Setting and Character Development in “A&P”

The great American author John Updike is known for his portrayal of characters that experience difficulty as a result of their mundane lives and middle class existence. Sammy, the adventure-starved and rebellious teenage grocery store clerk of Updike’s “A&P” is no exception. In the story, Sammy is portrayed as a clever and imaginative boy who reaches an epiphany about himself when three swimsuit-clad girls enter his conventional workplace. Sammy’s discovery about his non-conformist disposition leads him to quit his job, though his actions do not win him the girls’ attention, striking Updike’s familiar theme of disappointment and leaving Sammy to wonder about himself. The story can thus be classified as a bildungsroman, or a coming-of-age story, and its setting and the characters involved are all present to push Sammy to his epiphany.

To achieve a message about growing up and finding oneself, the story presents us with a world of strict value systems and the conflict that comes when those systems are challenged. The crux of the story rests on the conflict between old and new ways of thinking. The story is set when it was written—1960s America, when teenagers, having grown up in the conservatism and sameness of the 50s, were becoming rebellious and hungry for change. Updike places Sammy in an A&P grocery store, a modest and ordinary place clinging to old fashioned ideals. Updike intersperses revelations about Sammy’s character throughout the story, confirming he is too imaginative and clever to exist in such a place. Updike chose such a conventional setting for this coming-of-age story in order to underscore Sammy’s stark contrast, invite characters in the
setting to make Sammy reconsider himself, give Sammy the opportunity to leave into the world outside the store, and ultimately portray his epiphany as inevitable and poignant.

Updike makes it clear from Sammy’s language that Sammy feels trapped in the store and is desperately searching for ways to relieve his misery. Sammy looks at the store as something different than what it is in order to make his job more interesting. For instance, he uses the phrase “Hello (bing) there, you (gung) hap-py pee-pul (splat)” to describe the sound of a transaction at the register (35). Further, he even takes extensive notice of the customers and derides them as annoyingly mainstream, comparing them to sheep (35) and even calling married women “houseslaves” (34). These observations and comparisons reveal Sammy as sensitive to his environment. He is critical of it and wants more from it. Updike makes it clear that Sammy is bound to have to escape the A&P, but he cannot be put into his attitude of rebellion until the other characters intensify the tension between him and the setting.

The characters in Sammy’s environment play as much a role in his development as the setting itself. The girls are minor characters who serve as agents that encourage Sammy’s awakening. Walking into the store in swimsuits in such a non-conformist action that Sammy admires it, even deciding that “Queenie,” the leader of the girls, comes from “a place from which the crowd that runs that A&P must look pretty crummy” (35). When Lengel—the manager and the other agent in the story—disapproves, it causes Sammy to speak out against what he believes to be wrong. Sammy’s epiphany is directly linked to the consequence of the girls entering the store, though they do not acknowledge his deed and are nowhere to be found once he makes his exit. Nonetheless, Sammy’s leaving from one setting to another is vital in fulfilling his process of self-discovery.
Sammy’s resignation is drastic and unexpected, and Sammy himself is the only one who can seem to understand his decision. The movement from one setting to another is important, as it represents liberation, though nothing is gained as a result. The A&P serves as a metaphor for the world of the ordinary and straightforward and the empty parking lot outside represents the open world Sammy wants to belong to, though he will need to discover for himself what he is capable of. Fittingly, the story ends with Sammy’s acknowledgement of a feeling about “how hard the world was going to be to [him]” (36), solidifying Sammy’s realization of his differences and how they will make life difficult for him, given Updike’s backdrop of 60s America and A&P-style values.

Work Cited