

An Analysis on the Existentialist Theme of Raymond Carver's Cathedral

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Abstract

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) is hailed as "Master of Minimalism" and "the American Chekhov" for he inherited Ernest Hemingway's simplicity and developed own unique feature. Born in an impoverished family, Carver had led a tough life at his early age so that most characters in his short-story collection *Cathedral* experience anxiety and poverty, and fall into a survival plight. However, what is the culprit for their misery life and how do they survive in the world and transcend themselves? Through detailed analysis of Carver's *Cathedral* in accordance with Sartrean existentialism as theoretical basis, alcohol, television, and telephone are the culprit for making most characters' life absurd in Carver's stories. Thus, characters choose to alienate themselves from other people and the outside world, which causes more problems of interpersonal communication for the characters. While, Carver is an objective writer with a strong sense of social responsibility. He shows his concern towards those people in a desperate predicament and gives them freedom of choice. "Every choice is the choice of a concrete change to be bestowed on a concrete given". When making free choices, man could deconstruct a given existence and reconstruct a new one to acquire freedom.

Keywords

Raymond Carver; Cathedral; Jean-Paul Sartre; Existentialism.

1. Introduction

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) is generally considered as one of the most important American short-story writers and hailed as the Master of Minimalism (Barth, 1986) for his plain and objective description language. It is written in *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (Scofield, 2006) that Carver represents the revival of interest in the short story in America, which indicates his profound influence on American literature at that point. His short-story collection *Cathedral* written in 1983 contains twelve highly respected stories, depicting alienated characters and featuring alcoholism and hopelessness. Also, Carver expresses his concern for his characters and gives them hope and choice, which makes his writing more mature and accepted.

Jean-Paul Sartre can be regarded as the most representative philosopher for his fruitful works. Sartre's early works *Being and Nothingness* embodies a theme about the conflict between oppressive, spiritually destructive conformity and an authentic way of Being (McCloskey, 2006: 297). His existential philosophy includes Existence Precedes Essence, which is a theory about the existence of individual as well as the meaning of people's life are condemned to be free as humans and people must bear the responsibility for his own choices.

In *Cathedral*, people's life is full of absurdity, silence, and alienation. Because of the survival dilemma, they become depressed and alienated, finally resort to alcohol and electronic products, which decidedly lead to marriage broken and family inharmonious. Sartre probes into

existential predicaments, such as individual anxiety and absurdity, and studies the significance of human existence and individual freedom. Therefore, the solution to get rid of existential plight is to face up to reality and to harvest hope of meaningful connection to other people by taking positive action and bearing responsibility of self-choice.

2. Absurdity in Cathedral

Absurdity is borrowed from Middle French “absurdité” or Late Latin “absurditās” (Information on [https:// www. Merriam -webster. com/ dictionary/ absurdity](https://www.Merriam-webster.com/dictionary/absurdity)), which means the disharmonized or estranged state. Sartre says existence precedes essence which means that “man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself. There is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. This is the first principle of existentialism” (Sartre, 2007: 22). And then, the absurd world in Cathedral leaves people nothing but anxieties and desperation, making people feel hopeless.

2.1. Absurdity of Alcohol

Absurdity causes anguish because it prevents people from seeking the meaning of their life. Under such condition, people carry heavy burdens and could not get rid of it. Therefore, alcohol is served as a resort to make people less stressed though excessive drinking of alcohol does harm to people from different aspects. The influence of alcohol is obviously shown in Carver’s stories.

In “Where I’m Calling From”, it told a story about alcoholics who lived an anxious life in Alcoholic Anonymous. An alcoholic J.P. was once happy for his marriage when he was young and had everything he wanted and was doing what I wanted to do with his life. However, all his happiness was ruined by his excessive drinking. “For a long time, he drinks beer and beer only. Any kind of beer--it didn’t matter. He says he could drink beer twenty-four hours a day” (Carver, 1989: 133). As a result, he had checked himself in again at a drying-out facility. Alcohol devoured J.P.’s life and heavily damaged his marriage. He began to fight with his wife and dislocated her shoulders when he got drunk. Their relationship was getting worse and worse but J.P. still chose to keep drinking. J.P.’s inability to control his desire of alcohol resulted in frequent marital quarrel and conflict. Luckily, what made his wife pleased was J.P.’s willingness to change that helped his marriage get back on track, thus his wife would like to reconcile with him.

“Alcohol addiction casts a pall of alienation and misery over a great many of Raymond Carver’s stories, and it contributes more powerfully to his vision of life than perhaps any other single human problem” (Messer, 2011: 43). Carver is of no exception. Carver grew up watching his father struggle with alcoholism and he was also a problem drinker and “could drink for hours” (Sklenicka, 2009: 36). There are many alcoholics in *Cathedral* suffering the breakdown of their family and marriage, which is exactly the reference to Carver’s own life experiences. However, the reason for excessive drinking lies in people’s loneliness and their problems of communication. Drinking too much helps nothing but worsens problems of marriage and causes damage to the entire family as well (Lang, 2010: 236).

2.2. Absurdity of Television

“By 1950, some 4 million TV sets had been sold, but throughout the decade, 7 million sets were sold each year. By the time late 1960s fully 96% of all Americans have television sets” (Zhu, 1990: 146). Television increases in numbers and people get used to the existence of television and gradually become the slave of the electronic product which can help them escape from the real world but create barriers between couples. In the story of “Preservation”, Sandy’s husband got canned, but he had been lying on the couch without any plan or arrangement for his future and spent almost all-day time watching TV and reading newspapers instead of seeking a job or

communicating with his wife. "By the time she left for work, he'd made his place on the sofa and the TV was going. Most often it would still be going when she came in again that afternoon" (Carver, 1989: 37). He gradually became used to the lifestyle and totally lacked social mobility, which brought his marriage into a terrible situation. Although television acts as a companion to entertain the husband at home on the one hand, on the other television causes their marriage to be on the edge of hopelessness.

As Zhu (1990) said, TV preceded conversation in doors, and, as the number of sets owned by family increased, the family disperses into separate rooms, thereby increasing social isolation and weakening family cohesion. Television fulfills people's needs of escaping from the absurd reality and chaotic world.

2.3. Absurdity of Telephone

According to David Lodge, "the TELEPHONE is so familiar and ubiquitous a feature of modern life that we easily forget how unnatural it would have seemed, to previous ages, to speak and listen without being able to see or touch" (Lodge, 1992: 170). In the short-story collection, Raymond Carver repeatedly uses telephone as a tool to bring messages. However, telephone often makes no effort to get characters closely connected and doesn't work as a communicative device any more.

The telephone can engender the tension and add anxious feeling to the parents, which is completely presented in "A Small, Good Thing". The son Scotty's birthday was coming soon and Scotty's mother planned to have a birthday party and booked a birthday cake for her lovely son. However, a car accident happened on Scotty ruins everything. Scotty was brought to the hospital and his parents took turns to look after him. When the father or the mother stayed at home, the telephone calls came intermittently, which frightened them a lot. They wondered whether the call was from the hospital to tell them some terrible news about their son. The phone rang from time to time without taking the parents' feelings into consideration and made them suffering from the anxiety. While the fact was that the calls were from the baker who was responsible for the Scotty's birthday cake and only phoned the parents to get the cake. What made the story tenser was that the baker knew nothing about the accident and kept making ill-time telephone calls to the parents. Therefore, the telephone call is just like a terrible hell to the parents and exerts miserable influence on the parents, making the mother losing her temper.

Telephone should have been used to help people talk to each other in a more convenient way, but it acts as a bridge-breaking tool to interpersonal relationship, leaving turbulence and anxiety to characters in Carver's short stories.

3. Alienation in Cathedral

The word "alien" originates from old French, which means strange, foreign, not of one's own. Nowadays alienation is defined as people's withdrawal from society in psychology. "Hell is other people", which is the best explanation of alienation. In *Cathedral*, many people are trapped in a chaotic world in which there are few communications between husband and wife, parents, and children. They suffer from loss of jobs and poverty for the occurrence of the two world wars. They prefer to keep silent and live an isolated life.

3.1. Alienation from Oneself

Characters in Carver's stories often suffer from a psychological anxiety and alienation. In "Careful", Lloyd separated from his wife Inez and moved into a small room. He was the one who alienated from his own existence and lost his identity. The story happened on the day when Inez came to visit Lloyd in his house. While the couple didn't get along well with each other for some reasons that Carver didn't tell readers directly. "Inside the rooms, the roof slanted down sharply. If he walked around, he had to duck his head. He had to stoop to look from his windows

and be careful getting in and out of bed" (Carver, 1989: 110). It was a narrow and isolated place where people had to be careful when walking into the room. Lloyd liked to stay at home having a drink instead of hanging out with other people. He just ate and drank every day and he couldn't think of anything else noteworthy. He confined himself in the isolated room for he didn't want to exposure himself to the real world that could arouse the sense of uneasiness in himself. He hid in a narrow and isolated room which was the safest place for him.

As a result, those who alienate themselves by their own willingness are going to lose their identity and will forget the most important thing which is exactly the value and meaning of their own life (Humphrey, 1968).

3.2. Alienation from Others

Owing to lack of financial support, Carver had experienced many unpredictable changes of his life. He moved to one place or another just like the characters in his works without a stable place. Thus, it seems reasonable that most characters alienate themselves from their fellows because they continuously change their living place which results in looseness of social connection.

"The Compartment" describes a story that Myers travelled through France to visit his son in Strasbourg who he hadn't seen for eight years since a quarrel with his ex-wife. Before Myers' trip, "these days he lived alone and had little to do with anybody outside of his work" (Carver, 1989: 48). However, when he arrived at Strasbourg, "it came to him that he didn't want to see the boy after all.... this trip was possibly the most foolish thing he'd ever done" (Carver, 1989: 54). Thus, he missed the chance of visiting his son because from the bottom of his heart he didn't care about him. He disliked his son and blamed him for ruining his youth and the girl he loved. In the train, Myers felt bothered by foreign languages because he hadn't understood the language. He went into a compartment full of jovial air and fell into sleep. Since Myers was accustomed himself to an isolated life for a long time and unwilling to communicate with others. Sleep here can be considered as a sign of alienation and loneliness that builds an invisible wall between Myers and people around him.

3.3. Alienation from the Outside Environment

Men tend to be immersed into the society for they can find themselves useful and seek for their value to a great extent. While many characters in Carver's works don't like any communication or contact. They alienate themselves from the outside world and attempt to avoid any involvement with other people and even natural environment. Finally, they always keep a distance to people and the outside. Sartre believes that once people fail to find the value and significance of life, they will alienate themselves from the outside and find an isolated place, bearing a lonely and hopeless life.

Sandy's husband used to be a blue-collar worker who made ends meet in the story "Preservation". However, when he became unemployed, he just lay on the sofa all the days and his wife Sandy became the bread-earner in the house and bore the responsibility of making a living. One day Sandy found out their fridge broken and asked her husband to go to an auction and to buy a new fridge because she thought it was a good opportunity for her husband to walk around and leave the goddamn sofa. The husband hadn't prepared to face the outside and chose to stay on the sofa at last. Gradually the husband became afraid of talking to people and felt nervous in the crowd. His behavior suggested his estrangement from the outside. He totally isolated himself from the outside world and refused to face up to the reality. He is more like the rotten food in the broken fridge. Only when an individual finds his existence upon recognizing a distinction between good and evil, he will accept certain obligations as universally binding.

Among these alienated interpersonal relationships mentioned above, alienation from self-existence means the loss of selfness, "once the relationship with others is twisted and destroyed,

then hell is other people" (Sartre, 2007: 9), and alienation from others and the outside world are a result of fear of communicating with other people and lack of courage to face a new beginning.

4. Freedom of Choice in Cathedral

In *Being and Nothingness*, man's freedom precedes his essence and then enables his essence to be possible. The essence of man's existence is in man's freedom. "To be free is to be free to do, and it is to be free in the world" (Sartre, 2007: 650). Man's essence is not inborn but is formed over the course of life and decided by the man's existential mode. Meanwhile, man should be fully responsible for his own choice and assume responsibility for both himself and all others as well.

In *Cathedral*, Carver vividly described the life of ordinary people who indulged themselves in alcohol, television, and telephone, and how they alienated themselves from others and the outside world. More importantly, he gave characters choice to pursue freedom and salvation. Carver was once an alcoholic, then he decided to quit drinking though "sobriety is a painstaking process; wisdom and self-knowledge do not descend upon a person immediately after taking that last drink" (Sklenicka, 2009: 313). Carver made progress and said goodbye to alcohol which helped his life back on track. He showed care and concern to people around him and characters in his works in spite that his writing style seemed cold and simple. The tone of these stories was complex and changeable, and Carver conveyed a positive life attitude and explored the essence of existence instead of surrendering to the life (Sun, 2005: 169). Therefore, some characters in *Cathedral* correct their misbehavior and take action to make a difference to their miserable life. They overcome difficulties and get out of their predicament under the help of their beloved and even strangers, and finally acquire freedom and salvation of body and mind. Freedom of choice and responsibility are closely connected to each other. When one is responsible for his choice, he can overcome his predicament and transcend himself. Hope and freedom in an absurd and chaotic world matter most for people can find the way to prove their existence and realize their own value by actions. There appears epiphany in *Cathedral* that characters get salvation of mind and body, for example, the couple in "A Small, Good Thing" chose to cherish the present moment instead of immersing themselves in the past after their son passed away (Li, 2012: 63). According to Sartre, man makes himself and has absolute freedom to create his own value and can decide his being by himself (Sartre, 1993: 28). People can make full use of their free choice to find the significance of their existence and be aware of their responsibility for own choice.

5. Conclusion

Carver describes the hardship of ordinary people and the absurdity of the world which are majorly caused by the economic and spiritual crisis. People have many financial difficulties and life problems like unemployment, addition to alcohol and violence, making them feel upset and hopeless. Owing to the plight and surroundings of life, they choose to close their minds and alienate themselves from others and the outside environment. They only feel safe in a confined place. This is the real epitome of Raymond Carver's early years. Carver lived a hard life when he was young and worked hard to get material comfort, so most of his characters in his writings faced the same living plight and tried to make ends meet. While when Carver's financial situation got better, his writing style changed and he showed more care to his characters. He seems to be more commiserative to his characters in *Cathedral*. "Communication does exist in the world where people are isolated and lonely" (Facknitz, 1986: 287).

In a nutshell, the feasible way to acquire happiness and peace in the chaotic world is to shoulder the responsibility for self-choice, which may inspire those who are alienated in modern society to take steps against loneliness and reconstruct freedom.

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