

An Analysis of "A&P," a story by John Updike



English Composition
101
N. Montague

In his short story "A & P" John Updike utilizes a 19-year-old adolescent to show us how a boy gets one step closer to adulthood. Sammy, an A & P checkout clerk, talks to the reader with blunt first person observations setting the tone of the story from the outset. The setting of the story shows us Sammy's position in life and where he really wants to be. Through the characterization of Sammy, Updike employs a simple heroic gesture to teach us that actions have consequences and we are responsible for our own actions.

Sammy is a 19-year-old boy conveying a cocky but cute male attitude. He describes three girls entering the A & P, setting the tone of the story. "In walk these three girls in nothing but bathing suits. There was this chunky one, with the two piece-it was bright green and the seams on the bra were still sharp and her belly was still pretty pale...there was this one, with one of those chubby berry-faces, the lips all bunched together under her nose, this one, and a tall one, with black hair that hadn't quite frizzed right...you know the kind of girl other girls think is very "striking" and "attractive" but never quite makes it' ... She was the queen with "long white prima-donna legs." Completely distracted by the girls, Sammy rings a box of HiHo crackers twice, infuriating the customer. He describes her as being " One of these cash-register-watchers, a witch of about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows, and I know it made her day to trip me up," sarcastically conveying his chauvinistic attitude toward women.

We learn about Sammy's station in life through the setting of the story. He is not a big time war hero or superstar but a checker at a small town A & P, not moving up in his job or down, simply stagnant. The town is located north of Boston, five miles from a beach, with a summer colony on the Point. Sammy is ready to make a change. He wants to be part of the girls' world. Sammy's thoughts give us some insight in his feeling that the girls, just like the wealthy summer colony they came from, are out of his reach. "All of a sudden I slid

right down her voice into her living room. Her father and all the other men were standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties...When my parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it's a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses with 'They'll Do It Every time' cartoons stenciled on."

The girls are buying a jar of Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks as Lengel, the store manager and Sunday school teacher, criticizes their dress, "Girls this isn't the beach." The queen answers, "My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks." Lengel continues to harass the girls. "Girls, I don't want to argue with you. After this come in here with your shoulders covered. It's our policy." Sammy, having had enough of Lengel embarrassing the girls, now takes what he considers heroic action announcing, "I quit." Taking off his apron and bow tie, Sammy leaves the store with a final ring of "NO SALE." He is hoping the girls will give some sign of recognition to his heroic act on their behalf, yet they do not. One critic describes Sammy's quitting as "the reflex of the still uncorrupted, of the youth still capable of the grand gesture because he has not learned the sad wisdom of compromise"(Uphaus 127).

Updike successfully shows that our actions have consequences through Sammy who was trying to take a stand on a small but heroic principle. He is ignored by the wealthy girls. He does not have a job. "With a single act he achieves a new integrity, one that divorces him from his unthinking conservative environment and leaves him, not with a suddenly developed affinity to the wealthy set, but with a loneliness that signals his birth into alienation"(Detweiler 68). Sammy looks for the girls who have gone. He sees a young married woman, yelling at her children and realizes, "How the world was going to be to me here after."