

Memories of the Ford Administration

Short Guide

Memories of the Ford Administration by John Updike

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Characters

The book jacket for *Memories of the Ford Administration* shows a split portrait of James Buchanan and Gerald Ford, but neither president is the main character of the novel. Instead, the personality of Alfred Clayton provides the chief interest for readers of this comic tour de force. The narrator is not just another absent-minded professor, nor just a middle-aged man in limbo between wife and mistress, Clayton is one of Updike's most entertaining comic figures. The comedy, of course, often depends upon Clayton's enormous capacity to confuse reality and romantic dreams. While taking pride in his separation from the Queen of Disorder, the narrator cannot see that his story will lead inevitably to their reconciliation. His foolish attempt to promote a mistress to the status of Perfect Wife is doomed from the start, but Alfred Clayton will be the last to know.

The wife and mistress in the novel both suffer because of the narrator's deluded image of himself as a romantic man. Clayton's wife has long been more aware of his limitations, and when his mistress reaches the same perspective near the end of the novel, the romance is over. Although these characters in *Memories of the Ford Administration* are presented in a familiar triangle, Updike animates their story of midlife crisis with unusual wit and sympathy.

The two American presidents on the cover of the book are presented as mere academic concerns of the narrator, but they also serve as mirror images of his incompetence. While his professional research is focused on the romantic misadventure of the young James Buchanan, the narrator has agreed to write about the Ford Administration. Neither political figure is known as a model of success, and their history of compromise, vacillation, and failure informs at every turn the character of Updike's comic hero.



Social Concerns/Themes

Updike's fifteenth novel is a comic mixture of history and fiction. The title is a joke because the narrator cannot remember anything about the presidency of Gerald Ford. He is supposed to write about it for an Association of American Historians, but his report instead is a mixture of personal history and a biography of James Buchanan.

The narrator is a professor of history at Wayward Junior College in New Hampshire, and his midlife crisis of separation from his wife is played out against Nixon's resignation and Ford's interregnum. The contemporary political history, however, goes almost entirely unobserved. The narrator is completely distracted by his personal dilemma, and his professional report, designed by Updike to be the text of the novel, reads like an academic parody.

The marital crisis preoccupying the narrator is a chance for Updike to explore once again his favorite themes of adultery, betrayal, and the moral confusion of romantic desire. By setting the story in the mid 1970s, Updike allows the action to resonate with the social and political disintegration of the time. And by including biographical sections on James Buchanan, Updike is able to compare a twentieth-century story with a romantic crisis in the life of the man who became America's president on the eve of the Civil War. Thus contemporary events are foreshadowed by political divisions in the previous century, and both parts of the novel show an intersection of private and public concerns.

Updike's satire of academic writing raises important questions about historical knowledge. What happens to standards of objectivity and truth when the professional historian is unable to separate himself from the historical account? While laughing at the hopeless case of the narrator who cannot understand his own crisis, what happens if we think of Nixon trying in vain to erase contemporary history? Or if we recall Buchanan unable to face or avert the Civil War? Updike's novel thus explores the familiar motives and lies of American social and political experience.



Techniques

Updike's design for *Memories of the Ford Administration* is a collage of academic satire, historical narrative, and romantic comedy. These different kinds of fiction are held together by the firstperson narrator whose personality is revealed in each mode of the narrative.

Whether he is describing the young James Buchanan before the Civil War, or disclosing his own recent adventures at Wayward Junior College, the narrator typically confuses himself with history. This strategy not only allows Updike to offer comedy with each section of the novel, it also enables him to set up the many connections between history and his comic historian. The result is a novel that reminds us of two quite forgettable American presidents, while it also documents with comic brilliance the folly of political and romantic ambition.

Updike's technique includes a comic framework for *Memories of the Ford Administration*. The novel begins with a professional "From:/To:" form of address which identifies all that follows as Dr. Clayton's report to the Northern New England Association of American Historians to be printed in their triquarterly journal, *Retrospect*. The academic satire is continued as Clayton breaks up his rambling account with absurd technical advice for the editors of *Retrospect*: "All this strictly should be in the pluperfect, since the narrative begins post-coitally." After wandering more or less off topic for 369 pages, the final joke is the novel's closing line: "The more I think about the Ford Administration, the more it seems I remember nothing."



Key Questions

Questions about the success of Updike's academic satire, the purpose of the historical chapters, and the comic portrayal of a midlife crisis, should provoke a stimulating discussion of *Memories of the Ford Administration*.

Some evaluation of Updike's bold narrative strategy might also lead to a thoughtful study of the novel's design.

1. Why does Updike have Professor Clayton narrate *Memories of the Ford Administration*? How reliable is his account of contemporary events?
2. What comic framework is provided for the novel? How does Updike remind us that the book is a parody of an academic report?
3. What is the target of Updike's academic satire? Does he question the very nature of historical knowledge?
4. Why does Updike include the biography of James Buchanan? How does his career of compromise and failure echo in the next century?
5. What does the double portrait of Buchanan and Ford symbolize? Does the novel bring them together as two halves of the same character?
6. How does Updike raise questions about America's political destiny?

What point of view dominates his use of history?

7. What are the chief comic methods used in *Memories of the Ford Administration*? How does the comedy often depend on our reading between the lines of the narrator?
8. How does Updike find new comic material in a familiar romantic triangle? What keeps the scenes of midlife crisis from falling to the level of mere situational comedy?
9. What difference would it make if the story were told from the perspective of the wife or mistress? Could the "Queen of Disorder" take us further into comic confusion than Professor Clayton?
10. Where does *Memories of the Ford Administration* stand in the hierarchy of Updike's work? Will its mixture of academic satire and historical narrative help to ensure a place in the study of American literature?

Literary Precedents

There is a rich tradition of academic satire in twentieth-century fiction.

Novels like Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1953) and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) are well known for their comic portrayal of academic characters. A combination of academic satire and romantic comedy is also dramatized in Philip Roth's *The Professor of Desire* (1977). Updike clearly adds to this tradition with the creation of Professor Clayton.

There are also several precedents for the mixture of history and fiction in *Memories of the Ford Administration*.

Novels like Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) and E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) turn historical events into an obsessive and guilt-ridden fantasy of America's past. Updike goes even further by showing how the professor of history is hopelessly involved with his own need for confession and self-justification.

As far as Updike's comic portrayal of a midlife crisis is concerned, the possible examples in contemporary American fiction are legion. Indeed, the publication history of Updike's work in *The New Yorker* would suggest his long familiarity with this popular genre of contemporary fiction.

Related Titles

"I wanted to write a historical novel about James Buchanan," says Updike, "a fascinating man, at least to me. I did so much research I began to dream about him." The research, however, would not lend itself to fiction, and Updike must have felt some of the frustration that he later gives to Professor Clayton. "Having told a number of reviewers I was writing a book about Buchanan," admits Updike, "I painted him black and put him in Rabbit Redux." The last president to compromise the issue of slavery is thus ironically transformed into a black co-worker for Rabbit at the Verity Press.

Professor Clayton might approve of this unexpected use of history, but Updike continued to plan a more historical account of America's fifteenth president. The next appearance of this character is in *Buchanan Dying* (1974), the only play in Updike's long career.

Even a play about the death of Buchanan, however, did not succeed in removing that ghost from Updike's mind. The fact that he returns again to the Buchanan story almost two decades later proves indeed that *Memories of the Ford Administration* has deep roots in the author's imagination.



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