From Pulpit to Screen: Secularization, Mass Culture, and the Remaking of Belief in John Updike's In the Beauty of the Lilies (1996).

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Abstract:

This paper interprets John Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) as a narrative of twentieth-century American cultural history, highlighting changes in belief amid secularization and the growing influence of mass culture. Covering four generations of the Wilmot family, the novel shows how Protestant religious authority is gradually replaced by cinema, celebrity culture, and popular spectacle, which become primary sources of meaning and social bonding. Using Max Weber's idea of disenchantment and Neal Gabler's view of mass media as providing a secular form of transcendence, the article argues that Updike presents secularization not as a sudden break but as a process of replacement—where spiritual longing persists despite the decline of institutional religion. By portraying belief at different historical

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moments—from early film culture to postwar consumerism—the novel offers a literary perspective on how American modernity reshapes faith, authority, and transcendence. Seen as a reflection of American civilization, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* reveals the cultural mechanisms through which twentieth-century America addresses diminished religious certainty without losing the desire for transcendental meaning.

Key words: Secularization; Disenchantment; Mass media; Celebrity culture; American modernity; Spiritual longing

1- Introduction :

Throughout the twentieth century, American society underwent major changes in its belief systems. The influence of Protestant Christianity—once central to moral standards, social order, and national identity—gradually declined, replaced by new collective meanings shaped by mass culture, media, and spectacles. While this transition is often analyzed through sociological or historical lenses that emphasize secularization, modernization, and cultural diversity, literature offers a unique perspective by capturing how these shifts were personally experienced and understood in everyday life. John Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) exemplifies this literary approach to exploring American cultural changes history.

Spanning four generations of the Wilmot family from the early twentieth century to the late 1980s, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* serves less as a traditional family saga and more as a sustained reflection on how the foundations of belief in American society have evolved. The story begins with a moment of religious crisis: Clarence Wilmot, a Presbyterian minister, loses his faith after watching a silent film. Although this event appears minor

and personal, it sets in motion a broader cultural shift where religious authority is replaced by secular forms of transcendence. Throughout the novel, cinema, professional sports, celebrity culture, and media spectacles increasingly take the place of religion as sources of awe, ritual, and collective identification with meaning.

In fact, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* can be seen as a commentary on American civilization, serving as a narrative that reflects, interprets, and historicizes the cultural forces shaping twentieth-century American life. Instead of viewing secularization as a straightforward loss, Updike depicts it as a nuanced restructuring of meaning. Belief does not vanish; it shifts. Spiritual longing remains, but it is redirected toward mass-mediated experiences that offer immediacy, emotional impact, and shared feelings. Therefore, the novel questions linear stories of disenchantment by highlighting the ongoing connection between religious drives and the spectacle of secular life.

The argument draws on Max Weber's notion of disenchantment to explain the gradual decline of religious authority and incorporates cultural histories of American mass media to situate cinema and popular culture as alternative forms of transcendence. Nonetheless, the main emphasis is on the novel's role as a cultural document: a literary record that depicts historical shifts through characters, memory, and generational change. By analyzing *In the Beauty of the Lilies* at the nexus of literature and cultural history, this article aims to demonstrate how Updike's novel reveals how twentieth-century America reevaluated faith, authority, and meaning amid a growing secularism and media-saturated world.

1-1- Literature Review

Critical responses to *In the Beauty of the Lilies* have consistently highlighted its focus on religion, belief, and modernity, placing the novel within John Updike's lifelong exploration of Protestant culture and its decline. Scholars like James Wall interpret *In the Beauty of the Lilies* as part of Updike's depiction of religious dislocation in America, illustrating characters struggling with faith, its loss, and its transformation across generations (Wall, 1997, pp. 43-46). Similarly, James Wood perceives the collapse of Clarence Wilmot's faith at the start as a symbol of Updike's broader cultural commentary, suggesting the novel deals with "not atheism, but the exhaustion of belief and the hunger that follows" (Wood, 1999, p. 188). These analyses position religion as a key theme, though they tend to focus more on theological or moral issues than historical ones. Recent research, however, is now focusing more on the cultural-historical perspective. For example, Yabo Li (2025) argues that Updike's four generational stages reflect a transformation of religious meaning, rather than a simple decline of institutional Christianity. The Wilmot family's evolving relationship with faith—from Clarence's loss of belief to Essie's Hollywood-star spirituality and Clark's continuous quest—demonstrates how belief systems are transmitted, modified, and reconstructed in American modernity, with cinema and media emerging as new symbolic authorities.

1-2- Research Problem and Hypothesis

Despite extensive criticism of *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, the novel has rarely been examined as a commentary on American civilization—one that depicts long-term cultural evolution rather than solely focusing on personal

faith or theological crises. While reviewers have acknowledged its historical breadth and its reflection on religious decline, they often treat belief as a central theme rather than exploring how the narrative form itself models secularization as an ongoing cultural process. This article fills that gap by interpreting *In the Beauty of the Lilies* as a civilizational narrative serving as a literary record of American belief throughout the twentieth century. Drawing on secularization theory and cultural history, it suggests that the novel's multigenerational structure enables Updike to illustrate how belief systems are transmitted, diminished, and transformed over time. Secularization, therefore, appears not as a rapid break or outright loss of faith but as a slow cultural restructuring. The main question guiding this research is **how *In the Beauty of the Lilies* reveals the evolution of belief in twentieth-century America, especially the transition from Protestant religious authority to meaning mediated through mass media**. Instead of viewing secularization solely as disenchantment, the study examines whether cinema, celebrity, and popular spectacle have assumed social, emotional, and symbolic roles once held by traditional religious authority.

2- Theoretical Grounds

Building on Max Weber's early 20th-century theory of disenchantment (1904–1905) and Neal Gabler's late-century cultural history of mass media (1998), this study places *In the Beauty of the Lilies* at the crossroads of religious decline and the rise of entertainment as a dominant cultural force in American civilization. It develops a clear, methodologically sound framework. Weber discusses the societal conditions leading to disenchantment, while Gabler explains the cultural mechanisms of replacement. Together, they underpin the main argument that *In the Beauty*

of the Lilies portrays secularization as a process of symbolic substitution, where belief shifts from the pulpit to the media screen.

Max Weber's concept of disenchantment is central to understanding the decline of Protestant religious authority in modern American society. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber portrays modernity as a historical era where the world loses its sacred mystery and becomes understandable through rationalization: "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'" (Weber, trans. Gerth and Mills, 1991: p. 155). Disenchantment does not erase meaning but shifts it from religious cosmology to secular institutions and practices. Importantly, Weber sees disenchantment as a structural change in authority, not emotional emptiness. Religious worldviews lose their dominance over social life, while other cultural forms develop to organize meaning and experience. This perspective allows the novel's opening crisis—Clarence Wilmot's loss of faith—to be seen not just as a personal failure but as part of a larger civilizational transformation. Accordingly, Weber's theory supports a view of secularization as a slow, ongoing, historical process rather than a sudden change or rupture.

The replacement of religious authority in twentieth-century America is examined, drawing on Neal Gabler's cultural history of American mass media, especially cinema. In his book *Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, Gabler claims that mass entertainment became a key source of meaning and collective identity in modern America. He describes movies as providing Americans "a shared emotional experience that once belonged to churchgoing" (Gabler, 1999: p. 9). According to him, cinema

functions as a secular institution capable of generating wonder, ritual, and emotional connection. He argues that entertainment did more than distract; it transformed Americans' perception of reality: "Entertainment became the dominant force shaping how Americans saw themselves and the world around them" (Ibid. p. 6). This idea is crucial for understanding *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, where cinema, celebrity, and spectacle gradually replace the symbolic role of Protestant faith. Gabler's approach frames mass culture as a civilizational structure that reorganizes belief, rather than as a superficial cultural phenomenon.

Together, Weber and Gabler establish a solid theoretical basis for this study. Weber discusses the decline of religious authority, whereas Gabler describes how American culture is re-enchanted through mass media spectacles. This dual perspective underpins the main argument that *In the Beauty of the Lilies* portrays secularization as a substitution process, showing how twentieth-century American modernity breaks down traditional beliefs but maintains the human longing for transcendence through emerging cultural forms.

3- Disenchantment as a Foundational Cultural Event in *In the Beauty of the Lilies*

In *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, John Updike depicts disenchantment not merely as an abstract intellectual trend but as a significant cultural rupture that transforms beliefs, authority, and meaning in early 20th-century America. The sudden loss of faith by Presbyterian minister Clarence Wilmot serves as a narrative illustration of Max Weber's concept of the "disenchantment of the world" *(Entzauberung)*. Importantly, Clarence's

crisis is not caused by theoretical doubt or theological disputes; instead, it results from a tangible cultural experience—his encounter with cinema. While watching a film, he senses "the last particles of his faith leave him" (p. 8), marking a transition from religious mediation to mediated experience as a key source of understanding meaning.

From a civilizational standpoint, this episode marks a transitional phase in which Protestantism ceases to be the default framework for interpreting the world. Clarence's collapse highlights the decline of religious authority, not through direct confrontation but through displacement. In Weber's view, disenchantment does not mean the world becomes meaningless; rather, it means that religious institutions no longer provide guaranteed meaning. As Weber states, modernity is characterized by "the disenchantment of the world," in which magical and sacred explanations are replaced by rational systems of understanding (Weber, trans. Gerth and Mills, 1991: p. 155).

Updike presents this sociological change through an intuitive narrative. Clarence's loss of faith is described using sensory imagery that reflects the cinematic medium: the idea of faith breaking into "particles" echoes the flickering, fleeting images on the screen that trigger his crisis (p. 8). This imagery aligns with Weber's concept of disenchantment, which describes the removal of magic and supernatural causes from social life. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber explains how Protestant rationalization laid the groundwork for this by eradicating magical salvation methods and promoting a rational, calculated approach to the world (Weber, trans. Parsons, 2001, pp. 61–62).

Clarence's experience reflects a shift in cultural authority, not just disbelief. Cinema provides emotional, narrative, and symbolic impact without the need for religious mediation. In line with Weber's idea that disenchantment restructures belief rather than erases it, Updike suggests that authority shifts from the pulpit to secular institutions and media that organize experience and confer emotional significance. This scene's symbolism extends beyond Clarence's personal crisis, hinting at the decline of Protestantism as a key cultural force. While Weber views disenchantment as part of European Christian history, Updike situates it within the modern American perception of film. Cinema replaces the church not through rejection of transcendence but through a shift to mediated transcendence, turning movie theaters into secular ritual spaces where meaning, community, and emotion are shared and negotiated.

In *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, disenchantment is not shown as the end of meaning. Instead, it illustrates how meaning shifts into new cultural expressions. Clarence's loss marks the beginning of a generational shift, where belief spreads into a diverse marketplace of symbols—like cinema, celebrity, and even more extreme alternatives to sacred authority. This reflects Weber's broader idea of modernity as a process where unified meaning breaks into multiple value spheres, none of which holds unquestioned power (Weber, trans. Gerth and Mills, 1991: p. 181). Clarence Wilmot's crisis thus becomes a key cultural event. Using cinematic imagery and Weberian sociology, Updike portrays early twentieth-century America as a place where religious authority diminishes, secular meanings grow, and enchantment isn't erased but shifted. The novel ultimately affirms Weber's main insight: disenchantment changes how belief and meaning are experienced, rather than erasing them altogether.

4- Cinema, Secularity, and the Generational Reorganization of Transcendence in *In the Beauty of the Lilies*

Throughout *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, cinema is portrayed not just as entertainment but as a secular form of transcendence—a space where emotional depth, collective engagement, and symbolic significance come together. Updike often describes film as assuming roles formerly associated with religious rituals, especially as Protestant influence declines. In this way, the novel aligns with Neal Gabler's view of mass media as a civilizational force shaping modern American cultural consciousness.

From the very first pages, cinema is depicted as a competing symbolic system to religion. When D. W. Griffith films in Paterson, New Jersey, Clarence Wilmot's faith begins to falter nearby, intentionally contrasting the two to illustrate the transfer of cultural authority from the church to the cinema. Amid the spectacle of actors "sweltering in tights and velvet," Clarence perceives "the last particles of his faith leave him" (p. 8). The simultaneous presentation of these scenes indicates that cinema not only accompanies the decline of religion but also actively takes its place.

For subsequent generations of the Wilmot family, film evolves into a ritualized space of focus and emotional engagement. Dark theaters, collective viewing, and surrendering to the story emulate religious practices without invoking the supernatural. Updike highlights this attraction by describing cinema as offering "a place outside matter where [the soul] can stand" (p. 14). Here, transcendence isn't rooted in doctrine but emerges through images, stories, and emotional impact. This closely resembles Neal Gabler's point in *Life: The Movie*, where he argues that entertainment has become the

main lens through which Americans interpret reality. Gabler notes, "entertainment is no longer merely a diversion; it has become the organizing principle of American life" (Gabler, 1999, p. 6). Specifically, film provides narrative structure, emotional resonance, and shared symbolic references—functions once fulfilled by religion.

Gabler further contends that modern Americans increasingly live their lives as if they were acting in movies, shaping their identity and experiences through cinematic forms (Ibid., p. 12). Updike illustrates this idea with characters like Essie, whose fame blends religious longing with celebrity, and Clark, whose imagination is shaped more by screen images than traditional beliefs. Cinema becomes not an escape from reality but the framework through which reality is understood and emotionally processed. Importantly, this cinematic transcendence does not lead to renewed religious faith. Updike does not imply that film replaces God with a new theology. Rather, cinema creates what could be called a secular sacred—a shared space where meaning is felt, rehearsed, and reaffirmed through spectacle and storytelling. This supports Gabler's view that in America's "republic of entertainment," attention and emotion have overtaken older religious authority (Ibid., p. 28).

In this context, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* reflects a wider shift in civilization. As Protestant cosmology declines in cultural influence, cinema acts as a modern equivalent of religion—offering coherence, emotional connection, and community in a secular era. Updike's novel serves as a literary exploration of how mass media, particularly film, shape beliefs and notions of belonging in contemporary American society. This does not eliminate transcendence but instead shifts its location.

A key insight in *The Beauty of the Lilies* is how secularization gradually becomes normal across generations. Updike's multigenerational narrative enables him to go beyond Clarence Wilmot's initial faith crisis and illustrate how its effects quietly integrate into family life. What starts as a breaking point for Clarence evolves into a cultural norm for his descendants—one that they accept without question. Secular perspectives are neither actively adopted nor rejected; they simply become the backdrop to their lives.

Clarence's loss of faith is depicted as a sudden inner collapse when he realizes that "the words of the creed no longer fastened themselves to anything outside his own voice" (p. 5). This moment remains marked by shock and disorientation. However, for later generations—particularly his daughter Essie and her children—such shock diminishes. Cinema, advertising, and celebrity culture are not seen as replacements for religion but as natural sources of reference. Essie's admiration for film stardom, for example, is described with language reminiscent of religious reverence: Hollywood becomes for her "a higher, brighter realm, more real than the streets below" (p. 96). Transcendence has not disappeared; it has merely relocated. By the time the novel describes Clarence's grandchildren, secularity is fully accepted as normal. Media and spectacle are integrated into everyday life rather than viewed with awe or anxiety. One character notes that going to movies is now done "the way earlier people must have gone to church—without thinking why" (p. 241). Disenchantment here is no longer dramatic or reflective; it has become structural, ingrained in habits and expectations rather than conscious belief loss.

From an American Studies perspective, this generational change is significant. Updike illustrates that secularization happens gradually, through family tradition and cultural exposure rather than direct ideological opposition. Religious authority diminishes not because it is challenged, but because alternative sources of meaning—such as cinema, celebrity culture, and popular stories—gradually assume its social and emotional roles. In this way, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* counters narratives of sudden moral decline and instead presents a more nuanced view of cultural evolution: one characterized by continuity, inheritance, and the slow mainstreaming of secular values in life.

5- Celebrity, Authority, and Spiritual Longing in Secular American Modernity in *In the Beauty of the Lilies*

In *In The Beauty of the Lilies*, the decline of institutional religion is depicted alongside the rise of new, secular authority figures. Over generations, the Wilmot family's admiration shifts from clergy and doctrinal figures to visible personalities such as film stars, athletes, and public figures, whose influence depends on charisma and performance instead of spiritual authority. These figures may not be morally exemplary or consistently reliable guides, but they strongly influence desire, imagination, and aspirations for social life.

Updike highlights this shift most clearly through Essie Wilmot, whose ascent to stardom demonstrates how authority becomes aestheticized. She doesn't earn respect through belief or moral guidance, but through her presence and visibility. Updike notes that she “commanded the eyes of the city” (p. 124), emphasizing how attention itself becomes a form of power.

Her public image provides audiences with a narrative and emotional cue to absorb. In this mediated environment, authority is no longer rooted in doctrine or tradition but is instead conveyed through spectacle and collective fascination. This change mirrors Gabler's argument in *Life: The Movie*, where he describes entertainment as a dominant cultural system that reshapes values and hierarchies. Gabler states that in modern America, visibility gives importance: "The more something was seen, the more it mattered" (Gabler, 1999, p. 38). Celebrity acts as a secular source of influence, guiding attention and shaping models of behavior much like religious authority once did. In response, Updike's characters measure success, meaning, and even identity against the lives projected on the media screens.

Yet Updike emphasizes the delicate nature of this new form of authority. Unlike religious institutions, which offer continuity and transcendence, celebrity relies on ongoing attention and storytelling appeal. Its influence is temporary and often fragile. Nevertheless, its impact on culture is significant. As Gabler observes, entertainment "defines what is worth watching, listening to, and emulating" (Ibid., p. 51), influencing moral and emotional values even without formal belief. In *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, this principle shapes daily life, subtly directing desire and aspirations for generations.

From a civilizational viewpoint, the novel indicates that authority in secular America hasn't vanished but has shifted. It now manifests through images, performances, and public narratives rather than through church hierarchies. Updike depicts celebrity as a diminished yet omnipresent replacement for moral guidance—an unstable form of leadership that still

shapes cultural life. This underscores a key idea of secularization theory: modernity doesn't eliminate authority but changes its expressions—how it is acknowledged, felt, and experienced.

One of the novel's most subtle successes is its depiction of spiritual longing as an enduring force in secular modern life. While the Wilmot family's institutional religion diminishes over generations, their yearning for meaning, coherence, and transcendence persists. This desire shifts into secular channels—cinema, celebrity, spectacle—that provide emotional intensity and symbolic meaning without theological roots. Updike portrays this longing not as a return to faith or a straightforward acceptance of modernity, but as a resilient human impulse that persists despite the decline of religious authority structures.

Clarence Wilmot's crisis still bears the shock of loss: he discovers that faith no longer links him to anything beyond himself, rendering it "a matter of words alone" (p. 6). For later generations, however, such loss is no longer perceived as trauma. Transcendence is now sought indirectly through immersive cultural experiences that simulate depth, connection, and elevation. Movie theaters, celebrity stories, and mediated spectacles offer ritual-like engagement and emotional unity, serving as secular counterparts to religious practice. This pattern closely aligns with Max Weber's view of modernity. Weber characterizes the modern world as driven by "rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world" (Weber, Trans. Gerth and Mills, 1991, p. 155). However, disenchantment does not eradicate humanity's search for meaning; instead, it shifts where that meaning is pursued. Updike's novel gives this abstract

concept tangible form, illustrating how the need for transcendence moves into cultural practices that fit within a secular framework.

Gabler's analysis sheds light on this process. *In Life: The Movie*, he suggests that entertainment has become a central framework through which Americans interpret their emotions, identity, and understanding, describing it as "a dominant way of experiencing reality" (Gabler, 1999, p. 12). Updike illustrates this change through the Wilmot family's growing reliance on cinematic and celebrity stories, which they engage with a level of attentiveness and emotional devotion similar to religious fervor. Importantly, Updike avoids both nostalgia and celebration; he neither mourns the decline of faith nor fully endorses secular modernity. Instead, the novel presents a cultural landscape where continuity exists amid change: institutional belief wanes, yet the core impulses linked to religion—devotion, reverence, the pursuit of meaning—continue in transformed forms. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* affirms a key insight shared by Weber and Gabler: modernity does not eradicate spiritual longing but shifts it across the mediated spaces of contemporary life.

6- Literature as a Civilizational Archive in *In the Beauty of the Lilies*

In *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, the novel also highlights the importance of literature as a record of civilization. By exploring secularization through family history, generational timelines, and memories, Updike illustrates how large-scale cultural shifts are experienced from within communities. Unlike sociological or historical approaches that often reduce belief to abstract concepts or systems, the novel presents secularization as an emotional experience—felt deeply, absorbed gradually, and quietly passed

down through generations. Updike not only shows what changes occur but also how these changes are felt in everyday life: the discomfort of loss, the allure of cinema or celebrity as a comfort, and the slow process of secularization becoming a normal framework.

Wilmot's crisis highlights an early experiential shift, as he recognizes that his belief no longer grounds him beyond himself, viewing faith as "a matter of words alone" (p. 6). Over generations, this sense of rupture diminishes, but the fundamental human longing for coherence and transcendence persists. While children and grandchildren navigate media-saturated environments with ease, their attachments to film, fame, and spectacle still serve emotional and symbolic roles once linked to religion. From this longitudinal view, the novel shows secularization not as a single event but as an ongoing, uneven process with emotional effects that develop gradually over time.

In this way, Updike's story complements the theoretical insights of both Max Weber and Neal Gabler. Weber emphasizes that disenchantment involves not only institutional change but also a subjective shift, as people continue to seek meaning in a rationalized world (Weber, Tans. Gerth and Mills, 1991, p. 155). Gabler, meanwhile, explores how mass media reshape attention and values, becoming a dominant cultural framework (Gabler, 1999, p. 12). In *In The Beauty of the Lilies*, these ideas are brought to life, illustrating how belief, authority, and longing are reshaped through everyday actions, habits, and emotional investments. The novel, therefore, does more than mirror cultural change; it actively theorizes it. Through the Wilmot family across generations, Updike demonstrates how modern American society maintains continuity amid decline, even as its institutional bases

weaken, while preserving the impulses of devotion and transcendence. Literature thus becomes a vital resource for American Studies—preserving the emotional, symbolic, and experiential aspects of historical change that other analyses often overlook.

7- Conclusion:

This article contends that *In the Beauty of the Lilies* provides a detailed literary analysis of secularization and cultural shifts in twentieth-century America. Drawing on Max Weber's concept of disenchantment and Neal Gabler's view of mass media as a civilizational influence, this study illustrates how Updike depicts the decline of religious authority as a gradual, lived, and generational process rather than a sudden upheaval. Clarence Wilmot's loss of faith symbolizes a key moment of disenchantment, while subsequent generations grow up in a world where cinema, celebrity, and popular culture are already deeply embedded as normalized frameworks of meaning.

The novel clearly shows that secularization doesn't eliminate spiritual longing. Throughout generations, Updike's characters keep searching for coherence, transcendence, and emotional depth, even as these desires shift into secular expressions. Cinema and mass culture serve as emotional and symbolic replacements for religious rituals, redistributing authority rather than removing it. By exploring these changes through story, memory, and family history, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* illustrates how American modernity transforms belief—without eradicating it—creating a cultural landscape where secular and spiritual aspirations coexist and continually influence each other.

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