Censoring Senses

“Lights, camera, action!” Movies and television are one of America’s favorite pastimes. Due to society’s moral standards, movies and television shows have ratings (G, PG-13, Rated R), and several have some degree of censorship. Censoring indecent materials in movies and shows is commonly accepted and should be done, but censoring, or suppressing, personal sensations should not be done. The short story “Cathedral” by Raymond Carver is about a man who did just that: conceal his senses. The protagonist of the story then realized how figuratively blind he really was when he met his wife’s visually blind friend. Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” shows—through the characters, the structure, the technology, and the cathedral in the story—how people live their life shallowly because of their metaphorical blindness.

To understand how the function of blindness does not allow people to live life thoroughly, analyzing the male characters in the story is necessary—starting with the protagonist. Blindness can be a visual impairment, or it can be a form of oblivion. The wife’s friend, Robert, was visually impaired, while the wife’s husband was just oblivious; however, the blindness the husband experienced was more detrimental than Robert’s blindness. The husband actually gave his own description of blindness: “My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs” (Carver 1). Robert, with a full beard and no sight-seeing dog or dark glasses, astounded the protagonist. The husband’s stereotypical mindset of how people should be shaped his own
identity as well; the husband felt he had to be the conventional “macho man.” Ursula Hess, a researcher from the University of Quebec, wrote: “In Western cultures women are believed to be more emotionally expressive in general than are men. Specifically, they are expected to smile more as well as to show more sadness, fear, and guilt. In contrast, men are believed to show more overt emotional displays” (610). Due to this western culture belief, the husband suppressed his emotions and senses, thereby blinding himself. His stereotypic judgement also led him to isolation, for his wife disclosed that he did not have any friends; the protagonist’s marriage was not an optimal relationship either. One cannot enjoy the world alone. Thus, the protagonist’s stereotypical mindset blinded and isolated him, prompting a bleak way of life.

Moreover, analyzing the character Robert also helps understand how blindness in the form of oblivion leads to living unthorough lives. As previously discussed, Robert was not the stereotype of a visually blind person. The husband stated: “Robert had done a little of everything, it seemed, a regular blind jack-of-all-trades” (Carver 6). What Robert lacked in the visual realm, he offset by excelling in all other aspects of life. When the husband offered Robert a drink, Robert made the statement: “I’m like that [Irish actor, Barry Fitzgerald]. When I drink water, Fitzgerald said, I drink water. When I drink whiskey, I drink whiskey” (Carver 5-6). This quote shows how Robert, despite being sightless, lived his life to the fullest by enjoying every event in life. At the very end of the story, Robert was able to teach the husband to enjoy life this way. The protagonist said, “My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything” (13). The protagonist finally “saw” the world in a completely different but beautiful way, and such insight made him feel limitless and free. Thus, Robert shows how eliminating figurative blindness enables one to have a more pleasurable life.
In addition to the male characters in the story, the structure the story is written in demonstrates how people’s obliviousness makes them live shallow lives. Speaking of the characters, the visually blind man was given a name, but the protagonist was not. Carver did this intentionally to emphasize the severity of the husband’s blindness; the blindness the husband had detracted so much from his life that he did not even deserve a name. Giving the protagonist a name would have added false value to the protagonist’s life. Moreover, the conversational tone Carver used served more purpose than connecting personally with the audience. The story was written in first person and told through the protagonist’s eyes; as a result of this point of view and tone, it was easy to conclude that the husband was blinded because he suffered from depression. According to a Harvard mental health newsletter, some classical symptoms of depression in both men and women are “depressed mood, feeling sad or empty, and less interest in or pleasure from daily activities” (“Recognizing Depression in Men” para. 14). The husband possessed those classical symptoms, as seen in these quotes: “Right then my wife filled me in with more detail than I cared to know,” and, “It was a little wedding—who’d want to go to such a wedding in the first place?” (Carver 3) The husband was careless towards what his wife said and questioned attending an event, which are both signs of depression. Through the structure of the story, one can conclude that the husband was depressed, and the husband’s depression enhanced his blindness and did not let him to enjoy life.

Furthermore, the technology in the story conveys how people live unfulfilled lives because of their metaphorical blindness. As aforementioned, movies and television shows are popular means of entertainment. In “Cathedral,” the protagonist spent most of his leisure time watching television: “With nothing to do but wait—sure, I blamed [Robert] for that—I was having a drink and watching the TV” (Carver 4). Stuart Wolpert wrote in an online UCLA article
that studies (performed by a UCLA Professor, Patricia Greenfield) show young people in the last few decades do not engage in leisure reading, but that television and video games do not improve people’s thinking skills and imagination like reading does (para. 3). The protagonist, like many individuals today, is a victim of technology’s many disadvantages. Instead of going outside and enjoying nature or having a conversation with others, the protagonist watched television and drank. When one consumes media to isolate one’s self or to shut off other senses, then watching television is wrong. Technology does improve daily life to an extent; however, like all things, technology has its negative aspects. The television in the story shows how people—like the husband—hide behind technology’s screens, disregarding their senses and ultimately not living life.

Along with the characters, structure, and technology, the cathedral in the story illustrates how people lead shallow lives because of their nonliteral blindness. Cathedrals are widely-known places of worship; thus, the cathedral in the story automatically alludes to religion. When Robert asked the husband if he was religious, the husband responded: “‘I guess I don’t believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it’s hard’” (Carver 11). Therefore, the husband did not have any religious faith or any faith in general. Masoud Moghaddam wrote in the Journal of Happiness Studies:

> A number of other scholars have argued that socioeconomic factors per se cannot explain the true meaning of happiness. In a sense, they suggest that happiness is heavily affected by internal beliefs resulting in peace and tranquility of mind—amongst which, religiosity is of particular importance. Although religious beliefs
take different forms and can be applied in many different ways, their impact on happiness is very much the same. (578)

Moghaddam suggests that having a religious faith contributes to one’s overall positive outlook and inner peace; the peacefulness results from the religious answers of how to live life and what to expect in the afterlife. Happier people tend to thoroughly enjoy and live life. Although Robert made no mention of having a religious faith, it was strongly implied through his actions: making the husband draw, out of all things, a cathedral and then telling the husband, “Put some people in there now. What’s a cathedral without people?” (Carver 13) Robert’s religious faith lessened his visual blindness, for he found tranquility, happiness, and answers to life in his beliefs. On the other hand, the protagonist’s lack of faith added to his figurative blindness because he did not understand his place in the world or the gift of life. The cathedral meant nothing to protagonist because he had no faith, and his faithlessness blinded him from understanding and living life fully.

The cathedral in the story not only entails how religious faith relates to blindness and living more meaningful lives, but also how blindness affects the perception of beauty and the profoundness of life. Beauty is not just perceived visually. The protagonist bluntly stated, "[The blind man and his wife had] married, lived and worked together, slept together—had sex, sure—and then the blind man had to bury her. All this without his having ever seen what the goddamned woman looked like. It was beyond my understanding" (Carver 3). Humans have four other senses in addition to sight, but humans—like the protagonist—often fail to see the world with those other senses and fail to understand those who do. Because the protagonist could see with his eyes, he unnecessarily blinded his other senses; he could not see the beauty of love, life,
or even a cathedral with his other senses until he met Robert. The last line the husband said was, “It’s really something” (Carver 13). The husband was referring to more than the cathedral. He realized that although cathedrals are beautiful structures to the eye and even to the touch, nothing compares to the beauty inside cathedrals. The protagonist was referring to the internal feelings of hope that people experience while praying, as well as other beautiful feelings (like kissing, loving, and dreaming) that are felt and seen by the heart. The protagonist understood, after drawing the cathedral with Robert, that his blindness was prohibiting him from perceiving beauty in all forms and causing him to live a frivolous life.

In summary, Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” proves that people have unfulfilling lives because of unnecessary oblivion through the characters, the structure, the technology, and the cathedral in the story. The stereotypes society has etched into people’s mind, the depressive state of people, the disadvantages of technology, the faithlessness people possess, and the misconception of beauty all lead to metaphorical blindness and shallow lives. Carver shows his readers the importance of empathy; people must try to see and understand the world from other people's perspectives. People, like the protagonist, might be delightedly surprised by what they "see" with their other senses. Life is not a movie; people need to stop censoring their senses.
Works Cited


