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A New Historical Approach to John Updike's, "A & P": Consumerism and Dehumanization in
1960's America

When readers first approach John Updike's "A & P" they may be a little confused by the proliferation of brand names throughout it. After all what could brands names have to do with this salacious story of a young man's lust for three A&P customers? However if readers look at the social climate during the writing of this story they may get a better understanding of what Updike is trying to do. Updike focuses on the products to reflect the growing trend in America of defining one's identity by what we are able to purchase and consume rather than through other social interactions. In the article, "Consumerism: Its Goals, Organizations and Future", Robert Herrmann points out that specialist who examine the consumer movement of the 1960s, "have attributed consumer unrest to rising public standards of business conduct and social responsibility brought about by increasing education and sophistication"(55). As Americans of this era became more widely educated and their sense of a cultural history continued to develop shopping became a bigger and bigger part of their lives. Consumer unrest also grew as people became more aware of the growing importance of shopping in their lives. John Updike focuses on brand names, and how people are socialized to act in supermarkets, to rebel against America's growing obsession with consumerism.

One of the most straight forward ways that Updike expresses his distaste for the growing consumer culture is his description of the A&P's customers. As the girls walk by the customers

he refers to them as, “The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle” (301). At first this may not seem like much of an insult, sheep being a pretty benign word. However if readers think about the argument put forward in the article, “Resistance on Aisle Three?: Exploring the Big Curriculum of Consumption and the (Im)Possibility of Resistance in John Updike’s ‘A&P’” where Stearns, Sandlin, and Burdick point out that, “Schor argues that consumption has also been associated with declining civic engagement community involvement, and everyday socializing among friends, neighbors, and community members”(396) they may see the bigger implications of this. The customers are not just sheep-like in their docility they also are becoming dehumanized by corporate America and its need for uninterested, uninvolved consumers. The description of the A&P customers as, “scared pigs in a chute” (304) would be the exact kind of dehumanized, inactive shoppers that the rise of consumerism creates and that Updike is bringing attention to.

Updike emphasizes the dehumanizing qualities of supermarkets by introducing a very human element, scantily clad girls, into the cold, stark setting of the supermarket. Readers can see how this new element would be very disturbing in the setting that is described in the article, “Supermarket Sociology” by David J. Alworth as, “the postmodern supermarket is full of human-to-nonhuman contact and all but devoid of any interfacing between humans” (314). Modern stores are created to focus their customer’s attention solely on the products they may want to buy. Updike interrupts this system with the opening line, “In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits” (300). It may not be immediately apparent why this new element challenges the system but Alworth does a good job of explaining it as,

The scandal of these girls, then, is not their premature sexuality but their unwitting seizure of a display technology intended to ensure that nonhumans

are always constituted as the objects of human attention. Furthermore, they reassert both human agency and human embodiment, however unaware they are of their effect on the other shoppers, in a site where nonhumans are the proper agents of seduction (315).

The real problem is not even the fact that the girls are scantily clad, the problem is really about them interrupting a social practice, shopping, that is becoming a major part of American life. By breaking social codes these girls are not just challenging the authority of the A&P they are also calling into question America's entire consumer based capitalist economy. In a setting that is characterized by its display of food such as its, "pyramid of Diet Delight Peaches" (302) the girls detract from the careful display of products by displaying their bodies. This depiction of the girls as a symbol of resistance helps explain not only the importance of the girls entering the A&P, but also clarifies the significance of Sammy's resignation. Sammy is not just rebelling against the authority of his A&P supervisor; he is questioning his own role in and acceptance of a system that reduces humans to numbers that can be manipulated for profit.

Not only does the "A & P" resist the dehumanizing effects of modern supermarket it also points out the artificiality of such establishments. In a supermarket where everything can be found in huge conglomerations such as the, "cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft-drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle"(301) described in the story, advertising becomes less about directing people towards what they need, and more about convincing people they need what you have. In the book, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, Thomas Frank describes this phenomenon saying that, "Roland Marchand has demonstrated that advertising before World War II advised consumers in navigating the complex and hazardous ways of modernity;

advertising in the sixties and afterwards counseled consumers on maintaining individuality and purpose in a time that sought to deny individuality” (133). Readers can see this type of marketing at work in the story through some of the descriptions of the supermarket items. Instead of just herring snacks readers are presented with, “Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream” (303). Customers cannot just settle for plain old herring instead they need it to be “fancy” herring in “pure” sour cream. What may seem like overemphasize on the description of the herring really serves to highlight how the proliferation of goods after World War II lead to artificial advertisements in an attempt to stay ahead of competition.

In the book, *Conversations with John Updike* it becomes apparent that Updike has always been interested in exploring the conflicts that define America which helps explain why he might have included anti-consumerist sentiments in his story. He is quoted as describing America as being, “founded as a utopia, and that’s always on our minds – that we’re falling short of being a utopia” (Plath, xiii). Readers can see that Updike is very interested in the social problems that plague everyday Americans. It makes sense that in coming from the view that America is a failing utopia Updike would focus on one of the big social problems of his time, the rise in consumer culture. Readers may question why Updike would not write about such a social problem in a more serious light or direct fashion but in the same book Updike is also quoted as saying that his writing is mainly concerned with, “the same old middle-class muddle that continues to charm me and that I continue to investigate as if it was going to reveal the secret of life” (xiii). It is not just the overarching social changes that are going on in the late fifties, early sixties that Updike is interested in, but rather how these changes are felt by the average citizen and their reactions to these changes.

It was no coincidence that Updike chose the A&P for the setting of a story that rallies against the consumerist trends in America. In the book, *The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America* Marc Levinson points out that,

A&P was at the center of a bitter political struggle that lasted for nearly half a century – a struggle that went far beyond economics. At its root were competing visions of society. One vision could be described with such words as “modern” and “scientific,” favoring the rationalism of cold corporate efficiency as a way to increase wealth and raise living standards. The other visions could fairly be termed “traditional.” Dating to Thomas Jefferson and his contemporaries, the traditional vision harked back to a society of autonomous farmers, craftsmen, and merchants in which personal independence was the source of individual opportunity and collective prosperity.

Readers can see that the A&P was not just an arbitrary location to choose. It had long been involved in debates about the benefits of a large corporations verses their negative traits of de-personalization and alienation. Not only does the story capture the resistance to a growing consumer culture in Sammy’s attempt to quit and become the girls, “unsuspected hero” (304) its setting also reflects the ongoing struggle because of its importance in the growth and spread of supermarkets. Using the A&P as a symbol of growth was especially relevant during a time that Jennie Stearns describes saying, “Politicians and popular discourse during the 1950s engaged in a “jingoistic celebration” of consumption, which was advocated as a way to national prosperity and shown as evidence of Western capitalism’s superiority” (399). Readers can see how the A&P in the story symbolizes the American way of life when Sammy contemplates the possibility that the A&P could be called the, “Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company” (302)

someday in the future. The A&P not only symbolizes the rise in consumer culture in America it also represents the strength of Western culture.

Overall John Updike's "A & P" is actually a very dense read. What at first may just seem like a mundane moment in Middle-Class America becomes much more in depth with a little background. By looking at the socioeconomic forces at work in America during this time readers can see that there is a strong anti-consumerism thread at work. It would be hard to believe that a writer like John Updike, who is interested in American culture, could be unaware of the messages about consumerism in his work. This message may also explain why the "A & P" has remained relevant in a world that if anything has become more consumeristic and depersonalized than the world Updike was living in while writing this work.

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"The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratisation of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society," Leach writes in his 1993 book "Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture". Significantly, it was individual desire that was democratised, rather than wealth or political and economic power. The glove section at an early department store, which changed the way people shopped (Credit: Getty Images). Release from the perils of famine and premature starvation was in place for most people in the industrialised world soon after WWI ended. See latest official data of Vaccine deaths and injuries for the EU (from late December 2020 to May 22, 2021). There are both medical and economic reasons and causes for a drastic world population to which the NYT alerts us. Why would they do that? To Prepare us for one of the most horrendous crimes in recent human history: Inventing (meaning man-made) an invincible corona virus. Another example is the US Patriot Act that was for years under preparation, way before 9/11; just waiting for a catastrophe - i.e., 9/11 - to be rushed through and accepted by the US Congress. It took away some 80% of people's freedoms and converted the laws of the land quasi into a permanent Martial Law - and it is still applicable today, even with some convenient additions for the reigning financial elite. The customers at the funfair were leaving (and/but) the lights were going out. The last two people on dodgem cars paid (and/so) left. The big wheel stopped (for/and) the merry-go-round stopped (as well/not only). The stalls closed down (so/and) the stall-owners went home. "We can have a ride on the merry-go-round!" one of them cried. "That'll be fun!" Three of them jumped on merry-go-round horses (yet/and) the fourth started the motor. Then he jumped on too (and/but) round they went. There was something about the way (that) the man walked that made Mr Boxell suspicious. He felt as if he had seen him before somewhere, and then remembered that he had - on TV! The man was a wanted criminal!