

A Study of Carver's *The Bath* —A Refuge in Daily Life —

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It is said that "a new age of short stories" has come in modern American literature. The phenomenon is called "Minimalism." The representative writers are Raymond Carver, Frederick Barthelme, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tobias Wolff, and Susan Minot. Using short forms and plain style, they suggest many kinds of mental problems which lurk in modern American life.

It was with a collection of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* that Carver established his claim to national notice for the first time. Since then, he has been a pioneer of "Minimalism."

According to some books and magazines, he was born at Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1938 (or 1939), and began to write some poems and short stories at his high school days. He got married at the age of eighteen, and entered Chico State College as a part-time student. At the college, Carver was taught by John Gardner, who was teaching a beginning fiction writing course at that time, and exercised a strong influence upon his future life. After graduating from the college, he studied at Humboldt State College and at Writers Workshop of the University of Iowa. Then after becoming lecturer at the University of California, he became a professor of English at Syracuse University, but he threw up his position in 1983 when he was given Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award by American Art Academy, and came back to Port Angeles, devoting himself to creative writing in October last year, he gave up coming to Japan, where he was to give a lecture at the meeting of American Literature Society of Japan, because he was compelled to undergo an operation by which two-thirds of his lung was cut off. In July this year, he was married to Tess Gallagher, a poet and novelist. But, to our great regret, on 2nd August this year, he passed away at his house at Port Angeles in Washington.

After writing his first collection of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), he wrote *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), by which he was called "a master of the short form." But it is with his next collection, *Cathedral* (1983) that he acquired a higher public estimation. Then he published his works at successive intervals; *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories* (1988), some collections of poems, *Winter Insomnia* (1970), *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* (1984), *Ultramarine* (1986), and *Fires* (1983) which contains some essays, poems, short stories, and interviews. And he edited *Best American Short Stories: 1986 ('87)*, *American Short Story Masterpieces* (1987), and so on.

The Bath we will deal with in this paper is included in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Whenever we read his short stories, we will notice a queer effect which issues from their surface simplicity. However, the very simplicity contains a lot of implications, images and metaphors, which are inlaid here and there very skillfully. Indeed Carver himself puts it: "It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about common-place things and objects using common-place but precise language, and to endow those things— a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring— with immense, even startling power."¹ Therefore, by paying attention to "common-place things and objects" with "immense, even startling power," and also to "common-place but precise language" with many implications and metaphors, we will examine what kind of world Carver intended to show us, and at the same time we will investigate what the title of this short story means in

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the following chapters.

I

This story, like the others, is very plain and simple, but it takes a time before we realize how Carver's intention is represented by even the most seemingly slight sketch. In order to investigate Carver's intention and implications, first of all we will examine the people other than Scotty and his parents.

This story begins at the scene where Saturday afternoon Scotty's mother drives to the bakery to order a birthday cake for him. Here Carver describes the baker's character in detail:

The baker listened thoughtfully when the mother told him Scotty would be eight years old. He was an older man, this baker, and wore a curious apron, a heavy thing with loops that went under his arms and around his back and then crossed in front again where they were tied in a very thick knot. He kept wiping his hands on the front of the apron as he listened to the woman, his wet eyes examining her lips as she studied the samples and talked.

He let her take her time. He was in no hurry.²

Furthermore, Carver goes on: "The cake would be ready Monday morning, in plenty of time for the party Monday afternoon. This was all the baker was willing to say. No pleasantries, just this small exchange, the barest information, nothing that was not necessary."³ As we see in these scenes, the baker does not pay the customer any compliment. Indeed he tells her "nothing that was not necessary," letting her say as much as she wants. But we must pay attention to the fact that he wears a very curious apron which covers the front and back of his body. It is indeed a heavily equipped apron, which seems to symbolize that he is a man who guards himself against the outer world, and who is highly profession-conscious in a good sense, but that he never listens to anybody about any professional matter having to do with him. In a sense, he is a very selfish man who cannot enter into other people's feelings. So he is just occupied with his own matter regardless of causing annoyance to others. When Scotty's father drives home from the hospital, we see the baker reveal his real nature:

He [Scotty's father] picked up the receiver. He said, "I just got in the door!"
"There's a cake that wasn't picked up."

This is what the voice on the other end said.

"What are you saying?" the father said.

"The cake," the voice said. "Sixteen dollars,"

The husband held the receiver against his ear, trying to understand. He said, "I don't know anything about it."

"Don't hand me that," the voice said.⁴

Moreover, the baker makes a telephone call to the father, just as he is in the bath, saying "It's resdy."⁵ And at the very end of this story, Carver reveals his stubborn nature once again:

The telephone rang.
"Yes!" she [Scotty's mother] said. "Hello!" she said.
"Mrs. Weiss," a man's voice said.
"Yes," she said. "This is Mrs. Weiss. Is it about Scotty?" she said.
"Scotty," the voice said. "It is about Scotty," the voice said. "It has to do Scotty, yes."⁶

As we have seen, the baker makes telephone calls to Scotty's father and mother twice. At each time, he talks to them one-sidedly without going into details. Indeed he is a very selfish and stubborn man as his curious apron symbolizes.

Then how about the doctor in charge of Scotty and other persons concerned in the hospital? The doctor, like other doctors, examines Scotty, touching his wrist, peeling back his eyelid, and listening to the heart. But whenever he makes his appearance, we find his costume and appearance are very different. Let us have a look at the doctor's external appearance when he appears first in this story:

This doctor was a handsome man. His skin was moist and tan. He wore a three-piece suit, a vivid tie, and on his shirt were cufflinks.⁷

At first sight, he seems to have just come back from some party or meeting. He just says to the parents, "Nothing to shout about, but nothing to worry about. He should wake up pretty soon."⁸ And in response to the father's question, "You wouldn't call this a coma, then?" he answers in the negative, and says, "He is sleeping. It's restorative. The body is doing what it has to do."⁹ and goes away. Meanwhile a nurse comes in and handles her work in a businesslike way. Then another doctor comes in, telling them about taking Scotty downstairs for more pictures and doing a scan. Thus two orderlies take him downstairs, and bring him back out after sunup. Though the parents wait all day, he does not wake up. Then nurses and doctor come in one after another, and at last a technician comes in and takes blood. In response to the mother's protest, he only says, "doctor's orders." After that, the doctor in charge of Scotty comes in again. He looks tanned and healthier than ever as if he had just come back from his vacation. After examining the boy, he only says, "His signs are fine. Everything's good."¹⁰

So far we have seen the doctor in charge of Scotty and other persons concerned in the hospital. Maybe we will receive an impression that all the people in the hospital including the doctor are very selfish, and do not care about the parents's feelings at all, though they can be said to devote themselves to their own duty in their own way. In other words, they are self-centred and cold-hearted; they have a very cold heart and lack the touch of humanity. In that sense, all of them resemble the baker who is very selfish and cannot enter into other people's feelings.

Now we will turn to the boy who goes to school with Scotty. Monday morning Scotty is walking to school in the company of another boy. On the way an accident happens:

At an intersection, without looking, the birthday boy stepped off the curb, and was promptly knocked down by a car. He fell on his side, his head in the gutter, his legs in the road moving as if he were climbing a wall.

The other boy stood holding the potato chips. He was wondering if he should finish the rest or continue on to school.

The birthday boy did not cry. But neither did he wish to talk anymore. He would not answer when the other boy asked what it felt like to be hit by a car. The birthday boy got up and turned back for home, at which time the other boy waved good-bye and headed off for school.¹¹

What would most boys do when such an accident happened? Perhaps they would come up to Scotty and help him to rise to his feet, or they would ask for the help of other people. Instead of doing so, the boy wonders "if he should finish the rest or continue on to school" without helping Scotty to stand up or asking for help. Moreover, he is so insensible as to ask Scotty what it feels like "to be hit by a car." And, to our great surprise, the very driver who caused the accident is not seen anywhere. And in most cases, there will be some passers-by who witnessed the accident. In such a case, some of them will run up to Scotty and take necessary actions; some of them will give a first-aid treatment to him, and others will make a telephone call for an ambulance. But the reverse is the case; we can see neither the driver nor any passers-by. Therefore, we cannot help thinking that all the citizens including Scotty's friend are very egoistic and lack all sense of responsibility.

So far we have seen the people other than Scotty's family; the baker, the doctor in charge of Scotty and the persons concerned in the hospital, Scotty's schoolmate, the driver, and the passers-by. All of them, as stated above, have a cold heart, and deal with the matter in their own way. Above all, most of them lack the touch of humanity. Therefore, it may be said that Scotty and his parents are living in the very cruel society in which the inhabitants have no consideration for other people and will have their own way though the society seems to be peaceful and harmonious at first sight.

II

Now we will turn to Scotty's family. Perhaps the family life has been very normal, common and uneventful, but it is doubtful whether the family ties have been firm and strong. So we will take this problem into consideration in this chapter.

When Scotty comes home after the accident, and tells her what happened, she holds his hands in her lap. This behaviour of hers is quite different from that of cold-hearted people and cruel society. It can be said to be a behaviour by which she tries to make sure of the ties of the affection between parent and child through the warmth of her lap. As for the father, he seems to lose himself completely after the accident; he exceeds the speed limit on his way back from the hospital. And he thinks to himself about the past family life; he feels that it has been a good life till now; that he has had rather good work, fatherhood and nice family. Finally he concludes that he has been lucky and happy. At the same time, he begins to feel uneasy about the condition of his sick son and the family life in the future, and feels like taking a bath for fear. Here we will wonder what the word "bath" means. Indeed it has a lot of implications; to take a bath is our daily routine even in our complicated society, but first of all, it means the return to our normal daily life; in short, it is an attempt to take back original

ourselves by trimming ourselves up, and to wash away our uneasiness, fear and discomfort as well as the dirt and sweat from our daily life. At the same time, it is of course an attempt to warm ourselves in the bathtub. Paradoxically speaking, however, this attempt is considered an attempt to escape from reality. In this sense, the mother is much stronger and more persevering than the father.

As soon as the father drives home from the hospital to regain his normal condition, the baker as a member of the selfish and cruel society makes a telephone call to him. When the telephone rings, the father regrets to have had a kind of escape from reality, and thinks he is very stupid. But the baker, saying "It's ready," pursues him persistently. When the father goes back to the hospital, he begins to feel much uneasier, but he tries to tell to himself desperately: "The child is fine. Instead of sleeping at home, he's doing it here. Sleep is the same wherever you do it."¹² Then the doctor comes in and says as usual, "he should wake up pretty soon," but it seems to the couple's untrained eye that the boy is in the state of coma. After the doctor gets away, the couple sit down on the chairs. Carver describes the situation of the husband's uneasiness vividly:

The husband sat in the chair beside her. He wanted to say something else. But there was no saying what it should be. He took her hand and put it in his lap. This made him feel better. It made him feel he was saying something. They sat like that for a while, watching the boy, not talking. From time to time he squeezed her hand until she took it away.¹³

At this point, the husband tries to seek for the warmth of mind and body through her hand, and also to make sure of the ties of affection between them, just as the mother does so by holding Scotty's hand in her lap just after the accident. Thus he feels much better in doing so. Moreover, it may be noticed that there has been virtually no dialogue between the couple. However, the cruel society persecutes the couple in distress mercilessly; another doctor comes in and does a scan, or a technician takes blood, and so forth. At this point, the mother, who has braced herself up, and refused to go back home and take a bath in spite of the advice of the doctor and her husband, begins to realize the situation, including her son's progress toward recovery, is assuming serious proportions; she talks to herself, "We're into something now, something hard."¹⁴ Now we must pay attention to the word "we." If she worried merely about the condition of her sick son, she would say, "He's into something now." Now she seems to have completely realized the fear of the disruption of the family life:

She was afraid.

She saw a car stop and a woman in a long coat get into it. She made believe she was that woman. She made believe she was driving away from here to someplace else.¹⁵

At this scene, it is clear that she wants to become another woman, and drives away somewhere. No doubt this reveals her real feeling that she would escape, if possible, from the very fear. Overcome with such fear, at last she feels like going home, taking a bath, and putting on something clean, at the suggestion of the husband. Now she tries, like her husband, to regain herself by taking a bath, which means, as above-mentioned, a wish to return to her normal daily life, and to wash away her uneasiness and fear as well as the dirt and sweat. On the other hand, it also means a wish to escape from reality.

On her way back home from the hospital, she is spoken to by a woman worrying about her son, Nelson, and

she introduces herself and tells the couple about the condition of her sick son without being asked to do so. This manifests her desperate wish to open her heart to someone, and let him understand her, in this cruel society, and with it to quench her own lonely feeling. But when she goes home and is having a cup of tea, she is pursued, like her husband, by the baker as a member of this cruel society.

This story ends here. And Carver tells us nothing about the settlement of so many problems. Indeed Carver is such a writer as is sure to avoid the plot by which the end of a story becomes his final answer to a problem. Therefore, he does not show us very clearly what will become of Scotty's coma, and of the crisis of the disruption of the family life as well as the crisis of the ties of affection between the couple, which has come up to the surface after the accident. But if we use the very word in this story, such problems are all in a kind of "coma," that is, in an unstable condition.

III

As we have seen, this story takes up a traffic accident which can happen to anyone in this modern society, and shows us the parents' fear and uneasiness about the condition of their sick son, and with it reveals the crisis of the disruption of the family life which has come up to the surface, the fragility of the ties between the couple, and a sense of isolation. At the same time, this story reveals the selfishness, inhumanity, and violence by the baker, the doctors and others as the members of a modern society. In other words, this story, it may be said, reveals the world where what was the whole of life yesterday becomes quite meaningless today, and the substantial isolation of human beings as well as the violence of words and acts caused by other people when someone tries to have something to do with them. Therefore, Carver seems to suggest that the title of this story "The Bath" is a place of refuge visited by the common people seeking the warmth of mind and body, overcome by the cruelty and violence of the modern society, and that it is only in the place that we can feel the warmth in our daily life. Thus it may be given as a conclusion that we take our normal daily life for granted, and lead an easy life every day, but that nothing in the world is filled with more dangers than the ordinary daily life of the common people, and that we live in, as it were, the cruel, temporary world where what was the whole of life yesterday becomes quite meaningless today.

NOTES

1. Raymond Carver, *Fires; On Writing* (Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1983) , p.15.
2. Raymond Carver, *The Bath in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1981), pp.47-48. Subsequent quotations from *The Bath* will refer to this edition.
3. *Ibid.*, p.48.
4. *Ibid.*, p.49.
5. *Ibid.*, p.50.
6. *Ibid.*, p.56.
7. *Ibid.*, pp.51-52.
8. *Ibid.*, p.52.
9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p.54.
11. *Ibid.*, p.48.
12. *Ibid.*, p.51.
13. *Ibid.*, pp.52—53.
14. *Ibid.*, p.54.
15. *Ibid.*

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