A Peculiar Perspective

Perception is an intriguing concept. It demonstrates how humans can make bizarre decisions based on first impressions of the other’s appearance, characteristics and/or one’s recent fabricated identity regarding this individual. In the short story, “Identities”, by W.D. Valgardson, a carefree man meanders through an ignominious town in order to clear his mind and reminisce about his childhood on a bright and shiny day. As a result of his blue jeans and his unshaven face, the man was antagonized by the nearby police officer. Due to his unfavorable appearance and the shady environment surrounding the man, he was perceived as a threat. Therefore, when the man appeared out of his expensive car, the officer assumes he is a thief. When the officer demands the man to halt, the man turns around and reaches in his pocket to pull out his ID rather than doing as the officer instructs. The officer was not in the right with his decision to shoot the wandering man, as the man was simply roaming through the streets: “He does not hurry, for he has no destination” (page 3). There are strict protocols that every officer must abide by in order to stay lawful. Therefore, an officer must be able to recognize the difference between what is and what is not a threat. It is a privilege to be able to wear the badge and keep their streets safe, and the officer overstepped in this situation. He committed an irreversible mistake. Consequently, the officer must be held accountable for his erratic actions.

This particular short story took place in the 1970s. This was certainly a time with less development within solving societal issues like racial profiling, discrimination and prejudice actions. However, this is no excuse for the police officer to shoot a man based off of a probable minority. One may not have thought twice before acting, including a police officer back in the day. Everyone deserves a right to a fair trial, whether they are guilty or innocent. In spite of this, the man was never given the opportunity to prove himself to be an asset to the community.

Although, it was an era with less development in technology, and there weren’t many semi-permanent solutions like tasers or batons, the officer could have attempted other options such as asking the man to halt again instead of simply shooting before he had a chance to ask questions. Furthermore, the officer was on edge due to the poor environment and the appearance of the man: “When the officer, who was inexperienced, who was nervous because of the neighborhood, who is suspicious because of the car and because he had been trained to see an unshaven man in blue jeans as a possible thief and not as a probable owner…” (page 5). There should have been further and harsher preparation for such a burdensome job. Due to the fact that the officer was placed alone, he used his fight or flight response rather than taking the time to fully process the outcome of his arbitrary actions.

The short story “Identities” is a prime example of how even the simplest things can be perceived as something completely wrong. Everyone has their own experiences which can lead them to their own conclusions, no matter how grotesque and inaccurate they may be.