



Perceptual Failings and the Divine Epiphany in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral"

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Abstract:

Disability Studies is an academic discipline which focuses on the meaning, nature and consequences of disability. The term is used to refer to individual functioning including physical impairment, sensory impairment, cognitive impairment, intellectual impairment, mental illness and various types of chronic diseases. This paper focuses on blindness as not simply a deficit rather a gifted intellect and someone with great insight in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral". In this short story, the character Robert's blindness has given the narrator an access to beauty and meaning that he has never known before. The narrator has his own stereotypic image of the blind people only from the movies and he had no real life encounters which all through his life made him feel that they have their own stereotypes. He ultimately expands his own perception by inhabiting Robert's perspective where he finds something more meaningful and deeper within his own self. The verbal description of the narrator fails to portray the Cathedral to Robert whereas the view of the blind Robert opens the eyes of the narrator. It is the perceptual failings of the narrator that make him unable to understand other people's feelings and fails to find meaning or joy in his life. It is through the blind man he attains Epiphany, which is not just about attaining insight but a divine realization. Literal blindness is far more less than the emotional blindness and thus this paper flashes that blindness is in the eyes and not in the mind.

Key words: Disability, Visual Impairment, Perceptual Failings, Epiphany.

Disability studies helps to construct and present disabled people within literature and bring them to the center of public discussion. Educating people through literature is a popular form of teaching. There are many types of disabilities such as impairment regarding hearing, vision, thinking, learning, movement, mental health, communicating and social illness. The

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people who are found to be disabled are denied from various social rights and are not given equal opportunities due to their physical impairment and environmental barriers. The disability study gives an eye-opening to the readers about the differently abled and the people who are discriminated for their physical problem. "Disability is a matter of perception. If you can do just one thing well, you're needed by someone." - Martina Navratilova.

Raymond Carver is an American short story writer and a poet. His realistic writing of the poor working class depicts his own life. He became interested in writing career after taking a creative writing course in Chico State College. His short stories began to appear in *Toyon* magazine while he studied at Humboldt State College. Carver's first success as a story writer came in 1967 with the publication of his short story "Will You Please be quiet, Please?" (1976). This collection of short stories was nominated for the National literary Award. His other short story collections are "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (1981), "Cathedral" (1984), "Where I'm Calling From" (1988). Carver is also an accomplished poet in the tradition of Robert Frost. His poetry collections include "At Night the Salmon Move" (1976), "Where Water Comes Together with Other water" (1985). His short stories give the realistic life and the problems of the poor people in Pacific North West. The sudden revelation or the Divine Epiphany is the common element seen in Carver's work. The following lines are from Gunter Leypoldt's "Raymond Carver's 'Epiphanic Moments'":

In Carver's most experimental work, which can be said to be a quasi-representationalist variant of a pronounced anti-realism, the protagonist's epiphanic vision emerges as a sudden climax at a point when the reader expects the loose narrative threads to be synthesized into at least partial closure; yet it typically remains an anti-climax, for it leaves the plot so unresolved that the text almost appears to mock the very notion of anagnorisis (535).

"Cathedral" (1984) is a Pulitzer Prize winning short story which is a collection perceived as his best. The story is a first person narrative which begins with a blind man named Robert, friend of the narrator's wife has planned to visit them. The narrator is unhappy about the visit of Robert. He has his own stereotypical thoughts about the blind people that he has witnessed in the movies. He then flashes back to the story of how his wife



had met the blind man when she had worked for him as a reader. On the final day, the man had asked her if he can touch her face. The touch of his fingers on her face is a pivotal moment in her life, something the narrator does not understand.

The narrator's wife maintained contact with the blind man for ten years through tape and he has just lost his wife and will be travelling to Connecticut to visit his wife's family. Along the way, he is going to spend the night at the home of the narrator. His wife tells the

narrator about Robert's wife, Beulah and the narrator further denigrates the blind man by considering how dreadful it must have been for Beulah not to have been seen by the man she loved. When Robert arrives, the narrator observes the activities of Robert and his wife but only occasionally joins them in their conversation. The narrator's wife falls asleep and the narrator is left with Robert and the television. The narrator attempts to describe what he sees on the television. However, when a cathedral appears in a documentary, the narrator is unable to find words to describe it. Robert asks the narrator to get some paper and a pen so that they can draw a cathedral together. The narrator does as he is asked. The drawing goes on and on. Finally, Robert tells the narrator to close his eyes and continue to draw. At this moment, something strange happens to the narrator. Even when Robert tells him to open his eyes, he keeps them closed. He is no longer aware of Robert's blindness; the narrator experiences the possibility of change in his life.

The narrator fails to perceive things beyond the surface. He believes that the physical vision is the one which gives him the real meaning of life. He thinks himself to be superior to Robert because he has the gift of vision which Robert is deprived of. But this self-esteem ruined his whole behavior where he even mistakes the true friendship of his wife and Robert. He is blind folded to the real vision of life. He is incapable of knowing the true vision because he had buried himself in his own stereotypical thought. He gives importance to looking at things which is just a physical vision and fails to see things from his insight which needs a deeper level of cognizance.

The narrator's perception about the visually impaired Robert shows his inability to understand other people's feelings and to find meaning in his own life. He says, "My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed.



Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs” (1). This shows that the narrator had not encountered any blind people personally in his life time. He has his own conception about the visually challenged Robert and is not happy to invite him to his home. He is not happy about the friendship of his wife and Robert. He criticizes his wife for writing a poem about Robert touching her face. When his wife asks him to be kind to his friend so that she will also be with his friends he says, “I don’t have any blind friends” (1). He has his exaggerating self opinion about the unsighted person.

The discrimination of the people for their physical disability is clearly seen through the thoughts of the narrator throughout the short story. The narrator even says that the blind man’s wife must not have lead a good life because she might not have received any compliments from her husband throughout her life. She had lived with a man who doesn’t know how she looks. He says “All this without his having ever seen what the goddamned woman looked like. It was beyond my understanding”(2). This in fact reveals the narrator’s ignorance of the real life. The narrator thus discriminates Robert in all ways. As the narrator views life through the perceptions of the eyes or vision he fails to see the insight or true meaning of life.

The life of Robert shows his existence beyond the limitations of physical things. When the narrator sees Robert with beard he says, “A beard on a blind man! Too much I say” (4). He was in his own perception that “I’d always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind” (4). The narrator is amazed while seeing Robert eating perfectly. He explains how Robert handles the fork and the knife. And when the narrator turns on the television Robert immediately says that it’s a color television. The narrator is astonished on seeing the comprehensive ability of Robert. He begins to see a new person which was totally different from his stereotypical thoughts and begin to spend some time with him.

Experiencing the World from Robert’s perspective brings a new light to the life of the author. When Robert asked the narrator to explain the Cathedral, he is unable to express through words. He says “But I can’t tell you what a Cathedral looks like. It just isn’t in me to do it. I can’t do anymore than I have done.” (12). Thus the narrator gives up his talent to explain the cathedral to Robert. Robert has a perception of comprehending the wonder of things, the potential for greatness and compassion for humanity and curiosity that makes one



truly alive. Robert holds the hand of the narrator and makes him feel how the Cathedral looks like. "His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now" (13). There is a vast transformation in the mind of the narrator and he is able to look at the World in the perspective of the disabled man. In an interview with Claude Grimal, Raymond Carver says "The story 'Cathedral' seemed to me completely different from everything I'd written before. I was in a period of generosity. "

Elise Ballard defines Epiphany as "that term is a little more casual and speaks more to everyday insights. By epiphanies I mean the major, life-changing revelations that have had the greatest impact on our lives. ...a moment that changes the lens through which you view your life; our soul scratching around our head and giving us a signal to guide our lives with; a moment of descending light, open knowledge, and choice; ...that moment where you know your life is never going to be the same."

The narrator has a feeling of life-changing revelation where he finds a new insight about life. "This 'revelation' then, remains at the level of a non-semantic sense of the 'whatness of things' and at best branches into multiple meanings" (Raymond Carver's "Epiphanic Moments", 533). When Robert asks him to open his eyes he is unable to open and there is a sudden revelation in the minds of the narrator. He says "It was like nothing else in my life up to now" (14). He attains a divine epiphany and had seen life in a new light that he has never ever experienced.

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