

Fullness out of Minimalism—Interpretation on the Narrative Style of Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral”*

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Raymond Carver, American short story writer and poet is a major force in the revitalization of the short story in the 1980s. Carver’s writing permeates idiographic techniques and evocative insights into reality. “Cathedral” is the title story of Carver’s outstanding collection *Cathedral*. The story relates that the narrator through the visit of his wife’s blind friend eliminates the prejudice and goes out of shell of closed-off ignorance. Carver employs precise and concise language to develop plot and reveal characters’ mind and sets tensions leading to character’s epiphany. Through the setting of tensions, the achievement of epiphany, and the precise and concise narrative language, Carver makes fullness out of a minimalist style of writing.

Keywords: Raymond Carver, “Cathedral”, minimalism, epiphany, ellipsis

Introduction

Raymond Carver, American short story writer and poet, is a major force in the revitalization of the short story in the 1980s who is considered as the most outstanding short story writer after Hemingway in America. Raymond Carver was born in a working-class family. When he was 19, he got married and had a daughter in the same year, and then in the second year the young couple had their son. At that time, Carver was only 20. In order to support the family, he had to work as delivery man, janitor, library assistant, sawmill laborer, and so on. Carver experienced the hardship of labor and the obscurity of living in his early years. Nevertheless, he took on great interest in writing and all the hard times he went through cast shadows in his works. He persevered in learning writing and inventing his own.

Transformation of Style in Carver’s Short Story Writing and Creation of “Cathedral”

Carver’s first work was published in 1961. His first short story collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* was published in 1976, which was nominated for the National Book Award. During his entire life, Carver seemed to be cornered into the predicament between the need to subsist and the desire to write. The oppressive life and his struggle to be a writer led Carver to alcoholism from which he suffered too much and once ceased his writing career. Carver never wrote a novel in his entire life. He focused on short stories and poetry. He mocked himself in

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an interview:

It was simply impossible to start something that would have taken me two or three years, due to life circumstance. So I set myself to writing poems and short stories. I could sit down at the table, start and finish in one sitting. (Grimal, 1999)

As he himself said, Carver's career was dedicated to short stories and poetry in which he involved his own life reality. His writing career lasted 25 years. During these years, he published 65 short stories and collections such as *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (first published in 1976), *Furious Seasons* (1977), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), *Cathedral* (1983), *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). Carver died of lung cancer at the age of 50. In the same year, he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Carver's characters are mostly so-called blue collars who do the tough labor work, earn slender salary, live a desperate life, and even have the same alcoholism problems like himself. In his early writing period, Carver depicts all their hardships, misery, and pain realistically and desperately. Tragedy neither happens in the beginning, nor at the end of the story; it is his characters' daily life. Because of his concerns for the poor American working class and the austere themes of separated and alienated relationships between men and women in his stories, Carver's early works are labeled as dirty realism. As for artistic techniques, Carver tends to use the plain and concise language, which earns him the title of "Master of Minimalism".

Carver got rid of drinking in 1977. Since then, his life began to get better, and he created many short stories and poems successively. Moreover, his writing style became milder; the stories became more hopeful and his characters got more optimistic. In 1983, Carver was granted a five year Strauss Living Fellowship by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He became professional writer and did not need to worry about life. In the same year, he published his third collection *Cathedral* that was usually thought as his best. Because of this collection, Carver was nominated by Pulitzer Award. Carver saw *Cathedral* as a watershed in his career for it shifts towards a more optimistic and confidently poetic style. This collection including 12 short stories still concerns about the poor American working class who struggle with the economic recession, fail to communicate with others, and sink in various dilemmas in their everyday life. However, different from the previous stories of absolute desperation, stories in this collection are brighter and less absurd; the characters are more outgoing and seek to explain themselves. Although there still are complications and tensions between relationships, there are also possibilities to reconcile and lead to moments of epiphany. As Carver himself once said, "My style is fuller, more generous... In my latest book, *Cathedral*, the stories have more range. They're fuller, stronger, more developed, and more hopeful" (Grimal, 1999).

The title story "Cathedral" is the last story of this collection. Taking it as a study case, this paper aims to analyze Carver's distinguished narrative skills of this short story and to explore how Carver uses narrative skills and what extent of effect he approaches. The story of "Cathedral" begins with the narrator telling that an old friend of his wife's is coming to visit them. Robert, this friend, is a blind man who has just lost his wife and will travel to Connecticut to visit relatives. Ten years ago, the narrator's wife met the blind man when she worked for him as a reader for a whole summer. By the end of that summer, she married an officer in the Air Force. But she suffered isolation and loneliness after marriage. She failed to commit suicide and divorced, and then she got remarried to the narrator. In the meanwhile, the blind man married another woman named Beulah who carried

cancer. The couple lived inseparably for eight years until the woman died and the blind man buried her. During these years, the blind man and the narrator's wife never met again. However, they kept in touch by mailing tapes in which they told each other's daily life. The wife put all kinds of things on tapes and sent the tapes. This is the first time they have met again and he will sleep over at narrator's home. Nevertheless, the narrator is not enthusiastic about the visit. According to himself, the only idea of blindness comes from the movies and he feels uncomfortable with his wife's relationship with the blind man. Therefore, when the blind man shows up, the narrator behaves indifferently and impolitely. In contrast, Robert is enthusiastic and independent. Unlike the normal image of a blind man, Robert does not wear dark glasses and does not use cane. He smokes, locates food correctly, and "watches" TV. He attempts hard to communicate with and get to know the narrator during dinner and interacts with him when the wife falls asleep and leaves them alone. When something about church is shown on TV, Robert asks the narrator to describe cathedrals for him. However, the narrator cannot tell what a cathedral looks like. Robert invites the narrator to draw a cathedral together. The narrator draws windows with arches, flying buttresses, and giant doors. And finally they finish the good picture of cathedral. With the finishing of drawing, the narrator seems to go out of his shell of closed-off ignorance.

The Setting of Tensions and the Achievement of Epiphany

Carver believes writings cannot escape from reality. To him, the principal reality is the life of the growing fringe population, for he himself has been a divorcee, a laborer, an alcoholic, unemployed, and bankrupt. Carver's characters may have not received enough education, so they are reluctant to talk and unable to communicate. Hence, the issue of communication becomes one of Carver's recurring themes and motifs.

One of Carver's technical devices is setting tensions and developing suspensions till the end. In most of his previous works, due to the deliberate arrangement of tensions and excessive leanness of the writing, no enough space of introspection is given to characters. Thus, no clear indication of results of characters' fate, or their spiritual growth or mental epiphany are revealed in the end of the novel. However, in "Cathedral", Carver enriches his writing and leaves space for character to develop his mental world and generate epiphany. Carver arranges various elements of tensions. He foreshadows the enlightenment chances of the narrator who is not entirely hopeless and whose numbness is evoked at last by the blind man. The conflicts and tensions are slightly relieved and epiphany is introduced, which makes the character break the self-closure in the end.

An epiphany is a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it. (Morris, 1971, p. 18)

In literary criticism, an epiphany refers to a sudden realization—a flash of recognition in which someone or something is seen from new prospective. Epiphanies can come in many different forms, and are often generated by a complex combination of experience, memory, knowledge, predisposition and context. (Kounios & Beeman, 2009, p. 210)

In Carver's works, one of his technical approaches is to create the epiphany with tensions to illuminate both characters and readers to experience a sudden and striking realization. The tensions are composed of the phases of plot development and the verbal intensity, and among the tensions there are "luminous markers" (Arias-Misson, 1982, p. 625) connecting different fragments, pushing the plot development and making the entrance of epiphany.

In "Cathedral", there is a turning process of the narrator's attitude. It begins with the narrator's no anticipation of the arrival of the wife's long-time friend. The narrator is unhappy in his work and unconnected to other human beings. In addition to not being connected to others himself, he seems to resent his wife's connections to other people as well. He claims his prejudice, "The blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs"(Carver, 1992, p. 131). His idea of blindness came from the movies. He feels pathetic for the blind man's wife, for the marriage life with a blind man is beyond his understanding. He blames the blind man for all his bad mood and the quarrel with his wife. All narrator's negative attitudes towards the blind man including jealousy, prejudice, misunderstanding and complaints make the textual atmosphere tense and demonstrate the narrator's narrowness and alienation. Next tense segment is the greeting of guest. The narrator shows the hostility of his wife's guest through actions and utterance. When the narrator sees a blind man wearing full beard, he thinks it is "too much" (Carver, 1992, p. 136). He also criticizes the blind man's eyes in his mind. The blind man's behaviors exceed the narrator's expectation and imagination. Whether the unexpectation can be turned into other feelings leaves suspense. Every time when the narrator feels surprised by the blind man, it means reality tests his inherent concept and it offers a chance for him to arrest the movement from ignorance to illumination. Thus each unexpectation is a luminous marker. The suspension whether the narrator's denial of the blind man can be eliminated and the communication can be eventually achieved is created by all the stages set. Then the narrator turns on TV whose motivation is not mentioned. Readers can guess maybe it is due to his indifference, his purpose to insult the blind man or his hobby and the only way to obtain information from the outside, which is also the common problem of modern people. He supposes this visual recreation will exclude the blind man. However, the blind man tells he owns two TVs and one of them is a color set, which makes the narrator voiceless again. This also serves as a luminous marker, another turning point to change the narrator's previous attitude towards the blind man and also starts to unfold the plot. When the wife goes upstairs to get to sleep, the narrator still wants to avoid and escape from chatting with the blind man. He does not "want to be left alone with a blind man" (Carver, 1992, p. 141). However, later with the unfolding of the story the luminous markers of mental change are given from time to time. For instance, when Robert invites the narrator to stay up for a while, contrary to the former reaction, he is "glad for the company" (Carver, 1992, p. 143) and he means it because he and his wife "hardly go to bed at the same time" (Carver, 1992, p. 143) and he stays up alone. The narrator feels delighted for having a company, which means he takes another step ahead of communion. Then they give their attention to the TV, which means the connection and communion between the two men continues. To avoid embarrassment, the narrator introduces a program on cathedrals on TV. After discussing cathedrals for some time, Robert asks the narrator to describe what a cathedral is. However, he gropes for the words to convey it in vain. "How could I even begin to describe it? But say to my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else" (Carver, 1992, p. 146). Then the two come together in deeper communion when Robert and the narrator, at Robert's suggestion, begin to draw a cathedral on a paper bag. The blind man "closed his hand over my hand" (Carver, 1992, p. 149). At last, the narrator has his eyes closed but his mind opened stating "I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything" (Carver, 1992, p. 150). The surprising and fulfilling feeling of epiphany is delivered finally. The intimate cooperation of drawing achieves a connection between the two that finishes the narrator's description of a cathedral and sparks the narrator's mind. As Carver says himself, the narrator "changes; he grows" (Grimal,

1999). Carver transforms stressful elements into enlightenment, which not only promotes the process of narration, but is also an important driving force to arrest reader's interest.

Precise Narration With Minimalist Style

One cannot discuss the style of a Raymond Carver story without minimalism. Carver forms his minimalism under literary influence. One of his best mentors is Ernest Hemingway whose famous "Iceberg Theory" is that a writer omits things that he knows and forces readers to interpret. Carver serves apprenticeship with this theory to use bare language to present rich content. In Carver's essay titled "On Writing", he also points out the importance of relationship between the precise use of words and omission.

What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth surface of things. (Carver, 1983, p. 26)

Although Carver himself rejects this label, the style employed in his works displays the minimalist tendency. In his second life where Carver got rid of drinking and lived a stable life with his lover, he broke the pared-down style. On one hand, he enriches the thematic content of the story, which makes the character obtain epiphanic moment and leads the story into resolved ending. On the other hand, he keeps his original style in a much conciser way. He employs techniques, such as ellipsis, defamiliarization, juxtaposition, ambiguity, parallel structures, and suggestive dialogue. These techniques draw fullness out of his minimalist writing. The subject matter and themes of Carver's works are mainly realistic. However, the realistic contents are predated by minimalist devices.

Highly Brevity and Accuracy of Language

It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power. (Carver, 1983, p. 24)

Carver is accurate with selection and description of the material objects. "Cathedral" fully presents his lean style with concrete details, precise language, simple syntax, few psychological description, and monologue. As usual, Carver invents simple plot with conversations and simple actions of protagonists. His descriptions of setting and actions are very restricted. However, the simplicity on surface implies meanings in depth. The setting of the story is too simple that there is only a man, his wife, their house, the blind guest, and a television set. Even the slightest descriptive detail about the household—the fact that it is a color TV—is revealed only in the dialogue, where it serves to strike a colorful, bizarre note: "'This is a color TV', the blind man said. 'Don't ask me how. But I can tell'" (Carver, 1992, p. 140). Another object—tape is also repeated many times. The recurrence of objects like TV and tape in this story has symbolic meanings attached and narrative functions. They on one hand reveal modern people's isolation; on the other hand serve as communication devices for the protagonists to bridge the gaps.

The actions and words unspoken sharply indicate characters' suffering from a serious miscommunication. When the narrator sees the unwelcome guest from the window after long time waiting, the author employs a trail of actions to indicate narrator's fret and precipitancy.

My wife took his arm, shut the car door, and, talking all the way, moved him down the drive and then up the steps to the front porch. I turned off the TV. I finished my drink, rinsed the glass, dried my hand. Then I went to the door. (Carver, 1992, p. 136)

The writer gets rid of adjective to modify narrator's status, adverbs to modify narrator's action, and even any psychological description. Nevertheless, the tension still arises among these quick acts like speeding-cadenced timing. Moreover, the narrator is skeptical of the two friends' intimate long-term pen pal relationship that makes him more reluctant to welcome Robert's visiting. Carver employs single actions to reveal mind instead of psychological description. When seeing the guest, the protagonist is particular about everything. He sees too much beard on the blind man. Readers may doubt "why blind man cannot wear beard" when reading here. Then the narrator judges the clothing by one capitalized word sentence "Spiffy" (Carver, 1992, p. 137) and eyes by "Creepy" (Carver, 1992, p. 137). From these hints, readers can draw clues that the narrator treats the guest with prejudice and anger and his indifferent listless character is revealed as well.

Ellipsis

Ellipsis is an oft-used tactic in service of brevity throughout "Cathedral". Under the influence of the "Iceberg Theory", Carver leaves the main issues underneath the surface of narration, which means that readers must use their own speculations to understand all circumstances and motivations of the characters. Carver's narrators leave questions pertaining to plots and characters unanswered, often leading to interpretations that consider concerns the text raises rather than issues the text resolves.

In "Cathedral", the first person point of view is employed. This I-narrator owns prejudice and has issue of inability to explain himself. He often leaves superficial details unspoken and the discourse indirect, which makes the narration unreliable and reveals his self-closure, ignorance and alienation and reflects a recurring theme of communication. The unarticulated thought in the back of the mind and the unmentioned information about the characters and plot create an enormous effect. For instance, due to the narrator's narrow-mindedness, he cannot understand the blind man and his wife's spiritual connection. The writer does not point out the doubt clearly; instead, the uneasiness is related by the narrator's recalling. On the last day of that summer when the wife worked for the blind man, he asked to touch her face. The touch of his fingers on her face was a pivotal moment in her life, which she even tried to write a poem about it. The wife's feeling is not mentioned here; neither is the narrator's. However, one detail is mentioned that "he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose-even her neck" (Carver, 1992, p. 132) and she recalled the scene and her feelings of the touching in the poem. The writer omits what feeling it is. The narrator does not "think much of the poem" (Carver, 1992, p. 132). "I just don't understand" (Carver, 1992, p. 132). Nevertheless, envy can be conceived here through the repetition. Besides the poems, the content of the tapes is also unmentioned. His wife played the tape to him once, whereas the content of the tape ended when saying "from all you've said about him, I can only conclude—" (Carver, 1992, p. 134). Nothing important is mentioned here. But the narrator has already become impatient. "I'd heard all. I wanted to" (Carver, 1992, p. 134). The narrator shows no concerns for the poems or tapes that may reflect his wife's spiritual world. The narrator is inarticulate and insufficiently aware of his problem. Indeed, narrator's silences, weaknesses, and inability to communicate with other characters foreshadow his later epiphany and enlightenment.

The omission of some key plots or lines, the concise and precise language, the less austere and more

optimistic theme and the more explicit and outgoing ending than Carver's earlier work with characters talking about their emotions and seeking to communicate with others all form the rich but concise narrative style of "Cathedral", which also indicates Carver's exploration of people's existential condition. The way of "less is more" (Hallelt, 1999, p. 1) creates textual tension, increases a multitude of meanings of language and arrests reader's speculation.

Conclusion

"Cathedral" was published in 1983, and was an even greater success winning praise again on the cover of the *Times Book Review*, this time from Irving Howe, who wrote that in Carver's more expansive later work, one saw "a gifted writer struggling for a larger scope of reference, a finer touch of nuance" (Carver, 1984, p. I). In an interview with *The Paris Review* that year, Carver made clear that he preferred the new expansiveness, "I knew I'd gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone".¹ His subject remains the same—the complex tensions between men and women—but the movement in this story is toward reconciliation and renewal. The narration thus is more expansive, affirmative, and generous.

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¹ The Paris Review. (1983). *Raymond Carver, the art of fiction No. 76*. Retrieved from <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3059/the-art-of-fiction-no-76-raymond-carver>