Updike’s ‘A&P’: A Masterful Story of Maturation

John Updike’s “A&P” is a unique story about a young man who must grow up and mature in just a few short minutes. Sammy, the protagonist, is forced to clash with the society he lives in, and his actions permanently change his life (Porter; Shaw; Updike). Contained in the story are concepts such as lust, rebellion, and religion, and each is masterfully used to communicate the themes of maturation and living with consequences (Oates; Porter; Shaw; Updike). These three concepts each come together to make a powerful story about growing up, which is something all human beings can connect with. Sammy transforms from a judgmental teenager to a judged adult.

Lust is something that seems part of the human experience. Nearly everyone will have to grapple with it at some point in their lives, as sexuality is as intrinsic to human nature as breathing. The main character of Updike’s “A&P” is no different, as he is unwittingly smitten by the feminine charm of three young women who are clad in nothing but bathing suits (Updike). Sammy spends a great portion of the story remarking upon the girls’ appearances, but he seems to primarily focus on the girl he refers to as “Queenie” (Updike 260). She’s walking on “white, prima donna legs (Updike 259), and she’s wearing a “dirty-pink--beige…bathing suit” (Updike 260). Given Sammy’s tendency to focus on Queenie and his reaction when she pulls a dollar out of her top, it becomes obvious that Sammy is sexually attracted to her. Patrick W. Shaw concurs when he remarks, “Sammy is overpowered by the nubile body and its not-so-hidden persuasions.
Queenie attracts him like a bee to honey” (Shaw 326). Not only is he sexually attracted to her, it seems like she is intentionally trying to get attention. Shaw notes this when he states, “She is conscious of the erotic overtones of such dishabille…” (Shaw 326). He quits his job in a vain attempt to gain their attention (Updike 262-63). He quickly realizes how much his life will be affected by this decision. Sammy is forced to mature, as he realizes that he will have to deal with the consequences of his actions (Updike 263). It is unlikely that Sammy has lost his sense of sexuality. Rather, he has begun to grasp the concepts and consequences involved in its expression. This is something that people do as they mature, and Sammy is no different.

Rebellion is another familiar response for adolescents. Whether it’s a stubborn child or a stubborn dog, nearly every human being will have experience with it in some way. The stereotypical rebellious teenager is a prime example. Sammy is that teenager. He may not pull any major pranks, but he does reject authority and quit his job (Updike 262-63). Sammy is setting and abiding by his own standards, therefore he will not follow the crowd. In his essay, Gilbert Porter notes, “He is aware, of course, that he has separated himself from the flock, from the ‘A&P’ crowd…” (Porter 321). Sammy seems to hold contempt for the people in the store. He even gives them the moniker of “sheep” (Updike 260). Porter feels that “Sammy is repulsed by their insensitivity, their loss of individuality, and by the joyless, wooden nature of their existence (Porter 320).” These people clearly disgust him in some way, and his later actions put him at odds with them and their society (Porter). This is heavily implied when Sammy’s boss remarks that Sammy will “feel this for the rest of [his] life” (Updike 263). Sammy is opposing these peoples’ world and society. He will “incur that wrath which Emerson declared [was] the lot of the nonconformist” (Porter 321). Sammy is fighting a system through rebellion, and he knows
that the world will be hard on him (Updike 263). However, just as wrath is the nonconformist’s lot (Porter 321), acting on one’s own conscience is the lot of the mature adult.

Updike makes multiple references to religion in his stories, and “A&P” follows that trend. As Sammy is ringing up a particularly unpleasant customer, he remarks that “if she’d been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem…” (Updike 259). Shaw argues that Updike “simultaneously points to the story he wishes the reader to recall and evokes Hawthorne’s use of Salem as an emblem of Calvinist dogma” (Shaw 325). Updike does not shy away from using religion in his novels. Joyce Oates notes, “Updike explores wittily the very real possibilities of a shallow imaginative life “free” of Calvinistic gloom (Oates 148). In “A&P,” he does the same. By mentioning Salem in the beginning of the story, Updike places thoughts of religion, persecution, and the infamous Salem Witch Trials in the reader’s mind (Shaw 325-26). Updike does this in order to show a character breaking the mold and going against the grain of an entire society’s religious fervor. When Sammy quits his job, he breaks the Puritan belief that a way to avoid sin was possessing “‘diligence in one’s calling’” (Shaw 326). Sammy breaks this Puritan code of honor, and he’s punished for it. Shaw argues that Sammy is experiencing “juvenile self-pity” (Shaw 326) when Sammy realizes how life will be from that moment onward. Sammy is forced to deal with the ramifications of going against the expectations of religion (Shaw 325-26; Updike 262-63). Society will effectively abandon him, and he must mature in order to mitigate or, at the very least, cope with these consequences (Shaw 326-27).

Sammy has evolved throughout the course of the story. He is a dynamic character, and he changes in a way that is likely permanent. Sammy has become a more mature and independent person, and he makes his own decisions. He does succumb to the wiles and whims of lust, and he must live with the consequences of acting upon such temptations (Updike). He rebels against the
authority of the time, religion (Shaw 326-27). Sammy will face adversity because of his independent nature, and he knows it (Shaw 326-27; Updike 263). Due to these events, however, Sammy must be stronger. “A&P” stands as a testament to Updike’s skill as a writer. It is a masterfully crafted story that shows something nearly every human being understands: adulthood is inevitable, but one must live according to conscience.
Works Cited


