



## ALTERATION IN RAYMOND CARVER'S "CATHEDRAL": A READER RESPONSE READING

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### ABSTRACT

What would one expect from an ordinary blind man? What can he possibly do to completely alter the way of looking at life? In "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver, readers observe how Robert, a blind guy, alters the narrator's world view and the respective marked alterations that take place in narrator's life. The writer of this article explains about this shift of point of view and the enormous change that takes place in the narrator's life, when he changes from a person who only looks to a man who sees. The explanation is given through the lenses of reader response criticism using subjective reader-response theory represented by David Bleich.

**Key Words:** Cathedral, Carver, Reader Response, Seeing and Looking

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### INTRODUCTION

Raymond Carver was an American writer who was famous for his minimalist style of writing. Even though according to Ann Beattie in an interview in *The Paris Review* he resented the title, Carver is mostly known for his minimal short stories. Among his many stories the writer of this article chose Cathedral to discuss. Since the story is filled with numerous gaps it is the perfect story to be analyzed with subjective reader-response theory introduced by David Bleich and his idea of symbolic objects which is the experience that a reader goes through while reading the story. According to Bleich the act of reading and emotions associated with it is called symbolization which is the world created in the reader's mind with the help of his or her perception of the text and identification with it. "In subjective criticism, David Bleich suggests using response statements as a way of discovering and

analyzing subjective factors- perceptions, affects, and associations-that influence readers' reaction to the text." (Kathleen McCormick 836). In the following passages, the writer of this article tries to fill the gaps that are made in the reader's mind while reading the story by giving explanations on different parts of the story. The reader should keep in mind that the main character of the story changes from the beginning of the story towards the climax of it which is when he is asked to draw a cathedral.

### Analysis

The story opens with the narrator talking about a blind man coming to their house as a guest. This blind man happens to be his wife's friend for the past ten years. From the very beginning of the story the reader senses a detachment in the narrator's voice: "This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night. His wife had died. So he was visiting the dead wife's

relatives in Connecticut. He called my wife from his in-law's. Arrangements were made." (Carver 516).

At first the reader may think that the narrator is comfortable with his wife's weird friendship but as the story unfolds it is clear that he feels jealous towards them. "On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose- even her neck! She never forgot it." (Carver 516).

The reader may think that the narrator feels jealous perhaps because he lacks an actual close and intimate relationship with his wife and that the blind man's friendship may even be more valuable to her than their marriage. This jealousy can be sensed again when he says that he feels that his wife talks about everything with Robert. The way that the narrator chooses his sentences shows how detached he is from everything. He seems almost cruel and senseless towards the death of a specific other. His use of short statements is another reason to see his detachment.

He is not very much enthusiastic about their guest. "I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew." (Carver 516). The matter that is perceivable from this sentence is again the distance that the narrator has with everyone. He seems careless. This sense of detachment is felt almost in the entire story "My wife finally took her eyes off the blind man and looked at me. I had the feeling she didn't like what she saw. I shrugged" (Carver 520).

As the story goes on in the next few lines and also throughout the entire plot, the reader observes that how selfishly the narrator provides him/her with as much information as he wishes that is very little. For example, when he is talking about his wife's previous marriage, he does not even care to give the ex-husband's name, what the reader realizes from this little information is that he was her childhood sweetheart and he is an officer and they have got a divorce because she could not bear the idea of moving around the country constantly. Besides the lack of information, it is obvious is that he feels jealous and the fact that his wife had a life before him, probably bothers him a lot.

Narrator seems to suffer from being blind to everything that happens around him. Apparently he just "looks at" everything but the point is he doesn't "see". As if the narrator could see but the blind man is the one with "sight". He sees as much as it pleases him. Any extra information seems unnecessary. And it doesn't matter what is that information, about his wife, about her job or her previous marriage. "She read stuff to him, case studies, reports, that sort of thing." (Cathedral 516). It is perfectly understandable that the narrator is blinded by his own ignorance and his own biases and perhaps he is suffering from the fear of unknown because he has not encountered a blind person in his life. Any information that he has about a blind person comes from media. "And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed." (Carver 516).

Even after they meet each other, the narrator doesn't seem to change his mind about the appearance of a blind person. He is bothered that Robert, the blind guy, is not wearing glasses or that he doesn't have a white cane. "I'd always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind. Fact was, I wish he had a pair." (Carver 520). Robert is a bearded guy and the narrator thinks that even having a beard for a guy like him is completely unnecessary because of all the trouble that he might go through taking care of his beard. He thinks that Robert doesn't have the right to be bearded because it is against the norms that the narrator has seen or read about his entire life.

Unlike the narrator the blind man seems to have an open mind about everything and he is eager to learn as much as possible. He himself states that learning never ends and there is a first time for everything.

When it comes to Robert's marriage the narrator is once again confused by the odds of that event. It is hard for him to comprehend the very idea of marriage for a blind guy. He starts putting all the facts together to process the reasons that why someone should marry a blind person while they cannot be seen or appreciated for their beauty. "Someone who could wear makeup or not—what

difference to him? She could if she wanted, wear green eye-shadow around one eye, a straight pin in her nostril, yellow slacks, and purple shoes, no matter." (Carver 519).

In the example given from the text it is obvious that how much the narrator is dependent on the physical part of seeing and how much he lacks having insight. His dependence on his eyes reaches a point that he completely forgets that it is possible to feel things without seeing them that is one doesn't necessarily have to have eyes in order to see.

As the story goes on, the reader notifies that the narrator is trying to get along with their guest but since he still feels like an outsider, he is afraid to get closer because he has not experienced anything the way Robert has.

I remembered having read somewhere that the blind didn't smoke because, as speculation had it, they couldn't see the smoke they exhaled. I thought I knew that much and that much only about blind people. But this blind man smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin and then lit another one. This blind man filled his ashtray and my wife emptied it. (Carver 521).

Another particular characteristic of the narrator is his look towards life which is quite superficial. This is understood perfectly while he is talking about the dinner table, one of the few scenes that he almost completely explains and talks about. "We finished everything, including half a strawberry pie. For a few moments, we sat as if stunned." (Carver 521).

The same manner goes with when he is talking about the drinks or when they are smoking dope. It seems that eating, smoking, and drinking are the only important factors in his life. As a reader one may feel sympathetic towards the narrator when he is explaining his personal life with his wife, stating that he never goes to bed the same time as his wife, he sits in front of the T.V stoned and detached from everyday life, sits there long enough to forget everything.

Until the narrator's wife goes to sleep it is seen that he is feeling left out since he seems not sociable enough to communicate with the blind guy, he feels left out and because Robert is not his friend he does not care much to make up a conversation. He is just using stereotypical ice-breakers, offering drinks and asking about his trip.

The wife goes to bedroom twice. Once she comes back after a long while, wearing her sleeping gown and when she sits beside her husband and falls sleep again, part of her thigh is visible, the narrator panics for a second but quickly realizes that their guest cannot see anything. This shows that he is still feeling uncomfortable with Robert and maybe feels that his wife is just one of his possessions and he is not satisfied with the fact that she has a close friendship with another guy. Before this the reader grasps the fact that he is patiently waiting to hear his own name in their conversations while they are talking about these past ten years but this almost never happens and makes him sad and alienated. "I waited in vain to hear my name on my wife's sweet lips: "And then my dear husband came into my life"—something like that. But I heard nothing of the sort." (Carver 522).

When the wife falls asleep beside the narrator, the story reaches its climax. The narrator and Robert are watching T.V and it is showing a report on a cathedral. The narrator asks Robert if he wants to smoke some dope and to his surprise he agrees to have some. Although it is his first time smoking cannabis it is as if he has been doing this his entire life. "He inhaled, held the smoke, and then let it go. It was like he'd been doing this since he was nine years old." (Carver 524). This shows the major difference between the narrator and his guest. Robert enjoys living, he does not do anything out of habit, he tries to learn as much as possible, he sees beyond the surface of life.

After smoking and having considerable amount of drinks the reader can feel that the narrator is opening up to Robert and feels a bit more comfortable with him. When they are listening to the report on cathedral, the narrator asks Robert if he knows anything about cathedrals, Robert has some partial information so he asks the narrator to

explain. He starts talking. But after a few sentences asks that if he is doing O.K or not.

At this point it is obvious that the narrator feels weak while comparing himself to the blind man and bringing up that sort of question is not just asking about the quality of the information his giving, it shows how helpless he is. He is perhaps far away from his prejudice against the blind that he held at the beginning of the story and is now reaching out to Robert for help. He thinks that maybe with his insight he can somehow change, and Robert definitely finds a way to help him see.

He asks the narrator to come and sit by his side, and then asks him to close his eyes and start drawing a cathedral and then explain it. This action feels less a way for Robert to learn about cathedrals as it is a way for the narrator to learn about Robert. Twice he says "you'll see": "Draw. You'll see. I'll follow along with you. It'll be okay. Just begin now like I'm telling you. You'll see. Draw," the blind man said." (Carver 528).

Robert is not probably going to learn much about cathedrals by this drawing but instead he is teaching the narrator how to see, how to leave the surface behind and feel everything with senses other than eye-sight.

He is helping him to gain insight. Robert is physically incapable of seeing but he has the gift of insight over the narrator's ignorance towards everything.

"So I began. First I drew a box that looked like a house. It could have been the house I lived in. Then I put a roof on it. At either end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy. "Swell," he said. "Terrific. You're doing fine," he said. "Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you, bub? Well, it's a strange life, we all know that. Go on now. Keep it up."" (Carver 528).

From these sentences the reader follows the progress the two are making specially the narrator. He is opening up to Robert. He is distancing himself from his own world and his comfort zone in order to feel another world and to see from some other perspective.

Drawing with eyes closed is the action that brings the two characters closer together at the last paragraphs of the story, the reader senses that the

narrator has now more respect for the blind man because in some way he has crossed his own boundaries and stepped into Robert's world. By sharing knowledge in this way Robert shows the narrator how it feels to be blind and not see but feel everything.

The narrator feels much more comfortable with his guest and with himself as well. "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 529).

The two are able to see from each other's point of view through the end of the story. Robert is more caring about the wife than the narrator himself, even in this matter the narrator seems distanced and detached.

#### Conclusion

While the story continues readers might easily notify that narrator is detached and ignorant. He is careless about almost everything, his life, his wife and her past life, and he seems like a person who is just breathing and not living a life. Half way through the reader notices that the narrator is coping with his situation to make connection with his guest.

But it is only at the end that he is successful in his job and it seems that his efforts have paid off. By finally freeing himself from prejudice and useless boundaries and walls that he has created around him, he is able to see the world from another perspective, another point of view and perhaps for the first time in his life, he feels that there is a possibility for change and all you need is just trying. He does not feel isolated and distant anymore since he has stepped into a whole new world, the world of a blind person whom at the beginning he thought was incapable of feeling anything but as the night passes he realizes that he is the inadequate one, he is the senseless one.

With the help of Robert he gains a new view on everything and most importantly he gains insight.

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