

*Gertrude and Claudius*, by John Updike

reviewed by [James Yerkes](#) in the [February 23, 2000](#) issue

John Updike's 19th novel, plotted as a "prequel" to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is a beautifully crafted, captivating story. Updike owes much of his thematic treatment to Shakespeare and to modern Shakespeare scholarship, but it is his own fertile imagination that generates the novel's compelling narrative. This is his best book since *The Witches of Eastwick*.

Updike brings new energy and creativity to his métier: using the experience of human sexuality as a lens through which to glimpse ourselves as "creatures caught in the light," as he once put it. Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, is the central figure and heroine. In depicting her warm and cogent feminine sensibility, Updike convincingly refutes the charges of misogyny often directed against him. He expertly unfolds the tortured complexity of human motivations, rooted in nature, driven by spirit and unavoidably "under God's gaze." The novel reprises the fundamental issues he has dealt with throughout his writing career: "Man in a state of fear and trembling, separated from God, haunted by dread, twisted by the conflicting demands of his animal biology and human intelligence, of the social contract and the inner imperatives, condemned as if by otherworldly origins to perpetual restlessness—such was, and to some extent remains, my conception," Updike has stated.

*Gertrude and Claudius* explores "the human soul with its shadows." The dominant philosophical shadow cast here is the profound ambiguity of our relationship to nature. Before he becomes King Claudius, the king's brother, Feng, observes to his then sister-in-law Gertrude that in falconry there is "a beauty that puts our thoughts of good and evil at the mercy of the real." Nature is cruel, but the more complex truth is that nature is "forked," as the soon-to-be-murdered king says when Feng confronts him: "Nature is a two-edged instrument, a forked violence and mending, the wellspring of nurture and the ruin of reason."

Symptomatic of the latter is Feng's traitorous half-truth reasoning with Gertrude, with whom he has an adulterous relationship. "There are sins against the church, and sins against nature, which is God's older and purer handiwork. Our sin has been

these many years one of denying our natures," he tells her. Gertrude answers that we are indeed rooted in nature, but disquietingly so. "Life is part of nature, its beginning impossible to recall, its ending not to be contemplated outside of church, the home of last things."

For Updike, sexual experience both evokes our noblest gestures and eviscerates our highest principles. His characters embody the erotic perspective on life and love, married and not, which Updike discussed in an early review of Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World and Love Declared* (1963). Feng, unmarried and 59 years old, reflects that erotic love is "less the gift bestowed than the Heavenly graciousness of bestowal . . . this gift torn from Eden's shadows," and Gertrude maintains "the prejudice that it weakens man's devotion when that devotion becomes lawful."

The ardency of romantic love is recessive in both of Gertrude's marriages; it is infidelity which, in midlife, resurrects her spirit, rescuing her from personal and social irrelevancy. Every married person who reads this novel carefully and honestly will recognize that Updike, without endorsing infidelity as unavoidable therapy, clearly understands how poignantly difficult is the struggle to keep a marriage alive. In that respect, this novel could serve as a realistic resource for pastoral counseling.

Biblical references dot the book. Bathsheba and Jezebel are mentioned, as is Eden, but the image of Mary Magdalene kneeling in front of the resurrected "ultimate Man" is especially important. Her exposed pink knee and her hand raised "as if to ward off the blessing gesture" function as religious and moral symbols expressing the peculiar ambiguity of human existence. We are "sent from the bode of angels to live on this earth among beasts and filth, and sentenced to die in a misery of foreknowing." Gertrude chides Feng, who is tempted by the hubris of natural science and Aristotelian logic to discard faith, "God should have sent not his Son but a theorem." Our life remains "under God's gaze."

Updike once said that fiction is "a mirror out for a walk." Gertrude and Claudius, like Adam and Eve, represent each of us. Updike once told an interviewer, "My overall theory, if I have one, is that the life of a piece of fictional prose comes from its relationship to reality, to truth, to what actually happens." This novel is alive because it poignantly mirrors the shadows of our souls as startled creatures caught in the light of reality.