

# Research paper on sight in oedipus rex and cathedral

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



## **INTRODUCTION**

Sight is a very prevalent theme in a great variety of fiction; it can often be a symbol for understanding, comprehension, and enlightenment. Hindsight and foresight are often rewarded as virtues, or at least play heavily into the plot of a story. A blind person is often thought to ‘see’, or comprehend, more than the normal person, and sometimes people are not aware of a shocking truth, despite it looking them straight in the face. These two scenarios are found in the stories of Oedipus Rex by Sophocles and Raymond Carver’s short story “Cathedral.” In this essay, the use of sight in these two stories will be explored, and it will be argued that Carver uses the theme of sight far more effectively than Sophocles.

## **OEDIPUS REX**

Oedipus Rex tells the story of Oedipus, a young king who comes to wrestle with his past and his destiny, involving the inadvertent and unknowing murder of his father, and the marrying of his own mother. When searching for the murderer of the former king Laius, he finds out that he had, in fact, killed the man in a brawl some time ago, and taken his wife and kingdom as reward for another journey. He settles into life with Jocasta and the kingdom of Thebes, not knowing what he had truly done. Eventually, he learns that Laius was his father, making Laius’ wife (now his own) his mother.

Sight as a theme is showcased in a number of different ways within the text of Oedipus Rex, especially in the blindness Oedipus demonstrates towards the nature of his reality and the relationship with his mother. He is shown to

be a benevolent king toward his people, making his eventual downfall all the more tragic - " I would be blind to misery not to pity my people kneeling at my feet" (Sophocles, line 14). Upon learning the truth, he symbolically stabs his own eyes out with the pins of the dead Jocasta's dress. This is evidence of Oedipus' ultimate understanding and comprehension of the situation, and also his rejection of it. He laments having seen this truth, as it is a terrible one that has led to the death of his parents by his own hand, and as such he does not want to see it anymore. He removes his own ability to see as punishment for the sight he has experienced.

The theme of sight is more transparently explored in the character of Tiresias, the blind prophet. He is the one who informs Oedipus of what will happen to him (his fate), providing an ironic juxtaposition between his inability to see and his ability to dispense " sight" to others in the form of prophecy (" Blindness and Sight," 2011). Blind oracles are a fixture in fiction, as they are often thought to have greater insight as a result of their physical blindness - " Blind as you are, you can feel all the more what sickness haunts our city," says Oedipus to Tiresias (line 344). However, when Oedipus hears the bad news about his impending fate, he rejects it entirely, to which Tiresias says " Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich, he will grope his way toward a foreign soil, a stick tapping before him step by step" (line 517). This provides the foreshadowing of Oedipus' humble past, and the need to explore it in order to determine the truth.

The character of Tiresias showcases Oedipus' lack of foresight, as he derides Tiresias for his physical blindness (much like the narrator of " Cathedral"

would to Robert). Portentiously, Tiresias foreshadows the end of the play by saying, “ So, you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this. You with your precious eyes, you’re blind to the corruption of your life.” (Sophocles, line 469). Indeed, Oedipus does not care to question the circumstances of his birth and subsequent rise to power, perhaps intentionally, as he knows in the back of his mind that something does not add up, but does not dare investigate it (Rix, 1999).

The physical blindness carried by Tiresias is thought to be a torment, and is most certainly described as such for Oedipus. He blinds himself as punishment for his actions, which also condemns him to relive them for the rest of his life. He cannot look at anything else ever again, leaving his last real sight the image of his dead mother, who killed herself in grief at the tragedy of their lives. This, more so than the blinding, is the true punishment Oedipus subjected himself to (Miller, 2006).

## **CATHEDRAL**

Compared to Oedipus Rex, “ Cathedral” is a smaller, much more intimate story, one which effectively revolves around two characters – the narrator, a regular average joe, and Robert, a blind man who is an acquaintance of the narrator’s wife. One fateful night, invited over for dinner, the narrator attempts to understand Robert and his way of life, as well as his relationship to his wife. In the process of this, he begins to understand things about himself, life, and Robert that he could not imagine otherwise – this level of understanding is the ‘ sight’ that is discussed in the story.

There is a much more direct discussion of physical sight, as Robert is blind and has to deal with all the issues that come into that. However, in the process Robert has come to see in a much different, possibly more enlightened way as a result. He gains a much more subtle understanding of the world, which comes from the ability to comprehend things without being distracted (or blinded) by what the eyes present.

The narrator in the story goes through a significant character transformation over the course of "Cathedral". In the beginning, he is somewhat shallow and overly protective of his wife, being slightly wary of the friendship that Robert and his wife share. Due to his sightedness, he assumes that he is superior to Robert, looking down on him as someone who does not carry sufficient skills or quality of life. Because Robert is blind, the narrator assumes that his wife left him because she could not stand the thought of loving someone who could not see her, equating his physical blindness with his inadequacy as a man. The narrator places a great amount of importance on sight, making it the most crucial value to a person. As a result, he does not often use his other faculties and relies on superficiality, making him blind in a sense to the real natures of people (including his wife).

Robert, because he cannot see, relies more on listening and understanding; because he listens to the narrator's wife, he knows her more intimately than the narrator does. He "sees" her in ways the narrator cannot, as is clear from their truncated, brief interactions. Instead, the narrator's sense of physical sight comes from the arts - stories and drawing. When it comes time to draw a cathedral, he has the narrator join him, leading the narrator

to close his eyes and look within for inspiration to draw the building. Robert instructs the narrator to draw the cathedral while Robert holds the drawing hand; this is how Robert ‘sees.’ In the course of this drawing, the narrator understands more about himself, though he cannot articulate it properly in the story.

Besides the superficial issues of physical sight and blindness, the narrator’s journey toward true understanding comes from the drawing of said cathedral. Drawing the cathedral is easy for the narrator; however, when it comes time to describe the building on television to Robert, he finds that he cannot. While one may think it is because the sight strikes awe in him, the truth is that he is disaffected by its beauty, since he is only looking at it and not seeing it. Sight can also indicate belief; the cynical, superficial personality of the narrator may well be a secular one, and his inability to describe the cathedral indicates his distance from religion. The narrator even says “I guess I’m agnostic or something,” indicating his blindness to faith and God (Johnson p. 282). When it comes time to really delve into the details of the cathedral in order to draw it for Robert, however, that is when the narrator starts to comprehend what he is going through (Facknitz, 1986).

## **THE USAGE OF THEMES**

Comparing the usage of theme between Oedipus Rex and “Cathedral,” it could be argued that Carver’s use of sight, and his arguments about it, are far more cogent, subtle, and palatable to an audience. Sophocles’ use of the theme of sight is primarily as part of a cautionary tale about destiny and fate; essentially, you may not see the road ahead of you until it is far too late

to change it, and that destiny has a way of finding you. This presents a generally nihilistic view of humanity and fate; no matter what one does, people eventually end up in the same boat they were always destined to be in. Also, the actions of Oedipus at the end indicate that sight is something horrible that can cause terrible havoc and damage to a person and their family; the realization of the truth leads the parents to be killed and Oedipus to gouge his own eyes out.

“Cathedral,” on the other hand, presents sight as something to be embraced. The main journey is the protagonist’s path towards experiencing true sight – he was blind to his wife, blind to faith, and blind to the positive qualities of others, until Robert came along and showed him just how important and transcendental things were under the surface. Carver’s use of sight is meant to enlighten and uplift the audience, and the story deals much more with this theme than Oedipus Rex does (as that play is more about fate than sight).

The comparison can be made clearer in the importance of the roles of the stories’ protagonists in relation with the story’s blind character. In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus and Tiresias have a very openly conflicting relationship, particularly as Oedipus rejects the prophecies that Tiresias is telling him. The oracle’s blindness, while mentioned, is not nearly as important a trait as what he has to say about Oedipus’ fate. The play, when Oedipus eventually discerns the truth, presents it (at least somewhat) as revenge or comeuppance for his rejection and insulting of Tiresias, making his own blinding poetic justice.

On the other hand, the narrator and Robert share a very intimate connection,

and the initial conflict is subtler; Robert is merely pitied by the narrator as opposed to outright rejected. What's more, the end of the play sees a greater understanding between them; instead of the narrator being punished for his hubris, the blind character helps him to see what he needs to see, which is the glory of life that lives beneath the surface of sight. With their joining of hands to make the cathedral, they become a close fraternal partnership, understanding one another more closely (Broyard, p. 101). In this way, the theme of sight is more elegantly worked into the main theme, and the narrator actually grows as a result.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, because the use of sight is much more subtly handled, on a much more individual, human scale, it can be argued that Raymond Carver better utilizes the theme of sight in his short story "Cathedral." While Oedipus Rex tackles sight as an inability to understand oneself and who they are, the narrator in "Cathedral" learns about other people just as much as himself through his interactions with Robert; he realizes that he does not know his wife as well as he should, and that Robert is a much more well-equipped man under the surface than he. What's more, the ambiguity of the possibility of change within the narrator's character lends it more towards a relatable, hopeful response than the self-inflicted tragedy that ends Oedipus' tale. In short, Carver uses these discoveries about sight to inspire rather than warn, and as such it has a much more constructive effect on the audience.



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08 Aug 2011

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