

Aristocrats and
patriarchy: analyzing
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In his short story, "A&P," writer John Updike presents readers with a seemingly banal reality. Through a first-person narration style, we are introduced to the protagonist, Sammy, a run-of-the-mill young man employed at a run-of-the-mill supermarket, where a run-of-the-mill conflict emerges. While Sammy is assisting customers, irritated and bored with his life, three teenage girls enter the store wearing nothing but bathing suits. Here, Sammy engages with his fellow employees, commenting on their appearances in a fashion reminiscent of the way average boys would describe women. He ogles them, dissecting their looks until his focus lands on the apparent leader, who he refers to as Queenie. The girls peruse the aisles, up and down each one like a maze until they reach their goal: Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream. They bring the jar to Sammy to cash-out, and Lengel, the dreary manager, reprimands them for their indecent attire. The story culminates in the girls finishing up and exiting the store, and in an act of heroic prowess, Sammy quits his job. He attempts to catch up with them, but as he walks out, he realizes they are gone. His fair maiden, Queenie, and his opportunity for a better life, have slipped through his fingertips.

The rather basic plotline of "A&P" makes it a story that could have taken place anywhere. The events are not monumental. The characters are not exceptional people. There aren't any immediately discernible lessons to be shared, or grand, sweeping statements about the human condition. In spite of these things, this story strikes a chord thanks to countless subtle nuances, detectable through theoretical analysis. Because of the simplicity of the story, we can apply both Marxist and feminist critical approaches, and come

out with new meanings that assess the position of marginalized communities in American culture; here, the proletariat class, and women, respectively. By analyzing the narrative through both theoretical lenses, we can detect a significant shift in Sammy as a character. By the end of the story, Sammy seems to have awakened to a Marxist truth, that under a capitalist regime, he will never be able to get ahead, and those around him are being fooled into thinking they will. In spite of this realization, at the end, Sammy as a character retains a problematic attitude toward women; even though the girls at the heart of the story are of a higher class bracket, he views himself as superior to them, and to all women.

In a Marxist breakdown of “A&P,” it is easy to point to the obvious presence of a consumer culture weaving its way through the story. Speckled throughout the text, readers will find specifically branded food items such as “HiHo Crackers” and “Diet Delight Peaches.” The way Sammy includes these brand names in recounting mundane events suggests that they are an integral part of his daily life, that the aspects of the corporation are so ingrained in him that they become inseparable from the story. Take, for example, the scene where he rings out the box of crackers: “I stood there I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers trying to remember if I rang it up or not. I ring it up again and the customer starts giving me hell” (231). In a literal sense, the meaning of this passage would not change should “HiHo” have been omitted. In spite of this, the inclusion of “HiHo” speaks volumes about the culture these characters are living in. Additionally, we can detect a message in the branding of Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream. Notice the word choices in this product: “Kingfish,” “

Fancy,” and “ Pure,” are all rather regal descriptors, suggesting a product of a higher caliber, made to be bought and consumed by those of a high society, bourgeois background. That three young women purchased this product implies they are of an upper-class upbringing, which, in a Marxist framework, makes them more socially powerful than the A&P employees.

Although a Marxist reading suggests that the girls have more social currency than the working-class employees of the supermarket, a feminist reading suggests otherwise. When the girls enter the A&P in their bathing suits, it is obvious they enjoy the attention they receive as a result of their scant clothing. It makes them feel powerful. Sammy tunes in to this immediately, as he says, “ She didn’t look around...just walked straight on slowly, on these long white primadonna legs” (230-231). Even though it is clear the girls are walking deliberately, as if they are better than other patrons, the way the men in the store objectify them makes their scandalous venture seem petty, in a broader setting. In an exchange with his co-worker Stokesie, Sammy pokes fun at the three girls. “ Oh Daddy,’ Stokesie said beside me,’I feel so faint.’ ‘ Darling,’ I said. ‘ Hold me tight” (232). If it is not immediately obvious to readers that the girls are in over their heads, this scene confirms that they are. Laughter takes the power out of any situation, making it seem trivial, stupid. While the girls may feel strong, the way the men joke about this scene undermines this. In addition to the light-hearted fun Sammy and Stokesie have at the expense of the young women, they are also objectified, in a more serious way, at the deli counter. “ All that was left for us to see was old McMahon patting his mouth and looking after them sizing up their joints” (232). From the way the girls are described, we can assume they are

high-school aged, post-puberty, but not yet old enough to have an awareness of their place in the world. Though they are oblivious to it, the man behind the counter, McMahon, watches the girls in a predatory way. The power dynamic here is completely in line with that of an ordinary patriarchal structure. The girls sexualize their bodies on purpose, hoping to gain traction in a world that has not given them liberty to express themselves, yet fall victim to the ever-present eye of the male gaze.

Often, Marxist critics will point to the relationship among the three employees in order to highlight the fissure between capitalist and communist ideologies. “A&P” is set in a Cold War-era, consumer-based America, and the first subtle nod to this comes in a clever joke made by Sammy. In discussing Stokesie’s career aspirations he says, “He thinks he’s going to be manager some sunny day, maybe in 1990 when it’s called the Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company or something” (232). This nod to Russia, with inclusion of the names “Alexandrov” and “Petrooshki,” is so slight that a reader might not detect the reference, but it illustrates the attitudes people of the time had toward communist world powers. The idea that a communist government would infiltrate capitalist America and disrupt the liberties of civilians was a prominent ideology, and capitalist America exploited this. Basic Marxism states that business owners, the bourgeoisie, fool the working class, the proletariat, into thinking they have mutual business interests. Essentially, it is in the best interest of the owners to convince the workers they share a common goal, so that they may elicit greater labor for a lesser pay. We can see this brought to light in the relationship the workers have to A&P. Stokesie believes in the notion that he

will be able to rise through the ranks as an employee at the store, but Sammy sees through this. Besides Stokesie, we are also given Lengel, the store manager who blindly follows orders. Under a Marxist analysis, Lengel's response after Sammy says he embarrassed the girls carries significant weight. Lengel replies smoothly, "It was they who were embarrassing us" (234). His use of the collective, "us," is a unique word choice. It does not seem that Sammy, nor Stokesie, nor McMahon were embarrassed; rather, they seemed to enjoy the presence of the girls, albeit, in a misogynist way. It appears Lengel uses "us" to refer to himself and the A&P; he, the individual, chooses not to separate himself from the A&P, the corporation. It is not in the best interest of the business to have three girls roaming the store in their bathing suits, so it must not be in the best interest of Lengel. The way Lengel defines himself by his position, by his company, is characteristic of the capitalist brainwashing Marxism warns against. Sammy sees this in his superior, and instead of resigning himself to a similar fate, takes his chances, and quits.

While there is certainly a clash between capitalism and the rights of the working class in A&P, maybe a more overt dichotomy can be viewed in the rift between men and women. Nowhere in this narrative do we see women being portrayed in a positive light, unless they are being objectified, or praised for the way they look. By focusing on the minor female characters, those besides the three girls, we can discern a pattern in Sammy's opinion of women. First, we encounter the old woman. "She's one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows...if she'd been born at the right time they would have burned her

over in Salem" (230). The allusion to Salem Sammy presents here suggests a deep-rooted hatred of any woman who does not conform to his ideal "Queenie" archetype. The old woman is loud and unattractive, and challenges him when he double-scans her item. Though it would be easy to pass this encounter off as a cranky old woman, angry at the world and thereby angry at Sammy, the way he describes the tired mother-type customer suggests something different. "And anyway these are usually women with six children and varicose veins mapping their legs and nobody, including them, could care less" (232). Here, Sammy discusses the type of woman who would usually enter the store in a bathing suit. She is exhausted. With the piercing imagery of the varicose veins we get the sense she too is unattractive, possibly working-class, the presence of veins suggesting a woman who is overworked. Because this type of woman is not beautiful, Sammy does not notice her. He "could care less." She is invisible to him, and because she is not the ideal image of beauty, she holds no relevance to Sammy. She is worthless. In spite of this, it appears Updike's inclusion of this minor character serves to highlight the contrast between Queenie and the world around her. While Sammy seems disgusted by any woman who does not maintain an ideal standard of beauty, he seems to treasure Queenie, wishing to protect her like a China doll. This almost pseudo-paternal relationship Sammy invents with her culminates in his quitting the A&P, in the most climactic moment of the story.

As the three girls exit the A&P supermarket, embarrassed by Lengel's scolding, Sammy is faced with a decision which will greatly affect his future: does he stay on at the A&P, maintaining a steady life with a steady job in the

company of other steady people, or does he take a leap toward a better future and quit, an effort to gain traction on the same social plane as Queenie? Ultimately, Sammy hands in his apron, a valiant rebellion against the oppressive bourgeoisie. While his annoyance with his menial position in society seems to have been bubbling below the surface for some time, it seems his true awakening to his insignificant place in the world comes upon hearing Queenie speak. He says, “ All of a sudden I slid right down her voice...Her father and the other men were standing around...picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big plate...all holding drinks the color of water...When my parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it’s a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses” (233). Notice his contrast in diction in describing both events. In recounting Queenie’s (imagined) background, the sentences are long, overflowing with beautiful language and rich imagery. Rather than simply saying the members of Queenie’s family drink dry martinis, saying that their drinks were “ the color of water,” maintains a mystical element. This suggests a certain ambiguity, heightening the sense of the unknown. Sammy can visualize the drinks, but due to his upbringing, does not have the knowledge to articulate exactly what they are. In contrast, the way he describes his own family gatherings is very blunt, familiar. His incorporation of the branded beer, Schlitz, suggests a comfortability with the drink. It also denotes class. While the notion of a dry martini seems out of reach for Sammy, a cheap beer served in a tall glass is accessible, as it is the only world he knows. When he quits his job, he seems to be reaching toward this upper-class lifestyle, assuming that the girls will welcome him into their gated community with open arms as their savior; however, things are not so simple. The oppressive capitalist structure keeps the working-class down,

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and by attempting to rebel against this, Sammy is punished with an ambivalent future, making the road ahead even more difficult.

While a Marxist reading seems to make Sammy out to be some type of tragic hero, taking his future into his own hands only to be struck down by an exploitative enterprise, a feminist reading suggests something entirely different. When analyzing "A&P" within a feminist context, it becomes immediately clear that Sammy views himself as some type of white knight, a substitute father figure for the girls. If the leader of the pack is Queenie, then Sammy is King. Even the cutesy add-on of "ie" to "Queen" infantilizes her, making her seem helpless, childish, less-than. Much of what happens in the final scene of the story suggests Sammy believes he holds ownership over the girls, and maybe the most prominent example of this is also the simplest, when he refers to the young women as "my girls." He says, "I look around for my girls, but they're gone, of course" (235). When he quits his job, he seems to view himself as a type of martyr for the cause, throwing himself under the bus to save three damsels in distress. Naturally, he should receive some type of compensation for this act. He appears irritated with their disappearance, puzzled as to why they did not wait around to congratulate him on his heroic act. With the way the girls are sexualized throughout the course of the entire story, we can infer that Sammy expects some type of sexual reward for his deed, thus cementing his ownership over them, in particular, Queenie, the true object of his affection. Sammy feels entitled to the young women, to their bodies, their affections, their lifestyle. When he doesn't receive the outcome he was expecting, he feels cheated. He went out of his way to quit his job, and when no one is there to reward him for it

he is annoyed. He concludes the narrative lamenting the struggles that he, as a nice guy, will have to face from here on out.

By analyzing John Updike's short story "A&P" theoretically, we can break down some of its core ideas to reveal a story about more than an average kid who quits his job. From a Marxist perspective, we can view Sammy as a type of folk hero, an everyman, who, after spending too long groveling at the feet of an exploitative company, decides to fight back. A Marxist interpretation paints a decidedly positive portrait of Sammy. Just like his coworkers, he has fallen victim to the evils of capitalism, and he views the three girls as his ticket out of his proletariat circumstances. In contrast to this reading, a feminist analysis suggests that Sammy is a hopeless misogynist, a young man experiencing life in a male-dominated America, who views women as little more than sub-human specimens for examination. Despite the negative aspects of the feminist viewpoint, perhaps this is what makes "A&P" such a classic story. When we combine the positive aspects of the Marxist interpretation with the more problematic components of a feminist critique, we are left with an incredibly rounded character. Sammy is young and dumb. He acts on instinct rather than carefully considering his options. He jokes with his co-workers, complains about customers, just as any nineteen-year-old would. This story retains a place in the literary canon because Sammy is imperfect and average, not in spite of it. Through Sammy, readers can relate to the struggle of being a lost young adult, and may reevaluate the social injustices they remain passive toward. In "A&P," Updike creates a story that is so mundane, it becomes profound.