A Comparison of Cathedral by Raymond Carver and A&P by John Updike

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Introduction

Cathedral, written by Raymond Carver, and John Updike's A& P are two short stories written in the same era of contemporary literature. Both writers were American novelists living through the 20th century, and it is evident from these two works that they observed the transformations in society very keenly. The present essay is a compare-and-contrast review of the two famous works of Raymond Carver and John Updike.

Discussion

An article, "Cathedral And A & P," published by Researchomatic in 2012, suggested that the representation of characters in both stories reflects the influences on individuals arising from the social, cultural, and economic changes occurring in society and underpinned by modernism and mass-mediated communication. The influences of contemporary social transitions on individuals' social lives and sexual orientation are highlighted through the characters of the stories.

Stearns and his co-researchers wrote about the lead character of A& P, "Sammy," that he is sexually attracted to his female colleagues in the store and the shoppers at the store named A& P. He thinks that people are dressed ordinarily and similarly every day, but when the three girls enter the store, he is attracted to them because they are dressed boldly in swimsuits. He keenly observes the girls coming to the store in their swimsuits, *"It was bright green, and the seams on the bra were still sharp, and her belly was still pretty pale, so I guessed she just got it*." Watching them, Sammy makes a mistake in his work on the register; other men are also looking at them, and the whole store is distracted by them. A fairly large portion of the story consists of the narrator's physical descriptions of the girls. Sammy and Stoksie, his colleague, exchange views about the bodily beauty of the girls, but suddenly, Stoksie goes back into his married social status mode (Stearns et al.).

Saldivar and Tony, in their work "The Art of John Updike's 'A&P'" in 1997, analyzed the characters of the girls, noting that they are confident and think themselves decent enough, and Sammy is amused by this. They are characters different from the crowd in society and portray the influence of modernism on the personal lifestyles of women of the 1950s and 1960s. They reject the conventional

way of living and moving in the community by shopping in swimsuits, contrasting with the "house slaves in pin curlers." Sammy, however, is impressed by their boldness and likes it very much. Queenie, one of the three girls, is portrayed as a beauty-with-brains character who carries a sense of precocity. She visits the grocery store, enjoys people staring at her, and appears to have high self-esteem regarding her sexual identity. She walks around the store proudly because she thinks she is elegant and sexually attractive and can attract the attention of the men in town. She has a high opinion of herself (Saldivar & Tony, 1997).

Blodgett and Harriet, in 2003, analyzed the character of Sammy, who was portrayed as lustful toward the girls' bodies and judgmental about the social and personal lives they were living. He likes their way of doing things so much that when Queenie walks to the counter with a jar of "Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream," Sammy finds it a choice different from those of other people. He also thinks it is quite cute when the girl pulls money out of her top to pay at the counter and drops the jar, which feels heavier in his hands. Sexually driven, Sammy in A&P goes in search of sexually explicit people and resigns from the store. He does not want to be a common grocery worker his whole life; to him, men working at the store are not living a happy life, as he perceives from his male coworkers. He quits the store not only because he wants to explore the charms of the modern world more but also because he dislikes his boss's way of judging people who come to the store based on stereotypes. He finds it wrong to treat people differently in terms of their appearance. This shows the change in people's perceptions of other people and their lifestyles brought about by the modernism of that era (Blodgett and Harriet).

Brown, in his work on "The Cathedral" in 1990, looked at the plots and scenes of the story in a house where a husband and wife live and where the wife's former boyfriend visits. At the same time, A& P is plotted mainly in a grocery store with a static character of a manager, three girls, and Sammy (Brown, 1990). The researcher says that a certain wave of tension flows through Raymond's Cathedral, threatening the characters' stability. A woman tries drawing the old Cathedral with her former friend, who is visually impaired and is visiting her at her house. Her husband is not very happy internally to have the visitor in the house; he has such a stereotypical perception of blind people that when Robert, the blind man, smokes and fixes drinks, he is surprised. However, he becomes acquainted with Robert, which is also surprising to him (Brown).

Nesset and Kirk, in 1995, studied the scenes of acquaintance between the husband and Robert in "The Cathedral" analytically. They said that after the wife falls asleep in "Cathedral," the husband and Robert switch the channels on the television, and the only decent program they can find is something about the church and the Middle Ages. The program shows a Cathedral, and the husband typically thinks that Robert, being blind, will not know what it looks like and tries to describe it for him. Robert asks about the paintings of the Cathedral, and the husband can hardly describe them effectively. Robert comes up with an idea and asks the husband to bring a pen and paper and draw a cathedral with him. Not very interested, the husband brings the things and starts trying to draw with Robert's hand close over his own. He starts drawing a "*box that looked like a house*"and"*it could have been the house he lives in*." He continues drawing. Slowly, he becomes interested in the drawing, adding

things to it: “I couldn’t stop even as the TV show goes off-air.” Robert tells him to draw with his eyes closed, and he does so and experiences it as a great thing to do, “like nothing else in his life up to now.” After Robert tells him to stop, as he thinks it is done, the husband does not open his eyes and has a certain feeling about keeping them closed. When Robert asks how it was, the narrator replies, “It’s something” (Nesset and Kirk).

Facknitz and Mark talked about the central novelty of Cathedral: it is ironic that the character of the husband disdains visual impairment but later realizes that there is something more than just the physical. The husband is socially disconnected and spends much of his time at home watching television programs. His views of the world are largely based on what he sees in the media, especially television and movies. In the short story “Cathedral,” ‘the hero is a hitched man who experiences issues making associations with individuals and even his better half, and he appears to have issues perhaps somewhat desirous of the association his significant other can make with other individuals (Facknitz and Mark).

Maimon and his co-researchers did a comparative analysis of “A&P” and “The Cathedral.” They analyzed that, in both stories, the protagonists go through an experience that makes them change their way of thinking about the world. In Updike’s A& P, Sammy experiences such an epiphany when he decides to resign from his job at the store, and Raymond Carver’s narrator in Cathedral shows how the husband experiences an epiphany by drawing with closed eyes and finding something amazing about things beyond physical existence. Sammy comes to dislike the stereotypical view of his boss toward people’s clothing, and the husband develops compelling reasons to change his stereotypical perception of people with disabilities. The number of characters involved in the two stories is different, and both are told in different settings. The two stories do not express similar stereotypes; the husband in “Cathedral” stereotypes blind people, and he appears to have his mind made up about how all visually impaired individuals are. Thus, in the short story “Cathedral,” blindness becomes the focus of the stereotype (Maimon et al.).

Kellner and Bruce, in 2014, reviewed “A&P.” They are of the view that in “A&P,” for Sammy, it is the young ladies who provide the catalyst for change. The impetus for change in the two stories is unforeseen, and it disrupts the characters’ ordinary routines. At the point when the young ladies in swimming outfits entered the store, Sammy was extremely amazed at the young ladies’ thoughtless dress code or conduct: “You know, it’s one thing to have a young lady in a swimsuit down on the shoreline. . . in any case, something else in the cool of the A&P” (John Updike 14). Sammy, at that point, depicts the standard benefactors of the A& P as “ladies with six kids and varicose veins mapping their legs” (John Updike 14). Sammy has become somewhat used to the same “regular,” respectable, business-dressed customers who enter the store. This parallels the husband in “Cathedral,” who is also taken away from his day-to-day routine when Robert, the visually impaired man, comes to visit. He makes a big deal about the visitor coming because he is comfortable with satisfying himself, and the fact that Robert is visually impaired will, in all probability, complicate his regular day-to-day existence.

In the story “A&P,” Sammy is immediately fascinated by the three females who enter the market. His interest is perhaps prompted by the natural inclination of being a young teenager and by the presence of three young ladies wearing swimsuits. Once the three young ladies move through the supermarket, Sammy instantly starts making judgments about their character based on the way they walk and look. Sammy, while watching the three young ladies, names the center young lady “Queenie,”based solely on her appearance and the way she walks. He depicts Queenie condescendingly,”*She didn’t glance around, not this ruler and she just strolled straight on gradually, on these long white diva legs. She descended somewhat harder on her foot rear areas...* “(Updike 259) After viewing the young ladies stroll through the supermarket to find their item, he insults their intelligence without having spoken to them: “… *do you truly believe it’s a brain in there or only a little buzz”*... (Kellner and Bruce).

Conclusion

Both short stories are written in the same era, an early contemporary era, and both have characters depicting the stereotypes and prejudices of society. However, both have shown the transformation of characters into the new age. A& P is a coming-of-age story in which Sammy, as a teenager, turns into an adult and strongly depicts changed perceptions of modern society in the 1950s and 1960s. The husband in Cathedral is a dynamic character, while the manager at the grocery store in A& P appears to be a static character to readers because nothing particularly changes about him, although he is present throughout the events of the story. The husband in Cathedral is a person who does not connect much with other people socially. In a comparative overview, John Updike’s A& P and Raymond Carver’s Cathedral are different in terms of the settings of the narratives and the number of characters involved. Cathedral is a household story within the four walls of a house in a family environment, whereas A& P is about the interactions of people in a grocery store in a commercial environment. Both stories show dimensions of personal transformation caused by contemporary society and mass media.

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