Readers familiar with John Updike may think of him as a progressive voice in literature that promotes feminist issues. In the article, “In Desire’s Grip: Gender, Politics, and Intertextual Games in Updike’s Gertrude and Claudius,” Laura Elena Savu even writes that “His [John Updike’s] engagement with Shakespeare’s play integrates implications that express feminist values within the larger framework of intertextuality” (23). From reading statements like this and reading some of Updike’s other works, readers may get the sense that his writing are pro-feminists works that are in line with feminist ideologies. However a closer reading reveals that some of Updike’s writings, specifically his short story “A & P,” uses language to make assumptions about women that reveal even an author trying to be sensitive to women’s issues can still be influenced by the male-orientated patriarchy of our current society’s power structures. If readers do not pay careful attention to the subtle influences of our phallocentric power structure, they may be unaware of the insidious ways that women can be disempowered in literature. Even though Updike’s “A & P” is meant to be a coming-of-age tale in Middle America, the language used and assumption made about women reveal an even more intriguing look at how the patriarchal system pervades into all reaches of American life.

One of the most immediate ways that the male orientated nature of our society reveals itself is through the way the women’s bodies are described in the story. The focus on their bodies exposes the way society treats women as sexual objects. As the girls walk around the store the
narrator ranks them on their looks. He begins to think of the prettiest one as the, “Queen” (300) while referring to the other two as, “Tall Goony-Goony”, (304) and “the plump one in plaid”(303) or “The fat one” (301). This system of ranking the girls based on their beauty, with the most beautiful woman being the most powerful, shows one of the ways this story reproduces our society’s male-orientated power structures. The girls are valued not for their knowledge or skills but rather by how much men desire them. The prettiest girl is assumed to be the leader of the others girls while the least attractive one is dismissed with simple descriptions like, “the plump one in plaid, that I liked better from the back” (303). A reverse case of this can also be seen in the treatment of the women who is checking out when the narrator sees the girls. After appreciating the girl’s beauty, the narrators turns back to checking out the women and refers to her as, “one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows” (300). At first glance this may seem like a basically innocent response made out of anger. However, a closer examination shows that this use of language brings up the most oppressive period for women in America. In the article, “Feminism and Feminisms: Feminism” this dark time in our history is described as,

Nonetheless, the great majority of men and women who conquered or settled this country came from Europe at its most male-supremacist and racist. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries the effort to stamp out female dominated pagan religions resulted in the death of countless witches, leaving some villages with few females. (Mankiller, Marysa, and Steinem)

By thinking about the implications of calling a woman a witch, harkening back to a time when women had little to no power, readers can see that the narrator’s comment was not as innocent as it may seem at first glance. Not only is the most beautiful girl raised up to the status of queen but
the older, less attractive woman at the check-out is deemed a witch, unworthy of being a part of our society.

Not only does judging women based on their looks demean them as sexual objects but it also reveals another dangerous aspect of the patriarchy, valuing women only for their relationships to men. Readers can see this view threaded into the story not just through the assumption that the prettiest girl is the leader but also in the line, “the kind of girl other girls think is very ‘striking’ and ‘attractive’ but never quite makes it, as they very well know, which is why they like her so much” (300). This line implies that women are so concerned with attracting men that they even choose their friends based on who is least threatening to their own sexuality.

Savu’s praises Updike for doing basically the opposite of this because, “in positing the erotic drive as an empowering element in the dynamics of gender relations, Updike implicitly takes a critical aim at the male fantasy though which women is either objectified or idealized and which denies her both agency and voice” (30). This article makes it clear that Updike can be sensitive to women’s issues when he is trying to be, but leaves readers questioning why he fails to be so in his “A & P” story. Is Updike intentionally characterizing his narrator as chauvinistic to be ironic or are Updike’s own patriarchal assumptions influencing his work?

Even though some of the examples of sexism in this short story could be open to debate, about whether it was the character that is sexist or the work itself, the way the double standard about clothing is never mentioned in the story shows that some of the sexism is a result of the assumptions the text makes. One of the reasons the text never even mentions the fact that the girls are held to a different standard than men are, is explained in the article, “Anti-Feminist Backlash: The Role of System Justification in the Rejection of Feminism.” In this article Yeung, Kay, and Peach explain that, “System Justification Theory (SJT) posits that individuals are
motivated to bolster the legitimacy and fairness of their system and the status quo in general, often by denying or rationalizing injustices and unfairness” (475). Reader can see how this could be applied to the story “A & P,” a text in which the climax of the story revolves around girls being told off for wearing bathing suits. The girls are told, “After this come in here with your shoulders covered” (303). Readers can see that not only are the girls held to a different standard then men but the fact that this double-standard exists is completely ignored. If readers apply the system justification theory to this text they can see that Updike may have had a motivation, to uphold the status quo, for not commenting on the double standard that exists in his text.

Another worrisome aspect of the latent sexism in this story is the way the objectification of women eventually leads to the idea of ownership. At first the description are only moderately troublesome as the narrator describes the girls, “broad soft-looking can” (300) or their, “two smoothest scoops of vanilla” (304) but eventually the descriptions begin to seem a little dangerous. The narrator begins to thinks of himself as the girls, “unsuspected hero” (304) and refers to them as, “my girls” (305). These descriptions shows one of the dangerous aspects of sexism, as first the girls become objects of beauty then slowly they become the narrator’s objects of beauty. This type of thinking runs completely counter to the goals of feminism as described in the article, “Feminism and Feminisms: Feminism” in which it is stated that feminism’s,

Broadly shared goals included ending any status as chattel; the freedom to bear
or not to bear children; unlinking sexuality from reproduction; the right to
self-determination and participation at all levels of government; equality
of work, property, and income in and out of the home; democratic family
structures and laws to enforce them; cultural and spiritual practices that honor
females; women's culture and leadership as a source of diminished violence; and
ending hierarchies based on race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, not only because they penalize and divide females but also because they necessitate female oppression. (Mankiller, Marysa, and Steinem)

Readers can see that getting rid of the idea of women as property has always been an important part in feminist movements. It is no accident that it is listed first here because it is heavily tied to all of the other goals of the feminist movement. With the idea of women being property being one of the biggest problems faced by feminism it is surprising to see such an obvious example of it being reproduced in this text.

Another problem found in this story is the way it hints at the inferiority of women by portraying them as less intelligent than men. Most notably, this happens when the narrator is contemplating female’s minds. The story reads, “You never know for sure how girl’s minds work (do you really think it’s a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar?)” (300-301). This is an obvious criticism of women’s intelligence, but other examples are not so obvious. Throughout the story the narrator is constantly making assumptions about the girl’s lives without even being challenged. For example when the girl dubbed “queenie” makes a comment at the check-out the story reads, “All of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room” (303). Even though readers never get a sense of whether the assumptions are right or wrong the very fact that the narrator is never challenged makes it seem like women are simple creatures who’s motivations are easy to guess. One reason this type of stereotypical thinking about women may be included in the text is explained in the article, “Anti-Feminist Backlash: The Role of System Justification in the Rejection of Feminism”. In this article, Yeung, Kay, and Peach explain that “while there are various types of feminist ideologies, all converge on the basic idea that change to the status quo is necessary to address gender inequality. Because of this
explicit system-challenging agenda, antifeminist backlash may in part result from the motivation to defend the legitimacy of the social system” (475). Reader can see that Updike may have subconsciously included remarks about women’s intelligence to justify our current social system where men control most of the intellectually influential positions. Although it is not obvious and perhaps because it is not obvious these examples of the narrators insight into the lives of the girls shows an insidious way patriarchal assumptions can lead to portraying women as less intelligent.

John Updike’s “A & P” presents a troubling view of women through the language used to describe them and the assumption made about them. Some of Updike’s other works reveal a more sensitive positions which leaves the question, of whether the sexism found in this story was intentional or if sexist assumption found their way in subconsciously, up for debate. Readers may also find themselves questioning the value of a coming of age tale when it is so fraught with subtle sexism that those who find it most relevant, young people, may also find it most damaging.

Works Cited:

