

Shopping for principles at the aandp



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It is of little coincidence that John Updike's A&P occurs in one of America's most well-known supermarket chains where, "sheep pushing their carts down the aisle" search for the best bargains, and customers give "hell" over a few pennies (Updike 187). Perhaps A&P illustrates the way in which capitalist societies push us to our limits, turning us into nothing more than factory workers. Such is the case for Sammy, who day by day goes "through the punches" of tedious cash register work, while the unappreciative bourgeoisie fail to realize his job is "more complicated than you think;" the strains of this slave-like life turn Sammy into a type of machine, who sadly hears songs in the beeps and chirps of his cash register (Updike 194). While some may believe Sammy's heroic gesture of quitting is: "meaningless and . . . arises from selfish rather than unselfish impulses," I believe his action was more of an awakening to the American class system, where people such as Queenie – who live up to our prima-donna images of women, are still ostracized by the establishment symbolized in Lengel (Uphaus qtd. in McFarland 97). While it is true that Sammy acts childishly, it is important to remember that this story is told from the perspective of a nineteen-year-old, whose outlook on life is still being formed. What I am suggesting is that Sammy quitting his job is partly representative of his teenage immaturity, but it is also partly the beginning of a revolution in his mind. A Marxist reading of A&P considers the story to be a refutation of mid-century American capitalist values.

A&P beautifully illustrates the way in which capitalism commodifies objects in our society. In a capitalist society beauty in itself is not enough to make a person successful. If Queenie had visibly come from a lower-class family,

Sammy likely would not have shown interest in her. Capitalism has brainwashed Sammy's mind, like the brainwashing of Jay Gatsby, in a way that forces him to pursue the 'higher things;' he never takes into account that Queenie could be an awful girl, with a horrible attitude, because he can only see the signs of wealth, which inherently make her beautiful in his capitalist attitude toward the world.

In the same way that Sammy finds beauty in Queenie, we also see the other girls imitating her for the same reasons. For instance, Queenie is often portrayed as the leader of the group; she "walks, heavy-heeled and head high, with the haughty pride of the affluent, secularized American upper middle class" (Wells 129). Updike exemplifies our tendency to find beauty in things that are associated with upper class wealth in his portrayal of not only Queenie, but her companions as well. Both the "chunky kid, with a good tan" and the girl who "other girls think is very 'striking' and 'attractive' but never quite makes it" are designed in a way that makes them subservient to Queenie (Updike 188). Throughout the story we find these two girls following Queenie in strange aspiration, hoping to be like her; Queenie is ". . . the Queen. She kind of led them [the other girls] . . . showing them how to do it;" and she is portrayed as wise, knowing exactly what she needs from this life, careful not to "look around . . . she just walked straight on slowly [through the aisles] . . . [keeping] her eyes moving across the racks" (Updike 188-89). Queenie fits mold of a model consumer, scanning the shelves of A&P seeking out a bargain; meanwhile the "fat one . . . fumbled with the cookies, but on second thought she put the package down," suggesting that the chunky girl is "fat" because she is a careless consumer, lacking the keen buying sense

that makes Queenie physically attractive in the eyes of a capitalist society (Updike 190). The reader may begin to draw a subconscious parallel between two negative attributes – obesity and irrational consumption. Combined with the commodification of Queenie, whose body symbolizes what makes every female pop superstar or model a monetary success, the reader takes the ‘ chunky’ girl’s weight problem, along with her buying habits and creates an image of Queenie that is highly superior to that of the ‘ chunky’ girl. The irony of this commodification is that the ‘ chunky’ girl probably comes from the same class as Queenie, but since obesity is not associated with success, the reader automatically places her into a class lower than that of Queenie. America is exposed as a society that value success, and financial success in particular, above all else.

Perhaps it is these contradictions in how we perceive class that frustrates Sammy so much, causing him to quit his job. In the same way Queenie and the ‘ chunky’ girl are from the same class, Lengel and Queenie also share a similar class – a class where men are: “ standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties,” and the women are “ in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks” (Updike 193). Lengel persecutes Queenie not because of her skimpy clothing, but because of a more pressing reason – she is disturbing his customers and in effect causing him to lose money. Sammy begins to see the hypocrisy in Lengel, who portrays himself as the highly moral Sunday school teacher, but comes off more as a pitiful dictator – not concerned with morality at all, only money.

Queenie is the symbol of what being ‘ hip’ is. She is on the cutting edge of fashion and pushing social limits while showing off her beauty. Since Lengel

comes from a higher class, running a seemingly bourgeois business, his sole purpose is to serve his conservative working-class customers, even though he may believe that the girls' skimpy clothing is perfectly acceptable. Similar to how some claim Sammy is merely trying to impress the girls by quitting, Lengel is attempting to impress his working-class customers by reprimanding the girls, so there is a contradiction between Lengel's class and how he must act: the " supposedly elite upper class, is in fact, very casual, too casual, under the circumstances" for Lengel, and for a moment, he must lower himself to the class of his customers (McFarland 99).

The setting of this story is possibly one of the best Updike could have chose to spread the anti-capitalist message of A&P; a supermarket is " the common denominator of middle-class suburbia, an appropriate symbol for the mass ethic of a consumer-conditioned society," where " crackers and herring snacks meet, and so do the proletarian . . . the bourgeois, and the patrician (Porter 1155, McFarland 99). For example, when the reader is first introduced to the girls it is somewhat tied into the imagery of the store: before even learning where the story takes place we are introduced to " three girls in nothing but bathing suits," immediately making the reader focus on the commodification of the girls before the actual setting (Updike 187). Also, when we, as people who live within a capitalist society, think of women who dress in such attire, we do not think of their mental capacity, but we view them as sexual commodities, commodities that oftentimes are used to sell products in American advertising. We tend to view women who dress in this manner as " slutty" or " loose;" for the girls to enter into a supermarket it emphasizes the true American feeling towards women: they are not viewed

as human beings at all, but viewed as products that can be browsed through like clothing on a rack. This commodification is yet another flaw in capitalist societies that cause us to put less value on the worth of individual human beings and to only see people as producers and consumers. Queenie is no longer a woman; she is just another product in the store, something that with the right amount of money, can be bought. Sammy likens fluorescent lights shining on the girls in the store to that of sun glaring on their bodies at the beach. In the same way that the florescent lights help people compare stacked products to buy at the store, their brightness exposes the apperances of the girls in an especially exposing artificial, here artificial, light that may dehumanize them.

Sammy possesses a great eye for quality, not only in women but in products: “[Sammy] speaks disdainfully . . . of such products in the store as ‘ records at discount of the Caribbean Six or Tony Martin Sings or some such gunk you wonder they waste the wax on . . . and plastic toys done up in cellophane that fall apart when a kid looks at them anyway” (Updike qtd. in Porter 1155-6). Associations between people and products is common practice, and Sammy possesses a tendency to associate himself with HiHo crackers (a middle class product), rather than more expensive Ritz crackers (possibly viewed as a snack of the high class). Queenie, presumably upper class, is associated with “ Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks,” a brand name that “ not only fits the imperial Queenie, but also suggests the social class . . . to which she belongs” (McFarland 97).

What we may want to ask ourselves is: What does Sammy see in Queenie? Is Sammy truly thinking for himself or is he just like the “ witch about fifty with

rouge on her cheekbones,” or the people who “ would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists” even if a bomb exploded in the store? (Updike 187, 190) At one point in the story, Sammy does indeed fall into the trap of capitalist ideology, not thinking logically, and the setting of the store only draws him deeper into error. However, when Sammy says: “ Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them [the girls]” we begin to see the change in Sammy’s understanding. Queenie becomes more than a beautiful girl that Sammy fanaticizes about, and he begins to see her as a victim [of an invasive brand of capitalism] (Updike 191). She becomes a victim of capitalism because of the way that Lengel abuses her and also in the way that she is commodified by the other customers in the store . Not only does Queenie become a victim, but Sammy begins to see himself as a victim when he symbolically “ punches the ‘ No Sale tab’ and walks outside where, ‘ the sunshine is skating around on the asphalt” (Updike qtd. in Porter 1157).

Even at the beginning of the story we see that Sammy is vaguely familiar with the flaws of capitalism and often sees the store as an artificial atmosphere, viewing the “ fluorescent lights” and “ green-and-cream rubber tile floor” as generic. He ridicules customers such as the “ witch about fifty,” describing them as cattle who merely roam the isles looking for a good bargain (Porter 1156, Updike 187). The sunshine that falls on Sammy upon his exit is a deep contrast to the artificial fluorescent lights he works under in the A&P. The sunlight, a representation of sincerity, perhaps illuminates the truth of things, shedding a humanist natural light on people. The flawed capitalist ideology, by which people are viewed by how much money they make, is put aside, and Sammy begins to realize “ how hard the world was

going to be on [him] hereafter;" upon leaving his job Sammy feels relief, even though he realizes the decision he has made is a difficult one (Updike 196). In contrast to the pathetic musical tones Sammy hears from his cash register earlier, the story ends with a loud " pee-pul . . . [as the] drawer splats out," symbolizing Sammy breaking free from capitalist ideology (Updike 196). Perhaps it is not even obvious to Sammy himself why he has acted in the way that he does. In fact, maybe it is this uncertainty in Sammy's future that adds so much intrigue to the story, as if now Sammy has the potential to create his own, enlightened, genuine future. Walter Wells describes the ending as a look " ahead—into the life that lies before [Sammy] . . . And he sees nothing very clearly, only indefiniteness" (132). A&P is the typical tale of a teenager who begins to awaken to the faults of the world around him, and like many people who begin to understand life for the first time. Sammy's quitting may seem childish or stupid, but it is actually the first step in a rebellion against the crooked ideals around him. If it is true that Sammy does not realize what he is rebelling against, it emphasizes that capitalism is an unnatural way of life, and it would be natural that human beings lash out against it, even if they do not realize why exactly they are doing it. Sammy symbolizes the frustration of a person who simply cannot understand the monetized, hyper-capitalist world around him and therefore, chooses to no longer participate, at least not in the same way, at least not at the same store.

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