

"the cathedral" by
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essay sample



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At the center of " Cathedral" is a significant irony: a narrator who ignorantly disdains blindness while being oblivious to his own limitations in sight. Of course, the narrator can see with his eyes but does not realize the limitations he has placed on himself, and how those prevent him from seeing or wanting anything greater in life. The story is ultimately about transcendence; that is, an existence beyond the limitations of physical things. What Robert has that the narrator lacks is a sight into the wonder of things, the potential for greatness and tenderness in humanity, and the curiosity that can make one truly alive and free even if one is limited by physical factors.

To understand the narrator, it is helpful to analyze the masterful first-person voice of the story. The narration is arguably one of Carver's most vivid. The narrator is forthcoming with his listener, both in terms of what he shares (his insecurities are myriad) but also through the personal qualities he reveals. He's crude and he's mean, but he's also glib. There's a wicked humor in the way he talks. While he certainly is detached from himself at the beginning, he is unusually talkative and clever for a Carver narrator. It's a voice worth reading aloud, especially when one notices that the glibness is noticeably absent from the final pages. This absence delivers as powerfully as anything else how shaken and affected the narrator is by this experience.

The characterization does a lot to disguise the narrator's primary problem: he is detached from his life. As with most of the stories in this collection, the character seems to observe himself more than to feel himself in control. The nightly drug use and clear alcohol abuse are easy ways to understand this. It's telling that for all his seeming honesty, he never admits aloud his jealousy of Robert based on the blind man's past relationship with his wife.

There is obviously sexual intimidation – look at his language when he describes the touching of the face – yet he never acknowledges it. But this jealousy doesn't hide a functioning relationship; he is dismissive of his wife, and speaks of her great emotional experiences with a particular glibness. Likewise, he seems contemptuous of her desire to write poetry. His detachment from himself is well-reflected in the incident where he listens to one of Robert's tapes with his wife.

I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn't even know! And then this [from Robert's tape]: " From all you've said about him, I can only conclude—" But we were interrupted, a knock at the door, something, and we didn't ever get back to the tape. Maybe it was just as well. I'd heard all I wanted to."

For all his judgment of others, the narrator is more than happy to not turn his critical eye on himself, or to be confronted with as much. But he is alone – he has no friends (as his wife says), and he stays up watching TV stoned each night when she goes to bed. It's telling that, in the early stage of his time alone with Robert, he confesses that he truly was happy to have the company. There is an interesting aside when he listens to Robert and his wife talk about their past decade apart. He says, " They talked of things that had happened to them—to them!—these past ten years!" Whether he is simply annoyed that they are neglecting him (even though he seems uninterested in answering Robert's questions about himself) or if he means to suggest they live more fulfilling lives that he doesn't understand, his aside speaks to his sense of isolation. As he tells Robert late in the story, he "

doesn't believe in anything." He has no connection to anything greater or smaller than himself.

This sense of isolation helps to demonstrate his obstinate close-mindedness, most apparent in his feelings and pre-conceived notions of blindness. He immediately identifies the blind as remote and distinct from a 'normal' person. As he admits, his idea of blindness comes from the movies. His ideas are frankly absurd: for instance, he thinks blind people can't smoke, or that they don't wear beards. But what is not in many movies is the hatefulness he exhibits - "who'd want to go to such a wedding in the first place?" he asks about Robert and Beulah's nuptials. And his attitude about Beulah is harshly insensitive. He seems legitimately sorry for Beulah because of her marriage to Robert, as though his lack of sight meant he couldn't appreciate her.

Of course, the irony is that Robert most likely appreciated his wife more than the narrator does his own, despite the latter's visual sight. The narrator is more than remote from his wife - he's dismissive of her. Worse is his behavior when Robert arrives - he himself notes that she is "beaming" with Robert's presence, and nevertheless says or does things that earn angry looks from her on three occasions. He thinks Beulah must have been unhappy solely because she was deprived physical compliments - likewise, the only possessiveness the narrator shows over his wife is sexual, in the moment with the robe.

And the greatest irony of all is of course that the blind man sees more than anyone else. This theme is at least as old as Tiresias in Greek mythology, though it's likely older. The irony is that the blind are wise because they '

see' some greater truth because they are not blinded by the limitations of the physical world. In another sense, they transcend the physical. Robert is interested in traveling and learning, with attempting to find a depth in relationships (seen in the symbol of the tapes they send), in attempting to connect with others.

What Robert sees and teaches the narrator is to see this transcendent reality. Robert senses a depth in reality that confuses the narrator. Even before they sit together to draw the cathedral, Robert has begun to affect the narrator. It's nothing particular, he says, but nevertheless the narrator finds himself realizing that he does enjoy company, and then feeling compelled to explore the limits of Robert's sight, and to help the blind man visualize a cathedral. He tries to describe the cathedral, but when he can't, he attempts to retreat back into cynicism. He says, " The truth is, cathedrals don't mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They're something to look at on late-night TV." But of course, the dramatic irony is that we're well aware that he has indeed been affected, and can't retreat to his detached persona so easily. In the end, with his eyes closed, not at all focused on what he has been drawing but rather on something he can't comprehend, the narrator feels free - " I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything." He is not trapped and isolated in his own body and situation, but rather part of a greater existence.

It might be a mistake to talk about the story as religious, but certainly the transcendent view of reality to which Robert leads the narrator is connected to Christianity. Most obvious is the central image of a cathedral. Robert's view of a cathedral emphasizes its function as a place for community. He's

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less interested in its size than in the fact that the building exists through the dedication of generations of people. And when the narrator is drawing the cathedral, the final instruction Robert gives is, " Put some people in there now." So while Robert is not attempting a conversion necessarily, he is attempting to indicate to the narrator the power of faith in something greater. The fake-out prayer that the narrator uses is a bit befuddling in terms of story, unless you think of it as a set-up for the later conversation. When the narrator makes the joke, Robert lowers his head. And later, he asks the narrator whether he is religious, and the narrator confesses he " doesn't believe in anything." The experience they have could be viewed as a religious ritual - they share a communion of pot, and then the blind man leads him across the gulf of his self-imposed isolation to accept a place in a more free reality. Notice the way Robert listens so quietly as the narrator fumbles to explain what he sees, and then consistently encourages him to continue. It's the gentleness of a priest or a confessor, someone who is devoting himself to your spiritual benefit for the moment.

Of course, included in Robert's conception of a cathedral is that the people who work on them rarely live to see their work completed. The effusive optimism of this story is a powerful end to the collection, which more often dwells in failure than hope, and in context should not be taken to reduce Carver's worldview to a celebration of the power to transcend. But it does celebrate the power that beauty and communion in the face of overpowering isolation can have, the way it can brighten our daily struggles and failures, as though to say that we must confront our isolation, loneliness and limits,

continuing to work against it day-by-day even if we will, like the cathedral creators, never see our work completed.