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English 102

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Portrait of a 20th Century Hero?

The impulse to ignore personal safety and save a victim from a burning building is often called heroic. If a firefighter is getting paid for the job, or if a mother saves her own child, this might be just part of the job or maternal instinct, but when a stranger risks everything for another person with no hope of reward, that is reminiscent of heroes like Sir Galahad who came to the aid of the poor and helpless in the days of King Arthur. Battling knights and flames is not common to the average person in the 20th-21st centuries, so sometimes smaller acts, such as a beef lover's taking a difficult moral stand and becoming a vegan or quitting a job when there is an injustice in the workplace, could signal everyday heroes. However, although Sammy, the main character of John Updike's "A&P," does give up his job when he feels Lengel is embarrassing three customers, his actions are not really heroic.

A classic hero typically has a noble character, and Sammy is anything but noble. He is sexist, disrespectful, and sarcastic. Sammy seems to be championing three girls who come into the A&P supermarket in bathing suits when he thinks the butcher is treating them like sex objects. However, Sammy not only objectifies the girls himself when he stares at the "sweet broad soft-looking can" (142) of the chunky girl in the plaid two-piece swimsuit or the bare shoulders and uncovered skin at the top of Queenie's bathing suit, but he also paints all girls as sub-human when he wonders, "You never know for sure how girls' minds work (do you really think it's a mind in there or just a buzz like a bee in a glass jar?)" (142). Even if his act of quitting for the

sake of the girls seems like the act of a chivalric knight coming to the aid of damsels in distress, Sammy clearly does not have the pure heart of Sir Galahad, and he does not really respect the girls.

The rest of the paper would look at other elements of Sammy's character, at his lack of sacrifice, and at his expectation of reward.

NOTE: this is NOT a five-paragraph formula paper. DO NOT EVER turn one of those in to this class. The world is not neatly divisible by three. Open with an opening, move on to your first key point. Provide supporting examples (which you quote and document) from the story.