

Three bikinis and a
pyramid of diet
delight peaches: an
analysis of the six
basic...



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The literary genre of fiction is immense and staggeringly diverse, yet it is unified by six basic elements. The deconstruction and analysis of each of these components yields a richer appreciation for the work being explored. The basic elements of fiction are: plot, point of view, character, setting, symbol, and theme. John Updike expertly utilizes each of these aspects in his short story "A & P" in order to construct an utterly unified and complex work of fiction. "A & P" recounts the effect three girls have on the narrator, Sammy, when they walk into the downtown A & P and defy social norms by wearing nothing but bathing suits. Their bold display, when it is met with reproach and condemnation, inspires Sammy to follow their lead and reject his accepted place in society. Through analysis of the basic elements of fiction, the rich significance that abounds in Updike's short story "A & P" is illuminated and clarified.

The author's use of plot focuses the reader's attention and provides a foundation for the remaining key aspects of fiction. Using the Freytag Pyramid, the plot can be deconstructed into the inciting force, exposition, complication, climax, reversal, and catastrophe. The inciting force is unquestionably the arrival of the three girls at the A & P, where the narrator works as a cashier, because their entrance initiates the rest of the action. Following this is a lengthy exposition in which Sammy gives a detailed physical description of each girl. His observations range from the "black hair that hadn't quite frizzed right" (409) to the "long white prima-donna legs" and "bare feet" (410). Scattered throughout these meticulous renderings are bits of dialogue and small observations that provide the reader with a clearer understanding of the setting, point of view, and characterization. By

slowing the pace and focusing on the girls, Updike heightens their importance in the eyes of the reader. This prepares the audience to see the girls as symbols in relation to the larger theme as well as sets up for the conflict to revolve around the girls' physical appearance. Complication, the third step in the Freytag Pyramid, introduces the story's conflict through the store's negative reaction to the girls' attire. Because it is considered inappropriate to wear bathing suits in the A & P, the girls are met with scandal from the customers, mockery from the employees, and rebuke from the manager, which causes them great embarrassment. These complications gradually build to the climax where Sammy quits his job in protest. Up to this point Sammy has been a passive observer of the girls' rejection of social rules. By quitting his job he actively participates in the conflict for the first time making this the point of greatest action. The loss of job and place in society that Sammy endures is the reversal. The catastrophe occurs immediately afterwards when Sammy suddenly realizes "how hard the world was going to be to [him] hereafter" (414). This epiphany leaves readers with the somber understanding that Sammy's decision to reject the standards of society will have dire consequences on him for the rest of his life.

Careful analysis of the girls and customers, both as characters and symbols, reveal this epiphany to be a statement of the story's theme. Both the girls and shoppers are flat, static characters. They neither change nor exhibit any complexity. While Sammy sees the girls as beautiful, young, and independent, he describes the other customers as "houseslaves" (411) or "bums" (412). In one scene Sammy observes "sheep pushing their carts down the aisle" and the girls "walking against the usual traffic" (410).

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Sammy repeatedly uses “ sheep” or “ pigs” (413) as metaphors for the customers to illustrate their passivity and conformity. In contrast, the girls flaunt their individuality by walking the opposite direction and wearing clothing that cause the other shoppers to “ kind of jerk, or hop, or hiccup” (410). By creating such a dramatic contrast between these two sets of static characters, Updike establishes the girls as foils to the rest of the shoppers. While the shoppers stand as symbols of society and passive submission to the status quo, the girls represent the genuine freedom and life that come with individual autonomy. Their treatment at the hands of the other characters depicts the theme realized by Sammy in his epiphany, that those who rebel against accepted social standards will be rejected by society.

Updike highlights the girls as symbols of oppressed individuality by setting them against a backdrop of patriarchal authority and mindless submission. Two aspects of the setting that represent these concepts are the Congregational church and the A & P itself. The A & P general store, around which the entire narrative revolves, represents corporate ambition and marketing as well as American culture as a whole. Sammy dismisses the merchandise of popular culture, such as the music of “ the Caribbean Six or Tony Martin Sings,” as “ gunk” (411) and is constantly losing sight of the girls among the vast quantities of inventory such as when he notices the girls “ shuffle[ing] out of sight behind a pyramid of Diet Delight peaches” (411). These images illustrate the idea of losing one’s autonomy among a mass of advertisements and media. The church, in contrast, represents passive submission and is a cultural symbol of authority. It is later embodied in Lengel, the manager, who “ teaches Sunday school and the rest” (412).

While scolding them for their inappropriate attire, Lengel “ concentrates on giving the girls that sad Sunday-school-superintendent stare” (412). The paternalistic ideas that he and the church represent are the very concepts that seek to confine and control the girls’ rebellion against accepted social values. The enforcement of these restrictive standards eventually succeeds in symbolically banishing the girls from society by chasing them from the store.

Through the use of narration and point of view, Updike gathers each of the basic elements in “ A & P” and binds them into a unified whole. Sammy, the narrator, acts as the single point of view from which the reader experiences the story. His distinctive, first-person voice pervades the narrative in the form of casual rhetoric and a strong sense of humor. The reader also views the rising action from Sammy’s “ third checkout slot, with [his] back to the door” (409). The focus does not change until the reversal when Sammy symbolically forsakes his place in society by leaving the A & P. These consistencies in voice and focus provide the narrative with a collective harmony that also envelopes characterization. Beyond being just the narrator, Sammy is also the protagonist of the story. Unlike the other characters he is both round and dynamic, undergoing change as he develops from a passive onlooker to an active participator in the conflict against society. By delivering the story through the eyes of the dynamic protagonist, Updike allows the reader to participate in the journey from “ sheep” to rebel. Through his transformation Sammy connects the foils and bridges the gap between them. In this way, Sammy’s character unites opposing forces and ultimately unifies the story.

Updike's short story "A & P" is a complex web of basic fictional elements. When this web is deconstructed and analyzed a wealth of ideas can be uncovered that would otherwise have remained hidden. Each of the six key components are interrelated. The plot forms a frame around, which the other elements are structured, while the characters and setting also function as symbols that reveal the story's theme. Finally, the complete narrative is held together through the narrator's point of view. After analyzing these interrelationships between the key elements of fiction, "A & P" is revealed to be full of complexity and meaning, as well as consistency and unity.

Works Cited

Updike, John. "A&P." *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. 10th ed. Ed. Alison Booth and Kelly J. Mays. Now York: Norton, 2011. 409-14.