

Discussion/Study Questions for John Updike's "A&P"

1. Why is the title of this short story "A & P"? Would another title have worked just as well or is this one somehow appropriate to the story? (Setting) What role does the grocery store itself play in the story?
2. (Setting) What era would you place the setting of this story? Does the text indicate any reference to dates? Discuss Sammy's description of the year 1990.
3. Discuss the way the language sounds in this story. For example, is it formal or informal? Write down as many of the slang words that you can identify. What slang words do you think Sammy would use if the A&P grocery store were located in Saint Leo, Florida and the story was written in 2012?
4. Talk about the fashions that the narrator describes in "A&P." Be ready to read-back to the class any particular lines that describe the clothing. What do you think that Sammy would consider a "formal" and "informal" style of dress?
5. Discuss the element of "hypocrisy" in the story. For example, Sammy wonders why it seems okay for the townspeople to see people in their swimsuits at the beach but not at the market. What other examples of hypocrisy can you identify in the story? Is there anything about Sammy that comes across as hypocritical?
6. In a nutshell, how would you describe Mr. Lengel? Look in the text for all the clues about him. What are his responsibilities? What is his role in the community? Would you peg him as a liberal, a moderate, or a conservative? How do his social politics compare to Sammy's, for example? What about the other workers in the store: how are their values like or unlike Mr. Lengel's?
7. How does Updike describe the other "shoppers" in the market? There are at least six examples; see if you can find them. What do all of the words that describe the customers have in common? Are they a positive or negative characterization?
8. Look closely at the dialogue between Stokesie and Sammy after the sixth paragraph of the story. To what, exactly, are the two gentlemen "reacting"? If this scenario were to take place today, what might the public's reaction be? Is this sort of attitude normal? Expected? Perverted? Misogynist? Explore the various possibilities and be prepared to share with the class.
9. Why, exactly, does Sammy quit his job at the A&P? What, if any, are his reasons? Do you think that Sammy made the "right" decision to quit? Do you think his "heroic" gesture changed anything?

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10. Look closely at Mr. Lengel's reaction to Sammy's resignation. Lengel says that Sammy will "always feel this." Sammy agreed with Mr. Lengel. What does that mean? Do you think that Sammy will *really* never forget this? Why or why not? What do you think Sammy will remember [or have learned] from this incident some years down the road?
11. Discuss the relationships of "POWER" in the short story "A&P." For example, the relationship of power at the supermarket itself is that there is a hierarchy of management from those at the very "top" to those at the very "bottom." Look at all the characters in the story and decide where their "power" lies within the scheme of the story. What/who does each character (or set of characters) have power over (their responsibilities) and who/what has power over them (their superiors)? What power(s) do the customers have in the A&P?
12. It might be said that "A&P" is something of a modern-day "fairy-tale." Would you agree with this assessment? (Stereotype Characters) Who would the "prince," the "princess," the "dragon," etc. be in "A&P" Be creative and think of as many analogies as you can. What are the similarities to "A&P" and a typical fairy-tale? How are they different (for example, the final outcome)? Is Sammy chivalric (means having the idealistic qualities of a knight in the medieval times of chivalry)?
13. (Conflict) Consider the possibility that Updike might have contrasted the indoor world of the A&P where Sammy and his co-workers "existed" (synthetic, artificial) with the outdoor world from where the girls came in (natural). Be creative, but try to point out examples from the text, and show how these two "worlds" differ. For example, you might think about the fake, fluorescent lights in the store and the "real" sun outside that can give someone "sunburn." Like Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," is there a difference/contrast between the world "inside" the A&P and the outside world?
14. In Literature, a work like "A&P" is called a "coming-of-age" story. It usually suggests a loss of innocence or an "epiphany" that leads to maturity. Sometimes this means accepting responsibility (and becoming more like an adult). Think back on either books or films that you have experienced either in or out of this class that might have the "coming-of-age" theme. Make a list and share it with the class, e.g., *Pretty in Pink*, *Stand by Me*, *Stealing Beauty*, etc. Finally, consider the protagonist of "A&P" and the "change" that occurs in his character; decide why a label like "coming-of-age" is (or isn't) appropriate to this story.