Cathedral Study Guide

Cathedral by Raymond Carver

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Cathedral is a collection of short stories centered on working-class people who are or have been alcoholics, and are or have been ignorant or prejudiced. Many characters are trying to stop drinking, or else they are still in the clutches of their drinking addiction, and other characters are trying to get them to stop. This drama is repeated throughout the stories, but it is typically not resolved nor redeemed. Carver generally leaves his characters where he finds them. Instead of bringing them to a point of enlightenment or bringing them through a crisis, he simply tells their stories. With subtle authorial techniques, he makes it clear he, as the author, looks back at this kind of behavior and feels disgusted by it, even though at the same time he might feel he needs to bear witness to it. He does not seem to mind bearing witness against himself or the people he knows.

There are a number of types of characters who show up again and again in the stories. The most common is the somewhat ignorant or limited man who thinks drinking is the way out of every situation, or who thinks he can just get what he wants without consulting the people around him. This character typically has affairs or a failed marriage in his background, and doesn't feel much obligation to act disciplined like the people around him want him to act. This character exists within a finely-crafted literary short story collection, though, so his behavior is at odds with the penetrating and subtle description readers get from the author, himself. There is some irony, as a result, and readers perceive the author does not entirely share the characters' perspective.

One of the other characters recurring throughout the stories is the woman who loves the alcoholic man. This might be a girlfriend or a wife, but typically the woman is somewhat hardened, and has to work to be patient with a man who does not really know her feelings or know how to give her what she needs for herself. This person generally introduces a sense of tragedy into the stories, because the reader can see the man's behavior through the woman's eyes. The reader wants the man to behave, to make the woman happy, but Carver is more subtle than this, and the women are not merely angels or mothers. They have their own limitations, and in some cases, the women are the ones driving the men to drink, or drinking themselves into oblivion along with the men.

There are also, typically, children in the background of these stories, and they have generally made people miserable. In Feathers, Jack and Fran visit their friends Bud and Olla who have just had a baby, but the contentment Jack and Fran feel after their visit is the last contentment they'll feel. They have a child themselves, and the kid is manipulative and makes them ashamed of themselves, so they don't talk to Bud and Olla any more. The children that do exist are in the distance, or else the father doesn't bother to visit, as in the Compartment, or the child dies, as in A Small Good Thing. Basically the male and female characters have a hard enough time holding themselves together—they do not have an easy time or good results with their children or families.

These stories would be bleak if they were not told from the perspective of a deeply compassionate author who loves his characters in spite of - and probably even because of - their faults. The ironic distance between author and characters ends up being reassuring to the reader, who knows the author sees the same terribleness and heartlessness and indifference as they see, themselves. There is, therefore, a complicity between author and reader that redeems the disconnection and even the hostility between the characters themselves.

Feathers and Chef's House

Summary

Jack and Olla get an invitation to go to dinner at Jack's friend, Bud, and his wife's house. It is clear from Fran's reaction she would rather not go, because she and Jack appear to get along so well that they do not need other people. They aren't sure what to bring, wine or dessert or bread, and they end up taking a loaf of bread Fran has baked.

When Jack and Fran arrive at Bud and Olla's house, they are greeted by an enormous screeching peacock. They edge their way into the house. The bird wants to follow them, but Bud keeps it out. Once inside, conversation is a little uncomfortable, because Fran seems a little judgmental and Bud and Olla have a baby and an intimacy that is seems alien to and baffles Jack and Fran. As the night goes on, though, they all warm up, and Bud lets the peacock into the house. The baby wakes up, and the peacock and the baby play together. This lightens the mood, and Jack, who is narrating the story, says this makes him happy and he wishes he could remember that night forever.

This wish is a turning point in the story, for as it turns out, Jack remembers that night for different reasons: it symbolized the contentment he and Fran shared before they had their first child. They had conceived the baby in contentment after that night, but the child developed conniving ways, and whatever else is wrong with Jack and Fran's relationship comes out in the kid, so they feel trapped in their relationship and cannot return to the easy intimacy and comfort they had with Bud and Olla that night. Jack narrates this in an understated but disappointed tone causing the reader to perceive what seemed possible at the time, and what the unfortunate reality is, instead.

Chef's House: Wes is an alcoholic who invites the narrator, his wife, to come spend the summer with him at a house his friend, Chef, has loaned him for practically nothing. The narrator, Wes' estranged wife, dumps her boyfriend and agrees to join him. They get close again after a long time of being apart. The narrator puts her wedding ring back on, and they enjoy each other's company. One day, though, Chef drives up and tells them that they have to clear out. Fat Linda, Chef's daughter, needs the place and they have to go. When Wes curses his luck, something changes in him, and the narrator is sad to see he has effectively given up his determination to stop drinking.

Analysis

Feathers: There is a subtle tension between Jack and Fran, but it is not clear what it is, and the suspense of the story is built from anticipating the revelation of the cause. Because of the uncertainty though, and because the story is realistic and subtle, the reader is forced to pay attention to every sentence, to weigh the possibility of each sentence holding the key to the tension. Carver uses this technique to keep the reader close to every detail of his character's lives. The peacock at Bud and Olla's place feels

out of place, but then so does the plaster cast of Olla's crooked teeth from before she had braces. As the story goes on, Jack and Fran become more at ease with Bud and his wife Olla, and when Bud lets the pet peacock into the house and it rubs the baby, Jack and Fran feel content with the night and their relationship.

When Jack and Fran get home, Fran asks him to 'fill her with his seed' and they start a family, but then the story fast-forwards, and the magic Jack and Fran experienced that night disappears. Carver does not say as much, but whatever problems there were in Jack's relationship with Fran came out in the family they started, but he could not talk about it. He just didn't have a good feeling any more.

Chef's House: This story hinges on the difficulty Wes has trying to stop drinking. Drink remains a tempting solution for Wes' problems, and when Chef comes to tell him and the narrator they have to clear out, the bad news jolts him back into the Wes he is. The narrator had gone to him because she thought he might become again the Wes he used to be when she first married him, but after they get the bad news, he says he is who he is, and cannot change that. This undermines the narrator's hope Wes might stop drinking, but he feels bound to the person he becomes when he does drink. Here Carver seems to be saying, against many positivists, that certain conditions cannot be changed, and a man is who he is, faults and all. The reader cannot hold a man in contempt because of his drinking. The narrator feels torn, but also resigned. She still loves Wes, and apparently will still drop her own relationships to rejoin him. So his drinking is a bad part of him, but there are other parts as well, as Carver says in another story.

Vocabulary

compass, threatens, creamery, production, pigeons, squall, regarded, braced, scuttled, occasion, orthodontist, publication, fretful, prominent, diseased, disfigured, clamped, prancing, squirming, encyclopedia, paradise, courage, sober, drapes

Preservation and The Compartment

Summary

Preservation: In Preservation, Sandy's husband loses his job. He starts to spend his days on the couch, all day. He has been there for three months when the story begins. Sandy does not feel inclined to talk about it to anyone. She is upset, and she does not know what to do, but the one person she confides in acts like it isn't out of the ordinary.

One night when Sandy comes home from work, the refrigerator has stopped working. Everything is melted, thawed, and ruined. Sandy's husband says he will look at the classified ads; maybe they can get a used 'fridge at a bargain price. He finds a listing for an auction, which Sandy agrees they should attend. Her husband does not want to go, but Sandy insists she will. She starts cooking dinner, and remembers going to auctions with her father. She thinks about missing her father and her mother. When the pork chops are done, Sandy calls her husband in to eat, but he is aghast at the pools of water on the floor, and water dripping off the table. Carver does not say so explicitly, but presumably Sandy has been as careless and perhaps despairing as she was thinking about her parents as her husband has been while he has been unemployed.

The Compartment: Myers is traveling to Strasbourg to see his son after eight years of separation. He has not slept on the overnight train, and he has been thinking about the last time he saw his son. His wife, at the time, was breaking dishes, and the son rushed at him, full of hate. In the ensuing struggle, Myers had put him in a headlock and bashed him against the wall.

When Myers goes to the WC, he comes back and the expensive watch he had bought for his son has been stolen from his coat. This fills him with anger and also with frustration, because no one understands him when he speaks English.

He goes back to his compartment, and decides that he does not really want to see his son. He does not get off the train when it stops. He sits in his compartment, and watches a few tender scenes of leave-taking on the platform. The train starts to move again, but stops soon just outside of the station.

When the train stops, Myers goes back to second class to see why the train has stopped. In the interim, the carriage with his compartment is disconnected from the carriage he is on, and when the train starts to move again, he goes back to where he thinks his compartment should be, but his coat and suitcase are gone. He is in a compartment with men who are talking and laughing, and the atmosphere is very hospitable. He decides if he is going on the wrong direction, he will find out sooner or later. Content with this, he finally falls asleep.

Analysis

Preservation: Preservation is an enigmatic story, with a lot of the meaning residing in between the lines, in allusions. When Sandy gets to thinking about her parents, she is distracted and burns the oil in the pan before she puts the pork chops in. When her husband comes in and sees water everywhere, it seems as if Sandy has spilled water on the table, or else water has condensed from off the food they took out of the ruined fridge. Her disbelief resembles her husband's disbelief with being out of work. It may indicate Sandy is exasperated with her husband's despondency and has started to ruin things herself in order to bring about a confrontation that will force him to address his listlessness, and possibly motivate him again.

The Compartment: Readers do not entirely know what this story is about, not until the last paragraph. It seems to be a story about a man and his son and his divorce from his ex-wife, but it turns out instead to be a story about a man and his own conscience. The man has been up all night replaying scenes from his past, but after the gift watch is stolen, and then his carriage is decoupled from the train, he is rather content to be stripped of his things, and he falls asleep peacefully. The story in this light seems to be a metaphor, about the peace he finds when he is stripped of his belongings. By chance, the compartment he ends up in is filled with laughing, good-natured men. This lulls him to sleep in a way his anticipation of seeing his son had prevented.

Vocabulary

terminated, encouraging, milling, compensation, inclined, peat, expression, obituary, mergers, ashamed, yoghurt, classified, immaterial, equipment, carbon monoxide, malign, interference, outbuildings, compartment, corridor, inexplicably, deliberation, accumulated, ludicrous

A Small, Good Thing and Vitamins

Summary

A Small, Good Thing: A Small Good Thing begins with Ann Weiss ordering a cake for her son Scotty's birthday. However, on the day of Scotty's birthday, he is hit by a car. He makes it home after the accident before passing out, and his mother takes him to the hospital. The doctors in the hospital tell Ann and her husband Howard that everything seems fine. Scotty could wake up any time.

A day goes by, and another, and Scotty remains in a coma. When Howard, and then Ann, go home, they receive calls from the baker, asking whether they forgot Scotty, or saying that Scotty is all ready. Howard and Ann do not know that it is the baker calling though, and they are terrorized by the calls. After a few days in a coma, Scotty dies, and the doctor does what he can to console Howard and Ann. They go home, and make phone calls to relatives, but they still get more calls from the baker.

At night, Ann realizes it is the baker calling, and she is furious. She even tells Howard she wants to shoot the baker and watch him twitch. They go to the bakery, and confront the baker, a lonely man. He apologizes profusely once he realizes their son has died. He tells them he has forgotten how to act. He offers them seats, and then warm buns fresh from the oven. They have not eaten during their vigil, and Ann is hungry. The baker is satisfied to see her she eat three buns. They stay up all night, talking about loneliness.

Vitamins: The narrator in Vitamins has a job as a janitor at a hospital, and his wife Patti gets a job selling vitamins door to door. She does well at it and gets promoted, but eventually the bottom falls out of the vitamin market, and she starts to lose the girls who have been working for her. During the party, her husband, the narrator, hugs Donna, one of the girls. Instead of 'no', she tells him 'not now' and he takes this as encouragement. The narrator and his wife drink a good deal, and their conversations do not always connect them to one another. They often do not know what the other is thinking; sometimes they do not seem to know what they themselves are thinking. They just do their jobs and drink, then empty words go back and forth between them.

One night the narrator meets Donna and takes her to a black jazz club where he likes to drink. He and Donna sit down and get drinks and start kissing while listening to the music. A musician named Benny comes over with a friend of his who is just back from Vietnam. They have been drinking all day, and the friend, Nelson, has a Vietnamese soldier's ear in his pocket. He offers Donna money for sex, and he offers the narrator money to turn a blind eye. The bartender comes and breaks up the conversation, and the narrator and Donna leave, drunk but safe.

In the car, Donna breaks down and starts crying. There's no money in vitamins, and she feels bad because all she can think of was how she could have used the money. The

narrator cannot console her. Their romance has collapsed, and all he wants is to get away. He drives home, and Patti, his wife, has fallen asleep with her clothes on, presumably because she was drinking. He goes into the bathroom and knocks everything off the shelves.

Analysis

A Small Good Thing: This story builds on the irony that the reader knows the deranged baker is calling the house, but Howard and Ann do not know this. As their grief builds and builds, in contrast to the baker's indignation, it seems as if some violent comedy of errors might play out. The grief is very real, but the baker's anger is blown out of proportion. In the end, after the story has been threatening to spin out of control, Carver provides the reader with a humane and controlled conclusion. The bereaved couple and the baker sit down, and the baker does what the doctor could not do: he consoles the couple, sharing in their loss by telling them about his own loss, the ovens always either full, or always empty.

Vitamins: As with many of Carver's stories, the pleasure in Vitamins comes from the calm recollection with which the narrator recalls having been a callous, biased drunk. There is no conviction that he and Patti ever changed how much they drank, or that they had any motivation, within the story, for him to stop being unfaithful. Things simply went on in a permanent state of semi-crisis, with constant drinking fueling a perpetual air of surprise and dismay. Desire is the undercurrent making the confusion bearable.

The narrator's attention to the possibility of getting together with Donna seems like a strategy for avoiding certain problems in his life—starting with his drinking. In the short run, this is probably an entertaining way of living. But the calm narration indicates the author has gotten some distance from and control over that lifestyle, and does not find himself very entertaining any longer.

Vocabulary

jolly, abrupt, unsteadily, ambulance, concussion, consulted, Scandinavian, tightened, genuine, stethoscope, abdomen, restorative, trauma, procedure, orderlies, gurney, sill, transparent, convinced, nuances, definite, psychopath, gaunt, reluctantly, autopsy

Careful and Where I’m Calling From

Summary

Careful: Lloyd has moved out of the house he shares with his wife into an apartment where he can take stock of his life, and try to cut down on his drinking. He starts drinking only champagne, but he is still drinking three or four bottles of champagne a day: it is clear he is not making much headway in cutting back. His routine in this apartment is not a normal routine, and one day he even eats crumb doughnuts with champagne for breakfast. As much as Inez, Lloyd’s wife, might hope he is making progress, he does not seem to care about the breakdown of his life. “So what?” he says, about having doughnuts and champagne for breakfast.

When Inez comes to visit, Lloyd has been slamming the side of his head with his fist. He has wax buildup in his ear, and he is trying to get relief. Inez obviously wants to talk, and it is fairly clear Lloyd will not want to hear what she has to say, but instead of talking, she helps him. She gets oil from the landlady, and heats it up and pours it into his ear. He retreats to the bathroom for a drink, but she tells him she found his stash of champagne bottles.

After Inez clears the wax from Lloyd’s ear, Lloyd lays down and worries if he sleeps on the wrong side, his ear will get filled with wax again. He watches TV and drinks, and it is clear he is nowhere in control of his drinking. It is also clear Inez’s kindness is not going to last much longer.

Where I’m Calling From: This story takes place at Frank Martin’s, which is a clinic where alcoholics go to dry out for a couple of weeks to two months at a time. The narrator and J.P. are sitting outside on the porch smoking cigarettes. They have only been there for a few days, and J.P. is distracting himself from his shaking hands by telling the narrator about how he met his wife. The narrator is listening because he is at Frank Martin’s, and he has to pass the time somehow, but eventually he becomes genuinely interested in J.P.’s story.

J.P. tells the narrator he was with a friend when Roxy came to the house to sweep the chimney. J.P. was taken with Roxy and asked her out, and eventually they got married and had a few kids. He worked for her father and brother, and became a partner in the chimney sweep business. He took to drinking though, and started to have violent rows with his wife. She ended up breaking his nose, and he busted her lip. Her father and brother checked him into Frank Martin’s.

The narrator’s girlfriend, by contrast, was drunk when she dropped him off and when she drove away. Now, all the narrator can think about is how he has some things at her house and also some things at his wife’s house. He doesn’t seem to care about much, and the reader is not sure how committed he is to stopping his drinking. This is his second time at Frank Martin’s, after all.

J.P.'s wife comes to visit, and the narrator asks her for a kiss, because it's supposed to be good luck to be kissed by a chimney sweep. Roxy hasn't been a sweep for years, but she gives the narrator a kiss on the lips nonetheless.

Roxy's visit makes the narrator think back to a time when he was living with his wife, when their landlord showed up early on a Saturday morning to paint the house. He stood naked in the window looking down at the landlord, and felt a wave of happiness that he was himself, not the landlord.

The story ends with the narrator thinking about calling his wife and his girlfriend. He thinks he'll have to tell his wife where he's calling from. He thinks calling his girlfriend will be sweet—if he can avoid getting her mouthy son on the phone.

Analysis

Careful: This story is amusing because of the antics the drunk man Lloyd gets into, and how seriously he takes the wax-buildup in his ear. The reader can tell, from the narrator's and from Inez's point of view, Lloyd is seriously compromised by drink. He can't seem to see beyond the immediate problem, which is the wax. The kindness Inez shows seems like help to him, but the author makes it clear through irony and characterization that Inez is not going to be here for long. This makes Lloyd seem pathetic and maybe tragic, although the reader does not know enough about his situation to determine whether Lloyd's alcoholism is tragic or pathetic.

Where I'm Calling From: The narrator's wife will want to know where he is calling from when he calls her, so the title of the story refers to the fact he will have to acknowledge he has been having trouble with alcohol again, and has checked himself into Frank Martin's clinic. This is something he'll be ashamed to admit, and the subtext of the story is concerned with his attempt to accept this is what it's come to. There is a part of him that wants to stop drinking, but there is also another part. The narrator, like many other characters in Carver's stories, wants to believe in the best part of himself, but he knows how compelling the alcoholic part of him is. J.P. on the other hand, still seems to be in the early stage of a cycle or a process the narrator has been through before. So as amusing as his story is, the reader experiences it through the filter of the narrator's disinterest, which is really an attempt to establish an interest in other things.

The wife and the 'mouthy son'—like the writer of the present story (the man who creates the narrator as a character) are all witnesses who know what kind of craziness the narrator and his girlfriend are capable of. They see the alcoholism, and they have words for it or they don't. In their eyes (and in his own eyes) the writer looks back at his alcoholic behavior and is partly ashamed, and partly amused. Only instead of being amused and continuing to drink, he is detached from his old self, and gets wry amusement from describing his drunken antics. This lets him relive them without continuing to drink.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

combination, promptly, noteworthy, murmur, equilibrium, gristly, flushed, municipal, simulating, sensation, dinette, vaguely, diagram, tapering, probe, guarantees, massage, canals, pruning shears, preparations, accidentally, dislocated, biscuits, hollering

The Train and Fever

Summary

The Train: A woman holds a gun on a man, and threatens to kill him. She makes him kneel and presses his face into the dirt with her foot. She goes into the waiting room at a train station, and a stately old gentleman and a woman in a knit dress come in. The man is wearing a cravat, but he has no shoes on.

The old man and the woman talk in a disjointed way about his need for a light for his cigarette. The couple seems hostile to the woman, whose name is Miss Dent. They do not want to share the waiting room with her, but they do not leave, either. They do not seem to be drunk or impaired, but their words do not make much sense. They talk about a girl and the crowd she runs with, people who are concerned about their Swiss chocolates, their café au lait and their macaws. The reference is not explained.

Eventually the woman in the knit dress talks to Miss Dent. She is vaguely threatening, but they do not really engage each other in conversation. A train pulls up. It is late, and the passengers must wonder what these three people are doing on the platform at this hour, when people are going to bed. As they get on the train they sit near each other, but not together. The train speeds through the night.

Fever: Carlyle's wife, Eileen, has left him. She ran away with Richard Hoopes, a teacher and colleague of Carlyle's. She left for Southern California to be an artist and live out her childhood dreams. Carlyle is baffled by her departure. They had married young, at eighteen and nineteen, and he is lost without his wife. He spent every minute with the children over the summer, but now the school year has begun again and he has to find a babysitter for them while he is teaching.

The first babysitter he gets is Debbie, whom he calls the fat girl. She seems fine until one day Carlyle comes home to find the children filthy, in the front yard with a dog, and Debbie has a few boys over, drinking beer and listening to loud music. He kicks them out. That night, he shares his desperation with his new girlfriend, Carol, a secretary from the principal's office.

Eileen calls to say Richard has found someone to take care of the children, and an hour later Carlyle gets a call from Mrs. Webster, an older woman who had kept house for Richard's mother. Mrs. Webster is a godsend, a kind older woman who treats the children well and leaves fresh, good food for Carlyle when he comes home from school. She works with the children until the middle of the fall semester, just when Carlyle, an art teacher, is transitioning from Medieval to Gothic art. (The Renaissance is still a long way off, he says.)

Carlyle gets a fever, and Mrs. Webster takes care of him and the children while he is sick. When he starts to get better, Mrs. Webster tells him that she and he husband have

been offered good work out in Oregon. Jolted by this, Carlyle begins to tell Mrs. Webster the story of his relationship with Eileen, and she sits patiently and listens. When her husband comes to get her, he comes in as well and listens to Carlyle's story. While telling his story, even though Carlyle is still feverish, some part of his grief departs. When Mrs. Webster and her husband leave, he feels like his grief will leave him, too. He will look back on this as something that just happened.

Analysis

The Train and Fever Analysis

The Train: This is a thoroughly disorienting story. The details are confusing. It is not clear whether the woman who holds the gun on the man is defending herself or attacking him. Nor is it clear why the man is not wearing socks. Presumably, he is a drunk, or a bum, and shoes are not necessary to him. The conversation between the couple and the woman is menacing, but nothing comes of it. The reader is merely confronted with the suspense and disorientation.

Obviously, Miss Dent has just had a noteworthy and possibly exceptional evening. There is only one line explaining what might have happened: "She wanted to stop thinking about the man and how he'd acted toward her after taking what he wanted." (p. 148). This would indicate the woman was raped, or robbed, and ended up with the man's gun. If the reader gathers this from that one line, the story nevertheless does not explain the woman and the old man. As in A Small Good Thing, where the hostility from the baker seems unrelated to the death of Howard and Ann Weiss' boy Scotty, the older couple's chaotic life seems unrelated to Miss Dent's evening. The story is dedicated to John Cheever, who wrote about disorienting moments in suburban people's lives. Carver seems to be saying that in certain circles, this kind of disruption is just part of life.

Fever: After all the stories of drunks and people who cannot manage their lives, Carlyle's situation seems a little precarious, and the reader feels some anxiety about how his situation is going to turn out. His first babysitter, Debbie, is a catastrophe. She invites boyfriends over and drinks beer while the children are in the yard with a big mean-looking dog. As the story goes on, it doesn't seem like anything terrible is going to happen. Carlyle is not going to have a breakdown, things are just going to be tricky for a while.

When Mrs. Webster shows up, after Eileen arranges it, it seems as if Carlyle's troubles have ended. However, when he gets a fever, the winds change for him. Mrs. Webster brings her husband into the house to tell Carlyle about their departure. Carlyle is too sick to get out of bed for this, but he remembers hearing it when he does wake up the next day.

Mrs. Webster's departure should be a catastrophe for Carlyle, but he seems to take the news in stride. It even seems like Eileen was right when she told him he should pay

attention to his fever, because his mindset changes. When he wakes up and tells the story of his love to Mrs. Webster and her husband, he cleanses himself of the despair he had felt. He can see a life after the grief, and when he returns to his children, the reader senses it is with a new optimism, and a deeper experience that can comprehend the kind of grief he felt. Presumably he was too young and innocent to comprehend it before.

Vocabulary

trampling, deserted, astounded, cravat, disappointment, rapid-fire, slumped, existence, macaws, leopard, promenade, circumnavigation, contradict, prim, precede, dignified, scarcely, carelessness, irritating, registration, references, karma, manic, reliable

The Bridle and Cathedral

Summary

The Bridle: Holits and his wife show up in their station wagon at the apartment complex run by Marge and her husband Harley. They appear to have lost their farm and are looking for an apartment. Marge shows them a two-bedroom apartment, and they agree to take it. Holits does the talking—his wife Betty doesn't say anything.

Marge gets to know Betty a little when Betty comes to get her hair done. She has found a job waiting tables at an Italian restaurant and wants to color her hair. While Marge does her hair, Betty tells Marge about Holits and his racehorse, which never won a race. It took something out of Holits, but neither Betty nor Marge say exactly what.

Eventually Holits gets a job as well, and the family of four keeps living in that little two-bedroom apartment, their comings and goings watched carefully by Marge and Harley. One night Betty and Holits are drinking around the pool with some other residents, and Holits climbs on top of the cabana, apparently with the intention of jumping into the pool from there. He does not make it, and cuts his head fairly severely. He is disoriented and in pain afterward, and it seems like there might be reasons why he should not be taken to the emergency room. He is taken nonetheless, but it is only a few weeks later when the Holits family packs up and leaves.

When Marge goes to clean out the room where the Holits family had been staying, she finds a bridle from Holits' farming days. She picks it up and identifies the parts of it. She recognizes the bit, and the reins, and she says that with a bit in your mouth, and someone tugging on the reins, you would figure out what was what pretty quickly.

Cathedral: This story revolves around a blind man coming to visit the narrator's wife. The narrator is not too happy about the blind man's visit. He has ideas about blind men, and it is clear that he has very limited ideas about life and about other people. He is surprised when the blind man has a beard, and he is surprised the blind man smokes. He had heard blind people did not smoke because they could not see the smoke from the cigarettes.

The blind man's wife has died, but he has been corresponding with the narrator's wife for years. They have sent tapes back and forth to each other. The wife told him about her first marriage. She divorced her first husband, her childhood love, then she went out with the narrator and they married. Now that the blind man is coming to visit, the wife asks him to please help make the man comfortable in their house.

When the blind man shows up—his name is Robert—the narrator is shocked by everything about him. How he moves without a dog or cane; how he has a beard; and that he smokes. Together the narrator and his wife and Robert drink quite a bit and eat a huge dinner. The narrator is amazed to see the blind man eat ravishly at dinner. At the

end of dinner they are all stuffed and tired, so they sit on the couch and drink more and talk about the past years. The narrator is not much of a participant in the conversation, since it is his wife and Robert who are friends. When the wife goes upstairs to change into her robe, the narrator invites Robert to smoke pot. It is his first time smoking pot, but he picks it up quickly. In everything he does, the blind man seems to have a facility for picking up skills. The narrator describes him as a blind jack-of-all-trades, but when Robert asks him about his own work, he says he hates his work and doesn't have any options.

The wife returns and eventually she falls asleep, leaving Robert and the narrator alone. The TV has a show about cathedrals, and Robert asks the narrator to describe a cathedral to him. He tries to describe it in words, but fails. Robert then asks him to get paper and pens, and to draw a cathedral. He holds the narrator's hands as they draw, and when the wife wakes up, she asks what they are doing. The blind man's fingers are riding the narrator's fingers as they draw, and then Robert feels the paper to see what he has drawn. The blind man asks the narrator to close his eyes and feel the paper. When the narrator does, he says that it feels like nothing else in his life.

Analysis

The Bridle: The tone of The Bridle is a bit dark, as Marge and Harley treat the Holits family as a mystery to be unraveled—or else a tragedy just waiting to play out. They do not seem to care very much what happens to them, and the Holits family is too proud to ask for anything. Marge and Harley wait to see how things will turn out. The assumption being that this is a temporary housing complex, and this family is not likely to be around for long.

Things seem to take a turn for the good when Betty gets a job, but she never gets more intimate with Marge than the one time Marge does her hair. She confesses some of the things she must carry around with her. She tells Marge about Holits' horse racing days, but she also confesses that 'dreams are something you wake up from'. Obviously things have been hard for the Holits family for some time, and she is bitter about it. Holits' drunken recklessness leads him to overestimate his leaping abilities, and he plunges to the deck, injuring himself, and failing in his aspiration to reach the pool in his jump.

Marge and Harley do not seem to be surprised when the Holits family packs up and leaves. They do not know where they are going, only that the family will have to keep working to hold together. When Marge finds the bridle in the Holits family's room, the bit and the reins become a metaphor for fate, the thing that drives people, and forces them one way or another.

Cathedral: From the narrowness of tone, it is clear this narrator is not a very educated or cosmopolitan person. He is limited in his ideas about blind people and others, and he hardly knows his wife. He seems to have a working relationship, but he also talks down to his wife and treats her like an idiot. This only serves to reveal his own ignorance.

Carver seems to be having a joke on the poor man, and his ignorance is barely tolerated by the wife, and tolerated with good humor by the blind man. When the blind man comes to the house, the narrator is shocked by every thing the blind man does, whereas he himself is really only comfortable drinking or watching TV. He gains respect for the blind man by watching how he manages to eat dinner—without seeing!—and by the time they have had more drinks, his resistance is wearing down. When the blind man asks him to draw a cathedral, it seems like the narrator might finally burst out of his prejudiced ideas, and he does let the blind man's fingers ride his own. This is a shift in tone, as the narrator had exclaimed about the blind man touching his wife's face. All that alcohol must have loosened the narrator up. The story ends with the narrator experiencing blindness, and not wanting to open his eyes. Ironically, he can finally see how things appear to the blind man now. The blind man comes out looking like a good-humored old fellow, with lots of experience and patience for people and their limitations.

Vocabulary

implements, beautician, maintenance, corporation, unemployed, military, chlorine, dependable, denomination, thimble, remote, projector, manicure, jabbering, grindstone, portable, commotion, bandage, recreation, military-industrial, squeaked, scalloped, inseparable, pitiful, distinguished

Characters

Jack and Fran

This couple goes to a friend's house, and they are greeted by a peacock. The wife is tall and blond, with beautiful hair, and the husband works with the friend who invited them to dinner. The pleasant dinner party marks a high point for them.

Wes

Wes is a husband who is trying to stop drinking, and he invites his estranged wife to come up to a cabin on the water to help him through the summer.

Sandy

Sandy is the character whose husband has been out of work for three months. He has been on the couch, and Sandy is upset by the possibility that he might never get up. When she finds the refrigerator broken, her husband finds a listing for an auction, and this makes her think about her parents.

Myers

Myers is the man on the train who is going to visit his son in Strasbourg. He realizes he does not really want to see his son, and does not get off the train when it stops in Strasbourg. He ends up being quite content to have lost all his things when the train changes carriages.

Donna

Donna is one of Patti's vitamin salesgirls. She goes out to a black jazz club with Patti's husband, and is confronted with a drunk black Vietnam vet named Nelson, who wants to give her money for sex. This ends the date, and breaks Donna down. She starts crying, because she could only think of the fact she needed the money.

Lloyd

Lloyd has moved into an apartment of his own, and he has cut back to just drinking champagne. He gets a wax buildup in his ear, and when his wife Inez comes to talk about things, she has to help him by pouring oil in his ear to dissolve the wax.

J.P.

J.P. is Joe Penny, a chimney sweep who meets an unnamed narrator at Frank Martin's clinic for alcoholics. He had been checked in by his father-in-law and brother-in-law. When his wife comes to the clinic, she gives the narrator a kiss, because it is supposed to be good luck to kiss a chimney sweep.

Miss Dent

Miss Dent is holding a gun on a man when she is introduced. The man may have robbed or raped her, but she has the gun in her bag when she retreats to the waiting room at the train station. She meets an old man and a woman who are vaguely hostile to her, but nothing happens before the train comes and they all get on the train together.

Carlyle

Carlyle is a man whose wife has left him. He was nineteen, she was eighteen when they married, and now, eight years later, she has left him with their two small children. Carlyle has spent all summer with the children, but now that he has returned to teaching, he ends up finding Mrs. Webster to take care of the children. She gets him through the difficult time, and makes him see he will survive the breakup.

Mrs. Webster

Mrs. Webster is the old woman who used to keep house for Richard Hoopes' mother. She comes to Carlyle's house to take care of his two children. She helps him get back on his feet, partly through her talent for taking care of his children, partly by giving him time away from them.

Robert

This is the blind man who comes to visit the narrator's wife. He has a beard and smokes heavily, and he encourages the narrator to try to give him some idea what a cathedral is. He ends up with his fingers riding the narrator's fingers as the narrator draws a picture for him.

Objects/Places

The Off-Broadway

This is the place where the narrator in Vitamins goes for a drink after work. He takes his wife's employee Donna there for a date.

The Bakery

This is where Ann Weiss orders a cake for her son, but neglects to pick it up because her son is hit by a car on his birthday. After the baker makes ominous phone calls, Howard and Ann Weiss return to the bakery, and the baker apologizes. Together they make it up over hot buns fresh from the oven.

Frank Martin's

Frank Martin's is a clinic where alcoholics go to dry out and think about how drinking is ruining their lives. This is where a narrator meets J.P., whose wife Roxy was a chimney sweep.

The Train Station Waiting Room

This is where Miss Dent retreats after holding a gun on a man. An old man and woman come in, and seem to resent Miss Dent's presence. They menace her, a little, and then all get on the train together.

Champagne Bottles

These are hidden in the bathroom in Careful. Lloyd has made the switch to champagne, but he does not seem to be cutting down his drinking. He is only drinking champagne, but he is drinking three or four bottles a day.

The Bridle

Marge, the manager of the apartment complex in The Bridle, finds a bridle in the room the Holits family has vacated after Holits injures himself in a drunken accident. Marge sees how the bridle would be used, and she almost fears it as if it is an instrument of fate. If you had it in your mouth, you would know you were going places. This might be fine for the horse, but for a person, with fate at the reins, this is not always a pleasant experience.

Themes

Recovery

Many of the characters in Carver's stories are, like Carver himself, either recovering alcoholics or alcoholics who have not started to recover yet. Recovery is a tricky process, as characters have to overcome years of drinking, and many bad decisions they are ashamed of, and try to start again. In Chef's House, this process fails as the bad news that Wes and his wife have to leave the house sends Wes back to drinking.

It can safely be assumed the characters in Carver's stories will not succeed in getting off alcohol. They are generally trying to quit, but odds are not good they will succeed. The desire to quit, however—to get some kind of redemption by quitting—is apparent in a lot of the stories. It makes the reader see the drunks as less entertaining than pathetic, since the reader knows the drunks will regret the things they did while they were drinking. There is some shame involved in being brought into a recovery clinic against one's will, but presumably the capacity for redemption should encompass even this humiliation, if a drunk ever dries out.

Fleeting Beauty and Understanding

There are a number of cases when the narrators or characters have a feeling of overwhelming happiness. Looking down at the landlord who is painting the house, one man is delighted he is himself and not the man outside. It is so delightful to be inside with his wife, about to jump back into bed with her; he feels filled with contentment and laughs to himself.

This fleeting beauty is, of course, offset by the continual difficulties of life, from alcoholism, to bills, to ignorance and shame and the problem of other people's personalities and existence. The fleeting beauty does not redeem this, exactly. Sometimes it is the last thing a man remembers before having kids, and then often life takes a turn for the worse. But if it is not a redeeming experience, it is nonetheless a real thing, a waypoint, something to judge things against and to take your bearings.

Children and Childlessness

Having children is one of the deep issues slowly revealed by Carver's stories. Whether women want them and men do not, or whether couples come to the point of having children for the wrong reasons or without preparation, the idea of having children seems to promise a kind of fulfillment that cannot come from anywhere else. Children also cause a kind of bereavement that comes from nowhere else, as readers see in A Small Good Thing, where Howard and Ann and the baker sympathize over their mutual childlessness. Children are partly to be feared for the financial drain on a couple, but mostly they are ominous because they are witnesses of the parents' personalities, and

the narrator in Where I'm Calling From is afraid of getting his girlfriend's mouthy son on the phone. The boy knows what the narrator and his mother are up to, and he is mature enough to see their drunken exploits for what they are.

Regret

Many of Carver's stories are written from the perspective of men who look back on their atrocious behavior and regret they were as young and as foolish and as miserable as they were. The characters do not always know they are miserable, but a story like Vitamins, or Cathedral, builds on the notion that the narrator knows things the character, or younger self did not know.

Carver does not seem to wish that he could do things over again, and there are cases where the characters simply continue to make the same mistakes, but in general, the charm of these stories comes from the fact that the author, or the narrator, knows the character was wrong in his words or actions. Sometimes you can see it in the difference between the narrator's wide understanding and the character's narrow-mindedness, bias, or racism.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in Carver's stories is somewhat split. The author describes lives that are not self-aware or self-reflective. He translates their faults and limitations right into print, as if he wants to let characters speak for themselves. But the author also conveys to the reader he does not agree with the characters. Whether it is the husband's ignorance and prejudice in Cathedral, or the narrator's impatience and indifference in Where I'm Calling From, the characters live in a world the author clearly knows well—having been an alcoholic himself. But it is a world he is no longer at home in, and the point of view tells us he would not be comfortable there. He has too much mastery over the craft of writing. He is too self-conscious, now. Probably, he is ashamed of himself and his youthful exploits, or of the damage alcoholics do while they are drinking. Often times there are secondary characters in the stories who witness the narrators' actions from a similarly external perspective, and judge the narrator for their limitations. The girlfriend's 'mouthy kid' in Where I'm Calling From is one such.

Setting

The majority of these stories take place in domestic settings: houses, trailers, cars. A few take place on trains and in hospitals, but the settings are recognizable, ordinary places, where most people would have been. Sometimes the places are a bit rough, like the dive bars and the apartments men take women or where they live when they have to leave their wives. In some cases, the stories take place at clinics where alcoholism is treated, but most of the time, they take place in normal places that are complicated by people's drinking. Carver does not describe the locations in detail. Only a few key descriptions are meant to convey the mood and tone of a place, whether it is a shelter, of sorts, or another hellish place where drunks will get away with messing things up, making things worse for themselves and the people around them. The Bridle rests on this ambiguity—the reader knows the short-term apartments are not places where good things happen to people, and there is some suspense in the anticipation, of waiting to see whether the Holits family turns hopeless, or fixes things up for themselves.

Language and Meaning

Carver's language is simple, sometimes deceptively so. He speaks in the jargon of common people, uneducated people, even biased people. His vocabulary is deliberately unsophisticated, and big words are causes for characters and narrators alike to puzzle over the meanings of things. The simplicity is not the end of the line, though, because Carver is a master at subtext. He will not say a thing straight out, but the reader can make out the shape of a man's prejudice and ignorance, as in Cathedral, or the silent troubles of a family, as in The Bridle. The heavy repetition of 'spade' in Vitamins tells us

that the author knows the narrator is a bit over-the-top in his use of racist slang. By repeating it as much as he does, he overdoes it, so we can see the author would not speak the way the character does. An author would have tried to cut down the repetition. But the character has no such scruples.

Structure

Carver's stories are not always about what they seem to be about. There is generally a subtext, which slowly makes its way to the surface, or else to a place just below the surface, where it might be clear what the characters are really thinking or feeling. The stories do not typically resolve to perfect clarity, but the hidden emotions—resentment, longing, tenderness—make their way out of the story.

This structure—writing so closely about a situation that it is not clear what the plot is—makes the reader attend to every detail, to try to discern the pattern or the pressures beneath the surface, and Carver typically reveals these in the end. Some stories make a break from the narrative of many pages in the final page or two. They switch back to the present in which Carver is writing, or else they jump ahead in years, to see what was happening from a different perspective. Usually this rupture throws the action of the narrative into a more pathetic light.

Quotes

I wished that I'd never forget or otherwise let go of that evening. That's one wish of mine that came true. And it was bad luck for me that it did. But, of course, I couldn't know that then.

I can't talk like somebody I'm not. I'm not somebody else. If I was somebody else, I sure as hell wouldn't be here. If I was somebody else, I wouldn't be me. But I'm who I am.

He shook his head. In a lifetime of foolish actions, this trip was possibly the most foolish thing he'd ever done…This boy had devoured Myers's youth, had turned the young girl he had courted and wed into a nervous, alcoholic woman whom the boy alternately pitied and bullied.

I'm just a baker. I don't claim to be anything else. Maybe once, maybe years ago, I was a different kind of human being. I've forgotten, I don't know for sure. But I'm not any longer, if I ever was.

He tells them what it was like to be childless all these years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty.

This is hard, brother. This life is not easy, any way you cut it

I got out in a hurry. 'Night, Donna,'" I said. I left her staring at the dashboard. I started up my car and turned on the lights. I slipped it in gear and fed it the gas.

I was interested. But I would have listened if he'd been going on about how one day he'd decided to start pitching horseshoes.

Part of me wanted help. But there was another part.

The bit's heavy and cold. If you had to wear this thing between your teeth, I guess you'd catch on in a hurry. When you felt it pull, you'd know it was time. You'd know you were going somewhere.

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. She was always trying to write a poem. She wrote a poem or two every year, usually after something really important had happened to her.

Her officer—why should he have a name?

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

How does Carver create a distance between the characters and the self he was in the stories and the self he or his narrators have become in the telling of the stories? How does the reader know the person writing the stories has learned things from the experiences he had in the stories? What, typically, has he learned?

Topic 2

What is the experience of being alcoholic like in Carver's stories? How are alcoholics different from other people? How do other people treat them? How do they see their own alcoholism, and what, if anything, is the cure for drinking? What drives them to it in the first place?

Topic 3

How do relationships between men and women typically play out in Carver's stories? What are the themes that come up in their conversations? What role does drinking play in their relationships, and what role do children play? How do they manage to preserve, or how do they lose the feeling of being young and in love?

Topic 4

In many of Carver's stories, characters have a moment of understanding, or peace, or happiness. But these moments are fleeting, and often the narrators look back on them with some bitterness, or distance. What happens to these moments? Why don't they last? What is their worth? Do they justify or redeem other experiences? Are they genuine happiness, or are they illusions? How do the characters understand them? How is the reader meant to understand them?