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Epiphanic Awakenings in Raymond Carver's *Cathedral* and Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*

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Abstract

This paper explores how two short stories from very different backgrounds conclude in a significant epiphany for the characters. Raymond Carver's short story "Cathedral" and Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" are studied to see how the husband in Carver's work is blinder than his visually-impaired overnight guest, and the college-educated Dee in Walker's story is more ignorant than her uneducated Mama and sister with learning difficulties. In the husband's case in "Cathedral," once he is forced to interact with someone unfamiliar he has an eye-opening experience and is led to the realization of how blind he has been. Walker's Mama also has her own epiphany at the climax of the short story and her demeanor changes, becoming more assertive than before.

Keywords: Epiphany, moment of recognition, minimalist realism

1. Introduction

American writer and poet Raymond Carver (1938-1988) published "Cathedral" in 1983 as the last story in a collection of the same name. He is known for his bleak and stark portrayal of working-class people trapped in states of isolation (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008). Champion (1997) states that Carver is also known for his sparse, pared-down style which invites readers to contribute their own interpretations. "Cathedral" is no exception. Carver tells the story of a man we assume is working-class who is left to entertain a blind friend of his wife who drops by on his way to visit his dead wife's family in Connecticut. Robert and the husband stay up together as the wife sleeps on the couch, watching TV when a show about cathedrals comes on. Robert asks the husband to describe the cathedrals to him who finds himself unable to do so. So Robert then suggests they draw one together, but with the husband closing his eyes. This is when the husband has his epiphany. Throughout this short story, Carver does not weigh the story down with details about characters, time, and place. In fact, aside from the name Robert and the dead wife, Beulah, no names are mentioned. Instead, he leaves the reader to focus on the character's journey to enlightenment, and fill in whatever gaps they feel are necessary to complete the story in their minds."Critics often note Carver's narrators leave questions about plots and characters unanswered, which often leads to interpretations about concerns the text raises rather than issues it resolves."Critics also point out just as narrators leave surface details unspoken, characters frequently remain silent. Characters' silences, indicative of their inability to communicate with other characters, reflect a recurring theme in Carver's fiction. Often his stories are about discourse itself, ways people communicate or fail to communicate, demonstrating consequences of various modes of discourse…Frequently in Carver's fictional world, speech is therapeutic but silence is detrimental to characters." Ibid.

In previous studies, many writers analyzed Carver's employment of epiphanic rhetoric. Aldrige (1992:30) stated that Carver's stories fail to produce a moment of "climactic insight into the truth about the human condition" or what he calls "a large revelation or crescendo of meaning". Other commentators like Clarke (1990:111) argued thatthere are "moments of recognition and insight" in Carver's writings and there is a pattern whereby his characters learn how to grow even if it was in a muted and implicit way. Of the earlier opinion mentioned above, Clark (1993:391) claimed that the absence of the epiphanic moments in Carver's writing lead to his power and show "postmodernist sensibility". Leypolt (2001:2) stated that "Carver's use of epiphany is too varied to conform to the kind of aesthetic stereotypes with which the various camps in the debates on postmodernism and realism have attempted to differentiate progressive from regressive literature."

Meanwhile, Alice Walker (1944) is a Pulitzer-prize winning author as well as a poet and activist. She grew up in an environment full of racism and poverty, which along with her passion for gender issues, remains a large part of her narratives. The short story "Everyday Use" is about a rural family who has a daughter who breaks away from her roots

to improve her life and goes to live in the city. College-educated Dee's mother and her sister, Maggie, are portrayed as simple, hardworking and uneducated country folk. "I never had an education myself. After second grade the school was closed down" (Walker, 2005:404), says the mother about herself, and of Maggie: "Sometimes Maggie reads to me. She stumbles along good-naturedly…She knows she is not bright."(ibid).Dee on the other hand is "lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure…At sixteen she had a style of her own: and knew what style was." (Walker, 2005:403). After completing high school she went on to college where she became concerned with the African American civil rights movement, and believed she had to go back to her African roots. She changed her name to Wangero Leewankia Kemanjo because she could not "bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me." (Walker, 2005:406). On a visit back home she suddenly shows an interest in quilts her mother had made, ones she had previously labeled as "old-fashioned, out of style" (Walker, 2005:409) when they had been offered to her when she went off to college. With her desire to go back to her roots came a hunger for things her mother no longer wanted her to have. The mother seems to have her epiphany when she is able to see through Dee and is unimpressed by the changes in her daughter. She shows uncharacteristic adamancy by insisting the quilts Dee wanted would go to Maggie who could keep the tradition of quilt-making alive.

2. Discussion

Arthur A. Brown(1990) says Carver's writing has remained postmodern – he never loses sight of his subject, which is real life, even while his subject is also the creation of fiction. Stull (1993) characterizes the change the story represents in Carver's writing as a movement away from the "existential realism" of his earlier stories toward a "humanist realism." It has been said that Carver was an advocate of minimalist realism – something Clark (2012) says a number of scholars have attempted to describe, but remains poorly defined. In "Cathedral" the unnamed narrator objectively reports past sensory experiences, an action common in impressionistic works, but like many minimalist protagonists, is ultimately unable to articulate the significance of the events he describes.

Bethea (2009) in his*Technique and Sensibility in the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver* says "Cathedral" offers the odd coupling of a sarcastic dope smoker and a gregarious blind man that results in epiphanic liberation. The sighted narrator is portrayed as ignorant and somewhat mean-spirited, while in contrast, Robert is generous, jovial, and knowledgeable.

As the narrator tells how his wife and Robert came to know each other, he refers to the man as "the blind man." "On one tape, she told the blind man she'd decided to live away from her officer for a time…She and I began going out, and of course she told her blind man about it…Once she asked me if I'd like to hear the latest tape from the blind man…" (Carver, 1989: 211). His insistence on referring to the friend in that manner makes him appear inhuman – an object that can be owned by one person or another. The narrator, in his small and limited scope of understanding, seems to believe Robert is an incomplete human being. He is fascinated by how ordinary Robert is, and struggles to go beyond his pre-conceptions of what visually-impaired people are. As his wife pulls into the driveway and the narrator gets his first look at Robert, his initial thought is "A beard on a blind man! Too much, I say."(Carver, 1989: 214).Then before dinner, as they chat he thinks to himself he remembers reading somewhere blind people don't smoke because they can't see the smoke they exhale. "I thought I knew that much and that much only about blind people(Carver, 1989: 214,217)."He thinks to himself, but holes are poked in his knowledge as Robert smokes his cigarettes right down to the butt.

Once the wife fallsasleep on the couch beside them, the narrator and Robert are left watching TV when a show about cathedrals comes on. It is not the narrator's first choice of show as he switches through the channels, but finds nothing else on. He apologizes to Robert for channel surfing who accepts the apology by saying, "Whatever you want to watch is okay. I'm always learning something. Learning never ends." The blind man appears to be hinting to the narrator he could stand to learn a thing or two and gain enlightenment.

Robert asks the husband to describe a cathedral to him since his knowledge of cathedrals is just what he heard on the TV show they were watching, but the narrator finds himself unable to give a clear description. Robert then suggests he gets some heavy paper and he draws one for him. "His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now"says the narrator (Carver, 1989: 228). The blind man asks the husband to close his eyes so his mind and imagination can roam freely, unhindered. They draw and then Robert asks the narrator to open his eyes and look what they drew, but he chooses to keep them closed for a little longer.

The story ends with the narrator saying, "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything" (ibid). This is when the husband finally has his epiphanic awakening. He realizes he doesn't need to be physically sighted to see and learn.

Bethea (2009:90) writes: "*Cathedral* offers a variant on the Sophoclean irony of seeing the truth only when literally blind. Before meeting Robert, the sighted narrator sees nothing of what is true about blind people. At the end, temporarily deprived of sight when he closes his eyes, the narrator comes close to seeing liberation from his claustrophobic existence."(Ibid). When initially asked to describe the cathedral on TV, the husband admits his inability to communicate his vision, twice confessing his failure: "I'm just no good at it" (Carver, 1989: 225), and "I can't do anymore than I've done" (ibid), but this changes at the endwhen he puts himself in Robert's shoes and is still capable of achieving something he never thought possible.

Moving on to Alice Walker's work, "Everyday Use" was singled out for praise by several critics. Several admiring articles have been written about it, and in 1994, Barbara Christian published *Everyday Use*, an entire book of essays built around this one story. Christian (1994) wrote in the introduction of her book the story has come to be recognized

as an exemplary and foundational piece for several of Walker's primary interests as a writer. She noted the text "placed African American women's voices at the centre of the narrative, an unusual position at the time." (ibid).

Susan Farrell (1998)says with Alice Walker's "Everyday Use", most would agree the point of the story is to show, as Nancy Tuten argues, a mother's "awakening to one daughter's superficiality and the other's deep-seated understanding of heritage" (Tuten 125).

According to Tuten (1993), Walker uses speech to stress the importance of language and the destructive effects of its misuse. Dee opts for language over silence, as she demonstrates in her determination to be educated and in the importance she places on her name. "Rather than providing a medium for newfound awareness and for community, however, verbal skill equips Dee to oppress and manipulate others and to isolate herself."Before going to college, Dee would read to her mother and sister "…without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice…Pressed us to her with the serf'ous way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand." (Walker, 2005: 403). It is not surprising then that the mother, who often chooses silence over language, expresses herself in the climax through deeds - she hugs Maggie to her, drags her in the room where Dee sits holding the quilts, snatches the quilts from Dee, and dumps them into Maggie's lap, thereby empowering the previously silenced and victimized daughter. When Mama has her epiphanic moment, her appreciation of Maggie is significant because it represents the establishment of a stronger bond between the mother and her uneducated daughter.

Dee believes she is affirming her African heritage by changing her name, mannerisms, and appearance, leaving her mother and sister confused and intimidated by her new image as "Wangero". Her family's connection to their heritage is much more personal, focusing on memories of individual family members, while Dee's connection is more global. She chooses to focus on their heritage as a race, which leads to their valuing of possessions for different reasons. Dee sees items in her family home as being examples of African-American folk art, while her sibling and mother value them because of the memories they hold of loved ones. An example of this can be seen when Dee spots a butter churn that she wants to take. Wangero thinks of how she can put it on display, "I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table…and I'll think of something artistic to do with the dasher." (Walker, 2005: 408). The mother however has a more nostalgic reaction: "When she finished wrapping the dasher the handle stuck out. I took it for a moment in my hands. You didn't even have to look close to see where hands pushing the dasher up and down to make butter had left a kind of sink in the wood. In fact, there were a lot of small sinks; you could see where thumbs and fingers had sunk into the wood. It was beautiful light yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash had lived." (Walker, 2005: 408)

In this instance, Alice Walker is commenting on the Black Arts Movement, which was a cultural extension of the Black Power Movement. Artists and critics such as Bryant (1973), Christian (1985,1994), and Smith (1994) made a conscious effort to celebrate African-American culture for its own forms, ideas, and styles, rather than seeing it as a derivative of European-American culture. Walker however saw three deficits of the movement: its tendency to speak for all blacks, assuming they all had the same experience; its conception of blackness in mostly masculine terms; and its implication urban black experience is more "real" than rural black experience. When the mother has her epiphany and refuses to give in to Dee's greedy grab for the quilts, she is in a way asserting that the rural black experience of the mother and Maggie are in no way less real than Dee's urban experience. The mother recognizes that like Maggie and herself, "quilts are designed for everyday use, pieced wholes defying symmetry and pattern,... signs of the sacred generations of women who have always been alien to a world of literate words and stylish fancy" (Baker and Pierce-Baker, 1985:).

3. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore how Raymond Carver and Alice Walker led their characters to epiphanies at the climax of their two short stories, "Cathedral" and "Everyday Use". The husband in "Cathedral" was initially portrayed as an ignorant man who had formulated pre-conceived notions about visually-impaired people. His demeanor was that of a person who was comfortable in his ignorance, and had never really thought about exploring beyond his world. However, when the wife's friend cornered him into closing his eyes and drawing a cathedral using his inner senses to guide him, his attitude changed drastically and he had his aha-moment. The story draws to an end with the husband choosing to keep his eyes closed after they finished their drawing because, "I thought it was something I ought to do." It appears the narrator was trying to make up for all the lost experiences and senses he'd taken for granted when his eyes were open but not seeing anything. By keeping them closed he was experiencing a freedom he had never experienced before, "I didn't feel like I was inside anything" and he was reveling in it, "It's really something" he said.

Walker's Dee however did not go through a similar journey. Readers might expect that with Dee's grossly skewed take on life, she would be the one to have her epiphanic awakening as she is in dire need of it. However, unlike the husband in "Cathedral" she is not given the chance to connect with her senses, but remains on her high-horse, telling her mother disdainfully "You just don't understand…your heritage…It's really a new day for us. But from the way you…still live, you'd never know it."(Walker, 2005: 410). The privilege of seeing what was unclear is given to the mother who initially appears to be powerless to Dee's strong and over-bearing character. A possible interpretation of why this is so could be because Dee is perceived as more attractive and thus more worthy of being held in awe than others. The mother described her college graduate as having skin "lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure." (Walker, 2005: 403). According to data from the National Survey of Black Americans cited by Mark E. Hill, skin color consciously or unconsciously influences assessment of physical attractiveness among African American adults. Results indicated that skin tone influences the attractiveness ratings assigned to black women. The gender-by-skin-tone interaction is

consistent with the hypothesis African Americans perceive fair skin tone as a particularly feminine characteristic. This, along with the fact the daughter is more educated than her family, could explain why the mother would allow her daughter to push her around for so long. The mother remained quiet as she watched Dee taking things out of the home so she can display them herself as artifacts of their African heritage. However, when she saw the helpless look on Maggie's face as her sister grabbed quilts the mother and Maggie had painstakingly made by hand, and realizing all the sentimental values connected with the quilts would be lost in Dee's home, she had her epiphany and stood up to her daughter. The mother says of that moment, "When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet….I did something I never done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap."(Walker, 2005: 179). Maggie is left with her mouth gaping open because of the uncharacteristically assertive behavior of her mother.

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