

Sample critical
thinking on cathedral,
hands and a very old
man with enormous
win...

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An Analysis of Three Short Stories Using Literary Lenses

- Summaries

Cathedral is the story of a blind man named Robert, who comes to visit an old friend and her husband. Her husband is unhappy about the visit and throughout much of the story, observes him without commenting or contributing to the conversation or is simply rude to Robert. After dinner, the wife goes to bed, and the two men are alone in front of the television. The man tries to describe what he is seeing to Robert but finds himself unable to describe a Cathedral when it appears. Robert tells him to draw it while his hand is over the man's then tells him to close his eyes. The man's perception of everything changes and he realizes that change in his life is possible also.

In Hands, Wing Biddlebaum is known for his wandering hands. He has isolated himself for years from everyone except George, a young man he is trying to teach. One day he puts his hands on George's shoulders and then rushes away with an excuse. The story goes back to the time when Biddlebaum, then called Adolf Myers, was the head of a school. One day a delayed boy mistakes his dream for reality and reports Myers being sexually inappropriate with him. Suddenly, boy after boy falsely accuses Myers of indecent behavior and the townspeople force him to leave town.

At the beginning of A Very Old Man, it has been raining for three days and crabs are everywhere in a couple's house. Their child is ill. The man, Pelayo finds an old man with wings at the beach who a neighbor informs he and his wife Elisinda is an angel there for the child. They lock the old man up in a chicken coop and people from everyone come to jeer, throw things at him or in the hope that he can heal them. The local priest sends off to Rome for a

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determination of what the man is, however; the decision does not come, and the old man seems to age then falls ill. He recuperates, learns again to fly and flies away.

- Critical Approaches Most Similar to the Surface Reading

The best lens through which to view the story Cathedral is a feminist lens. Despite the fact that the wife is the one who has the relationship with Robert and the husband does not know him until he arrives, the wife goes to bed and is thus out of the story before the halfway point. This leaves only the two men and she does not reappear during the rest of the story. The husband is the one through which the revelation of the possibility of “ seeing without sight” comes through. Although she is the one with the connection to Robert and her husband only observes Robert and does not contribute to our understanding of Robert initially, once she goes to bed she is not even referred to again. There is no recognition on the part of her husband or moment of realization that he had been wrong about Robert and his wife had seen more than he had about her friend from the beginning. If the husband suddenly has this ever expanding understanding of his world, his wife should have appeared somewhere in this his perceptual reality.

The best lens through which to view the story Hands is a gender lens. This is because the concept of homosexuality or sexual orientation and gender identity criticism are considered to be in the same category. Thus, the idea, similar to feminist criticism, that homosexuals lack power and are not treated as equal to heterosexuals is of primary importance. In the story, despite the fact the main character did nothing wrong after one boy wrongly accuses him having interacted with him sexually, a mistake made due to his

developmental delay, the other boys start making the same accusations despite the fact that they knew they were lying. The fact young boys are the agents that destroy the characters livelihood and cause him to be run out of town points to the powerlessness notion while the lies told about him underscores the inequality notion as the adults believe the children not the adult as would normally happen.

The best lens though which to view the story *The Very Old Man With Enormous Wing* is through the deconstructionist lens. This would examine binary opposites present in the story. The main binary to examine would be that of natural/unnatural. When the husband finds the angel he believes is a very old man even after seeing his wings. He finally realizes that this is not a natural being and fear the angel especially when the neighbor say the angel is there for the child. He locks him up in the chicken coop. People come by to see the unnatural being as long as he is locked up. Humans fear the unknown and so they cover their fear with jeers and throwing things at him as if to say there is nothing to be afraid of since the being doesn't fight back. This is the case until the being finally has had enough and unfurls his wings and causes a wind storm. The only character who does not treat the angel as unnatural is the doctor. He did not see the angel as malformed because of the wings. After examining him, he was impressed and awed and wondered why all humans weren't built that way.

- Most Intriguing Critical Approach

In *Cathedral*, a Deconstructionist Lens would be intriguing since the narrator in the story is unable to describe an image using language. Instead drawing is used and language and other cues are further removed when he is told to

close his eyes. At this point not only the idea of the Cathedral but of everything else in his world changes completely. As language by definition, limits ideas as only what is available through verbal expression can be used to describe an idea, by removing language, as well as visual cues which can also limit expression by triggering preset ideas, the narrator was able to expand his conceptualization of not only his present but of his future as well. For the first time, he is able to understand that his life can be change and this understanding leads to the experience of hope.

The most intriguing lens through which to view Hands is the historical lens. When this story was written, the country, previously more aware of and if not accepting of at least not openly hostile to homosexuals, was returning to a more conservative time. The character in the story is so fearful of anyone, including his friend, ever wrongly accusing him of molesting someone again, that he flees from his own friend after innocently touching his shoulders.

The most intriguing lens through which to view the story A Very Old Man is psychological. This is represented by unconscious material in the readers mind such as fear of the unknown and fear of the other represented by the angel. The angel also causes a response which make humans who are social creatures by nature, feel a fear of isolation or rejections. There is also the concept of a conflict between the preference for satisfying one's self interest vs. satisfying the needs of the community or mankind in general.

Another way of using the Psychological lens to view this story is through Jung's conceptualizations. Jung's idea of the collective unconscious states that all of humanity shares knowledge of everything ever experienced including symbols and myths. The concept of an angel is shared by cultures

across time. However, as time changes so do our understandings and representations of myths. So the idea of an old man who doesn't resemble most ideas of what angels look like is interesting in there have been times in our history that religion was not allowed or fell out of favor in different parts of the world and that would mean supernatural beings also would not have considered positively.

The lens from which the author of Cathedral would most likely have preferred his story be viewed through is the psychological lens. The main element of psychological expression in this story is catharsis. It is implied throughout the story that the couple hosting Robert are not getting along. They do not appear to communicate with each other and make sarcastic comments or say something not directly to the other although meant to be heard by the other. The husband is opposed to the visit from Robert yet never says anything about it to her. In addition, it seems as if the husband is simply automatically opposed to anything or anyone from his wife's life before they were married that he was not a part of. It also appears at times that the husband cannot find happiness or interest in anything. Once he closes his eyes and experiences his epiphany it is as if a curtain is pulled back and all his positive emotions come sweeping back particularly his hopefulness in the future based on the certainty that change is possible. This represents a type of cathartic event. The husband seems to disdain Robert for his blindness if not for his presences in his wife's life and seems opposed to Robert even touching him. Yet once he faces his fear of blindness which is likely behind his disrespect of Robert and lets himself experience what life is like without vision, his negative emotions attached to dislike of Robert are

eliminated as is his fear of blindness. Within this temporary state of lack of sight the whole world seems to open up for him.

The lens the author of Hands would likely be most pleased with would be the psychological lens. At the time the story was written Carver was clearly attempting to be provocative by writing on a topic that continued to be viewed negatively in this country. He was also trying to make people think about the consequences of actions performed without complete consideration of the impact on others. So while the townspeople were attacking Adolf for molesting the children he taught without fully investigating the failed to consider another alternative and thus ruined his career and reputation. This is something the character never recovered from.

This example brings to mind the concept of labeling and the long term consequences that are seen as a result. In psychology, diagnosis are labels and many have stigmas associated with them. Providing a diagnosis without exercising extreme caution can follow someone throughout their life and perceptions of the person may never be able to be corrected. In the time the story was written, psychological diagnosis of homosexuality lumped these individual's together with those who were considered deviant, immoral and they were labeled sociopaths. The prescribed treatment was to become heterosexual and those who refused were frequently stigmatized and experienced extreme prejudice. The author presents the potential consequences to one man's life as a result of one retarded boy's comments which was quickly taken up by the rest of the town. It was almost as if they had been waiting to get rid of him. The effects of labeling a person with a

psychological term, condition or diagnosis can be permanent and the author would likely wonder how is it decided that certain people can define what is considered abnormal for the rest of society.

The lens Marquez might be most pleased with is biographical/historical. This is because the story includes a great deal of magical realism and in his home country superstitions and the idea of magic were both strongly believed in. He also used stories his grandmother told him for inspiration and this story was based on such inspiration. Finally, Marquez was strongly influenced by Kafka. The angel whose wings are dirty, balding and filled with parasites combined with the word "enormous" calls to mind the man turning into a giant insect in *Metamorphosis*, in addition to the way he is treated.

Works Cited

The Story and its Writer. Ed. Ann Charters. Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2003. Print.