

A Brief Analysis of Raymond Carver's Short Stories from a Marxism Perspective

He Xiaohong

School of Foreign Language, Gannan Normal University:

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ABSTRACT: *Marxist materialism shows that social existence determines social consciousness, so the era Carver writes about is not an era fabricated out of thin air; it is the era of the era in which he lives, and Carver's characters are also the characters of the era in which they live. The various stories of misfortune, bad and despair they experience are the evidence of the Vietnam War, the feminist movement, sexual liberation, the Watergate scandal, and a series of events that happened in this era. Most of Carver's characters work in sales, service, and other low-paying jobs, and they are part of the multitude of the proletariat. Just like Carver's own experience, he realized in his labor that the bourgeoisie oppressed and exploited them, and that the bourgeoisie's proclamation of equality and freedom for all was only a rhetoric to cover up their ugliness, selfishness, and unpleasantness. With his keen observation, Carver captures the objection of human beings in this era and sees the contradictions and conflicts of capitalist society. This paper will adopt the text-reading strategy to explore the process of alienation of Carver's characters, the realism of content creation and its roots, as well as the humanitarian light shining in it.*

KEY WORDS: Marxism, alienation, bourgeoisie, humanitarian

INTRODUCTION

"Alienation" has always been a hot topic of concern for Western neo-Marxism. The term "alienation" was originally developed from Latin, but the "theory of alienation" was first introduced in Hegel's philosophy, and Hegel's idea of alienation was first expressed in his critique of the "positivism" of Christianity. Hegel revealed the alienation of man and man in the form of alienation of the mind after Fichte revealed the alienation of man and nature. He argues that the so-called "positivism" of

Christianity means that the Christianity made by man has become a rigid and alienating force that oppresses man in turn. On the basis of his critical inheritance from Hegel, Marx creatively put forward the concept of the "Marxist theory of alienation". In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx systematically proposed the specific connotation of this concept, including the alienation of the worker from the product of labor, the alienation of the worker from the activity of labor, the alienation of the worker from the essence of his class, and the alienation of the relationship between man and man in labor (Marx, 1976). In the 1960s and 1970s, the Western world had just experienced the trauma of two world wars, followed by the social movements of the Vietnam War, women's liberation, and sexual liberation. People who had witnessed the great social changes began to doubt the eternity of the world. Especially the group of people who had just left the battlefield to shed their blood for their country, which is also the confused generation in Hemingway's book. They should have enjoyed the respect and admiration of their country and people after experiencing the brutal battlefield and devoting their lives to their country and people, but the reality is just the opposite. So they had to make a living by selling the medals they earned on the battlefield, which ironically were as worthless as trash. They saw a world full of dystopia, they lost their vision and pursuit of life, faith and their old values as well. Some even turned to alcohol and drugs to vent their discontent with the external world as well as the spiritual world. At the same time, the highly developed material civilization under the capitalist system makes people gradually lose their way in the forest of money and material desires. The spiritual concept that everyone lives for money makes people's communication become blocked and their spirit become deformed. The social relationship between people is reflected through the concrete image of "money". People lose themselves, they become objects, and they are alienated by social reality. Most of the protagonists in Carver's short stories come from humble backgrounds and poor families, and they spend their lives trying to enter the middle class. They have worked hard and believed that they could change the misfortunes and sufferings around them by their own hard and clean hands. They are like people living in the water, desperately trying to stay afloat to keep themselves from sinking to the bottom of the sea takes all their strength, let alone climbing to the shore. They yearn for the glamorous world outside the shore, so under the step-by-step temptation of the outside world, their consciousness is weak and they fall under the skirt of materialism and money-grubbing hedonism. Their human nature is alienated by the pursuit and desire for money and materialism, and they are no longer free human beings, but alienated creatures living under the material, industrial machine. Thus, by using Marxist

alienation theory to analyze the characters' views on money and morality in Carver's short stories, we can glimpse the alienation process that occurs in human beings.

Money First - Alienation between the worker and the product of labor

The products of labor are created by laborers but not at their disposal, and under bourgeois relations of production, this labor is alienated. The more you produce and the more diligent you are does not mean the richer you are the happier you are. This alienated labor brought disaster for the workers. "Labor creates palaces, but workers live in slums. Labor creates beauty, but workers become deformed"(Marx, 1976). The capitalists use the goods produced by the workers-money, commodities-to in turn enslave and exploit the workers. The worker, who is supposed to be the protagonist of the product of labor, becomes alienated from the product of labor he or she produces, i.e., the person is reduced to a slave of matter and money.

In Carver's novel *Vitamins*, the heroine Patti is a door-to-door saleswoman selling vitamins, she is quick and articulate, and is soon promoted to the leadership, with an independent office and a team of her own. But the vitamins that were supposed to give Patti hope and profit were bad for business and sent Patti into self-doubt. Dreams are a way for people to vent their frustrations. And Patti dreams of selling vitamins, she sells them day and night, even dreaming of sample boxes and vitamins disappearing and waking up screaming like crazy. Her freedom, her happiness, her spirit were all controlled by vitamins. On top of that, the unnamed hero of *Preservation* has been staying at home since he was fired three months ago. Except for going out once every two weeks to collect his unemployment pension, he spends all his time on the couch in the living room. In the story, a puddle of rotting liquid flows out of the refrigerator because of the broken refrigeration, just like the hero who is now spread out on the couch in a deadly puddle. Faced with his wife's anger, the husband says: "Hey, this fridge can't be more than ten years old. It was nearly new when we bought it. Listen, my folks had a fridge that lasted them twenty-five years. They gave it to my brother when he got married. It was working fine"(Carver, 2009). The broken refrigerator at this moment is actually a coded message to the hero, who, like the rotting things in the refrigerator, is now stuck somewhere. His complaint about the refrigerator is actually anxiety about his own incompetence. The hero asks the same question as the refrigerator: why is it useless after ten years of use, why did I lose my job after a few years of work? In the hero's eyes, losing his job means losing his value - the value that is needed by people, just like the goods on the shelves of the supermarket for people to choose at

will but no one asks for them, the hero is objectified into a thoughtless object. In the face of his wife's request for him to go to an auction to sell the refrigerator, he chooses to be silent and evasive, and continues to be spread out on the couch. Carver uses a bad refrigerator as a metaphor for the decay and deterioration of life. Under the influence of the consumerist and money-oriented values of capitalist society, money and work in turn dominate people and distort human nature, and the hero tries to stay on the couch to achieve spiritual preservation by isolating the environment and closing the connection between himself and the outside world.

Moral Degeneration - The Alienation of Human Relationships

In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx said that "the free and conscious activity of man should be the natural state of man's existence" (Marx, 1976), emphasizing that free and conscious activity is the characteristic of human beings. In the capitalist exploitation system, the real state of human beings in the real world contradicts the natural state of human beings, which is the alienated constraint of reality. People lose their freedom of interaction, their social behavior is controlled and their morality gets corrupted, leading to the alienation of the relationship between humans and self, collectives.

Carver's *So Much Water So Close to Home* tells the experience of Stuart and his three male buddies leaving home for Natchez to fishing. The first night on the river they find the body of a young woman floating in the river before they have a chance to set up their tent. "No clothes on her at all. She was wedged into some branches that stuck out over the water"(Carver, 2009). But they were taboo not at all about setting up their tents next to it for several nights. They spent several days around the carcasses, roasting, drinking, and even brushing the plates near the carcasses after dinner. They acted as if nothing had happened until one of their best friends overheard them talking about how hard the trout they caught was and how cold the river was before they remembered the young woman floating in the water. All these are enough to see the indifference, insensitivity, disregard and disrespect for life of the four of them. It is contrary to the image of "decent, family-oriented, hard-working and responsible" in the eyes of others. At the time of writing this novel, Carver was also suffering from the torment of life. His family, career and love were not going well, leaving his heart empty and withered. It is during this unusually difficult summer that Ray reads a newspaper report about a woman's body found in a river by several people. The report said the discovery of the woman's body was on Friday, while the report was on Monday, an interval of two days

made Carver very strange. This suspicion made Carver decided to write something, and the short story *So Much Water So Close to Home* was presented in this form. Knowing that Ray felt like a dead man himself in those days, one understands the deep sympathy his story extends to the dead woman, the one beyond help” (Sklenicka, 2009).

If you understand this period of Carver's life, you will find that it is actually a call for help from Carver to all of us. He wanted to meet people who would be as sad and angry as Stuart's wife, Claire, for her. Stuart is not the only one who is guiltless and indifferent, but all the people around him are. The day before Claire attended the funeral of the deceased Susan, she went to the beauty salon, and when Claire talked about the funeral and wanted to continue to talk about it, she was interrupted by Millie, who was doing her nails.

“I am going to a funeral tomorrow,” I say.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Marnie says.

“It was a murder,” I say.

“ That’s the worst kind,” Marnie says.

“We weren’t all that close,” I say. “But you know.”

“We’ll get you fixed up for it,” Marnie says. (Carver, 2009)

It can be seen that when Claire could not communicate with her guiltless husband at home and could not be comforted, she turned to the outside, hoping to meet someone who felt the same regret and sadness about the incident as she did. But when Claire tries to talk to someone, she is immediately interrupted by the other person, and eats the door. This reminds me of the Russian novelist Anton Chekhov's "Affliction", in which the main character also has nowhere to talk about the pain of losing his son, and finally has to give his heart full of thoughts to the pony that he is dependent on. Both authors use the technique of using small things to reflect the indifference and alienation between people in the social reality.

Another short story by Carver, *The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off* also reveals the ugliness of human nature and the alienation of people from each other. The most important event that ruined my father is the death of the mute. The essay is developed from the perspective of "I". The mute was a short, wrinkled man who worked as a janitor for a lumber company. Because he could not speak, and because his Mexican wife often go around with others, many people would laugh at him and deliberately make fun of him. And "my" father is the only one who is willing to get close to him.

But ever since his father showed him an ad for fish, and he started raising fish, his behavior became eccentric and petty. This is in large part due to the fact that Mute has directly encountered images of his father laughing at him with his colleagues. As a result, the relationship between the mute and his "father" gradually deteriorated. The only friendship the mute thought he had broke down, coupled with the weather-related flooding, became the last line of psychological defense that destroyed the mute. He finally chose to end his life by throwing himself into the lake. As the whole text is developed from "my" point of view, the description and view of the whole story are directly from "my" father, so this is mixed with the father's subjective assumptions about people, and there is a great deal of subjective and dynamic manipulation of the truth or falsity of the content. So for the reason why the mute chose to commit suicide, the father initially "blamed Dummy's death on Dummy's wife. Then he blamed it on the fish. And finally he blamed himself." Such a process could show that the father was in a gradually repentant and guilty mood. The father had also ridiculed the mute in front of his family and friends and colleagues, so it is likely that in the father's heart he despised the mute. He was forced to move back to his hometown, and his body was blessed to get close to the mute perhaps to satisfy his inner sense of superiority, thus giving him false comfort and confidence to continue living. The mute's death was to a certain extent caused by the ridicule and taunting of his father and the people around him, and on a larger level, by the social environment as a whole.

The Reality of Content Creation and its Roots of Alienation

In *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, Marx and Engels repeatedly emphasized the philosophical notion that matter determines consciousness and social existence determines social consciousness. In terms of literary creation, Marx and Engels proposed that the artistic work of any era must be closely related to the era in which he lived. The Marxist literary theory expressed in *Die Deutsche Ideologie* can be summarized as literary creation should start from real life, oppose the idealist discursive philosophy that starts from the concept of consciousness and advocate materialist epistemology. Many of Carver's novels are based on the material of social reality. While it is not absolute for some writers that art comes from life, for Raymond Carver it is like a credo for his short story writing. The U.S.-Vietnam War, which spanned nearly two decades in the United States, and the Watergate scandal left the people distraught and morally corrupt. Like Gertrude Stein's "Lost Generation," they were confused and disillusioned with society. The brutal twenty-year war in Vietnam left them physically and emotionally damaged and severely disconnected from society. They used alcohol to hypnotize themselves, numb

themselves, and escape the reality of physical and mental pain. During that era, a quarter of a million people died from alcoholism. This phenomenon influenced Carver's writing, and he brought those multitudes of people into his stories, such as *My Father's Life*, *Whoever Was Using This Bed*, and *Elephant*, all depict alcoholics and the plight of the mind and spirit they suffer. The feminist movement and sexual liberation were also influencing Carver's work. the values of marriage in American society in the 1970s: another wife, another life. The possibility of divorce and contraception irrevocably changed the expectations of marriage. "By 1970 men and women were looking at fidelity and children as a choice, not a duty or a responsibility" (Sklenicka, 2009). *What We Talk About What We Talk About Love* and *Are These Actual Miles ?* show the feelings of suspicion, doubt, and pain between couples. Carver also expressed his disappointment with love in his poetry, and his poem *The Word Love*, written in the spring of 1972, illustrates Carver's consistent theme in this poem: love is no longer something that gives us strength, but rather it is love that leads us to the grave, and it is love that scars us.

What then causes the alienation of the characters in the novel? In addition to the influence of values such as the flourishing of capitalism, hedonism, and money above all else; the social context of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the prevalence of alcoholic culture; the alienating characteristics of his novels are also closely related to his personal life experiences. Raymond Carver was born in Clatskanie, Oregon. His parents were Arkansans who had come west to find work. Like their ancestral frontier residents, the Carver's drifted around in search of financial stability. From childhood on, Raymond's parents moved many times with a desire for a new and better life, constantly settling in new places. Even though the living environment was constantly changing, what remained constant was the cramped housing and the embarrassment of poverty year after year. Carver's adult life was no different, as he faced the pressures of survival - bankruptcy, frequent relocations, financial hardship, spousal fights and beatings, alcoholism, and the neglect of his children as a result of his frantic social activities. Carver wrote about this difficult and tragic experience of his life in his novels and poems. As a short review of *Will You Be Quiet, Please?* published in *Publishers Weekly* in January 1976 says published in *Publisher's Weekly* in January 1976, the short review said "Twenty-two mini-stories that explore the depressing emptiness and futility of American life...Downbeat but perceptive writing about the inarticulate worlds of Americans" (Sklenicka, 2009)

As Carver's friend Kittredge observed the evolution of Carver and his work, he discovered that duplicity was deeply rooted in his friend and his world. "I think it was that he has two times too smart and too sensitive for the place he was born into and grew up in. There was one Ray who lived his life and another who watched all of that life. Alcohol may have dulled the pain he felt and given him a false sense of unity, but writing was the only thing that saved him all along; that allowed him to connect one self with the other. It was a struggle, always, and sometimes he connected artistically but not morally" (Sklenicka, 2009). Carver spent his whole life trying to get rid of material and spiritual crises, and spent his whole life pulling back and forth between fantasy and reality. Just like the people he writes about, we can see the shadow of "Carver" in them, and we can also see the struggling people in "Carver". They are in the same spiritual crisis, they also question humanity, and they also have the same fears about their future fate. But the difference lies in the fact that Carver finds a balanced path in life through his writing, while others can only pursue, then alienate, and finally give up their struggle, sinking deep into despair and loss.

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