



Cathedral From the Perspective of Reconstructive Postmodernism

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Abstract

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) is a famous American writer in the second half of the 20th century. He is very influential in the contemporary fiction field, who has been praised as “the American Chekhov”, “the greatest American short story writer after Hemingway” and “the greatest contributor to the revival of short story in the 1980s”. *Cathedral*, a collection of stories published in 1983, is Carver’s mature work nominated for Pulitzer Prize, which includes a short story named *Cathedral*.

Carver’s short story *Cathedral* illustrates the alienation and imbalance of the human spirit brought about by modernism. Aiming at Raymond Carver’s short story *Cathedral*, this paper adopts the method of combining literature review and literary criticism to illustrate the main narrative features of Carver’s novels from the perspective of Reconstructive Postmodernism. In Carver’s opinion, when communicating with others, recognizing and accepting the difference between oneself and others, which also means integrating into the world of others, enables the isolated individual can truly communicate with the social partner outside the family. Through true acceptance and respect of others which has been externalized as the means of communication, the inner relationship between the self and others is rebuilt, and the spiritual dilemma can be got rid of, and the spiritual home of human beings is finally rebuilt to accomplish the overall ecological civilization of human society, which is of great significance to the construction of contemporary ecological civilization and the realization of harmony between man and nature.

Key words: Reconstructive Postmodernism; Cathedral; Spiritual ecology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) is a famous American writer in the second half of the 20th century. He is influential in the contemporary fiction field. He has been renowned as “the American Chekhov”, “the greatest American short story writer after Hemingway” and “the greatest contributor to the revival of short story in the 1980s”. *Cathedral*, a collection of stories published in 1983, is Carver’s mature work nominated for Pulitzer Prize, which includes a short story named *Cathedral*. What’s more, Carver’s short story *Cathedral* illustrates the alienation and imbalance of the human spirit brought about by modernism.

1.1 Literature Review

Scholars have begun to analyze Carver’s novels in the early 20th century abroad and home.

At present in China, studies on Carver’s novels mainly focus on his narrative strategy and the manifestation of spiritual ecology. The unique narrative strategy makes Carver’s novels full of deep meaning and can motivate readers’ subjective initiative to participate in the reading of the text. The representative articles are as follows. In 2007, Zhang Hui published a work called “The Theory of Raymond Carver’s Simple Writing” in *The Journal of Zhejiang Industry and Commerce University*, through the analysis of the novel’s narrative and language use, this paper expounds the Carver’s unique writing style. In 2010, Lang Xiaojuan published a work called “A Work Based On the Principle of Dialogue -- a Review of Raymond Carver” in *Academics*, indicating that the implementation of the principle of dialogue between the author and the

reader can form a kind of interactive context. In 2010, Tang Yu published an article “When we talking about Carver what We Say --- from the Perspective of Raymond Carver’s Style and Theme “ in *Anhui Literature*, this paper expounds Raymond Carver’s simple narrative style. In 2012, Kong Rui published an article titled “Blindness and Insight -- a Brief Analysis of Raymond Carver’s minimalist style in Cathedral” in *The Journal of Ningbo Radio and Television University*, pointing out that *Cathedral*, the collection short stories, embodied Carver’s pursuit and artistic philosophy of minimalism.

Besides, the study of Carver’s novels from the perspective of spiritual ecology is not only in line with the general trend of contemporary attention to ecology, but also provides a new perspective to solve the spiritual crisis in reality. In 2010, Yang Chunmei published an article named “Raymond Carver’s Novels from the Perspective of Spiritual Ecology” in *Time Literature*, which elaborated on the significance of Carver’s novels for the construction of contemporary spiritual ecological civilization. In 2018, Ren Lingzhao et al. published an article titled “A Brief Analysis of Raymond Carver’s *Cathedral* Enlightening People’s Hearts” in *View on Publishing*, which pointed out that Carver elaborated the important significance of communication for realizing the redemption of human nature through the description of the embarrassment of people at the bottom of society.

In foreign studies, there are some researches on Carver’s short stories. Most of them focus on the minimalist writing technique of the novel, the embodiment of modernism in the novel text and the novel style. Critics generally regard Carver’s work as profound. The representative articles are as follows. In 1991, Miriam Marty Clark published an article titled “Raymond Carver’s Monologic Imagination” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, which analyzed “the chaos of life”, “the failed conversation”, “the din of alien discourse”, as well as “Carver’s singular discourse” (240). In 2001, Günter Leypoldt published an article titled “Raymond Carver’s ‘Epiphanic Moments’”, which used postmodernism to illustrate the epiphanies in the content and his narrative style. In 2012, Larry McCaffery et al. published “An Interview with Raymond Carver” in *Mississippi Review*, which indicates that “the things in Carver’s works are more than what they appear, for often commonplace objects in his stories become in Carver’s hands more than realistic props in realistic stories, but powerful, emotionally charged signifiers in and of them. Language itself undergoes a similar transformation” (228). In 2012, Robert C. Clark published an article titled “Keeping the Reader in the House: American Minimalism, Literary Impressionism, and Raymond Carver’s ‘Cathedral’” in *Journal of Modern Literature*, which illustrated the usage of demonstration of Minimalism in *Cathedral*. In 2016, Clifford Thompson published an article titled “The Art, Magic, and Blues of Raymond Carver” in *The Threepenny*

Review, which analyzed the plot, language, and artistic style of Raymond Carver’s works.

To sum up, the research on Carver at home and abroad mainly focuses on the writing technique, narrative strategy and article theme, and seldom involves the spiritual ecology in carver’s works.

1.2 Research Method

Aiming at Raymond Carver’s short story *Cathedral*, this paper adopts the method of combining literature review and literary criticism to illustrate the main narrative features of Carver’s novels from the perspective of Reconstructive Postmodernism.

Namely, in this paper, through the macroscopic social background and microscopic technique, combining the text, the author, and the reader, as well as the historical background and social development, has formed a presence of the organic networks with internal relationship. In this network, reconstructive postmodernism as an analysis technique integrates each part to contact, which further reflects the contemporary concept of organic wholeness. On the basis of realizing that things are related and associated, it is acceptable to accomplish the spiritual civilization, which is related to material civilization and social civilization.

1.3 Research Feasibility and Significance

As this paper mentioned earlier, the above studies mainly focus on the micro aspects, such as the elaboration of writing techniques, the elaboration of Carver’s narrative strategy, and the analysis of Carver’s spiritual ecology through describing characters. There are still a lot of explanatory space and research perspectives for Carver’s research at home and abroad. Therefore, on the basis of existing researches, this paper conducts a systematic research on Carver’s *Cathedral* through relevant knowledge of Reconstructive Postmodernism. According to Reconstructive Postmodernism, through true acceptance and respect of others which has been externalized as the means of communication, the inner relationship between the self and others can be rebuilt, and accomplish the overall ecological civilization of human society, which is of great significance to the construction of contemporary ecological civilization and the realization of harmony between man and nature.

2. MACROSCOPIC ASPECT: THE CONNOTATION OF RECONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM IN CATHEDRAL

In the ideological origin, Sprenak’s ecological postmodernism, or reconstructive postmodernism, is related to “non-deconstructionist forms of postmodernism” by David Griffin, Richard Falk and Charles Jencks et al. The reconstructive postmodernism takes changing the modernism thought as its basic standpoint and overcoming

the nihilism of postmodernism as its value purport to carry out a defense war to safeguard the harmonious relationship between man and nature.

2.1 Crisis Brought by Modernism

Reconstructive postmodernism rejects modernity because modernity has not lived up to its promise of bringing a better life, but has brought many problems. In the view of reconstructive postmodernism, the pathology of the world is not only represented by the destruction of the natural environment, but also by the decline of spiritual civilization.

Compared with the natural ecological crisis, the spiritual ecological crisis of human beings is a kind of internal and deep crisis, and its lethality is no less than the former. The progress of science and technology and the abundance of materials bring enjoyment to human beings, but also bring the deterioration of living environment and the degradation of human body, and the disappearance of kind feelings and spiritual home of human beings. Beneath the surface of modern society, many people are suffering from loneliness and emptiness. The alienation and disequilibrium of spirit are the most common mental state of Carver's characters, and the embarrassment, pain and alienation of the people at the bottom of society in the industrial civilization era are the important motif of Carver's novels. Their mental illness, enough to lead to the deterioration of the whole social ecology, and then lead to the ecological crisis of human beings, so it is a problem that must be solved in the era of ecological civilization. Neither strangers nor close friends in *Cathedral* are willing to be open up to others, and even communication between husband and wife is limited to the necessary exchange of information. This description shows the status quo of social interpersonal relationship -- interpersonal relationship has evolved into a purely materialized one, the pursuit of interests has become the goal of people, and the friendship between people has become the victim of interests. People's feelings gradually become cold and numb, people almost has nothing to say. The indifference and numbness between people make people's spiritual world under great pressure and even threaten their physical and mental health. People have nowhere to vent their feeling, which will inevitably lead to human alienation. From this point of view, Raymond Carver's short novel *Cathedral* embodies the criticism of the evil consequences of modernity, just like the pursuit of reconstructive postmodernism.

2.2 Nihilism Caused by Deconstructive Postmodernism

Because of the blindly pursuit of deconstructing instrumental rationality and criticizing the loss of life meaning, lack of construction, promoting the value of nihilism, it itself also be at the risk of deconstruction, and deconstructive post-modernism gradually lose vitality in the deconstruction of passion. Reconstructive postmodernism continues the unfinished business of deconstructive postmodernism and tries to put forward

constructive rescue plans. The thought of reconstructive postmodernism advocates the pluralistic integration, taking the organic holism as a weapon, on the basis of organic connection against modern mechanistic worldview, trying to break through the indifferent hostile relationship between human and nature and seeking to rebuild a new harmonious world of man and nature.

In many of Carver's characters, we see an increasingly diseased and alienated human spiritual world in which the sense of life is shrinking and the value of survival is devalued, and the moral consciousness is fragile and human beings are reduced to the state of walking dead. *Cathedral* profoundly reveals the spiritual world of modern masses, exploring the causes of mental crisis, that is the inner loneliness comes from the world of alienation, in which the relationship between human and nature, between man and self are in a state of alienation brought by the dualism. In this short story, readers can find that most people live away from nature while live in cities, where anxiety and solitude are typical characteristics. Inner depression is difficult to vent, they can only depend on alcohol to resolve, which makes the empty people more vulnerable. People do not know the meaning of their existence, let alone advocating the love for life. Marital relationship is also in crisis, social moral is close to bankruptcy, and people's inner world is on the verge of collapse. Carver's account in the *Cathedral* is a testament of the power of the spirit. To a large extent, the spirit can control the existence of human life. It can radiate tremendous energy and amazing creativity. The power of the spirit is based on the recognition that all things are interconnected and the world is an organic wholeness. In the exchange and communication between each other, to achieve the inner nature of the change, so as to get the redemption of human nature, to achieve the reconstruction of the spiritual ecology, and with the help of spiritual force to save the planet's ecological crisis. This provides enlightenment for modern people.

3. MICROSCOPIC ASPECT: THE USAGE OF RECONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM IN CATHEDRAL

3.1 Ontological Equality

D. R. Griffin emphasized that philosophical analysis should be done on multiple levels; research perspectives should be constantly changing. Efforts to promote diversity are also reflected in the reconstructive postmodernists' strong belief in the theory of ontological equality that all existence in the world is real in every sense and degree. "Nothing is more real than anything else" (Cobb 2002:4). Reconstructive postmodernists believe that the acceptance of any difference is the most important (Cobb 2002:28). In other words, different people in different layers should be

respected and accepted, and the potential discrimination should be eliminated.

Cathedral tells the story of “I” receiving my wife’s blind friend, showing the readers that the way people communicate with each other is not to stick to the so-called boundaries and barriers, or keep alert and aloof, and implicitly discriminate against others. It’s about having the courage to open up to others, to accept the other person’s world which is different from yours, and to learn know yourself in the process of communication and acceptance. Actually, “I” came out of my closed world through several contests with the blind Robert. When Robert first came to my house, I was contemptuous of his blindness and felt superior to him. Then, by approaching the stranger on television, “I” began to open up about my faith. Finally, Robert proposed to paint the image of a cathedral, so that “I” really feel the pleasures of communication without any constraints, really easily into the strange world. In the process of drawing a cathedral, with Robert’s encouragement, “I” began to try to communicate with others. When I knew and accepted the difference between myself and others, it also meant that I integrated into the world of others, which made a real communication between the isolated individual and the social people outside the family. The process of conflict in the text is actually the process of breaking the binary opposition between self and others, recognizing the real existence and value of others, and making the communication between people a power of salvation and rebirth: man and others are in a complete ecosystem, each with its own place and value, no one party is superior to the other. Only by protecting the integrity of biological community can the human spirits maintain relative stability and beauty.

3.2 Arbitrary Forms

In traditional literature, form is a carrier of content. However, this seemingly normative relationship between form and content seems to be retreat in the post-modern literature, which is characterized by seemingly loose forms piled up with a large amount of content.

The narration of Carver’s novel is full of vagueness and vacancy, which makes readers feel the characters’ situation more personally while causing confusion. As a writer of simplicism, Carver’s writing is devoted to liberating life from the walls of structure and the cage of stories, and restoring life to its formless and diffuse original form. In Raymond Carver’s novels, we don’t see the full story and plot, we don’t see the deliberate transition and structure, and we don’t see the obvious preset climax or ending. In the *Cathedral*, this vagueness and vacancy is realized through a large number of simple dialogues and the absence of plot narration, in which both the husband and wife are relatively silent, or they cannot talk well. There is no obvious transition from plot to plot, just by constantly describing narrator’s mental state to promote the story development. For example:

“Was his wife a Negro?” I asked.

“Are you crazy?” my wife said. “Have you just flipped or something?” She picked up a potato. I saw it hit the floor, then roll under the stove. “What’s wrong with you?” She said. “Are you drunk?”

“I’m just asking.” I said.

Right then my wife filled me in with more detail than I cared to know. ([Docinweb](#))

What the couple’s quarrel brought was spiritual silence and estrangement, and there was no transition between the two. Carver used the most concise language to change the scene, even without the foil of the environment. The reader does not know exactly what happened between the two, only which the end result was another cold conversation, another mental torment for the protagonist. In addition, in *cathedral*, the only direct quotation “I” gives to the reader when introducing the blind man is the one from the tape: “From all you’ve said about him, I can only conclude ---” Just as the reader is holding his breath to get a glimpse of his conclusion, the author stops abruptly, which is a sign of blank and vacancy. And this way of narration makes the reader more like a peep, to achieve the desired purpose of text writing.

3.3 Creative Techniques

The single traditional theme disappears, and the free communication between different themes is advocated, which emphasizes the function of dialogue (Cobb 2002:7). While respecting equality and diversity, reconstructive postmodernism critically focuses on the dialogue between various beings, including non-existence. Such dialogues are not internal monologues; on the contrary, they refer to a broad process, a dialogue between the present and the past, between the interpreter and the text, and between various interpreters. The purpose of this dialogue is not to impose one point of view on another, but to achieve a new perspective by improving the views of the partners concerned.

But *Cathedral* seems to follow that structure is loose, while the dynamic layout and the principle of dialogue covers the whole passage to create a harmonious environment within the elasticity. In fact, any literary works is in the context of a connected interaction between present and past. Realistic creation itself is the communication and the mutually interpretation with the text before. In the process of dialogue and interpretation, much richer historical connotation is obtained than the previous text itself, which enhances the performance of reality creation itself. *Cathedral* is a collection of stories based on the principles of movement and dialogue. (Lang, pp.233-237). *Cathedral* describes the trivial life of “me”. In the life, “I” have nothing to do but watch TV, drink wine and smoke marijuana in the dark to relieve the spiritual emptiness and knock the truth out. This state was a symptom of Carver’s early frustration. Carver experienced a series of tragic events in the early years of his life, including unemployment, alcoholism,

and separation from his family. Therefore, the *Cathedral* can be regarded as a dialogue between the writer and the text. In addition, the cathedral mainly adopts the first-person narrative point of view, so as to make readers feel empathetic, warm and moving. The reader becomes the narrator, feeling the despair and pain of life with the characters. And that way of writing it is a dialogue between the interpreter and the text.

CONCLUSION

On the one hand, Carver's *Cathedral* illustrates the alienation and imbalance of the human spirit brought by modernism from a macro perspective. The most immediate manifestation of this mental crisis is the alienation of people, whether strangers or close friends, who do not want to be open up to others, and even the communication between husband and wife is limited to the necessary exchange of information. Interpersonal relationship has evolved into a purely materialized one, the pursuit of interests has become the goal of people, and the friendship between people has become the victim of interests. In Carver's opinion, when communicating with others, recognizing and accepting the difference between oneself and others, which is also means integrating into others' world, makes it possible for people to live in meaningfully, and the isolated individual has opportunities to have real communication with the social people outside the family. Through true acceptance and respect to others, which has been externalized as the means of communication, the inner relationship between the self and others is rebuilt, and the spiritual dilemma can be got rid of, and the spiritual home of human beings is finally rebuilt to accomplish the overall ecological civilization of human society.

On the other hand, through the use of innovative writing techniques at the micro level, the readers are told a specific moment or event in the dispersed state of life with the help of the simplest language. There are no superfluous words that may affect the reader; every kind of analysis is up to the reader's choice and participant. Readers are quickly immersed in the narrative field carefully constructed by Carver, so that readers can participate in the communication and construction of characters and events, and realize the connection between the text and readers.

To sum up, in the principle of criticizing the crisis brought by modernism, Raymond Carver provides a new perspective to reconstruct spiritual ecology and to accomplish the overall ecological civilization of human society, which is of great significance to the construction of contemporary ecological civilization and the realization of harmony between man and nature.

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