Cathedral

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAYMOND CARVER

The son of a sawmill worker, Raymond Carver graduated from high school and worked a number of blue-collar jobs (janitor, gas-station attendant, delivery man) to support his wife and children. Carver did not begin writing seriously until 1958, when he took a college creative writing course taught by the celebrated mid-century writer John Gardner. Carver continued to work on his short fiction while studying at California's Humboldt State University, from which he earned a bachelor's degree in 1963. A few of Carver's stories were published by magazines but it was not until 1976 that his work was first published in a book-length collection called *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* The book was a finalist for the 1977 National Book Award in fiction. From 1967 through the late 1970s, Carver battled alcoholism and was hospitalized multiple times. By the late 1970s, Carver was able to get a handle on his disease and then took teaching appointments at the University of Texas at El Paso and Syracuse. Over the course of the 1980s, he published three collections of short stories: *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), the Pulitzer Prize finalist *Cathedral* (1983), and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). Carver also wrote poetry and published three collections of his verse from 1976 through 1986. Carver died of lung cancer at age 50 in 1988.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The minimalist movement—which also swept American visual arts, architecture, and music composition in the 1980s—can be seen as artists' response to the social, political and cultural circumstances of late twentieth century America. Some scholars see minimalism, with its characteristic terse style and melancholy subjects, as a response to the psychological trauma of the Vietnam War. Others note that minimalism, with its spare prose and few descriptions of material goods, was a response to America's rising post-World War II consumer culture.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the 1980s, Raymond Carver was one of the most feted writers in America. Under the guidance of the prominent editor Gordon Lish, Carver's *Cathedral* as well as his earlier works (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*) were held up by literary critics as the premier texts of American minimalism. Other hallmark texts from this "new wave" of American fiction include the work of Ann Beattie (*Distortions*, *Secrets and Surprises*, *Where You'll Find Me*), Amy Hempel's *Reasons to Live*, Tobias Wolff's *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, and Grace Paley's *Later the Same Day*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Cathedral*
- **When Written:** Port Angeles, Washington
- **Where Written:** 1982
- **When Published:** 1983
- **Literary Period:** Minimalism
- **Genre:** Fiction (Short Story)
- **Setting:** A couple's home in Connecticut
- **Climax:** After watching a television program on the cathedrals of Europe, the narrator undertakes the transformative activity of drawing a cathedral so that he can show Robert the blind man what cathedrals are like.
- **Antagonist:** At first, it seems like Robert the blind man is the antagonist, but by the end of the story it is clear that the nameless narrator is his own greatest antagonist.
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

In His Own Voice. Raymond Carver was one of the many minimalist writers to work with Gordon Lish, a well-respected editor. It has now become apparent that Lish had liberal tendencies when it came to editing Carver's work, and Carver's first two collections seem to have been changed a great deal by Lish. "Cathedral," included in a collection by the same name, is seen as the first Carver collection free from Lish's heavy hand.

A Financial Windfall. Just prior to writing "Cathedral" and the other stories that comprised his 1983 collection, Carver received a Strauss Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. This award allotted him $35,000 a year for five years and prohibited him from earning more than $1,000 at any other work than writing. This enabled Carver to quit his teaching job at Syracuse and move to Port Angeles, commencing the most prolific period of writing in Carver's life.

PLOT SUMMARY

Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" opens with an internal monologue in which the narrator expresses his hesitation about hosting Robert, a **blind** man who is a friend of the narrator's wife. The narrator remembers the circumstances that

precipitated the friendship between his wife and Robert. His wife, in need of money and engaged to her first husband, took a summer job assisting Robert, a social worker. At the end of the summer, Robert asked the narrator's wife if he could see her by touching her face, and the experience was a deeply memorable one for the narrator's wife. The narrator also recounts how his wife reached out to Robert for support after an unsuccessful suicide attempt fueled by her miserable relationship with her husband, whose military career caused them to have a nomadic existence.

Snapping out of his internal monologue, the narrator makes cynical jokes about Robert's blindness, asking his wife if he should take Robert bowling. She protests and implores him to be kind to Robert, who is spending the night at their house after a visit with his recently deceased wife's family. The narrator asks rude questions about Robert's wife, and the narrator's frustrated wife explains Robert's marriage to his late wife Beulah. The woman had worked for Robert the summer after the narrator's wife did. They married soon after. The narrator then contemplates this marriage, thinking how sad it must have been for Robert's wife to not have been visually appreciated by her husband.

The narrator's wife then retrieves Robert from the train station and brings him back to their house. While the narrator's wife is very accommodating to Robert, the narrator is insensitive. He asks Robert what side of the train he sat on, since the right side of the train is the one with the good view. The narrator avoids Robert's questions about his life and bristles when Robert refers to him as "bub." They have a drink and then eat a large dinner.

After a hearty meal and cherry pie, the trio sit back down in the living room and Robert continues his efforts to get to know the narrator. The narrator answers Robert's questions curtly and then turns on the television to prevent Robert from asking any more questions. The narrator's wife goes upstairs to change, and while she's away, the narrator and Robert smoke marijuana. When the narrator's wife returns she joins them, and soon all three characters are drowsy.

The narrator's wife falls asleep on the couch, and the narrator begins looking for a program to watch on television. After flipping around indecisively the narrator settles on one about the **cathedrals** of Europe. The narrator realizes that Robert cannot fully appreciate this program since he can't see the visuals of cathedrals being shown. He attempts to describe the cathedral's ornate architecture. This is a struggle for him, so Robert suggests that they draw a cathedral together. The narrator fetches a pen and brown paper, and the narrator draws a cathedral while Robert's hand rests on his. The narrator's wife wakes up and is confused by the activity, but the two keep drawing. Robert tells the narrator to close his eyes and keep drawing, and doing so precipitates a transformational spiritual experience in the narrator. When they are done drawing, Robert asks the narrator to open his eyes and admire their work, but the narrator chooses to keep them closed.

CHARACTERS

Narrator – The protagonist and narrator of Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" is a middle-aged unnamed man. Through interior monologue, the narrator shows himself to be cynical and insensitive, especially to the poetry written by his wife. He is jealous of her ex-husband from her previous marriage, though that marriage was a miserable experience for her, and he is especially envious of her friendship with a blind man named Robert. At the beginning of the story, the narrator finds his life banal and somewhat meaningless. He admits to Robert that he takes no pleasure in his work, saying that he has been at his job for three years, does not like it, but does not see any other opportunities to earn income. He seems to be fairly dependent on substances like alcohol and marijuana, which he smokes most nights before going to sleep. His strained relationship with his wife, his meaningless job, and his substance abuse seem related to his inability to find joy or meaning in the world, which becomes clearest when he admits to Robert that he isn't religious (although it seems like he was raised religious) and notes that he has a hard time in believing in anything. However, after drawing a grand European **cathedral** for Robert, the narrator undergoes a spiritual reawakening, becoming able to find beauty and meaning in the world by seeing things through Robert's perspective.

Robert – Robert is a friend of the narrator's wife who comes to stay at their home after visiting his recently deceased wife's family. Since the long-ago summer when the narrator's wife worked for Robert (who is a social worker), the narrator's wife and Robert have exchanged audio recordings in which they recount their thoughts and experiences. Robert's unfailing kindness and empathy, as well as his patience and his ability to listen conscientiously to others, allow him to form a close friendship with the narrator's wife, who seems emotionally closer to Robert than to the narrator, with whom she does not always share her thoughts. For the narrator's wife, her friendship with Robert seems unique, but it seems like Robert has a great many friends he values. He says, for instance, that as an amateur radio operator, he made friends who come from everywhere from Alaska to Tahiti. The narrator of the story does not seem like he wants to be Robert's friend, at least at first. But despite the narrator's mocking and exclusion of Robert, Robert remains kind to the narrator and ultimately wins him over, facilitating the narrator's spiritual transformation by encouraging him to draw a **cathedral**.

The Narrator's Wife – Most of what is known about the narrator's wife comes from the narrator's interior monologue, so it reflects his somewhat warped notions of her and her life. She was married previously to a military man and became so

lonely in that relationship that she attempted to commit suicide. The attempt was unsuccessful and she soon divorced her first husband. She later met and married the narrator, whom she seems to love, although she is often frustrated by his entrenched cynicism and insensitivity. Through all of this, she has maintained a friendship with Robert, the blind social worker for whom she worked one summer in Seattle. Exchanging audio tapes with Robert and writing poetry are, according to the narrator, her two major hobbies. There is a notable difference between the tenor of her relationship with Robert and her relationship with her husband. With Robert, she does her utmost to be accommodating and seems to genuinely enjoy his presence. With her husband, however, the narrator's wife is standoffish and sometimes even prickly. It seems that the narrator's inability to understand his wife's values and emotions leads to strain in their relationship, whereas the narrator's wife feels understood by Robert, who is a good friend and a careful listener.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

VISION

In "Cathedral," the lives of a married couple are disrupted when the wife's blind friend, Robert, comes to visit. While the husband, who is the story's narrator, initially believes that having Robert in the house will be inconvenient and unsettling, he comes to realize that blindness is not simply a deficit—Robert's fine-tuned perception adds to the narrator's own appreciation of the world.

Initially, the narrator imagines that Robert will be strange and pathetic. He passive-aggressively points out all kinds of things Robert can't do: the narrator asks his wife if Robert likes bowling and then asks Robert which side of the train he sat on during his trip (inquiring implicitly whether he sat on the side with a good view). The narrator gives curt replies to Robert's genuine attempts at conversation and he even turns on the television, which the sightless Robert cannot appreciate fully, in an attempt to both stop the conversation and exert his dominance over Robert, since the narrator is deeply jealous of Robert's friendship with his wife.

The narrator's crude attacks on Robert's disability are even more pathetic in light of the fact that Robert's mode of perceiving—his ability to understand and empathize with the interior struggles of others—is a type of perception that the narrator lacks. Fixated on physical sight as the only mode of appreciating others, the narrator ruminates on how sad it would be to the wife of a blind man, since the narrator believes that women should be appreciated for their appearance. This, of course, is ironic since the narrator's own wife knows that perceiving the world as Robert does is rich and rewarding because she herself feels seen and appreciated by Robert in a way that she doesn't with her husband. Her friendship with Robert—conducted through the exchange of audio tapes in which they discuss their thoughts and experiences—seems to be more emotionally intimate than her marriage.

However, the narrator ultimately comes to expand his own perception by inhabiting Robert's perspective. When the narrator first turns on the television, he intends it as way to exclude Robert or put him in his place. But Robert surprises the narrator with his deep appreciation for television and his nuanced perception of it—he can tell, for example, that their TV is in color just by listening. As they continue to watch TV, the narrator's own perception of the TV begins to shift. For example, the narrator says of Robert, "he and I listened to the weather report and then to the sports roundup"—note that the narrator suddenly sees himself as listening, rather than watching. He then further moves towards Robert's way of perceiving when he begins describing the **cathedrals** on the television so that Robert can know what's happening.

The narrator's transformation is complete when his verbal descriptions of the cathedrals fail. With Robert's hand resting on top of his, the narrator draws a cathedral on a paper bag so that Robert can "see" what they look like. Halfway through, Robert asks the narrator to draw with his eyes closed, and the narrator submits fully to perceiving the world as Robert does. It's clear that this experience with Robert changes the narrator; when Robert tells the narrator to open his eyes, the narrator prefers to leave them closed. Though the narrator had claimed not to care about cathedrals at all, he is deeply moved by the experience of perceiving one as Robert does. "It's really something," the narrator says of the cathedral, suggesting that Robert's blindness has given the narrator access to beauty and meaning that he never knew before.

EMPATHY AND LISTENING

While the narrator is able to see the physical world, he struggles in his relationship with his wife. Robert, on the other hand, is **blind**, but he seems to be quite attuned to the emotional lives of others because he is an empathetic listener. Carver, therefore, configures empathy via listening as a mode of perception that is perhaps more intimate than sight.

The narrator seems to have a difficult relationship with his wife. They sleep in different rooms and go to bed at different times, which is just one sign of their grave disconnection. Before Robert arrives at their house, the narrator and his wife

quarrel—he says that he does not want a blind man in their house, and his wife asks him to be nice to her friend if he loves her. It is apparent that the narrator does not listen to or truly understand his wife, because upon Robert's arrival at the house, the narrator poses rude questions to Robert, trying to emphasize his disability. After dinner, when the narrator turns on the television to avoid further discussion with Robert, the narrator's wife is frustrated and the narrator can tell: "My wife looked at me with irritation. She was heading toward a boil."

The marital problems between the narrator and his wife seem to stem from the narrator's inability to empathize with her, which leaves him with only a superficial understanding of who she is. He narrates his wife's suicide attempt in a cold, matter-of-fact manner, which seems a callous and even cruel way of relating to the distress of a loved one. Furthermore, the narrator belittles his wife's poem about an important moment in her life, when Robert touched her face at the end of her time working for him. "I can remember I didn't think much of the poem," the narrator says. He therefore seems unable to appreciate the poem, despite the emotional importance it holds in his wife's life. And an even more straightforward example of the narrator's unwillingness to listen is his reluctance to hear one of the audiotapes shared between Robert and the narrator's wife. When the narrator does agree to listen to a tape on which he is mentioned, the narrator allows an interruption (someone at the door) to sidetrack the listening. They do not return to the tape, and he says he prefers it that way—it seems that the narrator envies his wife's friendship with Robert because it is founded on the empathetic listening and understanding that the narrator does not provide her.

By contrast, Robert's conversational dynamic with both the narrator and the narrator's wife demonstrates that he is a very good listener. He is warm and interested in a way that suggests he is deeply empathetic. Furthermore, the fact that his friendship with the narrator's wife relies on sending audiotapes across the country shows his gift for listening, because this mode of communication gives little opportunity for discussion and clarification. Robert's empathy is perhaps most apparent in his willingness to put up with the narrator's deflection and rudeness, continuing to ask the narrator questions and show him kindness until he has won the narrator over. The power of being listened to and empathized with is apparent in the narrator's reaction to Robert's kindness: he undergoes a spiritual transformation after which it seems that he might become a kinder, more empathetic man himself.

INTIMACY AND ISOLATION

At the story's start, the narrator is alienated from other people. He and his wife have a tense relationship and they quarrel before her friend Robert, who is **blind**, is scheduled to arrive at their house. In this fight, the narrator's wife remarks that the narrator has no friends, and this seems true—he never mentions any, and when Robert arrives at the house, the narrator has trouble holding a conversation. He even struggles to respond to Robert's small niceties, such as "I feel like we've already met." However, over the course of the story, Robert's kindness wins the narrator over, suggesting that friendship—and the emotional vulnerability it can encourage—has the power to transform even the most staunchly isolated people.

Even before the narrator's transformation, the possibility of Robert's friendship changing him is foreshadowed by the details of Robert's friendship with the narrator's wife. Prior to Robert's arrival at the narrator's home, the narrator recalls how his wife began trading audiotapes with Robert after she made an unsuccessful attempt at suicide. At the time, the narrator's wife was married to a military man and the isolation of her existence, compounded by the military protocol of moving from base to base, made her deeply miserable. However, her friendship with Robert seems to have mitigated her isolation in a desperate time and allowed her to heal. The narrator notes how much his wife cherishes her audiotape friendship even now, saying that it seems to be one of her only hobbies.

Though the narrator is initially guarded with (and even rude to) Robert, as Robert persistently engages the narrator in conversation, the narrator begins to come out of his shell. When the narrator indecisively changes channel on the television, he experiences his first moment of vulnerability in front of Robert. The narrator apologizes for his indecision, and Robert gently consoles him, saying that he's happy with any program the narrator chooses. This small kindness from Robert seems to deeply affect the narrator, because afterward he shows much more consideration for Robert. While watching a program on the **cathedrals** of Europe, the narrator realizes Robert cannot see the grand architectural feats displayed on the television and the narrator begins explaining what the cathedrals look like, describing features such as gargoyles. After a failed attempt at verbally describing cathedrals, the narrator agrees to draw a picture of a cathedral with Robert. It is an intimate act, in which Robert and the narrator hold a pen together with their hands touching. This intimacy seems, importantly, to be a fulfillment of the narrator's wife's hope that Robert and her husband could be friends. The story's ending, in which the narrator lingers on the picture of the cathedral with his eyes closed, attempting to experience the drawing as Robert does, shows both his newfound deep connection to a man he initially disliked and his new ability to empathize with and relate to his wife, as he now understands her most important friendship.

THE SECULAR AND THE SACRED

The tension between the secular and the sacred is an animating force of Raymond Carver's "Cathedral," the very premise of which—a **blind**

man healing a man who can see—inverts a popular Bible story in which Jesus heals a blind man. Carver's story often explicitly and implicitly references religion, which is how many people find meaning in their lives, but Carver argues that a person does not need religion to find meaning—spirituality can be secular, and religion is perhaps most meaningful for the community it provides.

Though religion can provide meaning, it has not given the narrator meaning, despite that the narrator seems to have tried religion in the past. For example, he watches television program on Roman Catholic **cathedrals** and says that the program is about "the church and the Middle Ages." It is unlikely he would call the Catholic church "the church" if he had not been a member of it at one point in his life. Nonetheless, the narrator seems like he may be a lapsed Catholic, having been unable to find meaning from that theological tradition. His cynicism does not extend only to the Catholic church—when asked by Robert if he is religious, the narrator says that he is not and that he doesn't believe in anything: "I guess I don't believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it's hard. You know what I'm saying?"

However, "Cathedral" presents an alternative source of meaning, suggesting that close human connection can provide a secular fulfillment not unlike that provided by religion. At the beginning of the story, the narrator proves himself to be a bitter and argumentative person. He fights with his wife and asks Robert, his house guest, rude questions. Eventually, though, Robert and the narrator connect during a television program on cathedrals. The narrator attempts to describe the grand European churches to Robert—a first signal of the narrator's regard for Robert—and when words fail, the narrator draws a cathedral with Robert's hand placed on top of his as he holds a pen. With Robert's encouragement, the narrator draws in a frenzy. He even closes his eyes to see as Robert does and he describes drawing the cathedral with his eyes closed as an experience "like nothing else in my life up to now. This is undeniably a spiritual experience, and the narrator lingers in his moment of transcendence, keeping his eyes closed despite Robert's request to open them to witness their work.

Despite that the narrator's spiritual experience is a secular one, it is not completely divorced from religion, as it revolves around cathedrals, which are religious symbols. In a sense, Robert and the narrator build a cathedral together through their drawing, which echoes the television program's assertion that these grand cathedrals were built over many years with the help of many men. Perhaps, then, the communal aspect of religion was a main source of its meaningfulness all along. If a "cathedral" can be seen as a space built cooperatively and intended for people to join together in meaningful ways, then it's reasonable to see the narrator's spiritual experience as a secular version of simultaneously building a cathedral and worshiping inside one, since the narrator and Robert share a moment of finding meaning with one another.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CATHEDRAL

Carver uses cathedrals to represent a secular spirituality in which one can find beauty and meaning in everyday life through simply noticing how miraculous things are. Cathedrals are some of the most ornate and transcendent physical expressions of spirituality, but when the narrator watches a TV program about cathedrals, he finds them unimpressive. Watching the program, the narrator seems bored by the cathedrals and he can't think of ways to describe them because he doesn't really notice them at all—to him, they're just another thing on TV and they have no inherent beauty or meaning. The narrator's reaction to cathedrals gestures towards his general inability to find meaning or beauty in his life, an attitude that changes after Robert encourages the narrator to draw a cathedral with him. The exercise makes the narrator really notice and think about cathedrals for the first time, and he finds himself moved by them—he thinks they're "really something," which is a complete pivot from his former attitude. This isn't a religious conversion—neither the narrator nor Robert is religious—though the narrator does find himself converted by the cathedrals into a new way of perceiving meaning and beauty in his own life. This is a secular equivalent to spirituality, as spirituality is, for many people, a vehicle for finding meaning in their lives.

BLINDNESS

In "Cathedral," blindness has a two-fold meaning. It represents both Robert's lack of sight and the narrator's more intangible failures of perception: his inability to understand other people's feelings and his inability to find meaning or joy in his life. In his exploration of these two meanings of blindness, Carver's story inverts the famous Biblical story of Jesus healing a blind man. Jesus uses his own spit to make mud and then cakes it onto the blind man's eyes, which brings sight to a man who has never been able to see. In "Cathedral," however, it is a blind man who heals the perceptual failings of a man who can see. Robert, a blind social worker with a gift for perceiving the unspoken emotions of others, places his hand on the narrator's as they draw a **cathedral**. This experience precipitates a spiritual transformation within the narrator, one that leaves him newly able to find meaning in his life and empathize with Robert and his wife. For Carver, therefore, literal blindness is far less damaging than emotional blindness—after all, Robert has a rich and satisfying life, while the narrator needs to perceive the world more like Robert does in order to feel whole.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Cathedral: Stories* published in 1989.

Cathedral Quotes

But she and the blind man had kept in touch. They made tapes and mailed them back and forth. I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. 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. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Wife, Robert

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

Here, early in the story, the narrator gives context for the visitor he and his wife are about to receive at his home. The narrator displays discomfort with the idea of the blind man's visit on the basis of not knowing him. This not knowing functions in two ways. First, the narrator doesn't personally know this person who has a separate friendship with the narrator's wife. It is implied that this intimacy that Robert has with the narrator's wife makes the narrator uncomfortable, as it is something he has no part in. Second, the narrator is uncomfortable with Robert simply because Robert is blind. As a blind person, Robert seems alien and foreign and almost incomprehensible to the narrator, who is aware that his entire concept of blind people is flimsy and based on flat and shoddy portrays in the movies. The narrator's sense of Robert's difference sets up the tension in the story — which, despite Robert's best efforts to be friendly, lasts almost the entire length of the story.

Once she asked me if I'd like to hear the latest tape from the blind man. This was a year ago. I was on the tape, she said. So I said okay, I'd listen to it. I got us drinks and we settled down in the living room. We made ready to listen. First she inserted the tape into the player and adjusted a couple of dials. Then she pushed a lever. The tape squeaked and someone began to talk in this loud voice. She lowered the volume. After a few minutes of harmless chitchat, I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn't even know! And then this: "From all you've said about him, I can only conclude"— But we were interrupted, a knock at the door, something, and we didn't ever get back to the tape. Maybe it was just as well. I'd heard all I wanted to.

Related Characters: Robert, Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Wife

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator further reveals his reasons for being hesitant about Robert's impending visit. While his discomfort at Robert's blindness remains, at the forefront now is his discomfort with the depth of his wife's friendship with Robert. Note how he expresses his discomfort through mildly denigrating language: describing the conversation on the tape as "chit-chat," subtly making the tape seem cheap by describing it's "squeak." Just a bit earlier in the story, the narrator described his wife's attempted suicide at her depression in her first marriage, and how these tapes helped her through that time (though he describes the tapes as her "recreation"). What emerges from these quotes, then is a deeper sense of the narrator: he seems to be fundamentally shallow and insensitive, to see the world only through his own eyes, in the sense of being able to perceive of the world only from his own point of view, and how things affect him. That while listening to the tape the narrator felt hesitant to listen and then welcomes the interruption of someone at the door is emblematic of the narrator's inability to be emotionally intimate with others. His discomfort at his wife having a life beyond his own, of his being discussed by other people, points to his refusal or inability to see the world in any way other than with him at its center.

> A woman who could go on day after day and never receive the smallest compliment from her beloved. A woman whose husband could never read the expression on her face, be it misery or something better. Someone who could wear makeup or not—what difference to him? She could if she wanted, wear green eye-shadow around one eye, a straight pin in her nostril, yellow slacks, and purple shoes, no matter.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Robert

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 213-214

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator is describing his impressions of what the life of Robert's recently-deceased wife, Beulah, must have been like—of his sense of how depressing it must be to be the wife of a blind man. In this description, the narrator betrays his own sense of what is important in a relationship between a husband and wife. That the narrator pities Robert's wife because she could never experience being appreciated for her appearance, communicates more about the narrator, of course, than it does about Robert or Beulah. The narrator can't conceive that Robert—that anyone—might offer other forms of love, empathy, or connection than just appreciating how someone else looks.

> My wife said, "I want you to meet Robert. Robert, this is my husband. I've told you all about him." She was beaming. She had this blind man by his coat sleeve. The blind man let go of his suitcase and up came his hand. I took it. He squeezed hard, held my hand, and then he let it go. "I feel like we've already met," he boomed. "Likewise," I said. I didn't know what else to say. Then I said, "Welcome. I've heard a lot about you."

Related Characters: The Narrator's Wife, Robert, Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214-215

Explanation and Analysis

After much build-up, the narrator and Robert finally meet, thus introducing the central conflict of the story. Robert is amicable: he gives the narrator a friendly handshake and gives him a familiar, warm greeting. The narrator on the other hand is somewhat cold and stumbles to respond. This difference is notable in that it shows how dissimilar the two men are. The interaction highlights Robert's intimate, empathetic nature and the narrator's closed-off mentality, which is transformed at the end of the story through the experience of drawing a cathedral with Robert.

The narrator's wife's positive and excited attitude is also notable, as she was quite sharp with the narrator prior to Robert's arrival. Her changed demeanor speaks further to the contrast between the two men, and how those contrasts affect the people around them.

> I've never met, or personally known, anyone who was blind. This blind man was late forties, a heavy-set, balding man with stooped shoulders, as if he carried a great weight there. He wore brown slacks, brown shoes, a light-brown shirt, a tie, a sports coat. Spiffy. He also had this full beard. 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.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Robert

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 215-216

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator uses his primary mode of perception, his ability to see, to examine Robert. The narrator notes Robert's physical appearance with a noticeable amount of irony and condescension, thus betraying his distaste for having Robert as a guest in his house. The narrator's tone furthers the dramatic tension between the two characters, though it should be said that this tension is mostly one-sided — Robert is nothing but friendly to the narrator, despite the narrator's rudeness and flippant attitude. Furthermore, the narrator shows his superficial understanding of others—his notion of blindness is stereotypical in that he seems shocked that Robert doesn't wear dark glasses.

When we sat down at the table for dinner, we had another drink. My wife heaped Robert's plate with cube steak, scalloped potatoes, green beans. I buttered him up two slices of bread. I said, "Here's bread and butter for you." I swallowed some of my drink. "Now let us pray," I said, and the blind man lowered his head. My wife looked at me, her mouth agape. "Pray the phone won't ring and the food doesn't get cold," I said.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Wife, Robert

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

With his glib pre-dinner prayer, the narrator introduces the theme of the secular and sacred into the story, which has otherwise focused on the tension between the narrator and Robert up to this point. The narrator's mocking imitation of the thankful blessing a religious family would say prior to eating a meal together, continues to establish the narrator's generally shallow and sarcastic view of everything.

At the same time, the moment communicates more than he intends. First, his wife's shock at his fake prayer again captures the chasm between them. But also, the fake prayer, which generally falls flat, suggests and kind of emptiness. Just as the narrator has glibly portrayed his wife's emotional pain and Robert's relationship with his deceased wife, now the narrator glibly mocks religion. But all the narrator has, here, is glibness.

From time to time, he'd turn his blind face toward me, put his hand under his beard, ask me something. How long had I been in my present position? (Three years.) Did I like my work? (I didn't.) Was I going to stay with it? (What were the options?) Finally, when I thought he was beginning to run down, I got up and turned on the TV.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Robert

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

The tension between Robert and the narrator, which is wholly fueled by the narrator's attitude, bubbles to the surface again. Robert attempts to draw out the narrator by taking an interest in the narrator's work. The narrator, however, shows little interest in engaging with Robert. The contrast here highlights the difference between Robert's empathetic manner and the narrator's superficial and skeptical responses. At the same time, the narrator's responses continue to be revealing: his work life seems to be as empty as every other part of his life, and he moves through it with a sense that he has no other option.

Further, by turning on the TV, the narrator excludes Robert, since as a blind man Robert cannot fully appreciate the visual medium of television. It may be that the narrator is doing this purposely (in which case he's a jerk) or doesn't realize the implications of what he's doing (in which case he's insensitive and lacks empathy).

The news program ended. I got up and changed the channel. I sat back down on the sofa. I wished my wife hadn't pooped out. Her head lay across the back of the sofa, her mouth open. She'd turned so that her robe had slipped away from her legs, exposing a juicy thigh. I reached to draw her robe back over her, and it was then that I glanced at the blind man. What the hell! I flipped the robe open again.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Wife, Robert

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

This is an interesting moment in the story. On the one hand, it marks a continuation of the narrator's general dismissal of Robert on the grounds of Robert's blindness. At the same time, it marks something of a shift in the narrator's sense of jealousy toward Robert and the relationship that Robert has with the narrator's wife. In some ways, the narrator seems to be less threatened by Robert, even as the narrator remains dismissive of him.

"That's all right," I said. Then I said, "I'm glad for the company."

And I guess I was. Every night I smoked dope and stayed up as long as I could before I fell asleep. My wife and I hardly ever went to bed at the same time. When I did go to sleep, I had these dreams. Sometimes I'd wake up from one of them, my heart going crazy.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Robert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

This is a key turning point in the story, though the narrator seems not to entirely realize it. It's a turning point in two ways. First because at this point the narrator's animosity toward Robert has disappeared. He's now feeling at least mildly comfortable with Robert. But more important, he's finding that being with another person, that having company, is better than his usual cut-off and solitary state.

Second, the narrator's description of his dreams are key. While the narrator has seemed generally glib and uncaring up until now — while he's seemed mainly to be an unfeeling and uncaring jerk, to put it bluntly — his bad dreams and pounding heart suggest that there is something deeper to him, and that what he has become and the social isolation in which he finds himself is in fact taking a terrible toll on him. This is the first real glimpse that there is something in the narrator beyond the shallow, something that can be redeemed and that craves redemption.

Something about the church and the Middle Ages was on the TV. Not your run-of-the-mill TV fare. I wanted to watch something else. I turned to the other channels. But there was nothing on them, either. So I turned back to the first channel and apologized. "Bub, it's all right," the blind man said. "It's fine with me. Whatever you want to watch is okay. I'm always learning something. Learning never ends. It won't hurt me to learn something tonight. I got ears," he said.

Related Characters: Robert, Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

The symbol of the cathedral emerges in this quote, once again introducing the story's focus on the secular and the sacred. It is telling that the narrator seems reluctant to watch a program on cathedrals in Europe. This coupled with his referring to Catholicism as simply "the church" suggests that the narrator has previously had some experience with religion in his life, and most likely Catholicism. It suggests he used to have at least some religious life, which he has lost or left behind. And, regardless of what's on the other channels, it is significant that the narrator in the end chooses *this* program to watch.

This moment is also important because of Robert's response to the narrator. Robert's empathy is on full display here, as is his openness to the world. The narrator, for instance, up to his point has seemed completely uninterested in learning anything. But most important is Robert's final comment: "I got ears." Here Robert is publicly linking his ability to learn to his ears, to hearing, to a sense other than sight. Previously the narrator has thought about blindness as if it almost makes those who have it alien or less human, unable to give or take as much from the world. But this comment is an affirmation that sight isn't necessary to Robert. It's an affirmation, in that sense, of his humanity. A common humanity that will connect the narrator and Robert through the rest of the story.

There were times when the Englishman who was telling the thing would shut up, would simply let the camera move around over the cathedrals. Or else the camera would tour the countryside, men in fields walking behind oxen. I waited as long as I could. Then I felt I had to say something. I said, "They're showing the outside of this cathedral now. Gargoyles. Little statues carved to look like monsters. Now I guess they're in Italy. Yeah, they're in Italy. There's paintings on the walls of this one church."

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Robert

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

While watching the show, the narrator begins to explain what European cathedrals look like to the blind Robert. The

passage implies that the narrator tries to hold off on describing what's on the screen to Robert, with the implication that the narrator is embarrassed to so directly expose Robert's disability.

That the narrator can't hold back, though, shows that his regard for Robert's experience in watching the show outweighs his embarrassment. And it is this that begins to forge a connection with Robert. Robert, after all, isn't embarrassed about being blind; he doesn't even wear dark glasses. The narrator's embarrassment, then, was in fact a mask for avoiding the vulnerability of connection. But now the narrator attempts to share his visual abilities with Robert, and more broadly attempts to share descriptions of *cathedrals* with Robert. The narrator is making a connection, and doing so through the means of religious buildings.

"That's all right, bub," the blind man said. "Hey, listen. I hope you don't mind my asking you. Can I ask you something? Let me ask you a simple question, yes or no. I'm just curious and there's no offense. You're my host. But let me ask if you are in any way religious? You don't mind my asking?" I shook my head. He couldn't see that, though. A wink is the same as a nod to a blind man. "I guess I don't believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it's hard. You know what I'm saying?"

Related Characters: Robert, Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Robert and the narrator reveals a key piece of information about the narrator's state of mind. As someone who likely had experience practicing religion and most likely Catholicism, the narrator now shows himself to be uncertain. He also shows himself to struggle with the issue of faith not only in religion but also in the world around him by saying he doesn't believe in "anything." Robert's empathy and interest in the narrator have been present through the entire story, but here the narrator finally accepts Robert's unflagging kindness and answers one of Robert's questions sincerely and fully. This marks a dramatic shift in the narrator's attitude toward Robert.

So I began. First I drew a box that looked like a house. It could have been the house I lived in. Then I put a roof on it. At either end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy. "Swell," he said. "Terrific. You're doing fine," he said. "Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you, bub? Well, it's a strange life, we all know that. Go on now. Keep it up."

Related Characters: Robert, Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator describes the process of drawing a cathedral for Robert, as Robert holds his own hand over the narrator's in order to feel the creation of the drawing. The narrator's previous efforts to describe what the cathedrals look like didn't succeed, because the narrator was trying to share something that Robert as a blind man couldn't access. But now the narrator has taken a further step, and has accepted Robert's suggestion about finding a way that they can share and connect—and in fact they are physically connected, with Robert's hand held over the narrrator's. There is some sense in the passage that the narrator feels self-conscious as he draws, but nonetheless he does it. He goes along, and allows the connection between them to remain.

Robert's kindness is again highlighted in this piece as he encourages the narrator to keep drawing. It is notable that what began as a project to help Robert "see" cathedrals actually also seems like an experience aimed at benefitting the narrator, based on Robert's focus on encouraging the narrator.

It is also symbolic that the narrator describes his cathedral drawing as a house like the one he lived in, which speaks metaphorically to story's thematic idea that sacred experiences can happen in secular contexts.

"Close your eyes now," the blind man said to me.

I did it. I closed them just like he said.

"Are they closed?" he said. "Don't fudge."

"They're closed," I said.

"Keep them that way," he said. He said, "Don't stop now. Draw."

So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now."

Then he said, "I think that's it. I think you got it," he said. "Take a look. What do you think?"

But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do.

"Well?" he said. "Are you looking?"

My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.

"It's really something," I said.

Related Characters: Robert, Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

The end of the story reveals a changed narrator who marvels at the feeling of fellowship he has experienced while drawing a cathedral with Robert. Throughout the story, the narrator has shown himself to be a lonely and sarcastic person who has trouble connecting with his wife and Robert, but here he is fully in sync with Robert.

For the narrator, this is a transformative experience and perhaps makes him feel a faith that he said he had struggled to feel earlier on in his conversation with Robert. Further, notice how the narrator closes his eyes and keeps them closed. Through most of the story, the narrator has been focused on the superficial: on what he can see. But now he keeps his eyes closed. He experiences physical blindness, but at the same time finds so much more to feel, so much more to *see*. He's looking in a different way, and he's discovering that it's possible to look and see and feel in this different way. His description of his job which he doesn't like, and his marriage in which he and his wife seldom even go to sleep at the same time, has been one of being stuck, of, essentially being imprisoned without any other options. Now, in this experience that for the first time in a long time seems to connect the narrator with another person (Robert) and with a tradition of faith that the story suggests he once might have been a part of, the narrator feels like he isn't inside anything. When you see you are always inside your own body, doing the seeing. Now the narrator has closed his eyes, connected to other people and things, and finds himself unconstrained.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CATHEDRAL

The narrator notes that his wife's friend, a **blind** man named Robert, is coming to spend the night after visiting his late wife's family in Connecticut. The narrator's wife hasn't seen the blind man (as the narrator refers to him) in ten years, but they've kept up their friendship through mailing audio tapes back and forth. The narrator has never met the blind man, and he doesn't want to—the idea of having a blind man in his house bothers him, because blind people in the movies move slowly and never laugh.

This opening highlights two major features of the narrator's personality. His reluctance to host his wife's good friend for the night shows his jealousy and his discomfort with emotional intimacy, especially between his wife and another man. The narrator's stereotype-based assumptions about Richard — that he will be slow and humorless — show the narrator's callousness and distaste for weakness.

The narrator says that his wife met Robert when she worked for him one summer in Seattle. She was set to marry a man (not the narrator) who was in officers' training school, and she needed money so she responded to a "HELP WANTED" ad in the paper and began helping Robert with his work in the county social service department.

The initial interaction between Robert and the narrator's wife foreshadows a similar dynamic between the narrator and Robert later in the story. The narrator's wife started her friendship with Robert in an effort to help him, but it becomes clear through the course of the story that it is often Robert who helps her.

Over the course of the summer, the narrator's wife and Robert became good friends, and on her last day at work he asked if he could "see" the narrator's wife's face by touching it with his hands. She agreed and later wrote a poem about the remarkable experience of being "seen" by a **blind** man. The narrator comments that his wife was always writing poems after something important happened to her, but that he "didn't think much" of this poem when he read it.

Here the narrator betrays his inability to empathize with the emotional experiences of others, including his own wife. He dismisses her poem outright without even engaging with its emotional content, showing again how callous and unfeeling he is. His arrogance is highlighted by the fact that he disparages his wife's attempts at literary expression even as he himself makes such an attempt (in the form of a short story).

A year into her first marriage, once the narrator's wife and her husband had moved away to an Air Force base, the narrator's wife called Robert and he asked her to send him a tape telling him about her life. In the tape, she told him about not liking being married to a military man, and she and Robert continued to correspond this way for years as she and her husband moved around the country from base to base.

Robert's request for an audiotape shows his interest in others' experiences and inner worlds, an empathetic sort of "seeing." The audiotape correspondence puts emphasis on listening and creating a thoughtful response. Thus, the narrator's wife finds a degree of emotional intimacy in her friendship with Robert that she doesn't have with her husband, the military man, despite Robert's distance and his disability.

Finally, feeling lonely from her nomadic lifestyle, the narrator's wife attempted suicide, though the pills she took just made her sick instead. She told Robert about this, too, since by then she told him about most everything—the narrator notes that, aside from writing poems, the tapes were "her chief means of recreation."

The narrator's wife's reliance on her friendship with Robert is evident here, as it seems that one of her favorite activities is to exchange audiotapes with him. The suicide attempt shows her level of emotional distress, while the fact that she seems more stable now demonstrates the healing and nurturing nature of her friendship with Robert.

Eventually, the narrator's wife got a divorce and married the narrator, all the while continuing her audio-tape exchange with Robert. Once, the narrator's wife asked him if he'd like to hear a tape where he was mentioned and he agreed, though hearing his name "in the mouth of a stranger, this **blind** man I didn't even know" made him uncomfortable. After a knock at the door, the narrator never returned to hear what Robert said about him, which he notes is "just as well," since he "heard all he wanted to."

The narrator's discomfort with emotional intimacy is especially clear here when he betrays his reluctance to hear an audio tape from Robert. The narrator does not want to hear another person talking about him, or to fully know the level of emotional intimacy that his wife shares with Robert. Despite his jealous nature, then, he manages to suppress any curiosity he may feel.

Before the narrator's wife goes to the train station to retrieve Robert, the narrator and his wife quarrel. The narrator makes insensitive jokes about Robert's **blindness**, asking his wife if he should take Robert bowling, a sport dependent on sight. He also asks about the race of Robert's recently deceased wife, Beulah. (Beulah and Robert met when Beulah worked for Robert the summer after the narrator's wife did.) These remarks infuriate the narrator's wife who says: "Are you crazy? Have you just flipped or something?"

This interaction highlights the tension between the narrator and his wife as his jealousy turns to cruelty. The narrator is attempting to belittle Robert because of his blindness, perhaps because the narrator feels possessive of his wife and envies her emotional connection with Robert. The irony here is that he is mocking the man for his disability even as it is this disability which occasioned the friendship in the first place and allowed the two to develop such a strong and tender bond.

The narrator then wonders how Beulah must have felt about Robert's **blindness**, saying: "I found myself thinking what a pitiful life this woman must have led." Presuming that all women, including Beulah, love compliments on their appearance, the narrator thinks about how hard it must have been for Beulah that her husband had never been able to see her.

This passage shows the high premium the narrator places on visual perception. He is unable to comprehend how a woman could feel appreciated by her husband if he cannot see her when she is wearing a nice outfit. The fact that the narrator does not consider that relationships can be built on non-visual understanding reflects his own inability to comprehend his wife's emotions or to see that what is most important to her is not her appearance but her inner life.

Robert and the narrator's wife arrive back at the house, and the narrator immediately betrays his reluctance about having Robert as a guest in his home. To himself, he notes how Robert wears a full beard, thinking that a blind man having a beard is ridiculous. When his wife introduces him to Robert, the narrator struggles to return Robert's conversational niceties. Robert, however, seems unfazed by this. After they settle in the living room and begin talking, the narrator cruelly targets Robert's **blindness**, asking if he sat on the side of the train with a view. Robert replies in a cordial manner, talking about how he hadn't ridden on a train since he was child.

The narrator is unwilling to engage with Robert in a sincere manner. His internal comments about Robert's beard, as well as his pointed question about the train, demonstrate his discomfort with Robert's disability. They also show that the narrator wants to dominate Robert, exercising power conversationally by emphasizing his own ability to see. In fact, the narrator's need to make Robert feel inferior only makes his own insecurities painfully apparent.

The narrator then drops out of the conversation for a few moments to analyze Robert's appearance. The narrator notices Robert's clothing, which the narrator sarcastically calls "spiffy." He then notices that Robert does not use a cane or wear dark glasses, which he understood to be necessary tools for the **blind**. The narrator is then fascinated by Robert's eyes, which he says have "too much white in the iris" and he notices that Robert's pupils move about randomly. Robert's eyes are "creepy," he notes.

The narrator's interest in Robert, the first blind person he has ever had close contact with, is clearly piqued. He surveys Robert closely, but in a sarcastic, puerile manner, using a clichéd compliment of "spiffy" to describe Robert's clothes and a childish "creepy" to describe the blind man's eyes. The narrator's comments show that he is suspicious of Robert, but the narrator's close interest in Robert's physical appearance shows that the narrator is also intrigued by him, despite his suspicions.

The narrator then offers Robert a drink. Robert asks for Scotch with just a splash of water, and the narrator makes the same drink for himself and his wife. They talk for a little while more about Robert's travel from the West Coast to Connecticut to the narrator's home. Robert then smokes a cigarette, an act the narrator finds fascinating because he read an article that said blind people often didn't smoke. The narrator notes how Robert deftly smokes the cigarette down to the nub and then lights another cigarette.

Here the narrator shows some small consideration for Robert and begins to act more like a typical host when he asks Robert if he would like a drink. The narrator shows himself to be unexpectedly impressed by Robert's ability to smoke a cigarette so skillfully, but this again is only revealing of the narrator's ignorance.

The trio then settles down to eat a large dinner, comprising steak, potatoes, green beans, and pie prepared by the narrator's wife. Before the three begin to eat, though, the narrator jokingly says "Now let us pray," as if he meant to give thanks in a religious fashion before the dinner. Robert bows his head, but the narrator does not offer a religious prayer, instead saying, "Pray the phone won't ring and the food doesn't cold."

The narrator's dinner prayer joke explicitly introduces the theme of religion and faith into this story. The narrator displays a knowledge of religious practice that perhaps indicates he has a religious background. However, he shows his secular, skeptical bent by following up "now let us pray" with a joke that would surely strike some religious people as being in poor taste.

The three go back to living room to unwind after a large dinner. For a while, Robert and the narrator's wife talk together about things that have happened since they last saw each other 10 years ago. The narrator does not participate in this conversation, and mostly just listens. Robert attempts to engage the narrator in conversation but the narrator is still resistant. He offers curt answers to Robert's questions about his career.

This scene further demonstrates the narrator's inability to connect with others. This is most notable when compared with the conversational skills Robert exhibits in this scene. Robert is able to communicate openly and fluidly with the narrator's wife, even though the two have corresponded by audio tapes and have not met in person for ten years. The narrator, by comparison, seems to be the one with the real disability.

The narrator, uncomfortable with Robert's questions about his life (which the narrator seems to feel are too probing), turns on the television in an attempt to ignore and exclude Robert. This move irritates the narrator's wife, but Robert handles it with unfailing good humor and is able to correctly identify that that television is a color set and not an older, black-and-white model.

Robert once again impresses the narrator not only by proving to be unfazed by the narrator's rudeness in turning on the television, but also because he is able to identify that it's a color TV without being able to see it. This is an inkling of the tremendous perceptual abilities Robert has (although his most impressive perceptual talents are emotional) despite his blindness.

The narrator's wife leaves the room to change into bed clothes. Before she does, she asks Robert if he is "comfortable" and firmly says that she wants Robert to feel "comfortable" at home. While his wife is upstairs, the narrator invites Robert to smoke marijuana with him. (Smoking marijuana is an evening ritual for the narrator.) Robert and the narrator smoke together, and the narrator's wife joins in when she returns. Robert says that he has never smoked marijuana before, but the narrator notes how capably Robert smokes, like "he'd been doing this since he was nine years old."

Here the narrator's anxiety betrays itself. It seems as if, in order to calm himself, the narrator regularly smokes marijuana in the evening. Sharing this habitual act with Robert suggests that the narrator is beginning to open up to Robert. Meanwhile, Robert's fluidity with smoking once again impresses the narrator, as the narrator had evidently assumed that blindness would render a person wholly incapable in this respect. More and more, Robert seems more adept than the narrator in everyday life.

The narrator's wife soon dozes off, leaving the narrator to entertain to Robert. The narrator asks if Robert would like to go to sleep, but Robert responds that he'll stay up with the narrator. The narrator responds that he's glad for the company, and seems surprised that he actually means it. He notes that almost every night he stays up by himself while his wife goes to sleep and smokes marijuana. And that when he does go to sleep sometimes he has "these dreams," from which he wakes up with his heart pounding.

Now the narrator is left alone with Robert. His seemingly polite question about whether Robert wants to go to sleep can also be seen as an attempt to escape this situation of being alone with another person, of having to relate to another person. Robert decision to stay up ensures that the narrator will have to relate to someone. That the narrator then almost immediately realizes that he's glad to have company indicates his underlying loneliness. That lonelines, and its depth and power, are then highlighted by the narrator's terrible dreams.

When the news ends, the narrator looks for a new program to watch. There's "nothing on," and he switches between programs indecisively, settling on a program about "the church" and European **cathedrals**. He apologizes to Robert for his choice, but Robert kindly says that it's fine with him and says he's happy to learn something. "I got ears," Robert says.

While one could argue that the narrator ends up on the program about cathedrals for no reason, one could also argue that of all the choices, he does choose *to watch the cathedral program, That at minimum they hold some interest for him. Meanwhile, Robert's statement that he's always interested in learning and that he's "got ears" is important—Robert's assertion directly contradicts the narrator's focus solely on sight as an important sense throughout the story up to that point. Robert's kindness in response to the narrator's apology about the program further builds a bond between them.*

While watching the program, the narrator realizes that Robert is not able to fully understand what the **cathedrals** on television are, as he has never seen them. The narrator, who didn't even want to watch the program at first because he says cathedrals aren't "your run-of-the-mill TV fare," attempts to explain what they look like to Robert, but he is embarrassed by his feeble attempt to verbalize their elaborate structures.

The narrator now makes an effort to accommodate Robert, a notable departure from his initial attitude. It's also notable that the narrator is unable to describe the cathedrals he's looking at very well. This suggests that, even though the narrator can see, he's not particularly observant of details or adept at analyzing what he sees. Furthermore, his inability to find the right description contrasts the long audio tapes that Robert would make.

Robert wonders if it would be okay for him to ask the narrator a question, and then asks the narrator if he's at all religious. The narrator responds that "I guess I don't believe in it. In anything."

In describing his lack of faith in religion, the narrator in fact describes himself more generally: he truly does seem to have no faith in anything. He has closed himself off in his glib world from the world, from his wife, from friends. That the narrator admits this—even if he doesn't entirely realize what he's admitting—is a turning point.

Robert suggests that he and the narrator draw a **cathedral** together so that Robert can "see" it. The narrator agrees and finds paper and a pen. Together, they draw a cathedral: Robert holds his hand on the narrator's writing hand. Robert encourages the narrator to keep drawing, saying things like "swell" and "doing fine." The narrator becomes enthralled with the drawing, adding more and more details to his rendering of the cathedral.

The narrator's lack of sarcastic commentary and simple acceptance of Robert's praise is notable here because previously the narrator has been resistant to committing himself fully to interacting with Robert. Also, his immersion in the details of the cathedral contrasts his inability to describe much about them when he was simply looking at them on TV. This suggests that Robert's perception has a richness that the narrator lacks.

The narrator's wife wakes up and is confused to find the narrator and Robert drawing. Robert tells the narrator's wife that everything is fine and encourages the narrator to keep drawing. Robert then asks the narrator to draw with his eyes closed, and the narrator does so. He draws passionately. When Robert asks the narrator to open his eyes again to view his work, the narrator decides to keep his eyes closed for a little while longer. The narrator knows he is inside his own home, but feels as if he isn't inside anything. When Robert asks his opinion of the drawing, the narrator, eyes closed, says: "It's really something."

In this final moment, the narrator seems to have undergone some kind of transformation. He has abandoned his self-consciousness and his judgment of Robert. Until now, the narrator hasn't been impressed by anything, but his reaction to the drawing (even without seeing it) indicates that he is finally able to find some meaning and beauty in the world through perceiving things as Robert does. Or, rather, perhaps it is in perceiving as Robert does that the narrator is able to find a sense of true connection, to see beyond himself, and it is that sudden empathy that changes him and makes him see the world in a new way.

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