Raymond Carver’s Cathedral Story Analysis

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Written in 1981, Raymond Carver’s Cathedral is a story that follows the themes of jealousy, doubt, uncertainty, dispassion, and isolation. The story is written from a first-person perspective; however, the name of this person is unknown, and from the beginning, it becomes obvious to the readers that the narrator is a very insecure individual. The narrator is displeased with his wife for inviting her friend over to their house for a stay. The problem behind this is that this friend is a blind man named Robert, with whom the narrator’s wife worked and has been exchanging audio tapes ever since. Robert’s wife had passed away due to cancer, and the narrator’s wife did not want her friend to feel alone at such a time. The narrator is also bothered by Robert’s blindness and thinks that it is a pity that he could never know whether his wife is beautiful or not (Carver, 1981a). This paper will analyze the story and the author’s writing style in detail.

For a closely related comparison, see a comparison of Cathedral by Raymond Carver and A&P by John Updike.

Perspective

The story is narrated by an unnamed person whose opinions about different subjects provide a distinct understanding of him as an individual. It is quite obvious that this person is a narrow-minded individual as he is disturbed by his wife’s friendship with Robert, his stay at the narrator’s house, and his blindness, among other things. This perspective also allows the readers to witness his character’s transformation as he realizes the faults in his personality as well. The story seamlessly switches from past to present as the narrator relays the past events and then goes back to narrating the present events. This style of writing usually throws off the reader and takes a little getting used to; however, Carver applied this technique skillfully, allowing the readers to fully immerse themselves in the reading experience. Carver uses “Cathedral” as a symbol of the narrator’s blindness, which makes his opinion of Robert extremely ironic.

The Blind Man

The story begins with the line, “This blind man, an old friend of my wife’s, was on his way to spend the night” (Carver, 1981b). This line encapsulates a range of emotions: his dislike for the blind man, his jealousy towards the blind man due to his friendship with his wife, and his disapproval of the blind man’s stay at his house. This opening line gives the reader the first impression of the narrator’s

personality. He continues telling about the blind man, whose name he does not mention at this point, saying that his wife had recently passed away, and while visiting his in-laws, he made arrangements to stay at their house. His narration of the event is full of disdain, and he does not look forward to the blind man's visit.

He then talks about how this friendship with his wife came to be; his wife used to read for this man as she was saving money for her wedding to her childhood sweetheart. The narrator does not mention the name of the sweetheart and states angrily, "Why should he have a name? He was the childhood sweetheart; what more does he want? (Carver, 1981c)" These lines encapsulate his anger, frustration, and jealousy regarding someone who no longer existed in his wife's life. He goes back to narrating the relationship between the blind man and his wife. Before she leaves to marry her childhood sweetheart, the blind man touches her face to gain a sense of her appearance. She later wrote a letter about this experience, which the narrator had read. He comments that his wife wrote poems whenever something happened to her. After she stopped working for the blind man, she kept in touch with him, and they exchanged audio tapes informing each other of their life. She told him about everything in those tapes about her life, the poems she wrote, including the one she wrote about him, and about the narrator as well. The fact that his wife had discussed him with another man irritates him, and his irritation intensifies when he learns about the blind man's stay.

The Conversation

The conversation between the narrator and his wife begins when he says that he might take the blind man out for bowling, but his wife says that it would be better to make him comfortable, and as he cannot see, he will not be comfortable with bowling. The narrator states that he does not have any blind friends, so he does not know how one might entertain them. The wife points out that he has no friends, blind or not. She then reminds him that her friend had just lost his wife, "Beulah". The narrator thinks that the name sounds like it belongs to a woman of colour, and he asks his wife if the blind man's wife is a "Negro". His wife is appalled, and this comment about the deceased's colour indicates that the narrator is also a racist. The wife then fills him in about Beulah and the way she lost the battle with cancer. The narrator finds all this information unnecessary and thinks that Beulah's last thought might have been that her husband never saw her face. Here, the blind man's name is revealed for the first time: Robert. The narrator thinks that Robert and Beulah's relationship is pathetic.

The Arrival

At Robert's arrival, the narrator observes that his wife is smiling and laughing. He is amazed by this sight. Then, he finally lays eyes upon Robert and is amused to see that he has a full beard. He finds it quite unnecessary for a blind man to have such a beard. He notices again the way his wife is beaming before going out to greet Robert. They shake hands, and Robert is quite at ease with him; however,

the narrator does not feel the same. He does not know what to say to him, so he asks which side of the train he is sitting on. His wife is not pleased with this question, but Robert replies that he sat on the right side and that he had not taken a train since he was a child. The narrator notices his wife's displeasure but shrugs as he does not know the proper way to converse with a blind man. He notices that Robert is not wearing dark glasses, which he thought was necessary for a blind person. He further takes in his appearance, observing that his eyes do not look normal and move without Robert's noticing, which the narrator finds creepy.

The narrator invites him in and offers him a drink. Robert regales the host with the stories of his travels while the narrator notices that Robert is smoking. The narrator is surprised as he thought that blind people did not smoke due to their inability to see smoke; however, he remarks, "This blind man filled his ashtray, and my wife emptied it (Carver, 1981d)." Later, they had their dinner, and the narrator was amazed by Robert's ability to eat easily without assistance. Then, they once again return to the living room, where his wife and Robert talk about their time together. The narrator waits for his wife to talk about him, but she does not. Here, the readers can observe the narrator's need to connect with his wife and his jealousy of Robert, who seems to have taken all of his wife's attention.

Television

The narrator seems to be at a loss for words as he does not know anything about conversing with a blind man, so to ease the discomfort that he is feeling, the narrator turns on the television. His wife is furious at him, but Robert tells her that he has two television sets at home; one is black and white while the other is a colour set. He tells her that whenever he turned the TV on, he would always turn the colour set on, which was amusing as he could not see. Then he says that he knows that they also had the coloured set. The narrator offers Robert cannabis, which he agrees to take. The three of them smoke for a while, and then the wife goes to sleep on the sofa. The narrator is dismayed that she has fallen asleep, so he asks Robert if he would like to go to bed, but Robert says not yet.

Cathedral

The narrator has nothing to say, so he flips through the channel to find something to watch. Robert thinks that he is doing this for him, so he tells him that he is comfortable with any channel as he can listen to anything. The narrator then tries to explain the show that is airing on the TV, telling Robert that cathedrals are being shown on the TV. Robert asks him to explain the appearance of a cathedral to him as he may know the appearance of the building; he does not know what they look like. The narrator struggles to explain it; he tells him that cathedrals were very tall, reaching way up towards the sky, and some were so tall that they needed support, which was called buttresses. He notices that Robert does not understand his explanation, so he tries again, but he feels incompetent at explaining. He apologizes to Robert for his inability to describe a cathedral.

Robert asks him for a pen and paper to draw one together. The narrator brings these, and Robert takes the narrator's hand in his hand and then asks him to draw. The narrator draws, and before he knows it, he is absorbed in the process, so much so that when his wife wakes up and asks what they are doing, he does not answer. Robert tells her that they are drawing a cathedral. He then asks the narrator to close his eyes and continue drawing. When they are finished with the drawing, Robert asks him to open his eyes and see the result, but the narrator does not open his eyes. He thinks to himself that he is aware that he is inside his home, but at the same time, he feels like he is not inside anything. In the end, the narrator replies to Robert, "It's something" (Carver, 1981e). This referred to his experience of drawing without seeing, as he felt that it was the first time that he saw anything.

In the end, the readers witness the narrator transforming into a better person as he understands Robert, and his judgment of Robert's blindness melts away. Robert's simple request to explain a cathedral made the narrator realize that he was the one unable to see as he failed at describing it. However, Robert's patience with him not only allowed him to explain it but also allowed him to see it. This cathedral is a symbol of the narrator's blindness, which is alleviated by Robert. There is a sense of irony at this moment that is not lost on either the narrator, Robert, or the readers.

Open Ending

The story ends abruptly, leaving the readers perplexed. It forces the readers to make sense of it by coming up with their interpretations of the ending. This ending is not neatly tied up, and it seems like the author was going to add more to it. There are many questions left unanswered, such as whether the change in the narrator's perspective was truly positive or just a fleeting experience. What was the wife's impression of the whole situation? Was Robert aware of the impact of the drawing experience on the narrator? The ending, however, leaves an optimistic feeling in the readers' minds as they observe a positive change in the narrator's personality. Did he decide to become an even better man? The readers may never know. However, ending the story at that moment was a wise choice as it solidified the significance of the Cathedral. If the story had continued, then this significance would have been lost.

Themes

The story, even though short, explores many themes, such as jealousy, insecurity, disconnect, doubt, and judgment. The narrator is seen obsessing over his wife's relationship with Robert and her ex-husband. He goes over every detail of his wife's friendship with Robert and tells the readers about the way she met him through a job and helped him do his tasks. He is particularly upset about the fact that his wife wrote a poem after Robert touched her face to learn about her appearance. He talks about the fact that they had kept in touch ever since exchanging audiotapes, keeping each other informed about their lives. He does not like the fact that Robert knows more about the narrator than he does about Robert. However, his jealousy for his wife's ex-husband is more evident as compared to

Robert as he introduces him as “Anyway, this man who’d first enjoyed her favours”, then he refuses to tell his name, addressing him as “Her Officer” or “Her childhood sweetheart”.

He is extremely judgmental of his wife and the way she conducts herself. He judges Robert for being blind, finding his blindness to be creepy and his beard to be “too much”. He has assumptions about blind people as he thinks they are supposed to wear dark glasses at all times and have a walking stick. He also has this notion that blind people do not smoke and is surprised to see Robert smoking. He thinks that Robert’s deceased wife was a person of colour because her name is Beulah. He considers Robert and Beulah’s relationship to be pathetic as he never saw his wife, and she was never able to know if Robert would have found her beautiful if he could see her.

He longs for a connection with his wife, similar to her connection with Robert, and wants her to include him in the conversation. He wants to know what she thinks of him and if she loves him or not. He admires that Robert can do everything perfectly despite being blind, and he observes him throughout the night. He disconnects himself from the conversation but still wants to be included and acknowledged. The reason behind all these emotions is his silence. Throughout the story, he is thinking about the past and the present. However, he does not seem to verbalize any of these thoughts to his wife. His wife, on the other hand, has told him about everything in her past and shares everything that happens to her throughout the day. This is apparent, as he can narrate her life events easily. Although she hides nothing from him, he is still suspicious of her past. Robert, in contrast, can understand the narrator’s feelings as he tells him that he wants to talk to him instead of going to sleep. He says this to have a proper conversation with the narrator. He is patient with the narrator, who struggles to explain to him the show that they are watching, and then Robert shows him how he can explain things to him. The contrast in their personalities is very evident, and the narrator can feel that.

Writing Style

In 1983, Bill Bufford coined the term “Dirty Realism”, which referred to the literature that recorded the mundane lives of middle-class people. These stories usually followed the lives of spouses who were unsatisfied with their lives, people who wanted more from life but ended up being parents, thieves, drug addicts, etc. This kind of literature followed the least glamorous people of the 20th century. Raymond Carver’s works, including “Cathedral”, were written using this writing style. Cathedral follows the life of the narrator, who is a judgmental and closed-minded individual. He is suspicious of his wife’s character and possessive of her at the same time. He is extremely jealous of her relationship with Robert and the relationship she had with her ex-husband. This style of writing provides authenticity to the story and allows the readers to sympathize with the characters more easily (Newman, 2018).

However, the most prominent writing style used in this story is “narrative writing”. In this style, the main character narrates the events while engaging with the environment. This style of writing can be

extremely immersive if done correctly, as the readers can easily start seeing through the eyes of the narrator and feel a part of the story (Kramer, 2021). Carver uses this style skillfully as the readers can recognize the negative aspects of the narrator's personality from the opening line and can observe the subtle change in his personality towards the end. Apart from this, the narration is done extremely well as the narrator seamlessly narrates the past event and then flawlessly returns to the events at hand. Through his narration of the past event, the readers can pick up hints of jealousy, insecurity, suspicion, and judgment. His awkward interaction with his wife and Robert also allows the readers to observe that he does not talk much and lives mostly in his head. Carver has done an exceptional job at writing this story, as it is an immersive experience for the readers.

Conclusion

Cathedral is an immersive story about a judgmental individual who is displeased about the visit of his wife's friend. He is displeased about many things but does not relay this displeasure to his wife. He is not comfortable with Robert's blindness and keeps telling his wife that he does not know the proper manner to converse with a blind person. Robert can pick up on the narrator's discomfort as he had asked him to explain a Cathedral to him. He helps the narrator in explaining what a cathedral looks like, and in doing so, he helps evoke a positive change in the narrator. Robert, although blind, had travelled around the world and experienced life to its fullest. In contrast, the narrator has done nothing of the sort, so through this comparison, the readers are able to know that it was the narrator who was truly blind.

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