Society’s Routine Checkup

To truly SEE something is quite difficult. Most individuals look at people and objects without truly understanding them. Two authors who discuss the difference between looking and seeing are Charles Baxter in his “Gryphon” and Raymond Carver in “Cathedral.” Both of these stories deal with narrators who are learning how to be more open minded and see themselves and the world as they truly are. Looking implies a physical activity or reflex, whereas seeing suggests having true, unbiased knowledge and insight.

In order to discuss the relationships between the characters in these two stories, we must first understand the difference between looking vs. seeing. How to Unleash Your Creative Power says, “to look is to pose your eyes upon an object, perhaps without major thought or consequences… Now when the observer sees, he has observed, processed, digested, and is thus able to have a moment of enlightenment” (Hernandez para.1). You can get these two words mixed up because they have similar meanings. The best way to separate two words that have similar meanings is how they are defined. Dictionary.com says, the definition of looking is the act of directing the eyes toward something (“look”), and the definition of seeing is perception by means of the eyes and having vision- “not blind” (“see”). In order to see or perceive an object, we need to look at it first thus we often interchange the two words. That’s what makes it easy to confuse seeing with looking. In better words, these two words are very close related, but, as defined, they have completely two different meanings. The reader sees these definitions
symbolically in the two stories. We see this in “Gryphon” when the substitute teacher Miss Ferenczi orders the class to not stare at her, “Looking I will permit. Staring, no. It is Impolite to stare, and a sign of bad breeding. You cannot make a social effort while staring” (Baxter 247). We also see it in “Cathedral” when Robert asks the narrator to close his eyes to teach him how to “see.” “[To the narrator] Close your eyes now…Are they closed…Keep them that way, don’t stop now. Draw [the cathedral picture]” (Carver 442). The difference between looking and seeing is looking requires no effort; it’s just a reflex; however, seeing something for what it is, and not what’s just on the outside, requires an understanding of the person or object.

Now that we understand looking vs. seeing in terms of the stories, we can analyze them individually. In Baxter’s “Gryphon,” Miss Ferenczi teaches Tommy how to be more open minded and free, instead of allowing society lead his life. During the spelling quiz, Tommy is unable to spell the word balcony. Miss Ferenczi tells him, “I have never liked the word either…if you don’t like a word, you don’t have to use it” (Baxter 249). When Miss Ferenczi shares her story of a trip to Cairo to the class, she tells them of a creature she saw that was half lion and half bird, called a Gryphon. How does Tommy perceive this? He doesn’t believe her at first. So, once he gets home, he looks up “Gryphon” in the dictionary, and is amazed to read the definition (Baxter 252), Tommy then says, “there really is such a creature”(252). Miss Ferenczi encourages Tommy to be independent and go look and do research for himself. Miss Ferenczi shows Tommy how to “see” the world for what is really is and be the person he wants to be, instead of just taking a look at the world and jumping on the bandwagon.

The narrator in “Cathedral” goes through a similar transformation, just as Tommy did in “Gryphon.” In the beginning of the story, the narrator displays a lack of insight and self-awareness, making him even blinder than Robert. The narrator looks at the world from the
outside, without studying the important details or even caring. The narrator can see with his eyes just fine, he just has trouble being open minded and seeing what’s on the inside. When Robert arrives at the narrator’s house, the narrator tries to understand him through his characteristics, and he looks at Robert as of some sort of an alien, “This blind man, feature this, he was wearing a full beard! A beard on a blind man!” (435). I think that the narrator does this because he only looks and guesses, he doesn’t take the time to actually “see” like Robert does. “This blind man was late forties, a heavy-set, balding man with stooped shoulders… He wore brown slacks, brown shoes, a light-brown shirt, a tie, a sports shirt. Spiffy” (435). Consequently, this is the reason why the narrator’s relationship with his wife is faulty, and he lacks the understanding of his wife’s intimacy. “[Narrators wife] If you love me… you can do this for me. If you don’t love me, okay” (434). The narrator’s wife shows how their relationship is missing what Robert and the narrator’s wife has. On the other hand, Robert is very different than the narrator. He is very insightful. He takes the time to dissect all the details and listens to everything the narrator’s wife tells him. Robert understands the narrator’s wife and what she has went through. That’s why she has always vented to the blind man in the audiotapes. After the narrator’s wife falls asleep, the narrator is forced to have a conversation with the blind man about what a cathedral looks like. The narrator’s good intentions are thwarted when he realizes he is unable to describe a cathedral. He is unable to describe the cathedral to Robert because he can’t “see” its significance. He just describes what it looks like. “They’re massive. They’re built of stone. Marble, too, sometimes” (441). It isn’t until later when the narrator understands how to describe the cathedral.

When discussing the relationship between the characters in each story, we should demonstrate the life lesson as we, the reader, interpret these stories. Miss Ferenczi and Robert are both prime examples of a free standing, open minded individual. Society teaches us to look and
not “see,” but these figures teach us how to move beyond society and truly see. Some readers will remember Miss Ferenczi and Robert from “Mars” (Baxter 246), and some readers will remember these two “eagle-eyed” mentors as being socially or physically “blind” (Carver 432-442), but most will remember these two figures as teachers who teach us to overlook society’s routine, and essentially becoming the better person we want to be.

Ultimately, there is a clear difference between the two words, looking and seeing, as being defined generally and symbolically. Looking is a natural thing that the human eye interprets whereas seeing requires actual thought and comprehension. To be able to “see”, or perceive something thoroughly, one must first be able to “look” at what needs to be perceived. And, I think Baxter and Carver teach this in each of their stories. The act of drawing the cathedral with Robert with the narrator’s eyes closed helps him open his mind, and search from inside himself, to understand the more important meaning. Robert teaches the narrator, through drawing the cathedral together while being “blind”, how to perceive life. This allows him to truly “see” for the first time, just like Tommy in “Gryphon.”
Work Cited


