

Carver's Cathedral

Raymond Carver ~~by no means~~ **did not** ~~live~~ easily or comfortably. Alcoholism and troubled ~~with~~ relationships among other mounting problems were fuel for the fire of a man whose spark would ignite **his readers'** ~~the~~ hearts and minds ~~of~~. One of his most famous works is his short story, ~~entitled~~ *Cathedral*. On the surface the story may seem peculiar or distant, but among careful examination it can be seen that Carver wrote this piece ~~from his heart~~ to act as a mirror of his life through ~~its~~ contrast, irony, and symbolism.

Carver uses stark contrast in *Cathedral* ~~in order~~ to show a rift between the narrator and the rest of the world. The narrator is pessimistic and hardened to the sensitivity ~~aspects~~ of the world around him. He ~~details~~ ~~has proven~~ his tendency toward jealousy, isolation, and bitterness ~~in many regards~~. Specifically, he finds no remorse for a blind man his wife has invited ~~over to visit following in wake of his wife's recent passing~~. He ~~even~~ shows blatant prejudice, ~~going so far as to assume~~ **assuming** the man's wife was black. ~~Immediately~~ Carver draws a fragile line, contrasting life and death. Further contrast presents itself when the narrator, underwhelmed by **attention** the blind man **is receiving** ~~and the attention he's receiving from his wife~~, turns on the TV: "On the screen, a group of men wearing cowls was being set upon and tormented by men dressed in skeleton costumes and men dressed as devils. The men dressed as devils

wore devil masks, horns, and long tails...The TV showed this one cathedral. Then there was a long, slow look at another one. Finally, the picture switched to the famous one in Paris, with its flying buttresses and its spires reaching up to the clouds. The camera pulled away to show the whole of the cathedral rising above the skyline." (Carver). This procession of skeletons and devils taking place in Spain directly opposes the cathedral **that follows it** shown on the screen later. The good versus evil concept is nothing new, but Carver presents it through the use of TV as a medium to suggest to the reader there is more **to at play** in this story than meets the eye. While one **side's** imagery is very dark and morose, the other is light and **full of hopeful**. This concept is crucial ~~as Carver is developing his story~~. The final ~~obvious~~ contrast Carver presents to the reader is the **concept one** of sight. The narrator thinks very little of the blind man, Robert, at first. ~~But~~ as the story progresses, the narrator allows himself to see the two as equals, despite their differences in what ~~it is~~ they are seeing. Similarly, Carver's ~~own~~ writing style contrasts simplicity with complexity. "Newsweek's Peter S. Prescott feels that [Carver's works] 'are excellent, and each gives the impression that it could not have been written more forcefully, or in fewer words.'" (Poetry Foundation). ~~Despite his brevity~~, Carver manages to expertly jam a ~~lifetime~~ of wisdom and a profound perspective into his short stories **skillfully** in a way that I've hardly seen among other writers.

The second element expertly tuned in Carver's story is the concept of irony. The narrator at first feels superior ~~in the beginning~~ to Robert because Robert is visually impaired. What he fails to recognize is that Robert possesses the strength to see far beyond any **physical** ability ~~he possesses himself~~. Robert proves this ~~on countless~~

occasions as **the narrator** allows himself to be open to new experiences and to listen. He contrasts the narrator ~~because he refuses~~ **in refusing** to allow his inability to see to ~~become a way to~~ isolate himself. When the narrator is trying to figure out what they should watch, Robert responds: "~~Bub, it's all right,~~ the blind man said. 'It's fine with me. Whatever you want to watch is okay. I'm always learning something. Learning never ends. It won't hurt me to learn something tonight, I got ears,' he said.'" (Carver). He even smokes marijuana with the neighbor because he wants to grow and learn from experience rather than hiding in his shell. ~~However, in the beginning,~~ the narrator ~~makes the conscious decision~~ **decides** to isolate himself from the world and to become numb to it, like an insect under a rock, rather than ~~trying to~~ **delving** into its meaning and ~~the~~ wonders ~~there are to be found~~. For example, as when Robert asks the narrator to describe the cathedral, he is closed-minded, ~~relying on~~ **allowing** stammered words and useless details to cloud his explanation. The cathedral means so little to the narrator at first, that he does not allow himself to open up to the possibility of what it might mean. Robert, however, is unafraid of exploring the new and unfamiliar. The greatest irony ~~of~~ **all** is that the man who can see has become more lost in his life and in his ways than the man who cannot. In Carver's work, there too is a great irony that pervades all his writings. "Paul Gray, writing about *Cathedral in Time*, says that 'Carver's art masquerades as accident, scraps of information that might have been overheard at the supermarket check-out or local beer joint. His most memorable people live on the edge: of poverty, alcoholic self-destruction, loneliness.'" (Poetry Foundation). Normally when **we** see tragic stories of people losing control of their lives ~~on the news~~ like celebrities

hooked on drugs or people suffering from depression, our initial impulse is pity. But in Carver's work, ~~the greatest irony is that~~ these people are not weak **or pitiful**. Their experience gives them the tools to see the world in a way that others cannot. These people in dire situations are not to be pitied; rather, they are art.

The final sweeping unity in Carver's work and in his life ~~has been~~ **is** symbolism. In *Cathedral*, the symbol of the cathedral ~~itself~~ is at the forefront. The elaborate, grand building symbolizes **having** faith ~~and belief~~ in something—~~no matter what it may be,~~ whether it be in religion, or science, or purpose in life—as opposed to believing the world is without meaning entirely. I can draw from personal experience, having seen St. Patrick's Cathedral in person on my way to the Met on 5th Avenue. It's a stunning, towering example of something awe-inspiring and wondrous enough to make you stop and stare (despite holding up a few angry pedestrians) ~~at the~~ its beauty, ~~of a building~~ tall enough to reaching beyond ~~earthly~~ reality itself. An analysis by James Esch puts a finer point on this crucial **idea** ~~element in the story~~: "The building is a massive architectural symbol. Robert, a religious man and believer in God, is confronted with our narrator who doesn't really believe in God or much of anything else. He is a lonely, drifting soul...He lacks a spiritual center. He isn't close to his wife. He doesn't like his job. He has no purpose. Nothing much matters to him. The subject of cathedrals: their majesty and accomplishment, is something that forces the narrator to recognize his anomie." (Esch). The church proves that we are more than people put on the earth to live and die without purpose. No matter what cause someone stands for, they should realize and respect any symbol of faith in meaning ~~beyond what we can prove~~. The pen

that the narrator uses to guide the blind man's hand represents the process of people engage in throughout their life of searching for this meaning or their purpose. "I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn't stop. The TV station went off the air. I put down the pen and closed and opened my fingers. The blind man felt around over the paper. He moved the tips of his fingers over the paper, all over what I had drawn, and he nodded." (Carver). The process of searching for meaning is not simple. It isn't always easy is **difficult** to understand in ~~which direction~~ **where** someone is going or where they will end up. The same can be said for the pen. The blind man had to feel his way through the grooves to understand what he was seeing. And this parallels how people must experience something for themselves in order to understand it. By the end of the story, when the blind man tells the sighted narrator to shut his eyes, they are one: "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything. 'It's really something,' I said." (Carver). All at once, the narrator allowed himself to release his iron grip on his self-imposed constraints, and when he let go he was free.

What Carver learned with age is that writing is about experiences and finding ways to use those experiences for the better instead of allowing them to corrupt your perspective of the world. His contrasts define his ability to now see ~~all~~ **with a new** perspective of the world instead of merely his own, and his irony and symbolism teach the reader that life is ~~so much~~ more than what your eyes are seeing. As a reader, I felt his writing ~~really~~ opened my eyes to what lies beneath the surface of the words, when you allow yourself to let go and free-fall into ~~something new and~~ **the** unfamiliar.

Works Cited

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