

Shopping for Social Evolution

In the story "A & P" by John Updike, a nineteen year old cashier named Sammy muses to himself, "That's policy for you. Policy is what the kingpins want. What the others want is juvenile delinquency" (856). At first glance, this seems like a surprisingly tired outlook on the older generation, especially coming from someone so young. With it, however, Sammy opens a window for us to view the clashing interests of staunch cultural traditionalism with the human drive for individuality and self-realization. This battle for the mind takes place in every facet of cultural experience, and is such a common thread throughout our history that it is often overlooked as the real cause of the sweeping changes that have occurred in human thought and behavior. It should come as no surprise that the individual's tendency towards the self is at the root of Sammy's decision to quit his job at the A & P.

It is the nature of the human mind, given the freedom of time and the autonomy of thought, to challenge the everyday assumptions of contemporary culture which surround it. Ironically, it is the very mechanisms of culture which allow individuals, both now and in the past, to exercise this most basic of human traits. For example, in the ancient Greek world, mass production of food and specialization of labor culminated in a sizable middle and upper class who were essentially freed up from the tasks of day-to-day survival. Some of these individuals, like Pericles, pursued their interests in politics, seized power, and shaped the foundations of modern democracy. Others pushed the envelope of art, architecture, and technology. And still others, like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, became philosophers, and challenged (correctly, I might add) the very assumptions and beliefs of the culture that supported them. In other words, cultural traditions, and the challenging of cultural traditions, are inseparable. One could not exist without the other, and the give and take between these two factors leads to a natural evolution that shapes our development, both as a species and as individuals.

In general, cultural traditionalism arises when a particular set of rules, methods, and beliefs is successful enough to allow a group of people to survive in a specific environment. The traditional ideas of religion, propriety, and status slowly become a kind of code through which order and, more importantly, control are maintained by the ruling or governing body. In turn, these cultural traditions become the mechanism through which wealth, goods, and information are disseminated from the elite to the population as a whole. This tendency of culture to curl inward and serve relatively few at the expense of many can also be viewed as a safety valve of sorts; it invariably leads to discontent, and triggers challenges to its value systems that almost always result in a restructuring of the culture in some way.

"Cut! Take two!" the cultural director yells. As the changes happen, those that are too set in their ways to move quickly to the next scene become extras, or they simply end up on the cutting room floor. Viewed through this lens, it becomes easy to see the whole of human history, from modern day civilizations to the earliest groups of upright walking hominids, as a straight and predictable line. Today, some people believe that America is the pinnacle of cultural evolution, representing a selection and nurturing of the very best ideas that human history has had to offer, and in some ways, this is probably true. But given what history shows us, who in their right mind would think that change would stop here? Or in the 1960's? Well, Sammy's manager, Lengel, for one.

Lengel would like to think of culture as a rock never moving because he has been inculcated into the system, with all of its beliefs, accepted modes of expression, and taboos. As a reward for his fealty, Lengel has been somewhat nurtured. He is relatively successful in the work force and respected in society as a manager of the A & P and as a Sunday school teacher. In short, Lengel is comfortable. Therefore, anything that challenges the status quo in any way is automatically viewed as a threat rather than a virtue. You can almost hear Lengel whining, "But this is the way it's always been!" as the sexual revolution unfolds and his world crumbles around him. The cultural director walks up and says, "No, Lengel, it hasn't always been this way. Sorry. Oh, and by the way, you may not want to watch this part."

Not surprisingly, Sammy is practically bursting at the seams to see what comes next. When he imagines what Queenie's life is like, he envisions a party where "her father and the other men [are] standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties and the women [are] . . . picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big glass plate and they [are] all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them" (855). Sammy then contrasts the world he imagines for Queenie with his own, reflecting that "when [his] parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it's a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses with . . . cartoons stenciled on" (855). We can see here that Sammy feels a measure of contempt for the life his parents lead, likely because in them, he sees his own future looming. We also see that Sammy is covetous of Queenie's more glamorous life, even if it is pure fantasy conjured out of a forty-nine cent jar of pickled fish and sour cream. Sammy wants something better than the status quo, even if he doesn't know what it is yet.

It is often the role of the next generation to shake things up and challenge cultural assumptions. Like the three girls in the story, Sammy recognizes this on a visceral level, and the careful reader can tell that it's been eating at him for some time. He sees the hypocrisy and empty promises inherent in the system, and he senses the glass ceiling that has been placed over his social ladder by the very society in which he lives. The three girls that come into the store after their day at the beach are like the sirens in Odysseus; they beckon, and Sammy must follow their music even though he fears that it means hardship for him. Something tells me that he's going to be okay, though, in spite of all the rocks ahead. History wouldn't have it any other way.

Work Cited

Updike, John. "A & P." Literature for Composition. 6th ed. Ed. Sylvan Barnet et al. San Diego: Longman, 2003. 853-857.

Instructor's Note: The assignment that launched Marc's essay was a causal analysis assignment: to analyze the elements that caused or created an action in a story. The assignment also suggested that students bear in mind when writing about literature to provide insights outside the boundaries of the story that help readers gain further insight into the meaning of the work. This writing goal, beautifully illustrated in Marc's essay, offers readers an insight into Updike's "A & P" that is both entertaining and profound.

--Teri Pastore