

A Rough Road to Reality

The protagonists, Sammy in “A&P” by John Updike and the main character in “Araby” by James Joyce both live in a world that is both restricting and unpromising. For Sammy, life consists of the small summer town where he has lived all his life and the A&P in which he feels doomed to work in for the rest of his life. He is only able to find an escape when he becomes entranced by the pretty girls entering the A&P. The girls represent a life he could never have, a life he dreams about and wants. It is at this moment when Sammy is reminded of the life he is destined to live if he does not escape soon. The Boy in "Araby" revolves his life around the girl next-door and ultimately takes a terrible and expensive trip to a bazaar and gains nothing out of it except the realization of his bleak existence. To him, the bazaar represented a majestic and exotic world, a world that was much better than his depressing life on North Richmond Street. Both boys try to escape their dreary and unpromising future by pursuing unrealistic dreams and fantasies of royal fair and the girl they view as their escape. At the end of the stories both young boys are left in a similar mental state, they are left with broken dreams, forced back into their everyday lives without any hope of escaping their restricting worlds.

It is easily observed that Sammy and the boy from "Araby" have very imaginative minds and these imaginations lead them to be shocked by the realizations that they are forced to make at the end of each story. Dealing with Sammy will bring upon great discussion. For Sammy, working at the A&P was his life. His co-worker, Stokesie, represents all that he could become, a boy of twenty trying to support his family in a dead end job with no promise of moving up. “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 in April” (Updike 755). It wasn’t until the group of pretty girls came into the store that Sammy finally gained the realization of his life. The one girl in particular that he called “Queenie” represented all that he could never have. Sammy tells of the “Queen’s” family party, “Her father and the other men were standing around in ice cream coats and bow ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big glass plate and they were all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them” (Updike 736). This represents the fantasy world that Sammy is creating in his head as the young girls prance around the A&P. It is obvious that Sammy knows nothing of this world as he refers to tuxedo suits as “Ice cream coats” and martinis as “drinks the color of water”. He reflects on this image of the girls and their lives which forces him to then compare it to his own life, “When my parents have people somebody over they get lemonade and if it’s a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses with “they’ll do it every time” cartoons stenciled on” (736). This shows the gap between Sammy’s fantasy world filled with beautiful people with fancy glasses and expensive snacks and his own world. He sees his parents’ parties as a joke, their cheesy glasses, almost as if this life isn’t good enough compared to what he imagines as the girls.

Sammy puts the girls on a pedestal, which in effect makes him enraged as he sees Lengel, his manager try to embarrass and talk down to them. Perhaps it is the accumulation of the visions of a life that he could never have or the seemingly inescapable fate of becoming a Stoskie or worse like Lengel, who after years of working at the A&P has become dreary, exhausted and miserable that gives him the courage to quit. “So I say “I quit” to Lengel enough for them to hear, hoping they’ll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero” (Updike 755), This was Sammy’s final attempt to gain the

attention of the girls, as if as long as they paid attention to him for a moment he would be able to escape his life and become a new person and part of their world. It isn't until the end of the story that the reader is able to see why Sammy may have this complex about his life as Lengel says; "Sammy, you don't want to do this to your mom and dad" (Updike 737). Lengel also states; "You'll feel this for the rest of your life" (Updike 737). This shows that Sammy's parents and Lengel do not have any faith in him, as if the A&P is the best job he could ever get. Consequently, Sammy believes that he too has no hope after quitting the A&P, "And my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter" (Updike 737), this portrays how small Sammy thinks his world actually is, as if there is no job or opportunity out there better than that of the A&P. He is victim of the restricting forces of his world both that he creates himself and that those around him create by telling him that he can be nothing more than a clerk at a local food store. However, there is a glimpse of hope that the reader can see in Sammy because he did have the courage to quit the A&P because he saw a world in the girls that he longed for and knew was unattainable if he stayed working at the A&P.

The boy in "Araby" also creates an exotic fantasy world. His life on North Richmond Street is depressing and dark, "The back doors of the dark dripping gardens where odours arose from the ashpits, to the dark odorous stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harness" (Joyce 721), this shows the neighborhood in which he lived, the only light mentioned is when he talks about the girl next door, his friend Mangan's sister. "The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and falling, lit up the hand upon the railing" (Joyce 730), this image of the girl is a symbol of hope for