

The foolishness of men in the short stories aandp by john updike and the man who ...

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The Foolishness of Men Men in the short stories “ A&P” by John Updike and “ The Man who was Almost a Man” by Richard Wright are seen to undergo a major growth period within a short burst of time, illustrating the foolish ways they act in a moment of panic. One story is set in a relatively urban context as a boy describes three girls walking around in bikini bathing suits and his response to this. The other depicts a black man in the highly racist rural South who attempts to earn the respect of adulthood by purchasing a gun. While the two stories are vastly different, both Dave Saunders and Sammy act in rather foolish ways through the course of their stories, emerging at the end as wiser men.

In Updike’s “ A&P,” Sammy is the narrator. He works at the cash register in a small grocery store approximately five miles from the ‘ point’ and in the center of town. He begins his story when he notices three girls in the store, all of whom are wearing nothing but bikini bathing suits. His descriptions of the girls are somewhat crass, using colloquial language to describe body parts and focusing in on those areas where a tan line is obvious. This direction of his thoughts emphasizes his immaturity as his eyes continue to hunt for the girls while they move around the store. “ The whole store was like a pinball machine and I didn’t know which tunnel they’d come out of.” While he remains focused on the ‘ eye candy’, the manager comes out and points out that the girls are improperly clothed for shopping, which Sammy himself has considered. When the girls become embarrassed by this, Sammy gets angry and asserts his authority by quitting his job in order to be a hero for the girls. However, the girls don’t even know he’s done anything and he realizes the foolishness of the act even while he’s doing it. The story ends

with Sammy a wiser, but not happier man.

In “ The Man who was Almost a Man”, Wright presents the story of David Seymour who is a farm laborer in the rural South in the early 1900s. David works hard in the fields all day and, despite his accomplishments, decides that the only way he will gain the respect of being a man is if he owns a gun. At the beginning of the story, Dave finishes his work and thinks to himself “ a man oughta hava little gun aftah he done worked hard all day” because only men carry guns. After saving his money as much as he can, Dave buys the gun he’s been craving and feels like a man for only a brief period of time. With his first shot, he kills his boss’s mule, Jenny, and must bury the gun in a foolish attempt to conceal his crime. This is much like Sammy’s foolish attempt to conceal his dehumanizing behavior in the store by quitting his job in defense of the girls. Like Sammy, Dave could find no means of saving his reputation and establishing his manhood after the embarrassment of his actions and he was left with no other real choice but to hop on a train going anywhere.

The events of these two stories are widely different, but the basic actions of the protagonists are nearly identical. Both characters begin the story as foolish young men who don’t put much thought into what they are doing – Sammy focusing on the physical attributes of the young girls while staring at them through the store and Dave focusing on his need for a gun over and above the needs of his family. As they are forced to face their foolishness, Sammy as the manager speaks with the girls and Dave as he realizes he’s shot Jenny, they react in panic, Dave by attempting to hide what he’s done and Sammy by attempting to take the noble stance of heroic defender of

rights. Finally, they are forced to realize their foolishness, Sammy as he realizes the girls will never know what he's done for them and Dave as he is confronted and ridiculed by his lie, and see no other means of becoming a 'man' than to run away.

Works Cited

Updike, John. "A&P." Tiger Town. 2003. June 30, 2008 < <http://www.tigertown.com/whatnot/updike/>> Wright, Richard. "The Man Who Was Almost a Man."