

Interpretive Essay

Updike explores the societal divide due to generational conflict in the 1960s in his short fiction piece titled "A&P." Drastic differences between the stricter upbringings of the "Silent Generation" following the Great Depression, born between the years 1925 and 1945 and the less demanding, sheltered upbringing of "Boomers," prompted constant conflict as Boomers found their purpose and role in a steadily changing society. During the Boomers' generation, parents often criticized this seemingly robust, free-spirited generation that made it their mission to experience life without limitations. Many boomers were ridiculed for their long hair, drug use, random sexual encounters, and dress choices, as expressed in "A&P." Updike's interchanging casual, discomfort, and bold tones emphasize this tension.

Before diving into the story, it is important to know a little about the author, John Updike. Born in March of 1932, Updike falls into the Silent Generation of Americans born during or just after the end of the Great Depression. Often, the parents of the Silent Generation are portrayed as stern, and firm believers in the "children should be seen and not heard parenting philosophy" (Hutton). It is often coined that because of this, the Silent Generation has a profound "toughness" about their approach to life. However, this negatively impacted the Silent Generation's ability to express emotion. Repressed feelings prevented ease in bonding with close friends and loved ones. It was common for people in this generation to remain silent for fear of being called communists or social outcasts or simply because they wanted to please their parents. It is no wonder there was so much tension between this generation and the Boomer generation born between 1946 and 1964. The Boomers were ridiculed for their outspoken nature and courage to stand up for themselves. Updike uses tone to eloquently convey all these specifics in

his short story, "A&P." First, the story is introduced in a casual tone. In the first-person point of view, Sammy, the main character, narrates the story. It all begins with the girls in bathing suits walking into the store and stealing the attention of all the other shoppers, including Sammy himself. Sammy takes in every detail of the girls and admits how attracted he is to them. He then goes on to describe the simple-mindedness of his coworker, the condemnatory nature of the other people shopping in the store, and the seeming absentmindedness of the girls who have entered the store.

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)...

(Updike, 94)

Updike's casual tone mimics the bluntness that the Boomer generation was known for. This introduces the setting for the conflict that is soon to happen between Sammy and his boss, Lengel. It also reflects the generational contrasts Updike is transmitting through the story.

The next tone that Updike uses is discomfort. Fast-forwarding to the scene when Lengel confronts the girls for being dressed "indecently" in his store, Sammy's tone shifts as he experiences second-hand embarrassment for them. This change directs the reader to the rising action before the climax, as the reader single-handedly witnesses the mixed emotions that Sammy expresses.

He didn't like my smiling—as I say he doesn't miss much—but he concentrates on giving the girls that sad Sunday-school-superintendent stare...

I uncrease the bill, tenderly as you may imagine, it just having come from between the smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known were there and pass a half and a penny into her narrow pink palm, and nestle the herrings in a bag and twist its neck and hand it over, all the time thinking.

(Updike, 97)

Soon after, Sammy spontaneously quits his job. As the words leave his mouth, even he is surprised and repeats them firmly when Lengel questions him. Lengel expresses his disappointment in Sammy and even tries to convince him that he does not mean it. Sammy also narrates an inward battle with himself, but the rush that Sammy feels and the courage to stand up for the girls drives him on.

'You'll feel this for the rest of your life,' Lengel says, and I know that's true too, but remembering how he made that pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy inside I punch the No Sale tab and the machine whirs "pee-pul" and the drawer splats out.

(Updike, 97)

During Sammy's moment of standing up for the girls, Lengel masks his discomfort through judgmental accusations toward Sammy. As Lengel perceives it, Sammy is committing the ultimate taboo by speaking out, something Lengel had been taught never to do. Considering his upbringing, Lengel cannot help but feel sincere about Sammy's parents' disappointment if he follows through with his actions.

Lengel sighs and begins to look very patient and old and gray. He's been a friend of my parents for years. 'Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad,' he tells me. It's true, I don't.

But it seems to me that once you begin a gesture, it's fatal not to go through with it.

(Updike, 97)

During the heat of the moment, Updike effectively addresses the different mindsets of Sammy and Lengel, further emphasizing the generational divide that affects the story. Sammy hadn't considered his parents' thoughts until Lengel brought it up. His main concern at that moment was standing up for what he believed was right. At first, this caused him some discomfort, but as we progress to the final tone, the uneasiness seems to dissipate as Sammy holds true to his decision.

Last but not least, Updike uses a bold narrative voice to emphasize the generational divide in the story. The discomfort and bold tones sort of bleed into one another as Sammy is shaken about his radical decision but still proud. Admirably, Sammy manages to remain respectful throughout the entire ordeal. Despite his internal turmoil, he often comes back with witty or nonchalant responses. As stated in the previous paragraph, he knew he was doing something rash, but he cared more about what was right. He rips off his uniform and walks out of the convenience store, emphasizing the free-bird mentality Updike hopes to convey through Sammy as it pertains to the Boomer mindset. Updike also narrates Sammy's refusal to conform and to "remain silent" when he describes the other shoppers as sheep. Without a doubt, there may have been others in the crowd that felt that Lengel's actions were wrong, but only Sammy takes a stand, which intensifies the scene unfolding.

All this while, the customers had been showing up with their carts but, you know, sheep, seeing a scene, they had all bunched up on Stokesie...

(Updike, 96)

Sammy mentions the shopper's attitudes to prove his point when standing up for the girls. Seeing as no one else seemed to have the heart to do so, Sammy persists, transforming his discomfort into a sense of determination. However, Sammy switches back to an uncertain tone towards the end when he considers that there will probably be many things in life he disagrees with, yet he can't stand up for them all.

...I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His face was dark and gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.

(Updike, 97)

Lengel's words get into his psyche as he honors his regret but is still proud of his personal decision.

Updike's ability to address societal tensions between two different generations was achieved primarily using tone in his literary work "A&P." As expressed in the story, Lengel and his generation were taught that boldness was a ridiculous way to show off and bring shame to their parents, which is why he critically emphasizes this to Sammy in the middle of his audacious

act. Nonetheless, Sammy is pleased overall with his decision but knows that life will never be easy for someone like him with a passion for standing up for what is right.

Works Cited

Abcarian, Richard, et al. *Literature : The Human Experience*. Boston, Bedford/St. Martins, 2019.

Hutton. "What Is The Silent Generation: The 1920s-1940s Kids." *Image Restoration Center*, 2022, imagerestorationcenter.com/what-is-the-silent-generation/#:~:text=Some%20people%20also%20posited%20that%20the%20Silent%20Generation,their%20silence%20in%20history%20compared%20to%20other%20generations.

Swendson, Paul. "The Ultimate Generation Gap of the 1960s." *Soapboxie*, 14 Apr. 2022, soapboxie.com/social-issues/The-Ultimate-Generation-Gap-of-the-1960s#comments.