**Rude Awkening in "A&P" and "Cathedral"**

          Both Raymond Carver’s short story “Cathedral” and John Updike’s short story “A&P” contain central characters who are confronted with people who initially represent a stereotype to them but ultimately work as catalysts for a profound and unexpected change in the way they view the world. For Sammy in “A&P” it is the young, scantily-clad girls who bring about this change, and for the husband in “Cathedral” it is the blind man Robert. The catalysts for change in these stories are similar: the two main characters view them negatively, they are unexpected intruders into the main characters’ every day routines, and they represent a way out from the closed world of the main characters.
            The group of girls in “A&P” and Robert, the blind man, in “Cathedral” are both viewed as having little value by the main characters. Sammy, after the girls enter the store, sarcastically asks the following question: “[D]o you really think it’s a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar?” (Updike 15). Sammy’s name for the leader of the girls, “Queenie,” also shows that he does not take them seriously. Likewise, the husband in “Cathedral” shares similar feelings by revealing his reservations about the blind man, Robert, coming to visit. He immediately says, “His being blind bothered me” (Carver 448). Then, after letting us know that his perception of blindness was formed by movies he has watched, the husband says, “A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to” (Carver 448). The negative opinions the two main characters share about these people are important in that they create an immediate contrast between them and the bringers of change. It is this contrast that magnifies the enormous reversal of perception for the two main characters at the end of the stories.
            The catalysts for change were definitely unexpected by Sammy and the husband. When the girls in bathing suits arrive at the store, Sammy reveals his surprise at the girls’ unashamed demeanor: “You know, it’s one thing to have a girl in a bathing suit down on the beach . . . [but] another thing in the cool of the A & P” (Updike 16). He then describes the usual patrons of the A&P as “women with six children and varicose veins mapping their legs” (16). Sammy has become accustomed to the same run-of-the-mill, appropriately dressed patrons who enter the store. Similarly, the husband in “Cathedral” is also ousted from his daily routine when Robert comes to visit. He is apprehensive about the out-of-towner coming because he is familiar only with pleasing himself, and the fact that the houseguest is blind will only complicate his routine. The husband says to his wife, “Maybe I could take him bowling” (Carver 449). This jest towards his wife, although obviously sarcastic, betrays the way he feels about stepping outside the boundaries of his everyday, mundane life. The random arrival of these people forces Sammy and the husband to re-evaluate their lives and what these unexpected arrivals mean to them.
            Both protagonists lead very ordinary lives, but these unexpected visitors open up a pathway to extraordinary change. For Sammy, the girls unknowingly represent nonconformity and a way of life guided by an individual’s own moral choice. After their awkward encounter with the manager, Sammy defiantly says, “You didn’t have to embarrass them” (Updike 18). He then proceeds to quit his job, only to learn the futility of his “heroism.” Had the girls never entered the A&P, Sammy’s own life’s path might never have been altered. Just as the girls affect Sammy, so does Robert forever change and enlighten the husband. He leads the husband out of the stagnant waters of apathy and into a world filled with optimism and imagination. The compelling change in the husband can be seen clearly at the end of the story when the husband sees the cathedral with his imagination. As he imagines the cathedral, he makes a positive statement for the first time when he says, “It’s really something” (Carver 458)). Thus, the two revelations that take place inside Sammy and the husband are caused by their encounters with, respectively, the girls and Robert.
            One can see that the two causes of change in the main characters are alike. They are unforeseen, out of the ordinary, and enlightening for Sammy and the husband. These characters’ lives are now eternally different because of the incursion of the unexpected. The epiphanies reached by the boy and the man in these stories give us hope and show us that life’s spontaneity can be a blessing in disguise.

—Joel William Hendrickson  (essay on http://www.lonestar.edu/13775.htm)