Student Views on a Prohibited Text: John Updike and the A&P Controversy.

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Introduction

In May 1998 a controversy erupted for a brief time in Japan (and also received some publicity in the United States) concerning the well-known John Updike short story A&P. The controversy arose due to the Japanese Education Ministry's decision to prohibit publication of a Japanese translation of the story in a proposed high school textbook. The affair received wide reportage in the press - The Japan Times running two articles in late May: 'Updike story banned from texts' and 'Updike ban not over sex, but chivalry' (the latter taken from The Washington Post); while the Daily Yomiuri also ran one article: 'Updike tale too steamy for textbooks?' (also taken from The Washington Post).

A&P is the story of a nineteen year old boy, Sammy, who works in a convenience store ('A&P') in a small town north of Boston. One day three vivacious young girls enter the store wearing bathing suits, exciting Sammy and his co-worker Stoksie (not to mention other older customers stealing secret pecks), but raising the ire of the store manager, Lengel, who insists that they may only enter the store if they are "decently dressed". Sammy, upset at the humiliation of the girls in front of other customers, and keen to
snare a chance at becoming "their unsuspected hero," throws in his job in
dramatic style and walks out— only to find that the girls have already
disappeared.

The text of the original Yomiuri article was as follows:

**Updike story banned from texts**

The Education Ministry has ordered a Tokyo publisher to remove a
Japanese translation of a short story by U.S. novelist John Updike
from a new high school textbook, saying its descriptions of women
might embarrass schoolgirls, the publisher said Monday.

Kadokawa Shoten Publishing Co. had planned to include Updike's
"A and P" in a textbook on contemporary literature. The book
would have been used in high schools beginning next April.

But the Ministry told the publisher that the story's descriptions of
women would give significant exasperation to readers and would
hampen classes, company officials said.

Kadokawa Shoten protested, but to no avail.

The story depicts a teenage supermarket worker and his observation
of three young female shoppers in swimsuits.

The Ministry has defined six parts as offensive, including one
describing the charm of the hip of one of the shoppers, they said.

The publisher has replaced the Updike piece with a story by Japanese
writer Natsuki Ikezawa dealing with a boy's experience of his
mother's death.

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Both The Japan Times and The Daily Yomiuri ran articles that were
critical of the ban, citing like-minded teachers of literature such as Paul
Cardaci of Georgetown University ("It's so odd. It sounds like political
correctness. I think Updike would be amused.") and Irene Gilman of the
American School in Tokyo ("They teach 'Romeo and Juliet' and certainly
that's a lot more sexual and enticing... I think they're reading too much into
this story. It's not a sexual thing, he just thinks she's lovely.")

Nowhere were the opinions of the Japanese youth themselves heard.

**About This Study**

This study attempts to follow-up the intriguing debate surrounding A&P
by reporting the opinions and reflections of 32 Japanese students in their
second year at Kanda University of International Studies, who were asked to
read the story then complete a questionnaire about it. The full text of the
questionnaire was as follows:
A&P
JOHN UPDIKE

Please answer the following questions about the story A&P by John Updike.
Please do not write your name on this paper.

1. Please describe this story in one or two sentences.

2. What do you think the author is trying to say?

3. Do you think that this story would be suitable for Japanese high school students to study (if it was translated into Japanese)?
   YES   NO
   If YES, please give a short reason why:

   If NO, please give a short reason why not:

4. The Japanese Education Ministry ordered a Tokyo publisher to remove a translation of A&P from a new high school textbook. Why do you think the Ministry did this?

5. Do you think that high school students could get any benefits from studying this story? If so, what?

Thank you for answering these questions.

The students were given two weeks to read the story before completing the questionnaire. They completed it alone and anonymously, in class. To minimize influence, the instructor did not talk about the questions at all - at

least, not until all students had handed in their responses. The students were also not told the reason for the questionnaire until they had all completed it.

Student Responses

Question 1: Please describe this story in one or two sentences.

19 out of the 32 students were able to describe the story in some detail. Two typical responses were:

The man works at A&P found 3 girls wearing bathing suits enter into the shop. He got to like a girl of the three. They were said not to shop when their shoulders weren't be covered, by the manager of the shop. So they left there. That's why he quit his job to be a hero of them.

Sammy who works at A&P is pleased with girls who wear nothing but bathing suits. And the manager of A&P advised girls to cover their shoulder. Then, Sammy said "I quit" with hoping they'll stop and watch him. But they didn't.

A further seven students were able to summarize the plot in very general terms. One example:

This story is about a boy who works at supermarket.

Five students described it in generic terms:

Sexual love story.

This is a man's foolish story.
Question 2: What do you think the author is trying to say?

Predictably, there was a range of answers to this question. The three most popular responses were that the author was trying to (i) say something about youth and growing up (5 students), (ii) say something about boy-girl relationships (5 students), or (iii) say something about rules and regulations (4 students).

Examples: (i) youth and growing up.

_He tries to say that there are many disappointments in adolescence although it seems they’re all trivial, minor problem, disappoints for other people. But young people grow up by experiencing many times that kind of things to be adults. Therefore he, the man in the story, is representative person of young generation._

_The difference of the thinking way between young and adult._

_It is a part of adjusting to life to be charmed by young girl and to resist elder people._

_“When you are young, think about and stare at yourselves.”_

Examples: (ii) boy-girl relationships.

_Maybe he is trying to say the mind of the boy because girls don’t understand boy’s thoughts and boys also don’t understand girl’s thoughts._

_The young boys always feel attracted the young girls and also want to attract their attention by acting like a cool._

_Most boys use every method whatever they could to attract someone._

Examples: (iii) rules and regulations.

I think he is trying to say whether girls can be allowed to enter the supermarket or not.

_I think the author says that the boy should understand his place. He is not young child, so he must behave as a clerk._

_The author want to say is: which is more important for him, to carry out his intention or to obey people around him._

Question 3: Do you think that this story would be suitable for Japanese high school students to study (if it was translated into Japanese)?

Of the 33 respondents, 20 answered ‘Yes’ and 13 answered ‘No’. Amongst the ‘Yes’ voters there was absolutely no consensus as to why they thought the story was suitable for study at high school – virtually 20 different reasons were given. The following is a selection of responses:

_I think it is good to have different types of stories._

_I think it’s OK, because we could learn a lesson from this story._

_This story is funny. High school’s textbooks are boring. So high school students become lose interested._

_Because this story is about one brave man._

_It will be good text to make student think their own will._

_If you say that it’ll influence Japanese high school students in bad way, what’ll be the problem? I learned this story and I don’t think this story does harm to young people. Removing the things look like harmful on the surface and feed only good one will result in making the grown ups who can’t answer all things._

_I heard that high school students translate Spice Girls song. So, this story is better than that._

_Because high school students know about sex, so it is natural to read this
In contrast, the 'No' voters were quite focused in the reasons for their choice. Basically, most of them (i.e. 8 out of 13) thought that A&P was simply not a high-quality piece of writing:

I want to read more fine stories. There are so many good stories all over the world. It is not necessary to choose A&P.

I studied this story in English class when I was in high school. I didn't think this story was interesting.

For, this story doesn't have contents. That is, it doesn't have coherence. Japanese couldn't regard this story as literature.

The other half of the 'No' voters argued that a short story of this type was inappropriate for the Japanese high school context:

Describing the girls is not suitable for high school student.

Because we should learn about sex by not short story but health and physical education.

Because this story is excessive for high school students.

Because we can learn about disappointment or another situation in Japanese story. So, it's not necessary to study in Japanese.

Question 4: The Japanese Education Ministry ordered a Tokyo publisher to remove a translation of A&P from a new high school textbook. Why do you think the Ministry did this?

About half (16) the students thought that the Education Ministry removed the story because of the sexual nature of some of the descriptions contained therein:

This story is not too bad. But I think that they just paid attention to description of 3 girls.

Because there are many expressions of girls body.

Because the Ministry thought some expression of this story is not good for high school student.

Because this story describe what girls like. There are many descriptions about girls.

This story has a lot of improper description about women.

About one quarter (7) of the students felt that the story was removed not because it was lewd, but because of the overly-strict or even misguided attitudes of the Education Ministry itself:

I can't understand what the Japanese Education Ministry is afraid (of).

Ministry is too serious. I think high school students should read any kinds of topic.

Ministry think this story affect bad thing for students.

The Japanese Education Ministry is too strict. And person who work there are very old people who experienced World War II. So, their idea are ridiculous.

They want to be serious. So, even if high school student don't mind the story, they tend to make strict decision to the textbook.
5 students thought that A&P was pulled because, according to the Ministry, it may mislead high school students outside of class:

_I think they are concerned that high school girls will imitate girls who wear bathing suits. It is a common sense that wearing clothes when we go to somewhere. But, recently, high school kids don't have common sense. So, the Japanese Education Ministry ordered to remove A&P because they don't want high school kids to increase the lack of common sense._

_The Ministry might thought textbooks are for to teach something. So if the students study that all of the men are like him, it would be trouble, not good._

_This story about man and girls. At that time, in Japan "Eniyokosai" was the talk of the town. So the Ministry ordered to remove A&P._

Only three students thought that the story was removed because of the effect it may have on students in class:

_Because the Ministry thought that this book was too exciting for high school students. When they read this, it's hard for teachers to explain._

_Because high school students are puberty now. So, maybe they are ashamed reading this._

**Question 5: Do you think that high school students could get any benefits from studying this story? If so, what?**

Almost all (27) of the respondents felt that benefits were to be gained by studying A&P at high school. When asked exactly what these benefits were, the students provided a great range of answers. The main ones were:

_Personal growth: They are the same age as the characters. They will mature through lots of experience._

_Deep awareness of expected behavior: I think they will be able to think about their attitude in the public situation._

_Deep understanding of the relationships between boys and girls: They could recognize that it is natural to be attracted to another sexuality, and could have more free opinion about love and so on._

_Better clothes sense: They can think about suitable cloth for each place and each time._

_Linguistic benefits: If this story was read in English, they could get any benefits. They could learn figure of speech of English. So, if they read this story in English, it is very good._

Two students felt that there were no benefits to be gained from the study of A&P:

_I don't think they could get any benefits. I think they could not understand the whole story._

_No. Because this story's the main subject is difficult. So, they could not get any benefit, I think._
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Analysis

On the surface the results seem to indicate that there is a surprising amount of support among young Japanese for the Ministry's actions. 13 of 33 (39%) respondents thought that A&P was unsuitable for study by high school students. But a closer examination of the reasoning given by these students for their 'No' vote shows that there is very little evidence to support the Ministry's claim that the story would cause "exasperation" to readers, or that it would hamper classes. Most of these students simply thought that, as a piece of literature, A&P did not stand up. Far from causing exasperation, these students generally thought A&P was somewhat boring. Only 5 students thought that A&P was unsuitable for study at high school because it contained some lewd descriptions. Furthermore, it should be remembered of course that the majority of respondents (61%) thought that A&P was suitable for inclusion in a high school textbook.

A large percentage of the students surveyed (48%) were easily able to identify the Ministry's rationale for removing the story from the high school reading list, pointing out that the action was probably due to the highly sexual nature of some of the descriptions of the young women in the store. This result cannot be read as support for the stand taken by the Ministry of Education, but it does show that the Ministry's rationale probably has widespread understanding amongst Japanese. This can be contrasted to the United States, where the 'banning' seemed to have caused some degree of shock, and an outbreak of ridicule. This is evident in the Washington Post article, reproduced in local newspapers, which is extremely belittling of and condescending towards the Japanese Ministry of Education, referring to "the blue-suited men with the red pencils over at the Education Ministry", and to passages "that apparently sent the censors into a book-burning frenzy".

It is worth noting, however, that roughly one-quarter of the Japanese students were also highly critical of the Education Ministry (see results for Q. 4 of the survey). Moreover, only three students conceived of a potential 'exasperation' effect, or suggested that it might cause embarrassment to students (the two reported reasons given by the Ministry for removal of the story).

What do students perceive the intention of the story to be? There seems to be no dominant paradigm (usually one quality of a good story). When asked 'What do you think the author is trying to say?' the students produced a very wide range of results. Most dwelt on deep thematic strains running through the story, rather than taking the simplistic, surface view that it was a story exulting in the sexual attraction of the female form. Collectively, the class could identify themes of generational differences ("the difference of the thinking way between young and adult"), relationship problems ("girls don't understand boy's thoughts and boys don't understand girl's thoughts"), the struggle against conformity ("which is more important for him, to carry out his intention or to obey people around him"), and the necessity of self-belief ("not believing myself is foolish").

Conclusion

John Updike's story, published in 1962, reflects the flowering of sexual liberation in the United States in the 1960s. For the young generation, represented by Sammy, there is nothing wrong with three young girls walking through a convenience store in bikinis - they are a thing of beautiful arrogance in a world of drab conformity:
Queenie puts down the jar and I take it into my fingers icy cold. Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in pure Sour Cream: 49 c. Now her hands are empty, not a ring or a bracelet, bare as God made them, and I wonder where the money’s coming from. Still with that prim look she lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her muddled pink top. The jar went heavy in my hand. Really, I thought that was so cute.

(p.52)

The clash between the store manager and the girls over the definition of ‘decency’ represents the wider issue of the clash of ideologies, moral and sexual, between the younger and older generations that became the hallmark of the 1960s. Any reader in the United States, high school student or otherwise, intuitively understands and identifies with the place that this story occupies in the cultural history of late twentieth century America. This may not be so self-evident to a Japanese, for whom it may simply appear to be the tale of a young man with sex on his mind and scant respect for his elders.

Nevertheless, the final irony of the whole debate remains the fact that Sammy and Stoksie, the two young A&P employees who ogle the three sexy girls from the beach, are nineteen and twenty–two years old respectively–and given that the story takes place in (we assume) 1962, this makes them exactly the same generation as the Ministry officials who “banned” the story.

References