A & P Study Guide

A & P by John Updike

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

A & P Study Guide....1
Contents....2
Introduction....3
Author Biography....4
Plot Summary....6
Detailed Summary & Analysis....7
Characters....11
Themes....13
Style....15
Historical Context....17
Critical Overview....19
Criticism....20
Critical Essay #1....21
Critical Essay #2....24
Critical Essay #3....29
Critical Essay #4....32
Critical Essay #5....36
Adaptations....38
Topics for Further Study....39
Compare and Contrast....40
What Do I Read Next?....41
Further Study....42
Bibliography....43
Copyright Information....44

Introduction

John Updike's short story "A & P" was first published in the July 22, 1961 issue of the *New Yorker*, and was published again the following year in the author's collection *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*. Arthur Mizener's review of the collection in the *New York Times Book Review* exalted Updike in terms that soon became commonplace for the writer: "his natural talent is so great that for some time it has been a positive handicap to him." Almost forty years later, "A&P" remains Updike's most anthologized story and one of his most popular.

Sammy's encounter with a trio of swim-suited girls in the grocery store where he works encompasses many of the themes central to adolescence, including accepting the repercussions of one's choices. When Sammy quits in protest of how the girls are treated by the store's manager, he knows that from now on, the world will be a more difficult place.

Critics have responded enthusiastically to "A & P," and readers' identification with Sammy's predicament has contributed to the story's popularity. Though little action occurs in the story, Sammy' s character is finely drawn in the space of a few pages, and his brush with authority has large implications. He has been compared to Holden Caulfield, J. D. Salinger's protagonist in *Catcher in the Rye*, and Walter Wells has suggested that Sammy's moment of protest is similar to the "epiphany" of the narrator in James Joyce's story "Araby," a comment that places Updike in the pantheon of the most accomplished writers of the twentieth century. Negative reactions to the story center on what some readers perceive as Sammy's misogynist views. Other critics consider "A & P" a slight story, though one into which a lifetime of dignity, choices, and consequences is compressed.

Author Biography

John Updike is one of America's most prolific authors. He has written novels, short stories, essays, poetry, reviews, articles, memoirs, art criticism, and even a play. His work has been adapted for television and film, and he has won numerous awards, including a National Book Award and two Pulitzer Prizes. Since 1959 he has published nearly fifty books.

Updike was born on March 18,1932, in Reading, Pennsylvania and lived in nearby Shillngton until he was thirteen. Many of Updike's stories exhibit autobiographical elements, and his fictional town of Olinger is patterned after Shillington. When he was thirteen he moved with his parents and grandparents to a farm in Plowville, Pennsylvania, where his mother had been born. His father was a junior high school math teacher, and his mother a writer who, as her son later did, wrote stories for the *New Yorker* magazine. Updike did well in school, graduated from Shillngton High School as co-valedictorian, and attended Harvard University on a scholarship. In college, he wrote for the *Harvard Lampoon*.

In 1953 Updike married Mary Pennington, and the couple traveled to England on a Knox Fellowship. He enrolled in the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford, and for a while he considered drawing cartoons for Walt Disney or the *New Yorker*. In 1955 his daughter Elizabeth was born. For the sake of his growing family, Updike took a job at the *New Yorker* which he held for two years before deciding to move to Ipswich, Massachusetts, and devote himself to fiction writing as an independent author. He and Mary eventually had four children before the couple divorced in 1977. He subsequently married Martha Bernhard.

The years 1958 and 1959 were productive, as Updike published his first novel, Poorhouse Fair, a collection of short stories, *The Same Door*, and a book of poems, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures*. The following year, the first of his "Rabbit" books, *Rabbit, Run,* introduced the world to Harry Angstrom, a man whose life peaked at eighteen when he was a high-school basketball star. To Harry's continued amazement and sorrow, he lives his life as a shadow of what he used to be.

Critics have praised the character of Harry Angstrom highly, and Updike has won two Pulitzer Prizes for his "Rabbit" books; one in 1982 for Rabbit Is Rich, and one in 1991 for *Rabbit at Rest*. Another of Updike's most popular novels is *The Witches of Eastwick*, the story of three divorced women in New England who use magical skills to attract men. Their enticements backfire when a devilish man moves into the neighborhood. The book was made into a film in 1987 starring Jack Nicholson, Michelle Pfeiffer, Susan Sarandon, and Cher. Throughout the many forms Updike's writing takes - novels, stories, poems, and essays - the author's primary concerns are Protestant, middle-class, contemporary American life, and the roles that marriage, divorce, sexuality, and religion play in it.

Updike told *SSJS* that he wrote "A & P" "in 1961, when I was living in Ipswich, Massachusetts. Driving past the local A & P, I asked myself, 'Why are there no short stories that take place inside an A & P?' I proceeded to write one, based on a glimpse I had had of some girls in bathing suits shopping in the aisles. They looked strikingly naked." Updike added: "Originally the story went on, past the ending it now has: Sammy goes down to the beach to find the girls, and never does find them But the story's editor at the *New Yorker* thought that the story ended where it now does, and I agreed with him."

Plot Summary

Sammy, the teenage narrator, begins the story by describing the three girls who have walked into the A & P grocery store where he works. They are wearing nothing but bathing suits. He is so distracted by them that he cannot remember if he rang up a box of crackers or not. As it turns out, he did ring them up, a fact that his customer, "a witch about fifty," lets him know quickly and loudly.

He finishes ringing up the customer's items as the girls, who have disappeared down an aisle, circle back into view. He notices that they are barefoot. He describes each: there's a "chunky one . .. and a tall one [with] a chin that was too long" and the "queen," whom he imagines is their leader. She catches his eye for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the straps of her bathing suit have fallen off her shoulders.

Sammy watches the reactions of the other shoppers to the girls. He refers to the store's other customers as "sheep" and "a few house slaves in pink pin curlers." Another clerk, Stokesie, a married twenty-two year old with two children, trades innuendos with him. Sammy notes that the store, in a town north of Boston, is five miles from the nearest beach.

The narrator announces that he has come to what his family deems "the sad part" of the story, though he does not agree. The girls come to his checkout station, and Queenie puts down a jar of herring snacks and pulls a dollar from her bathing-suit top, a motion that makes Sammy nearly swoon. The store's manager, Lengel, spots the girls and reprimands them for their attire. Lengel further tells them that they should be decently dressed when they shop at the A & P.

Sammy rings up the girls' items, carefully handling the bill that just came from between Queenie's breasts. Other customers appear nervous at the scene Lengel has made at the check-out, and the girls are embarrassed and want to leave quickly. Sammy, in a passionate moment, tells Lengel that he quits. The girls, however, fail to notice his act of chivalry and continue walking out of the store. Lengel asks him if he said something, and Sammy replies, "I said I quit." Lengel, a longtime friend of Sammy's parents, tries to talk him out of it, but Sammy folds his apron, puts it on the counter, punches "*No Sale*" on the cash register, and walks out. He realizes that the world will be a harder place for him from now on.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

A & P, by John Updike, is written in the first person, as told from the point of view of a 19-year-old grocery clerk named Sammy. One day, while Sammy is working, three girls walk into the A & P supermarket wearing nothing but bathing suits. At first, one of the girls intrigues Sammy. She is chunky and wearing a green two-piece bathing suit. He is so lost in thought while looking at the backs of her legs that he can't remember if he has rang up the box of crackers in his hand. He punches the price of the crackers into the cash register, only to have his customer become angry because he has already charged her for them. It takes him a few minutes to calm down the woman and finish her transaction. By the time she walks away, the three girls in bathing suits have left the bread aisle and are making their way through the story. Sammy notices that they don't have shoes on. He takes another look at the girl in the green bathing suit. He scrutinizes her suit and decides that it must be new because it still has sharp seams in the bust. He then turns his attention to the girl next to her. Immediately, he is not attracted to her, but he thinks that she is the type of female other girls would call striking. His focus drifts to the third girl and she, thinking that she is the "queen" of the group, instantly intrigues him. Sammy watches dumbstruck, as she leads the other girls around the store. He studies her every move, noticing that she seems proud and walks straight and slowly. However, he is most enthralled with the condition of her bathing suit. Her shoulder straps have fallen down, leaving her upper chest exposed. Sammy stares at "this clean bare plane on the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light. I mean, it was more than pretty."

Sammy cannot take his eyes off the girl he has silently dubbed "Queenie." He thinks that she must feel him and his co-worker, Stokesie, staring at her, but she doesn't appear to notice. While she glides confidently through the grocery store, not looking at anyone, her two friends seem to huddle next to her, as if looking for protection. As Sammy gawks at the trio, he notices that other shoppers, whom he refers to as "sheep," are taken aback by the girls. He is amused to see some shoppers do a double take when they notice the fallen straps. While the girls seem entirely out of place under the harsh lights of the grocery store, Sammy ponders the fact that if they were at the beach, no one would notice them or their attire. Somehow in the store, their naked feet walking across the rubber tile floor seems titillating and scandalous.

While the girls continue circling the store, obviously looking for something, Sammy and Stokesie joke to each other, making comments about feeling faint at the sight of their bodies. Sammy wonders what the girls are doing in the A&P, because although their small town is located near the coast, it is still five miles from the beach. In addition, most women and girls put clothes on over their bathing suits before walking down the street. Sammy considers the town's location, which is north of Boston. Despite its proximity to the coast, he thinks that some people in the town haven't even seen the ocean for at least twenty years. As Sammy continues to examine the girls and their trip through the

store, the trio stops at the meat counter. The man at the counter, McMahon, points at something and they walk away. McMahon pats his mouth and stares at them as turn. Sammy's feelings about the strange girls begin to change and he starts to feel sorry for them and the way they are being gawked at.

Now Sammy loses sight of them, but he continues to watch while leaning on the register, waiting for the girls to appear again down an aisle he can view from his post. He says, "The whole store was like a pinball machine and I didn't know which tunnel they'd come out of." Finally, the girls reappear and Queenie leads them toward his register, holding a gray jar in her hand. She puts down the item and Sammy picks it up, noticing that she is purchasing herring snacks in sour cream. Suddenly, he wonders where the money will come from. After all, she is not carrying a purse and has no pockets. With the demure look on her face never changing, she reaches into the top of her bathing suit and pulls out a dollar. Sammy is stunned and is suddenly acutely aware of the weight of the jar in his hand.

While Sammy prepares to ring in the sale, Lengel, the store manager, walks in and notices the girls. He quickly walks over and reminds them that the store is not a beach. Sammy thinks he sees the queen blush, but he can't tell if she might just have a bit of sunburn. She tells Lengel that her mother asked her to pick up a jar of herring snacks, but she doesn't explain why she is only wearing a bathing suit. Sammy is startled at the sound of her voice. At the mention of her family, he immediately fantasizes that her parents are in their living room, dressed up and having a party, drinking cocktails with olives and sprigs of mint, and eating herring snacks. He thinks about how his parents only serve lemonade or Schlitz in glasses with cartoon stencils.

Lengel repeats to the girls that they are not on the beach. Sammy smiles at the absurdity of the situation and Lengel notices. The queen really does start to blush now and the chunky girl in the green bathing suit tries to explain that they only wanted to buy one item. Lengel tells her that it doesn't matter how much they are buying. He says that when they come to the grocery store they must be dressed decently. The queen protests that they are decent, but Lengel refuses to argue with them. He tells them that if they ever come back to the store, they must have their shoulders covered. He turns his back on the girls.

During the confrontation, the other customers are watching the scene and Stokesie is doing his job as quietly as possible at the next register so he can hear every word. Lengel asks Sammy if he has rung up their purchase. Sammy admits that he hasn't and begins to punch in the sale. He carefully unfolds the bill, thinking about where it has come from. He gives the queen her change and puts the jar in a bag. He can tell that the girls want to get out of the store quickly. He suddenly tells Lengel, "I quit," fast and loud enough that the girls can hear him. He hopes that his quitting will catch their attention, but they walk out of the store and to their car. Lengel tells the clerk that he is making a mistake. Sammy responds, saying that Lengel embarrassed the girls. Sammy takes off his apron. He notices the other customers staring in shock, and thinks that they look like scared pigs in a chute. Lengel tries to stop Sammy from quitting by reminding the young man that his parents will be upset. However, Sammy feels that

now that he has made this dramatic gesture, he has to go through with it. He takes off his bow tie, pushes the no sale button on his register, and walks through the automatic door. While walking toward the door, he decides that he is happy that this happened during the summer, when his grand exit does not have to be ruined by stopping to get his coat.

As soon as he gets outside, he searches for the girls, but they have left. Sammy looks through the window and sees Lengel take his spot at the register and begin to checkout customers. Lengel's face looks grey and he seems stiff. Sammy's stomach turns as he realizes that because he has quit his job, the world is now going to be a very hard place for him.

Analysis

A & P mostly consists of Sammy's inner thoughts, with a few small sections of dialogue. This is an important aspect of the story, because it shows how reality is truly subjective. Sammy makes many assumptions about the girls based on only a few facts. Just because he notices that they are wearing bathing suits and buying herring snacks, Sammy creates an entire scenario in his mind about the girl he dubs "Queenie" and her family. He decides that she is rich and very self-confident. These assumptions say more about Sammy than they say about the girl, for these are the very attributes he seems to want for himself.

When he first sees the girls, he is attracted to the larger girl in the green bathing suit, but as soon as he notices Queenie, his life will never be the same. Sammy seems like a typical, bored 19-year-old male. Clearly, nothing out of the ordinary ever happens at his dead-end job, so seeing three girls in bathing suits creates a lot of excitement for him. He watches Queenie's every move and scrutinizes the way she walks and holds her head. Mostly, he is fascinated with her chest and the way the straps on her bathing suit have fallen down. This seems like a normal reaction for a young man who is looking at three nearly naked girls. However, Sammy does more than just admire Queenie's physique and the way she displays her body. His imagination runs away with him. Without ever exchanging a word with her, he comes to believe that she has had a privileged upbringing. Even the nickname he gives her puts her in a class above his. He wants to be like her, which is evident in the way he fantasies about being in her family's home. When she mentions that her mother told her to buy herring snacks, Sammy deduces that her parents must be holding a party at that very moment. He daydreams that he is there, enjoying the sophisticated luxury of her life. He sees men "standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big glass plate and they were all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them." He then thinks of his own parents, who only serve guests lemonade or cheap beer. This comparison shows that Sammy aspires to move beyond his parents' social standing, which will not be possible if he remains working as a supermarket checkout clerk. When Queenie defends herself against Lengel, he thinks that she is comparing her fancy life to the downtrodden A&P. Suddenly Sammy sees his life through her eyes, and he does not like the reflection.

However, it most be understood that the girl never makes a verbal reference to social standing. Sammy is only imagining her thoughts.

Sammy is struggling to create his own identity, separate from what his parents and Lengel think is best for him. He has nothing but contempt for the grocery store, its employees, and the customers. For instance, even though he seems to get along with Stokesie, he silently ridicules his co-worker for someday hoping to be a store manager. This dream seems pathetic to Sammy, which further leads the reader to believe that Sammy wants more out of life. Sammy feels the same scorn for Lengel, whom he describes as a dreary Sunday school teacher. Sammy also refers to the store's customers as various herded farm animals, including cows, sheep, and pigs. It is clear that he thinks the customers spend their lives mindlessly grazing through the store, without any real purpose or excitement. Although he doesn't say exactly what he wants for himself in life, it is obvious by his snide remarks about the adults he sees that he knows exactly what he does not want his life to turn into.

Sammy says he is quitting in protest of Lengel's treatment of the girls. A part of him wants to impress the girls. He hopes they hear him quit and stick around to thank him. Yet, he knows the hope is probably futile and is not surprised when he discovers they have already left the parking lot. However, Sammy is not upset that the girls are gone because he is not only trying to impress them. He is really trying to impress himself and convince himself that he is special and he can have a life that is somehow less ordinary than his current path. When he leaves, he says his stomach fell as he thinks about how hard his life is going to be now. Sammy knows that his parents will be unhappy that he quit his job. Yet, he is not very worried about their reaction or how he will make money now that he has lost his job. Sammy seems more worried because he realizes that he has rejected the boring, but easy, career path of working in a dead-end job. By quitting, he will now have to live up to his new expectations for his life. He knows it will be difficult to achieve the kind of success that he imagines Queenie's parents enjoy. Ultimately, Sammy is satisfied with his decision to quit, because in the retelling of that important day he says that his parents call the event sad, but he doesn't agree with them. However, quitting is scary for Sammy because it has forced him to realize that he has a dream, but no real life plan that will help him fulfill it.

Characters

Lengel

Manager of the local A & P, Lengel is a man who spends most of his days behind the door marked "Manager." Entering the story near the end, he represents the system: management, policy, decency, and the way things are. But he is not a one-dimensional character. He has known Sammy's parents for a long lime, and he tells Sammy that he should, at least for his parents' sake, not quit his job in such a dramatic, knee-jerk way. He warns Sammy that he will have a hard time dealing with life from now on, should he quit. He seems truly concerned even while he feels the need to enforce store policy.

Queenie

"Queenie" is the name Sammy gives to the pretty girl who leads her two friends through the grocery store in their bathing suits. He has never seen her before but immediately becomes infatuated with her. He comments on her regal and tantalizing appearance. She is somewhat objectified by nineteen-year-old Sammy, who notes the shape of her body and the seductiveness of the straps which have slipped off her shoulders. When the girls are chastised for their attire by Lengel, Queenie, who Sammy imagines lives in an upper-middle-class world of backyard swimming pools and fancy hors d'oeuvres, becomes "sore now that she remembers her place, a place from which the crowd that runs the A & P must look pretty crummy." Sammy becomes indignant at Lengel's treatment of the girls and tries to help them save face by quitting his job. Queenie, however, appears not to notice and leaves the store promptly, diminishing the impact of Sammy's gesture.

Sammy

Readers do not learn Sammy's name until the end of the story, even though he is the first-person narrator of the story. He is a checkout clerk at an A & P supermarket. His language indicates that, at age nineteen, he is both cynical and romantic. He notes, for instance, that there are "about twenty-seven old freeloaders" working on a sewer main up the street, and he wonders what the "bum" in "baggy gray pants" could possibly do with "four giant cans of pineapple juice." Yet, when Queenie approaches him at the checkout, Sammy notes that "with a prim look she lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top.... Really, I thought that was so cute." He vacillates back and forth between these extremes of opinion during the story, calling some of his customers "house slaves in pin curlers," yet he is sensitive enough that when Lengel makes Queenie blush, he feels "scrunchy inside." At the end of the story, he quits his job in an effort to be a hero to the girls and as a way of rebelling against a strict society. In a sudden moment of insight—an epiphany—he realizes "how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter" if he refuses to follow acceptable paths.

Stokesie

Stokesie is twenty-two, married, and has two children. He works with Sammy at the A & P checkout. He has little to say or do in this story, though, like Sammy, he observes the girls in the store with interest. He is a glimpse of what Sammy' s future might be like; Stokesie' s family "is the only difference" between them, Sammy comments.

Themes

Choices and Consequences

An important theme in "A & P" is that of choices and consequences. All of the main characters in the story must make a choice and endure the consequences of that choice. The consequences of these choices are not always apparent to the characters. Sammy, the cashier, makes the most obvious and most painful choice, and on some level he is aware of the consequences. When he chooses to quit his job, he knows that this decision will have ramifications in his life that will last for a long time. His family is affected, and it causes him to recount the situation as "sad." Because he has stood up for something on principle—he was protesting the manager's chastisement of the girls—he knows life will be difficult for him. If Sammy quits his job every time he encounters a situation he dislikes, his Me will become extremely complicated. In the short term, the consequence of quitting is having to find another job, and with his rash decision comes the possibility he will be branded a troublemaker or misfit by the community in which he lives.

The three girls must suffer the consequences of having gone to the grocery store in their bathing suits. It is hard to believe that they had no idea they were improperly dressed. In the early 1960s, women still wore dresses, hats, and gloves most of the time when they were in public. In their youthful exuberance to push the limits of propriety, the girls have been reprimanded by an adult. They have also made quite an impression on two young men, Sammy and Stokesie, which was, perhaps unconsciously, their intention in the first place. Nevertheless, because of their choice to violate community standards, they suffer embarrassment by being reprimanded by an authority figure. Even Sammy's attempt at solidarity with them is not enough to salvage the situation; they make a hasty retreat from the store and disappear without taking a stand, unlike Sammy. From the girls' meek reaction, one can surmise that the girls will not take many more risks of the same sort in the future. Such a brush with authority will likely hem them in, successfully socializing them to accept community norms Sammy, however, because of his quick defiance, is less likely to blindly adhere to arbitrary rules for the sake of maintaining peace.

Lengel, too, makes a choice, and for him the consequences are entirely unforeseen. When he comes into the store after "haggling with a truck full of cabbages," he could have ignored the three girls. They were, after all, standing in the check-out line, and he is "about to scuttle into that door marked MANAGER." Instead, he makes the choice to confront the girls in front of Sammy. If he considers any consequences to his actions, he does not show it. He is merely enforcing the social codes of his time and place. He expects that the girls will comply and that Sammy, and anyone else within hearing, will agree with him.

The girls inevitably stop their protestations, as Lengel expected they would, but Sammy quits—an act that Lengel could not have imagined ahead of time. To Lengel's credit, in

spite of his stuffiness and self-importance, he shows Sammy patience. He does not yell or order him immediately out of the store, but warns him of the very real consequences of his act. Yet, it is Lengel's adherence to the social code—which says that this behavior must go into Sammy's personnel file and dog him for the rest of his life—that cause those consequences. It is, in a small way, like Greek tragedy. The players in this drama are helpless to act other than the way they do, but it is not the gods who set the parameters of their behavior, but society, with its written and unwritten list of expected behaviors and consequences for deviating from that list.

Individualism

Sammy asserts his individuality when he quits. He knows that Lengel has every right, according to the standards of his time, to speak to the girls as he does. But by standing up for the girls, Sammy questions those standards and asserts that there is a higher standard of decency that says one should not embarrass others. In deciding which rules of conduct are more important, he asserts his individuality, unlike the girls who slink away because they know they have violated the rules of conduct.

Sammy is the only character in this story who asserts his individuality. Two of the girls are simply following their leader, and Queenie is easily embarrassed and capitulates to Lengel. The other shoppers in the A & P are only "sheep," nervously herding together at Stokesie's cash register to avoid the confrontation. Lengel is the enforcer of policy, a term often used for rules that cannot be easily explained with any degree of rationality. He blindly follows the dictates of society, unable to articulate the reasons for those dictates beyond saying that the A & P "isn' t the beach," an observation so obvious and so lacking in reason that it causes Sammy to smile—a small, but definite step toward his rebellion.

Style

Point of View and Narration

Sammy, a checkout clerk, narrates this story in the first person. His voice is colloquial and intimate. His speech is informal, a factor that highlights his individuality and propensity to question authority. Terms of slang, like describing a dollar bill that had "just come from between the two smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known" characterize him as a fairly typical teenage boy. Using the present tense to make the story seem immediate, he speaks as if to a friend—"I uncrease the bill, tenderly as you may imagine"—drawing the reader immediately to his side. Everything that happens, the reader sees through his eyes. When the girls in bathing suits disappear from his view, they disappear from the reader's view, as well.

Sammy's diction indicates that he is probably not a well-educated person. "In walks these three girls," he says at the very beginning of the story. He also uses a land of wisecracking slang when talking to Stokesie. Yet, because of the immediacy of his voice, he seems to be a reliable narrator, telling the truth even when it does not flatter him.

Symbolism

"A & P" is rich in symbolism. The HiHo crackers Sammy is ringing up are an exclamation. When he rings them up the second time, he is saying "Heigh-ho! Something out of the ordinary is happening!" And the older woman takes him to task for it. The other shoppers are "sheep" who follow blindly up and down the aisles, finally entering the chutes where they will check out. Near the end of the story, they bunch up in Stokesie's chute, crowding together like the nervous sheep they are.

The girls themselves are associated with bees, from the moment that Sammy notices one of them is the "Queen," leading the others around the store. Shortly after that, he wonders what goes on in their minds, if it is "just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar." Like buzzing bees, they make everyone just a little bit nervous. They are the catalyst in the story, stirring things up as they buzz around the store. Of course the girls, especially Queenie with her shoulder straps hanging loosely, symbolize sexual freedom as they walk around the store. It is a sexual freedom that is bottled up rather quickly when Lengel arrives. At the end, Lengel tries to talk Sammy into staying, but Sammy cannot get the picture of the girls' embarrassment out of his mind, so he rings up No Sale on the cash register. He is not buying.

Epiphany

An epiphany is an instance of sudden truth brought about by a mundane event. What began for Sammy as an ordinary day results in a the realization of an important truth: "I

felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter." This final statement of "A & P" is the culmination of the fairly minor event of witnessing three inappropriately dressed girls reprimanded for their appearance. In presenting this epiphany, Updike illustrates how average people grow and change. Ordinary events become pivotal as people examine their motives and reasons for then* decisions and behavior. At nineteen, Sammy is ripe for experiences that will start to define who he is going to be. He discovers, as "his stomach kind of fell," that he prefers not to be a sheep who blindly follows the dictates of society.

Another well-known literary instance of epiphany occurs in James Joyce's story "Araby." A boy realizes shamefully that he has been idolizing a friend's sister after embarking on a quest to a church carnival to bring her a present, a token of his affection. Once he realizes that the carnival is nothing but an excuse to sell people cheap trinkets, and that his friend's sister is merely an ordinary girl with no special interest in him, his eyes "burned with anguish and anger." The similarity between the epiphany in "Araby," in which an adolescent realizes the futility of romantic quests, and the one in "A & P" is explored by Walter Wells in his essay "*John Updike*'s 'A &P': A Return Visit to Araby." He notes that both protagonists become "smitten ... distracted, agitated, disoriented" by pretty, unattainable girls. Furthermore, "both protagonists have come to realize that romantic gestures—in fact, that the whole chivalric world view—are, in modern times, counterproductive "

Historical Context

Today it is common for businesses to post signs stating the rules of their premises1 "No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service," or for movie theaters to constantly remind people not to talk during a film. Society has become so informal that reminders of basic decency and courtesy are commonplace. This is in sharp contrast to a generation or two ago, when standards of appearance and behavior were more rigid and more accepted. Women were required to wear hats in church, and men were required to take theirs off. In the office, rules were largely unwritten, but rarely broken. Women wore dresses, nylons, and girdles. Men wore gray, blue, or black suits and never left home without a tie.

This era was the 1950s and early 1960s, when conservative dress mirrored conservative social values. Conformity was the measure of popularity as well as a measure of moral lightness. Most people, particularly members of the middle-class, wanted to fit in with their neighbors. Suburbs were constructed of identical houses, and the American dream was to have a family, car, and the other modern conveniences that would make them equal to others of their social standing. Those who bucked the trends were frequently labeled eccentric or bohemian. The rebellion of many young people from the mid-1960s onward stemmed from what they perceived as the oppression of the staunch rules their parents imposed upon them. Sammy is a good example of this. He knows what the rules are, but he does not admire the "sheep" who so willingly follow them. When he quits his job at the grocery store, he has upset the status quo, an event that Sammy's parents deem "sad " In refusing to smooth over his behavior and return to his job, Sammy takes a stand that makes him aware of "how hard the world was going to be... hereafter." In such a rigid society, he knows he may be relegated to the status of an outsider or troublemaker for disagreeing with the unwritten code of acceptable behavior.

There was little positive incentive for Sammy to act as he did. In the late 1950s, the culture had its iconoclasts, but they were never sanctioned by the mainstream. In Nicholas Ray's 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause*, a teenager's quest for love and warmth, played by James Dean, in a cold and loveless world turns to tragedy. All movies were subject to censorship from the Hayes Office before the current rating system was devised in the late 1960s. Not only was sex, obscene language, and violence strictly curtailed, but characters of low morals were required to suffer negative consequences of their actions within the course of the film. Jack Kerouac's seminal novel *On the Road*, published in 1957, tells of beatnik outcasts Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty who drive across the United States listening to jazz and smoking marijuana while trying to find something authentic in American culture. It was also during this era that Allen Ginsberg's poem Howl was published. In it, Ginsberg condemns a conformist culture for crushing the creative spirit of artists: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix." Such strong language was not received warmly by mainstream society. The poem became the subject of a landmark obscenity trial, and the poem's publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Books, was jailed by the San Francisco Police Department and charged with obscenity.

Rock 'n' roll music got its start in the 1950s. At best, it was dismissed as a fad, at worst, it was considered the devil's work. The new music was filled with a sensuality that middle America vehemently condemned, if only because it was causing young people to swoon with emotions previously kept largely in check. Elvis Presley, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry were considered suspicious for their wild movements, flashy clothes, and for beguiling American youth away from the path of safe, decent, sexually modest entertainment. This is the world into which Updike introduces the three teenage girls in bathing suits in "A & P."

Critical Overview

Updike was only in his twenties when he wrote "A & P," but he had already gained a reputation for his concise and elegant prose. In a *New York Times Book Review* article on *Pigeon Feathers*, the collection in which "A & P" was reprinted, Arthur Mizener called him "the most talented writer of his age in America... and perhaps the most serious." Having already published two novels and a collection each of stories and poems, Updike had familiarized reviewers with his propensity for capturing small moments in his fiction. Though many claimed he did so with grace, others criticized Updike because the moments were small, and in their opinion, insignificant. " A & P" originally suffered from this view. An anonymous reviewer in Time magazine remarked that "this dedicated 29 year old man of letters says very little and says it well," echoing the sentiment of many of his contemporaries. The reviewer went on to say that "even the book's best story—a young A & P food checker watches three girls in bathing suits pad through the store and quits his job impulsively when his boss reproaches them for their immodesty—is as forgettable as last week's *New Yorker*."

Yet, "A & P" has become Updike's most popular story over the years and has appeared in more than twenty anthologies. Young people especially seem to identify with Sammy and respond to the way he tells his story. Robert Detweiler surmised in his book, *John Updike*, that Sammy's popularity is due to his "integrity, one that divorces him from his unthinking conservative environment" M. Gilbert Porter, in an essay for English Journal, noted that Sammy's overreaction "does not detract from the basic nobility of his chivalric intent, nor does it reduce the magnitude of his personal commitment " Ronald E. McFarland, in an essay for *Short Studies in Fiction* claimed that the story's enduring popularity was due in part to the ambiguity of the narrator's actions. This sentiment was first proposed by Suzanne Uphaus, who stated in her book, John Updike, that Sammy's behavior is an attempt by Updike to reflect on his conviction that "the heroic gesture is often meaningless and usually arises from selfish rather than unselfish impulses."

Other critics are similarly interested in the character of Sammy. In an essay titled "Irony and Innocence in John Updike's 'A & P'," Lawrence Jay Dessner lauded the story's "brevity and its outrageously naive yet morally ambitious teen-age hero," whom he called "boisterously inventive and rebellious." Walter Wells discussed the story as a modem interpretation of James Joyce's classic tale of adolescent initiation, "Araby." Calling Sammy's "the more ambivalent epiphany," Wells drew comparisons between the sudden realizations of the narrator of "Araby" and that of Updike's story, and speculated that the author's purpose in updating Joyce's story was "to contrast the spiritual value-systems and the adolescent sexual folkways of Joyce's Dublin with those of suburban New England in the Atomic Age." Donald J. Greiner, in *The Other John Updike: Poems, Short Stories, Prose, Play*, summarized the attraction many readers feel to Sammy: "The end of the story suggests that all is not self-righteousness and slang, Sammy has sympathy and a sense of outrage. However ironic, his sacrificial gesture is as refreshing as his colloquial candor.... An observer of his social world, he resolves not just to record but also to act upon his impressions."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Peltier is an English instructor at Trinity College and has published works of both fiction and nonfiction. In the following essay, he argues that Updike's story presages the youthful rebellion of the 1960s.

John Updike has been accused of writing extremely well about matters of very little importance. His prose, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, does read beautifully, perhaps more beautifully than anyone writing today. Erica Jong says, in an essay in Robert Luscher's *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction*, that his detractors are "transparently envious" of him. I agree with Jong. Updike's prose style is not separable from the content of his works, and that content is not trivial. The story we are examining here, "A & P," is a fine example, especially since many critics consider it a slight work describing an ultimately insignificant moment in a young man's small life.

A reader skating along (he smooth ice of Updike's prose might be quite content to simply watch the approaching horizon, but the careful reader who looks below the surface will see all sorts of interesting, and sometimes frightening things lurking there. In "A & P," it seems that a grocery checkout clerk named Sammy quits his job to impress a pretty girl in a bathing suit. But just below the surface, we can see that Sammy has made a conscious choice to protest his manager's bad treatment of the girl. And if we get close and look even deeper, we can see that this story, informed by the social and cultural currents of the times, is an early harbinger of the youthful rebellion of the 1960s, which was in its embryonic stage at the time Updike wrote "A & P."

The 1950s were to some extent years of conformity, of marching in step, and also (it is said) years of sexual repression. Married couples portrayed on television and in the movies had to have twin beds. Censors dictated thai bedroom scenes involving man and wife had to have at least one partner with a foot on the floor at all times. On the political front, a few influential people believed there were communists everywhere—or so it would seem from the headlines and speeches of the day. At times Hollywood seemed obsessed with communists and troubled teenagers, with films like / Married *a Communist and Runaway Daughter*. To be different in any significant way was to be suspect. In short, some Americans believed that there existed people "out there" who would seduce the nation's children, turn the country communist, and play rock and roll music all day in order to arouse the base, sexual longings of the populace. These people were more afraid of being labeled outsiders than they were afraid of the outsiders themselves.

Most people, of course, were not so dogmatic in their thinking. Most lived productive, normal lives, unrecognized and basically content. There were other people who spoke out in various ways against the uniformity of American society. But they were, by and large, on the periphery of the culture.

Among those who spoke out, the bi-coast-al Beat Movement, centered around Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, and

various friends, fans, and hangers-on, came to the fore in the mid-1950s with the publication of Kerouac's On the Road and Ginsberg's Howl. Although neither work might seem dangerous to us in the 1990s, they were roundly condemned by mainstream society at the time for being too sexually explicit, encouraging the mixing of the races, promoting drug use, and instigating a host of other immoral and illegal acts. Combining a fear of sex, race, drugs, communism, and freedom of dress and self-expression, society labeled the Beats "beatniks." In fact, anyone who challenged the status quo was labeled, humiliated, criticized, and denounced everywhere, from the Oval Office at the White House to the pulpit of the local Congregational Church, from the halls of Congress, to the halls of Shillington High School.

It is into this rigid world that John Updike sends three young girls wearing nothing but bathing suits. Youth is significant in this story. Sammy is only nineteen, and the girls are younger than he. Lengel and the shoppers are, one assumes, much older. Stokesie, the other checkout clerk, has already crossed the great divide. He is twenty-two, an age at which it is legal to vote, to drink, to marry and to have children. He is vested in the system. It is only the young who have not been indoctrinated, who still have the freedom—and perhaps the courage—to make choices.

The choice the girls make is to walk into an A & P with nothing on but their bathing suits Make no mistake; this is a conscious decision They are young, but they are also sexual beings, proud, in that often confused way that teenagers are, of their sensuality. They are aware of Sammy watching them, and they are half self-conscious and half exhilarated by his attention.

The other shoppers nervously tend to their shopping as the girls pass them by. There is something amiss, something out of the ordinary and therefore frightening but, as Sammy notes, "I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering 'Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, applesauce!' or whatever it is they do mutter." Sammy sees the dogmatic, rote way people lead their lives, alphabetizing their purchases, buying by the letter instead of by the food itself. What could be further apart in terms of taste and texture than asparagus and applesauce" Yet the shoppers force them together in their lists under the letter "A."

Sammy also knows that no matter what happens, these shoppers will not visibly react. They just want to get along, follow the cart in front of them up and down the aisles without incident. If dynamite were to go off, they would ignore it, go about their business as usual. It would have nothing to do with them. They want only to get their shopping done and get home. They do not want to stick out in a crowd. It is as if they are praying, "Get me through life without incident, Lord. Let me feel no pain and, if taking away feeling means I'll feel no joy, so be it." They have made their choices, and they are faced with the consequences of those choices.

Lengel, too, makes a choice. He is the manager, the person charged with enforcing policy, and so he chooses to chastise—and embarrass—the three girls. They are checking out when he sees them, so he could easily let them go, but he feels deeply his

responsibilities as the representative of the Establishment. Managers, of large and small institutions alike, are there, in large part, to make sure that the social codes are enforced within that institution.

He brushes aside their argument that they aren't "doing any real shopping," but merely picking up one item "That makes no difference.... We want you decently dressed when you come in here," Lengel says, and one can hear this voice spring from our youthful memories of teachers and parents and clergy and other grownups who knew so much about right and wrong. But Queenie does not address his comment directly, because he has addressed the wrong issue. "We are decent," she says. She knows the difference between appearances and a deeper truth. Dressing decently and being decent are different things. She knows she is a decent girl, and to judge her by her appearance is itself indecent.

Sammy, of course, makes the most drastic choice, a choice some critics have charged is charmingly romantic, but naive. But, as it foreshadows the choices an entire generation is about to make, I think it is of great importance. Sammy chooses to quit his job. He first says this to Lengel when the girls are still in the store, and one might be tempted to dismiss such a gesture as silly and romantic. But Lengel, perhaps wishing to give Sammy a chance to recant or even pretend he had said something else or nothing at all, asks, after the girls are gone, "Did you say something, Sammy?" This is what raises this story above the superficial; this simple interrogative sentence changes everything, for Sammy then says, "I said I quit."

Sammy had several alternatives, but he chose the straight and true one. He knew that he was quitting not to impress the girls now, but in protest over Lengel's action. He had an epiphany that it was an indecent thing to do to embarrass three young, vulnerable girls in public. He saw the unyielding "policy" of the "kingpins" as a doctrine that was cold and callous and amoral. He agrees with Lengel that he'll "feel this for the rest of [his] life," for he knows that he has just gone against "policy," too, and a world run by policy will not be easy on him.

By the end of the story, Updike has foretold of the coming revolution when sex will be sprung from its monastic cell, when the Establishment will have to justify each and every rule (and war), when appearances will not place one outside of society's gates. All the elements in American society that led to the free-spirited, often naive, romanticism of the 1960s are present in Updike's "A & P."

Source: Robert Peltier, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Wells is Professor of English at California State University, Dominguez Hills. As a literary scholar, he is known primarily for his Tycoons and Locusts: Hollywood Fiction in the 1930s and Mark Twain's Guide to Backgrounds in American Literature. In the following essay, Wells draws comparisons between Updike 's"A&P" and James Joyce's famous story of adolescent epiphany, "Araby."

John Updike's penchant for appropriating great works of literature and giving them contemporary restatement in his own fiction is abundantly documented - as is the fact that, among his favorite sources, James Joyce looms large.

With special affinity for Dubliners, Updike has, by common acknowledgment, written at least one short story that strongly resembles the acclaimed "Araby," not only in plot and theme, but in incidental detail. That story, the 1960 "You'll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You" - like "Araby" - tells the tale of a poor, romantically infatuated young boy who, though obstructed by parental slowness, journeys with innocent urgency, corns in hand, to a seemingly magical carnival - only to find there, behind its facades, just a sleazy, money grasping, sexually tinged reality that frustrates and embitters him Both stories draw on the Christian imagery of Bunyan's Vanity Fair episode to trace a modern boy's passage from innocence to experience, and to expose some of the pains and complexities of that passage. Notwithstanding "Araby"' s cachet as one of the great short stories in the English language, at least two critics have found "You'll Never Know, Dear" to be "a far more complex story."

What remains unacknowledged, I think, is that shortly after writing "You'll Never Know, Dear," Updike made a second fictional excursion to Araby. This time he transformed Joyce's latter-day Vanity Fair, not into a cheaply exotic destination for a starry-eyed youngster, but into the richly resonant single setting for an older adolescent's sad tale: a tale of the modern supermarket The resulting story, since its publication in 1962, has been Updike's most frequently anthologized: the popular "A & P." Updike even signals his intention for us at the outset, giving his story a title that metrically echoes Joyce's: Araby... A & P (Grand Union or Safeway would not suffice.)

Like "Araby," "A & P" is told after the fact by a young man now much the wiser, presumably, for his frustrating infatuation with a beautiful but inaccessible girl whose allure excites him into confusing his sexual impulses for those of honor and chivalry. The self-delusion in both cases leads quickly to an emotional fall.

At 19, Updike's protagonist, Sammy, is a good bit older than Joyce's - at the opposite end of adolescence, it would seem. While in Joyce's boy we readily believe such confusion between the gallant and profane, I think we needn't assume that Sammy is likewise unable to distinguish between the two quite normal impulses. His attraction to the girl in the aisle is certainly far more anatomically and less ambiguously expressed than that of Joyce's boy to Mangan's sister. But it is Beauty that confounds the issue. When human aesthetics come into play, when the object of a young man's carnal desire

also gratifies him aesthetically, that is when the confusion arises. In Irish-Catholic Dublin of the 1890s, such youthful beauty not surprisingly invokes analogies between Mangan's sister and the Queen of Heaven (though the swinging of her body and "the soft rope of her hair toss[ing] from side to side," which captivate the boy, hint at something less spiritual than Madonna worship). And while beauty's benchmarks in Sammy's more secular mid-century America are more anatomical than spiritual, Updike does have Sammy call his young *femme fatal*e "Queenie," and he does make her the center of a "trinity" of sorts, showing her two friends at one point "huddl[ing] against her for relief."

Once smitten, both young protagonists become distracted, agitated, disoriented. Joyce's turns impatient "with the serious work of life." His teacher accuses him of idling. His heart leaps, his thoughts wander, his body responds "like a harp" to the words and gestures of Mangan's sister, which run "like fingers.. .upon the wires." Similarly, Updike's young hero can't remember, from the moment he spots Queenie in the aisle, which items he has rung up on the cash register.

Even details in the two stories are similar, Updike clearly taking his cues from "Araby." Both boys are excited by specified whiteness about the girls - Joyce's boy by "the white curve of her neck" and "the white border of [her] petticoat" in the glow of Dublin lamplight, Sammy by the "long white prima-donna legs" and the white shoulders to which he refers repeatedly "Could [there]," he wonders, "have been anything whiter than those shoulders[?]." Joyce's boy also observes a nimbus surrounding Mangan's sister, "her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door." True, Mangan' s sister comports herself more humbly than her American counterpart. Queenie walks, heavy-heeled and head high, with the haughty pride of the affluent, secularized American upper middle class. But her enticing whiteness, in Updike's sly parody, is also given a luminous, halo-like quality: "around the top of the cloth," says Sammy of the bathing suit that "had slipped a little on her ... there was this shining rim."

Both girls, remote as they are from their ardent admirers, also engage in some subtly seductive posturing. In the supermarket aisle, Queenie turns so slowly that Sammy's stomach is made to "rub the inside of [his] apron." It's the same sensation, we suspect, that Joyce's protagonist feels when Mangan's sister "turn[s the] silver bracelet round and round her wrist" and bows her head toward him in the lamplight in front of her door. Queenie bows to no one, but the "clear bare plane of the top of her chest... [is] like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light." Her beauty, too, like that of Mangan's sister, is incandescent as it inclines toward her aspiring young knight.

Certainly one artistic motive for Updike's second reworking of "Araby" must be to contrast the spiritual value-systems and the adolescent sexual folkways of Joyce's Dublin with those of suburban New England in the Atomic Age. (The disillusionment of little Ben, who is only ten in "You'll Never Know, Dear," is clearly pre-sexual.) "A & P" holds the secular materialism of Updike's own day up for comparison against the slowly imploding, English-dominated Catholicism of the mid-1890s - and, behind it, the fervor of Protestant evangelism in Bunyan's seventeenth century. As critics have often noted, few non-Catholic writers in America make issues of religious faith and doubt as

important in their fictions as does Updike. In Victorian Dublin, redolent with the musty odor of incense, parochial schools, and the litter of dead priests, the Araby bazaar, a romanticized, pseudo-Oriental pavilion created by the fund raisers of the Jervis Street Hospital, stands incongruously pagan and temporary. It is there briefly, soon to be gone. Updike's supermarket, on the other hand, is permanently planted in the light of day near Boston, precisely where the church used to be: "right in the middle of town." "[From its] front doors," says Sammy, "you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real estate offices ..." - quite the satellites to material abundance they've become. The temple of modern consumerism has supplanted the house of worship at the heart of things. It is also an era in which Sammy (and hardly Sammy alone) takes for granted that the godless communists will take control sooner or later (as the British had long since assumed control in Joyce's Ireland). Sammy looks ahead quite assuredly to a time when the A & P (the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Co, that bedrock American institution) will be "called the Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company or something."

Updike heightens the story's skepticism over the destiny of American Christianity by having his three girls stroll through the aisles of the A & P inappropriately clad, in reductive parody of Bunyan's pilgrims in Vanity Fair:

Even as they entered into the fair, all the people in the fair were moved, and the town it self as it were in a Hubbub about them; and that for several reasons: For, First, the pilgrims were clothed with such kind of Raiment as was diverse from the Raiment of any that Traded in that fair. The people therefore of the fair made a great gazing upon them. Some said they were fools, some they were Bedlams, and some they are Outlandish-men.

The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle - the girls were walking against the usual traffic... - were pretty hilarious. 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. I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists. But there was no doubt this jiggled them. A few house slaves in pin curlers even looked around after pushing their carts past to make sure what they had seen was correct.

Contrast these two sets of "pilgrims " in the marketplace. Bunyan's proudly ignore exhortations that they partake of the bounty of the fair, insisting instead that the wares of the marketplace are nothing but stimuli to vanity. They will, they say, buy only the Truth. Queenie and her pals, on the other hand, do buy: one jar of Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream.

Queenie's approach to the checkout stand, Sammy warns us, begins "the sad part of the story." Lengel, the store's manager, a self-appointed moral policeman who also teaches Sunday school, confronts the girls at the register - just as Bunyan's pilgrims are confronted by "the Great One of the fair" (i.e., Beelzebub) "Girls, this isn't the beach," Lengel tells them, echoing the Devil's demand in Vanity Fair that the pilgrims account for "what they did there in such an unusual Garb." Queenie and her friends, like Bunyan's

pilgrims, protest that they "weren't ... shopping," only buying the snacks that Queenie's mother asked them to get on their way home from the beach. Bunyan's pilgrims explain to their inquisitor that they are just passing through on their way to the Heavenly Jerusalem. Sammy imagines, in fact, that the girls are returning to their own latter-day heavenly city, the affluent beach set where folks eat "herring snacks on toothpicks off a big glass plate and ... [hold] drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them" - this by comparison to the lemonade and Schlitz beer crowd, whence Sammy comes, where the suds are drunk from glasses with stenciled cartoons. In Bunyan's world, the choice was earthly vanity or heavenly salvation; in Updike's, it's just one level of class vanity or another.

To Queenie's protest, Lengel replies that it "makes no difference. . We want you decently dressed when you come in here." Queenie snaps back, insisting that she and her friends '•'¦are decent. " But they are nonetheless (after Lengel allows Sammy to ring up the herring snacks) quietly banished from the store. Bunyan's pilgrims, of course, are more harshly persecuted, thrown in a cage and forced to assert their dignity in a much more drawn out manner than Updike's girls. The difference, however, is only one of degree.

At the checkout stand, Sammy witnesses Queenie's mortification up close with profound, if complicated, sympathy. He tenderly unfolds the dollar bill she hands him ("it just having come," he says, "from between the two smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known"), puts her change "into her narrow pink palm," hands her the jar of herring in a bag, then blurts out "I quit" - quickly enough, he hopes, for the girls to hear, so they will stop and acknowledge "their unsuspected hero "

It's pure impetuousness on Sammy's part, a gallant gesture, a promise of sorts. Like Joyce's boy in Dublin, when face to face with the object of his adoration, not knowing what else to say or do, Sammy offers a gift. Where the Irish boy, in his comparatively poor working-class milieu, wants (perhaps needs) to offer something material to Mangan's sister to show his adoration, Sammy, who inhabits an affluent American world cut loose from the consolations of Christian faith, a world of largely material values, offers instead an assertion of principle as his gift. His Queenie has been wronged, and he will stand by her; in an age when the supermarket has replaced the church as the community's central institution, "principle" is the nearest equivalent one has to spiritual commitment. But before we anoint Sammy's act as one of pure principle, however Imprudent, we should ask ourselves whether he would have done the same had one of the other girls - maybe Big Tall Goony-Goony - borne the brunt of the reprimand, with Queenie out of the picture. I doubt it.

The promises of both young men prove futile, of course. Joyce's boy gets to Araby too late, and recognizes in the flirtatious banter there between the salesgirl and her two English admirers, and in the two men counting money, something uncomfortably close to the nature of his own longing: his dream, he later sees, was actually sexual, and money would not buy it. In the A & P, Queenie and her friends disappear out the door. Sammy's promise is also in vain; but, like Joyce's young protagonist, he's stuck with it. "It seems to me," says Sammy, "that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go

through with it." He removes his apron and bow tie, and leaves the market. Once outside, he looks back woefully through the store windows and sees Lengel replacing him behind the cash register. Business goes on, and - as at Araby - the money must be collected. Like Joyce's boy peering into the darkened rafters of the Araby bazaar and lamenting the vanity of his impulsive act, Sammy says at the end of his story, "My stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter."

Hereafter ... it's an oddly formal word with which to conclude for Sammy, who is otherwise a most colloquial storyteller. Does Updike mean to hint that Sammy's epiphany bears intimations of immortality? - and not very positive ones at that? Joyce's boy would seem simply to have matured as a result of his insight, to have become better equipped for life as an adult. Though convinced as a youth that his devotion to Mangan's sister was divinely driven, he has come to realize - as his older, more articulate narrative voice makes clear - that he had, back then, been "a creature driven and derided by vanity." Looking backward, Joyce's narrator has resolved his earlier confusion of spirit and libido, and can recount for us, however wistfully, how that resolution came about. Updike's Sammy, by comparison, speaks less retrospectively. He is still 19 at the end of his story, and still looking around for the girls in the parking lot, though "they're gone, of course." Sammy looks ahead - into the life that lies before him, even perhaps (given that including word) at his own uncertain path to the Hereafter. And he sees nothing very clearly, only indefiniteness.

Both protagonists have come to realize that romantic gestures - in fact, that the whole chivalric world view - are, in modern times, counterproductive. That there are, however, for American adolescents in post-atomic, Cold War New England, any viable alternatives is less assured. Sammy's is the more ambivalent epiphany.

Source: Walter Wells, "John Updike's 'A & F: A Return Visit to Araby," in Studies in Short Fiction, Vol 30, No. 2, Spring, 1993, pp 127-33.

Critical Essay #3

Dessner is Professor of English at the University of Toledo. He specializes in Victorian literature and creative writing. In the following essay, Dessner presents insight into the character of Sammy, whom the critic believes does not realize what his real troubles in life will be.

John Updike's short story "A & P" first published in The *New Yorker* and then in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (1962), has become something of a classic of college literature anthologies, and no doubt the story's brevity and its outrageously naive yet morally ambitious teen-age hero have much to do with that status. Part of the story's appeal, too, derives from the fact that the wild comedy of its boisterously inventive and rebellious narrator modulates at its end into a gentle but benign sobriety. Moments after Sammy dramatically surrenders his job at the cash register to protest the unchivalrous treatment of the three girls in swim suits who have broken the store's unwritten dress code, we may rejoice in the condescending yet charming irony of his naive conclusion: "I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter." Sammy surely overrates the harm he has done to his prospects We chuckle at his groundless apprehension and at Updike's momentarily convincing if mischievous pretense that the world is benign. We are gladdened to have had our disbelief suspended.But this analysis of the tonal satisfactions of the ending overlooks its deeper irony and the story's more considerable structural design on which that irony depends. The running theme which links the bulk of the story's incidents repeatedly demonstrates Sammy's inability to imagine himself personally at risk. The expectation this motif awakens in us is that Sammy will continue to underrate the world's dangers. At the story's end, however, he surprises us by *overrating* them - although with ludicrous and touching selectivity

The first of these dangers to present itself to Sammy is either penury or a neurotic meanness of spirit The middle-aged customer who gives Sammy "hell" for ringing up her box of crackers twice is in Sammy's quick calculation, "about fifty," and a "witch" of the sort he's learned once flourished in nearby Salem. He notices the "rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows" but nothing else that might stir him in the direction of sympathy. That the malicious intent he silently accuses her of, and the "sheep"-like behavior, "like scared pigs in a chute," of the other "house slaves in pin curlers" who draw his sarcastic ire, might have sources in something other than the one's motiveless malignity and the others' dullness of character, does not occur to Sammy. He calls the "pigs" "scared" as if he himself had never known fear, as if no one ever had, as if "scared" were a term of opprobrium. He blames the customers of his A & P for being "house slaves" without any sensitivity to the misfortunes of literal or metaphoric slavery the epithet points to. The thought that his mother, or his wife to be, might herself deserve something more generous than loathing for having "varicose veins pike those] mapping [the shoppers'] legs" does not break the shell of the boy's innocence.

Nor does he know, or care about, the circumstances that might lead one - himself for instance - to a career as a laborer in the city's Department of Streets and Sewers. The men who have come to such employment are to him nothing more than "old

freeloaders." Similarly, the "old party in baggy gray pants who stumbles up [to his checkout lane] with four giant cans of pineapple juice" evokes in Sammy nothing more than the thoroughly self-satisfied question, "what do these bums do with all that pineapple juice? I've often asked myself." There is no malice in that "bums," merely the guileless narcissism of youth. We laugh with Sammy more than we laugh at him How grand it must be to know nothing at all about marginal employment or implacable constipation!

Sammy sneers at the store manager for "haggling with a truck full of cabbages" - and by extension sneers at all those who grow, transport, even eat, such mundane stuff. He is entranced and made enviously defensive by his notion that the under-clad younger shoppers inhabit a higher social station than his own. His reflections on this topic permit him a kindly smirk not only at his own family's lower middle-class predilections but also at their better's sartorial usages. "Ice-cream coats" is his mocking name for their formal summer attire. Of his own eventual settling into or battling to gain or retain a standing in the social hierarchy, he is merrily unaware.

Sammy shamelessly ogles the three girls and reports on his sudden bodily weakness when one of them hands him a dollar bill taken from her bodice, but when McMahon, who works behind "the meat counter," follows them with his eyes while "patting his mouth" in the embarrassed simulation of yawning boredom, Sammy watches without an iota of masculine fellow feeling. McMahon is what Sammy doesn't realize he may someday consider himself fortunate to have become: McMahon is "old." To Sammy *his* ogling the girls is absurd, ludicrous, grotesque, even distasteful, a response Sammy neatly expresses when he says that McMahon, the butcher, is "sizing up their joints."

Sammy's tenure at the check-out counter at the A & P has exposed him to a fair sampling of the ordinary range of insult and indignity with which adults are forced to compromise. The fact that his observations, so marvelously acute and so precisely and delightfully expressed, have not led him to the slightest insight into his own membership in the family of the sons of Adam culminates in the surprising double irony of the story's conclusion. While enormously overrating the world's subsequent interest in his own employment history, Sammy enormously underrates the range and reach of the adult world's terrors, those necessities which do indeed lie in wait for him, the exhibition of which has comprised the essential bulk of his narrative.

Sammy renounces his allegiance to the A & P for their sake, but the girls are gone when he seeks them on the street; and when he looks back through the store's "big windows," he "could see Lengel," the offending store manager, standing in for him at the cash register. "His face was dark gray and his back stiff," says Sammy, "as if he'd just had an injection of iron." We know that Lengel had "been a friend of [Sammy's] parents for years" and that he had asked Sammy to reconsider quitting for their sakes. Surely the "dark gray" of his face is the sign of something other than the proud obstinacy Sammy believes it to be. But from the story's beginning to here at its very end, Sammy gets it wrong. The payoff of this theme ought to be Sammy's lack of concern for the consequences of his precipitous renunciation of his job. The irony turns in on itself when he doesn't even get that right. Our chuckles at his overestimation of the trials which

await him are seasoned with a soupcon of kindly concern for him that has been prompted by his underestimation of all those ordeals of which his narrative has so forcefully and comically reminded us - but not him. Sammy, like the frightened child in Philip Levine's poem "To a Child Trapped in Barber Shop," thinks that his "life is over." The poem's narrator, like our story's, reminds his protagonist with wistful affection that "it's just begun."

Source: Lawrence Jay Dessner, "Irony and Innocence in John Updike's 'A &P'," in Studies in Short Fiction, Vol. 25, No. 3, Summer, 1988, pp 315-17.

Critical Essay #4

McFarland is Professor of English at the University of Idaho. In the following essay, he discusses the reasons he sees for the enduring popularity of Updike's story and theorizes about the symbolism of the story's brand names.

During the twenty years since its appearance in *Pigeon Feathers* (1962), "A & P" has been established as John Updike's most widely read short story. Its popularity among anthologists, as recourse to the listings in Studies in Short Fiction demonstrates, has made the story standard reading for thousands of college and high school students It has appeared in over twenty anthologies since its inclusion in Douglas and Sylvia Angus's Contemporary American Short Stories in 1967. What accounts for the continuing popularity of this particular story9

The reviewers greeted *Pigeon Feathers* with that peculiar damnation-by-hyperbolic-praise which continues to plague Updike. Arthur Mizener began his page-one review in *New York Times Book Review* by hailing Updike as "the most talented writer of his age in America (he is 30 today) and perhaps the most serious," only to warn later of the dangers of Updike's Joycean "verbal brilliance" and of the sometimes awkward conflict in his work between "wit and insight." He did not mention "A & P." J. M. Edelstem, who made a passing comment on "A&P" but focused on "Lifeguard," found Updike's work "rewarding," but also "terribly frustrating." Along with the stones' "glitter and shine," occasional "dazzle," their "irony" and "neat felicity," Edelstein also detected "a cleverness and an obvious mannerism that becomes tiresome." Granville Hicks did not mention the story in his lead review for Saturday Review, though his praise of Updike ("bold, resourceful, and intensely serious") was more unstinting than that of other reviewers. Only the unsigned reviewer for Time, who began, "John Updike is a brilliant writer who has so far failed to write a brilliant book," reflected upon "A & P." But here, too, the damning with exaggerated praise was evident. Lauding "A & P" as the best story in *Pigeon Feathers*, the reviewer concluded that "it is as forgettable as last Week's *New Yorker*."

Regardless of this indifferent reception, "A & P" has emerged as Updike's best known story. One reason that anthologists have embraced the story is probably their awareness of audience. Sammy, the 19-year-old check out boy, has natural appeal to a classroom full of 18- and 19-year-olds. His colloquial usages make him "accessible" to college-age readers, and the frequently remarked similarities with J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield have probably added to his appeal

In his instructor's handbook, R. V. Cassill characterizes Sammy as "a good-natured, average boy" with "a vague preference for beauty, liberty, youth, and recklessness as against the stultifying cant of a stodgy civilization." This has been the main trend of the critical response to Sammy as a character. "He will not always be understood," Rachael C. Burchard writes, "but he refuses to be captured by conformity and monotony." Hailing "A & P" as "one of the brilliant pieces" in *Pigeon Feathers*, Robert Detweiler finds that with his act Sammy "achieves a new integrity, one that divorces him from his unthinking

conservative environment." The most effusive admiration of Sammy, however, is provided in M. Gilbert Porter's essay, which discovers Emersonian qualities of various sorts in the protagonist and which argues that the "histrionic" aspect of his gesture "does not detract from the basic nobility of his chivalric intent, nor does it reduce the magnitude of his personal commitment." Sammy, Porter concludes, "has chosen to live honestly and meaningfully." This decision, presumably, makes him an Emersonian character rather than an ordinary fellow who, one may surmise, elects to live dishonestly and meaninglessly. Porter admits that Sammy's view of the adult world is "harsh," but he also finds it "essentially true."

An important reason for the continuing attractiveness of "A & P," however, as is often the case with stories which prove to be of interest to literary critics and other serious readers, is its ambiguity, or, more narrowly, the ironic duality with which the protagonist is presented. Caught up in the colloquial comedy of Sammy's narration, the reader tends to view the story (and especially the protagonist) uncritically, thus discovering in Sammy at least a Quixotic type of nobility. Shortly after it was published, William Peden described the story as "trivial rather than significant, and more dull than delightful," perhaps because he could detect little besides adolescent arrogance in the protagonist, though he did not elaborate. More recently, Donald J. Greiner, noting that the girls in the story, ironically, are not in need of Sammy's help, observes "Sammy learns that no one welcomes or even tolerates idle idealism. Rather than insist on principle, he has merely shown off." Suzanne Uphaus also detects the "ironic distance" between what Sammy intends and what he accomplishes, "which reflects Updike's conviction ... that the heroic gesture is often meaningless and usually arises from selfish rather than unselfish impulses." Much of the impact of the story, as I shall demonstrate, derives from the ambiguity, the ironic doubleness, with which Updike has invested his protagonist.

In order to illustrate (in a couple senses of the word) this story, Updike creates what I will call "brand-name symbolism." From the H1H0 crackers to the Falcon station wagon Updike's brand names are more than simply appropriate projections of the setting. They are symbols, comical, if only because of their nature and context, which have meaningful associations when properly considered. They also contribute to the ironic portraits offered throughout the story.

Sammy associates himself at the outset with HiHo crackers, and they are a fitting symbol for him - an ordinary, middle-class (not Ritz crackers) snack item. How seriously, then, ought one to take Sammy? How seriously does he take himself? The brand name connotes lightheartedness and high spirits. The movement of the story, and of Sammy's perspective, is from the easy gaiety and freedom of youth toward the "hard" realities of adult societal judgment. As Sammy observes, his parents think what has happened is "sad," but, although he sees that life hereafter will be hard for him, he doesn't yet see how unfortunate is his fall from boyhood.

The girl Sammy calls "Queenie" is associated with "Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream: 490." (I recently priced a similar product at $1.98 for an 8-ounce jar.) The brand name not only fits the imperial Queenie, but also suggests the social class, the upper crust, to which she belongs. The incongruity of the common HiHo crackers

and a luxury hors d'oeuvres like herring snacks anticipates one aspect of the hard lesson that Sammy will learn. Queenie's brand-name symbol represents a world completely alien to that of Sammy, who visualizes her parents and their stylish friends "picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big glass plate." As X. J. Kennedy observes in his instructor's manual, the unsophisticated Sammy "thinks martinis are garnished with mint." The brand name that Sammy refers to as symbolic of his own family is Schlitz.

In the confrontation itself there are several ironies. The A & P, after all, is the subsuming brand name in the story. It is a democratic melting pot of sorts, a typically American institution where, just as the Atlantic and Pacific come together, so do crackers and herring snacks, and so do the proletarian (the "bum" in bis baggy pants who buys pineapple juice), the bourgeois, and the patrician. All are equal, one might suppose, at the supermarket. Yet it is here that a standard of social decorum is asserted, so the irony cuts at the upper class girls. Sammy is no kinder to his reflections on the proletariat (including the street workers) and the bourgeoisie than Lengel, the manager, is in his treatment of the patricians. At the same time, the social code itself is undercut, for though it is distinctly bourgeois in nature, its aim is to sustain the appearance of "class" (the patrician). The code of decorum keeps the store from being what it would pretend to be. The supposedly elite upper class is, in fact, very casual, too casual, under the circumstances, for the snobbish middle-class manager.

Some less central brand-name symbols also figure in the story. McMahon, the butcher is mentioned in the context of Diet Delight peaches, an ironic anti-product to that of his department. The only brand name (of a sort) associated with the town besides the A & P is the Congregational church, a standard, Protestant, middle-class denomination, which is virtually surrounded by such non-spiritual businesses as two banks, a newsstand, and three real estate offices. Finally, although the company is not named, record albums which denote a particular middle-class brand of music are alluded to: the Caribbean Six and Tony Martin Sings. The common name of the popular singer contrasts with the presumably exotic sextet.

The ironic duality and ambiguity are most obvious, however, with the last brand-name symbol in the story, the "powder-blue Falcon station wagon." Associated with "some young married screaming with her children" and being a station wagon, the vehicle relates to the sheep-like customers, the women with varicose veins and six children, and the fifty-year-old cash-register-watchers. But the vehicle's model name, "Falcon," suggests predatory aggressiveness. Falconry is traditionally a sport of aristocrats, and poetically the falcon has been connected with the power of Christ (a sort of anti type to the dove). The vehicle itself, therefore, is a sort of self-contradiction. It is small wonder that the confused Sammy anticipates a hard life ahead. The world which he is entering creates just such confusing, ambiguous symbols for itself.

Some readers, as I have indicated above, have asserted confident and even dogmatic readings of Sammy's character. He is commonly seen as "standing for" youth (naive, but "right"), beauty, sensitivity, nonconformity, individualism, honesty, and excitement. It appears that the story has been promoted largely by those who read the protagonist in

that way. Like Holden Caulfield, then, the altruistic (even chivalric) Sammy learns a hard lesson about reality, the "sad wisdom of compromise," as Detweiler calls it. But Sammy lacks several essentials of the worthy hero. For one thing, he has no perspective on his situation He can judge the effects of his "gesture," apparently, only from a brief passage of time. Furthermore, despite what some readers have said, Sammy appears to have very little sensitivity, except, of course, to the obvious nubile beauty of Queenie and her friends (although they respond to it differently, both Stokesie and McMahon also perceive that beauty). Sammy's reaction to the angry customer early in the story and his lack of sympathy for the varicose-veined mothers simply indicate his immaturity and failure of compassion. His descriptions of customers as sheep, or as "scared pigs in a chute" may be funny, but a moment's reflection shows them to be simply jejune. Finally, by his own account, Sammy's "gesture" (the word is used advisedly, for it is a mere gesture) is intended to impress the girls who have, ironically, missed the whole show

If my antithetical portrait of Sammy were the whole story, however, he would be no more engrossing as a protagonist than what I might call "Sammy the altruist," as portrayed by other readers. Sammy, in fact, achieves a certain degree of heroism not so much by his gesture, which initially appears to be selfishly motivated rather than a defense of principle, but by his insistence upon going through with it even after the girls have left At the end, the reader perceives Sammy as both victor and victim. Against the many instances of his insensitivity and immaturity, the reader finds some signs at the end that Sammy is growing up. In short, it is only partly correct to say that Sammy is noble or chivalric, and it is only partly correct to say that he is acting on selfish impulses. Much of the continued popularity of the story derives from Updike's refusal to guide the reader to an easy solution.

At this writing, I can account for ten books or monographs published on the works of John Updike, a writer who, at fifty, may have his best work ahead of him. His facility with language and what David Thorburn describes as his "unmannerly fertility" may always be held against him. The charges (particularly of his facile style) are reminiscent of those one encounters from time to time against F. Scott Fitzgerald. Robert E. Spiller wrote: "Fitzgerald's strength - and his weakness - lay in the sincerity of his confession and in the gift of words in which it was expressed." Like Fitzgerald, Updike concentrates on a specific social milieu. Updike's subject, Thorburn writes, "is always some variation on the spiritual and communal enfeeblement of contemporary American society, particularly among the suburban middle class." Like Fitzgerald's, Updike's reputation will have to wait a generation or two to be properly measured, but I think he will prove to be the major spokesman of a longer and more complex era (the 1960's through the 1980's) than the Jazz Age.

Source: Ronald E. McFarland, "Updike and the Critics. Reflections on 'A &P'," in Studies in Short Fiction, Vol. 20, Nos 2-3, Spring-Summer, 1983, pp 95-100

Critical Essay #5

Greiner is the chair professor of English at the University of South Carolina. He has published extensively on the works of Updike and Robert Frost, among other American authors. In the following excerpt, Greiner discusses "A & P," focusing particularly upon the character of Sammy.

"A & P" is one of Updike's most popular and anthologized tales. Told in the first person from Sammy's point of view, the story calls attention not to the tone of nostalgia but the brashness of his colloquialism. The first sentences suggest his confidence: "In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits. I'm the third check-out slot, with my back to the door, so I don't see them until they're over by the bread The one that caught my eye first was the one in the plaid green two-piece." Sammy's sympathy with the teeny boppers is established immediately by the contrast between the girls and the typical cash-register watcher, "a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows" who gives him a hard time for ringing up a box of HiHo crackers twice. Admiring the three girls for daring to enter the grocery store dressed in bathing suits, he especially likes the one who wears her straps down and her head high. He also enjoys the shock on the faces of the housewives in pin curlers who do a double take to corroborate this breach in decorum: "these are usually women with six children and varicose veins mapping their legs ... there's people in this town haven't seen the ocean for twenty years."

The sketch turns on the offhand comment that his parents think the outcome sad. We know then that despite the colloquial immediacy of the tale, "A & P" is the record of an incident which Sammy has already lived through but not forgotten. His response to the situation has made an impact upon him which he continues to ponder. When Lengel, the store manager who teaches Sunday school, criticizes the three girls with the comment, "this isn't the beach," Sammy's sense of heroism is aroused. Lengel utters his sarcasm as if the A & P were a great sand dune and he the head lifeguard, but no one is saved. Like a hero in a story by J. D. Salinger performing a quixotic gesture, Sammy accepts the role of the girls' unsuspected hero and announces to Lengel that he quits.

He does not agree with his parents that the outcome is sad. Someone must stand up for embarrassed teenagers in bathing suits with straps down. But this quixotic gesture does him no good The girls never hear him declare himself their protector, and they do not wait for him in the parking lot with favors and thanks. Indeed, when he steps outside, he is in the ugly world of harried housewives with varicose veins: "There wasn't anybody but some young married screaming with her children about some candy they didn't get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon station wagon." Sammy does not want to quit his job, but he believes that he must go through with the gesture. His protest throws him out of the artificially ordered world of the A & P, where the third checkout slot looks directly up the row to the meat counter, and into the parking lot where mothers yell at children while pretty girls in bathing suits do not notice small acts of heroism. Worse, they do not care.

Sammy's brash slang covers his sentimental act which neither the teenagers nor the world accepts. His sacrificial action is incongruous but nevertheless mildly moving. The irony is that the girls never need his help. They stand up well under the Victorianism of Lengel and the stares of the other shoppers. As one of the girls retorts, "We are decent." Sammy learns that no one welcomes or even tolerates idle idealism. Rather than insist on a principle, he has merely shown off: "My stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter." ...

In both "A & P" and "Lifeguard," the first-person narrators are defined largely by their tones and vocabularies. No one else supplies background information or details to round out character. Updike experiments with opposite extremes of voice, for Sammy is casual and colloquial while the lifeguard is pompous and pedantic. Sammy initially seems so confident that he may irritate some readers. Surveying the three girls as they wander the aisles, he assumes that his perspective and judgment are naturally correct. When he describes the girls, we wonder if his lyrical flights of language expose the inadequacy of his slang as he stretches to show why these teenagers deserve his sacrifice: Breasts, for example, become two smooth scoops of vanilla. We can see him longing to ring up the purchase of *that* ice cream. Yet the end of the story suggests that all is not self-righteousness and slang. Sammy has sympathy and a sense of outrage. However ironic, his sacrificial gesture is as refreshing as his colloquial candor. We finish the story sensing that he is more than just another A & P employee with an eye for cute behinds. An observer of his social world, he resolves not just to record but also to act upon his impressions.

Source: Donald J. Gremer, in his *The Other John Updike. Poems, Short Stories, Prose, Plays*, Ohio University Press, 1981,297 p

Adaptations

"A & P" is read by the author on the audiocassette *Couples and Pigeon Feathers*, published by Caedmon Audio Cassette. The cassette also includes the other stories from both collections.

Topics for Further Study

Rewrite the first paragraph of this story in the third person. Why do you think Updike wrote it in the first person? Which version do you think is better? Why?

If three girls in bathing suits walked into your local supermarket, what do you think the reaction would be today? Has society's attitude towards such issues as dress changed or remained essentially the same in the past forty years?

If you were to make this story into a film that takes place today, what song would you have playing over the store's speakers'? Think of the themes involved in both the story and the song as you make your decision.

At the end of the story, Sammy says "I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter." Do you think he is insightful or naive about his own character and the future?

Compare and Contrast

1959: Although only 10 percent of all grocery stores are large enough to be considered supermarkets, they account for almost 70 percent of all food sold in the United States. (The A & P, a long-standing concern originally called the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, is one of these supermarkets.) This statistic mirrors the trend towards suburbanization, since most supermarkets are located in fast-growing suburbs.

1993: Sears Roebuck stops publishing the Sears Catalogue, which for almost a hundred years has enabled people to mail order everything from groceries to prefabricated houses. In addition, Sears closes over a hundred stores nationwide The decision is impacted by the rising popularity of so-called "category killer" stores, huge warehouse-like structures that specialize in certain niche markets, like housewares, and can offer the public deep discounts because of bulk buying.

1961: FCC chairman Newton Miaow declares television "a vast wasteland" filled with "blood and thunder... mayhem, violence, sadism, murder ... more violence, and cartoons ... and, endlessly, commercials - many screaming, cajoling, and offending."

1997: Bowing to pressure from parents concerned about the effects of violence and sex on then: children, television networks agree to a system of ratings for television programs, which will allow parents to gauge whether or not a program's content is suitable for their children.

1960s: According to Alfred Kinsey's study of female sexuality, one-third of all 25-year-old unmarried women are sexually active Other studies claim that 75 percent of young unmarried women are virgins. An estimated 40 percent of unmarried men are virgins.

1990s: According to most surveys, a majority of females are sexually active by the age of 17. Thirty percent of all children in the United States are born out of wedlock. Eighty percent of all teenage mothers are unmarried, and eighty percent of them go on welfare to support their babies.

What Do I Read Next?

Pigeon Feathers and Other Stones (1962) by John Updike. "A & P" is one of the stories in this collection which contains stories about characters making choices and living with those choices as they grow.

The *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J. D. Salinger, a classic—and controversial—coming-of-age story. Holden Caulfield is kicked out of school— again—and decides to take a few days vacation before heading home 25 & under Fie edited by Susan Ketchin and Neil Giordano. A collection of stories by writers who are twenty-five years old or younger. It includes one story about the extraordinary outcome of an ordinary event that happens to a woman walking away from an A & P.

The Children of Perestroika Come of Age: Young People of Moscow Talk about Life in the New Russia (1994) by Deborah Adelman. What is it like to be a teenager in Moscow? Adelman interviews a cross-section of young people and finds that Russian youth face many of the same problems as their American counterparts.

Coming of Age: Short Stories About Youth & Adolescence (1993), edited by Bruce Emra. A collection of short stories about coming of age.

Minor Characters (1983) by Joyce Johnson. In this memoir, Johnson writes of what life was like for a woman in the company of the Beat writers during the 1950s.

Further Study

Macnaughton, William R. *Critical Essays on John Updike*,G. K. Hall, 1982.

A longer collection of essays and criticism Authors include fellow fiction writers as well as Updike scholars

Javna, John and Gordon Javna, 601, St. Martin's, 1988.

A catalogue of 1960s popular culture, from toys to television shows. It also includes a look at some '60s fads that have made a comeback.

Bibliography

Uphaus, Suzanne, *John Updtke*, Ungar, 1980, pp 125-26

Detweiler, Robert. *John Updike*, Twayne, 1972, p. 68.

Luscher, Robert *in John Updike. A Study of the Short Fiction*, Twayne, 1993.

Mizener, Arthur, "Behind the Dazzle Is a Knowing Eye," in theiVew York Times BookReview, March 18,1962

Porter, M, Gilbert "John Updike's 'A & P' The Establishment and the Emersonian Cashier," in English Journal, Vol 61, November, 1972, p 1157

A review of *Pigeon Feathers* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, February 1,1963, p. 73.

Areview of *Pigeon Feathers*, in *Time*, March 16,1962,p 86

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any

form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permissions Department
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535