

Updike's A&P

The Explicator, Washington; Summer 2001; Corey Evan Thompson

Volume: 59
Issue: 4
Start Page: 215-216
ISSN: 00144940
Subject Terms: Short stories
Literary criticism

Personal Names: Updike, John

Abstract:

Thompson discusses John Updike's short story "A & P," which chronicles Sammy, the protagonist's, seemingly impulsive decision to quit his dead-end job at a local supermarket. Sammy should not be regarded as a hero, but rather as a frustrated young man who takes full advantage of an opportunity to free himself from the responsibility-filled life that he desperately wants to avoid.

Full Text:

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John Updike's most anthologized short story, "A & P," chronicles the protagonist's seemingly impulsive decision to quit his job at the local supermarket. On the basis of Sammy's forceful stand against his boss Mr. Lengel, who nearly kicks three girls out of the A & P for failing to comply with the "no shirt, no shoes, no service" rule, the established critical stance has placed Sammy in the position of "hero" (Saldivar 215-16). Although classifying Sammy as a hero is understandable, since he views himself as one (Updike 195), critics have failed to adequately consider the fact that he is also the narrator through whose limited point of view the story is told. Thus, he reveals much about the impetus behind his resignation when he describes the events prompting his decision to quit.

In "John Updike's 'A & P': A Return Visit to Araby," Walter Wells correctly recognizes that Sammy is frustrated. But the source of Sammy's frustration eludes Wells; he attributes it to Sammy's "infatuation with a beautiful but inaccessible girl" (128). The text suggests, however, that Sammy is not frustrated because he cannot woo Queenie but because of the length of time he has been working at the supermarket and his daily encounters with customers. Sammy wishes to quit, but he resists doing so because his parents would regard his decision as "the sad part of the story" (192). Sammy must, therefore, remain an employee until he can find a reason to justify his quitting. Though masking his actions as chivalry, Sammy uses the girls; for they act as catalysts that precipitate his well-considered decision to resign.

Sammy observes the girls walking "up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfastcereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft-drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle" (189-90). He gives a detailed description of the supermarket's floor and knows of every event that occurs outside the

store's front window (190-91). Clearly Sammy has been working at the A & P for a very long time.

Sammy routinely deals with customers for whom he has no respect, describing them as "witch[es]," "bums," and "sheep" (187, 192, 194): "I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers trying to remember if I rang it up or not. I ring it up again and the customer starts giving me hell. She's one of these cash-register watchers, a witch about fifty" (187). He suggests that he has been thinking about quitting for at least a few months because he recognizes the advantages of doing so in the summer rather than the winter (196).

As the girls enter the store, Sammy solely views them as sex objects. He goes from noticing how little the girls are wearing, to what they are not wearing, to finally focusing on their bare skin. He initially notices that they are wearing "nothing but bathing suits" (187) then that "[t]hey didn't even have shoes on" (188). Sammy moves from clothing to skin in his third observation: "She held her head so high her neck, coming up out of those white shoulders, looked kind of stretched, but I didn't mind. The longer her neck was, the more of her there was" (189). By privileging the girls' skin over their clothing, Sammy indicates that his main interest lies in their bodies and not in their right to wear bathing suits in the supermarket.

He describes their bodies in terms of common items found in the supermarket; by drawing a parallel between the store's commodities and the girls, Sammy suggests that they, like the commodities, are merely objects to be observed, handled, and used. He describes one girl as having "a soft looking can with those two crescents of white just under it" (187), and the other as having "one of those chubby berry faces" (188). Most significantly, he views Queenie's breasts as "the two smoothest scoops of vanilla [he] had ever known" (195).

Once the disagreement between Lengel and the girls commences, Sammy begins to spend "all [his] time thinking" (195). Presumably he has begun to realize that the incident offers him the perfect opportunity to free himself from his dead-end job. Sammy should not be regarded as a hero, but rather as a young man who takes full advantage of an opportunity to free himself from the responsibility-filled life that he desperately wants to avoid.