Writing Ideology Of Post-Modernism In Raymond Carver's Short Story Cathedral

Methodology

The structuralist approaches are varied when applied to textual analysis (Bressler, 100). In this essay, I will take four of them to interpret Raymond Carver's Cathedral. The main elements within each approach are binary oppositions, narrative functions, metalanguage, and literary competence. While applying these divergent methods to the interpretation for this short story, different specific sections from the whole text will be the target of analysis. One thing that needs to noting is that all the interpretations in this work come from my own creative thinking, but of course, the theories connected are from authoritative literature. After the procedure of analysis involving each element, I will see if there are connections between the results and the post-modernist characteristics that are related to literary criticism.

Binary Oppositions

What are binary oppositions?

Similar to a minimal pair in linguistics, a binary operation refers to a pair of messages that can be converted though a slight change, and the so-called binary opposition raised by Roland Barthes represents two things that are of the same type yet oppose to each other (Bressler, 101). For instance, both 'light' and 'dark' are an adjective for describing the level of brightness, but they can imply totally opposite ideas - 'light' to 'goodness' and 'dark' to 'evilness' (Bressler, 102). Therefore, readers are able to interpret the text by finding and subsequently decoding the binary operations (Bressler, 102). One note here is that binary operations are just the starting point of decoding, while binary oppositions are the opposite implications that are already decoded.

The Most Noticeable Binary Operation in Cathedral: The blindness of the old friend of the narrater's wife and the non-blindness of the narrater

The image of blindness in common implication, as has already mentioned at the beginning of story:

'My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I look forward to (1).'

However, the above stereotype of a blind man is broken by the blind man in the story. The evidence is in the following:

'She worked with this blind man all summer ... They'd become good friends, my wife and the blind man... Anyway, this man who'd first enjoyed her favors, this officer-to-be, he'd been her childhood sweetheart... (1)'

The description of the treasurable relationship between the wife and the blind man goes on and on in the later story. The significance of such a relationship to the wife is even greater than that of the conjugal relation between the wife and the narrator, which can be recognized by:

'I saw my wife laughing as she parked the car. I saw her get out of the car and shut the door. She was still wearing a smile. Just amazing (3).'

'My wife finally took her eyes off the blind man and looked at me. I had the feeling she didn't like what she saw. I shrugged (4).'

'Finally, when I thought he was beginning to run down, I got up and turned on the TV. My wife looked at me with irritation (7)'

'My wife gave me a savage look (8).'

The contrast of the wife's attitude to the blind man with that to the narrater is very obvious throughout the whole story. The reasons why the wife cares about the blind man so much are not straightly put forward, but there are messages showing the uniqueness of the blind man that might be able to explain.

'This blind man, feature this, he was wearing a full beard! A beard on a blind man! (4) '

'He wore brown slacks, brown shoes, a light-brown shirt, a tie, a sports coat. Spiffy. He also had this full beard. But he didn't use a cane and he didn't wear dark glasses. I'd always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind (5).'

'This blind man had right away located his foods, he knew just where everything was on his plate. I watched with admiration as he used his knife and fork on the meat (6).'

'The blind man said, 'My dear, I have two TVs. I have a color set and a black-and-white thing, an old relic. It's funny, but if I turn the TV on, and I'm always turning it on, I turn on the color set (7).'

'Now and then he put his fingers into his beard and tugged, like he was thinking about something he was hearing on the television (9).'

' 'if you want the truth, bub, that's about all I know. What I just said. What I heard him say. But maybe you could describe one to me? I with you'd do it. I'd like that. If you want to know, I really don't have a good idea (11).' "

All the above evidence illustrates there is something different about the blind man in this story, the habit of wearing beard, not wearing dark glasses, and listening to a color television regardless of his blindness, the constant thinking about something, the modesty, and the eagerness toward knowledge. And All of these narrations violate the conventional interpretation for a blind man.

Not as detailed as to portrait the blind man, the author depicts the narrater in only a few sentences using parentheses:

'How long had I been in my present position? (Three years.) Did I like my work? (I didn't.) Was I

going to stay with it? (What were the options?) (7)'

Despite that the narrater is not blind, such his answers to the questions of the blind man might imply that he is acting blind in front of his life situations, which does not correspond to the non-blindness of a whole being. Moreover, there is one detail to notice, at the end of the story, that when the blind man asked the narrater to open his eyes to see what the cathedral he had just drawn looked like, the narrater's eyes stayed closed. He wished he'd stay blind. This detail is in the contrast to the blind man's (continue to elaborate when wording is not enough)

Therefore, this binary operation, the blindness and the non-blindness, of which the meanings are not inherently carried by the text, and the readers are not supposed to decode them in a common way. In other words, the way this binary operation becomes a binary oppostion does not follow a conventional rule - we cannot simply guess how the blind man or the non-blind man would behave in the story via merely knowing their capability of seeing. The blind man is not a blind man, and the non-blind man is not a non-blind man as we might assume.

This can be related to one of the main characteristics of postmodernism is a 'scepticism or rejection of grand metanarratives to explain reality' (Bressler, 90). The reality in Cathedral about the blind man and the non-blind man cannot be explained by our empirical knowledge, the potential narrative of the text. We are always sceptical of applying our previous experience of interpretation practice to decoding the existing information in this story.

Narrative Functions

What are narrative functions?

The idea of 'narrative functions', proposed by Vladimir Propp in his Morphology of the Folktale, is associated with 'structualist narratology' whose 'concern is the narrative structure of a text' (Bressler, 103). Each of the 'narrative functions' can predict 'patterns' that main heroes cause to push the development of plots (Bressler, 103). However, interpretation for narrative functions in terms of the influences of the characters' actions on furthering is usually for only folk or fairy tales (Bressler, 103). For contemporary fictions, to analyze the narrative functions in them, we change Propp's stress on characters to events, like the method Emma Kafalenos has taken, 'defining the term function as an interpreted event, an event interpreted according to its consequences (Kafalenos, 470). '

The Narrative Functions in Cathedral in the Definition of Events

The first event in Cathedral is about the old days of the blind man and the wife. Then it suddenly shifts into the second event, the fierce argument between the narrater and his wife. We cannot say the old stories of the blind man and the wife is the cause for the argument, even though there might be some connections between both. We also cannot guess the reason why Carver arrange of this second event, the argument, right after the first event.

The third event is the arrival of the blind man at the narrator's house. Then the last and the most important event is the drawing of a cathedral by the narrater with his eyes closed. Before readers get to read the last event, they still have this confusion why the story is entitled Cathedral, because there is no clue indicating the appearance of a cathedral.

Therefore, the narrative functions in Cathedral seems indeed functionless. The connections between each event are not identifiable. This 'continual ontological uncertainty (Malpas, 24) evoked from a last event on the next event is what the readers will confront while reading postmodern fictions. (Malpas, 25).

Metalanguage

What is metalanguage?

Through a 'grammatical model', we distinguish how the narrative tells the story. In other words, when identifying the metalanguage of a story, the focus is on 'how' rather than 'what'. The 'discourse' (Chatman, 9), as Seymour Benjamin Chatman calls the way of narration, other than the 'story' itself is what we concentrate on.

Tzvetan Todorov, the Franco-Bulgarian narratologist, claims that 'grammatical units' are what consist of stories (Bressler, 103). He believes that the 'syntax of narrative' in which the 'grammatical model' adopted by the narrative can be discovered (Bressler, 103). The linguistic means of telling the story, the 'variety of grammatical categories' seen through the narrative's langue, such as the grammatical clause, and the structure of the subject and verb, instead of meanings of lexicon is what we try to explore (Bressler, 104). In addition to uncovering the structure of a sentence, Genard Genette, the French narratologist, who agrees with Todorov that showing the structure of all the narratives, is the goal of interpretation, added more methods for this purpose, specifically, paying attention to the tropes the author uses.(Bressler, 104). Thus, instead of the narrative functions in the last section that help to construct the narrative structure, what we are looking into here regarding metalanguage are the grammar within individual texts and rhetorical terms (Bressler, 104).

The Grammatical Structures and the Colloquial Langue in Cathedral

It is easy to capture the little distances between periods in this story. Like Hemingway's writing style, in which we see short sentences frequently appear, Carver's is in the similar manner. Very contemporary. Just like what I am doing here. But different from Hemingway, for whom using short sentences does not mean giving up writing in elegant descriptive langue, Carver consistently uses colloquial tongue which does not follow a formal writing convention, so we can sometimes notice grammatical mistakes. Starting a sentence with 'but' is an example; starting a paragraph with 'so' is another. Using short sentences is a reflection of this spoken style.

The following are some instances of short expressions in the story.

'He'd been her childhood sweetheart. So okay. (1)'

'The other half of the coin went into the box with her. Pathetic. (4)'

'She was still wearing a smile. Just amazing. (4)'

'I didn't know what to say to that. I had absolutely nothing to say to that. No opinion. (7)'

'He was leaning forward with his head turned at me, his right ear aimed in the direction of the set. Very disconcerting. (9)'

'At either end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy. (12)'

The occasional appearance of these adjectives that are the only component of a sentence suggests that Carver is a minimalist in fiction writing. The characteristics, 'spare prose, paratxis, and monotone', and ' 'open' narratives that eschew the 'beginning-middle-end' convention for elision, ellipsis, and indeterminacy' (Mullen, 99), were brought up by the minimalist school of fiction on criticizing Carver's stories.

According to Abadi-Nagy, 'the world of minimalist fiction was indeed conceived under the signs of a postmodern zodiac (Abadi-Nagy, 131). ' And the aforementioned characteristics of Carver's minimalist writing style can be linked to what minimalism and post-modernism share in common in contemporary American fiction, the former's 'conspicuous elliptic incompleteness' and the latter's 'rejection of totalizability' (Abadi-Nagy, 130). Therefore, to identify Carver's minimalist writing strategy that is within the framework of post-modernism is the evidence of the claim that Carver is a post-modernist fiction writer.

Apart from the incomplete short sentences in which the subject and the verb are eliminated and that can help us to distinguish Carver's writing ideology, the consistent colloquial tongue that involves informal fictional writing habit in 'Cathedral' - discounting grammatical mistakes - is also part of the metalanguage. The instances of this oral expressions are as below.

'Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one. (3)'

'Someone who could wear makeup or not - what difference to him? (3)'

'But there was nothing on them, either. So I turned back to the first channel and apologized. (9)'

In the first example, (add detailed illustrations to each example when wording is not enough)

There are other examples of this spoken style of Carver that focus on the colloquial vocabulary instead of the grammatical structure of sentences.

'I said, he said, she said' - no substitutes for 'said'.

'But it was a church wedding just the same. It was what Beulah had wanted, he'd said. But even then Beulah must have been carring the cancer in her glands. (2)' - the constant using of 'but' to start a sentence.

'So... Then... But... (13)' - the most frequently used conjuntions.

'He ran his fingers over the papar. He went up and down the sides of the paper. The edges, even the edges. He fingered the corners. (12)' - the sense of listening to someone's daily talking.

Such a colloquial feature falls in the post-modernist framework. Even though this 'flat description

that yields immaent meaning, the Romantic faith in the power of ordinary, and everyday experience to yield thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears', such as the language of 'Skylights' by Tess Gallagher (Perioff, 63), is always considered only in contemporary American poetry, and is a characteristic of modernism instead of post-modernism (Perioff, 63), what Steven Connor have introduced that 'the move from modernism to post-modernism is a move from poetry to fiction (Connor, 62)' might be saying this colloquial language appearing in fiction can be regarded as a post-modernist means of literary practice.

The Rhetoric in Cathedral

To discover the characteristics of the rhetoric in Cathedral, I picked the excerpt of the last section from this story about the blind man and the narrater's conversation on how a cathedral looks like, and the narrater's drawing a cathedral with his eyes closed and the blind man holding his hands.

'The TV showed this one cathedral. Then there was a long, slow look at another one. Finally, the picture switched to the famous one in Paris, with its flying buttresses and its spires reaching up to the clouds. The camera pulled away to show the whole of the cathedral rising

Literary Competence

What is literary competence?

The concept of literary competence, raised by Jonathan Culler, is 'a return to an investigation of langue, the main premise of Saussure' (Bressler, 104) whose proposal of semiology was where structuralism originated (Bressler, 99). As Culler states, readers will select the 'most bizarre texts' to interpret because of this literary competence they own, and thus the interpretation for an individual story with the notion of literary competence is in fact the interpretation for 'the act of interpretation itself' (Bressler, 104).

The previous research I have done on Raymond Carver, saying he was a postmodernist all along (Lehman, 11)), and that he wrote in a minimalist style, leads me to always seeking for evidence to prove this idea. With the above inherently accepted assumption, I found clues through which the postmodernist characteristics of Carver’s novels are approved of. These clues, the binary operation of the blindness and non-blindness, (adjective) narrative functions, and the minimalist metalangue, as the set of my 'internalized rules' (Bressler, 104) that govern my act of interpretation, even though from my own creative thoughts, are not “the result of subjective associations” (Tompkins, 104). In other words, creativity is indeed out of objectivity. Thus, the result of my creative interpretation that proves Carver had always been a postmodernist is in fact objective and correct.

Moreover, there are some questions towards my act of interpretation that can be asked, such as 'Why do I choose the structuralist approaches', 'Why do I focus on the ideology of post-modernism other than feminism which is also found in the literature on interpretations for Cathedral', 'Why do I choose this short story as the object of criticism', 'Why do I emphasize the interpretation for the last section of the story in the last passage of this essay, the rhetoric part', such and such. The answers to these questions might be provided, yet is not of importance. We only need to focus on the question itself to explain how the idea that Carver is a post-modernist

writer with regard to the concept of literary competence that is not text-orientated. Specifically, for the second example question in above, 'Why is the first and foremost ideology taken into my consideration is post-modernism despite that other ideologies can be reflected in Cathedral', only what we are asking about here is what matters. The priority of post-modernsim in the interpretation for Cathedral that I have taken can be linked to how hermeneutics operates in finding evidence to prove that Carver is a post-modernist writer - how the langue of interpretation supports the parole - how the 'act of interpretation itself' supports the outcome of the interpretation.

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