

Jaachi David

Christine Callison

ACC Faith, Doubt, and Literature

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Literary Analysis of Cathedral and The Death of a Salesman

Daydreaming. We've all done it before while we sat through that boring history class. It's one of our many ways for avoiding our current reality. In Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman*, the protagonist, Willy Loman, escapes reality by living through his flashbacks. Whether happy or sad, his flashbacks cause him to lose touch with reality. In some cases, altering one's current situation causes them to become distant emotionally from almost everyone they encounter. This happens when the narrator in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral". His perception became blinded and so shallow that he couldn't see deeper than the surface. This leads me to believe that when we try to escape reality, we become disaffected and eventually blinded.

Drinking seems to be one of the narrator's passions in "Cathedral" as he repeatedly refers to himself drinking throughout the story. Alcohol is a depressant that affects the body's nervous system ultimately affecting the way one thinks. We can infer that the narrator is an alcoholic and drinks several times throughout each day. With alcoholics, alcohol is a big part of their life and influences them heavily (Messer 2). The alcohol is going to work in the narrator's mind and changing the way he would've approached situations otherwise. The narrator uses alcohol to escape the problems of his own life on a daily basis. He drinks before listening to the audiotape of Robert. He is uneasy about Robert coming to visit, so he drinks before Robert's arrival and

while he's there. This way he doesn't have to face the reality of Robert's presence. The alcohol changes the way things are perceived by the narrator. "Then I rolled us two fat numbers. I lit one and passed it" (8). The smoking of marijuana on top of the alcohol just adds to the effect of the narrator escaping his own reality.

Instead of facing the facts concerning his current situation, Willy Loman lives in the past losing touch with the present. At one point in the the play, Willy is in the present playing cards with his neighbor, but having a conversation with his deceased brother from the past.

"CHARLEY: Good, keep playing; you'll sleep better. Did you call me Ben?

WILLY: That's funny. For a second there you reminded me of my brother Ben" (30). The flashbacks show how deranged Willy is becoming, but also gives the readers more insight on what happened in his life. Willy thinks that he is the reason to blame for his son's failing in life.

"From the darkness is heard the laughter of a woman" (24). Willy believes this due to Biff catching him having an affair with another woman. Willy is constantly searching his flashbacks looking for when and how things went wrong. This conflict going on in his head is not only taking his focus away from what's going on around him, but it's causing Willy to become more and more wild.

In "Cathedral", the narrator's dependency for alcohol causes him to become disaffected from everyone around him including his wife. When asked to help make the blind guest feel comfortable, the only thing the narrator could say was, "I don't have any blind friends" (3). The narrator sees Robert visiting as a bother. He's jealous by the connection that they have. "For the

most part, I just listened. Now and then I joined in” (6). Even when Robert and his wife are talking in the living room, the narrator is just on the outside looking in. The narrator is also disaffected due to his predetermination about blind people. “But he didn’t use a cane and he didn’t wear dark glasses. I’d always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind” (5). Clearly the narrator assumed all blind people had to be a certain way that fit his own description and he couldn’t connect with Robert when he saw that he was different. Finally, when Robert asked the narrator if he was in any way religious, he replied with, “I guess I don’t believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it’s hard” (11). This drives the argument home. Although he was asked about his religion, he took an extra step to say he doesn’t believe in anything. Here he is basically verifying his disaffection for everything around him.

Willy’s distorted idea of the American Dream was influenced by his older brother Ben and had to do with being well liked and absolutely nothing to do with working hard. Willy’s blind faith in this version of the dream sees him discrediting anyone who isn’t well liked. “WILLY: Don’t be a pest, Bernard! What an anemic! BERNARD: Okay, I’m waiting for you in my house, Biff. WILLY: Bernard is not well liked, is he?” (21). Instead of working hard and trying to be a success, Willy neglects his family and has to borrow money from his neighbor and pretends that he made the money at work. His willingness to follow this broken dream has caused him to go on a mental decline and become disaffected from others.

From the moment the narrator sees Robert, he is surprised by all the things Robert can do as a blind man. “Robert had done a little of everything, it seemed, a regular blind jack-of-all-trades” (6). As previously stated, the narrator had some assumptions about blind people that

blinded his perception towards Robert. This mixed with his jealousy won't allow the narrator to see Robert for who he really is. At the end of the story though we see a light at the end of the story for the narrator. Before the narrator draws the cathedral, he is still on the outside looking in or blinded. Then the narrator starts to draw the cathedral and he can't stop adding all these details and he's really into. The turning point is when the narrator finishes the drawing with his eyes closed. "It was like nothing else in my life up to now" (13). At this point the narrator is now able to see beyond the surface. Unlike his counterpart Willy, he is on the road to recovery.

Willy has become so blinded by his twisted version of the American Dream that he can't see he's hurting his family. He thinks he's this successful salesman who everyone likes, but we know this is not true as he struggles to make ends meet. His sightlessness to his own life can be seen several times throughout the story. "WILLY: They don't need me in New York. I'm the New England man. I'm vital in New England" (7). As readers, we didn't know at first that Willy was living in his own world. As we read on though, we began to learn more about his delusions. "BIFF: I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him! And then he gave me one look and—I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years" (76). Here Biff is forced to face the truth about his family and when he confronts Willy with it, it leads to Willy's demise. Willy's faithful wife, stands by him throughout all his trials and tribulations and whether he's in the wrong or not. Although she thinks she's doing Willy a favor, she's actually prohibiting Willy from seeing the truth. When Willy tries to see himself for who he actually is, Linda blinds

him by helping him keep up this illusion that he's already started. She knows what's going on, but she does not do anything to stop him and it's been like this for quite some time (Haque 2). Perhaps if Linda had intervened instead of letting Willy continue on this mental downfall, perhaps he wouldn't have committed suicide and left Linda on her own.

Escaping reality is something that we all do and we all have our ways of doing it. There are effective ways for doing this such as traveling, taking up a hobby or even watching T.V. On the contrary, when we do it in ways that damage our psychological frame such as the characters in "Cathedral" and *The Death of a Salesman*, we can sometimes fall victim to becoming disaffected. This discontent with your surroundings can make someone feel completely alienated and isolated from the world. This ultimately leads to not being able to the affected person to become shallow and not be able to think beyond the surface. They become figuratively blind. Sometimes though, there is hope for recovery and reversing the cycle.

Works Cited

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