

Peter A. Smith

Professor Blinn

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Why Sammy Really Quits

At first glance, Sammy, the first-person narrator of John Updike's "A & P," would seem to present us with a simple and plausible explanation as to why he quits his job at the grocery store mentioned in the title: he is standing up for the girls that his boss, Lengel, has insulted. He even tries to sell us on this explanation by mentioning how the girls' embarrassment at the hands of the manager makes him feel "scrunchy" inside and by referring to himself as their "unsuspected hero" after he goes through with his "gesture" (15). Upon closer examination, though, it does not seem plausible that Sammy would have quit in defense of girls whom he quite evidently despises, despite the lustful desires they invoke, and that more likely explanations of his action lie in his boredom with his menial job and his desire to rebel against his parents.

While it's true that Sammy finds the three scantily-clad girls who enter the supermarket attractive, as would any normal nineteen-year-old male, what is most notable about his descriptions of the girls, and particularly of the "leader" of the group, is that Sammy holds them in contempt (15). Once we get beyond the descriptions of their bodies, we see nothing but derogatory comments directed at them, including the derisive nicknames that Sammy assigns to them. Nowhere is this more evident than in Sammy's description of the leader, "Queenie." The nickname assigned to her by Sammy points out the stereotypical snap judgment that Sammy makes about her personality and social

status initially, and to which Sammy rigidly adheres despite no real evidence of its accuracy. From the description of her "prima donna" legs, to his imagining of the type of party thrown by her supposedly rich parents, to his interpretation of her facial expression when confronted by Lengel (she remembers her superior social status), Sammy consistently portrays the girl as a stuck-up, spoiled rich kid who is just out to shake up the middle-class A & P (15). The notion that he would quit his job in defense of this person that he so evidently despises is ludicrous. In fact, prior to the description of Lengel's encounter with the girls, Sammy as much as admits the validity of the exact same objection that Lengel has to them, their appearance in swimsuits, when he offers us a description of the A & P's location: in the middle of town, miles from any beach, and where "the women generally put on a shirt or shorts or something before they get out of the car into the street."

A more likely explanation for Sammy's abrupt resignation from his job is his complete boredom with it. This dissatisfaction with his work situation is plainly seen in his regard for a group that Sammy holds in even more contempt than the girls: the regular, paying customers. His references to them as "sheep" (16), "houseslaves" (17), and "pigs" (19) reveals his attitude toward the group that keeps his employer in business—and Sammy in a job that he hates. His diatribe in the story's beginning directed at the "witch" who points out to him that he rang up the same purchase twice shows the unreasonable nature of this contempt for the customers: the mistake was quite clearly Sammy's fault, yet he lashes out at a customer who simply did what any reasonable person would have done in pointing out the cashier's mistake (16). Sammy's "cash register song" and his delight with the girls' breaking up the orderly shopping of the

"sheep," who are merely trying to buy the items on their grocery lists, further point out the scorn that Sammy has for his menial job (15). It is also clear from his mockery of Stokesie's ambitions to remain employed at the market and work his way up to manager "some sunny day" that he has no such long-term employment plans of his own (16). The "embarrassment" of the girls gives him just the excuse that he needs to do what he has evidently wished to do for a long time: quit his job.

That Sammy needs an excuse to quit is evident in his revelations about his family and their desire to see him in the cashier's job; Sammy views quitting the job as his way to assert his own independence. After all, Sammy introduces the climactic encounter between Lengel and the girls by telling us that his family thinks that the events that culminate in his resignation constitute the "sad" part of the story, although he is quick to add that he does not share this assessment (19). Sammy also implies that it was his parents who got him this job in the first place through their friendship with Lengel: "He's been a friend of my parents for years" (19). Lengel's reminder to Sammy that he doesn't want to "do this to [his] parents" when he abruptly announces his resignation serves as yet another link between obedience to parents and employment at the A & P (19). This also explains Sammy's evident contempt for yet another fixture at the A & P: Lengel. In Lengel's paternalistic reminder to the girls about the impropriety of their attire, as well as in his patient attempt to talk Sammy out of quitting his job, we can hear the voice of the parental figure. Lengel represents the middle-class respectability that Sammy so evidently despises in his own parents, as revealed in his description of the type of party that they throw, where cheap beer in cartoon glasses constitutes a "racy affair" (19). This is apparently the type of life that Sammy's parents have already mapped out for him in

securing him a position at the A & P -- the type of life that Sammy so desperately wants to avoid. In saying "no" to Lengel's suggestion that he relent and keep his job, Sammy is actually saying "no" to his parents and their attempt to put him on the road to middle-class respectability.

In the final analysis, it would seem that the most obvious explanation for why Sammy quits his job -- the one that he implies -- is actually the least plausible. While Sammy would like to portray himself as the fearless defender of the delicate sensibilities of innocent girls, the reality is that Sammy's motives in quitting have far more to do with his own sensibilities than with those of the three girls.

Work Cited

Updike, John. "A & P." *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*,
edited by X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, 9th ed., Longman, 2005, 15-20.