

Beer Can

John Updike

Like Vine Deloria, John Updike doesn't think progress is always wonderful. But his perspective in this paragraph is quite different from Deloria's. Sometimes, he complains, progress can thoughtlessly alter the little things in life, taking away their rewarding, comfortable familiarity. (Note: This paragraph was written in 1964, before can makers had created drink cans with the molded bottoms they have today.)

Words to Know

gratuitous done for its own sake, useless

This seems to be an era of gratuitous inventions and negative improvements. Consider the beer can. It was beautiful—as beautiful as the clothespin, as inevitable as the wine bottle, as dignified and reassuring as the fire hydrant. A tranquil cylinder of delightfully resonant metal, it could be opened in an instant, requiring only the application of a handy gadget freely dispensed by every grocer. Who can forget the small, symmetrical thrill of those two triangular punctures, the dainty *pffff*, the little crest of suds that foamed eagerly in the exultation of release? Now we are given, instead, a top beetling with an ugly, shmoo-shaped "tab," which, after fiercely resisting the tugging, bleeding fingers of the thirsty man, threatens his lips with a dangerous and hideous hole. However, we have discovered a way to thwart Progress, usually so unthwartable. *Turn the beer can upside down and open the bottom.* The bottom is still the way the top used to be. True, this operation gives the beer an unsettling jolt, (and the sight of a consistently inverted beer can might make people edgy, not to say queasy. But the latter difficulty could be eliminated if manufacturers would design cans that looked the same whichever end was up, like playing cards. What we need is Progress with **an** escape hatch.

Questions About the Reading

1. What is the "handy gadget so freely dispensed by grocers"?
2. Why might an upside-down beer can make people edgy or queasy? How does this suggestion relate to the main point of the paragraph?
3. Describe in your own words what it is that the writer liked about pre-pop-top beer cans.

Questions About the Writer's Strategies

1. One problem leads to another in this paragraph. Where does the writer state the problems? Where does he state the solutions?
2. Describe the **connotations** of the word *beetling*. If you like, just brainstorm for a short list of other words *beetling* makes you think of.
3. What does the writer mean in the final sentence? What is the irony in this **statement**?
4. Although the writer cites only irrefutable facts in the paragraph, he clearly is not entirely serious or objective in his **tone**. What methods does he use to overstate the importance of his topic? How does his choice of words contribute to his method?
5. Compare Updike's portrayal of progress in this paragraph with that expressed by Deloria in "The Inflammable River." What similarities or differences do you see in the writers' methods? Is Updike also making as serious a point as that made by Deloria?