
Transcendence In “Cathedral”: Interdependence Between A Close Minded Narrator And An Open Minded Blind Man

Rarely does a story portray self-discovery and personal enlightenment as honestly and tenaciously as Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral.” This story depicts the encounter between an initially close-minded narrator and a free-thinking blind man. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that both characters need each other in order to evolve and attain fresh perspectives. Carver achieves this end by embedding the reader into the story, through his use of the limited and progressive narrational point-of-view. He explores the theme of transcendence through his use of tone, setting, imagery, and character development in order to portray the narrator’s climactic enlightenment.

The tone of “Cathedral” initially contains a considerable amount of indigestible satire, which Carver represents in the form of choppy, staccato-esque sentences. The narrator (who is commonly referred to as “Bub”) speaks sardonically and indifferently to the people around him – regularly displaying an air of nonchalance regarding his wife. He belittles her frequently – largely due to his overall, insecure nature – and her longtime friendship with the blind man embitters him deeply. He is essentially “walled in by his own insecurities and prejudices.” (Nesset 116) He despises the fact that his wife previously worked for the blind man and formed a close relationship with him, which she

“enjoy[s].” He envies their intimate history and is extremely jealous of the fact that, “on her last day in the office [...] he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose-even her neck.” (Carver 91)

Carver makes it quite clear from Bub’s perspective that “a blind man in [his] house - [especially one who caressed his wife’s face!] - was not something [he] looked forward to.” (Carver 90) This is a prime example of the narrator’s bleak, sheltered perspective, which Carver portrays in order to provide a clear starting point. However, as the story progresses, the narrator – whose “prejudices and cynicism [previously comprised] limitations he [was] too boorish or lazy to free himself from” (Hathcock 31) – takes a turn for the better, subsequently causing the tone of the story to become more personable and optimistic.

The dinner scene (in which the narrator, his wife, and Robert truly establish a form of common ground for the first time) provides an ideal, image-laden setting while also solidifying a foundation for the tonal change in the story. Bub, mid-chomp, happens to notice the efficient eating habits of Robert, as he admittedly “watched with [great] admiration as he used his knife

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and fork.” (Carver 95) It is the first compliment the narrator offers Robert; obviously he is astounded by the fact that a blind man might be so adept with his kitchen utensils.

Following the meal, the three characters find themselves sharing some pot in the living room, and the narrator, once again, pays Robert a compliment. He is greatly impressed by Robert as he “inhaled, held the smoke, and [...] let it go.” (Carver 97) Watching Robert smoke his first joint, Bub states, “It was like he had been doing it since he was nine years old.” (Carver 97) Carver uses this imagery and tonality to emphasize the shift that is taking place within the narrator. Bub is beginning to apprehend the falsity of his preconceived ideas about Robert, and is now acknowledging there is something undoubtedly special about the blind man. This, in turn, causes a shift in the reader as well, due to the fact that the narrator has not displayed any type of compassion – toward anyone – thus far.

Carver then takes this initial “spark” of the narrator’s transcendence and magnifies it considerably. Shortly after the pot smoking, the narrator’s wife passes out, causing Robert and Bub to be alone for the first time. When Robert decides to stay up a little longer for a friendly chit-chat, the narrator admits – in reference to the once “bothersome” blind man’s presence – that he is “glad for the company.” (Carver 97) Utterly perplexed by his own words, Bub ponders his newfound appreciation for Robert’s company as if he had never experienced anything like it before. At this point, Carver suggests that an even deeper shift is taking place within the narrator – foreshadowing the climax of the story.

The focal point of transcendence in “Cathedral” begins with the men stoned and gathered around the television. A historical program about cathedrals is on, and Bub and Robert begin to discuss the events taking place on the screen. When asked by the narrator, Robert states that he knows little about cathedrals, with the exception of a few basic facts; he is obviously limited in his knowledge due to his blindness. The narrator then tries to explain the magnificence of one to Robert but becomes temporarily dumbfounded as his words fail him. He is extremely limited in his description of the televised cathedrals, and admits “[they don’t] mean anything special to [him].” (Carver 99). After all, Bub is not a religious man and doesn’t really believe “in anything.” (Carver 99) This displeases Robert somewhat; he clears his throat and asks Bub to get some pen and paper so that the two of them may attempt to draw a cathedral. Beginning the illustration, Robert holds onto the narrator’s hand as he “drew a box that looked like a house [which] could have been the house [he] lived in.” (Carver 100) Robert repeatedly states, “Draw. You’ll see. You’ll see. Draw.” (Carver 100) Then, a remarkable change, occurs as the narrator realizes he isn’t as limited as he once thought. He continues to draw the cathedral in great detail – adding windows, arches, doors, and, most importantly, people – as Robert’s encouragement grows. With Bub’s eyes closed, the final, climactic shift occurs: Bub reveals that “It was like nothing else in my life up to now.” (Carver 100). He achieves freedom, finally does not “feel like [he is] inside anything.” (Carver 101). Carver then underlines the narrator’s

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ultimate transcendence in Bub's words: "It's really something." (Carver 101) With this statement, it is apparent that the narrator no longer subscribes to his cynicism, insecurities, or close-minded and stereotypical perspective. He has achieved a new state of consciousness. He has become enlightened and gained a new sense of vision through his experience with a blind man.

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