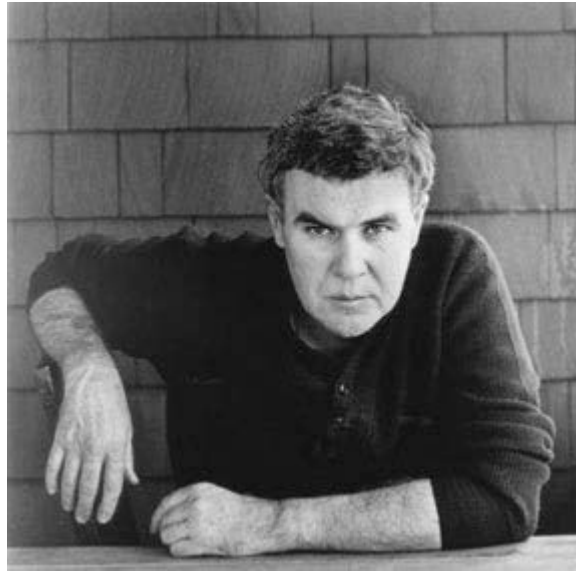


ANALYSIS

“Cathedral” (1981)



Raymond Carver

(1938-1988)

Raymond Carver became a popular model for creative writing students mainly because his dialogue is convincing and evocative and his plain style is easy to imitate—simpler than Hemingway. Carver once said that he avoided irony, which Henry James advised all fiction writers to cultivate, because he felt it distanced him from his characters. Ironically, “Cathedral” is perhaps his best story in part because it is so richly ironic. Much of the intellectual content of modern fiction is generated by irony. Lack of a sense of irony makes some Carver stories simplistic and sentimental.

Fundamentally the story is traditional Realism in (1) focusing on the commonplace; (2) characterizing ordinary people; (3) in a representative social situation; (4) using a plain style; (5) with realistic dialogue; (6) evoking the illusion of real life by narrating a linear sequence of actions in authentic detail; (7) in order to dramatize universal truths of human nature and society. Carver is among those writers during the Postmodernist period (1960s--present) who resisted decadent fashion and carried on the aesthetic traditions of fiction, in particular Realism—most notably Wallace Stegner and Marilynne Robinson. Like Stegner and Robinson in this story Carver enhances his Realism with Modernist techniques and themes, most significantly in affirming transcendence, spirituality, and belief in God.

The narrator is such a representative ordinary guy that his name and how he makes a living are not even mentioned. The blind man calls him “Bub.” Like many ordinary people today, Bub does not like his job but he feels stuck in it--whatever it may be. “Every night I smoked dope and stayed up as long as I could before going to sleep.” Bub and his wife do not seem to be sleeping together. He is insecure in his marriage, cynical, has nightmares and drinks too much alcohol. Drinking is “one of our pastimes.” He learns from movies rather than by reading. Today drugs and pop culture have replaced religion. At dinner instead of saying grace he makes a mockery of prayer: “I guess I don’t believe in anything.” Not even his marriage. Bub is another lost soul in the spiritual wasteland of late 20th-century Postmodernism, first imaged by T. S. Eliot in “The Waste Land” (1922).

The title “Cathedral” evokes a great majestic work of art in ironic contrast to the mundane style of the story. Realism tends to remain at ground level whereas a cathedral is literally high art, a symbol of the aspiration for perfection in life and art: “They reach way up. Up and up. Toward the sky.” In contrast, Bub and his wife merely pass joints and reach for the bottle. Realism is prose, a cathedral is poetry. Speaking of his wife’s poetry, Bub admits, “Maybe I just don’t understand poetry.” Or women. Or God. “In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone’s life.” Bub does not say, In those olden days, people believed in God. Instead he posits the existence of God while declaring that today He is not important to people like himself. Ironically, by implication the blind man is able to imagine God just as he is able to imagine a cathedral as a monument to God.

The blind man puts Bub in touch with the meaning of a cathedral—the literally blind leading the spiritually blind. The blind man and the wife had “kept in touch.” His effect upon her when he touches her face is parallel to the effect when Bub moves his hand under the blind man’s and they draw a cathedral together. Carver’s emphasis on touching and communion recalls Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). The wife’s relationship with the blind man even at a physical distance is closer than her relationship to Bub or to her previous husband, whose military life so distanced her that she attempted suicide. She has difficulty completing both her poems and her marriages. While the blind man shows Bub how to feel about a cathedral, she is passed out.

Blindness is a traditional ironic characteristic of seers that calls attention to inner sight or spiritual vision—Homer, Milton, Joyce. In *Wise Blood* (1952) by O’Connor, the protagonist blinds himself in order to escape the illusions of the material world and save his soul. In “Cathedral” Bub finally declares, “I can’t tell you what a cathedral looks like. It just isn’t in me to do it.” His physical weakness implies a spiritual weakness: “My legs felt like they didn’t have any strength in them.” While drawing a cathedral in a process like consulting a quija board, he unites in spirit with the blind man. He has a peak transcendent experience when he closes his eyes and becomes like the blind: “It was like nothing else in my life up to now.” Up to now he has been describing and drawing the *exterior* of the cathedral. Then he puts in some people for “the interior stuff.” But with his eyes closed, “I didn’t feel like I was inside of anything.” This is because everything is now *inside* of him: “‘It’s really something,’ I said.”

One of the general ironies in “Cathedral” is that the blind man is coping better with his disability and loss of his wife than the couple is with their spiritual disabilities. He speaks boldly, has a big laugh, and is adventurous. He has a social service job and is also an Amway distributor and a ham radio operator with contacts all over the world--far more “in touch” than Bub. Though he has just lost his wife, he displays a sensitive interest in the problems of others and is able to redeem them from alienation. He has “stooping shoulders, as if he carried a great weight there”—an image that evokes Christ carrying the cross. Another irony is how much more the blind man has to show Bub than the other way around: “‘Maybe I could take him bowling,’ I said to my wife.”

Michael Hollister (2015)