

Cognition and Characterization in Raymond Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*

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Keywords: characterization, physicality, stop-and-go

Abstract: This paper examines elements of cognition and characterization in Raymond Carver's short story *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*. Cognitive styles and characterization supplements each other in this story. The analysis first identifies the three stop-and-goes in the unfolding of the central conflict, and then by poring over the characterization and especially the physicality of the hero Ralph, brings about the sexual education of the hero. In conclusion, the analysis shows how the author relates to the readers personal and intimate experience of ordinary people with studied narrative skills and art.

1. Introduction

Raymond Carver (1938-1988), American short story writer and poet, was highly lauded in America as "the American Chekhov" and "the observer and expresser of the rare hard times on American literature". Carver's writing of short stories, often with fragmented plots, brief dialogues and open endings, made great contribution to revitalize short story as an art form in contemporary American literature. His short novels usually focused on the sadness and loss in the everyday lives of ordinary people. The characters in his short stories are mainly from the working class, many of whom are drunkards and people with psychological weakness. The story *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, one piece in *Short Cuts: Collected Stories* (1993) is about a man's getting over of his wife's infidelity, interwoven with the husband's awareness of his wife's sexuality. This incident also serves as a tumbling stone for the husband to get a down-to-earth realization of himself and the world he lives in. The analysis first starts with the narrative progression, which is peculiarly slow and divided to three stop-and-goes. From ignorance to knowledge of the wife's extramarital affair, Ralph's character is gradually shown to the readers, the indirect characterization giving a full performance of how his character is formed and changed. Ralph's physicality, his slow but effective engagement with his wife's sexuality and his living background, is especially important in bringing him to a realistic knowledge of life itself.

2. Constant Stop-and-goes

The first characteristic that attracts a reader is its slow narrative progression. In the minimalist development of an insignificant incident—husband and wife's fight over an extramarital affair, there is not much confrontation. It can be easily found out that the story is divided into three parts, though the wife Marian's extramarital affair is made understood by Ralph the husband only near the end of the first part, about the middle of the story. The story makes it to the effect that it is not that the wife does not want to be frank, to talk over the unpleasant issue between them, but the husband's lack of capacity in handling things of his nature forces the story to move very slowly. The revealing of the extramarital affair is constantly delayed and several stop-and-goes are adopted in the process. There was first a mention of the affair, referred to as an "injury to their marriage", but during the following two years, the affair is "never talked about", apparently avoided intentionally by both of them. Then the wife brought up this issue suddenly on a Sunday night, but the talk about the affair between the husband and the wife ended with the impression of just a kiss with the other man. It took some time for the husband to brave himself up to face the issue the third time, and this time, though slowly and

painfully, he got the full details. The husband and the wife fought, after which the husband left the house and started his aimless wandering from one place to another. The three stop-and-goes well presented the causes of the delay, and the narrative form perfectly accords with the content it serves.

In the second and third part of the story, the stop-and-goes are marked at each place where Ralph happened to go to. He could not face his life directly, so there are a lot of roundabouts. But in the end, Ralph's awareness started to develop constantly; he knew more of his situation with each of his visit to one place after another. It seems that Ralph suddenly begins to see the world as it is: he found places he had never paid any attention to, and he began to understand what people around him were really up to.

3. The Characterization of Ralph

Why should the revealing of the affair and the husband's realization be delayed? How does the characterization reflect Ralph as a man works on the reader's cognitive capacity? The author uses indirect characterization on Ralph. It is never shown how Ralph looks like, yet the reader knows from the very beginning of the story the type of education Ralph had received and how he got settled down. Ralph's father, a successful person respected by Ralph, believed and said that "life was a very serious matter, an enterprise insisting on strength and purpose in a young person just setting out, an arduous undertaking". This was a father that dominates and controls, under which Ralph did not get much chance to exercise his own strengthen of thinking and self-identification. The son's school days were much guided by the father's teaching. He "thought" he wanted to find high goals to strive for, yet he "hazily" found that he had "neither the emotional attachment nor the ability"; he tried many things and even was once "on the brink of some kind of huge discovery about himself", yet it never came, until he knew the woman he married and the life he actually led.

By the way, the other character of the story, Marian the wife, is depicted with direct characterization. There are several direct descriptions of her appearance, especially her eyes. Before marriage, "her eyes were large and seemed to take in everything at a glance", and during the honeymoon Ralph found her eyes may "look away from him, staring at something in the distance". This shows a much more sophisticated woman, a woman who has secrets to ponder upon. She is not given much opportunity to show herself, yet from the few words she had spoken and the way she handled the whole affair, she gives the impression of a person with insights and a determined mind. She knew what she had done, and she seemed also to know that everything would pass. Perhaps she knew Ralph better than Ralph did about himself. With this contrast, Ralph's ignorance is accentuated.

Usually the novelist uses direct characterization on characters that does not change much, and indirect characterization on those that will change (Brooks & Warren, 2004: 107-111). As is analyzed above, this technique is applied quite successfully in the story in the sense that it gives a diachronic tracing of Ralph's character development.

4. Ralph's Physicality and Cognition

Ralph's awareness was shown not through direct description nor dialogue, but his action. This way of characterization can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics* that had defined the way characters are represented. In the story there are not many comments on the characters; the plot develops with Ralph's physical response to his surroundings. This was first given in his response to his wife's attraction, most importantly appearance, which was seen from his own eyes. There was a typical vision which gave Ralph the feeling of "an intensely dramatic moment into which Marian could be fitted but he could not". Raymond Carver is a writer of "deadpan style" (Boxer & Phillips. 1976); he seldom comments, and only gives very brief yet quite suggestive details. What does this vision suggest? Surely there was some distance between husband and wife, though the man just saw it vaguely. He took everything for granted, but was never quite able to grasp them. Yet, this incident in his marriage opened a crack into reality. This was quite dramatically presented: while the wife was giving out the details of her affair with the other man, the husband was irrevocably attracted to her.

Ralph's body was reacting to his wife, with more knowledge about himself, them, and even Marian's extramarital affair. This was the basic reason for his final return.

Secondly was Ralph's physical response to the neighborhood he lived in. Ralph wanted to get over with his extramarital affair, but he simply did not know how. His leaving home was a forced choice. The first place he went to was Blake's, to which he was apparently a regular customer. It should not be ignored that Ralph was back in college a heavy drinker. It may seem strange that a man who expected so much from life and had so high goals to pursue may even let himself get dissipated; but this dissipation was only a testament of a restrained and frustrated poor soul. The immune education and traditional lifestyle restricted his vision. When he got out of it, though reluctantly, he saw and felt about a real world. He was able to perceive his surroundings with a new vision: he found around him things that were "frightening" and "evil"; he got to know that other men were basically indifferent to the disaster he was facing; and finally he saw with his own eyes that he had a face which was "nothing out of the ordinary". He got "suddenly aware that he had come a long way that evening, a long way in his life." In other words, he began to see his "self" divided from the others, and the ordinary face showed that he was not a greater person than he had once believed himself to be. It took a whole night of tortures on the body in the neighborhood, venturing into different places, gambling, getting beaten up and exhausted, until he could take in the reality into mind. Physicality came ahead of reasoning and played a deciding role in the growing process. Ralph returned home in the morning, found himself a father of two beloved children, and a husband who still loved his wife.

5. Ralph's Sexual Education

The process of learning the wife's sexuality actually serves as the start of Ralph's sexual education, the beginning of experience and involvement. "Sexual education" in the present analysis has two layers of meaning, one being the mastery of the facts of life, and the other being erotic development, which according to Freud, accompanies the whole psychological life. In the case of Ralph's sexual education, the two interwove together. The big incident in his life helps to stretch his perceptions.

The story's tracing of Ralph's psychological development starts from the flaws in his education, which is generally oppressive. His inability to recognize the basic facts of human sexuality has caused confusion in understanding the things about him. Right after graduation, Ralph moved unprepared into marriage, in which his awakening to full sexuality finally comes. He starts to understand why she is attracted to Marian, and so other man, and more importantly, he starts to separate himself from other people, beginning to establish his own identity system. He started to see his world in a new way, correcting the misconceptions that he previously placed on both personal and social relationships.

As this awakening is much delayed, its revelation caused great pain. It is only apt that Raymond Carver chose physicality as the right way to represent. Through the many clashes and conflicts that he saw with his own eyes and the pains that those disharmonious contacts affect on his body, the read get a sensuous appreciation of what is going on in this man.

But what is disappointing and even sad is that the sexual education only brings Ralph home to his living condition; there is no epiphany. The end of the story does not give any enlightenment, as Ralph still lacks the power of reflection. He is not able to draw lessons from his life experience and put fragments together to form his own thinking. This is a true representation of the lives of the lower classes. For many reasons, they are not able to see the real problems in their life, not to say to find proper ways to solve them.

Ralph goes back home after a whole night of extreme pain and misfortune. Nevertheless, he starts to examine his family life again. His crisis is over, without a noble fight. He looks with his own eyes, at his wife and children, and decides that he forgives. Unlike in college days when he did not know which direction to take, he is now braver to acknowledge the imperfection in his life and to face his wife, who had in the end shown obvious penitence.

6. The Revelation of the Story

This is a story of the ordinary people, and for the ordinary people. It should be noticed that the reader never gets to know what Ralph looks like. This has an intended effect: Ralph is just any ordinary man. The disaster that Ralph faces may happen to anyone, only that it may be accepted with some dramatization by a man not as simple and unsophisticated as Ralph. He is just too frustrated and unable to properly handle the issue. But who can see life as it really is all the time? Who can always have the right answer? The discrepancy between the ideal and the real is a constant problem, in all sorts of terms, for every ordinary person.

The characterization of a man like Ralph is also quite representative. He was born from an American middle-class family, received college education, got a career teaching in high school, and married a woman who was also girlfriend from college time. Strict education and smooth life path gave him an illusion that everything happened just as he had expected and he had an unreal opinion of himself. When Ralph was trying all subjects in college days to pick one for his lifelong career, the reader may have a similar feeling that he/she is also constantly urged to find out what his/her mission in life is, however significant or insignificant that can be. When Ralph was half-drunkenly wandering from one place to another, the reader sees that life for them may also be cruelly blurred as the way Ralph's was. The unexpected affair helped to bring Ralph to reality. Ralph wondered whether there were other men "who could look at one event in their lives and perceive in it the tiny makings of the catastrophe that thereafter set their lives on a different course". Surely there were, and still there are. Catastrophe is like a fall, which brings people down, but it is reality that he/she falls to and embraces. This can be represented by Emily Dickinson's poem: *IT dropped so low in my regard/I heard it hit the ground/And go to pieces on the stones/At bottom of my mind*. It can be seen that Ralph goes emotionally bankrupt when he found that his wife cheated on him, but he starts to see life in its real sense. Carver used the most fitting language to tell the truth of life.

7. Conclusion

The narrative, including its progressive pace, characterization and genuine revelations, are realized so successfully that it earned the author a style. The writing style of Carver was once compared with that of Chekov, and it was found that, like Chekov, Carver gave priority to certain elements in his short stories:

An ordering of the hierarchy of aesthetic constituents which Carver ... sought in the stories ...: strong narrative drive, realism in the presentation of character, and language charged to its utmost in the realization of situation, through a perspective both intense and complete. (Kelly, 1996)

This gives the reader directions as to what to look for in Carver's short stories. Carver's novels often capture a special momentary feeling, which is to be developed repeatedly and elaborately in the narrative process of the story. The feeling of falling in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* is just a case in point. This type of feeling from the text has the air of real life and is presented in such a direct way that it caters to readers who have similar experience in life. Reading novels like this is a reflection on life and readers will see that this life journey is full of falls and bumps. They will thus gain more understanding of their living and of the people around them.

Carver's linguistic style also serves as an easy access to his readers. His language is simple, plain, compact, and smooth. His minimalism is quite striking when applied to the lives of the ordinary people. It is only proper that he "flattens his prose to mirror the flatness of his characters' lives" (Boxer, 1979). There will not be many descriptive passages, only some touches of the key backdrop. The characters speak few words and they speak only to the caring minds. In addition, the author makes no comments. Generally, the stories seem a collection of shootings from different life spots, which show some genuine reality of life. But, despite the fact the scenes that have been presented in Carver's stories are simple and clear on the surface, there are violent emotions lurking under it. It is only that the people involved have no power to express them. The greatness of Carver's art is that he

can speak the unspeakable; endowing a voice to the people he's so familiar with. He also transforms his observation of the lives of the people around him into larger experiences, so that they can be seen and understood.

Carver's stories are also not ended in the traditional way. They are open-ended, the way how life unfolds its mysteries to us. There are usually no resolutions of problems. The characters can only passively accept what comes to them. Though there can be vaguely expressed desires or hopes, they are mostly not fulfilled. But *Will You Please Be Quiet Please* is an exception. When it was first published in a collection of stories with it as its title story and placed it at the bottom of the list, it embodies a change of some sort. Emerging out of the hopeless and insolent living environment, there is finally a hint of revelation. By attaining a certain degree of self-knowledge, Ralph becomes the most introspective character in Carver's stories. Its ending is thus pregnant with meaning, starting off people's appreciation of the droll, the trifling, the evil, and also the warmth of life, in an atmosphere of quietness.

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