



An Analysis of the “Minimalist” Narration in *Cathedral*

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the minimalist narrative techniques in Raymond Carver’s short story collection, *Cathedral*, highlighting how his unique narrative style redefines the short story form. The study finds that Carver’s use of internal and external focalization enhances the realism of his narratives, allowing readers to experience events through a more subjective and fragmented lens. The incomplete narrative structures and open endings in his stories mirror the complexities and uncertainties of real life, encouraging readers to actively interpret and engage with the text. Carver’s concise language—characterized by short sentences and everyday speech—effectively distills complex emotions and situations, offering a profound reflection of the human condition. These findings demonstrate Carver’s significant contribution to minimalist literature and his ability to capture the nuances of ordinary existence.

Keywords: Minimalist Novel, Narration, *Cathedral*

I. Introduction

Raymond Carver is the most important novelist and a representative figure of minimalist fiction in the second half of the 20th century in the United States. He is known for simple and plain words which is the trait of minimalism. His works focus on capturing the details of life and mostly describe the living dilemmas and emotional struggles of ordinary people. Plain dialogues show the complexity and helplessness inside the characters. Carver’s works have redefined the form of short stories, making people pay attention to the subtleties in ordinary life and those neglected emotions. His writing style has influenced a group of contemporary writers and made minimalism more widely spread in the literary field. *Cathedral* is one of the representative works of Raymond Carver, which contains 11 short stories, such as “*Feathers*”, “*Chef’s House*”, “*Preservation*”, “*The Compartment*”, “*A Small, Good Thing*”, etc. This collection of short stories inherits the two writing periods. It has both the helplessness and inability to extricate himself in his early works, and at the same time, there is also the gradual emergence of warmth and positive transformation in his later style. Carver is known for his unique minimalist style. He is good at using concise words and seemingly ordinary plots to reveal the helplessness and dilemmas in people’s lives. But in this collection of works, readers can feel that he has more extensions and deepenings in expression. In terms of character setting, the protagonists of the novel are mostly ordinary blue-collar or people at the bottom of society, such as restaurant waitresses, vitamin salesmen, mechanics, postmen, barbers, etc. They are faced with various pressures and dilemmas in life, such as unemployment, economic difficulties, family conflicts, etc. They are the middle and lower classes who are oppressed by survival and are strugglers and survivors in life. There are no heroic characteristics. The characters all have their own character flaws and helplessness in life. Instead, as ordinary people in real life, they have complex emotions and behaviors, which easily resonate with readers. Most of the stories show the hardships of life, the impermanence of fate and people’s struggles in difficulties. For example, in *A Small, Good Thing*, the son unfortunately dies after a car accident, bringing great pain to his parents, reflecting the absurdity and nothingness brought to people by the contingency of the world and the uncertainty of reality. In *Feathers*, the relationship between the husband and wife gradually becomes plain and distant with the changes of life, and there is a huge gap between their expectations of life and reality. In *Cathedral*, the male protagonist is initially full of hostility and discrimination towards the blind, reflecting his inner loneliness and distrust of others. Carver is known for his minimalist writing style. His language is concise and clear without too much decoration and exaggeration. He is good at expressing profound emotions and thoughts with simple language and letting readers experience the meaning by themselves during the reading process. The endings of the novels are often open-ended without clear conclusions or answers, leaving room for readers to think. This writing technique increases the mystery and attraction of the novel and enables readers to have a deep thinking and discuss the story after reading.

II. Literature Review

Minimalism originated from the modern art movement in the 20th century and was influenced by the Bauhaus school, the De Stijl movement, etc. In the field of art, artists such as Donald Judd and Carl Andre promoted the development of minimalism. The famous saying of the architect Mies Van der Rohe, “Less is more”, has become the motto of minimalism (Xu Gang, 2007). The term “minimalism” began to land in China around 2000. At first, it was mostly seen in the field of architectural art and then spread to multiple fields. As the most influential short story writer after Hemingway in the 20th century, Carver’s writing attainments have attracted the attention of many scholars. In 2000, the famous domestic writer



Ge Fei's article "Reading Raymond Carver" was published in *Fiction World*, which discussed for the first time the minimalist characteristics of Carver's novels in a concentrated way. Ge Fei believes that Carver's novels are not simple at all and are even rather profound and strange. Because he is always hidden and secretly sets up traps quietly, readers are not easy to notice and instead will think that his novels are completely natural (Ge Fei, 2001). The research of Mr. Tang Weisheng is the most prominent. His published articles include "*The Narrative Dilemma of 'Minimalism' and Its Solution: A Comparison between 'Bathing' and 'A Small, Good Thing'*" and "*Which One is the True 'Textual Actual World'? On the Indeterminate Ending of Raymond Carver's 'So Much Water So Close to Home.'*" Starting from the perspective of narratology, he explores the narrative characteristics of Carver's novels. At this stage, which school should Carver's minimalism belong to is still a topic widely discussed by scholars. Carver's novels are generally in a realistic style (Hu Haiqing, 2015). Professor Yu Jianhua believes that the labels pasted on minimalist novels by the critical circle, such as "ironic realism", "experimental realism", "yuppie postmodernism" or "postmodern hyperfiction", all point to the intersection of realism and postmodernism in terms of naming and classification, indicating that minimalist novels have some characteristics of both types of novels (Yu Jianhua, 2012).

III. The "Minimalist" Narration in *Cathedral*

3.1 The Narrative Perspective with Internal and External Focalization

Understood from a simple meaning, narrative text is a series of events conveyed by the narrator to the reader according to a certain narrative method. As a typical representative of narrative text, traditional narratology often focuses on this "series of events" and limits the analysis angle of novels to the three elements of character, plot and environment, seriously ignoring the two important characteristics of narrator's perspective and narrative method. In the long run, people simply understand novels as "stories". In this case, novelists need to constantly fabricate various novel stories to win the favor of readers, and the status of novels is therefore threatened. This paper takes *Cathedral*, one of the classic short story collections of Carver's short stories, as the research object, and comprehensively and deeply analyzes its minimalist art from multiple aspects and dimensions such as narrative perspective, narrative structure, narrative method, narrative language and narrative theme.

Before the end of the 19th century, traditional writers often used the omniscient perspective to construct plots and analyze the psychological activities of characters. The narrator is omniscient like God and can show profound narrative effects. However, it has obvious didactic nature and strong traces of narration, reducing the authenticity of works and limiting the reader's space for re-creation. Since then, writers have been exploring limited narrative perspectives. The author and the reader are at the same level to explore the literary world. Under the restrictive narrative perspective, the narrator only knows part of the content. Usually a character in the story, he tells the story with limited cognition and experience, increasing suspense and mystery. His emotions, biases and limitations will affect the presentation of the story. In *Narratology*, Hu Yamin divides narrative perspectives into non-focus type (omniscient perspective), internal focus type (the narrator is equal to the character, divided into fixed internal focus and unfixed internal focus, which can penetrate into the inner world of characters, enhance the authenticity and credibility, and also have suspense and mystery) and external focus type (the narrator is smaller than the character, can only observe behavior and language, presenting an objective and calm narrative style and leaving imagination space for readers).

In *Feathers*, the first person "I" is used to tell about a family gathering at a friend Bud's house. The whole story unfolds through "my" perspective. The information "I" know is limited to what "I" see, hear, think and feel. For example, "I" can tell that she is already fed up. Maybe it's because Ora didn't let her see the baby and she is angry. "I" has a highly sarcastic description of Bud's child. "He is so ugly that I am speechless. I can't squeeze out a single word... Big red face, bulging eyes, big forehead, and those big and thick lips." The observations and feelings about the peacock at Bud's house, Bud's wife's behavior and everyone's interaction at the gathering are all based on the perspective of "I", belonging to the fixed internal focalization in the internal focalization type.

In *Chef's House*, readers may have questions and curiosity about Joseph's relationship with the house, his behavioral motives and the final fate of the house. This sense of suspense will attract readers to continuously read deeply and explore the truth behind the story. *Vitamins, The Bridle, Cathedral* also use internal focalization to intuitively let readers feel everything that the characters see, hear and feel. This immersive feeling makes the story more real and credible.

In Carver's *Preservation*, the external focalization perspective is obvious. It objectively presents characters' behaviors, such as Sandy's husband's actions after losing his job and his actions when dealing with the refrigerator problem. It describes the environment calmly without the subjective feelings of characters. The dialogue is directly recorded, simple and plain. The emotional expression is implicit, hinting at characters' psychology through details, making the story objective and real and in line with Carver's minimalist style. In *The Compartment*, the application of this perspective makes readers full of questions about the protagonist's experience on the train and the intentions of various characters he encounters. The objective presentation of characters' behaviors can better highlight the loneliness and estrangement between people. In *A Small, Good Thing*, the emotions and psychological states of the characters in the story need readers to infer and understand through their behaviors and words, which prompts readers to think more deeply about the motives of characters' behaviors and the emotions behind them. *Careful, The Train, and Fever* also use the external focalization perspective to let readers continuously think about the deep meaning behind the story during the reading process, so as to better understand the theme that the author wants to convey.

3.2 Incomplete Narrative Structure

Carver's novels mostly depict the life of the blue-collar class in the United States, with incomplete narrative structure and plots and open endings, which are in line with the life conditions of his characters. This way of writing truly reflects the unknown, difficult and complex interpersonal relationship that people face in real life, and also reflects the limitations of character cognition. Through such creative techniques, Carver makes readers deeply feel the uncertainty and elusiveness of life, and triggers readers to think deeply about many issues such as human nature, life and family relations.

3.2.1 *Incomplete Plots*

Most of Carver's novels present incomplete and incoherent plot structure, and are often composed of several fragments of events. These events either lack a clear causal link or have no continuity in time. Carver often leaves out moments that have little to do with the progression of the story, while subtly weaving in nuances outside the story. The plot is sliced and diced, the sequence disorganized, and numerous seemingly unrelated pieces of material are randomly inserted into the novel like jigsaw puzzles. Although the vague and broken plot sets up certain obstacles for the reader's reading road, it also gives the reader more initiative to think and free space to understand. Those incomplete and chaotic plots precisely reflect the limitations of the characters' cognition of the external world and the uncertainty of the real world. This is Carver's unique writing technique in his creation. The incomplete plot is very obvious in *Feather*. The novel opens with a seemingly mundane life scenario in which a couple visits another couple with a peculiar peacock. However, the story does not give a complete account of the characters' backgrounds and past experiences. Readers don't know why the couple went to visit the couple with peacocks, nor do we know the exact origins of their relationship. This omission of the plot makes the story full of mystery and uncertainty at the beginning. During the visit, events revolve around the peacock and the child's reaction, but there is no strong causal link between these events. The appearance of the peacock seems to be only an accidental element, and it has no direct logical connection with the life of the protagonist couple. The novel also intersperses details that seem to have little to do with the main story line, such as the description of the room layout, the back of the swan ashtray, the slender red vase, and the plaster tooth model. The appearance of these details further breaks the coherence of the plot and makes the story more fragmented. The order of the plot has also been reversed. Instead of telling the story in a traditional chronological or logical order, the novel jumps between different scenes and events. For example, during the description of the visit, a memory of an obscure scene from the couple's past is suddenly inserted, and then quickly returned to the present situation of the visit. This incomplete plot setup brings certain obstacles to readers' reading, but at the same time, it also inspires readers' thinking initiative. Readers need to fill in the gaps in the story through their own imagination and reasoning, and understand the characters' behavioral motivations and emotional changes. The incomplete plot also more truly reflects the uncertainty of the real world and the limitations of the characters' cognition, making readers feel the complexity and elusiveness of life. *A Small, Good Thing* consists of episodic events such as the baker constantly making phone calls and the couple waiting for the child to recover, with no strict time continuity and obvious causal connection between the events. The baker's appearance seems accidental, and there is no direct logical connection with the child's accident, but together these fragments create an atmosphere of depression and a hint of hope. The plot is disrupted, and the reader does not at first know why the baker is calling, only to understand as the story progresses. Dialogue plays an important role in this process, and the dialogue between the couple and the baker promotes the process of the story, allowing the reader to gradually understand the inner world of the characters and the direction of the story. Take *Cathedral* as another example, the communication between "I" and the blind person and the blind person make "I" describe the process of the cathedral full of uncertainty. Instead of following a traditional linear path, the plot is woven into the story through seemingly random details such as a TV show, a wife's past with a blind man, and so on. Dialogue becomes the key clue to understand the story. The dialogue between "I" and the blind person shows different outlook on life and cognition of the world, and also makes the reader think about the understanding and communication between people. The whole story is vague and broken, but it deeply reflects the complexity of the real world and the limitations of the characters' cognition.

3.2.2 *Open Ending*

Traditional novels are often forced by various factors to give a satisfactory solution to the reader's doubts in the reading process at the end, that is, a closed ending. Since the 20th century, more and more writers have abandoned the closed pattern of "beginning - development - climax - end" and adopted an open ending. The reason is that "the open form prevents the closure of the narrative and the consequent determination of meaning." It requires readers to exert their subjective initiative and actively participate in it, which expands the imagination space of readers. In a sense, the end does not mean the end, and it really realizes the end of words and infinite meaning. *The Compartment* first decides to visit his son after an eight-year absence. It's supposed to be a journey of father-son reconnection. However, during the trip, the watch he intends to give his son is stolen, which becomes the trigger for his inner transformation. Later, his son's violent behavior as a child keeps coming back to him, and these memories make him hate his son and realize that he doesn't really miss him. His identity also took a hit after the experiences of broken marriage and separation with his son for a long time. The parting scene of the couple he saw on the train may have also made him reflect on his own life and emotional experience. At the end of it, he entered his new compartment and fell asleep with the noise and laughter of the train. This open ending fills the reader with worries and expectations for the protagonist's future, while also reflecting the unknown and uncertainty that people often face in real life. At the end of *Preservation*, Sandy "suddenly felt that she should put on lipstick, grab a coat, and go to the auction," but she only had such thoughts, and whether she actually went to the auction is not clear. This leaves the reader to the imagination. If she goes to the auction, she may want to take this opportunity to get out of the current bad life state and look for new possibilities, such as buying a cheap second-hand refrigerator to improve her living conditions, or meeting new people and things at the auction to bring some changes to her life; If she doesn't go, it may be because she still has a little hope for her husband, or she lacks the courage to change completely,

and still chooses to stay in this marriage that has problems. The changes of husband and wife relationship in the novel reflect the complexity of married life. Open endings ask readers to consider the nature of marriage, how couples should get along with each other, and whether a relationship can withstand the pressures of life.

3.3 Concise Narrative Language

Carver's language is extremely concise, and he does not use flowery words and long descriptions. Often use the most concise words to express the rich connotation. For example, when describing characters or scenes, he does not make too many embellishments, but directly captures the key features to outline. The sentences are short and concise, with precise words and no unnecessary nonsense. This concise language style, on the one hand, allows readers to quickly focus on the core content, on the other hand, it also creates a cold and restrained atmosphere, like the simplicity and directness of life itself. When it came to *Vitamin* scene descriptions, Carver didn't spend a lot of time describing the environment in fine detail, but instead used simple language to sketch out the general scene. For example, describing the scene of the party, "Around Christmas, vitamin business is slow, we want to have a party to cheer everyone up... One minute she was standing in the middle of the living room smiling, and then she closed her eyes, her legs were weak, and she fell to the ground with a glass in her hand." A few simple sentences present the time, background, and scene of Sheila falling down drunk, so that readers can quickly enter the situation of the story and feel the atmosphere at that time. In addition, the novel repeatedly mentions the scenes of characters drinking alcohol, "I do some work, punch a card for eight hours, and then drink with the nurses", "I sit at the table and drink wine until the sky begins to brighten", these simple descriptions not only reflect the life state of the characters, but also create a depressed and dreary atmosphere, making readers feel the helplessness and confusion of the characters under the pressure of life. Carver used straightforward style of writing in *Train*. The appearance of the characters was rarely described in detail, but a few simple strokes gave readers a general impression of the characters. For example, for Miss Dent, the article does not specifically describe her looks, clothes and other details, but only through her behavior and emotions to show her state which let the reader to imagine her appearance. This treatment makes the reader pay more attention to the meaning behind the characters' inner world and actions, rather than external appearances. The description of the waiting room simply mentions "an empty waiting room", "a large wall clock on the wall", etc., and uses the most basic elements to outline a cold and monotonous space, so that readers can intuitively feel the lonely and boring atmosphere.

Carver's narrative relies heavily on everyday speech. The characters in his novels talk as naturally and casually as people talk in real life. This colloquial language makes the characters feel more real and closer to the readers. It is as if the reader can hear the characters talking in their ears and feel their joys and sorrows. At the same time, the colloquial narration also enhances the authenticity of the story, making it easier for readers to immerse themselves in the world depicted in the novel. The dialogue between the characters in *Vitamin* is as natural and simple as everyday conversation. For example, the dialogue between Patty and "me" when discussing work and life, "I dream of vitamins in my sleep now" and "I don't dream at all", this simple dialogue reflects the daily communication state between husband and wife, and also reflects their different mindsets under the pressure of life. The dialogue has no flowery words, but it can let the reader feel the real emotions of the characters and the triviality of life. The brief dialogue in *Fever* shows the relationship between the characters. Carlisle's conversations with his ex-wife Erin are often conflicted and tangled, and their language is short and emotional, reflecting their broken marriage and complex emotional entanglements. Carlisle's conversation with his friend Carole is relatively gentle and caring, showing their friendship and Carole's care and support for Carlisle. Through short words, the character's personality can be quickly presented to the reader. Carlisle's conversations with others, for example, are concise, direct, and sometimes blunt, reflecting his irritability and anxiety after his wife's departure and troubled life, as well as his gritty, independent character. And nanny Debbie in the face of Carlisle's accusations, without too much justification, just silence or simple response, showing her irresponsibility and guilt.

Carver's novels often use concise language to highlight the core plot. In terms of enhancing the reading experience, the concise narrative language stimulates the imagination of readers. Because he does not describe too many details, readers can fill in the gaps in the story according to their own experience and perception, so as to construct their own unique understanding in the reading process. Carver also reflects the essence of reality with concise narrative language, removes the complexity and falsity of life surface, reveals the real dilemma and helplessness of ordinary people's lives, and makes readers deeply understand the essence of life.

IV. Conclusion

This paper analyzes Raymond Carver's novel collection *Cathedral* in depth, and shows Carver's unique minimalist artistic style from the aspects of narrative perspective, narrative structure and narrative language. With a narrative perspective of internal and external focus, Carver breaks the limitations of traditional omniscient perspective, and goes deep into the inner world of characters through an internal focus perspective to enhance the authenticity and credibility of the story. For example, *Feathers* uses an external focus perspective to present an objective and calm narrative style, leaving space for readers to imagine. In addition, the incomplete narrative structure of *Preservation* is a major feature of Carver's works, and the incomplete plot reflects the uncertainty of the real world and the limitation of characters' cognition. The omission, fragmentation and disorder of plots in *Feathers*, *A Small, Good Thing*, *Cathedral* and other works stimulate readers to think actively. The open ending expands readers' imagination space and reflects the unknown in real life. For example, the ending of *The Compartment* and *Preservation* makes readers full of worries and expectations about the characters' future, triggering reflections on marriage, life and other issues. Finally, concise narrative language is another notable feature of Carver's works. Instead of gorgeous words and lengthy descriptions, Carver uses the most concise words to express rich connotations and create a cold and restrained atmosphere. For example, scene descriptions

and character descriptions in *Vitamin* and *Train* as well as a large number of daily colloquial dialogues enhance the authenticity of stories and narrow the distance between readers. At the same time, the concise language highlights the core plot, stimulates readers' imagination, reflects the essence of reality, and makes readers deeply understand the real dilemma and helplessness in ordinary people's lives. Carver's *Cathedral*, with its unique narrative art, not only redefined the short story form, but also had a profound impact on contemporary literary creation, drawing more attention to the nuances and overlooked emotions of ordinary life.

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