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The A & P as a State of Mind

The setting of John Updike’s "A & P" is crucial to our understanding of Sammy's decision to quit his job. Although Sammy is the central character in the story and we learn that he is a principled, good-natured nineteen-year-old with a sense of humor, Updike seems to invest as much effort in describing the setting as he does in Sammy. The setting is the antagonist and plays a role that is as important as Sammy's. The title, after all, is not "Youthful Rebellion" or "Sammy Quits" but "A & P." Even though Sammy knows that his quitting will make life more difficult for him, he instinctively insists upon rejecting what the A & P comes to represent in the story. When he rings up a "No Sale" and "saunters" out of the store, he leaves behind not only a job but the rigid state of mind associated with the A & P (1284).

Sammy's descriptions of the A & P present a setting that is ugly, monotonous, and rigidly regulated. The fluorescent light is as blandly cool as the "checker-board green-and-cream rubber-tile floor" (1281). We can see the uniformity Sammy describes because we have all been in chain stores. The "usual traffic" moves in one direction (except for the swimsuited girls, who move against it), and everything is neatly ordered and categorized in
tidy aisles. The dehumanizing routine of this environment is suggested by Sammy's offhanded references to the typical shoppers as "sheep," "houseslaves," and "pigs" (1281). They seem to pace through the store in a stupor; as Sammy tells us, not even dynamite could move them (1281).

The A & P is appropriately located "right in the middle" of a proper, conservative, traditional New England town north of Boston (1281). This location—coupled with the fact that the town is only five minutes from Salem, the site of the famous seventeenth-century witch trials (1280)—suggests a narrow, intolerant social atmosphere in which there is no room for stepping beyond boundaries of what is regarded as normal and proper. The importance of this setting can be appreciated even more if we imagine the action taking place in, say, a mellow suburb of southern California. In this prim New England setting, the girls in their bathing suits are bound to offend somebody's sense of propriety.

As soon as Lengel sees the girls, the inevitable conflict begins. He embodies the dull conformity represented by the A & P. As "manager," he is both the guardian and enforcer of "policy" (1283). When he gives the girls "that sad Sunday-school-superintendent stare" (1283), we know we are in the presence of the A & P's version of a dreary bureaucrat who "doesn’t miss that much" (1282). He is as unsympathetic and unpleasant as the woman "with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows" who pounces on Sammy for ringing up her HiHo crackers
twice (1280). Like the "electric eye" in the doorway, her vigilant eyes allow nothing to escape their notice. For Sammy the logical extension of Lengel’s "policy" is the half-serious notion that one day the A & P might be known as the "Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company" (1281). Sammy’s connection between what he regards as mindless policy and Soviet oppression is obviously an exaggeration, but the reader is invited to entertain the similarities anyway.

The reason Sammy quits his job has less to do with defending the girls than with his own sense of what it means to be a decent human being. His decision is not an easy one. He doesn't want to make trouble or disappoint his parents, and he knows his independence and self-reliance (the other side of New England tradition) will make life more complex for him. In spite of his own hesitations, he finds himself blurtling out "Fiddle-de-doo" to Lengel’s policies and in doing so knows that his grandmother "would have been pleased" (1284). Sammy’s "No Sale" rejects the crabbed perspective on life that Lengel represents as manager of the A & P. This gesture is more than just negative, however, for as he punches in that last entry on the cash register, "the machine whirs 'pee-pul'" (1284). His decision to quit his job at the A & P is an expression of his refusal to regard policies as more important than people.

Work Cited