

Heroism in the Age of Consumerism: The Emergence of a Moral Don Quixote in John Updike's "A & P"

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Abstract

This paper analyzes John Updike's short story "A & P" in the light of Max Weber's notion of moral decision-making. A prominent contemporary American story-writer and literary critic, Updike has devoted his fiction to subjects' rational and moral problems in the contemporary consumerist society. Updike's lifelong probing into the middle classes' lives is a body of fiction that raises questions about determinism, moral decision, and social responsibility, among others. "A & P" is a revealing example of such fiction and one among Updike's most frequently anthologized short stories. The story, titled after a nationwide American shopping mall in the early twentieth century, investigates the possibility of decision-making within consumerist society. This paper demonstrates how Updike's portrayal of his characters' everyday lives reveals the predicament of intellectual thinking and moral decision-making in a consumerist society and warns against the loss of individual will in such societies.

Keywords: John Updike, Max Weber, intellectual decision, morality, "A & P"

Introduction

John Updike (1932 – 2009) is an American story writer and critic whose popularity is, to a large extent, due to his Rabbit Tetralogy, the life story of a middle-class individual named Harry Rabbit Angstrom. After Newton Booth Tarkington and William Faulkner, Updike was the third author in American history to win Pulitzer Prize for fiction for a second time. Updike is a miniaturist in his fiction as the world he shapes is usually minuscule and inhabited by middle-class citizens whose religious and moral concerns are represented in a parable-like narrative.

Different critics have underlined different aspects of Updike's fiction. Among the prominent studies on Updike's work is Alice and Kenneth Hamilton's *The Elements*

of *John Updike* (1970), wherein the critics describe Updike as a narrator of parables, a description which underlines the didactic nature of Updike's fiction. In the introduction to his *Critical Essays on John Updike* (1982), William R. Macnaughton maintains that Hamilton and her partner were so profoundly mesmerized by the "quasi-allegorist" and religious features of Updike's stories that they totally forgot his being a storyteller. Rachel C. Burchard (1971) takes the comic aspects of Updike's works into account, claiming that they have been marginalized due to the mainstream tendency, among readers and critics, to aggrandize the more serious aspects of his fiction. In his *Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction* (1971), Larry Taylor argues that the central theme of Updike's stories "is the representation of the pastoral and the anti-pastoral in our time" (p. 87). Investigating Updike's story writing method, Robert Detweiler (1972) has concluded that there is a difference between Updike's poetry and non-fiction on the one hand and his fiction on the other. While in his poetry and non-fiction, he displays a sense of humor, in his fiction, he is more of a pessimist (Keener, 2005, p. 1). Among other significant studies of Updike's work are Joyce Markle's *Fighters and Lovers* (1973) and Edward Vargo's *Rainstorms and Fire* (1973), which have selectively analyzed a number of his works.

Among the works approaching Updike in the early 1980s are George Hunt's *John Updike and the Three Great Things: Sex, Religion and Art* (1980) and Henning Uphaus's *John Updike* (1980), which have been devoted, as their titles suggest, to different but significant concepts like religion and sex especially in contrast with hesitation and certainty in Updike's works. Judie Newman (1988) has inspected a different theme, namely, Updike's response to social changes in American society. The prominent role of religion in Updike's work explains the appearance of several religious-oriented studies on him in the late 1980s and 90s, among which are *The Comedy of Redemption Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* by Ralph C. Wood (1988) and James Yerkes' *John Updike and Religion* (1999). Marshal Boswell's *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy* (2001) has also inspected Updike's famous tetralogy in the early twenty-first century. "Resistance on Aisle Three: Exploring the Big Curriculum of Consumption and the (Im)Possibility of Resistance in John Updike's "A & P" is a critical study on the short story "A & P." The authors of the article have inspected Updike's depiction of the prevalence of consumerism and the subject's doomed resistance to the dominant consumerist culture. Joyce Carol Oates points to some distinguishing features of Updike's work and, praising his mastery, proclaims that "it is far more difficult to do what Updike does. Like Caldwell/ Chiron, he accepts the comic ironies and inadequacies of ordinary life" (1975, p. 472).

Updike's "A & P," first published in *New Yorker*, was included in his *Pigeon Feathers*. The story portrays the events occurring in a few minutes in one of A & P's famous malls in the late 1950s. The plot revolves around the main character's fruitless attempt to challenge the values of the consumerist society. What follows the text of "A & P" is read as Updike's criticism of the dominant consumerist culture. An overview of Weber's ideas on decision-making, intellectual thinking, and individual and social will is provided below to shed light upon the argument.

Theoretical Background

According to the available literature on Updike's work presented above, it is almost impossible to approach him without considering the intellectual and moral status and his characters' reactions in his fictional works. Updike's work needs to be read from a moral and philosophical perspective, being devoted to middle-class citizens' lives and their interaction with each other. Regardless of its theoretical and political inadequacies, Marxism should be praised for its moral approach to life. Marx's criticism of the capitalist society has influenced many thinkers who are not necessarily Marxists. Among such thinkers is Weber. Although he does not consider himself a moral philosopher, Weber's different works indicate his moral tendency and concern about the human position within capitalism (Brubaker, 1991, p. 91; Lowith, 1982, p. 20). One of Weber's main concerns is the investigation of human freedom in modern society, a challenging query that targets capitalism's core.

According to Weber, intellectuality or intellectual action is intertwined with meaningfulness. There are two aspects to each meaningful action: end and value. The agent does such actions with a kind of awareness and willfulness; in other words, the one who does a meaningful action is conscious of her action and has a specific aim and objective. In a meaningful action that includes both "means-ends rational" and "value-rational," the agent consciously considers the objectives of the action (Brubaker, 1991: 92). Thus, freedom is intertwined with intellectuality (Weber, 1949, p. 124-5), and the intellectual action or behavior is the one that is meaningful and willful. Therefore, genuine human behavior is willful, meaningful, and intellectual. To Weber, human life itself must be meaningful, purposeful, intellectual, and willful (Brubaker, 1991, p. 94). Thus, it is concluded that personality, for Weber, is not a psychological concept but a philosophical one. "The essence of personality lies in the constancy of its inner relation to certain ultimate values and life-meanings, which, in the course of action, turn into purposes and are thus translated into teleologically rational action" (Weber, 1975, p. 192). Personality, as defined by Weber, signifies heroism and presupposes the subject's rising to a

certain humane position. It is not to be accomplished by each and every "person." For Weber, a decision is considered moral, which is consciously made with its logical outcomes measured. It is the only decision that is morally valuable and causes moral growth. A decision that lacks this characteristic is not influential in the person's moral growth (Brubaker, 1991, p. 103). Accordingly, the significant matter for Weber is moral autonomy, which leads to genuine human personality. Morality, therefore, occurs where there is a person who takes into consideration the result of his decision and does it consciously.

A & P and Consumerism

A & P chain stores' sudden growth in the early twentieth century turned them into a symbol of economic development and success in the United States. This boom directly affected American society's shopping and consumption patterns in the first half of the century. "A & P" stands for The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, an American chain store founded in 1859 in New York. According to Time Magazine Cover, the number of its shops reached 70 in 1878, making it the most important American groceries in the late nineteenth century. In 1915 the number reached 1600. In 1930 the stores were the brand leader, having a million-dollar sale and 16000 branches. However, in the early 1950s, the time of Updike's story, the stores had lost their fame and were gradually overshadowed by the modern malls, which caused their total disappearance.

Along with advertising products, A & P managers' primary objective was to form and shape loyal consumers, who were mostly women, through cultural methods, including the publication of a magazine titled *Woman's Day*. First published in 1931, the magazine focused on themes directly related to shopping and consuming and was instead devoted to promoting consumerism and consumerist society's values. It features issues related to housekeeping, cooking, fitness, attractiveness, and fashion. The instrumental use of literature and art to promote consumerism is one of the fundamental issues dealt with in the Frankfurt School's critical theory. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno, and Horkheimer, having cinema and radio in mind, argue that media is reduced to a business and its products are rubbish (2002, p. 95). In a consumerist society, the media is too easily recruited to promote consumerism. In fact, the magazine attempted to define women as goods among goods, indicated by the manager's behavior towards the indecent clothing style of the girls entering the shop in the story. It is why the change of the woman type in "A & P," done by three girls, meets the immoral and extreme reaction of the shop's manager. When it was sold to Fawcett Publications, the magazine was sold in four

million issues monthly. This high circulation comes to be quite meaningful and thought-provoking.

The story locates the store architecturally and, of course, quite symbolically, in a square along with a church and a bank. It forms a capitalist city space, which is significantly introducing the situation. Sammy, the protagonist narrator and the focalizer, says, "we're right in the middle of town, and if you stand at our front doors, you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real-estate offices." These places have been intentionally selected since they have symbolic overtones. In this place, there are "about twenty-seven old free-loaders tearing up Central Street because the sewer broke again. It's not as if we're on the Cape; we're north of Boston and there's people in this town haven't seen the ocean for twenty years" (Arp & Johnson, 2015, p. 374). Several aspects make this description significant. The first social institutions facing the shop are banks and churches. The bank is an economic institution without which modern capitalism sounds impossible, a liminal space present and absent where the capitalist finds his being and his life there. On the other corner is located the congregational church, which is the place for great gatherings. The significant point is that, unlike Judaism and Islam, Christian scriptures are not much concerned about economic and financial issues, i.e., the Jewish and Islamic scriptures both comment on capital and how it should be circulated within the society, although each in its own different and specific ways. On the other hand, the New Testament is mostly concerned about the life of Jesus Christ, how he sacrificed himself to pay for the original Sin and bring about redemption for human beings. The archetypal Jewish figure in literature is an individual known for massing wealth. In Islam, although the ideal Muslim is the true warrior (Mujahid), there is a well-designed system for circulating the capital and sharing it with all layers and classes within the society. Weber distinguishes the ideal images in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well. For Weber, a prosperous merchant, a monk, and a mujahid are the ideal images of a typical Jew, a typical Christian, and a typical Muslim, respectively.

The church, which is to be critical of immoral capitalist policies, is in the city center close to two capitalist institutions. The other chain to strengthen the relationship between the church and the store as a capitalist space is Lengel, the manager. He is a teacher in Sunday school teaching religious teachings on Sundays. Lengel is here a parody of a true Christian figure. Although a Christian, as discussed above, is not and should not be involved in such issues, he is now the manager of a store. He is concerned about Christian values and teaches the basics of the religion at the Sunday School. The amalgam of the shop, bank, and church is ornamented by real-estate offices and the newspaper store, which is required for the citizens to justify their life values in such a society. You rent a house in the real-estate office, do the shopping

in the store, put the savings in your bank account if anything remains to be spent on next occasions, scan newspapers to be provided with more opportunities of buying and consuming and finally head home without giving the faintest thought to the seaside located just five miles away. To make the scene even more remarkable, the loaders are brought into account digging the street because the sewer is broken again. Ending the description with a report of the broken sewer creates an anticlimactic situation. Close to these institutions, the sewer is broken again and has symbolically contaminated the surrounding.

Sammy ridicules and makes fun of A & P's future and ties it with Stokesie's personality, which is too much like A & P stores' values. Stokesie, who is pretty disciplined and admired by the managers, daydreams about his promotion and becoming a manager one day. Sammy ridicules Stokesie: "I forgot to say he thinks he's going to be manager some sunny day, maybe in 1990 when it is called the great Alexandrove and Petrooshki Tea Company or something" (Arp & Johnson, 2015, p. 373). As clarified earlier, The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company had become A & P, from which Sammy forms two Russian words and replaces them with the original ones. The Russian names signify the Americans' anxiety and nervousness about the Soviet Union and the cold war. People who are always worried about Soviet Union's predominance are preoccupied with the consumerist and capitalist social ties so much that they have not visited the seaside five miles away within the past twenty years. Interestingly, the narrator indicates the meaninglessness of such a worry through the names he has replaced A & P with since they are perverted Russian names that do not make sense.

"A & P" and Intellectuality

In order to analyze the story, the characters need to be put into different categories. Even though they are apparently very different, they can be categorized easily. They are divided into two groups: the narrator and the three girls with the indecent style on the one side and the common customers, the manager, and the staff on the other. These two groups form a binary opposition that shapes the story's major conflict and develops the plot. The inspection of each of these groups and their moral characteristics helps us find the conclusion of the story. It is apparent that in the first group, the girls and the narrator, a social norm has been ignored in its general sense. The narrator describes the girls while his diction is erotic and full of sexy imagery. He is reliable in describing the girls based on the other aspects present in the story to a great extent. The girls enter wearing swimsuits; one of the girls' mother has asked her to buy something on the way home and the rest, regardless of their

appearance, accompany her. They have even worn the swimsuits improperly, which indicates their disinterest in the conventions. The question is why an A & P manager should react to such behavior while the major policy of such a store is to keep the customers. Are the social norms and morality more significant than the profit in America as a remarkable capitalist arena?

The principal character, i.e., the protagonist, is the most complicated of the characters. He is the narrator of the story too. He is a 19-year-old teenager who is on the cash register. It is first deduced that he is following the rules and he is loyal to the conventions. In the beginning, he is thought of as a married middle-class citizen working as a cash register to make ends meet until his reaction to the girls' entrance is observed; his description, however, confirms the contrary. However, the way he looks at the customers, especially a woman, is an index of his inner resistance against capitalism. His diction shows his tendency towards counter-culture. In his descriptions, slang and taboo are used, and the informal register, the index of his social class, is the style he criticizes the customers' behaviors and immoralities. He sometimes uses animal imagery to describe appearances and behavioral features. The state of being the slave of capitalism is evident from a woman's traits and appearance. "She's one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows." This customer is described to appear like a witch. "She'd been watching cash registers forty years and probably never seen a mistake before" (Arp & Johnson, 2015, p. 372). She is a grotesque representation of one of the customers of A & P.

In some cases, the narrator follows a personal style, like his representation of the calculator sound, making it difficult to understand. It makes his position counter-cultural. His manner and style of talking is unconsciously directed against the dominant economic policies of the consumerist society. The use of animal imagery in his description of the customers is a significant and sophisticated device to show this; it has also added a poetic and humorous feature to the story's language. The point is evident in the initiation of the story when a woman, whose biscuit is mistakenly rung up twice, gets extremely angry (see the previous quote) and relates that "by the time I got her feathers smoothed and her goodies into a bag, she gave me a little snort in passing," which is quite clearly representing her as a pig and continues "if she'd been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem" to introduce her again as one the witches of Salem (Arp & Johnson, 2015, p. 372).

The point worth noticing is the abusive language of the description. The witch and the hen imagery is highly abusive and critical. The metaphor of the feather in the narrator's description of the angry woman forms the image of an angry hen in mind.

Her snorting also forms the image of an angry pig in the mind of the reader. In some other parts, customers are called the sheep: "The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle – the girls were walking against the usual traffic." (p. 372) The bitterest satire is the sheep imagery for A & P customers. It is almost apparent that sheep is, more or less, a universal symbol of thoughtless people known for being aimless and materialist. The narrator continues as follows:

‘I bet you set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering “let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, apple sauce!”’ (p. 373)

The customers are mostly women. The narrator’s viewpoint about women is in no way revolutionary and follows the same capitalistic approach dominant in the society. The girls’ description is in a patriotic diction. “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?)” (p. 372) The analysis of characters’ behavior provides aspects based on which their humane or inhumane sides can be judged.

The analysis of what Sammy says about A & P customers indicates that they lack humane features and are closer to animals. A rationale for using animal imagery, especially sheep, is thus a confirmation of the point. Based on what was presented on intellectuality and intellectual behavior by Weber, it can be claimed that the customers’ behavior is not “meaningful” since the “means-ends rational” and “value-rational” are missing. The customers’ preoccupation with shopping and consumption makes their unconditional slavery evident. The more significant point is their lack of freedom shown in the way they buy and consume, and in case there is freewill it is defined within the norms of A & P. Among the managers and staff, Lengel and Stocksie have been magnified. Stocksie, as explicated earlier, is the one who defines himself and his future with A & P values, looking forward to winning a position within the system. Lengel, the manager who preaches the girls, is A & P hypocritical and thus immoral, inhumane, and imprisoning values displayed. In the closing events, when Lengel enters, he is described as “dreary.” And Sammy goes on: “he [Lengel] had been thinking all these years the A & P was a great big dune and he was the head lifeguard” (p. 376). For the narrator, Lengel, a cacophonous word, is much of a villain who commits immorality although he teaches Christian teachings. Thus, it is concluded that the customers’ behavior is not humane as they lack the three characteristics enumerated by Weber as being free, meaningful, and intellectual.

The behavior of the characters in the second group, Sammy and the girls, is more thought-provoking. The reader might consider this group's behavior and decision moral and intellectual; however, the evidence confirms the opposite. The question posed about the girls, regardless of the manager's reaction, is whether their appearance is moral and intellectual? Even though it is a highly relative issue depending on several cultural, ethnic, and anthropological factors, the answer can be provided in Weber's theory. It is apparent that the manager is quite right claiming that the entrance to a public place in swimsuits is not appropriate, but the point is that an A & P manager's preoccupation is neither moral nor intellectual, but financial. Throughout the story, it is observed that A & P has been aiming at developing a generation of buyers and consumers inspired enough by consumerism to have humane and intellectual features forgotten. The point is clearly observed in the customers' behavior. Suppose Lengel and his likes were worried about the customers' morality. In that case, the story should have been initiated with a different introduction of its customers as, for example, patient and thoughtful people rather than introducing them as inhumane, nervous, and impatient animal-like creatures facing cash register's mistake (refer to the preceding part in which the narrator's use of animal imagery is explained). His being teaching religious teachings is not a sign of moral but proof of hypocrisy and conventionality in his personality. No reader ignores the fact that it has been years since the citizens of this small city have not visited the beach about five miles from the city. Interestingly enough, contrary to the rest, the girls have just been to the beach and, as they enter the store, they walk in the opposite direction to act unconsciously as a counter-consumerist symbolic force. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the girls' behavior is neither moral nor intellectual in itself but is a revolutionary reaction against the patterns of the capitalist and consumerist lifestyle.

Even though not much different, the protagonist of the story, Sammy, is more significant than the rest of the characters as he makes decisions, the analysis of which, based on Weber's ideas, reveals thought-provoking questions and explains the argument of this article. After Lengel advises the girls, Sammy immediately chooses to resign as a reaction against what Lengel has done to protest against him. Although his decision is symbolic and remarkable, indicating his being against the dominant immoral and inhumane patterns, his being young and his erotic attraction to the girls indicate a sudden and illogical reaction to show off in a quixotic heroic action. The act is quixotic in that it comes not to be appreciated in any way within the society he lives; its being ignored is quite visible in the girls' passive reaction. It appears that the girls do not notice this heroism at all. The heroism occurs in Sammy's isolated, unrealistic and outdated world. Quite evidently, his reaction remains unnoticeable by his friends, Lengel and the girls, and this is why we come to call Sammy's sudden reaction to Lengel, *heroism in the age of consumerism*; this

is, in other terms, the emergence of a moral Don Quixote. This decision is not logical as it is abrupt, emotional, and outdated. Having lost his job, Sammy has not noticed the girls at the end of the story. Standing outside the store, he says: "...I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter." (p. 376) This symbolic assessment is considered in two ways: firstly, he has understood his illogical decision arriving nowhere, and secondly, he has figured out how consumerism and capitalism work; thus, living in such an atmosphere will be challenging or even impossible hereafter. In other words, although Sammy's reaction has made him more conscious about his position as a citizen of a consumerist society, his decision comes to be unappreciated since it lacks both a logical goal and intellectual purpose.

Conclusion

The analysis of John Updike's "A & P" based on Max Weber's moral and intellectual decision-making concept indicates that decision-making and logical action become challenging where consumerist values prevail. This fact becomes apparent when none of the decisions, behaviors, and reactions is agreeable to intellectual and logical behavioral reactions and decision-making criteria that Weber enumerates. The question is to find from where the problem comes. Since consumerism values are predominant, based on what Updike has pictured in his story, and since individuals lose their freedom, making humane and intellectual decisions becomes impossible.

The characters, which were divided into two groups, regardless of their social class, are captivated by consumerist patterns and unable to make logical and purposeful decisions. The controversial issue is whether there is a way out. Updike's story represents the situation as a complicated and paradoxical one; finding a way out is impossible as long as the character is situated within the system. Every single attempt is doomed if it does not follow a purposeful, logical, and intellectual decision-making framework. It is observed that Sammy as the protagonist of the story, acknowledges his meaningless and absurd state at the end. The story's ending clarifies the point that the social movement to change consumerist patterns through free and humane decision-making fails if it is within the capitalist system.

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