

Reading Feelings into Sammie

Thomas Smith

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John Updike, in his story “A & P,” reveals the feelings of the narrator, Sammie, both in the actual action of the story, and in the *way* that Sammie reports the story. The action informs the reader about Sammie’s feelings through dialogue, action, and statements to the reader. The way that Sammie tells the story includes what details he includes, clues as to how he feels now about the events, and so on.

Dialogue and action are used to convey what the characters felt at the time—for instance, the quick exchange of words between Stokesie and Sammie on page 28¹ indicates that both of them are feeling the influence of Queenie’s taken-down straps rather heavily. Another example may be found when Sammie decides to quit. Explicit statements make it clear that he feels like a hero: “I say ‘I quit’ to Lengel quick enough for them to hear, hoping they’ll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero.”

More common are statements about emotion made by Sammie directly to the reader. One example may be found at the top of page 28: “She held her head so high her neck, coming up out of those white shoulders, looked kind of stretched, but I didn’t mind.” From

¹Page 28 of Literature (Reading Fiction, Poetry, and Drama), the class’s source text.

his statement that he didn't mind, we can see that he likes what he sees enough that he doesn't mind the attitude that she strikes. A pair of examples can be found just before and after the break in the story. In the first, Sammie tells us that he "began to feel sorry for them, they couldn't help it." In the second of the pair, which expresses an emotion that is actually rather important to the interpretation of the story, Sammie says "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."

Sammie's statements about emotion should be read with the awareness that it is Sammie himself telling the story, and that he may modify his reporting of feelings to make himself look better, or to justify actions that he made without fully considering them. For instance, while on page 30 he says that "it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it," he may not have thought those words at the time the action took place. He may simply be justifying his actions after the fact.

The reader may also notice things about Sammie from his choice of details to report, word usage, and other implicit cues. His extensive descriptions of Queenie, for instance, indicate to us that he noticed a lot of details about her while the story was happening. His notes about the song of the cash register on page 30 indicate that he was thinking hard about his job, perhaps about whether he was ready to quit.

Sammie's choice of words is worth noticing in several places. Some of his more interesting word choices are his words for customers. On page 28, he calls some customers "houseslaves," probably meaning housewives, since slavery was outlawed long before the story seems to take place. He also calls customers "bums," and several times "sheep." We can see that he is not very enthusiastic about his job by these details.

Noticing and connecting details both explicit and implicit can help a reader to understand the message of a story. Writing with enough depth for these kinds of details to show through is a challenge but pays off in the ability it grants an author, such as Updike, to give subtle nuances to a story. While some particularities of detail types are specific to first person narratives, others can extend to other narrators, and we would do well to keep in mind what can be gleaned from all levels of fiction and reality.