

Study Guide: *Terrorist* by John Updike (2006)

Directions: In our class discussion of this novel, we will delve into the issues Updike raises about society, religion, and morality. Spoiler warning: These questions and our class discussion will reveal important details about the novel. Finish the book before reading the questions below and before coming to class.

1. The opening sentences of *Terrorist* are “Devils, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God.” The last sentence is “These devils, Ahmad thinks, have taken away my God.” Why does Updike bookend the novel with these parallel thoughts? Who are the “devils”? Are they different at the beginning and end of the novel? How do they take away Ahmad’s God?
2. Mr. Levy is an atheist who is very aware of his aging body and seems cynical about whether there is any meaning in life. How else does Mr. Levy contrast Ahmad? Why does Updike spend so much time on Mr. Levy’s story in a novel entitled *Terrorist*?
3. What is Ahmad’s view of sex and materialism in America? Mr. Levy’s view? How does Updike describe sex and materialism through the images he uses? Give examples.
4. Updike’s descriptive language takes readers into different character’s minds and provides a bigger picture of situations than would be evident through the action alone. See if you can find three specific examples of this technique.
5. Provide a brief, three-sentence character description for each of the following eight characters: Shaikh Rashid, Ahmad Mulloy Ashmawy, Jack Levy, Beth Levy, Teresa Mulloy, Tylenol Jones, Hermione, and Charlie. Then for each one, try to determine if this character is a fully developed and three-dimensional person or a stereotypical and two-dimensional character.
6. How is Ahmad different from the other terrorists, such as the imam and the technicians?
7. How is Ahmad different from Charlie? What does he like and admire about Charlie? Did Charlie seem like a terrorist? What was the surprise about Charlie that we learn near the end of the novel?
8. Why was Ahmad attracted to Joryleen Grant? Why does he leave his reward money to her?
9. How is religion portrayed in *Terrorist*? What is Ahmad’s view of God? Mr. Levy’s? How Ahmad’s worship is different from that at Joryleen’s church?
10. The novel has a surprise ending. In your opinion is this ending justified? Is the ending a moment when all the pieces of the puzzle fall together? Or were you simply blind-sided?