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Literature Studies

Essay #1

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### “Queens” Inspiring Individualism

Anyone who has worked in the retail industry knows that it’s easy to feel trapped. A repetitive routine, power-hungry workplace dynamics, and an unrelenting desire to quit. In “A & P” by John Updike, the protagonist, Sammy, encountered all three. Throughout “A & P,” Sammy expressed an objectifying obsession with a few girls who entered the store. However, he also pointed out several of his grievances with working at the A & P. Sammy quit his job not only to impulsively be seen as a hero to the girls he’d been admiring but because he saw an opportunity to get out of a situation he hated and was inspired by the girls’ individualism.

Despite what he might want the reader to think, Sammy’s impulsive decision to quit was originally rooted in his desire to be a hero to the girls. Ever since the moment three girls walked into the A & P wearing only their bathing suits, Sammy was entranced. He became fixated on every part of their bodies, from looking at the tops of the backs of their legs to the detail of the stitching on their bras, claiming that since the “chunky one” still had a pale stomach and her bright green swimsuit top’s “seams were still sharp,” the suit had to have been brand new (347). While admiring them, he still had plenty of rude things to say about them. When describing the second girl of the trio, he said her hair “hadn’t quite frizzed right,” her chin was too long, and she had a “chubby berry-face” (347). He held the girls to an impossible standard, immediately assessing their beauty and seeking imperfections. He also had a sexist viewpoint on women appropriate for the story’s 1960s setting. As he watched the “queen” of the group, with her “long white Primadonna legs” walk across the floor, he insulted the girls’ intelligence, saying, “You never know for sure how girls’ minds work (do you really think it’s a mind in there or just a little

buzz like a bee in a glass jar?),” implying that they acted as if they were inexperienced in walking (347). He was most taken aback by the “queen,” both her appearance and the confident control she used as she carried herself and her trio throughout the store. Her suit was described as a “dirty pink” top with a little nubble texture on it, and, to Sammy, “what got me, the straps were down” (347). He was captivated by skin showing across her chest, as “there was nothing between the top of the suit and the top of her head except just *her*, this clean bare plane of the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light” (348). Sammy generalized that “women generally put on a shirt or shirts or something before they get out of the car into the street,” yet said nothing about what was expected attire for men entering the store (348). Despite being caught off guard by her risqué appearance, he was captivated by her presence, describing her as “more than pretty,” but qualifying her beauty by concluding that “walking into the A&P with your straps down, I suppose it’s the only kind of face you *can* have” (348). By downplaying the intelligence of the girls and remaining fascinated by their appearances, he is setting himself up to be a ‘knight in shining armor’ for them when he quits.

Sammy’s outlook on the girls changed when he saw his grumpy old boss ogling the girls the way he just had. Despite previously examining their presence so close he could see how fresh the threads of their bathing suits were, he was disgusted by the way McMahon began “sizing up their joints” (349). This change of perspective allowed him to see the girls as humans with actual feelings, and he began to pity them, realizing “they couldn’t help it” that men treated them like strippers when they were just trying to get a snack for their fun day at the beach. While he was still immaturely enthralled by the “queen” pulling her payment from the hole in her bathing suit top, and still examining their behinds, describing “the plump one in plaid” as the one “that I liked better from the back,” this realization triggered his self-awareness (350). The girls earned sympathy from him, and he sought to protect them from misguided stares. They became a

symbol of innocence to him, just living their life without caring about people looking at them. The girls were something different from what he was used to. Most people in the town hadn't seen the beach in years and were so focused on work to survive. But the girls symbolized a way out. They were in a higher social class than Sammy and privileged enough to be taking a beach trip in fancy little swimsuits and were an innocent separation from the consumerist world he was surrounded by. Sammy was inspired by their freedom as he thought about the environment, he was forced to work in. When he looked at his boss, he said "remembering how he made that pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy inside" (351). The way his boss sexualized the girls made him see how Lengel held his power over everyone, that "he had been thinking all these years the A & P was a big great dune and he was the head lifeguard" (350). Lengel was incredibly self-righteous, dismissing the girls as embarrassing to the store.

More than ever before, he felt like a cog in a machine, just going through the motions. He saw the customers waiting in line like sheep as if they were awaiting their slaughter. While he still had hoped the girls would see "their unsuspected hero" step up for them, Sammy only uttered the words "I quit" because he was truly frustrated with his workplace and how he and those around him were treated (350). While he hesitated immediately afterward, he reasserted his proclamation one more, saying, "it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it" (351). This shows his character, that quitting to him was taking a stand and showing his individualism just as the girls had. Compared to the other customers roaming the store, described as "a few housewives in pin curlers," flocking like mindless "sheep" in the socially contracted flow of traffic down the aisles, they were perceived as underdressed, and walking against the natural order of things (348). Their obliviousness to the social contract of conformity present in the store made Sammy realize he had the ability to do what he wanted, even if it wasn't what was expected of him. If he backed down, Lengel would've won. If

someone threatens to quit and stays, they are showing that they can be pushed around, and Sammy didn't want to stay in the slaughtering line. Quitting is separating himself from the system that humiliated the girls so that he can give himself room to grow from what he learned. Thanks to his subconscious need to impress the girls with his own display of individuality, he was standing up for the principle of justice for the girls and himself.

At the end of the story, he said, "I felt how hard the world was going to be for me hereafter" (351). While this may have sounded silly to say after quitting a grocery store job, taking a stand at A & P changed his perception, his income, and how those around him would view him. Sammy chose not to be a "sheep" at a time when it was head-turning to choose individualism. He was afraid of the karma his actions would bring him, as a world of convention isn't the biggest fan of a protester or quitter. Not only that but to his family, quitting was a disappointment and made him a failure. Overall, Sammy's stand against society was motivated by the temptation of wanting to impress "his girls," as well as his desire to do something more fulfilling and ambitious with his life, embracing individuality.