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102-060

19 July 2019

Raymond Carver’s Theme of Bias in “Cathedral”

Cathedral is an open-ended short story about a grumpy working-class man learning about the radically different perspectives offered by those who are different. In this case, that difference is blindness. Throughout the story, the nameless narrator offers multiple examples of bias, which all are all ultimately disproven. In the time which “Cathedral” was written, and as many people’s final ghosts of the Civil War were finally being laid to rest, the discussion of bias was beginning to expand from covering individual types of discrimination – against women, homosexuals, African Americans – to more general questions thereabout, such as “why do people have biases?” and “can we eliminate bias from people?” As this issue gained attention nationally, it was pioneered hardest in the region where it took root – the final years of a “red” California. It would be hypocritical to write an investigation into tackling bias while simultaneously assuming Carver’s opinions based on his hometown, but there is no doubt that he had an opinion on the matter. Subtle details in “Cathedral” seem to indicate his support for this movement.

In the story, bias is expressed from the perspective of a working-class male living in a suburb of New York City – about as “regular” as demographics get for the eighties. Though associating, and subsequently attacking, bias with such a generic citizen was not as regularly considered in that time period as it is today, it is an important detail for making the characters relatable for as many likely biased readers as possible. This is possibly one reason why the narrator is never named; so that the reader can easily immerse himself in the situation described by the story, making the story’s lessons about bias easier to learn. With this framework for inserting the reader into the story, Carver has him or her experience expressing misplaced biases.

Simple cases of misplaced bias are detailed occasionally by the narrator. The first example of this occurring is when the narrator states that the name of Robert’s wife, Beulah, is “a name for a colored woman” (Carver 35). He then goes on to specifically inquire if she is “a Negro” (Carver 35). However, it is mentioned later that the item that Robert and Beulah share as a final parting sentiment is a twenty-peso Mexican coin (Carver 36). This implies that she heirs from a Latin background, which was not quite well known for its African American population at the time. This is a simple case of passing discrimination comprised of a momentary detail and what was normal conversation for the time.

Prejudice holds yet a much more pervasive place in the narrator’s interactions with Robert. The narrator’s general nervousness causes him to separate Robert from “normal people” and assume a completely different way of interacting socially with him. One example is the fact that there was no discussion at all over dinner, only descriptions of the narrator’s surprise at Robert’s ability to maneuver the dinner plate normally (Carver 38). Such a nervousness as the narrator’s could also cause one to lie or give generic or indecisive responses to questions in order to avoid a potential unseen conflict or awkward situation. The narrator does this by unconfidently stating that he is not religious, stating “I guess I don’t believe in it” (Carver 42). This comes after his previous directive before dinner of “Now let us pray” (Carver 37), revealing a discrepancy between his statement about his beliefs and his actual practices. Either he is, in fact, religious and is trying to hide it due to the theorized nervousness, or, conversely, he is areligious and lead the meal prayer for the same reason. These experiences paint a picture of awkward and undesirable situations for the reader and serve as guidelines for how not to interact with people that one may find different that oneself. Carver left a lesson that, in today’s political landscape, would have earned him high praise from anti-discrimination activists, strong adversity from the lesson’s refuters, and unignorable political attention from everybody.