

A&P



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN UPDIKE

John Updike grew up in Pennsylvania and attended Harvard University, where he wrote for the *Harvard Lampoon* and graduated *summa cum laude*. After graduation, Updike attended art school in Oxford for a year before returning to the United States. Updike moved to New York, where he began writing with quick success, publishing short stories and poems, often in *The New Yorker*. Updike continued to publish prolifically over the next fifty years, producing 21 novels, 18 short story collections, 12 collections of poetry, 4 children's books, and 12 collections of non-fiction. He died of lung cancer in a hospice in Danvers, Massachusetts, at the age of 76.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A&P" was written in 1961, when American consumer culture reflected postwar prosperity, and the increasing use of automobiles had pushed more families to embrace a suburban lifestyle. In the Fifties, this prosperity gave way, for the first time, to a distinct youth culture of rebellion and disregard for authority, documented in films (*Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955) and books (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951) that likely influenced Updike's "A&P," a story about conformity and questioning authority. Despite the prosperity of the postwar era, however, a significant minority of Americans continued to live in poverty by the end of the Fifties, and "A&P" also documents this inequality in the class differences between the story's characters. The Cold War is also referenced in the story, when the narrator, Sammy, imagines that the A&P will be owned by Russians in 1990.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A&P" showcases a lot of the same colloquialisms and teenage angst as Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Both works concern the coming of age of a young male narrator, and Sammy's internal dialogue shares stylistic elements with Holden Caulfield's narration.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A&P*
- **When Written:** 1961
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1961
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short story/Coming of Age

- **Setting:** An A&P grocery store in a town somewhere north of Boston
- **Climax:** Sammy quits
- **Antagonist:** Lengel
- **Point of View:** First-person narrator (Sammy)

EXTRA CREDIT

Cartoonist. After graduating from Harvard, Updike's earliest ambition was to become a cartoonist, attending The Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at the University of Oxford.

Updike's Mother. John Updike's mother was a writer herself and inspired Updike to write when he was young. "One of my earliest memories is of seeing her at her desk ... I admired the writer's equipment, the typewriter eraser, the boxes of clean paper. And I remember the brown envelopes that stories would go off in — and come back in."



PLOT SUMMARY

Three girls walk into the A&P in their bathing suits, as Sammy rings up the groceries for a woman in her fifties. Distracted by the sight of the first girl who catches his eye—a "chunky" girl in a green plaid bathing suit, with a nice tan—Sammy accidentally rings up a package of crackers twice, causing the woman to complain. Sammy fixes the mistake for her and sends her on her way.

By this time, the girls are in the bread aisle, and Sammy observes them, describing each of their appearances. There's the girl in the green plaid bathing suit he saw first, and then another tall girl, who Sammy describes as the type of girl who other girls find "striking" though they know she'll never make it—and then there's the leader, Queenie. The leader walks deliberately in a pink bathing suit with her straps down, and Sammy admires the smooth plane of her chest and the rim of pale skin that her bathing suit exposes when she wears the straps looped loosely around her arms.

Sammy believes that Queenie can sense that people are watching her, but she pretends not to notice, turning slowly to confer with the other girls as they walk down the aisle toward the meat counter. The sight of the girls surprises the other shoppers at A&P, but they return their gazes quickly to their own shopping baskets. Sammy comments that someone could set off dynamite in the A&P, and the "sheep" would continue unfazed, looking at their grocery lists. However, a few "house-slaves in pin curlers" do turn to give the girls a second disapproving look.

Stokesie, another clerk, also ogles the girls and jokes with Sammy about them. At twenty-two, Stokesie is just a few years older than Sammy, but he already has a wife and two kids. He aspires to become the manager of the A&P one day.

The girls reach the meat counter and ask McMahon something, and he points them on their way. As they walk off, McMahon sizes them up, and Sammy begins to feel sorry for the girls. "Poor kids," he comments, "...they couldn't help it."

Since it's a quiet Thursday at the store, Sammy doesn't have much to do except wait for the girls to reappear between the aisles. When they emerge again, Queenie is still leading the way, heading for the cash registers with a jar in her hand. She considers Stokesie and Sammy, but an elderly person reaches Stokesie first, so Queenie heads for Sammy's register. She hands him a jar of Kingfish Fancy **Herring Snacks** in Pure Sour Cream and pulls a folded dollar bill out of her cleavage, a gesture Sammy finds "so cute."

Then, the store's manager, Lengel, walks through the door and notices the girls. He reprimands them, saying that A&P "isn't the beach." Queenie blushes, loses some of her composure and replies that her mother told her to buy herring snacks, causing Sammy to imagine the type of high-class gathering her parents might be holding, with cocktails and herring snacks, and contrasting it with the mental image of his own parents' parties, at which guests drink lemonade and beer.

Lengel tells the girls that they should dress decently when they enter the store, and Queenie regains her self-possession, announcing with some defiance that they are decent. Lengel responds that he doesn't want to argue and advises them to cover up their shoulders next time, as it's the store policy.

Sammy absentmindedly rings up Queenie's jar of herring snacks, and as the girls hurry out of the store, he quickly announces, "I quit," in time for them to hear. However, the girls continue on their way, paying no attention. Sammy takes off his bowtie and apron, laying them on the counter, as Lengel reminds him that he doesn't want to do this to his parents and will feel the repercussions of his actions for the rest of his life. Although Sammy feels that there's truth in Lengel's words, he continues outside, where he looks for the girls. The girls are gone, however, and as Sammy looks back into the storefront, he sees Lengel in his spot at the cash register. Observing Lengel's gray face and stiff back, Sammy's stomach drops as he realizes how hard the world will be to him in the future.

he reacts to Lengel's authority with youthful rebellion. However, as a blue-collar worker, he has to face more uncertainties and fears about the future than the girls do, and he finds himself dreading the adult consequences of his actions at the end of the story.

Queenie – Queenie is the leader of the group of three girls who walk into the store in their **bathing suits**. Unlike the others, Queenie is unabashed and self-assured, walking deliberately through the store in a suit with her straps down. Sammy, our narrator, describes the sight of her as "more than pretty." When Lengel reprimands her for wearing just a bathing suit into the store, however, her self-confidence wavers slightly, and her response—that she's getting **herring snacks** for her mother—reveals her youth. It's also clear to Sammy that Queenie belongs to a higher socioeconomic class than he does, as he imagines the type of gathering her parents might have put together and contrasts it with the sorts of get-togethers his own parents have.

Lengel – Lengel is the A&P's manager. Also a Sunday school teacher, he runs the A&P with a watchful eye, and Sammy describes him as "dreary." Lengel acts as a kind of force for conformity, and reprimands the girls for wearing their **bathing suits** into the store, embarrassing Queenie and, ultimately, causing Sammy to quit.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Stokesie – Stokesie is another checkout clerk at A&P. Although he's only a few years older than Sammy and jokes around with him at the store, Stokesie already has a wife and two kids to support. He hopes one day to manage the A&P.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GROWING UP

The narrator, Sammy, is 19 years old and inhabits an in-between space between adulthood and adolescence, a standpoint from which he can both relate to the girls when they face authority and also observe and act as their unlikely defender, since he's a few years older. He also has to answer to his parents still—Lengel mentions them in an attempt to get Sammy to reconsider his decision to quit—but he's technically (legally) an adult, too. For comparison, Sammy's coworker Stokesie is only three years older and is already married with two kids.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sammy – Sammy, the narrator of the story, sarcastically observes the customers of A&P from his standpoint behind the cash registers. He's technically an adult at 19 years of age, but he still relates to the teenage girls who walk into the store, and

As Sammy approaches adulthood, he also has to face the consequences of his actions more directly. Just a few years older than the three girls who walk into A&P in their **bathing suits**, Sammy relates to the girls because of their youth. However, unlike the girls, Sammy can't just invoke his parents or use them to excuse his behavior as the girls do when Lengel reprimands them. Sammy, instead, will have to answer to his parents' disappointment and find other means of supporting himself when he quits, and the dejected sense of foreboding he has at the end of the story carries the weight of the consequences he'll have to face for his actions. Sammy's rash act of quitting is a youthful act, inspired by his connection with the girls, but as he faces the consequences of his actions, he realizes that he's no longer a youth as the girls are and will have to answer to the consequences as an adult.



SEX, GENDER, POWER

The three girls walk into the store, and it seems that their sexuality asserts power in the way that they turn heads and capture the attention of the store-goers and employees. The girls are aware that others are watching them, but they act oblivious, and this dynamic seems to lend the girls a kind of unspoken power. However, this power proves to be something of an illusion, since the girls can't really harness it—as Sammy says, "Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn't help it"—and they can't adequately come to their own defense when Lengel asserts his own personal power within the store and shames them. He accuses the girls of being indecent, and in doing so asserts that the girls' attire goes against social norms, that the girls' sexuality is itself inherently indecent, and blames the girls for the men's sexual desire for them.

Sammy's response to defend the girls and sacrifice himself arises because he's both attracted to them and wants to be their defender. As he attempts to protect the girls from Lengel's power, however, Sammy actually objectifies them further in some sense—he renders them more helpless, as passive objects of desire who require his defense and can't act for themselves.



APPEARANCES AND INNER LIVES

Sammy, as a store employee, judges everyone who walks through the store based on their appearances, what they buy, and how they act. He imagines what their inner lives might be like (the fifty-year-old woman, for example, who's been watching cash registers for the past forty years, looking for a mistake) and he analyzes the girls as they walk into the store, identifying their leader and envisioning their social backgrounds. The girls are dressed only in their **bathing suits**, and Sammy spends the entire first half of the story describing what they look like. Other customers and store employees react to their appearance too, which doesn't

conform to the social norm of what one should wear into the town's grocery store. The conflict of the story arrives when the store's manager confronts the girls about their appearance, asking them to dress decently when they come in to shop—which embarrasses the girls and leads to the climax of the story when Sammy quits.

At the end of the story, Sammy, who has believed himself able to understand the inner lives of all the customers based on their actions and appearances, is suddenly faced with the realization that he doesn't quite understand why he just quit—in other words, his own inner self is something of a mystery to him. And part of his realization of the difficulty of the world may rest on his sudden understanding that his blithe, arrogant, and youthful way of looking at the world was wrong.



INDIVIDUALISM AND ETHICS

When Sammy quits, he asserts his individualism. The other characters in the story all follow someone or some code of conduct. Lengel enforces the policies of the store and general social norms without being able to explain why they exist, only responding, "This isn't the beach." Stokesie follows the normal path of ambition to become the next store manager. The customers, who Sammy refers to as "sheep," avoid confrontation and choose not to disturb their usual routines. As Sammy says, "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, in contrast, confronts the authority figure, Lengel—the store manager and a Sunday school teacher who represents all the conservative moral and social codes of conduct of the town—and presents him with his own ethical code, saying that Lengel shouldn't have embarrassed the girls. The girls in their bathing suits, and Queenie in particular, represent the sort of willingness to break social norms that Sammy admires ("Policy is what the kingpins want. What the others want is juvenile delinquency"), even if the girls' breaking of those norms is more in line with a prank or game than a real rebellion. When Lengel disagrees, Sammy does something completely unexpected and quits, as the customers nervously back away, uncertain how to proceed in this unforeseen turn of events. Yet the end of the story provides a further comment on individualism, as Sammy realizes how hard the world will be on him, how hard the world is on anyone who resists its rules and norms.



CLASS

The girls in their **bathing suits** flaunt their wealth, as they've obviously been lounging by the pool or beach while the people in the store have been working. As Queenie speaks, Sammy envisions the type of

background she might come from, coming into A&P to buy fancy **herring snacks** for her parents.

Sammy's defense of the girls also involves a hope of impressing them, but they shuffle out of the store without taking any notice of his sacrifice on their behalf. He is from a lower class and is beneath them, which adds another element to the foreboding feeling he has about his future. Looking back at Lengel's weariness, he realizes that he, like Lengel, is stuck in the working class. While the girls' class protects them from the consequences of their actions—Queenie draws from a reserve of superiority when she remembers her place in the confrontation with Lengel—Sammy has to face the consequences of his actions without any protection of wealth or class.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BATHING SUITS

The story revolves around the disruption the girls cause by walking into A&P in only their bathing suits. The bathing suits, in contrast to the regular attire of the housewives and other "sheep" who enter the store, draw attention to the girls' sexuality, which Sammy immediately takes note of. As the other employees and customers react to the girls, however, their bathing suits begin to symbolize a sort of freedom to Sammy, who finds it exciting that the girls flout the norms of social conduct. When Lengel reprimands the girls and accuses them of indecency, the bathing suits take on a different tint, akin more to sexual shame or, more accurately, sexual shaming.



HERRING SNACKS

When Sammy hears that Queenie is purchasing the Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream for her mother, he immediately imagines the kind of gathering at which these snacks might be served and contrasts the image with the kind of parties his own parents throw. He recognizes that Queenie comes from a higher socioeconomic class than he does, and that to her, "the crowd that runs the A&P must look pretty crummy." This class difference also contributes to the feeling of foreboding Sammy has about his future at the end of the story.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Fawcett Columbine edition of *Pigeon Feathers* published in

1996.

A&P Quotes

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Sammy (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

This, Sammy's first sweeping judgment on a stranger, gives readers insight into his character and his age. Confronted with someone he knows nothing about who has caught him making a mistake with her groceries, Sammy pegs her as a very specific type of person (someone who watches a cash register like a hawk, longing for the cashier to make a mistake) instead of acknowledging that she was correct to point out that he was overcharging her for her groceries. From this, we understand that Sammy is judgmental in a way that young people often are when they do not understand the complexities of what makes up an adult life. We also learn that Sammy, though he sees himself as having adult understanding of the world (being able to intuit specific things about a person from a small interaction), also still sees himself as a child in some ways. Instead of acknowledging his own mistake and accepting responsibility for it like an adult would be expected to do, Sammy blames the woman's (imagined) stinginess and pettiness. His reaction shows that he still feels that, as an adult, she has power over him that he is incapable of contending with.

☞ You never know for sure how girls' minds work (do you really think it's a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar?) but you got the idea she had talked the other two into coming in here with her, and now she was showing them how to do it, walk slow and hold yourself straight.

Related Characters: Sammy (speaker), Queenie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

This is another example of Sammy's tendency to project personalities or motivations onto complete strangers, which shows a lack of humility and empathy. In fact, his only moment of uncertainty about the girls' characters (when he states that he does not understand how girls' minds work and then questions whether they have minds at all) betrays a dehumanizing sexism in Sammy. His description of the girls' bodies (which occupies him for the bulk of the story) combined with this offhand remark suggesting the girls lack intellect and complexity shows that he views them as objects, and that he does not consider them to be whole people independent of his desire for them. Even his consideration of their internal dynamic (who is the leader, who is following, etc.) is simply playing into his fantasy about the leader teaching the others to come into their own sexualities. This obsessive imagining of whether the people around him are asserting or bending to power betrays his own internal struggle, of which he is unaware, between the forces in his life that ask him to toe the line of emerging adulthood and his desire to shirk the responsibilities that come with his age and social position.

☞ She must have felt in the corner of her eye me and over my shoulder Stokesie in the second slot watching, but she didn't tip. Not this queen. She kept her eyes moving across the racks, and stopped, and turned so slow it made my stomach rub the inside of my apron...

Related Characters: Sammy (speaker), Stokesie, Queenie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

This part of the story shows the odd power struggle that Sammy perceives regarding the girls walking around the store in their bathing suits. Sammy has some understanding that ogling them is a way for him to assert power over them, and he also understands that the girls pretending not to notice is a way for them to reclaim some of that power. Instead of viewing this as a serious contest for respect and dignity, though, he sees it as a sort of sexual game in which the girls' leader is further seducing him by refusing to acknowledge his bad behavior. This, again, shows how profoundly Sammy cannot intuit or empathize with the inner lives of the people around him, even though he seems to fancy himself a sort of expert at guessing what people are thinking and feeling while they shop for groceries.

☞ The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle—the girls were walking against the usual traffic (not that we have one-way signs or anything)—were pretty hilarious.

Related Characters: Sammy (speaker), Queenie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

This passage shows that Sammy views his blatant ogling of the girls as authentic action, in contrast to the boring and contemptible following of social norms that the other people at the grocery store perform. Sammy seems to relish his disrespectful behavior because he sees it as a kind of rebellion against stifling and boring aspects of society. In this passage, Sammy is mocking the people around him for pretending not to notice the girls. He contrasts this behavior with the behavior of the girls, who are wearing the wrong thing and walking the wrong way, and with his own behavior, since he seems to believe that he has the unique courage and insight to recognize the absurdity of the situation. Were Sammy truly empathetic he might consider that the other patrons' refusal to look at the girls might come from a motivation other than simple fear or inability to break from social norms; they might be trying to respect these girls, or trying not to encourage them to use sexual power in the world since that kind of power (as Sammy later learns) can be accompanied by vulnerability.

☞ 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. 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.

Related Characters: Sammy (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

This passage shows a continued expression of Sammy's disdain for people who follow normative, middle-class, American values. By proposing that the shoppers wouldn't

react if dynamite exploded in the store, Sammy implies that he believes these people to be so conditioned by social rules that they entirely lack awareness and individuality. He also continues to betray a particular meanness towards women by mocking the "house-slaves." He believes that the "house-slaves" are disturbed by the presence of the young girls (his reference to the older women's pin curlers indicates that Sammy believes that part of their disturbance has to do with jealousy of the girls' youth and beauty) but he thinks that they hide their feelings in order to not make a scene. This is doubly cruel of Sammy, as he projects a scandalized sense of inferiority onto the older women at the same time as he imagines them to be so powerless that they cannot express the insecurity and anger that Sammy imagines that the women feel.

☝ "Oh Daddy," Stokesie said beside me. "I feel so faint."

Related Characters: Stokesie (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Sammy's interactions with Stokesie are crucial to understanding how Sammy understands himself. In this interaction, Sammy and Stokesie are ogling the girls together, and their mutual acknowledgement of the activity is, paradoxically, the kind of social reinforcement of behavior that Sammy seems to detest in others. It shows a dynamic among men in which sexism is accepted and perpetuated by this type of unexamined mutual reinforcement. In other words, Sammy is himself falling into the prescribed role of men ogling beautiful young women—thus following a category of social behavior rather than asserting true individualism by questioning his own motives and morals and considering the young women as full people deserving of his respect.

It is also important to consider that Stokesie's comment and Sammy's narrated thoughts indicate that they believe that the girls are exercising power over them. A more nuanced understanding of the situation would force them to acknowledge that, by staring at these girls and projecting fantasies onto them, the men are exerting their own power over the women. The men avoid responsibility for their bad behavior by framing their actions as resulting from the power the girls are exercising over them.

☝ Stokesie's married, with two babies chalked up on his fuselage already, but as far as I can tell that's the only difference. He's twenty-two, and I was nineteen this April.

Related Characters: Sammy (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Updike manages to convey something crucial about Sammy through a tiny interaction. Sammy tells the reader that Stokesie is married and has a family, but says that he believes that otherwise the two of them are just alike. Sammy is flippant about the profound importance of Stokesie's family to his life and experiences, treating it as almost a superficial detail of his character instead of something that structures Stokesie's life. If Sammy's shallow pronouncements about the middle class families in the store didn't already show us that Sammy does not understand the complexity of adult responsibility, then this interaction cements our understanding that Sammy's outlook on the world is more youthful than adult. Updike tops off this complex interaction by allowing Sammy to narrate the moment when Stokesie turns away from the girls and seems not to want to see them anymore. Sammy is dismissive of this gesture, chalking it up to Stokesie being a "responsible married man" and then rolling his eyes at Stokesie's ambition to become manager.

☝ All that was left for us to see was old McMahan patting his mouth and looking after them sizing up their joints. Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn't help it.

Related Characters: Sammy (speaker), Queenie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage Sammy is startled by seeing the butcher, who is an older man Sammy seems not to respect, engaging in the same ogling that Sammy and Stokesie have just been doing. While Sammy lacks the self-awareness to feel ashamed of his own behavior after feeling disgusted at McMahan's behavior, his disgust does open him up, for the first time, to feeling empathy towards the girls. Seeing McMahan eye them makes Sammy realize that there is

probably something gross about being eyed by older men at the supermarket. Tellingly, for the first time he refers to the girls as "kids," showing that he is taking a more adult position towards them. The enigmatic "they couldn't help it" seems to be Sammy's complex expression of the feeling that, while the girls can't help attracting male attention, they also are somewhat responsible for it. While this is a more mature attitude than simply ogling them and mocking everyone who doesn't, it still shows some sexism.

☞ "My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks." [...]All of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room. Her father and the other men were standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big plate and they were all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them. When my parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it's a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses with "They'll Do It Every Time" cartoons stenciled on.

Related Characters: Sammy, Queenie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Sammy is beginning to realize how much more complex these girls are than he imagined. For one, he realizes their upper-class status and imagines the differences between their experiences and his own. While he is still projecting his imagination onto them, it is at least a more nuanced projection that acknowledges that they have lives to which he can't quite relate. In this interaction, Sammy also relays being startled by the girl's actual voice, since it is not like what he imagined. Throughout the story he has imagined this girl as somebody confidently exercising her power over men, and it startles Sammy to see her in a situation in which, confronted by the store manager, the girl tentatively brings up her mother to justify her presence in the store. Seeing her confidence falter helps Sammy to understand the complex negotiations of power at play, and also helps him to see that this girl is wavering between youth and adulthood in a way that mirrors his own experience.

☞ "We are decent," Queenie says suddenly, her lower lip pushing, getting sore now that she remembers her place, a place from which the crowd that runs the A & P must look pretty crummy. Fancy Herring Snacks flashed in her very blue eyes.

Related Characters: Queenie, Sammy (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Queenie has now publicly gone from exuding confidence, to faltering, to seeming embarrassed, to seeming indignant about the way she is being treated. When the manager tells her she needs to dress decently (as in, she needs to be sufficiently clothed) she seems to take it as an attack on her status and personhood, as her response is a defense that she is, in fact, a decent person. Sammy, meanwhile, assumes (correctly or incorrectly, we can never know) that Queenie's reaction is based on her feeling that, because of her class, she should not be talked down to by the lower-class employees of the A&P. When he says that "fancy herring snacks flashed in her very blue eyes" he is using the herring snacks as an emblem of the upper-class world that does not belong at the A&P. Sammy's intuition that Queenie is having a moment of realizing that she is above everyone else in some way mirrors Sammy's feeling of superiority throughout the story.

☞ "Girls, I don't want to argue with you. After this come in here with your shoulders covered. It's our policy."

Related Characters: Lengel (speaker), Queenie

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lengel is changing tactics in his confrontation with the girls, which reveals his own confusion about his values and motivations. While his first attempt to chastise the girls rested on his moral conviction

that the girls should be decently clothed in public, here he pivots and claims that he is merely enforcing store policy. This appears to occur in reaction to the girls' embarrassment, which may have left Lengel conflicted about whether or not he still had the moral high ground—but also in response to Queenie's indignation, which suggests that she comes from a place of privilege and is immune to punishment. It is this shift to claiming the importance of policy that disgusts Sammy, who frames his reaction not in terms of the moral mismatch between policy and the distress it causes, but in the much more youthful and simplistic terms of old people having power and young people wanting rebellion. Still, Sammy is moved by this interaction that causes the young women's emotions to modulate in a way that reveals to him some of the nuances of their inner lives.

☛ 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. They keep right on going, into the electric eye [...]

Related Characters: Sammy (speaker), Lengel, Queenie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

This is the climax of the story, in which Sammy, moved by the interaction he has just witnessed, impulsively quits his job. In keeping with his youthful lust, his initial motivation for quitting seems to be to impress the girls, but he frames it to himself as solidarity, in that he feels he is quitting to protest their poor treatment. This is obviously a muddled chain of logic, since his attempt to stand up for their dignity is conflated with his sexual desire and longing to impress them. It also seems that Sammy's motivation is partly personal, in that, by quitting, he is proving to himself that he lives by the individualism that he admires instead of bowing to social norms and continuing to ring up customers. When Updike shows the girls walking out the door as Sammy is quitting, though, he gives readers a sense that all the muddled things Sammy is standing up for are unattainable.

☛ "Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad," he tells me. It's true, I don't. But it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it. I fold the apron, "Sammy" stitched in red on the pocket, and put it on the counter, and drop the bow tie on top of it.

Related Characters: Lengel, Sammy (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

With the girls gone from the store, Sammy has to face the reality of what he is doing. Since it does not seem that he has successfully impressed the girls, this moment is a test of whether his conviction that individuality is more important than bowing to social pressure is strong enough to make it worth quitting his job. The answer is inconclusive here; Sammy's rationale for following through is not that his belief in what he is doing is strong, but rather that he must finish what he has started, or that he feels he cannot now take it back. Ironically, this mindless continuation of action mirrors the sheep-like behavior of the people Sammy has criticized. It is also important that in this passage, for the first time, Sammy recognizes that he has a responsibility to others. His mom and dad seem to depend on him, perhaps to help the family financially, and his quitting will have an effect on others besides himself. Though this consideration does not keep him from quitting his job, it foreshadows the complex adult realities that his decision will usher in.

☛ I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.

Related Characters: Sammy (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

By the end of the story, Sammy is identifying with the character he would have, at the beginning, seemed least likely to identify with. Lengel, the stand-in for mindless authority and for the cruelty of social systems, now seems pathetic and almost sympathetic to Sammy. It is important that Sammy sees Lengel through the window after he has already gone out into the parking lot to check on whether

the girls are still there. The girls are not there--the parking lot is devoid of the objects of desire that, in part, motivated him to quit--and now Sammy is left with only his uncertainty about what he has done. Here, in this last paragraph of the story, it is clear that Sammy has had a revelation, however vague, about how complex the lives and responsibilities of

adults are. Updike leaves us to understand that this moment has broken in Sammy some of the innocence and arrogance of his childhood, and that he now understands that the world is more complex than his simplistic worldview permitted just moments before.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A&P

Three girls in **bathing suits** walk into the local A&P grocery store as Sammy, the nineteen-year-old narrator, rings up the groceries for a woman in her fifties he describes as "a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows." Sammy is distracted by the sight of them – first seeing a "chunky" girl wearing a green plaid suit and analyzing her tan – and he accidentally rings up a pack of crackers twice, causing the woman to complain and snort as he sorts things out. Sammy imagines that the woman has been watching cash registers for the past forty years, eager to find a mistake.

After the woman leaves, Sammy watches the girls walk down an aisle, and he describes each of them. There's the girl in green plaid, whose **bathing suit** looks new, and another girl with frizzed hair, a sunburn, and a long chin, who Sammy describes as the type of girl who other girls find "striking" but who they know won't truly make it. Finally, Sammy describes the girls' leader, a self-possessed girl of medium height who carries herself like some kind of queen, she walks deliberately and looks straight ahead while the others follow along more meekly. Sammy says that you never know how girls' minds work (and questions whether there's even a mind in there) but it seems that the leader talked the other two girls into coming into the shop in their bathing suits.

Sammy continues to describe the leader, who wears a "dirty-pink" **bathing suit** with the straps down. The straps loop loosely around the tops of her arms, causing the suit to slip a little so that her tan-line shows around the rim of the bathing suit. Sammy admires the plane of her chest, describing it as "more than pretty." She also has oaky hair and a prim face, according to Sammy, and holds her head high.

The girls in their bathing suits command attention with their sexual power, causing Sammy to make a mistake at work. Based on the appearance and actions of the woman who's sale he is ringing up (incorrectly), Sammy thinks he's got her pegged through and through, that he understands her inner life.



The girls continue to command Sammy's attention as they walk through the store. Even as he admits that he's not sure how girls' minds work (or, with casual sexism, whether they even have minds), he assumes that he knows the power structure between the three girls—two are sheep, and they follow around their brazen leader who asserts her individualism by flouting social norms.



The leader of the group continues to command Sammy's attention with her sexuality, emphasized by the way she allows her bathing suit to slip. She also continues to carry herself with confidence, in contrast to the other two girls.



Sammy continues to admire her, and he believes she can sense Sammy's and Stokesie's eyes on her, but she doesn't acknowledge them. Sammy watches her turn to confer with the other two girls as they walk down the aisle to the meat counter. He observes as "the fat one with the tan" considers a pack of cookies, and he watches the reactions of the store's other customers to the girls. The other store-goers notice the girls with surprise but return quickly to their own carts, and Sammy bets that someone could set off dynamite in the A&P without getting a reaction. A few women Sammy describes as "house-slaves in pin-curlers" glance back at the girls disapprovingly, however. As Sammy explains, seeing girls wearing **bathing suits** on a beach is one thing, but seeing them in an A&P grocery store is surprising.

Stokesie, another clerk, also ogles the girls and jokes with Sammy. Only a few years older than Sammy, the twenty-two year old Stokesie already has a wife and two kids, and he aspires to manage the A&P one day. Sammy explains that the town is situated five minutes from a beach, and women usually put on shirts and shorts before coming into the store—and usually, these are older women with several children, so nobody really cares how they're dressed. According to Sammy, the town is north of Boston, and there are people living there who haven't seen the ocean in years.

The girls reach the meat counter and ask McMahan for something, and he points them in a direction before ogling them as they walk away. At this point, Sammy begins to feel a little sorry for the girls. He says, "Poor kids...they couldn't help it."

It's a quiet day at the store, and Sammy waits for the girls to come around the corner. As they appear with lead girl, whom Sammy now refers to as Queenie, still leading the way, she chooses between Sammy's and Stokesie's registers, but an elderly customer reaches Stokesie first. Queenie hands Sammy a jar of Kingfish Fancy **Herring Snacks** in Pure Sour Cream for 49 cents and pulls a folded dollar bill from the cleavage in her top, which Sammy finds "so cute."

The leader knows that the men in the store are watching her, but she pretends not to notice, and this dynamic gives her a certain power. Sammy also observes the reactions of the other customers with amusement and disdain. To Sammy, they represent complete social conformity, dulled to all outside stimulus. His reference to the housewives as "house-slaves" again shows he assumes he knows about their inner lives at home, where he imagines they cater to the rest of the family.



Stokesie represents a kind of adulthood that Sammy is wary of, with few ambitions and the burden of family. However, despite these differences, Sammy admits that he and Stokesie are similar in a lot of ways. Stokesie, for instance, is equally distracted by the sight of the girls in bathing suits. At this moment the difference between being an adult and a youth seems like very little to Sammy, like it's just a biological matter of having kids.



Sammy's comment that the girls couldn't help it suggests either (or both) that the girls were overcome by the need to attract male attention or that they would have attracted male attention no matter what they did or were wearing. He begins to feel sorry for the girls as he realizes that their sexuality represents not only power, but also vulnerability.



Sammy's response to Queenie pulling the money out of her cleavage also demonstrates both Queenie's sexual power over Sammy and Sammy's condescension towards the girl, since he responds by finding it "cute."



Lengel, the store's manager and a dreary Sunday school teacher, comes inside the A&P after haggling with a truck of cabbages on the lot and catches sight of the girls. He reprimands them, announcing that "this isn't the beach." Queenie blushes and explains that her mother told her to buy **herring snacks**, which immediately sets Sammy to imagining the type of high-class background Queenie comes from. Sammy imagines her parents throwing a fancy gathering with cocktails and herring snacks and mentally contrasts the image with his parents' parties, which involve lemonade and beer.

Lengel repeats that the store's not a beach, which strikes Sammy as funny and makes him smile. Lengel disapproves of Sammy's smile, but continues to focus on the girls, saying that they must be "decently dressed" before entering the store. Queenie, suddenly regaining her sense of place in relation to the store workers, replies that they are decent, to which Lengel responds that he doesn't want to argue and tells the girls to come into the store with their shoulders covered next time—it's store policy.

The store is quiet after this scene, with the customers nervously converging on Stokesie's lane. Lengel asks Sammy if he's rung up the purchase yet, and Sammy responds that he hasn't and rings it up absentmindedly. As the girls hurry out of the store, Sammy says, "I quit," in time for them to hear, but they continue out of the store, paying no attention.

Sammy informs Lengel that he didn't have to embarrass the girls, but Lengel replies that the girls were embarrassing the store. Sammy responds with a nonsense phrase—"Fiddle-de-do"—and pulls off his store uniform, leaving the apron and bowtie on the counter. Lengel tells Sammy that he doesn't want to do this to his parents and that he'll feel the repercussions of this for the rest of his life. Sammy has the sense that what Lengel is saying is true, but he continues to go through with quitting when he remembers how Lengel made Queenie blush.

Lengel's appearance as a male authority figure who also represents the rules of society (especially as a Sunday school teacher) changes the power dynamic, causing Queenie to lose some of her self-possession for a moment, as she falls back on the protection of her parents by mentioning her mother and the herring snacks. The herring snacks, to Sammy, also emphasizes that Queenie comes from a higher class, distant to his own experience. Sammy's thoughts on this subject also give further meaning to his nickname for the girl, Queenie.



Lengel's accusation that the girls are being indecent implicitly blames the girls for the men's own sexual desires, but wraps that blame within the larger structures of social and religious norms. Queenie's defiant response is described as emerging directly from her sense of being higher-class, to being superior to the store workers. Lengel's response that he doesn't want to argue and that it's store policy seems like a kind of backing down. A moment ago he set himself up as the source of authority regarding what is decent. Now, challenged by Queenie, he casts himself as just the enforcer of store policy. In other words, he's just the messenger for the local rules of the store, which were made by someone else.



Whenever Sammy thinks of the customers, he considers them with disdain, calling them "sheep"—here, for example, they have no idea how to respond to the disruption of their usual shopping routine. Although Sammy sacrifices himself in part to impress the girls, they pay him no attention—he's beneath their notice, perhaps because he's from a lower class.



Sammy sticks to his own ethical code and asserts his individualism by quitting. However, he's not entirely certain that he understands what he's doing (as evidenced by the nonsense phrase), which proves that inner lives are more complex than Sammy assumed they were throughout the story—he's not even sure he can understand his own feelings or motivations. Sammy also realizes at this point both his actions are going to hurt his parents and that there will be adult consequences, but pushed on by his personal (and idealized) sense ethics, he makes a youthful decision and quits anyway.



Sammy saunters outside in the white shirt his mother ironed for him the night before and looks around for the girls, but they're gone. Looking back through the windows into the A&P, Sammy can see that Lengel has taken his spot at the cash register. As he watches Lengel, whose back looks stiff "as if he'd just had an injection of iron," Sammy feels his stomach drop as he realizes how hard his future in the world is going to be.

By asserting his individualism, Sammy has lost his place in the system and is unsure what to do next. As he looks back at Lengel, however, he gets a sense of foreboding. He seems to see in Lengel the stiffness and anger that the world will present to any effort of his to assert his individuality, and at the same time the rigid sense of being caught that conforming to that society (in which he is working class) will force him.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Cao, Diana. "A&P." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Dec 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Cao, Diana. "A&P." LitCharts LLC, December 15, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-and-p>.

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MLA

Updike, John. *A&P*. Fawcett Columbine. 1996.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Updike, John. *A&P*. New York: Fawcett Columbine. 1996.