

Essay on michael lowes in impulse

[Life](#), [Friendship](#)



Conrad Aiken's short story "Impulse" follows Michael Lowes, a selfish, self-aggrandizing and lazy young man who lacks responsibility and thinks only of himself. The most important character trait of Lowes is that he is a hypocrite; despite thinking of himself as a "good man" who is simply at the mercy of "fate" (which he perceives is cruel), he is in fact receiving retribution for his own actions. Lowes goes through quite a few tribulations over the course of the short story, but where Lowes perceives them as happening because he is unjustly treated by fate, he is forced to snap out of this perspective by the consequences of his own actions.

In the beginning of the short story, we see Lowes looking at himself in the mirror, contemplating his own face, "amused by [what] he saw" (p. 1).

Despite his face being described as "pallid, asymmetrical, with the right eye so much higher than the left," he is pleased with it, or at least entertained - this demonstrates a noted sense of vanity right from the start - the reader is shown that Lowes is a character of extreme self-centeredness. He struggles with his own lack of responsibility; he wonders whether or not he should inform his wife, Dora, that he won't be at home to take care of the bills and act as a responsible head of the household. Sneaking out of the house, he remarks wryly about his ability to deceive his wife: "Pretty neat, that!" (p. 1). Despite this luck, Lowes still feels put upon, as his escape to go play cards with his friends is meant to be a rare, much-needed escape from his responsibilities: "A man couldn't do everything at once, could he, when bad luck hounded him everywhere?" (p. 1). At the same time, this rendezvous seems to be barely desired by Lowes, who hates his friends, whom he thinks are "cheap fellows" and "mere acquaintances"; however, they are "good

enough for a little escape," as he will put up with them for the sake of their booze (p. 1). Even with this simple opening, Aiken establishes Lowes as an extremely manipulative, cowardly and self-centered being - he only informs his wife about his choice after he's done it, in order to avoid confrontation. Lowes' character is defined primarily by impulse, which is echoed in the conversation he has with his friends at Smith's house; discussing the subject of impulse, his friends mention good impulses, like kissing girls, while Lowes mentions "slashing fur coats with razor blades," a decidedly gruesome and negative impulse (p. 2). Mentioning that these things are "just impulse, in the beginning, and only later a habit," Lowes reveals his own habits of letting his self-destructive impulses get the better of him - he does not stop himself from doing what he wants anymore (p. 2). Bryant sums up the issue of impulse very succinctly when he pins down the source of impulse - "It isn't that we do it, it's only that we want to do it" (p. 2). Lowes identifies with this greatly, as he always felt alienated by his own impulses. At the same time, he seems to have less of a filter than the other two do; it is a "habit" for him, whereas with Smith and Hurwitz they are still just impulses that they can control. Lowes does not understand this: "Here was everyone wanting to steal - toothbrushes, or books - or to caress some fascinating stranger of a female in a subway train - the impulse everywhere - why not be a Columbus of the moral world and really do it?" (pp. 2-3). Lowes reveals himself as having gone much further with his impulses than most other people, as his friends start to treat him with greater suspicion and pause.

Lowes' struggle with impulse extends to his kleptomania; during the break they have to take a drink, they pass a drugstore, and "at once he was seized

with a conviction that his real reason for entering the drugstore was not to get a hot chocolate - not at all! He was going to steal something" (p. 3). The impulse to steal becomes a test for him, both to see if he can do it well enough, and whether or not it would make him happy. His efforts to steal the safety-razor set are depicted by Aiken in great detail; his thought process reveals the kind of mind that is not repentant about the idea of stealing, but instead is caught up in the thrill of the act itself. He ogles every object in the drugstore with an almost predatory glee, until he "experienced love at first sight. There could be no question that he had found his chosen victim" (p. 3). The happiness and excitement he feels at following his impulses are absolutely a response to his own perceived helplessness in his ordinary life; with the bills, and the nagging wife, and his own aging, Lowes steals in order to feel something again.

He then goes back to strategy, to act as though he has control of the situation - "He observed quickly the exact position of the box - which was close to the edge of the glass counter - and prefigured with a quite precise mental picture the gesture with which he would simultaneously close it and remove it" (p. 3). However, his efforts are thwarted by a police officer who immediately grabs him and emasculates him - "I guess you thought that was pretty sick," says the officer, removing any pretense that Lowes had of skill or cunning (p. 4). This act of getting caught shakes the foundation of Lowes' arrogance; he attempts to calm the officer "with what frigidity of manner he could muster," but in reality he is panicking, horrified that he got caught, and that he is not as much of a master thief and king among men as he thought he was. His attempts at getting his friends and his wife to bail him out are

futile as well, to which he "bitterly" notes that Dora must consider "women and children first" in the family when weighing the possibility of getting a lawyer, even though he desires for that money to be used on him (p. 6). Michael Lowes, throughout the story, is shown to be a selfish and self-centered human being; even after he is caught and sent to prison, he shows little remorse for his actions except when they affect him, and dramatically overestimates his importance in the universe. As he sits in his cell in the end, he considers finally that "His whole life seemed to be composed of such trivial and infinitely charming little episodes as these," but still considers himself a "good man"; he believes that everything he had worked for "had all come foolishly to an end" (p. 8). To this end, Aiken shows Lowes as a man uniquely capable of self-delusion and sugarcoating his own persona.

Works Cited

Aiken, Conrad. Impulse. Short Story Masterpieces. Warren, Robert Penn, and Albert Erskine, eds. New York: Random House, Inc., 1982. pages: 1-14