

## **John Updike's "A & P"**

*Commentary by Karen Bernardo*

Updike's "A & P" tells the story of a checkout boy, Sammy, who quits his job after his boss Mr. Lengel speaks disparagingly to three teenage girls who come into the grocery store on a summer afternoon. But on a deeper level, the story is a contrast of worldviews: the conservative, conventional, and stoic (represented by Mr. Lengel) against the free-spirited, individualistic, and non-conformist (represented by the teenage girls).

Even though Lengel does not make his physical appearance until near the story's end, his arrival has in a way been foreshadowed by a number of other characters who preceded him. For example, Updike notes that as soon as the three girls appear in the A & P, the "sheep" -- Sammy's word for the run-of-the-mill customers who plod through the store, pushing their shopping carts, following their prescribed routes -- react to their presence with amazement; "You could see them, when Queenie's white shoulders dawned on them, kind of jerk, or hop, or hiccup, but their eyes snapped back to their own baskets and on they pushed."

The staff of the market, likewise, can hardly believe it when these three girls traipse in. Stokesie, another young clerk, who is married and the father of two babies, comments to Sammy that the girls make him "feel so faint." An older clerk, McMahon, begins "patting his mouth and looking after them, sizing up their joints." What all of these men are reacting to, clearly, is the presence of sex, raw sex, in an environment which is usually free of it.

After the three girls have paraded through the store for three full pages, Mr. Lengel the manager comes on the scene. Sammy tells us that his boss "comes in from struggling with a truck full of cabbages" when "the girls touch his eye." Our very first view of Mr. Lengel, therefore, shows him engaged in hard, manual labor as opposed to the frivolous activity of the girls.

Lengel's remark to the girls -- "This isn't the beach" -- reinforces this. Sammy observes that the way Lengel insistently repeats this remark seems "as if it had occurred to him, and he had been thinking all these years the A & P was a big sand dune and he was the head lifeguard." Which, in a very profound way, he is: as not only the manager of the A & P but a Sunday School teacher, he feels he has the right to set the tone for what is considered acceptable in his arena. But his "sand dune" is the world of work, whereas the girls' is the world of play.

He therefore approaches the girls and scolds them, implying that their attire has violated and desecrated his space. Note that his obvious displeasure at the girls' appearance does not stop him from telling Sammy to ring up their purchase and take their money so they can leave. But this is too much for Sammy. He mumbles under his breath that he quits, and when Mr. Lengel asks him to repeat his last remark, Sammy complies -- pulling off his apron and walking out. Mr. Lengel warns him that "You'll feel this for the rest of your life," and Updike writes that Sammy "know[s] that's true."

What precisely has just happened? Why did Sammy quit? He tells Mr. Lengel that "You didn't have to embarrass them," to which Mr. Lengel replies, "It was they who were embarrassing us." Since Sammy is clearly not embarrassed, the "us" refers not to Sammy but to Mr. Lengel and the entire town his attitude represents. Sammy is therefore telling Mr. Lengel that in his own belief system, people should be able to be frivolous when they want to. They should be able to come into a store in bathing suits to buy snacks, and they should be able to turn heads when they do it. Young men should be able to be attracted to young women without feeling guilty, and when they do, society should be able to withstand the shock. To confine oneself to Mr. Lengel's view of society is to condemn oneself to the ordinary.

In the last sentence of the story, Sammy realizes, as he walks away from the store, "how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter" -- but it will only be hard in the sense that Sammy will forever be forced to buck the Lengels of the world, who will outnumber him a thousand to one. Sammy at least has given himself a shot at achieving real joy in his life; Mr. Lengel will never even know that joy exists, because his worldview is too narrow to admit it.

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