from an 'easy listening' station" whose tunes reminded him of "Key Largo, Bogie, and Bacall, here's looking at you, kid..." (*Afterlife* 148-9)<sup>3</sup>

Iseult's first words to Tristan are "Turn your head toward me, please" and then, after looking into his mouth, "A little sore tissue under these bridges. Don't be afraid to get up in there with the floss," however, ironically, Tristan is unable to speak back "for fear of dislodging the muttering saliva ejector." To add to this hindrance, Tristan dares only to glance at her eyes shyly and hardly to any effect:

His glance didn't dare linger even long enough to register the color of these eyes; he gathered only the spiritual, starlike afterimage of their living gel, simultaneously crystalline and watery, behind the double barrier of her glasses and safety goggles, above the shield-shaped paper mask hiding her mouth, her chin, her nostrils. (*Afterlife* 150)

In spite of this, Tristan turns the "pricking and probing" of Iseult's dental instruments into a religious ritual of cleansing in which his rotten teeth are the cause of shame and she is the saintly *domina*:

She more than anyone knew how imperfect he was. How rotten, in a word. Sinking beyond the reach of shame, he relaxed into her exploration and scarification of his lower molars, corrupt wrecks just barely salvaged from the ruin of his years of

heedless, sugar-oriented consumption. Doughnuts, candied peanuts, Snickers bars, licorice sticks, chocolate-coated raisins... *Mea culpa, domina.* (*Afterlife* 150)

who, despite seeing a corrupt side of him nobody else can see, forgives his wreckage:

...She was seeing, and forgiving even as she saw, a side of himself he had never had to face—a micro-ridden, much-repaired underside. (*Afterlife* 150)

Tristan's fantasy reaches a climax when Iseult's voice raises its pitch and becomes firmer commanding him to "open wider" in order to get to his upper molars. At this point we are told that because of her "faintly more aggressive tone" Tristan's body is invaded by "a sense of counter-striving" that causes him to "arch upward in the chair" and surrender himself into "her ministrations." In the midst of this operation, Tristan idealizes both, what is taking place, and Iseult, leading him to muse in a string of non-poetic comparisons that, though on the verge of mere vulgarity, serve his fantasy just as well:

Her flesh, as it touched his, had a resilience slightly greater than that of a cigarette pack, a warmth a bit less than that of a flashlight face, a humidity even more subtle than that of laundry removed five minutes too soon from the dryer. (*Afterlife* 151)

From Tristan's unique point of view in such an awkward scenario, Iseult "was made for him" and, in that moment and place she was "indeed non-existent but for him, like air made blue by our own vision, and burned into life by our lungs" (*Afterlife* 151).

Tristan's self-rapture is suddenly interrupted when Iseult asks, "How're you doin'?" Concerned that "the transfixed state of his soul" might have unconsciously "translated somatically in resistance or involuntary spasm," Tristan tells Iseult he is "fine" but, with all that is going on inside of him, he feels his answer is a lie. When Iseult then informs him that there's "Just a little more," all Tristan dares respond is "Unnh" in way of consent. Immediately though, as Iseult resumes search of "the last potentially disastrous plaque in the remotest crannies of his upper left molars," Tristan returns to his fantasy. As Iseult leans deeper in, Tristan feels "the parallel beams of her gaze like lasers vaporizing his carious imperfections." The normally dreaded intervention turns for him into "timeless moments passed in rhythmic scraping." Once this process is finished, Tristan feels clean and the fact that Iseult, at this moment, informs Tristan that he may rinse, verifies the courtly dimension of purifying love to Tristan's imagined love affair. Tristan at this point feels, we are told, that Iseult has "done him," from which we gather that Tristan means this in more ways than one.

After the rinsing came the polishing and the flossing, but this final part of the session, with its quick and nimble strokes and complete lack of the threat of pain, felt "anti-climactic" to Tristan. Tristan displays his deepest state of remoteness when, at the end of the session, he asks Iseult about his mouth:



T: "How did I look, overall?"

I: "Uh- do you smoke or drink a lot of tea?"

T: "No. Why?"

Her mask and goggles were off; she blushed. It was thrilling, to see emotion tinge that prim, professional face. (*Afterlife* 152)

Far from being disappointed in Iseult or offended by her tame indication that his teeth were near black, Tristan pays no notice and interprets her blush as a sign of personal, heart-felt concern for him: "She cared. She had to care, after all. How could she go through these motions and not care?" Meanwhile, back in the real world, Iseult replies: "'I just wondered,' she said, turning away in, at last, embarrassment. 'You have a fair amount of staining'" (*Afterlife* 152).

Tristan, in a Quixote-like stubborn denial of truth, transforms Iseult's embarrassment into uncontainable desire seeing in her skin not the red signs of awkwardness but the rosy colour of "cheeks whose thin skin could no longer conceal the circulating heat of her blood" (*Afterlife* 153). When Iseult ends the conversation and the session altogether by sentencing: "There's a bleaching process that's pretty safe and effective," Tristan feels she is "just short of ardor!"

The story ends with Tristan reminding himself that if he were to return for the bleaching process, it would not be with Iseult because the hygienist was always a stranger for he "never had the same one twice." The tone here is not sad or weary because we are told that "The principle [of changing hygienist] lay between the two of them [Tristan and the attending hygienist] like a sword," and that if it were not so it "wouldn't be sublime... it wouldn't be hygiene" (*Afterlife* 153). In other words, and wholly in line with Denis de Rougemont's thesis of love and with the symbol of the separating sword of the Tristan legend, the principle that acts like a sword is that which hinders the lovers from having what they want because consummation means the death of desire and thus the end of passion. So, in changing women as it were, Tristan has discovered that love, if only a product of his imagination, can be sublime. It goes by untainted, there's no room for error or tragedy, it is clean, it is safe, it is hygiene!

However, this very principle that grants love safety and hygiene, also locks it in a one-sided hold, turning it into a trick of isolation, an unattainable ambition. Excitement is therefore not in the action itself, not in the materialization of passion, but in the thought of it, in the one-sided fantasy. In the case of Updike's Tristan, fantasy is upheld by the few brushes of skin that occur between Iseult and him, by the position of their bodies during the session, by the few brief shy glances he manages to get of her eyes, by the misinterpretation of her words and body language, by the distant threat of pain, and by the idyllic atmosphere his mind endows the clinic room with.

This modern-day urban fantasy reveals the sad and lonely condition of an aging man, who delights in unreal love affairs. It speaks of a world in the age of AIDS where "death [is] the possible price of contact" (*Afterlife* 149). Consequently, it is safer to keep to the principle that comes between people like a sword though it means permanent isolation and a withdrawal from true and fulfilling relationships.



The couple in this adaptation of the Tristan legend have nothing but a dental appointment in common. There is, moreover, no other objective explanation for Tristan's attraction to Iseult apart from her motherly skills of caring for him and making him feel as if at home. We are never told what Iseult looks like, not even if she has blonde hair and, even in his blind condition of enraptured awe, Tristan describes her as "nunnish," (*Afterlife* 148) and as having a "humorless gaze" (*Afterlife* 151).

Magic is present in Updike's "Tristan and Iseult" to the extent that Tristan numbs his mind through fantasy creating a world where he can evade reality and live a dream. In "Tristan and Iseult" Updike turns a dental appointment into a modernized medieval romance that happens solely in Tristan's imagination. It contains a pathetic undertone that accompanies the story and is highlighted to the extent that Tristan is unaware of his own guile and Iseult remains ignorant of any event save her duty to remove the rot from her client's mouth.

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