

Confidence and innocence through point of view

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



John Updike's well-known short story, "A & P", employs a unique form of narrative, utilizing the first person point of view.

The themes of innocence and confidence of the youth intertwine in Updike's story, through a play in narrative tone, as made possible by the first person point of view. As an effect of this narrative form, the story begins abruptly: "In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits." The tension that will slowly build up as the story progresses is given right away at the narration's first blow.

Followed by the first sentence is a statement from the persona, which serves as a device to establish the story's setting. At this point, a "camera" is set up for us in the place where the story happens. The voice in the narrative serves as the set of eyes by which we witness all events taking place. Set in the A & P grocery store, the story unfolds in a setting of complex structure—shelves with items lined up and several identical aisles.

Perhaps, with this focused and limited set of eyes, the first person point of view allows the reader to get a simplified description of the A & P's surroundings: "I'm in the third check-out slot, with my back to the door . . ." Throughout the story, we meet characters and witness events through this perspective.

Updike's narration, however, is not just unique in terms of point of view. The choice of perspective also enables the reader to hear a distinct "voice."

Accompanied by a pair of eyes is a voice and tone that contributes to strengthening the realistic feel of the story. It is noticeable that the language used by the author is very conversational, making it feel like the

voice connects directly to the reader. Not only does it tell the story; it slowly forms a personality, which, in this case of using the first person point of view, is not excluded from the story's turn of events.

In "A & P", we witness an incident caused by three teenage girls in bathing suits from the perspective of Sammy, a nineteen-year-old boy working at the check-out counter. It is interesting that his name is not revealed until the late middle portion of the story. Nevertheless, his character has already been established at the very beginning, where we hear his voice and vicariously experience the story. To further explore this point, let me cite a few lines, which contribute to establishing Sammy's character.

Seeing the three girls in bathing suits, he immediately focuses his attention to one girl, which he refers to as a "chunky kid." Here, by noting his word choice, Sammy already appears to us as a free-spirited teenager. This is reiterated as he comments on the customer who complains as Sammy rings the purchase a second time: "She's one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows, and I know it made her day to trip me up. She'd been watching cash registers forty years and probably never seen a mistake before."

These lines are dabbled with a sense of annoyance towards elders, and in this case, an old lady. Later on in the story, we get the same feel in his somewhat mocking remark: ". . . women generally put on a shirt or shorts or something before they get out of the car into the street. And anyway these are usually women with six children and varicose veins mapping their legs and nobody, including them, could care less."

This tone, which brings with it a sense of confidence freedom of spirit, also shows us the innocence behind the personality—his opinions are quite shallow, leaning towards trivial matters. This overall tone contributes and prepares us for the shifts that occur in the story. The finality in Sammy's tone falters when he begins to speak of Lengel, the single figure of authority in the story. More and more, the image presented to us of Lengel reveals Sammy's innocence. And indeed, the story's conclusion confirms it.

The presence of the three girls in A & P also reflects the innocent confidence of the youth. Baring all, they brazenly enter into a place, not caring that their outfits don't blend in. At first, it appears to us as a dare, as something that "Queenie" perhaps suggested—a rebellious act, which could probably be an act against authority, intended to project superiority over rules and adults.

However, this queen-like image of strength also falters at the entrance of Lengel into the story. Lengel obviously represents authority—as manager and as Sunday Schoolteacher. Firm in his tone—not defensive or angry, nor is he loud and uncontrolled, he calls out the unfitting clothing worn by these three young ladies.

As he speaks, we feel the stark contrast of tone between him and the teenagers in the story. Right after this, one of the girl mentions her mother as an excuse: " My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks." Immediately, the brazen air to " Queenie" vanishes—she appears to us as a little girl hiding under her mother's skirt. By inserting a figure as Lengel into the narrative, Sammy's tone is helplessly muffled—as if he suddenly gives in to how things are—and not as how he perceives things to be.

The events that follow feel like a gradual crash. Impulsive as he is, Sammy decides to play the role of an “ unsuspected hero.” And the way he narrates his story implies that his next act is only seemingly brave, defiant, and strong.

He makes his motives clear: “ The girls, and who'd blame them, are in a hurry to get out, so I say “ I quit” to Lengel quick enough for them to hear, hoping they'll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero.” Not knowing how to handle the situation, he puts up a front, faltering more and more: “ I started to say something that came out “ Fiddle-de-doo.” It's a saying of my grand- mother's, and I know she would have been pleased.”

Again, figures of authority are projected in the story—the mention of his grandmother, for instance. Soon after that, Lengel’s input to Sammy’s impulsiveness makes him look even more innocent and young—an image which veers away from the initial confidence suggested by the tone made possible by the narration’s first person point of view: “ Lengel sighs and begins to look very patient and old and gray. He's been a friend of my parents for years.

“ Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad,” he tells me.” Parents once again come into the picture. And the mockery thrown by the