



Perceiving the Other in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral"

| | |
|-------|--|
| メタデータ | 言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2010-07-29 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Kevin, Keane メールアドレス: 所属: |
| URL | https://doi.org/10.24729/00011138 |

Perceiving the Other in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral"

Kevin Keane

Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" concerns the division between self and others and treats how perception helps to bridge that gap. Communication, perception, and awareness are all important for overcoming the alienation between self and others, but Carver focuses on perception in particular in this story. We will also examine Carver's stories, "Neighbors" and "They're Not Your Husband," as they relate to "Cathedral" and its theme.

In this paper, the "other" will refer both to other people and the outside world, including society and the physical environment. "Perception" and "perceiving" will signify "understanding" or "sensory awareness," and "seeing" will similarly mean understanding or the simple act of seeing with one's eyes. Likewise, "blind," "deaf," and "handicapped" can refer to a physical impairment or an inability to understand other people or communicate with them.

I. "Cathedral"

"Cathedral" concerns a man whose wife invites a visually impaired friend named Robert to the couple's house. The husband (the protagonist) is initially reluctant to meet the blind man, but gradually develops a friendly relationship with him and finds a new way to perceive other people and the world around him.

In the beginning, however, perception and empathy are clearly

not the protagonist's forte. To give one example, the husband doesn't appreciate his wife's poem or poetry in general; this is one way in which he is spiritually blind. This makes it all the more interesting that he learns to appreciate architecture and art at the end of the story. He draws a picture of a cathedral so that he can help Robert appreciate what a cathedral looks like. Ironically, Robert helps him draw the picture by propping his hand over the husband's. The former initially only tries to feel the sensation of drawing passively, but he winds up being an active participant in the art of drawing.

The husband got his ideas about the blind from the movies. For instance, he comments that, "In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to."¹ In a sense, he thinks without seeing by basing his perceptions of the visually impaired on a stereotype. A stereotype is one way that the self reduces the other to an object. By looking at others in a one-dimensional way, one can survive any imagined threats to one's identity or deal with the uncomfortable feeling of encountering the unknown or unfamiliar. In the protagonist's case, he reduces Robert to a stereotype in his mind rather than deal with him on an equal basis.

Robert, incidentally, is really the wife's friend, so the husband wasn't particularly interested in meeting him in the first place. He was prejudiced against him for this reason as well.

The husband also doesn't like to use his sense of hearing; he doesn't enjoy hearing a tape that Robert sent his wife as part of an exchange of tapes. He complains when his wife plays him the tape:

After a few minutes of harmless chitchat, I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn't even know! And

then this: "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.²

Of course, he feels embarrassed about having his name mentioned on the tape, but still he does not really care to listen to or communicate with others; he is not interested in other people or what they have to say.

The protagonist, in addition, can be sarcastic or abrupt at times because he does not think enough about the other's situation or feelings, whereas his wife is quite sociable. When the wife tells him about Robert's late wife, Beulah, he initially blurts out, "Was his wife a Negro?" to which his wife replies, "Are you crazy?"³ Obviously, it was in bad taste to say since they were talking about the wife's demise.

This is also another case of the husband stereotyping others, this time on the basis of race. He automatically assumes that Beulah is an African-American name. He seems more obviously prejudiced in the case of the visually impaired. He even objects to Robert's having a beard: "A beard on a blind man! Too much, I say."

The husband also cannot talk about his job. He states that Robert would "put his hand under his beard, ask me something. How long had I been in my present position? (Three years.) Did I like my work? (I didn't.) Was I going to stay with it? (What were the options?) Finally, when I thought he was beginning to run down, I got up and turned on the TV."⁴ The protagonist is, metaphorically speaking, handicapped even when he speaks inasmuch as he cannot communicate with other people. His handicap even extends to his mind—he is incapable of finding joy in life or expressing any sense

of love or friendship until the end of the story.

Indeed, the wife tells the husband, "You don't have any friends." He evidently does not know how to be sociable in light of his rude and awkward behavior in Robert's presence. He even needs marijuana just to unwind enough to talk with Robert when his wife leaves the room to put on her robe: "I didn't want to be left alone with a blind man. I asked if he wanted to smoke some dope with me. I said I'd just rolled a number. I hadn't, but I planned to do so in about two shakes."⁵

The husband, on the other hand, temporarily loses his sense of embarrassment, thanks to Robert. He thinks about drawing his wife's robe over her while she is sleeping on the sofa, but he changes his mind, saying, "What the hell! I flipped the robe open again."⁶ It's hard to feel any sense of shame when nobody can see you, so Robert's presence gives him a new sense of freedom that he didn't feel in the seeing world. He intuitively realizes that there are more important matters than clothing when you communicate with another person, especially someone like Robert.

Another way that Robert helps the husband become more perceptive is in the previously mentioned scene in which the husband and Robert draw a cathedral together. Robert puts his hand over the husband's and tells him:

"...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." [...]

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.⁷

Through these actions, the husband gets to experience the world of the visually impaired and we find out about Robert's fine sense of

touch. Just by feeling the narrator's hand, Robert can sense what a cathedral feels like. The blind visitor even suggests putting people in the cathedral and basically finishes the drawing for his new friend.

At the end of the story, the husband even tries closing his eyes to experience the sensation of blindness. He finally feels as if he is outside himself, free from his usual situation or emotions: "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I know that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything."⁸ (Emphasis added.) This may be only a momentary epiphany, but ironically, his feeling that he is nowhere or outside of himself gives him a sense of unity with his surroundings and Robert. The husband doesn't need eyes to perceive his environment; now he has something in common with Robert.

As for Robert, he can perceive others by hearing but also in a tactile fashion. The protagonist says that once Robert touched his wife's face to sense what sort of features she had.

Robert challenges the husband's expectations about the visually impaired and makes him more and more curious until the husband comes to admire him. The protagonist is impressed by his guest's ability to perceive his environment without literally seeing it. The husband, for example, watches him smoking: "This blind man smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin and then lit another one." He is also amazed by the way Robert eats. The blind man locates the food on his plate right away. He knows just where every item on his plate is:

I watched with admiration as he used his knife and fork on the meat. He'd cut two pieces of meat, fork the meat into his mouth, and then go all out for the scalloped potatoes, the beans next, and then he'd tear off a hunk of buttered bread and eat that.⁹

Robert is also quite a talker, unlike the husband, and even uses a ham radio. As the protagonist states, "He talked in his loud voice about conversations he'd had with fellow operators in Guam, in the Philippines, in Alaska, and even in Tahiti. He said he'd have a lot of friends there if he ever wanted to go visit those places."¹⁰ Robert cannot see, but he speaks and listens as well as anyone.

Robert, in addition, is anxious to learn about his environment, including TV. When the husband apologizes because there is only an educational show about the church in the Middle Ages on television, the blind man says, "It's fine with me. . . . I got ears."¹¹ As we can see, he can learn without actually seeing with his eyes. He even knows about frescos, something unfamiliar to the protagonist.

The reference to ears is revealing. Robert uses his other senses, especially hearing, to perceive others and his surroundings. Indeed, he "watches" TV with "his right ear aimed in the direction of the set."¹²

Ironically, the husband asks, "Do you know what a cathedral is?"¹³ because he thinks that Robert has to have eyes to know such a thing. But actually, the protagonist does not really know anything about cathedrals. As was discussed before, Robert then asks the husband to draw a cathedral while he has his hand on top of the protagonist's. This occurrence is a telling illustration of Robert's sense of perception: he can use his tactile sense to feel what a cathedral is. Through drawing the husband gains a new awareness of how much he can learn without seeing. He also comes to know the viewpoint of the visually impaired. That is, he can finally understand the other as a subject, not an object; he can see the perspective of another, even that of a blind man. At the end, he tries closing his eyes to experience the viewpoint of the blind.

Robert has the husband close his eyes near the end of their drawing session. He thought the husband would open his eyes to

look at the drawing, but instead the latter looks at it with eyes closed. "Well, are you looking?"¹⁴ Robert says, and the husband says he is looking but he is not.

The protagonist finds a new reality. Before that day he usually stayed up late and had nightmares once he fell asleep, but now he is no longer afraid of the darkness; perhaps he is no longer so afraid of himself or sleep. He also feels a sense of unity, however temporary, with another person.

As for the wife, she also can relate to or perceive the world with her feelings, with her senses, and even through her attempts at writing poetry. She once tried to write a poem about Robert touching her face in order to comprehend the sensation fully.

The wife also uses her sense of hearing to perceive or understand other people, using tapes she used to correspond with Robert in the past. Her husband tried to listen to her tapes, but couldn't relate to them.

In addition, she also knows about loneliness and despair. She felt isolated when she was married to a member of the Air Force and, subsequently, tried to commit suicide. If nothing else, she tried to take some action about her loneliness whereas the husband only tries to block it out of his mind.

The wife is also more outgoing than the protagonist. She even has to beg him to be sociable with Robert: "If you love me . . . you can do this for me."¹⁵ She has feelings for others, in light of which we can say that she is more perceptive about life than her husband.

At any rate, the wife and Robert are more amiable and communicate better than the husband, but at the end of the story, the husband and Robert discover through the act of drawing a deeper form of communication that is tactile but does not necessarily require the ability to see. The senses can help us to perceive the other, but we

do not have to depend on them exclusively. Friendship, for example, is an emotional bond that is not dependent on the senses.

It should be mentioned here that building a cathedral is a kind of collaboration between individuals just as Robert and the protagonist have to work together to draw a picture of one. Self and the other in the story are temporarily joined together through action and perception. As Carver once observed, "The main thing is to get the work of art together. You don't know who built those cathedrals, but they're there."¹⁶

II. "Neighbors" and "They're Not Your Husband"

In some of Carver's short stories, "Neighbors" and "They're Not Your Husband," perception, in particular the ability to see, can lead to obsession or even a state bordering on perversion. Instead of developing a sense of friendship as in "Cathedral," the perceiver attempts to overcome his or her self-alienation by obsessing about another person or his or her surroundings. "Neighbors" is one such story.

In this story, Bill and Arlene Miller house-sit another couple's home and are totally captivated by its atmosphere because of their feelings of envy towards the occupants, Jim and Harriet Stone. As Carver writes:

Bill and Arlene Miller were a happy couple. But now and then they felt they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow, leaving Bill to attend to his bookkeeping duties and Arlene occupied with secretarial chores. They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison with the lives of their neighbors, Harriet and Jim Stone. It seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life. The Stones were always going out for dinner, or

entertaining at home, or traveling about the country somewhere in connection with Jim's work.¹⁷

Once their friends are gone, the Millers feel free to pretend that they themselves are the Stones living in their luxurious apartment. The Millers make themselves completely at home and Bill helps himself there to whatever he wants:

He found a container of pills and read the label—*Harriet Stone. One each day as directed*—and slipped it into his pocket. He went back to the kitchen, drew a pitcher of water, and returned to the living room. He finished watering, set the pitcher on the rug, and opened the liquor cabinet. He reached in back for the bottle of Chivas Regal. He took two drinks from the bottle, wiped his lips on his sleeve, and replaced the bottle in the cabinet.¹⁸

The house-sitters become sexually aroused by the place and have intercourse several times in the story, usually while thinking about or after visiting the other couple's apartment. The Millers feel both envy and lust as they spend more and more of their time at the Stones' place. They want to escape their ordinary home and life. The apartment next door is like a whole new world for the house-sitters.

Bill, incidentally, becomes so obsessed with the Stones and their quarters that he even tries on the clothes of both the husband and wife. Bill comes to identify with the Stones so completely that he imitates them in their absence.

In this story, the physical surroundings become the other. The two protagonists escape into the other, namely the apartment, leaving their ordinary selves and lives behind until they lock themselves out of the Stones' place by accident. Their error serves as a rude

awakening that will no doubt lead them back to reality and dissatisfaction with their lives.

In "They're Not Your Husband," a woman called Doreen Ober works as a waitress in a coffee shop. Her husband, Earl, goes there one day to eat and sees the male customers ogling his wife's rather large *derrière* while she is walking and later bending over to get some ice cream:

...The white skirt yanked against her hips and crawled up her legs. What showed was girdle, and it was pink, thighs that were rumpled and gray and a little hairy, and veins that spread in a berserk display.

The two men sitting beside Earl exchanged looks. One of them raised his eyebrows. The other man grinned and kept looking at Doreen over his cup as she spooned chocolate syrup over the ice cream.¹⁹

Because of that one incident, Earl decides that his wife needs to lose weight, so he tells her, "I hate to say anything...but I think you better give a diet some thought. I mean it. I'm serious. I think you could lose a few pounds. Don't get mad."²⁰

Significantly, Earl is unemployed. Instead of worrying about his own situation, he obsesses about his wife's supposed need to shed pounds. His sense of emptiness leads him to obsess about the body of another person, his wife. Her body is an object that he thinks he can control or shape. Earl is like a pathetic version of Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*.

Sartre asserts that the body gives the self a sense of its own facticity,²¹ but here the body of another makes Earl feel inadequate. One reason is that Earl identifies completely with his wife's body, but more importantly, he sees in his wife's contours the reflection of

his own facticity, namely his lack of employment and his inability to relate to others, in particular his wife. He cannot look deeply enough at his wife to appreciate her inner self or feelings; he sees only a body.

At any rate, Earl compensates for his lack of a sense of purpose in life by trying to live vicariously through his wife, just as the Millers identify with the Stones and the latter's apartment.

As can be seen in these two stories, perception also has a negative aspect, whereas in "Cathedral," perception can lead to greater awareness and the creation of bonds with other people. The perceiver in "Neighbors" and "They're Not Your Husband" can try to escape the self by becoming obsessed with another person or with his or her surroundings, but any sense of communion with anyone or anything is a mere fantasy.

III. Conclusion

To summarize, in these three stories perception becomes a way for the self to realize a sense of unity, however fleeting or illusory, with the other. "Cathedral" is the only story of the three in which the protagonist forms any sort of positive relationship with another person or the world around him. In "Neighbors," the Millers develop a sense of oneness with the Stones' apartment that borders on obsession. In the end, any unity is a mere fantasy that leaves the less fortunate couple feeling uncertain and incomplete.

Earl Ober in "They're Not Your Husband" must feel as if he has become one with his wife's body by fixating on its supposed obesity. He seems to be content with this illusory unity, but his wife, her co-workers, and her customers view him only as eccentric or disturbed:

"Him," the other waitress said and nodded at Earl. "Who is this joker, anyway?"

Earl put on his best smile. He held it. He held it until he felt his face pulling out of shape.

But the other waitress just studied him, and Doreen began to shake her head slowly.²²

Earl seems to be the only one satisfied with this symbiotic relationship with his wife's body; one can only wonder how long he can maintain his fantasy.

Perception in Carver's fictional universe can lead to awareness and friendship or an illusory sense of identity with other people or objects. It is interesting that at the end of "Cathedral," the protagonist closes his eyes. We cannot depend merely on our senses here as in the other stories. We have to be self-aware in relation to others; otherwise, our senses will trick us into having a false sense of unity with other people or objects. Perception in Carver's world includes a sixth sense, which is not intuition but rather a psychological awareness essential to understanding reality.

Notes

1. Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989. p.207.
2. *Ibid.*, p.212.
3. *Ibid.*, p.213.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.214-218.
5. *Ibid.*, pp.212-219.
6. *Ibid.*, p.22.
7. *Ibid.*, p.225.
8. *Ibid.*, p.228.

9. Ibid., pp.217-219.
10. Ibid., p.218.
11. Ibid., p.220.
12. Ibid., p.222.
13. Ibid., p.223.
14. Ibid., p.228.
15. Ibid., p.212.
16. Runyon, Randolph Paul. *Reading Raymond Carver*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992. p.8.
17. Carver, Raymond. *Short Cuts*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1993, p.13.
18. Ibid., p.14.
19. Ibid., p.2.
20. Ibid., p.22.
21. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992. pp.403-406.
22. Carver, Raymond. *Short Cuts*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1993. p.27.

Bibliography

Primary Texts

- Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989.
- Carver, Raymond. *Short Cuts*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1993.

Secondary References

- Bellamy, Joe David. "A Downpour of Literary Republicanism." *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985): 31-39.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *George Bernard Shaw's 'Pygmalion.'* New York: Chelsea House, 1988.
- Boxer, David, and Phillips, Cassandra. "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver," *Iowa Review* 10, no. 3 (1979): 75-90.
- Chenetier, Marc. *Critical Angles: European Views of Contemporary American Literature.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1986.
- Facknitz, Mark A.R. "Missing the Train: Raymond Carver's Sequel to John Cheever's 'The Five Forty-Eight.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 22, no. 3 (1985): 345-47.
- Gallagher, Tess. "Carver Country." Introduction to *Carver Country: The World of Raymond Carver.* Photographs by Bob Adelman. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990.
- Herzinger, Kim A. "Introduction: On the New Fiction." *Mississippi Review.* 40/41 (Winter 1985): 7-22.
- Laing, R.D. *Self and Others.* London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Runyon, Randolph Paul. *Reading Raymond Carver.* Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1992.
- Saltzman, Arthur M. *Understanding Raymond Carver.* Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1988.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness.* New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.
- Stull, William. "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver." *Philological Quarterly* 64 (1985): 1-15.