Updike (1932— ) was born in Shillington, Pennsylvania, an only child. His mother—a writer—gave him the idea that being a painter or writer would lead him to a happy life, so he launched himself as a cartoonist for the Harvard Lampoon during his college years and for a year after graduation studied drawing in England. Soon after this he joined the staff of The New Yorker and served the magazine in a number of capacities until 1957; he continues to contribute verse, reviews, and fiction to its pages. His fiction is often topical—people trapped in American fads and prejudices figure often in his most characteristic writing. His novels include Rabbit, Run (1960), Couples (1968), Rabbit Redux (1971), Rabbit Is Rich (1982); The Witches of Eastwick (1984), Roger’s Version (1986), Trust Me (1987), and S (1988). His stories have been collected in Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories (1962), The Music School (1966), Bech: A Book (1970), Museums and Women and Other Stories (1972), and Problems and Other Stories (1979).

A & P

In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits. I’m in the third checkout slot, with my back to the door, so I don’t see them until they’re over by the bread. The one that caught my eye first was the one in the plaid green two-piece. She was a chunky kid, with a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can with those two crescents of white just under it, where the sun never seems to hit, at the top of the backs of her legs. I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers trying to remember if I rang it up or not. I ring it up again and the customer starts giving me hell. She’s one of those cash-regis­ter-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows, and I know it made her day to trip me up. She’d been watching cash registers for fifty years and probably never seen a mistake before.

By the time I got her feathers smoothed and her goodies into a bag—she gives me a little snort in passing, if she’d been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem¹—by the time I

¹ A seaport in Massachusetts, famous for the execution of “witches” in 1692.
and turned so slow it made my stomach rub the inside of my apron, and buzzed to the other two, who kind of huddled against her for relief, and then they all three of them went up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-speads-spaghetti-soft-drinks-crackers and-cookies aisle. From the third slot I look straight up this aisle to the meat counter, and I watched them all the way. The fat one with the tan sort of fumbled with the cookies, but on straight thought she put the package back. 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, 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 and muttering “Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, applesauce!” or whatever it is they do or hop, or hiccup, but their eyes snapped back to their own baskets.

You know, it’s one thing to have a girl in a bathing suit down on the beach, where what with the glare nobody can look at each other much anyway, and another thing in the cool of the A & P, under the fluorescent lights, against all those stacked packages, with her feet paddling along naked over our checker-board green-and-cream rubber-tile floor.

“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, maybe in 1990 when it’s called the Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company or something.

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. As I say, 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 and about twenty-seven old freeloaders 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.

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. Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn’t help it.

Now here comes the sad part of the story, at least my family says it’s sad, but I don’t think it’s so sad myself. The store’s pretty empty, it being Thursday afternoon, so there was nothing much to do except lean on the register and wait for the girls to show up again. The whole store was like a pinball machine and I didn’t know which tunnel they’d come out of. After a while they come around out of the far aisle, around the light bulbs, records at discount of the Caribbean Six or Tony Martin Sings or some such gunk you wonder they waste the wax on, six-packs of candy bars, and plastic toys done up in cellophane that fall apart when a kid looks at them anyway. Around they come, Queenie still leading the way, and holding a little gray jar in her hand. Slots Three through Seven are unmanned and I could see her wondering between Stokes and me, but Stokesie with his usual luck draws an old party in baggy gray pants who stumbles up with four giant cans of pineapple juice (what do these bums do with all that pineapple juice? I’ve often asked myself) so the girls come to me. Queenie puts down the jar and I take it into my fingers icy cold. Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream: 49¢. Now her hands are empty, not a ring or a bracelet, bare as Cod made them, and I wonder where the money’s coming from. Still with that prim she lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top. The jar went heavy in my hand. Really, I thought that was so cute.

Then everybody’s luck begins to run out. 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. 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.”

Queenie blushes, though maybe it’s just a brush of sunburn I was noticing for the first time, now that she was so close. “My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks.” Her voice kind of startled me, the way voices do when you see the people first, coming out so flat and
dumb yet kind of tony, too, the way it ticked over “pick up” and “snacks.”
All of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room. 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. When my parents
have 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 stencilled
on.

“That’s all right,” Lengel said. “But this isn’t the beach.” His
repeating this struck me as funny, as if it had just occurred to him, and
he had been thinking all these years the A & P was a great big dune
and he was the head lifeguard. He didn’t like my smiling—as I say he
doesn’t miss much—but he concentrates on giving the girls that sad
he had been thinking all these years the A & P was a great big dune
and he was the head lifeguard. 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.

Queenie’s blush is no sunburn now, and the plump one in plaid,
that I liked better from the back—a really sweet can—pipes up, “We
weren’t doing any shopping. We just came in for the one thing.”

“That makes no difference,” Lengel tells her, and I could see
from the way his eyes went that he hadn’t noticed she was wearing a
two-piece before. “We want you decently dressed when you come in
here.”

“We are decent,” Queenie says suddenly, her lower lip pushing,
gaining now that she remembers her place, a place from which the
crowd that runs the A & P must look pretty crummy. Fancy Herring
Snacks flashed in her very blue eyes.

“Girls, I don’t want to argue with you. After this come in here
with your shoulders covered. It’s our policy.” He turns his back. That’s
policy for you. Policy is what the kingpins want. What the others want
is juvenile delinquency.

All 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, who shook open a paper bag as gently as peeling a peach,
not wanting to miss a word. I could feel in the silence everybody get-
ting nervous, most of all Lengel, who asks me, “Sammy, have you rung
up their purchase?”

I thought and said “No” but it wasn’t about that I was thinking. I
go through the punches, 4, 9, CROC, 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 spat being the drawer flying out. I
uncease the bill, tenderly as you may imagine, it just having come
from between the two smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known

there were, and pass a half and a 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.

The girls, and who’d blame them, are in a hurry to get out, so I
say “I quit” to Lengel quick enough for them to hear, hoping they’ll
stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero. They keep right on going,
to the electric eye; the door flies open and they flicker across the lot
to their car, Queenie and Plaid and Big Tall Goony-Goony (not that as
raw material she was so bad), leaving me with Lengel and a kink in his
eyebrow.

“Did you say something, Sammy?”

“I said I quit.”

“I thought you did.”

“You didn’t have to embarrass them.”

“It was they who were embarrassing us.”

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.

“I don’t think you know what you’re saying,” Lengel said.

“I know you don’t,” I said. “But I do.” I pull the bow at the back
of my apron and start shrugging it off my shoulders. A couple of cus-
tomers that had been heading for my slot begin to knock against each
other, liked scared pigs in a chute.

Lengel sighs and begins to look very patient and old and gray.
He’s been a friend of my parents for years. “Sammy, you don’t want to
do this to your Mom and Dad,” he tells me. It’s true, I don’t. But it
seems to me that once you begin a gesture it’s fatal not to go through
with it. I fold the apron, “Sammy” stitched in red on the pocket, and
put it on the counter, and drop the bow tie on top of it. The bow tie is
their’s, if you’ve ever wondered. “You’ll feel this for the rest of your
life,” Lengel says, and I know that’s true, too, but remembering how
he made that pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy inside I punch
the No Sale tab and the machine whirs “pee-pul” and the drawer splats
out. 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, and the door heaves itself open,
and outside the sunshine is skating around on the asphalt.

I look around for my girls, but they’re gone, of course. There
wasn’t anybody but some young married screaming with her children
about some candy they didn’t get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon
station wagon. Looking back in the big windows, over the bags of peat
moss and aluminum lawn furniture stacked on the pavement, I could
see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His
The face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he's 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.

1. Does Sammy understand why he sticks by his decision to quit? Is it “in character” for him to quit? What does the reader know about Sammy that he doesn't realize himself? Has something new emerged out of the ingredients of his character?
2. What is the importance of the fact that the girl is wearing bathing suits? Of calling one of the girls “Ouijebie”? Of the fact that there are three girls together?
3. To what extent does the conflict depend on different interpretations of such concepts as decency and policy?
4. Do you think the girls meant to cause trouble by coming to the store in bathing suits? If so, what has this to do with the theme of the story and any myths or illusions called up by the situation itself?
5. Is Sammy right in thinking the world will be a harder place for him hereafter? If it is, will this be a gain or a loss for him?

Answer the following in at least a one page response.

What elements of modernism which we've discussed are evident in this story? Relate your understanding of elements of modernism to multiple SPECIFIC events in the story. To be successful you will need to discuss AT LEAST 3 or more different elements of modernist writing.