

'The Bankrupt Man' by John Updike.

The bankrupt man dances. Perhaps, on other occasions, he sings. Certainly he spends money in restaurants and tips generously. In what sense, then, is he bankrupt? He has been declared so. He has declared himself so. He returns from the city agitated and pale, complaining of hours spent with the lawyers. Then he pours himself a drink. How does he pay for the liquor inside the drink, if he is bankrupt?

He is dancing at the Chilblains Relief Association Fund Ball. His heels kick high. The mauve spotlight caresses his shoulders, then the gold. His wife's hair glistens like a beehive of tinsel above her bare shoulders and dulcet neck. Where does she get the money, to pay the hairdresser to tease and singe and set her so dazzlingly? We are afraid to ask but cannot tear our eyes from the dancing couple.

The bankrupt man buys himself a motorcycle. He is going to hotdog it all the way to Santa Barbara and back. He has a bankrupt sister in Santa Barbara. Also, there are business details to be cleared up along the way, in Pittsburgh, South Bend, Dodge City, Santa Fe, and Palm Springs.

The bankrupt man is elected to high civic office and declines, due to press of business. He can be seen on the streets, rushing everywhere, important-looking papers flying from his hands. He is being sued for astronomical amounts. He wears now only the trendiest clothes – unisex jumpsuits, detachable porcelain collars, coat sleeves that really unbutton. He goes to the same hairdresser as his wife. His children are all fat. This galls us. We wish to destroy him, this clown of legerity, who bounces higher and higher off the net of laws that would enmesh us, who weightlessly spiders up the rigging to the dizzying spotlight tip of the tent-space and stands there in a glittering trapeze suit. We spread ugly rumors, we mutter that he is not bankrupt at all, that he is

as sound as the pound, as the dollar, that his bankruptcy is a sham. He hears of the rumour and in a note, with embossed letterhead, he challenges us to meet him on West Main Street, by the corner of the Corn Exchange, under the iron statue of Cyrus Shenanigan, the great Civil War profiteer. We accept the challenge. We experience butterflies in the stomach. We go look at our face in the mirror. It is craven and shrivelled, embittered by ungenerous thoughts.

Comes the dawn. Without parked cars, West Main Street seems immensely wide. The bankrupt man's shoulders eclipse the sun. He takes his paces, turns, swiftly reaches down and pulls out the lining of both pants pockets. Verily, they are empty. We fumble at our own, and the rattle of silver is drowned in the triumphant roar of the witnessing mob. We would have been torn limb from limb had not the bankrupt man with characteristic magnanimity extended to us a protective embrace.

In the locker room, we hear the bankrupt singing. His baritone strips the tiles from the walls like cascading dominoes. He has just shot a minus sixty-seven, turning the old course record inside out. He ascends because he transcends. He deals from the bottom of the deck. He builds castles in air. He makes America grow.

***Based on your reading of the above text, what sort of life does the bankrupt man lead?***

The 'Bankrupt' man leads a charmed life. Despite his financial woes he leads a carefree life of luxury, extravagance and glamour.

We can see this in the opening sentence when Updike tells us – 'The bankrupt man dances'. He portrays a man unburdened by financial responsibility who 'spends money in restaurants and tips generously'. The author describes him as dancing at a charity ball with his glamorous wife; whose hair 'glistens like a beehive of tinsel.' Later we hear that after a record breaking round of golf he is to be heard singing in the locker room.

In a mixture of awe and envy Updike tells us that the bankrupt man 'buys himself a motorcycle' so that he can 'hotdog it all the way to Santa Barbara and back'. Undaunted by his financial collapse he has 'business deals in Pittsburgh, South Bend, Santa Fe and Palm Springs'. His bankrupt empire extends as far as 'Arabian oil', Jamaican bauxite' and 'Antarctic refrigeration'. Nothing can hold him back, he hasn't a care in the world.

***What, in your opinion, is the author's attitude towards the bankrupt man?***

In my opinion the author's attitude towards the bankrupt man changes through the course of the article. At first Updike seems suspicious and resentful of the bankrupt man and his expansive lifestyle. He grows to have a grudging respect for his can-do attitude and lack of care.

Initially he questions the bankrupt man's lifestyle, asking 'How does he pay for the liquor, inside the drink if he is bankrupt?'. He later wonders where his wife gets the money to 'pay the hairdresser to tease and singe and set her so dazzlingly?'. He acknowledges his own envy of the bankrupt man admitting his wish 'to destroy him' and to 'spread ugly rumours that he is not bankrupt at all...that his bankruptcy is a sham'. However faced down by the bankrupt man

the author sees his own face as 'craven and shriveled, embittered by ungenerous thoughts'.

Updike regards himself as the lesser man and rather than resent the bankrupt man he comes to admire him, dazzled by his brilliance like an acrobat in a 'glittering trapeze suit', overshadowed by his presence and confidence like a heroic gunslinger whose 'shoulders eclipse the sun'. The author regards him as a man apart, one who has 'passed into a ..sacred state.. a condition not ours', one who 'ascends because he transcends', who 'tugs a thousand creditors in his wake, taking them over horizons they had never dreamt of hitherto.

He comes to regard the bankrupt man as a force for good with almost mystical powers who 'makes America grow' and 'proves there is an afterlife.'

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