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Sammy's Erotic Experience: Subjectivity and Sexual Difference in John Updike's "A & P"

Greg W. Bentley

- 1 First published in *The New Yorker* (July 22: 22-24) in 1961, John Updike's "A & P" stands at the vanguard of the 60's movement, especially the sexual revolution and feminism. Briefly, "A & P" focuses on one day in the life of a nineteen-year-old grocery-store clerk, Sammy. When three young girls enter the A & P wearing nothing but swimsuits, Sammy immediately notices their presence, as does everyone else in the store. Coming in from out back, Lengel, the store manager, confronts the girls. Claiming that they are dressed indecently, he tells them that they can return only when they are properly attired. Incensed because Lengel embarrasses the girls, Sammy quits. Although the girls fail to observe Sammy's heroic gesture, he nevertheless keeps his resolve. The story concludes with Sammy calmly and coolly exiting the store.
- 2 The story's popularity and its significance, however, stem from more than just its historical position. Fictionally, it represents "an urgent feminist project," a phrase that Kaja Silverman, one of psychoanalytic semiotics' most prominent voices, employs to describe her work *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. Aware of the irony of developing a feminist text that centers on concepts of masculinity, Silverman argues that "[t]o effect a large-scale reconfiguration of male identification and desire would, at the very least, permit female subjectivity to be lived differently than it is at present..." (2-3). At the same time, Silverman argues that "[t]he theoretical articulation of some non-phallic masculinities...would render null and void virtually everything else that commands general belief" (3). Working from Silverman's ambitious and provocative theoretical bases, I propose to illustrate how Updike's protagonist, Sammy, represents an example of the reconfiguration of male identification and desire of which Silverman speaks. Even more specifically, I argue that Sammy's encounter at the A & P, rather than a simple sexual adventure, represents a genuine erotic experience, for it not only compels him to divest his subjectivity of conventional masculine ideologies—especially

a subjectivity rooted in sexual difference—but it also compels him to develop and embody a subjectivity predicated on the *absence* of sexual difference, a development that marks a substantive *rite de passage* for him.

- 3 Psychoanalytic semiotics posits the fundamental notion that there is no sexual difference between men and women—at least psychically. However, because of the overt biological differences between men and women, culture consistently defines and differentiates manhood and womanhood by those physical, sexual categories. Thus, as Silverman notes, “[m]ale’ and ‘female’ constitute our dominant fiction’s most fundamental binary opposition” (34-35). Because of this sexual bifurcation, moreover, the dominant fiction, a category largely synonymous with the patriarchal structure, privileges the male over the female, and a man’s privilege largely resides in his sexuality. As Silverman states, “exemplary’ male subjectivity cannot be thought apart from ideology, not only because ideology holds out the mirror within which that subjectivity is constructed, but because the latter depends upon a kind of collective make-believe in the commensurability of penis and phallus” (15). That is, our dominant fiction is predicated on the ideology that the male, because of the “potency” of his anatomical appendage, simultaneously embodies the privileged signifier—the phallus.¹ Thus, as Silverman concludes, within our dominant fiction a subject who “lays claim to normative [male] identity,”—modeled on the positive Oedipal complex—is “sexually, as well as economically, ‘captated’” (15). In “A & P,” Updike specifically and concretely represents these features of the dominant fiction.
- 4 As a 19-year-old boy, Sammy is clearly captated by his sexuality. Indeed, his observation that opens the story reveals how his sexuality focuses his subjectivity: “[i]n walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits” (187). Sammy’s syntax—“[i]n walks these...” not only reveals his youthful idiomatic constructions and casualness, but it also reveals the intensity of his sexual captation, for the succeeding phrase—“in nothing but”—rhetorically denudes the girls of even the minimal attire they have on. From Sammy’s perspective, the girls are, for all intents and purposes, naked. After his attention is momentarily diverted by the old “witch,” Sammy returns his focus to the girls and remarks: “They didn’t even have shoes on” (188). Also, when Sammy describes “Queenie,” he focuses on what is not there as much as what is: “She had on a kind of dirty pink—beige maybe, I don’t know—bathing suit with a little nubble all over it and, what got me, the straps were down” (189). The absence of straps reveals more of Queenie’s nakedness. Indeed, Sammy is so captated by the nakedness that the absence of Queenie’s swim suit straps foregrounds that he continues the description at some length: “They were off her shoulders looped loose around the cool tips of her arms, and I guess as a result the suit had slipped a little on her, so all around the top of the cloth there was this shinning rim” (189). Here again, Sammy moves from what is absent to what is even more absent to visualize the presence of Queenie’s nakedness. Because the top of her swimsuit has slipped, the rim of unsunned skin that is now revealed shows whiter—and by implication more naked—than the white of her naked shoulders. For Sammy, this slippage—this absence—reveals Queenie in *all* her naked glory: “With the straps pushed off, there was nothing between the top of her 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. I mean, it was more than pretty” (189). In addition to indicating how thoroughly Sammy’s subjectivity is captated by his sexuality, this last passage illustrates how thoroughly his sense of aesthetics rests in his conventional masculinity. Only a conventional man would think

of comparing a woman's bosom to a "dented sheet of metal." For example, such men think of—and name—their cars—their most prized metal objects—after women. One of the Beach Boy's most famous songs of the 60's has the refrain: "She's real fine my 409..." In this case, the man does not name his car after a woman; he metonymically embodies her in an engine block, a "fine"—and powerful—piece of machinery. "Her" libido appropriately powers his desire and fantasy. To his credit, Sammy does describe Queenie's "oaky hair" and her "prim face," which he says is the only kind she could have since, he implies, she is so bold as to walk into the A & P with her swimsuit on and her straps down. In contrast to his earlier descriptions, however, in which absences revealed presences, here the presence of Queenie's highly held head reveals her absence—of clothing: "She held her head so high her neck, coming up out of those white shoulders, looked kind of stretched, but I didn't mind. The longer her neck was, the more of her there was" (189). Clearly, Updike devotes so much time and space to this sensually charged language and imagery to illustrate how absolutely Sammy as a subject—as a normative male—is captated by his sexuality. In his focus on, his attitude about, and his description of the girls, Sammy represents conventional masculinity. Sammy's sense of subjectivity is clearly predicated on sexual difference.

- 5 In addition to being a sexist, Sammy is also a chauvinist. When he describes Queenie's walk, he comments, "you never know for sure how girls' minds work, and then he adds parenthetically, "(do you really think it's a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar?)" (188). Not only does Sammy fail to understand women, but his focus on their absence—they fail to possess or embody the qualities of reason and reflection—conventionally masculine characteristics—once again centers attention on their presence—their bodies and their nakedness—their sexual difference.
- 6 As Updike makes clear, however, Sammy is not the only man in the store—which functions as a microcosm of culture in general—especially of the dominant fiction—and beyond that of the system of representation encoded in and by the symbolic order—who is captated by ideologies of conventional masculinity, for Stokesie, too, is captated by his sexuality. In a brief dialogue between Stokesie and Sammy, the two "men" not only role-play their sexual fantasy about the girls, but Sammy then narrates how Stokesie differs from himself only in the degree to which Stokesie is even more captated by his sexual and economic identity than Sammy is:

'Oh Daddy,' Stokesie said beside me. 'I feel so faint.'

'Darling,' I said. 'Hold me tight.' Stokesie's married, with two babies chalked up on his fuselage already, but as far as I can tell that's the only difference. He's twenty-two, and I was nineteen this April.

'Is it done?' he asks, the responsible married man finding his voice. I forgot to say he thinks he's going to be manager some sunny day. . . . (190-91)

- 7 This passage clearly illustrates how much more thoroughly Stokesie is captated by the ideology of conventional masculinity than is Sammy, an ideology which defines a male by his sexual and economic roles: occupation, husband, father. In this scene, Stokesie represents the exemplary male in our culture, and, as Sammy points out, the only difference between him and Stokesie is that Stokesie has moved one step further up the chronological and ideological ladder of conventional masculinity. And Stokesie is only one rung lower than Lengel, whom he eventually hopes to displace and replace. In our dominant fiction, conventional masculinity follows a clear, direct, and unilateral line of ascent.

- 8 As Updike makes clear, moreover, the men in this microcosmic dominant fiction remain largely undifferentiated by either age or positionality. In terms of their subjectivity, they are all captated by their sexuality, and they define themselves by their sexual difference. In response to Stokesie's question, "Is it done," Sammy replies:
- What he meant was, our town is five miles from a beach, with a big summer colony out on the Point, but we're right in the middle of town, 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... (191)
- 9 Updike's point of having Sammy differentiate between the customs of dress at the beach and that at the A & P is to emphasize exactly that: it is custom. There are no set rules about how customers must dress at the A & P. As Sammy says, other women have come into the A & P in their bathing suits, but they "generally" put on a shirt or shorts to cover themselves. Sammy also says that even if the women did come into the store dressed only in their swimsuits, no one, including them, would care. Because of their age and their apparent lack of sexual appeal, they would not cause a scene and no one would notice. But apparently women have—and can—come into the store dressed only in swimsuits.
- 10 What differentiates the three girls from the other women is, of course, their youthfulness, their physical attractiveness, and their sexual provocativeness. In terms of the story's plot, though, Sammy's description allows time to pass. As Updike continues, "the girls had reached the meat counter and were asking McMahon something. He pointed, they pointed, and they shuffled out of sight behind a pyramid of Diet Delight peaches. All that was left for us to see was old McMahon patting his mouth and looking after them sizing up their joints" (191). Despite their differences in age and position, then, all the men represent conventional masculine ideology. Their subjectivities are predicated on sexual difference, and just as Sammy is in line to become Stokesie, Stokesie is in line to become Lengel, they are all in line to become McMahon. Also, while we can understand Sammy and Stokesie's attitudes and desires because of their youth and inexperience, we cannot ultimately accept them. The poignancy and even humorousness of their libidinal politics will eventually develop into the lurid, offensive voyeurism of a McMahon who, manning the meat counter, sizes up the girls' "joints"—as if they are simply pieces of meat to be devoured—and who, because of his libidinal appetite, cannot help but salivate at the mere sight of them.
- 11 Since conventional masculinity is predicated on the commensurability of the penis and the phallus and since the basis of the normative male's subjectivity lies in his sense of self-sufficiency and self-mastery—upon his belief in his power, privilege, and wholeness—the conventional male must—in order to maintain his identity—protect himself against anything or anyone that threatens, literally or figuratively, to castrate him. This ideology, of course, not only defines conventional masculinity, but, in turn, it defines conventional femininity. As Silverman notes, "... female subjectivity represents the site at which the male subject deposits his lack" (46). She adds, moreover, "that conventional masculinity can best be understood as the denial of castration, and hence as a refusal to acknowledge the defining limits of subjectivity. The category of 'femininity' is to a very large degree the result" (46). As Updike makes clear, the girls, from the men's perspective, represent lack—they lack adequate and appropriate clothing and, as Sammy says, they lack minds, too. Thus, the men's attitudes toward

and their ideology about the girls serve to marginalize and dehumanize them. They become not just sexual objects upon which the men imaginatively satisfy their libidinal desire, but they become the equivalent of inanimate objects the men circulate among themselves to ensure their own power, privilege, and wholeness. As Corey Evan Thompson accurately observes, Sammy views the girls' bodies "in terms of common items found in the supermarket: by drawing a parallel between the store's commodities and the girls, Sammy suggests that they, like commodities, are merely objects to be observed, handled, and used" (216).² Indeed, they are just joints of meat to be sized up and drooled over.

- 12 In the microcosm of the A & P—and in our cultural macrocosm—men and women who are captated by ideologies of conventional masculinity and femininity become marginalized and even dehumanized, for they fail to embody or deploy important qualities that differentiate *human* ontology—consciousness, reason, and discourse, among others—from animal being. As Updike makes clear, the “regular” customers—who are both men and women—lack these humanizing qualities. As Sammy notes: “The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle—the girls were walking against the usual traffic (not that we have one-way signs or anything)—were pretty hilarious. You could see them kind of jerk, or hop, or hiccup, but their eyes snapped back to their own baskets and on they pushed” (190). That is, the girls’ nakedness momentarily jolts the “sheep” into awareness—simultaneously making them self-conscious—but they quickly snap back into their daily routines, preprogrammed by cultural ideologies and conditioned by traditional expectations of conventional behavior. Indeed, in his next comment, Sammy emphasizes how completely the customers are bound by convention and habit: “I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep searching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering ‘Let me see, there was third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah yes, applesauce’ or whatever it is they do mutter” (190). As Sammy recognizes, even a bomb going off would probably fail to disturb the average American’s fetish to satisfy his gustatory appetites. However, as he notes next, a bit of exposed flesh arouses their attention: “But there was no doubt, this jiggled them. A few houseslaves in pin curlers even looked around after pushing their carts past to make sure what they had seen was correct” (190). As M. Gilbert Porter rightly notes, “Sammy is repulsed by the [customers’] insensitivity, their loss of individuality, and by the joyless wooden nature of their existence,” and he correctly concludes: “[t]hough harsh, [Sammy’s] observations are essentially true” (1156).
- 13 As Updike suggests, about the only thing that will make average Americans forget about their stomachs is sex—even the slightest suggestion of it—and that only momentarily. Ironically, too, the girls’ swimsuits, from Lengel’s perspective, are inappropriate attire for the supermarket, but hair in pin curlers, an element of dress generally associated with privacy and bedtime, is apparently perfectly acceptable. In his next depiction of the A & P customers, Updike again emphasizes their herd-like mentality. Sammy notes how, during the confrontation between Lengel and the girls, “[a]ll 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...” (194). This incident, of course, precipitates the conflict between Lengel and Sammy, and when Sammy takes off his apron, he observes “a couple of customers that had been heading for my slot begin to knock against each other, like scared pigs in a chute” (195). As Updike stresses, the general “customer” is scared, scared of a scene, scared of a conflict, scared of departing from culture’s virtual “one-way” signs. And this fear of embodying, let alone

asserting, private, autonomous subjectivity, dehumanizes them. As Updike stresses, though, it is not just the customers who are bound absolutely by conventional ideologies. Since the A & P functions as a microcosm of the world in general, conventional ideology and behavior governs the populace as a whole, a fact Sammy notes as he walks away from the store. Turning to look back, he says: "I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through" (196). Lengel is "checking the sheep," but, ironically, he is one step lower on the de-evolutionary scale, for he figuratively transforms himself into an inanimate object. He is simply another cog in the wheel; he fills a slot, a slot that any person could fill, a slot that everyone who is bound by conventional ideologies of masculinity and femininity in fact does fill.

- 14 While Sammy conforms to conventional masculinity—defining his subjectivity by means of sexual difference—at the beginning of the story, events at the A & P compel him to change and grow. Sammy has a genuine erotic experience that develops in several stages. In contrast to the conventional notion that equates eroticism with sexuality, Georges Bataille argues that eroticism is a psychic experience: "[e]roticism is one aspect of the inner life of man. We fail to realize this because man is everlastingly in search of an object *outside* himself but this object answers the innerness of the desire" (29). As Bataille suggests, too often in culture, people try to find happiness or psychic satisfaction by acquiring objects, presuming or hoping that those things will provide contentment. Ironically, however, since objects are inanimate, they cannot respond to the psychic desire invested into them, thus the continual need to acquire more objects to try to satisfy the libidinal energies mistakenly directed to them. In addition, as Bataille observes, "eroticism differs from animal sexuality precisely in this—that it calls inner life into play. In human consciousness, eroticism is that within man which calls his being into question" (29). The first stage of Sammy's erotic experience occurs after McMahon, from his position at the meat counter, drools over the girls and sizes up their joints. Updike ends this episode and this section of the story by having Sammy observe: "Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn't help it" (191). In effect, this comment registers not only how Sammy explicitly calls the girls' being into question, but how he implicitly calls his own being into question. First, he begins to see the girls as more than objects, especially as more than sexual objects. Second, by feeling sorry for them, Sammy, in contrast to displaying his earlier limited masculinity, begins to embody and deploy elements of conventional femininity—compassion and understanding. Emotionally and psychically, Sammy becomes "one of the girls."
- 15 The second stage of Sammy's erotic experience occurs as an indirect cause of Lengel's conflict with the girls. As Sammy says, "[t]hen everybody's luck begins to run out" (192). And Lengel's conflict with the girls is an indirect conflict with the cabbage man. As Sammy continues, "Lengel comes in from haggling with a truck full of cabbages on the lot and is about to scuttle into that door marked MANAGER behind which he hides all day when the girls touch his eye" (192-93). As Updike suggests here, Lengel has been struggling with—perhaps even thwarted by—the person who sells cabbages to the store. Feeling figuratively castrated, Lengel—the executor of power and authority in the A & P—"scuttles"—the word evokes an image of an insect which suggests Lengel's figurative loss of manhood and humanity—to his office to hide from the tensions and conflicts of the world by taking refuge behind his title—MANAGER—the bold lettering of which professes his position and his sense of wholeness. Feeling marginalized and unempowered, however, Lengel, seeing the girls, seizes on the opportunity not only to

reassert his power and authority, but he also seizes on the opportunity, he thinks, to cover over his psychic wound and regain his sense of masculinity.

- 16 In effect, Lengel functions – as much as, if not more than, the girls – as the hinge upon which Sammy's erotic experience turns. As Sammy observes, Lengel is bound by conventional masculinity and conventional morality: "Lengel's pretty dreary, teaches Sunday school and the rest, but he doesn't miss that much. He comes over and says, 'Girls, this isn't the beach'" (193). Although he manages the A & P, Lengel, psychically and ideologically, is one of the sheep. When Queenie protests, asserting: "My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks," Lengel repeats himself: "'That's all right. . . .But this isn't the beach'" (193). In this brief episode, Updike emphasizes the girls' dilemma. They are caught between two voices of authority. Apparently, Queenie's mother feels that the girls' actions and their attire are perfectly appropriate for a quick stop at the A & P, and she authorizes them to make their purchase. As Updike has already suggested, moreover, the girls' appearance, while clearly different, is apparently no more unappealing or unacceptable than that of many of the other customers, especially the houseslaves who wear pin curlers. When Sammy smiles at Lengel's repeating himself, imagining that Lengel thinks the A & P is a big sand dune and he is the head lifeguard, Sammy observes: "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" (193). Lengel registers Sammy's smile—and it threatens him on two fronts. First, it mocks Lengel. Although Lengel isn't privy to Sammy's thought about the sand dune and lifeguard, Sammy's smile indicates the ridiculousness of Lengel's repeated phrase. While he is the manager of the A & P and although he is supposed to be the voice of reason and authority, Lengel's repetition reduces him to an automaton. He parrots the tape-recorded messages that hourly play over the loudspeaker: "A & P shoppers—don't miss our specially reduced cling peaches on aisle 9." Although Lengel is supposed to embody the positive phallus, he can neither think nor speak for himself. Second, Sammy's smile again psychically and emotionally aligns him with the girls, and his smile, like the girls' nakedness, threatens Lengel's masculinity—his power, privilege, and wholeness. In this sense, Sammy's smile also figuratively castrates Lengel.
- 17 In order to overcome his figurative castration, Lengel tries to regain his sense of power, privilege, and wholeness by marginalizing the girls: "'That makes no difference'" Lengel says, and he adds: "'We want you decently dressed when you come in here'" (194). Empowered by her socially superior position and her mother's authority, Queenie responds: "'We are decent.'" (194). Provoked by Queenie's assertiveness—and perhaps still stinging from his argument with the cabbage man—Lengel closes the issue by declaring: "'Girls, I don't want to argue with you. After this come in here with your shoulders covered. It's our policy.'" (194). And he turns his back on them. Not only does Lengel physically try to deny the girls' threat to his power and authority by turning his back—literally disavowing them—but he also tries to cover over his lack discursively by resorting to the concept of policy, a concept, I argue, that Lengel makes up on the spot as his last resort to heal the wound and cover over his figurative castration. Just as it has no traffic signs for its aisles, the A & P has no formal dress code—for women come in dressed in hair curlers—and, as Sammy has already noted, "women *generally* put on a shirt or shorts or something before they get out of the car into the street" (191, my emphasis). Sammy's "generally" is significant, for it indicates that women have—and do—come into the A & P in attire that under Lengel's "policy" would be considered

indecent. However, because they are neither young nor sensually appealing, Lengel has never questioned them—nor has he felt threatened by them. Thus, rather than be an executor of justice—of legitimate policy—and rather than embody the positive phallus—the privileged signifier equated with virtue—Lengel reveals how he is nothing more than a petty tyrant, and immediately following Lengel's officious declaration of store "policy" Sammy reveals as much: "That's policy for you. Policy is what the kingpins want. What others want is juvenile delinquency" (194). Indeed, the girls represent the "other" for Lengel, and it is their otherness that threatens to castrate him.

- 18 Lengel's tyranny compels the next stage in Sammy's erotic experience. When Lengel asks Sammy whether he has rung up the girls' purchase, Sammy articulates, albeit unconsciously, the progression of his psychic development:

I thought and said 'No' but it wasn't about that I was thinking. I go through the punches 4, 9, GROC, TOT—it's more complicated than you think, and after you do it often enough, it begins to make a little song, that you hear words to, in my case 'Hello (*bing*) there, you (*gung*) hap-py pee-pul (*splat*)!—the splat being the drawer flying out. I uncrease the bill, tenderly as you may imagine, it just having come from between the two smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known were there, and pass a half and 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. (194-95)

- 19 Even though Sammy is still partly bound by conventional masculine ideology—he compares Queenie's breasts to scoops of vanilla ice cream—that is, he still, to some degree, sees the girls as sexual objects—and even though his actions are still in part motivated by habit and routine—the cash register's sound, from Sammy's perspective, resembles a pleasant, little jingle that signifies how happy—and unconscious—the customers generally are—like well-fed sheep or fattened hogs—Sammy nevertheless exhibits a substantive change in his subjectivity here. As Updike stresses in this passage, Sammy begins to employ the positive conventional masculine quality of reason. By repeating forms of *to think*—"I thought," "I was thinking," "all the time thinking"—Updike illustrates how Sammy is beginning to analyze, interpret, and evaluate events rather than just react to them out of impulse or habit. By employing the positive, conventional masculine quality of rationality, Sammy simultaneously deploys its concomitant characteristic—the positive phallus, or the privileged signifier. Sammy clearly and courageously declares: "I quit."
- 20 Sammy quits because he is, in part, still bound by conventional masculine ideology. As Sammy acknowledges, he quits "quick enough for [the girls] to hear, hoping they'll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero" (195). Sammy wants to play the chivalric hero, the white knight in shining armor, and rescue the maidens in distress; he wants to save them from the foul ogre, Lengel. Ironically, though, the girls are out the door and never notice Sammy's heroic deed. As Updike quickly suggests, though, Sammy is motivated by more than just chivalric posturing, for he leaves Sammy an escape. When Lengel asks, "Did you say something, Sammy?", Sammy, rather than swallow his words and slink back into his slot at the cash register, boldly and courageously repeats his assertion: "I said I quit" (195). At this point, Updike reveals the main motive for Sammy's gesture, for he immediately tells Lengel: "You didn't have to embarrass them" (195). At the same time, Updike reveals the motive behind Lengel's conflict with the girls, for he immediately replies: "It was they who were embarrassing us" (195). As Lengel unconsciously suggests, the girls' nakedness, their raw feminine sexuality, embarrasses him. However, their sexuality does more than embarrass him. It threatens

his masculinity—his power, privilege, and wholeness. That is, women's sexuality, as it has done for centuries, threatens the conventional male's sense of self-sufficiency and self-mastery. In "Inquiry into Femininity" Michele Montrelay accurately describes the problematics of the female subject's entry into the symbolic order, and she does so by differentiating two sets of binary oppositions: "woman" and "femininity," "repression" and "censorship." As Montrelay argues, "woman" refers to the female subject who, like the male subject, is an effect of repression. "Femininity," however, signifies a complex of drives which remain outside of cultural structuration and thus they escape repression because repression occurs only as a result of representation, and female sexuality remains unrepresented within the patriarchal structure. Commenting on Montrelay's assertion, Silverman notes: "In other words, because both male and female sexuality are defined in relation to the phallus, and because the symbolic order provides a positive representation of male sexuality, but a negative one of female sexuality (female sexuality as the 'not-phallus'), the latter is censored rather than repressed" (*Semiotics* 186-87). The process of censoring female sexuality or "femininity," rather than repressing it, is significant. Summarizing Montrelay's observations, Silverman correctly states that

repression involves the setting in place within the unconscious of a representation which structures sexuality in a particular way. Censorship, however, excludes without representation, and consequently has no structuring effect upon sexuality. Because male sexuality is both represented and repressed by the phallus, the male subject is simultaneously more alienated from the real and more integrated within the symbolic than is his female counterpart. Female sexuality, on the other hand, is censored rather than repressed by the phallus—covered over but not represented or structured by the paternal signifier. For that reason it remains a 'dark continent,' a real which threatens to submerge not only the female subject but the entire order of signification. (*Semiotics* 187)

- 21 The girls' nakedness, then, their "femininity," functions as a form of figurative castration for Lengel. Having just entered the store and still feeling his power and privilege threatened by the cabbage man, Lengel feels doubly castrated by the girls' open and unabashed display of their sexual selves. In order to cover over his sense of castration, Lengel resorts to the conventional masculine strategy of disavowal, and as Silverman correctly argues: "whereas the Freudian account of that psychic mechanism explicitly posits it as a male defense against *female* lack [Freud's essay], 'Fetishism' implicitly shows it to be a defense against what is in the final analysis *male* lack. Since woman's anatomical 'wound' is the product of an externalizing displacement of masculine insufficiency, which is then biologically naturalized, the castration against which the male subject protects himself through disavowal and fetishism must be primarily his own" (46). That is, rather than invoke policy—an element of justice rooted in a system of laws and ethical principles—and which clearly never existed in fact or in concept until the moment that Lengel confronts the girls—Lengel invokes his Law—his exclusive power, privilege, and wholeness. He is the manager, the executor of power and authority. As a conventional male, it is his job and his "right" to deny, contain, or censor female sexuality whenever and wherever it raises its monstrous head. Thus, Lengel feels right and just in marginalizing, dehumanizing, and even figuratively annihilating the girls. Instead of playing the just judge, Lengel plays the petty tyrant. That is, he plays the role of the petty warlord, and, as foil to Sammy's role as chivalric hero, he not only vanquishes the Libidinal Beast (the girls), but he simultaneously

vanquishes the Upstart Knight who threatens to unseat him from his position of power and privilege.³

- 22 Rather than be vanquished by Lengel, however, Sammy unseats him and appropriates the positive phallus. In response to Lengel's assertion that the girls were embarrassing "us"—as if Lengel has the authority to speak for everyone in the store—Sammy says: "I started to say something that came out 'Fiddle-de-do.' It's a saying of my grandmother's and I know she would have been pleased" (195). Rather than descend to Lengel's level and reply with the conventionally masculine curse—fuck you—a curse, of course, that's rooted in the conventional male's attempt to cover his sense of castration—Sammy discursively and ideologically aligns himself with a woman—his grandmother—and by extension with the girls.⁴
- 23 Unable to penetrate Sammy's discourse or his thinking, Lengel simply states: "'I don't think you know what you're saying,' and then a short while later he adds: 'Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad'" (195-96). As Sammy begins to remove the signs of his conventionality—the bow tie and the apron with his name stitched onto it—the superficial appellation of his identity—Lengel concludes: "'You'll feel this for the rest of your life'" (196). On one level, Lengel is exactly right: Sammy doesn't want to hurt his parents, and he will feel the repercussions of this event for the rest of his life. However, in order to establish his own private, autonomous subjectivity, Sammy elects to defy Lengel's petty tyranny, and he chooses not to succumb to the ideologies of conventional masculinity. As Toni Saldivar rightly states: "[c]ompassion makes possible Sammy's gesture, which his narrative helps him see as the turning point in his life, occasioned by an event he did not will" (220). Thus, by aligning himself with the women, by deploying his positive feminine characteristics—compassion and understanding—and by simultaneously enacting his positive conventional masculine quality—reason, Sammy consciously divests himself of the negative conventional masculine ideology and positionality which resides in the conventional masculine *méconnaissance* of the commensurability between the penis and the phallus.
- 24 As Updike makes clear, such rites of passage do not produce simple alteration, but they mark the beginning of a legitimate transformation. That is, Sammy is still, in part, captated by his romantic ideals and by his youth. In response to Lengel's comment about Sammy not wanting to hurt his mom and dad, Sammy acknowledges the truth of Lengel's utterance, and then he adds: "But it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not go through with it," and, after he removes the store's identifying attire, he concludes: "One advantage to this scene taking place in summer, I can follow this up with a clean exit, there's no fumbling around getting your coat and galoshes, I just saunter into the electric eye in my white shirt that my mother ironed the night before..." (196). On one level, Sammy is a boy who is still partly bound by idealistic codes of conduct and who is still partly dependent upon his mother's domestic ministrations.
- 25 At the same time, though, Sammy moves 180 degrees away from such dependence and such ideologies, for Sammy arrives at a different and profound knowledge about himself and the world. While he is too young to articulate the nature and value of his experience clearly or fully, he *perceives* its meaning and significance. When Lengel tells Sammy that he will feel the consequences of his act for the rest of his life, Sammy acknowledges the truth of Lengel's comment, and then in his characteristic adolescent colloquialism adds: "...but remembering how he made that pretty girl blush makes me

feel so scrunchy inside I punch the No Sale tab and the machine whirs “pee-pul” and the drawer splats out” (196). The “scrunchy” feeling Sammy experiences is his sense of injustice, his recognition that Lengel, rather than deploy policy with regard to the girls, has executed tyranny, his embodiment of raw power and privilege. And Sammy recognizes that if Lengel can so willfully marginalize and dehumanize the girls, he can turn that power and privilege against Sammy—or against any of the other “subordinates” in the store. In this context, Saldivar correctly observes: “Sammy must make a gesture to honor himself (that is, what he has felt as beauty within himself), perhaps more than to aid the girls. His reconstruction of events makes clear they do not need a defender. His narrative also makes clear this: he is effecting his own rescue from an order of thought that demeans his feelings” (221). I would only add to Saldivar’s comment the qualification that Sammy effects his own rescue from a model of ontology that minimizes and threatens to annihilate his very subjectivity, and Updike registers this idea in Sammy’s gesture. His physical act of punching the “No Sale” tab concretely registers his speech act: “I quit.” That is, Sammy refuses to sell out. Preserving his integrity—his private, autonomous subjectivity—by holding the line against tyranny means more to Sammy than preserving his economic position or his parental acceptance. Similarly, the cash register’s speech act—it “whirs pee-pul”—registers Sammy’s physical act of walking out of the store. Earlier when Sammy described punching the cost of a grocery item into the cash register, it would sing: “Hello... there, you... hap-py pee-pul.” That is, Sammy, by going through his daily routine, just as the customers go through theirs, thinks he is happy because his life seems safe, secure, and materially comfortable. But he, like the customers, is one of the sheep. They are all unconscious—of themselves and of others. In this sense, they function like animals—or worse. They are automatons. They function like machines—or worse. They are simply the elements—a part in a slot—of *the machine*—the microcosm of the A & P—and the literal machine, the cash register—speaks to and for them. Inversely, the machine’s second “song” simply registers “pee-pul”—without the “happy.” It no longer echoes pre-scripted speech. It registers Sammy’s newly awakened humanity—his consciousness rooted in his conventional positive masculine trait—reason—combined with his conventionally positive feminine characteristics—compassion and understanding—to mark him as an individual—a *human* being who carries his new subjectivity, his new ontology, beyond the glass walls of the A & P with its limited—and limiting—social and ideological order.⁵

- 26 When Sammy walks out of the A & P, he experiences a rebirth. As he walks through the glass door, he sees “the sunshine... skating around on the asphalt” (196). Updike’s personification does double duty. On the one hand, it suggests the childhood activity of roller skating, and Updike clearly intends to register the freedom associated with that activity. At the same time, the image suggests the “naturalness” of such freedom, for it is sunshine that skates on the asphalt. However, the rebirth and the concomitant freedom that Sammy experiences are not, as Updike has made clear, a return to the innocence and inexperience of childhood naivete. That’s very often license, not freedom. As Gadamer points out, “the concept of freedom is linked to the concept of power” (205), and freedom is bound by necessity, knowledge, and limitations. That’s the freedom Sammy experiences as a result of his erotic experience, the result of calling being into question—that of the girls, of Lengel, and of himself. And that is why Updike concludes the story on the image of Sammy looking back into the A & P, and, as he says, “I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His face

was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he had 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" (196). Ironically, Lengel, who considers himself the executor of morality and good sense, by embodying the qualities of conventional masculinity—absolute power, privilege, and wholeness—becomes more mechanical, more robotic, than the cash register that humanely speaks Sammy's newly discovered discursive subjectivity: "No Sale." Although Sammy's financial condition may be worsened and even though his material existence may be less comfortable as a result of his quitting his job, as Updike clearly emphasizes, Sammy, by standing up to Lengel's tyranny, measures himself by a new standard—by his honor and integrity. By extrapolation, Updike encourages all of us to defy tyranny wherever it occurs—whether it is a store manager marginalizing girls, the Dean of a university branch campus who "fires" the Chair of the Division of Arts and Sciences because that person would rather enforce academic standards than virtually sell degrees to the highest bidders, or the sole individual who defies either the financial or environmental tyranny of powerful conglomerates. In this sense, Sammy experiences not only freedom, but he also experiences happiness. But, again, as Updike stresses, Sammy's newly discovered happiness is far different from the conventional association of happiness with financial success or material comfort. As Aristotle says, "Happiness is more than momentary bliss" (39). Indeed, Aristotle defines happiness "as an activity in accordance with virtue..." (41). And Aristotle concludes by defining the happy man as "one who realizes in action a goodness that is complete and that is adequately furnished with external goods, and that not for some limited period but throughout a fully rounded life spent in that way. And perhaps we must add to our definition one who shall live in this way and whose death shall be considered with his life" (48). Even though Aristotle grants a modicum of material comfort, as he suggests, human happiness, as opposed to animal pleasure, demands knowledge of and action upon virtue. From this perspective, to be a happy human is often a difficult and conventionally unpleasurable condition, and that's why Sammy says his "stomach kind of fell" when he realized "how hard the world was going to be to [him] hereafter." But it's also why he begins the second half of his story—the half in which he details the specifics of his erotic experience—with the statement: "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" (192). Indeed, rather than end sadly in the figurative death that Stokesie, MacMahon, and Lengel experience, Sammy is reborn. He begins finally to live, and even though life may be hard for him financially or materially after he walks out of the A & P, he will continue to live as a happy man, for he is a new kind of man, a new kind of being.

- 27 Sammy is a different kind of man because he has an erotic experience. He has an awakening; he becomes conscious—and he develops a conscience. He no longer interprets and evaluates women—and men—on the basis of sexual difference. To Sammy women are no longer simply sexual objects, and men are no longer the sole and absolute executors of power, privilege, and wholeness. That is, Sammy is no longer captated by the conventional masculine *méconnaissance* that equates the penis and the phallus. Indeed, Sammy, at the end of his career at the A & P, but at the beginning of his life, now not only embodies the positive masculine qualities of reason and reflection, but he also embodies the positive feminine qualities of compassion and understanding. Most importantly, by *volitionally* divesting himself of conventional masculine ideology—of raw power and privilege (tyranny)—Sammy gains more power, for he embodies a

private, autonomous subjectivity rooted in individual and social justice, and thus he becomes a truly empowered *human* being.

- 28 In this sense, Updike clearly subscribes to the Horatian notion of art, which is intrinsically necessary to the psychic life of the macrocosm. As Horace says, the nature and function of art is twofold: *aut prodesse aut delectare*. Art must teach and delight. Thus, following the great tradition of classical literature, Updike suggests that if each reader consciously and conscientiously understands and embodies the meaning and significance of Sammy's erotic experience, then Sammy's story becomes the reader's story, and it functions as a *rite de passage* in his or her life. Like Sammy, the individual reader would have an erotic experience and would undergo psychic development, a metamorphosis from adolescence to adulthood. Similarly, to take the process one step further, if we can collectively understand and embody Sammy's erotic experience, then his story becomes society's story, and "A & P" would function as a cultural *rite de passage*. Like Sammy and the individual reader, society can have an erotic experience, for "A & P" can positively affect and permanently alter our dominant fiction. Thus, reading, understanding, and embodying the lesson that Updike symbolically represents in "A & P" can mark a significant stage in society's psychic development, for Sammy's story—which is simultaneously our story—can function as a substantive sign of our collective transformation from cultural adolescence to ideological adulthood.

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NOTES

1. With regard to the phallus, I am largely working from the notions that Lacan articulates in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" and "The Signification of the Phallus." Unlike Lacan, however, I distinguish between a positive and a negative phallus. The positive phallus is rooted in the classical ideas of *nosce teipsum* (self-knowledge) and *sophrosyne* (self-mastery). It is coterminous with *virtus* (manliness, worth, excellence, especially moral excellence). In this regard, it signifies a kind of oneliness or integrity, and one uses it to signify this state in himself or herself or to empower others. In contrast, the negative phallus is rooted in the conventional *méconnaissance* of the commensurability between the penis and the phallus, and it represents the traditional ideologies of masculinity: power, privilege, and wholeness. This last quality, wholeness, signifies a kind of absolute self-sufficiency (why *real* men don't ask directions) and differs substantively from integrity, for it lacks *virtus* and generally represents discursive tyranny.
2. Although I agree with Professor Thompson's observation about Sammy with regard to this incident, I find the conclusion that "Sammy should not be regarded as a hero, but rather as a young man who takes full advantage of an opportunity to free himself from the responsibility-filled life that he desperately wants to avoid" (216) not only limited and unconvincing, but also decidedly misguided, a misreading of Sammy's character specifically and of the story in general.
3. Harriet Blodgett rightly sees the girls as paralleling the mythical Sirens, but, as she says, they are not "the Homeric figures who tempted sailors with their songs. They are the more widely known creatures who had fish bodies and so came to be seen as mermaids and above all as symbols of seduction." However, her conclusion that "A & P" tells "a tale of a young man who may realize belatedly that he should not have made the gesture he did but, captivated by female allure, at the time could not help doing it" represents a misunderstanding of Sammy's character and a misreading of the story.
4. In contrast to Robert Detweiler who claims that "Updike has Sammy narrate the story in a breezy, late-teenage vernacular; the brashness of the language balances nicely the inherent sentimentality of the action" (53), I suggest how even though Sammy speaks largely in an adolescent idiom, his language, albeit often vague and inarticulate, is nevertheless commensurate with his feelings and thoughts—and with the action of the story, which is anything but sentimental.
5. Saldivar asserts that "Sammy is angelic in his rejection of both his manager's public policy, which ostensibly works for the common good, and the butcher's private lechery, which works against it. Sammy, like Botticelli, makes a 'great refusal': in quitting his job he acts on the basis of morality—not of his community—but of his own private vision" (223). While I clearly disagree with Saldivar's characterization of Sammy as "angelic," his conclusion about the motive behind Sammy's act is wholly commensurate with my own.

ABSTRACTS

Par le biais de la sémiotique, le présent article propose une lecture psychanalytique d'Updike, pour montrer comment son protagoniste, Sammy, recompose son identité masculine et son désir : la rencontre de Sammy au "A & P" représente non pas une simple aventure sexuelle mais une expérience amoureuse profonde. Elle le force non seulement à dévêtir le côté subjectif d'idéologies masculines conventionnelles dont il est fait — elle le débarrasse surtout des préjugés dont les racines plongent dans les différences des deux sexes — mais surtout le pousse-t-elle à épouser un comportement fondé sur l'absence de différence sexuelle. Ce parcours constitue un rite de passage pour le personnage. Dans ce sens, la fin de la carrière de Sammy chez A & P correspond au début de sa nouvelle vie où il fait preuve de compassion et de compréhension, qualités masculines positives. Mais le plus important, en se dépouillant du côté conventionnel de sa virilité, Sammy gagne en termes de personnalité et d'individualité ; parce que sa subjectivité est à présent fondée sur ses choix propres. Il devient ainsi plus puissant dans sa qualité d'être humain.

(traducteur : Nicolas Bélangé)