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**“It won’t hurt to learn something tonight”:  
Blindness and the Power of Touch in  
Raymond Carver’s *Cathedral***

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## "النتعلم شيئاً غير معتاد": العمى وقوة اللمس في قصة الكاتدرائية للكاتب رايموند كارفر

**المستخلص:** تم الإشادة على نطاق واسع بقصة رايموند كارفر الكاتدرائية لتصويرها الإيجابي للإعاقة والابتعاد عن الصور النمطية السلبية. تركز الدراسة على دور العمى كدعامة سرية في القصة، اذا يركز الباحث بشكل خاص على التفاعل بين العمى و اللمس في تطور احداث القصة. يستند الباحث على نظرية دراسات الإعاقة والتي تشدد ان الإعاقة تقدم منظور مغاير و متميزا للواقع المعيش بدلا من كونها مهمشة. ويعتمد الباحث في تحليله للقصة على مفهوم على ديفيد ميتشل وشارون إل سنايدر للإعاقة على أنها دعامة سردية، و الذي يفترض أن الروايات تتكئ على الإعاقة لتدعيم التطور السردى للأحداث و الموضوعات. كما يستند الباحث أيضا على مفهوم شانون والترز عن "اللمسة البلاغية" كفعل قوي لتحديد الهوية، مما يضيف مزيدا من المصادقية على فكرة أن التجارب اللمسية تساوي- وليست أقل -البصريات. وهكذا يزعم الباحث بأن كارفر يستخدم العمى للتشكيك في وكذلك زعزعة هيمنة الادراك البصر في التواصل اللفظي من أجل التأكيد على أهمية التواصل العاطفي و غير اللفظي بجميع مظاهره.

**الكلمات الدالة:** العمى، كارفر، الكاتدرائية، اللمس، الإعاقة

**Abstract:** Raymond Carver's short story *Cathedral* has been widely praised for its positive portrayal of disability and departure from negative stereotypes. However, the focus of this paper is to examine the role of blindness as a narrative device in the story. Specifically, it explores the experiences of blindness, emphasizing the interaction between blindness and touch. Drawing from disability studies, the paper argues that disability offers a valid perspective on the world, rather than being marginalized. This analysis is based on David Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's concept of narrative prosthesis, which posits that narratives utilize disability to enrich and advance literary storytelling. Furthermore, the paper delves into Shannon Walters' concept of "rhetorical touch" as a potent means of identification, reinforcing the notion that tactile experiences are as valued as visual experiences. Through this framework, the argument is presented that Carver uses blindness to question and destabilize the dominance of visual perception in verbal communication and underscore the importance of affective and non-verbal communication in all its manifestations.

**Keywords:** blindness, Carver, "Cathedral", touch, disability

## Introduction

Many studies have revealed the prevalent tendency toward prioritizing sight over blindness (e.g., Healey; Paterson). The capacity to see has been disproportionately prioritized, often resulting in the misconception that blind individuals lead tragic lives. Healey claims that the lives of blind individuals are generally perceived as veiled in darkness, which is considered inhumane. Consequently, a dichotomy of sight and blindness perpetuates the marginalization of the experience of being blind as an alternative way of living. Stereotypes in the media, in literature, and in movies often shape perceptions of blindness (Garland-Thomson; Mitchell and Snyder; Bérubé; Couser). Geldrich-Leffman notes that blindness has been a theme in literature for centuries and that blind characters have often been portrayed as helpless beggars or heroic and prophetic figures (20). Unfortunately, these portrayals have been mostly negative, contributing to the stigmatization of blind individuals. Perceptions of blindness arise from imagination. According to Healey, “we imagine blindness as what we know, and what we know is what we imagine” (1). People’s perceptions of blindness are “pre-scripted” by social attitudes, shaping our understanding of it as a deficiency and rejecting it as a distinct state of being.

This paper examines blindness in Raymond Carver’s short story “Cathedral,” which focuses on the lived experience of blindness by examining the interplay between blindness and touch in communication among characters. Carver was renowned for his capacity to capture genuine human nature while retaining empathy and compassion. His stories employed the “show, don’t tell” approach, which keeps readers interested with seemingly straightforward language. “Cathedral,” from his 1983 collection, showcases a new turn in Carver’s writing toward more optimistic portrayals of humanity, especially despondent working-class males.

In “Cathedral,” blindness serves as a narrative device that challenges the hegemony of vision in communication and promotes a deeper understanding of the world through tactile experiences and nonverbal interactions. David Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder discuss how disability in literature functions as a metaphorical tool to enhance the narrative (47). They

state that writers and artists have used it as a “crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (49). Mitchell and Snyder caution that writers have often exploited disability by attempting to swiftly conceal the disabled body, rendering it invisible. Their concept of narrative prosthesis aims to expose this appropriation of disability and emphasize the failure of its prosthetic impact. In "Cathedral," Carver utilizes disability in a way that surpasses it being a mere narrative device. He showcases how a character's blindness enables him to serve as a compassionate instructor and mentor, assisting another character in breaking free from a limited perspective rooted in fear and prejudice. Importantly, he accomplishes this without disregarding disability, acknowledging blindness as a valid way of life. Carver’s story uses blindness to question and destabilize the dominance of visual perception in verbal communication and underscore the importance of nonverbal communication in all its manifestations.

Adapting a disability studies perspective, Shannon Walters in her book *Rhetorical Touch* investigates the sense of touch and its rhetorical effect on communication. She highlights the importance of embodiment in highlighting disparities when various bodies come into contact. She coined the phrase “rhetorical touch,” which she defines as “a potential for identification among bodies of diverse abilities that takes place in physical, proximal, and/or emotional contact” (3). She explains that rhetorical touch goes beyond language, allowing for the transmission of nonverbal and affective information. She argues that touch broadens the field of awareness by recognizing embodied distinctions as alternative ways of being in the world through the identification process. She defines identification as “a partial and incomplete process that does not erase difference among people but operates in the potential of difference” (3). Walters stresses the bodily contact between toucher and touched and believes it has a transforming purpose that acknowledges difference. She asserts that individuals with disabilities utilize touch to connect with their surroundings, allowing them to develop independent and interdependent relationships (6). Thus, collaborating with people with different abilities becomes possible.

While blind people rely on their sense of touch to gather information and navigate safely, their touching of other people is controlled and regulated. “Cathedral” explores a situation where a blind person introduces a new form of socially accepted touch to a sighted person, facilitating a type of communication that is not possible using language. In the story’s epiphanic moment, two male characters use touch to collaborate on drawing a cathedral on a piece of paper which entails a close bodily interaction. This engagement of haptic interaction leads the narrator to experience a transformation that causes him to identify with different ways of being in the world.

### **Subverting Normate Reductionism**

“Cathedral” is set in the home of an unnamed married couple in the United States in the early 1980s. The husband narrates the story. They receive a visit from the wife’s longtime friend, a blind man called Robert. From the outset of the story, the husband is uncomfortable with Robert and distances himself from him. The husband exhibits what David Bolt describes as “normate reductionism”. Bolt adapts Garland-Thomson’s concept of the normate to emphasize how non-disabled people often reduce the experiences of individuals with disabilities to their impairments due to the assumption that disability cancels out other human traits. In the story, the husband reduces Robert to his blindness. This is evident in his constant repetition of the phrase “the blind man,” a stance that forecloses any chance of communication between him and Robert as equals. Based on what he has seen in the movies, the husband claims that blind people “moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs” (Carver 356). Eve Wiederhold attributes the husband’s refusal to be hospitable to his misanthropic and prejudicial feelings against blind people (100). The husband feels that Robert is not an equal companion because his blindness prevents him from doing many activities; he sardonically and cruelly suggests to his wife that perhaps he could take Robert bowling. He is afraid that Robert will be a burden for him, and that he will be required to accommodate his blindness.

Carver effectively highlights and then challenges negative stereotypes about blindness through his use of dirty realism, a literary style characterized

by gritty subject matter and sparse, unsentimental language. He proves the stereotypes the short story conveys to be irrational. Robert’s appearance and actions subtly defy most stereotypes and unsettle the ableist husband. For example, he is startled to realize that Robert has a full beard: “This blind man, feature this, he was wearing a full beard! A beard on a blind man! Too much I say” (Carver 361). The husband also expresses his annoyance that Robert “didn’t use a cane and he didn’t wear dark glasses. I’d always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind. *Fact was, I wished he had a pair*” [Emphasis added] (Carver 362). Thus, Robert refuses to conform to the husband’s preconceived ideas about how blind people should function in the world.

## Haptic Navigations

Throughout the story, Robert thwarts the husband’s ableist prejudices, rendering his assumptions inaccurate and sparking curiosity through a series of surprises. The husband believes that “the blind didn’t smoke because as speculation had it, they couldn’t see the smoke they exhaled” and is surprised to see that Robert smokes expertly; “he smoked his cigarette to the nubbin and then lit another” (Carver 363). Similarly, Robert amazes the husband when he displays self-reliance at the dinner table. D. A. Caeton observes that some sighted people believe that the “blind body has only limited access to the world through a pitiable, incomplete sensorium” (36). This is evident in the husband’s initial interaction with Robert.

As the husband observes how Robert is handling himself, some of his negative views start to fade and a slight change in his attitude emerges. Robert’s ability to function well in an environment where he has never been before challenges the ableist and ocularist presumptions of the husband. The husband says: “I watched with admiration as he used his knife and fork on the meat” (Carver 364). The husband’s objectifying stare is replaced by a look that begins to take in information about how Robert functions and begins to show acceptance of Robert as a human being.

“Cathedral” portrays the husband’s journey from prejudice and fear to acceptance and openness. The husband reveals his confusion in his stream of thoughts about Robert and his late wife Beulah. He makes an effort to

imagine being married to a blind person, yet fails to understand it. He ruminates, “They’d married, lived together, slept together—had sex sure—and the blind man had to bury her. All this without having ever seen what the goddamned woman looked like. It is beyond my understanding” (Carver 360). The husband cannot imagine forms of intimate communication that do not rely on visual gratification; he can barely imagine that Robert and Beulah had sex during their marriage. He feels that sight is a paramount requirement for the development of a truly intimate love relationship. He views Robert to be, as Bolt describes, “an inappropriate choice of love” (“Castrating Depictions,” 148). He sees Robert as less than fully human, and for that reason he feels pity for him. But he is so entrenched in his ocular-centric worldview that his pity immediately switches to focus on Robert’s wife:

I felt sorry for the blind man. Then I found myself thinking about the pitiful life this woman must have led. Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was in the eyes of her loved one. Imagine a woman who could go on day after day and never receive the smallest compliment from her beloved. Imagine a woman whose husband could never read the expression on her face, be it misery or something better. (Carver 360)

The husband’s prejudice and ignorance hinder his understanding of Robert’s relationship with Beulah. However, even with the sense of sight, the husband is unable to be emotionally close with his wife. Carver uses this dynamic to set up the epiphanic moment when Robert becomes the teacher who leads the husband out of his constricted emotional world.

Some people perceive blind individuals as a sexual threat because they use touch in ways that express emotional intimacy, and in “Cathedral,” the husband is very uneasy about his wife’s friendship with Robert. He expresses jealousy about the time when Robert touched her face. He recalls, “On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose—even her neck! She never forgot it. She even tried to write a poem about it” (Carver 357). The wife’s involvement in what could be called a

scene of “haptic seduction” underscores the significance of the sense of touch the blind rely on when interacting with their surroundings. The implied “seductive tactility” (Bolt, “Castrating Depictions,” 146) triggers in the husband “anxieties and jealousy concerning his wife’s former acquaintances” (Decker 45). Mark Facknitz indicates the husband’s jealousy to emphasize “the eroticism of the blind man’s touch” (293). Touch can substitute the male gaze and bring pleasure and gratification to the person performing it. The touched person is also transformed into an object, subjugated by the power of the person performing the act.

The husband’s uneasiness about his wife’s relationship with Robert stems from two reasons. First, Robert represents the wife’s past, which unsettles the husband. Second, Robert can effectively fulfill her emotional needs. This is believable because she has not found emotional fulfillment with her spouses—not with her former husband and certainly not with the narrator of the story. Although Robert is blind, he can relate to her emotionally and provides her with a comfortable shoulder to lean on. The husband’s failure to meet his wife’s emotional needs makes Robert a threat to him, even though he is not a sexual rival. His inability to empathetically appreciate his wife renders him emotionally disabled, while the physically disabled man displays emotional ableness.

The husband asserts that it is the wife who “made the first contact with Robert after a year or so” of no longer working for him (Carver 357). She was going through emotional turmoil because of the nature of her first husband’s job in the military, which required them to relocate often. Unable to maintain consistent friendships with others due to their frequent moves, she became depressed and attempted to take her life. In reaching out to Robert at this moment of crisis, she indicated that she considered him a safe person in whom to confide her troubled feelings. She and Robert have exchanged recorded tapes since that time. She shares stories about her life with him. The husband callously recalls her correspondence with Robert: “Over the years, she put all kinds of stuff on tapes and sent them off lickety-split. Next to writing a poem every year, it was her chief means of recreation” (Carver 358). The husband demonstrates his disregard for her creative efforts and her emotional connection with Robert.



The husband seems unaware that he is failing to meet the emotional needs that Robert is filling and is disdainful of their mode of communication. He shows indifference when she asks him to listen to a tape Robert has sent. When he hears Robert responding to what the wife has told him about himself, he is outraged: “I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn’t even know!” (Carver 358). On the tape, Robert is constructing an image of the husband’s personality, which threatens his masculinity. After the husband and wife are interrupted while listening to the tape, they don’t return to listen to the rest of it together: “We didn’t ever get back to the tape. Maybe it’s just as well. I’d heard all I wanted to” (Carver 359). The rancor the husband expresses about Robert’s upcoming visit is the result of this dislike and jealousy. Since he views blind people as weak and inferior, he considers Robert less than equal to him. Thus, he thinks that Robert, the blind friend, must not form an opinion about him, a seeing husband. But actually, he is worried because he fears that Robert has recognized the void inside him.

Robert’s blindness intimidates the husband and renders him speechless and in a state of awe. He is anxious about being alone with Robert but starts to become more comfortable when Robert accepts his invitation to smoke marijuana. It is the first time for Robert, and he follows the husband’s guidance when smoking. Unlike the husband, he is willing to experience new things. When the wife says “Robert, I didn’t know you smoked,” Robert responds, “I do now, my dear. There is a first time for everything” (Carver 367). Now interested in talking, the husband explains the mellowness of the marijuana, describing it as the kind one “can reason with” (Carver 367). Socializing between the two occurs because Robert participates in the act of smoking narcotics. As the husband’s inhibitions about Robert begin to subside, the two men begin to communicate.

## **Touching Something Beyond Language**

In the story’s powerful last scene, Robert and the husband watch TV together, an activity that significantly influences the action in the story (Decker 40). Carver employs watching TV as a narrative device in most of his works. Christof Decker describes TV viewing as a “routine daily activity

that metonymically alludes to the repetitious and mechanical pattern of everyday life” (40), but in “Cathedral,” Carver brilliantly defamiliarizes normal life by making the act of watching TV with a blind person an unfamiliar experience.

The TV-watching scene in “Cathedral” illustrates how a blind person’s lack of visual references and the inability of blind individuals to perceive nonverbal cues can destabilize communication for sighted individuals. Carver’s handling of this scene illustrates how blindness (more than other forms of disability) can powerfully interrupt “patterns of human interaction” (Gowman 29). While watching TV with Robert, the husband experiences something new. He starts to notice the differences between himself and Robert and how Robert uses his senses in a unique way as a blind individual. This causes the husband to become more interested in Robert's perspective and he begins to observe Robert closely:

We didn’t say anything for a time. He was leaning forward with his head turned at me, while his right ear was aimed in the direction of the set. Very disconcerting. Now and then his eyelids drooped and then they snapped open again. Now and then he put his fingers into his beard and tugged, as if thinking about something he was hearing on the television. 370

The husband is no longer a passive observer of Robert; he becomes emotionally engaged as he attempts to supply information whenever there is no voiceover narration. The husband realizes that when the camera is panning and there is no sound, Robert is not receiving any information, so he begins to narrate for him. "I waited as long as I could. Then I felt I had to say something" (Carver 370). This experience not only completely destabilizes the husband, but also prompts him to pay attention to how Robert receives information and to start entering his world.

After the husband has been describing what is on the TV screen for a while, he says, “Something occurred to me. Do you have an idea what a cathedral is? What they look like, that is? If somebody says cathedral to you, do you have any notion what they are talking about?” (Carver 370). Robert responds with the factual information he has just heard on the TV program

but admits he has no clear idea about what cathedrals look like, prompting the husband to describe one to him. The husband, challenged by Robert’s request, attempts to describe a cathedral as if his “life depended on it” (Carver 371). However, he is not able to get the image through to Robert. His normative position is destabilized.

This moment in the story illustrates a frequent characteristic of Carver’s stories: the inadequacy of language. His characters often face dilemmas where they cannot articulate their ideas through language. Decker notes that in these moments, Carver’s characters need to search for “new means of expression” (37). Chad Wriglesworth argues that while the husband’s effort to describe a cathedral is honest, his language fails to encapsulate what the image communicates (169). This realization leads the husband to understand that his verbal repertoire is limited. The husband’s struggle to convey the concept of the visual appearance of a cathedral helps him understand that visual language is limited. The husband becomes open to exploring alternative forms of communication, such as drawing the cathedral. Robert asks the husband to draw a cathedral, igniting the husband’s curiosity. The husband abandons his distancing behavior toward Robert and sits right next to him, Robert touches the paper to create a mental image of its dimensions. He then places his hand on the husband’s hand and tells him to draw, saying, “Go ahead, bub, draw. Draw. You’ll see. I’ll follow along with you. It’ll be okay. Just begin now like I am telling you. You’ll see. Draw” (Carver 373). The expression “you’ll see” refers to a different mode of perception. Robert conveys that he understands that this is a novel experience for the husband, saying, “Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you bub?” (Carver 373). The husband follows Robert’s instructions, becoming dependent on him to guide him through this new experience. This homosocial haptic engagement promotes interdependence, empowering the husband to embrace and identify with differences.

After they draw the cathedral together, the husband is transformed; he comes away from the experience with a new attitude. In Carver’s words, he “grows.” The experience frees the husband from constraints or boundaries. As he answers Robert’s question about what the drawing looks like, the husband says, “My eyes were still closed. I was inside my house. I knew that.

But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything. It’s really something” (Carver 375). The cathartic effect of drawing a cathedral demands that the husband view blindness differently. His brief engagement in volitional blindness, amplified by touch, can be read as an act of rhetorical touch, as Walters describes. Through this activity, the husband reaches a state of identification with Robert; he revises his understanding of blindness. To borrow from Healey, it could be claimed that the husband’s presumptions of blindness are “rewritten (reimagined) into another script” (6). The husband experiences a “felt phenomenology” (Paterson 2007) of touch, leading him to a state of inexplicable knowledge. He begins to rewrite his social imaginary of blindness.

Using drawing to convey the idea of a cathedral to a blind man opens up permitted contact between the two men. Carver uses their homosocial activity to illustrate the importance of interdependence as a way of being. The husband’s experience of touch as communication leads him to identify with an affective “something,” an inexplicable felt experience of growth. The drawing scene deploys touch to create an affective impact beyond the physical. The body and mind interact through touch, opening, drawing on Walters, a threshold toward a state of identification. Through touch, the sighted husband and blind Robert create a referent to a communal religious entity, the cathedral.

Carver models Robert after Tiresias, the archetype of the blind prophet in Greek mythology. Robert provides the husband with insight and deeper sensitivity (Geldrich-Leffman 680). Possessing a paradoxical vision, Robert goes deeper than the husband could imagine (Wriglesworth 168). Robert imparts a valuable lesson to the skeptical, narrow-minded husband, seeing through the husband’s uncertainty and enlightening him. He directs the husband to other forms of connection. The husband fails to describe a cathedral because of his dependence on visual language. As he explains the shape of a cathedral, he glances at the TV to recharge his memory of visual information about the cathedral. His reliance on visual information and visual language prevents him from fully connecting with the cognitive image he is trying to convey. Nils Clausson points to the distancing effect of sight compared to the immediacy of touch and its impact on perceiving one’s

surroundings (113). When drawing, the husband closes his eyes, indicating his desire to free himself from the “intervention of visual consciousness” (Spilka 113). Regina Fadiman asserts that touch is the chief way of understanding others’ feelings and perceptions. Perception, especially through touch, provides a person with an understanding of themselves and the inner nature of things (63). In the drawing scene in “Cathedral,” touch and blindness combine to create an emotional impact beyond the physical. The body and mind interact through touch to reach a state of identification. The husband’s brief experiment with volitional blindness makes him temporarily more sensitive and liberated. He experiences growth.

Even after finishing the drawing, he keeps his eyes closed; he is transformed and in touch with something beyond himself. He experiences a new mode of consciousness that changes his perception and makes him aware of the significance of haptic communication. Geldrich-Leffman views blindness as a “liberating, open, non-limiting factor for the creative imagination” that leads to deep intellectual and spiritual knowledge and insight (693). The husband says, “my eyes were closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything” (Carver 375). However, there is a sense of incomprehensibility about the nature of this newly acquired “something.” In an interview with Claude Grimal, Carver describes how he could not fully grasp what he was trying to achieve when he was writing “Cathedral”: “I felt it tapped into something. I felt it was very exciting.” The sighted man changes; he puts himself in the blind man’s place. The “something” cannot be encapsulated by language; it is perceived through feelings. Even Carver is unable to describe it fully just as the husband cannot perceive and feel this “objective, substantial, and meaningful” something, internalized through deeper insight and becoming part of one’s feelings. Robert instills in the husband a knowledge that transcends the tangible or the physical. The husband could not attain this mysterious something without a genuine “leap of faith” (Geldrich-Leffman 675). Indeed, by dismantling the grip of the ocular signifying economy, the potential of the affective is achieved.

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## Conclusion

In “Cathedral,” Carver skillfully utilizes blindness to bring about a significant transformation in the protagonist, the husband. The character of Robert, modeled after the blind wise man archetype, challenges the husband’s beliefs and stereotypes, ultimately leading him to a powerful realization. Carver defamiliarizes the embodied lived experience of sightedness and highlights the potential of unsighted modes of functioning to disrupt the centrality of ableist cultural imagery. In this short story, Carver powerfully conveys a character’s journey to acceptance of difference as a valid way of existing in the world. The husband comes to understand that difference—in this case, blindness—teaches people to function in multiple ways that broaden the range of human understanding and communication. Carver uses blindness to underscore the power of nonverbal and haptic interactions as ways of connecting with others. Indeed, it is through the character of Robert that the husband connects with a sublime “something” that goes beyond language. Touch serves as a powerful narrative device in the story, demonstrating the importance of deep connections that surpass language barriers. It symbolizes the profound gift of spiritual enlightenment. Carver uses the power of communication through touch to underscore the importance of interdependence as a way of living and appreciating differences. “Cathedral” not only invites us to reevaluate our perceptions of disability but also suggests that embracing difference and interdependence can lead to a richer, more compassionate human experience.

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