

John Updike's "A & P": A Return Visit to "Araby"
An Essay by Walter Wells

Name: _____

John Updike's penchant for appropriating great works of literature and giving them contemporary restatement in his own fiction is abundantly documented—as is the fact that, among his favorite sources, James Joyce looms large (1).

With special affinity for *Dubliners*, Updike has, by common acknowledgment, written at least one short story that strongly resembles the acclaimed "Araby," not only in plot and theme, but in incidental detail. That story, the 1960 "You'll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You"—like "Araby"—tells the tale of a poor, romantically infatuated young boy who, though obstructed by parental slowness, journeys with innocent urgency, coins in hand, to a seemingly magical carnival—only to find there, behind its facades, just a sleazy, money grasping, sexually tinged reality that frustrates and embitters him. Both stories draw on the Christian imagery of Bunyan's *Vanity Fair* episode to trace a modern boy's passage from innocence to experience, and to expose some of the pains and complexities of that passage. Notwithstanding "Araby"'s cachet as one of the great short stories in the English language, at least two critics have found "You'll Never Know, Dear" to be "a far more complex story" (2).

What remains unacknowledged, I think, is that shortly after writing "You'll Never Know, Dear," Updike made a second fictional excursion to Araby. This time he transformed Joyce's latter-day *Vanity Fair*, not into a cheaply exotic destination for a starry-eyed youngster, but into the richly resonant single setting for an older adolescent's sad tale: a tale of the modern supermarket. The resulting story, since its publication in 1962, has been Updike's most frequently anthologized: the popular "A & P." Updike even signals his intention for us at the outset, giving his story a title that metrically echoes Joyce's: *Araby . . . A & P*. (Grand Union or Safeway would not suffice.)

Like "Araby," "A & P" is told after the fact by a young man now much the wiser, presumably, for his frustrating infatuation with a beautiful but inaccessible girl whose allure excites him into confusing his sexual impulses for those of honor and chivalry. The self-delusion in both cases leads quickly to an emotional fall.

At 19, Updike's protagonist, Sammy, is a good bit older than Joyce's—at the opposite end of adolescence, it would seem. While in Joyce's boy we readily believe such confusion between the gallant and profane, I think we needn't assume that Sammy is likewise unable to distinguish between the two quite normal impulses. His attraction to the girl in the aisle is certainly far more anatomically and less ambiguously expressed than that of Joyce's boy to Mangan's sister. But it is Beauty that confounds the issue. When human aesthetics come into play, when the object of a young man's carnal desire also gratifies him aesthetically, that is when the confusion arises. In Irish-Catholic Dublin of the 1890s (3), such youthful beauty not surprisingly invokes analogies between Mangan's sister and the Queen of Heaven (though the swinging of her body and "the soft rope of her hair toss[ing] from side to side" [Joyce 30]), which captivate the boy, hint at something less spiritual than Madonna worship). And while beauty's benchmarks in Sammy's more secular mid-century America are more anatomical than spiritual, Updike does have Sammy call his young femme fatal "Queenie," and he does make her the center of a "trinity" of sorts, showing her two friends at one point "huddl[ing] against her for relief" ("A & P" 189).

Once smitten, both young protagonists become distracted, agitated, disoriented. Joyce's turns impatient "with the serious work of life" (Joyce 32). His teacher accuses him of idling. His heart leaps, his thoughts wander, his body responds "like a harp" to the words and gestures of Mangan's sister, which run "like fingers . . . upon the wires" (31). Similarly, Updike's young hero can't remember, from the moment he spots Queenie in the aisle, which items he has rung up on the cash register.

Even details in the two stories are similar, Updike clearly taking his cues from "Araby." Both boys are excited by specified whiteness about the girls—Joyce's boy by "the white curve of her neck" and "the white border of [her] petticoat" in the glow of Dublin lamplight (Joyce 32), Sammy by the "long white prima-donna legs" ("A & P" 188) and the white shoulders to which he refers repeatedly. "Could [there]," he wonders, "have been anything whiter

than those shoulders[?]" (189). Joyce's boy also observes a nimbus surrounding Mangan's sister, "her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door" (30). True, Mangan's sister comports herself more humbly than her American counterpart. Queenie walks, heavy-heeled and head high, with the haughty pride of the affluent, secularized American upper middle class. But her enticing whiteness, in Updike's sly parody, is also given a luminous, halo-like quality: "around the top of the cloth," says Sammy of the bathing suit that "had slipped a little on her . . . there was this shining rim" (189).

Both girls, remote as they are from their ardent admirers, also engage in some subtly seductive posturing. In the supermarket aisle, Queenie turns so slowly that Sammy's stomach is made to "rub the inside of [his] apron" (189). It's the same sensation, we suspect, that Joyce's protagonist feels when Mangan's sister "turn[s the] silver bracelet round and round her wrist" (Joyce 32) and bows her head toward him in the lamplight in front of her door. Queenie bows to no one, but the "clear bare plane of the top of her chest . . . [is] like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light" ("A & P" 189). Her beauty, too, like that of Mangan's sister, is incandescent as it inclines toward her aspiring young knight.

Certainly one artistic motive for Updike's second reworking of "Araby" must be to contrast the spiritual value-systems and the adolescent sexual folkways of Joyce's Dublin with those of suburban New England in the Atomic Age. (The disillusionment of little Ben, who is only ten in "You'll Never Know, Dear," is clearly presexual.) "A & P" holds the secular materialism of Updike's own day up for comparison against the slowly imploding, English-dominated Irish Catholicism of the mid-1890s—and, behind it, the fervor of Protestant evangelism in Bunyan's seventeenth century. As critics have often noted, few non-Catholic writers in America make issues of religious faith and doubt as important in their fictions as does Updike (4). In Victorian Dublin, redolent with the musty odor of incense, parochial schools, and the litter of dead priests, the Araby bazaar, a romanticized, pseudo-Oriental pavilion created by the fund raisers of the Jervis Street Hospital, stands incongruously pagan and temporary. It is there briefly, soon to be gone. Updike's supermarket, on the other hand, is permanently planted in the light of day near Boston, precisely where the church used to be: "right in the middle of town." "[From its] front doors," says Sammy, "you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real estate offices. . ." (191)—quite the satellites to material abundance they've become. The temple of modern consumerism has supplanted the house of worship at the heart of things. It is also an era in which Sammy (and hardly Sammy alone) takes for granted that the godless communists will take control sooner or later (as the British had long since assumed control in Joyce's Ireland). Sammy looks ahead quite assuredly to a time when the A & P (the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Co., that bedrock American institution) will be "called the Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company or something" (191).

Updike heightens the story's skepticism over the destiny of American Christianity by having his three girls stroll through the aisles of the A & P inappropriately clad, in reductive parody of Bunyan's pilgrims in *Vanity Fair*:

[E]ven as they entred into the fair, all the people in the fair were moved, and the town it self as it were in a Hubbub about them; and that for several reasons: For, First, the pilgrims were cloathed with such kind of Raiment as was diverse from the Raiment of any that Traded in that fair. The people therefore of the fair made a great gazing upon them. Some said they were fools, some they were Bedlams, and some they are Outlandish-men. (Bunyan 111)

The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle—the girls were walking against the usual traffic . . . —were pretty hilarious. You could see them, when Queenie's white shoulders dawned on them, kind of jerk, or hop, or hiccup, but their eyes snapped back to their own baskets and on they pushed. I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists. . . . 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. ("A & P" 190)

Contrast these two sets of "pilgrims" in the marketplace. Bunyan's proudly ignore exhortations that they partake of the bounty of the fair, insisting instead that the wares of the marketplace are nothing but stimuli to vanity. They will, they say, buy only the Truth. Queenie and her pals, on the other hand, do buy: one jar of Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream (5).

Queenie's approach to the checkout stand, Sammy warns us, begins "the sad part of the story" (192). Lengel, the store's manager, a self-appointed moral policeman who also teaches Sunday school, confronts the girls at the register—just as Bunyan's pilgrims are confronted by "the Great One of the fair" (i.e., Beelzebub; Bunyan 112). "Girls, this isn't the beach," Lengel tells them ("A & P" 193), echoing the Devil's demand in *Vanity Fair* that the pilgrims account for "what they did there in such an unusual Garb" (Bunyan 112). Queenie and her friends, like Bunyan's pilgrims, protest that they "weren't . . . shopping" ("A & P" 194), only buying the snacks that Queenie's mother asked them to get on their way home from the beach. Bunyan's pilgrims explain to their inquisitor that they are just passing through on their way to the Heavenly Jerusalem. Sammy imagines, in fact, that the girls are returning to their own latter-day heavenly city, the affluent beach set where folks eat "herring snacks on toothpicks off a big glass plate and . . . [hold] drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them" (193)—this by comparison to the lemonade and Schlitz beer crowd, whence Sammy comes, where the suds are drunk from glasses with stenciled cartoons. In Bunyan's world, the choice was earthly vanity or heavenly salvation; in Updike's, it's just one level of class vanity or another.

To Queenie's protest, Lengel replies that it "makes no difference. . . . We want you decently dressed when you come in here." Queenie snaps back, insisting that she and her friends "are decent" (194). But they are nonetheless (after Lengel allows Sammy to ring up the herring snacks) quietly banished from the store. Bunyan's pilgrims, of course, are more harshly persecuted, thrown in a cage and forced to assert their dignity much more protractedly than Updike's girls. The difference, however, is only one of degree.

At the checkout stand, Sammy witnesses Queenie's mortification up close with profound, if complicated, sympathy. He tenderly unfolds the dollar bill she hands him ("it just having come," he says, "from between the two smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known" [193-94]), puts her change "into her narrow pink palm," hands her the jar of herring in a bag, then blurts out "I quit"—quickly enough, he hopes, for the girls to hear, so they will stop and acknowledge "their unsuspected hero" (194).

It's pure impetuosity on Sammy's part, a gallant gesture, a promise of sorts. Like Joyce's boy in Dublin, when face to face with the object of his adoration, not knowing what else to say or do, Sammy offers a gift. Where the Irish boy, in his comparatively poor working-class milieu, wants (perhaps needs) to offer something material to Mangan's sister to show his adoration, Sammy, who inhabits an affluent American world cut loose from the consolations of Christian faith, a world of largely material values, offers instead an assertion of principle as his gift. His Queenie has been wronged, and he will stand by her; in an age when the supermarket has replaced the church as the community's central institution, "principle" is the nearest equivalent one has to spiritual commitment. But before we anoint Sammy's act as one of pure principle, however imprudent, we should ask ourselves whether he would have done the same had one of the other girls—maybe Big Tall Goony-Goony—borne the brunt of the reprimand, with Queenie out of the picture. I doubt it.

The promises of both young men prove futile, of course. Joyce's boy gets to Araby too late, and recognizes in the flirtatious banter there between the salesgirl and her two English admirers, and in the two men counting money, something uncomfortably close to the nature of his own longing: his dream, he later sees, was actually sexual, and money would not buy it. In the A & P, Queenie and her friends disappear out the door. Sammy's promise is also in vain; but, like Joyce's young protagonist, he's stuck with it. "It seems to me," says Sammy, "that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it" (196). He removes his apron and bow tie, and leaves the market. Once outside, he looks back woefully through the store windows and sees Lengel replacing him behind the cash register. Business goes on, and—as at Araby—the money must be collected. Like Joyce's boy peering into the

darkened rafters of the Araby bazaar and lamenting the vanity of his impulsive act, Sammy says at the end of his story, "My stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter" (196).

Hereafter . . . it's an oddly formal word with which to conclude for Sammy, who is otherwise a most colloquial storyteller. Does Updike mean to hint that Sammy's epiphany bears intimations of immortality?—and not very positive ones at that? Joyce's boy would seem simply to have matured as a result of his insight, to have become better equipped for life as an adult (6). Though convinced as a youth that his devotion to Mangan's sister was divinely driven, he has come to realize—as his older, more articulate narrative voice makes clear—that he had, back then, been "a creature driven and derided by vanity" (Joyce 35). Looking backward, Joyce's narrator has resolved his earlier confusion of spirit and libido, and can recount for us, however wistfully, how that resolution came about. Updike's Sammy, by comparison, speaks less retrospectively. He is still 19 at the end of his story, and still looking around for the girls in the parking lot, though "they're gone, of course" ("A & P" 196). Sammy looks ahead—into the life that lies before him, even perhaps (given that concluding word) at his own uncertain path to the Hereafter. And he sees nothing very clearly, only indefiniteness.

Both protagonists have come to realize that romantic gestures—in fact, that the whole chivalric world view—are, in modern times, counterproductive. That there are, however, for American adolescents in post-atomic, Cold War New England, any viable alternatives is less assured. Sammy's is the more ambivalent epiphany.

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NOTES:

- (1) Among the numerous critical acknowledgments of Updike's debt to Joyce's fiction, two of the most stimulating are by Mizener ("Behind the Dazzle is a Knowing Eve") and Joyce Carol Oates. Updike himself has examined Joyce's fictional aesthetic in his *New Yorker* article, "Questions Concerning Giacomo," a piece in which he suggests that nowhere are Joyce's characters better presented than in *Dubliners*. Among other writers in whose work Updike has found fertile source material for contemporary restatement, the most significant in recent years has been Nathaniel Hawthorne. Three of Updike's novels, *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger's Version* (1986), and *S.* (1988) have been "retellings" of *The Scarlet Letter*, from the standpoints of Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth and Hester Prynne, respectively. An insightful discussion of these "Scarlet Letter" novels of Updike's is that by James A. Schiff.
- (2) Hamilton 21-22. Another critic who perceptively explores the similarities between "You'll Never Know, Dear" and "Araby" is Robert Detweiler (8-9, 51-53).
- (3) Though the story's events are not expressly dated in the narrative, the actual Araby bazaar—staged as a charity event to aid the Jervis Street Hospital in Dublin—fixes the story's climax at somewhere between 14 and 19 May 1894.
- (4) For useful views of Updike's treatment of religious issues, see Yates 469-74 and Strandberg 157-75.
- (5) The symbolism here is tantalizing. Is it Christ the king of fishermen we are meant to recall, reduced in this modern temple of consumerism to a tasty but soured snack that replaces the Truth alone that Bunyan's pilgrims will buy? Or should we infer an image of the legendary, impotent Fisher King of Arthurian legend, presiding over his wasteland?—so important symbolically to Eliot's great poem. Queenie's purchase seems to me the most symbolically provocative element in Updike's story.
- (6) I do not mean, in so saying, to ignore the great social, political and religious density of "Araby," which reverberates far beyond Updike's transformations of the story. That density is brilliantly explicated by Harry Stone in "'Araby' and the Writing of James Joyce."