

The Dream and Imagery Writing in Raymond Carver's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT: *Raymond Carver is the most important American novelist of the second half of the twentieth century, is the most influential American short story writer after Ernest Hemingway. His main representative works are Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, Cathedral, What We Talk about When Talk about Love and so on. The author's literary work is closely related to the social environment in which he lived. At the time of Carver's creation, American society experienced major events, such as the "feminist movement," "sexual liberation," "Vietnam War," and so on. The impact of these events affected not only Carver but also his characters, so Americans of that era were generally faced with the disillusionment of the American dream. The dream for them was not only a shortcut to escape from reality, but also a unique artistic contradiction generated by the contradiction between realistic desires and social institutions. What is more, the study of Carver's art mainly focuses on the novel ending art, thematic style research, and other aspects of the research, such as the dream and imagery in the short stories, involved less. Therefore, the analysis of Raymond Carver's short stories through dreams and their imagery can help us understand the author's intention and the deepening effect of dreams and their imagery on the novel's themes.*

Keywords-*Dream, imagery, desire, disillusionment*

I. INTRODUCTION

The origin of the Chinese character "dream" first came from China, where more than 2,000 years before Freud, there was a monograph on dreams called "Zhou Gong's Book of Auspicious and Inauspicious Dream", which gave dreams the ability to interpret one's future and their misfortunes. In the West as well, dreams were often used as a means for Christians to communicate with God during the Christian era, so they are often used in *the Bible* as a way to reveal the will of God.

Dreams have always had a very close relationship with literature, "As the subject, content and expression of literary creation, dreams have infinite richness, magic and transcendence, no matter what kind of

writers, they can obtain the materials for creation and then create a variety of dream literature, thus artfully reflecting the infinite richness of the objective world and all aspects of human beings themselves, greatly enriching the entire history of literary creation, or rather, constituting a huge trend in the history of literature”(1).

Throughout the world, there are many literary works related to dreams, some of which are inspired by dreams, some of which are directly depicted by dreams. Dreams in literature have their basis in reality and are also the products of writers' personal consciousness. Just like Freud's interpretation theory in dream that “A recent and psychologically significant events which is directly represented in the dream or several recent and significant events which are combined by the dream into a single whole”(2).

II. Illusory and Dream

In Carver's short story *The Student's Wife*, the heroine has a dream during the night. This dream comes from an experience of the couple spending the night in Tilton River. The heroine recalled that "after scarcely thinking about it these late years, it had begun coming back to her lately"(3). In the dream they had a very happy night, a world without children, and although the water came over the side of the boat and got wet, they were happy, laughing and joking about who should squeeze in the back of the boat. It was the best time they ever had. Freud claimed that dreams are the fulfillment of unrealized and repressed wishes in reality. And the dreams of the heroine are exactly what they can not achieve in real life and have been struggling to pursue. In real life, they are not as happy as in the heroine's dream. For them, life is a collection of bills, unaffordable rent, the possibility of losing their jobs at any time, they are trapped in the cage of life, in the quagmire of a never-ending struggle for survival. The misfortune of life has gradually made them lose the ability to love each other.

But in the face of the psychological gap, the heroine has always adopted a positive attitude to solve the problem, she repeatedly used the language of begging soft, such as “don't go to sleep before me, I don't want to be awake by myself.”, “I wish you'd rub my legs. My legs hurt.....”(3). But the male lead kept adopting an evasive attitude, impatiently talking about “I wish you'd leave me alone”. The heroine felt warm in her dream, but woke up only cold through the bones. “She tried to regular her breathing so that she could breathe in and out at the same rhythm he did. It was no use. The little sound in his nose made everything no use”(3). This unbalanced, discordant relationship between them prevents them from communicating effectively in the same magnetic field. At the same time, Carver has also bluntly expressed that dreams are one of the main ways of catharsis of human desires. In his short story *Vitamins*, the heroine is a member of a vitamin sales company who is fed up with the day-to-day sales pitch at work and the lack of a bright future. Carver says, in the narrator's voice, that “Everybody dreams. If you didn't dream, you'd go crazy. I read about it. It's an outlet. People dream when they're asleep. Or else they'd go nuts”(3). The main character's inner conflict of self is cathartized through the realization of his dream.

Carver's characters "are people who just float to the surface and don't choke to death on life"(4). They dare not expect anything else from life, and all they can do is flounder and struggle in the face of this life, which has taken all their strength. In Carver's short story *Elephant* is about a middle-aged man living alone, everyone in his family —his ex-wife, his brother, his mother —is asking him for money, and he can't even use any of the money he earns. This economic pressure makes him feel helpless, but he is powerless to change.

Aristotle hold that “dream is a product of the emotion”(5). At the moment when he could not hold on, the protagonist dreamed of his dead father and returned to his childhood: “Get up here, he said, and he took me by the hands and swung me onto his shoulders. I was high off the ground, but I wasn't afraid. He was holding on to me. We were holding on to each other. Then he began to move down the sidewalk. I brought my hands up from his shoulders and put them around his forehead. Don't muss my hair, he said. You can let go, he said, I've got you. You won't fall. When he said that, I became aware of the strong grip of his hands around my ankles.

Then I did let go. I turned loose and held my arms out on either side of me. I kept them out there like that for balance. My dad went on walking while I rode on his shoulders. I pretended he was an elephant. I don't know where we were going. Maybe we were going to the store, or else to the park so he could push me in the swing(3).

My father is like an elephant to "me", riding on his back gives the man a feeling of safety and stability, "I was high off the ground, but I wasn't afraid".[3]594 页 This dream suggests that the main character is in deep financial difficulties from his father to get some strength. Under the heavy pressure of life, the main character can finally sit on his father's shoulder and be a carefree child in his dream, go to the zoo, go on the swing, and let all his worries and troubles get a little bit of relaxation and respite. The description of the dream is not only a reflection of the characters' emotions, but also an expression of the writer's self-awareness. Here, the elephant in fact also represents Carver's nostalgia for his father. Even though Carver's relationship with his father becomes distant in adulthood, his father has always been a tall and powerful image in Carver's heart. Even though alcoholism and unemployment put heavy pressure on his father, he always took the responsibility of the family and protected them like a man. After waking up from the dream, the main character seems to have the strength to take up the familial responsibility again. He completely put off the idea of abandoning them and changing his name, and was ready to continue being the backbone of the family. Dream writing is a narrative way for Carver to express specific characters as well as his own emotions. The transcendent, satisfying and comforting nature of dreams enriches the emotional content of the creation, and to some extent dissolves the overly bitter elements of the story, finding a little hope for those who are struggling in life.

III. Imagery Writing in the Dream

According to Freud: "Dreams are thought mainly in terms of visual imagery"(2). That is to say, dreams reveal certain deep connotations hidden beneath the surface of facts through imagery. In Carver's works, the imagery of "wine" occupies almost all of his works, and some stories are even set in the center of sobriety. Perhaps it is because of the alcoholic culture of the time, or perhaps it is because of Carver's family experience, which made Carver so obsessed with alcohol. Carver's father was an alcoholic, as Carver's brother said that once his father started drinking, he could not stop. Perhaps influenced by his father and his own unruly personality, Carver began drinking in high school. After reaching adulthood, Carver, who had long struggled with poverty and bankruptcy, eventually became addicted to alcohol as well.

However, the pleasure that "alcohol" brought Carver was short-lived and immediate, but the damage it did to the family was long-lasting and indelible. Carver's daughter, Christy, concluded that alcoholism was the only cause of the problem. "his drinking escalated, and it began undermining every aspect of family and work structure he had, and my childhood as I had known it had changed and was gone forever.....The compounding problems from the drinking took a toll on everyone. It's tragic how two people in love, with such great ideals and talent, became victims of this disease. The infidelity broke my mother's heart, and my dad suffered horribly as well"(6). In an interview, Carver's mother, Ella, told the story of how he beat her when he came home drunk. Carver also included this story in *My Father's Life*. The discord in his parents' marriage and the tensions in their family relationship left Carver with a hidden problem that influenced his writing. Perhaps because of this, the image of "wine" has always surrounded Carver's narrative works. At the same time, alcohol is a means of hypnotizing the self, paralyzing the self, and escaping from reality, and it is a catalyst for dreams. In Carver's short story, *Whoever Was Using This Bed*, the heroine dreams that someone is having a party, a party where only beer is served. However, in real life, the heroine does not like beer at all, but in the dream she drinks a lot. In this novel, Carver continues to depict, as he did before, the trivialities of life, the mental and spiritual dilemmas.

In *Elephant*, there is also the imagery of "wine". In the second dream of the main character. "somebody

had offered me some whiskey, and I drank it. Drinking that whiskey was the thing that scared me. That was the worst thing that could have happened. That was rock bottom. Compared to that, everything else was picnic. I lay there for minute longer, trying to clam down. Then I got up”(3). Although Carver did not explain the main character had alcoholism or sobriety, but he drank whiskey in a dream after waking up remorseful, from which we can easily conclude that he was once an alcoholic. Due to alcoholism, he divorced from his wife, he felt that he had ruined all his family, he had guilt feelings for his family, so he never resisted when his family repeatedly asked him for money.

Insomnia is also a recurring imagery in Carver's work. It is probably because of insomnia that alcohol is needed, and it is because of alcohol that dreams are produced. Morris describes sleep, in *The Space of Literature*, as "freedom from the vastness and restlessness of the external world, giving oneself over to such a world is fixed in the reliable reality of some limited and completely enclosed place"(7). A good, quality sleep is a sign of a healthy and happy life, while insomnia represents the disorder and discomfort of life. In the novel—*The Student's Wife*, the main character, "the wife", wakes up after a nap and has insomnia, longing for her husband to care for him and comfort her. But her husband, who does not want to share his wife's insomnia and fear, says, "Leave me alone". She tossed and turned and did not fall asleep until dawn. She cried several times during the long, lonely night, and the truth of their marriage came out in her insomnia. She sensed the fear of being abandoned by her husband. Not in pictures she had seen nor in any book she had read had she learned a sunrise was so terrible as this”(3).

In most literature, the dawn symbolizes hope or rebirth, but here the sunrise is a sword that destroys hope and mercilessly leads the wife to the grave of marriage. The protagonist in *Menudo* is also faced with insomnia. The main character, who is deeply involved in several relationships, cannot sleep at night. He is restless, afraid that his tangled relationship problems will never be resolved. When he was upset, he remembered that he had missed a bowl of menudo. That is said to be good for the nerves and good for calming elaboration. But unfortunately, before the soup was ready, the main character fell asleep and woke up after being drunk by other friends. "Menudo" is the theme of the short story, it is not just a dish, it is also an opportunity to heal the body and mind. So the main character regrets not missing out on a bowl of soup, but rather a chance to bring peace to himself. The difference is that the protagonist in *The Student's Wife* has an epiphany instead of the endless fear of insomnia. "The sky is turning gray, and I hear some birds starting up. I decide I can't wait any longer. I can't just sit there, doing nothing—that's all there is to it. I can't keeping waiting”(3). Then he go out to sweeping the leaves in the yard, the action is not only to clean up the garbage, but also to symbolize the urgent need to clean up his spiritual and emotional world, and the urgent desire for order and tranquility.

IV. Conclusion

As Carver's friend Kittredge observed the evolution of Carver and his work, he found that duplicity was deeply rooted in his friend's relationship and the 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”(6). 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". But the difference lies in the fact that Carver found a balanced path in life through his writing, while others can only dive into the illusionary dream world, sparing no effort to find a moment of eternity and stillness in life.

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