The One Who Changed: An Analysis of "A & P" and Sammy's Epiphany

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English 200

Queer feminist literature is no longer something you need to ask a librarian for help finding. With a mind open to alternate interpretation, you can find it nearly anywhere. "A & P", by John Updike, is one of those stories, and it does not take much effort to turn it into that genre. One of the most key elements of my paper involves interpreting Sammy, the main character, as a woman. While the story never outright states Sammy's gender, many readers assume the characters are men, because of the way they are written. I want to challenge this idea though, and interpret Sammy as female. By looking at her through that perspective, her epiphany becomes that much more significant, and a lot of her behavior has better explanations too. Rather than being one of those stories when some awkward boy fantasizes about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture one of those stories when some awkward boy fantasizes about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told. In this paper about girls, judges them, and does some grand gesture for their attention, a different story is told.

One of the first things to accept in this interpretation is that Sammy is definitely suffering from internalized misogyny. Internalized misogyny affects many women: your mother when you warned you against giving boys the wrong idea to your friends when they tell you what a slut their frenemy has been. Sammy is just as guilty. She starts off judging all the girls for their appearances, and in her head has assigned them all roles and personalities that they might not necessarily live up to. But the real telling bit comes from where she talks of girls as a whole: "You never really know how girl's minds work (do you really think it's a mind in there or just like a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar?)" (Updike 19). Sammy is very critical of women, but pays special attention to the one she deems Queenie.

Girl on girl hate is terrible. It ruins friendships, it pits women against each other, and it is not helpful in anyway. But Sammy is definitely guilty of it. She's overly critical of the three girls that come in. She criticizes the one in the green swimsuit for her weight. Her judgement of the tall one is particularly telling. Sammy calls her "the kind of girl other girls think is 'very striking' and 'attractive' but never quite makes it, as they well know, which is why they like her so much" (Updike 17). Not only does this show how well Sammy understands the dynamic of women friendships, but how she believes that other girls judge each other too. In a way this shows her belief of justification for her judging these girls.

The most telling part comes from her judgments of Queenie. She sets the queen up on a throne. Just because she has put her on a pedestal doesn't mean that Sammy has kind words for her. In fact, Sammy seems the most judgmental of her. Sammy assumes that this girl is the mastermind of the group. Sammy pays special attention to Queenie, describing her in great detail, but there is still that tinge of something almost akin to jealousy in her tone. Sammy talks of the way she walks, how she "didn't walk in her bare feet that much" and compares her to something much more high class than what Sammy is used to (Updike 17). One of the most telling parts comes towards the beginning of the climax: "Still with that prim look she lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top" (Updike 19). Sammy is still thinking of the other girl as something proper, something different from her. Of course, only one sentence later Sammy admits that it was "so cute", which leads into my next area to examine.

In the very least, Sammy's a little bicurious. Yes, she judges these girls harshly, but that's because of a multitude of reasons. In part it is because she is jealous of them. This shows up many times and is easy to see in her judgments of the girls. I don't think she is just jealous of how they look, but also that they have this free time. While Sammy works, these girls can just trapeze around in their swimsuits. But I think that her biggest issue is that she likes girls. It's not that big of an issue, but for Sammy, it is. I think she struggles with being attracted to girls. On one hand she accepts it and looks at these girls because they are pretty; On the other hand, she is struggling, and cutting them down and criticizing them is a way for her to avoid addressing her feelings for them. Sammy is unable to completely stuff her feelings for the queen: "She held her head so high her neck, coming out of those white shoulders, looked very stretched, but I didn't mind. The longer her neck was, the more of her there was" (Updike 17). Sammy talks so much about Queenie, and sets her up a certain way in her mind, which makes the reveal of the Queen's voice so perspective-changing.

The reveal of the queen's voice is very important, because it helps lead Sammy to her epiphany: "Her voice kind of startled me, the way voices do when you see the people first" (Updike 19). Everything that Sammy had built Queenie up to be changes. Suddenly rather than viewing Queenie as other, Sammy regards them as similar. She even thinks of how they could be dealing with similar situations with their families. Hearing Queenie's voice helps Sammy relate to her and think of her as someone experiencing the same things as Sammy rather than just some girl in a swimsuit.

Recognizing Queenie as a person is a very important part of Sammy's development. Just as important is why Queenie spoke. Lengel, the store's manager and the story's antagonist, comes out of nowhere to basically make the girls feel bad about themselves. He makes multiple comments about how they are not dressed properly and he is very rude. It flusters the girls, especially Queenie whose blush becomes more and more noticeable. Sammy has yet to ring up their purchase, but hurries to do so after Lengel makes it clear.
that the girls don't belong there. In this I think it truly shows Sammy as female. Sammy can think whatever she chooses about the other girls, ranging from the mean- "Queenie and Plaid and Big Tall Goony-Goony" to the perverse- calling Queenie's boobs "the two smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known" (Updike 19 & 20). However, a man speaking out about it is unacceptable. The dismissive and rude way that Lengel talks to the girls angers Sammy. She rings them up and as the trio hurries out, Sammy quits.

Sammy's resignation from her job is swift. She explains to Lengel that she quit, she takes her apron off, and she leaves the grocery store. Sammy looks around for the girls in their swimsuits, but they are gone. The closing line is dark: "my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter." [20], but at the same time, I still think the ending has a bit of a positive spin to it. If you compare Sammy at the beginning of the story to who she is at the end, she's different. Yes, she's still a little weird with her feelings towards the swimsuit trio, calling them "my girls", but I like to believe that she has changed (Updike 20). Sammy finally stands up for the swimsuit trio rather than cutting them down. While it's a small step, it's a step in the right direction. As a reader, I would like to believe that the incident would inspire her to stop hating her own gender.

The reader gets to experience Sammy's epiphany with her. She doesn't outright state it, but you can see it happen as you read the story. It is very clear in this excerpt from page 20 that something has shifted in Sammy's thinking. After selling the snack to the girls, Sammy announces that she is quitting as the girls walk out of the store. The following interaction happens between Lengel and Sammy:

"Did you say something, Sammy?"
"I said I quit."
"I thought you did."
"You didn't have to embarrass them."
"It was they who were embarrassing us."

I started to say something that came out "Fiddle-de-doo." It's a saying of my grandmother's, and I know she would have been pleased.
"I don't think you know what you're saying."
"I know you don't," I said. "But I do." (Updike 20)

A lot happens in this conversation. The most obvious thing is that Sammy quits, this hint that Sammy is working towards possibly making some progress with her issues of internalized misogyny among other things. The line about her grandmother is especially important to me, because it shows how her grandmother would be pleased to see her standing up for these other girls rather than cutting them down. This shows a possible positive female role model that Sammy has had in her life. Sammy's line about Lengel not understanding is also especially important. Lengel might not understand her reasoning, but Sammy does.

Her epiphany comes in two parts. The first part came when she realizes that Queenie is a person just like her. Queenie wasn't some impossible ideal. The girl in the beige swimsuit, was just trying to get a snack for her mom. Queenie was a lot like Sammy, stuck doing something that made her feel awkward. The other part comes in this interaction. Sammy knows that in quitting, she's going to disappoint her parents and also that she might not find another job. But she doesn't let her fears stop her from resigning (Updike 20). She makes a decision for herself. Even though Sammy expresses nervousness at the end of the story, she looks back on the situation differently. Around the middle of the story, she reveals what her true feelings are: "Now here comes the sad part of the story, at least my family says it's sad but I don't think it's sad myself." (Updike 18).

By changing Sammy's perceived gender, the whole story changes. There's more of a struggle with her feelings, the time she takes to describe the swimsuits the girls wear makes sense, and her judgments of them and how they look also becomes an internalized judgment on herself. Her comment about buzzing in the heads of girls becomes less insulting and more self depreciating. Most interestingly, it changes this story into something a little more unique, giving it a queer protagonist, which shifts the story in a lot of ways. It also makes Sammy's epiphany that much more important. It is not just some clerk realizing that the customers are people too, it is creating a bridge between two girls who come from different backgrounds; it highlights sexism and classism. Not only that, but it creates a more hopeful ending. Yes, Sammy has lost her job, but perhaps she will start to learn how to stop hating herself and other girls. If more stories could end with girls having revelations like that, I would be very happy.

**Works Cited**