John Updike: A & P

Everyone is a product of their own choices; for the most part, these choices result from experiences we undergo in life. Therefore we can argue that choices are a measure of maturity. The more rational the choice, the more mature an individual is. Naiveness can be translated to immaturity, synonymous with a lack of experience in the given field or context. The essay looks through the character of Sammy, the short story “A & P” by John Updike, suggesting that maturation is a complex process that takes time.

The environment at and around A&P is diverse as it is a meeting point for many people. Being diverse, Sammy is exposed to different people who, according to John Updike, are a part of the summer colony. Despite the diversity, one theme stands out; everyone minds their business. “...and the women generally put on a shirt or shorts or something before they get out of the car into the street. And anyway these are usually women with six children and varicose veins mapping their legs, and nobody, including them, could care less” (383). Given the context, society expects such women to behave and dress decently as their character greatly influences their children and others around them, Sammy included. At the same time, Sammy is confined in an environment that upholds decency, thanks to Lengel, a Sunday school teacher who has been friends with Sammy’s parents for years. As such, Sammy is torn between two worlds, one that upholds decency and another that does not. Between the two worlds, Lengel’s relationship is more important than that of the fleeting summer colony. Sammy proves immature because he chooses to side with the three girls at the cost of his relationship with Lengel. It can also be argued that Sammy’s current job might be due to the relationship between Lengel and Sammy’s parents. However, Sammy quits his job for people who barely know him and would care less that he lost his job defending them.

It is clear that Sammy was attracted to the three ladies, especially Queenie, as soon as they walked into A & P. According to the story, Sammy was lost in their movement around the store that he could tell how hard one of the ladies was on her heels. “She must have felt in the corner of her eye me and over my shoulder Stokesie in the second slot watching, but she didn't tip. Not this queen. She kept her eyes moving across the racks, stopped, and turned so slow it made my stomach rub the inside of my apron” (383).Although Sammy watched their every move while in the store, the three girls, especially Queenie, didn’t bother or at least acknowledge the advancements from Sammy or anyone. Eventually, Queenie and her side-kicks came to the counter. At this point, Sammy could discern how smart Queenie is based on her voice. “Her voice kind of startled me, the way voices do when you see the people first, coming out so flat and dumb yet kind of tony, too,” It is clear that while Queenie was beautiful, she was not the smartest in the block. At this point, Sammy was well aware of Queenie’s shortcomings. The immaturity in this context can therefore be seen in Sammy’s emotional attraction to a stranger only because of her looks. Despite this truth, Sammy went on to quit his job.

But why did Sammy quit his job? The events leading to Sammy’s eventual decision to quit his job started when Lengel returned to the store. Being a Sunday school teacher, it is evident that Lengel was a religious person. As such indecent dressing was against what he stood for. To defend his beliefs, Lengel confronted the three girls about their dressing. “We want you decently dressed when you come in here” (385). From the moment the three girls walked into the store, it became apparent that the register was the only place Sammy would make his advances. Because Stokes was busy attending to an old party, the three girls walked to Sammy’s counter. It was here that Sammy would make a move until Lengel showed up. Lengel’s confrontation made things difficult for Sammy because by then, the three ladies felt offended, and the change in mood meant it would be hard for Sammy to advance. The uncomfortable situation herein made the ladies haste their leave from the store; this meant that Sammy’s chance to talk to the ladies had been blown. Without thinking, Sammy quit his job in an effort to impress the ladies and maybe continue his initial advancements. The main reason behind Sammy’s decision to quit his job was to impress the ladies. While it was a bold move, Sammy failed to weigh his options. Even after quitting his job, Sammy didn’t get to talk to the ladies. Here, Sammy realized he had made a mistake, “...as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world would be to me hereafter” (387).

Indeed maturity is a complex process that takes time. In this case, time provides the experiences needed for maturity. While not entirely true, the older we get, the more mature we become. Sammy is an example of many going through the complex phases of maturity where failure is part of the process. In the next phase of maturity, it can be argued that Sammy would know better than to quit his job for a stranger. While Sammy’s story is sad, it brings into perspective the maturity process. Failure is part of the process; no one should beat themselves hard but learn from their failures; this is the Zen of maturity.

Work Cited.

Updike, John. “A & P.” The Norton Introduction to Literature, edited by Kelly J. Mays,

Portable 13th ed., W.W Norton & Co., 2017, pp. 382-387.