

Cathedral by Raymond Carver

Plot Overview →

The narrator says that his wife's blind friend, whose wife has just died, is going to spend the night at their house. He says that he isn't happy about this visitor and the man's blindness unsettles him. He explains that his wife met the blind man ten years ago when she worked for him as a reader to the blind in Seattle. He says that on the last day of her job there, the blind man touched her face and she wrote a poem about the experience. The narrator then describes his wife's past. She married her childhood sweetheart and became an officer's wife. Unhappy with her life, she tried to commit suicide one night by swallowing pills, but she survived. She and the blind man kept in touch by sending audiotapes back and forth to each other throughout her marriage, and she told everything to the blind man on tapes.

The narrator says that his wife once asked him to listen to one of the blind man's tapes. They started to listen but were interrupted before the narrator could hear anything about himself. The narrator suggests taking the blind man bowling. His wife reminds him that the blind man's wife, Beulah, just died and says that if he loves her, he'll welcome the blind man into their home. The narrator asks whether Beulah was "Negro," and his wife asks him whether he's drunk. She then tells him more about Beulah. Beulah became the blind man's reader after the narrator's wife stopped working for him, and they eventually got married. After eight years, however, Beulah died from cancer. The narrator thinks how awful it must have been for Beulah to know that her husband could never look at her. He speculates that she could have worn whatever she wanted.

The narrator's wife goes to pick up the blind man at the train station as the narrator waits at the house. When they arrive, he watches his wife laughing and talking with the blind man as she leads him by the arm to the house. The narrator is shocked to see that the blind man has a full beard. The wife introduces the narrator to the blind man, whose name is Robert. They all sit in the living room. The narrator asks what side of the train he sat on, and Robert says he sat on the right and that he hadn't been on a train for years. The narrator says his wife looks at him but doesn't seem to like what she sees.

Character List →

The Narrator - An unnamed man who describes his experience with Robert. The narrator is jealous of the men from his wife's past and doesn't want Robert to visit, but he eventually connects with him when they draw a cathedral together. While his eyes are closed, the narrator has an epiphany after finishing the drawing in which he feels like he isn't anywhere.

Robert - The blind man. Robert visits the narrator and his wife after his own wife, Beulah, dies. He is a caring, easygoing man who sets even the narrator at ease. He encourages the narrator to draw a cathedral when the narrator is unable to describe one in words.

The Narrator's Wife - A nameless woman who invites Robert to their home. The wife has kept in touch with Robert since they met ten years ago, exchanging audiotapes with him and telling him everything about her life. Before she married the narrator, she'd been married to a military officer and was so unhappy that she tried to kill herself.

Analysis of Major Characters

The Narrator

Even though the narrator of “Cathedral” is not literally blind, he displays a lack of insight and self-awareness that, in many ways, makes even him blinder than Robert. Unlike Robert, the narrator can see with his eyes perfectly well, but he has difficulty understanding people’s thoughts and feelings that lie beneath the surface. He pities the deceased Beulah because Robert could never look at her and doesn’t realize that Robert was able to see Beulah in a nonphysical way—that is, he could understand her intimately. Consequently, the narrator makes no effort to really get to know his own wife. Instead of welcoming her old friend to his home, he merely categorizes Robert as part of his wife’s past, which makes him jealous, petty, and bitter. He doesn’t care whether this visit is important to his wife or what role Robert may have played in helping her through her suicide attempt and divorce. The narrator is jealous of his wife’s ex-husband but also cockily sure of his revered place in her life, expecting at one point to hear her tell Robert about her “dear husband.” However, every comment he makes to his wife as well as everything he does seems designed to annoy and anger her. Far from being a “dear husband,” the narrator is insensitive and arguably has no idea who his wife really is. The fact that he can recognize her on sight doesn’t necessarily mean that he knows her intimately.

When the narrator draws a cathedral with Robert and closes his eyes, he has an epiphany during which he can see more than he ever could with his eyes open. Although he has been curt with and dismissive of Robert throughout the evening, he is forced to converse with Robert when his wife falls asleep. After some initial awkwardness, the narrator eventually taps into a core of compassion, clumsily describing what’s on television. The narrator’s good intentions are thwarted when he realizes he is unable to describe a cathedral. Even though he can see the cathedral, he is unable to describe the cathedral to Robert because he can’t “see” its deeper significance. The act of drawing a cathedral with Robert with his eyes closed, however, lets the narrator look inside himself and understand the greater meaning. As a result, his description of the cathedral takes on a more human element, which liberates the narrator and allows him to truly see for the first time.

Robert

Robert is an insightful, compassionate man who takes the time to truly listen to others, which helps him to “see” them better than he could with his eyes. Robert and the narrator’s wife have been listening to each other for the past ten years through the audiotapes they send back and forth. All the difficult details of the narrator’s wife’s past, including her marriage, suicide attempt, and divorce, have been recorded and sent to Robert, who has recorded responses in return. He is the person the narrator’s wife turned to when she needed to talk. The fact that we never learn exactly what Robert says on the tapes is significant because it suggests that the mere act of listening to the tapes was more important than responding to them.

Robert’s wife has recently died, but we learn little about his relationship with her and only slightly more about Robert himself. Though he is there in person, discussing his travels, Amway distribution business, and hobbies, he seems disembodied somehow and not really present. The narrator’s wife is glad to see him, but since he cannot see her, their interaction is only slightly different from the back-and-forth conversation they’ve been carrying on through the tapes. Robert becomes wholly real, however, when he invites the narrator to draw a cathedral. With their hands touching, the two men work together and temporarily inhabit a space that excludes the narrator’s wife. Robert is not a magical being in any way, but the effect this interaction has on the narrator is almost mystical.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols→

Themes

The Difference between Looking and Seeing

In “Cathedral,” the act of looking is related to physical vision, but the act of seeing requires a deeper level of engagement. The narrator shows that he is fully capable of looking. He looks at his house and wife, and he looks at Robert when he arrives. The narrator is not blind and immediately assumes that he’s therefore superior to Robert. Robert’s blindness, the narrator reasons, makes him unable to make a woman happy, let alone have any kind of normal life. The narrator is certain that the ability to see is everything and puts no effort into seeing anything beyond the surface, which is undoubtedly why he doesn’t really know his wife very well. Robert, however, has the ability to “see” on a much deeper level than the narrator. Even though Robert can’t physically see the narrator’s wife, he understands her more deeply than the narrator does because he truly listens. The wife obviously has a lot to say and has spent the past ten years confiding in Robert on the audiotapes she sends him. The only interaction we see between the narrator and his wife, however, are snippy exchanges in which the narrator does little more than annoy her. True “seeing,” as Robert demonstrates, involves a lot more than just looking.

The narrator, his wife, and Robert find insight and meaning in their experiences through poetry, drawing, and storytelling. According to the narrator, his wife writes a couple of poems every year to mark events that were important in her life, including the time Robert touched her face. The narrator doesn’t like the poems but admits that he might not understand them. The narrator gains insight into his own life when he draws a picture of a cathedral with Robert, realizing for the first time that looking inward is a way to gain greater knowledge and a deeper understanding of himself. Robert, too, gleans insight from the drawing. Although it’s unlikely that he was able to visualize what the narrator drew, he shares the experience of the narrator’s awakening. The narrator’s mere act of retelling the story of his epiphany helps him make sense of his newfound understanding. Even though his narrative is choppy and rough and he frequently interrupts himself to make a defensive comment or snide remark, he gets the story out, passing along some of his insight to us. The narrator doesn’t fully understand what happened when he closed his eyes and drew the cathedral, but he knows that it was an important experience.

Motifs

Drinking

The physical act of preparing and consuming drinks gives the story rhythm and weaves the narrative together. Before every action in the story, someone prepares a drink or sips from a drink that’s already been made. When the wife tries to kill herself, for example, she drinks a bottle of gin. Before the narrator begins listening to one of Robert’s tapes, he makes drinks. When his wife tells him about Beulah, he drinks. When he waits for her and Robert to come home from the train station, he drinks. During the evening, the three of them drink constantly. Also, as the drinking continues into the night, compounded by cigarettes and marijuana, the story takes on a dreamy tone, with meaning lurking behind every corner but never quite clearly in focus.

Symbols

The Cathedral

The cathedral that the narrator draws with Robert represents true sight, the ability to see beyond the surface to the true meaning that lies within. Before the narrator draws the cathedral, his world is simple: he can see, and Robert cannot. But when he attempts to describe the cathedral that's shown on television, he realizes he doesn't have the words to do so. More important, he decides that the reason he can't find those words is that the cathedral has no meaning for him and tells Robert that he doesn't believe in anything. However, when he takes the time to draw the cathedral—to really think about it and see it in his mind's eye—he finds himself pulled in, adding details and people to make the picture complete and even drawing some of it with his eyes closed. When the drawing is finished, the narrator keeps his eyes shut, yet what he sees is greater than anything he's ever seen with his eyes open. Carver isn't specific about exactly what the narrator realizes, but the narrator says he "didn't feel like he was inside anything"—he has a weightless, placeless feeling that suggests he's reached an epiphany. Just as a cathedral offers a place for the religious to worship and find solace, the narrator's drawing of a cathedral has opened a door for him into a deeper place in his own world, where he can see beyond what is immediately visible.

Audiotapes

The audiotapes that Robert and the narrator's wife send back and forth to each other represent the kind of understanding and empathy that has nothing to do with sight. The narrator believes that Robert's wife, Beulah, must have suffered because Robert could never see her, but in his own way, the narrator has never truly seen his own wife. Robert's relationship with the narrator's wife is much deeper than anything the narrator can understand. When he hears a bit of Robert's tape, he says it sounds only like "harmless chitchat," not realizing that this sort of intimate communication is exactly what his own marriage lacks. Only when the narrator closes his eyes to finish drawing the cathedral does he approach the level of understanding that his wife and Robert have achieved through their taped correspondence.

Point of View→

Carver uses a first-person narrator to tell the story of "Cathedral" to emphasize the bewildering aspects of the transcendent moment that he relates in the story. The unnamed narrator is self-absorbed, concerned only with how the visit from Robert will affect him and dismissive of what role Robert may have played in his wife's past. At the same time, the narrator lacks self-awareness. He pities Robert's wife, Beulah, because her husband could never look at her, never realizing that he doesn't really know his own wife despite the fact that he can see her. The narrator is not a very skillful storyteller either, putting his narrative together crudely, with rough transitions and defensive interruptions. For example, when he refers to his wife's childhood sweetheart, he breaks in, "Why should he have a name? He was the childhood sweetheart, what more does he want?" Interruptions such as these reveal the narrator's jealous insecurity and suggest that his relationship with his wife is not as stable as he makes it out to be.

When Robert arrives, the narrator does his best to make sense of him. He describes Robert's appearance, including his eyes, and observes Robert's actions with a kind of awe: the way Robert smokes his cigarettes, the way he cuts his meat during dinner. Carver's use of a first-person narrator is especially effective in these scenes because it makes Robert seem abnormal,

even alien, because the narrator has no concept of what a blind man can and cannot do. Likewise, once Robert becomes more human for the narrator, he takes shape for us as well. At the end of the story, when Robert guides the narrator in drawing the cathedral with his eyes closed, the narrator revels in the strangeness of the experience, and his bewilderment makes this transcendent moment more poignant. It is a remarkable moment, but the narrator's unsophisticated description of it makes it a human moment as well.

Optimism and the “Zero Ending”→

Carver finishes “Cathedral” with a “zero ending,” leaving the narrator with his eyes closed, imagining the cathedral he has just drawn with Robert. A zero ending is an ending that doesn't neatly tie up the strands of a story. It may not even seem like an ending—in some cases, the writer may seem to have left off in the middle of a thought or idea. Instead of tacking on a florid conclusion that leaves everyone satisfied, Carver often stops his stories abruptly, at the moment when his characters are faced with a stark realization, glimmer of hope, or wall of confusion. Ernest Hemingway used the zero ending in many of his short stories as well. Also like Hemingway, Carver wrote in a sparse, masculine style, and this, along with his favored method of ending a story, has prompted many readers to compare the two writers.

The abrupt ending to the story leaves many questions unanswered, such as how exactly the narrator has changed, if his relationship with his wife will change, or how his opinion of Robert has changed. But the answers to these questions are not the point of the story. “Cathedral” concerns the change in one man's understanding of himself and the world, and Carver ends the story at exactly the moment when this change flickers in the narrator's mind. The narrator has not become a new person or achieved any kind of soul-changing enlightenment. In fact, the narrator's final words, “It's really something,” reveal him to be the same curt, inarticulate man he's always been. The zero ending, however, adds an unexpected note of optimism to the story. Until this moment, the narrator has been mostly bitter and sarcastic, but he has now gained a deeper understanding of himself and his life. Far from leaving us unsatisfied, Carver's zero ending leaves us with our breath held as the narrator sees a new world start to crack open.

Dirty Realism→

The “dirty realism” school of writing became popular in the 1980s thanks to a group of writers who began writing about middle-class characters and the disappointments, heartbreaks, and harsh realities of their ordinary lives. *Granta*, a highly regarded literary journal, coined the label dirty realism in 1983 when it published its eighth issue, which featured writers from this school. *Granta 8*, as the issue became known, included stories by Angela Carter, Bobbie Ann Mason, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, Raymond Carver, and many others. Although each of these dirty-realism writers has a distinctive style, they are connected by their sparse prose, simple language, and direct descriptions of ordinary people and events. Much of the fiction published in the *New Yorker*, where many of these writers were and are still published, is of the dirty-realism school, but today the term—as well as the practice—has somewhat fallen out of fashion. Many of Carver's short stories, including “Cathedral,” are prime examples of the dirty-realist style.

Important Quotations Explained→

1. And then I found myself thinking what a pitiful life this woman must have led. Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one. A woman who could go on day after day and never receive the smallest compliment from her beloved. This quotation appears near the beginning of the story when the narrator ruminates on what life must have been like for Robert's wife, Beulah, before she died. This passage reveals the extent

of the narrator's self-delusion about what kind of husband he is and what really matters in a relationship. Though he calls Beulah's life "pitiful," everything his wife has told him about Beulah and Robert's relationship suggests the opposite. They were devoted to each other — "inseparable," the wife says. They'd worked together, and Robert had stayed by her bedside until her death. The narrator's sole criterion for deeming Beulah's life "pitiful" is the fact that Robert never knew what she physically looked like. For the narrator, the ability to see the other's appearance seems to be the defining element in a relationship.

The narrator tries to reflect on Beulah's life from her own perspective: she could never see herself as Robert saw her, and she could never receive a compliment on her appearance. What's ironic about the narrator's observation is that he himself can see, yet he fails to make his own wife happy. The narrator assumes that he is more capable of making his own wife happy than Robert simply because he can see. This assumption reveals that the narrator isn't aware of the difference between seeing and understanding.

2. I stared hard at the shot of the cathedral on the TV. How could I even begin to describe it? But say my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else.

This quotation appears near the end of the story when Robert asks the narrator to describe the cathedral that appears on television. Before this, the narrator has successfully described a parade in Spain in which people were dressed as devils and skeletons, but he doesn't have any idea how to describe a cathedral. The task seems impossible for the narrator, who doesn't have the words to describe what he sees. In a way, this is a crisis moment for the narrator, who realizes that he couldn't describe a cathedral even if his "life depended on it." The scenario he imagines—a crazy man forcing him to describe a cathedral—is absurd and comical but reflects his sense of panic. Even though he can see the cathedral, he can't describe what he sees because he really doesn't understand it. Only by drawing the cathedral with his eyes closed can the narrator bridge the gap between seeing and understanding.