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Psychological Distance in Raymond Carver's CATHEDRAL

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In the first paragraph of his short story "Cathedral," Raymond Carver's use of demonstratives and possessives, central determiners, draws readers close to the story's narrator while simultaneously creating psychological distance between the narrator and the other two characters in the story. The total effect of this language creates what English professor Jeanette S. De-Carrico calls an "atmosphere of expectation," allowing the readers to know where to place themselves in relationship to the "the narrator, the characters, and the scene" (28). By situating readers in a close, direct relationship with the narrator and forcing them to view the world from the narrator's perspective, readers progress through a series of epiphanies, effectively conveying the story's central message on "blindness" and spiritual awakening.

"Cathedral" opens with the narrator speaking directly to the audience, using the demonstrative *this*, a word used to indicate distance, in a metaphoric way, creating a closeness between the narrator and the reader while establishing emotional remoteness between the narrator and the blind man. The sentence reads, "This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night" (Carver 975). In the context of the sentence, *this* indicates a specific, definite person but also illustrates the distance between the narrator and the blind man. The use of the demonstrative determiner *this* instead of the indefinite article *a* (as in "a blind man") or the definite article *the* (as in "the blind man") indicates to the reader that the speaker is referring to a very specific blind man. In addition, because the narrator uses *this* instead of *the*, the reader is given the impression that the speaker, in this

case the story's narrator, is talking to the readers as if he knows them. The narrator's tone is colloquial and conversational.

In addition to the central determiners creating a sense of affinity between the reader and the narrator, possessives reinforce the personalities of the characters and the story's metaphorical exploration of "blindness." The narrator's use of the possessive *my* in reference to his wife introduces the narrator's character, the story's conflict, and the relationship between the narrator, his wife, and the blind man. When the wife is mentioned in the first paragraph, it is in relationship to the narrator and the blind man: "He called my wife from his in-law's. . . . He would come by train, a five-hour trip, and my wife would meet him at the station" (Carver 975). Each time he speaks of his wife, the narrator describes her in relation to the blind man, such as a "friend of my wife" or he "called my wife." In this opening paragraph the narrator repeatedly reminds the reader of the relationships between the characters and shows, clearly, that the narrator's wife, and not the narrator himself, is the one in relationship with *this* blind man. This successfully sets the narrator apart from his wife and the blind man while maintaining a forced intimacy between the narrator and the audience.

At the end of the first paragraph there is a change of determiner use that is subtle but arguably significant. The narrator refers to the blind man not as *this* blind man, as he did earlier, but rather as *a* blind man. Up to this point, the reader assumes the narrator's main dislike for the blind man is based on the relationship between the blind man and the narrator's wife. However, this belief is confronted when the narrator stops referring to the blind man as *this* blind man, indicating distrust in a specific, definite blind man, and replaces it with *a* blind man, indicating a distrust of blind people in general. What looks like a simple distrust of one blind man moves to a general distrust of, and dislike for, blindness. In context, this illustration of the narrator's fear of things unknown helps establish the central conflict of the story and mediates to the reader that the issues within the story are more complex than first realized. The shift in determiners from *this* to *the* to *a* could be overlooked, but such a shift is necessary: In the context of the story, the movement guides readers into the center of the narrator's paradoxical core where exists both willful blindness and the fear of this blindness. Experiencing this paradox themselves, readers can then journey with the narrator through his series of epiphanies.

"Cathedral" is an effective short story because the central determiners trap the reader within the mind of a closed-off, narrow-minded man as he undergoes a spiritual awakening. In the first paragraph of the story, the use of

demonstratives and possessives bring the reader inside the narrator, creating an uncomfortable closeness between the two. By the time the readers finish the last sentence of the story, they are able to finally “see” along with the narrator, and therefore are able to accept the spiritual implications of the seemingly ordinary occurrence of drawing a cathedral.

Works Cited

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