

Example of critical thinking on the things they carried and cathedral

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



In "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien and "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver, the short stories' respective characters deal with their masculinities, and its emotional consequences in a similar manner. There are also striking differences between their characters' portrayal of masculine behavior, as well as its consequences.

In "The Things They Carried", the protagonist, platoon leader Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, is beset by romantic reveries of his girl back home. He often daydreams about a girl from the States Martha (who was his college classmate), during his platoon's missions in Vietnam. As a direct result of his daydreaming, one of the platoon's soldiers is killed while urinating. He takes personal responsibility for the young soldier's death, and resolves to lead his men like never before. "He had loved Martha more than his men. (O'Brien, 1986, p. 353)" However, Martha was only an illusion that had emasculated him during his tour of duty in Vietnam. He even imagines her being courted by other young men. Cross is a cuckold-in-the-making. When he burns her pictures and letters, he sets himself free from her mirage-like romantic grip on him. The stone she had sent to him from the beach became, for him, "like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war. (O'Brien, 353).

Similarly, another emasculated protagonist can be found in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral." The narrator never even mentions his own name. His wife is, in essence, having a long-distance "affair" -- albeit asexual -- with a blind man. The narrator is, in one sense, another type of emotional cuckold as he allows his scantily-clad wife to fall asleep between himself and the blind man. Ironically, the blind man is him, as he is unable to satisfy his wife's emotional needs. Moreover, he is unable to see that she has both

sexual and emotional needs. While it is unclear whether he takes care of her sexual needs, the blind man certainly takes care of her emotional needs. Both Lieutenant Cross and the protagonist from Cathedral overcome their female dependency by relying on their own inner guide to emancipate themselves from their limited definitions of "masculinity". In the case of Cross, after his memories of Martha are singed in his tiny foxhole fire, he also burns up his preconceived notions of masculinity. For Cross, his preconceived notion of masculinity is the de-flowering of a virgin, losing masculinity in the feminine ideal. For the narrator in "Cathedral," masculinity means marriage, a job he does not like, and an aversion to his wife's poetry efforts. However, this man also loses his preconceived idea of masculinity as he allows the blind man to guide his hand in the drawing of a cathedral, as he envisions what a cathedral must look like, as he realizes that his masculinity is bound to his five senses. He allows himself to be taught by a man whom he perceives as less than a man, a man who nonetheless has won the admiration and poetic waxings, as well as the intimate confessions of his wife for years. He need only close his eyes in order to feel that his manhood is not defined by his self-imposed restriction to what he can see with the naked eye alone.

Both stories reveal the hero as he lets go of his preconceptions about masculinity, yet they differ in significant ways, as well. Besides the obvious (Cross loses his fear of losing his masculinity on a battlefield while Carver's protagonist loses his fear of losing his masculinity in his own house), the stories differ insofar as they stress different aspects of masculinity re-born and rekindled in their respective protagonists.

For example, after one of Cross's soldiers is killed, his resolve to lead his men becomes stronger. He becomes a leader among his men, as opposed to a daydreamer whose fantasies while "on the job" wreak havoc in the ranks. His appreciation for poetic, young virgins at home wanes as he begins to focus on the War.

On the other hand, Carver's male narrator regains his sense of masculinity by losing all things associated with traditional masculinity. At the story's end, he bonds with a blind man whom he allows to guide his hand while drawing a cathedral on a paper bag. He accepts the blind man's wisdom, and his heroic journey ends with a poetic revelation. The stereotypical American suburban man has transformed himself by letting himself be transformed, by allowing a process to happen.

O'Brien's Lieutenant Cross becomes the more-traditional, take-charge man by burning his past, and playing an active role in his destiny. Indeed, the hero's quest on the battlefield while bonding with fellow warriors is remarkably similar to a different hero's quest who reigns victorious over his past in the living room of his own house. No longer an emotional cuckold, Carver's character is allowed to freely explore his emotional well, just as he freely explored his drawing ability through freehand. However, the battlefield represents life-or-death at the hands of the enemy, or even "friendly fire." The living room is the suburban man's territory. While it does not literally represent the possibility of death, in Carver's story, his main character undergoes ego death in order to transcend his limited conception of self as defined by masculinity.

Both men deal with their fears, overcome their limited views of masculinity,

and become the hero of their own " battles." In short, both men free their true selves from their preconceived selves, allowing their ideals of masculinity to blossom.

Works Cited

Carver, Raymond. (1981). " Cathedral."

O'Brien, Tim. (1986). " The Things They Carried."