Some Considerations on *Are You A Doctor ?*

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New short stories in American literature began to appear in the latter half of 1970s, and as soon as Raymond Carver made his debut in letters in 1980s, a lot of short stories became the main current, in American literature in '80s, especially in novels, as if it were in response to Carver's appearance in the literary world. Many critics call this phenomenon "Minimalism," or "New American Short Stories," "K-Mart Realism," "Blue Collar Realism," or "Diet-Pepsi Realism" with a little irony or sarcasm. The representative writers are Raymond Carver, Frederick Barthelme, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tobias Wolff, and Susan Minot. What are the characteristics of "Minimalism" ? A certain scholar summarizes the characteristics in *The Rising Generation* (January, '88) : [1]

1) the small size as a story
2) very simple style ; the conscious use of lean and pruned style as simple one
3) the materials about an everyday affair ; banality ; the narrowness of materials themselves
4) The mental attitude of the writer experssed through the individual persons in the stories is nihilistic or extremely passive.
5) the lack of social extension, and small space, as some critical persons point out
6) an acurate eye to the materials ; from it readers accept a kind of suggestion

Indeed minimalists suggest many kinds of mental attitudes which lurk in modern daily life in America by using such forms and plain style.

It was with a collection of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please ?* (1976) that Carver took the critics by surprise and established his claim to national notice for the first time. Thereafter, when he wrote a second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), Frank Kermode in the University of Cambridge spoke highly of him, saying that Raymond Carver was a master of the short form. Since then he has been called a pioneer of "Minimalism." 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 Insommia* (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.

In October in 1988, he intended to come to Japan in order to give a lecture at the meeting of

American Literature Society of Japan, but he was compelled to give up the plan, because he underwent an operation by which two-thirds of his lung was cut off. And in July in 1988, he married Tess Gallagher, a poet and novelist, whom he had lived with for many years. Perhaps it is because he wanted to express his gratitude and compassion to her who had served him well for a long time. However, to our great sorrow, on 2nd August in 1988, watched by Tess, he passed away at his house at Port Angeles, Washington.

Are You A Doctor ? we will deal with in this paper is included in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please ?* (1976). This story, like the others, is very simple, but after reading it, we will wonder what kind of story it is. We can easily understand the plot ; a man feels like visiting a woman's apartment house because she happened to phone him by mistake. When he visits the woman's appartment house, he tries to leave the room at any moment, but he embraces her and kisses her. After that, he returns home at once. He receives a telephone call from his wife making a business trip. And the story ends. Then we will wonder what story it is. It is often said that what is recognized in Carver's stories as soon as we read them is a queer effect that issues from their surface simplicity. But the very simplicity contains many implications and images, which are very skillfully inlaid here and there in his stories. By a queer effect we mean that there is some feeling of threat of sense of menace in his short stories. Indeed Carver himself puts it :

> I like it when there is some feeling of threat or sense of menace in short stories. I think a little menace is fine to have in a story.... There has to be a tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won't be a story.[2]

Moreover, Carver shows his attitude of writing in the same book :

> It's possible in a poem or a short story, to write about 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. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader's spine — the source of artistic delight, as Nabokov would have it. That's the kind of writing that most interests me.[3]

Therefore, by paying attention to his simple and precise words with various images and implications, we will examine what kind of modern world Carver tried to describe, and at the same time we will investigate his real intention of the short story in the following chapters.

I

This story, like the others, is very simple and plain, but it takes a lot of 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 see what happens in Arnold's normal daily life.

This story begins at the scene where Arnold hurried out of the study in slippers, pajamas, and robe when the telephone rang. Carver describes his ordinary family life and the relation between the

couple in a casual manner :

> Since it was past ten, the call would be his wife. She phoned — late like this, after a few drinks — each night when she was out of town. She was a buyer, and all this week she had been away on business.[4]

Contrary to his expectation, the caller was a woman, but not his wife. It was a telephone call by mistake. Seeing a piece of paper on the table when she got in from work, the woman says that she telephoned him, but his number is unlisted. So he tries to ring off, telling her to toss it away :

> "Is there anything else ? " he said, "It's late and I'm busy." He hadn't meant to be curt, but one couldn't take chances. He sat down on the chair by the telephone and said, "I hadn't meant to be curt. I only meant that it's late, and I'm concerned how you happen to have my number." He pulled off his slipper and began massaging his foot, waiting.[5]

Here we must pay attention to the sentence "one couldn't take chances." ; not "he" but "one" is used. It means that if man is a right-minded person, he will guess what kind of woman the strange female who rings up late at night is, and that it is better for him to ring off as soon as possible. However, perhaps from his habit in his daily life, he gives responses that make a conversation go smoothly, asking her to forget it and throw the paper away whatever the reason may be. Then the woman says, "You sound like a nice man."[6] With that he is much surprised ; usually we will not say this kind of flattery. Maybe a woman of a certain character would say such kind of thing. At any rate he really feels that it is good "to hear a voice, even his own, in the quiet room,"[7] and feels like enjoying himself by having a conversation with the woman, letting go his foot. And the woman gives her name as Clara Holt, and asks his full name. His first name "Arnold" is derived from German, and the original meaning is "strong as an eagle." And his family name "Breit" is also derived from German, and originally means "broad." On the other hand, "Clara" is derived from Latin and is a modification of "Clare" meaning "clear." At any rate, their names symbolize more or less their character, and we will see it in the following chapters.

In the meantime, Arnold thinks that he should hung up, but he feels like enjoying himself by having a much more conversation with Clara, and goes into his study for a cigar, keeping her holding the phone :

> "Will you hold the phone a minute ? " he said, "I have to check on something." He went into the study for a cigar, took a minute lighting it up with the desk lighter, then removed his glasses and looked at himself in the mirror over the fireplace. When he returned to the telephone, he was half afraid she might be off the line.[8]

Here he removes his glasses and looks at himself in the mirror. Indeed, very often we see this kind of behaviour of his in this story. Thus the woman says in the end, "I know I'm imposing, Arnold, but do you think we could meet somewhere we could talk ? Just for a minutes ? "[9] However, he refuses it at once, saying that he is an old man. It is obvious from this word of his that he thinks what kind

of woman Clara is. Clara denies that he is an old man, but he repeats that he is old. Then she says, "Could you meet somewhere, Arnold ? You see, I haven't told you everything. There's something else."[10] In response to this, he asks what she means, but she hungs up. After that, when he is preparing for bed, his wife calls. They have a chattering for a while, but he goes to bed without saying anything about the woman's call. In a while, there is also a telephone call from the woman, and she says that it's important they meet.

The next morning when he puts the key into the lock, he hears the telephone ringing. He hurries over to the table, and picks up the receiver, still in hat, coat and gloves. This is also a call from the woman, and she says, "Arnold, I'm sorry to bother you again. But you must come to my house tonight around nine or nine-thirty. Can you do that for me, Arnold ? "[11] He refuses to do so, but his heart moves when he hears her call his name, but the woman asks him persistently :

> "Please, Arnold," she said. "It's important or I wouldn't be asking. I can't leave the house tonight because Cheryl is sick with a cold and now I'm afraid for the boy."
> "And your husband ? " He waited.
> "I'm not married," she said. "You will come, won't you ? "
> "I can't promise, " he said.
> "I implore you to come," she said and then quickly gave him the address and hung up.
> "*I implore you to come,*" he repeated, still holding the receiver.[12]

As a very little consideration will show, her request is very strange ; the woman does not confirm at all whether he is a doctor or not. All we can understand is that the woman falls in a very helpless condition. He says he can't promise, but her words "I implore you to come" touch his heartstrings because such a woman as will use this mode of expression can seldom be found. Therefore, he repeats her words "I implore you to come." Here he has known that the woman leads a life with her two children because she is a widow or she is divorced form her husband, but he does not repose absolute confidence in her. So he feels he has to be careful ; he fears that there may be a trap somewhere ; when he meets the woman, her husband makes his appearance, and may threaten him for his scandal with her. In spite of such fear, he makes the decision to visit her while he looks at himself in the bathroom mirror, and begins to soap his face. Then he checks his nails. It is perhaps because he wanted to reveal his manly spirit that he made the decision to go to see her. So he goes to her apartment house by taxi, but he gets off the taxi cautiously at the end of the block where her apartment house stands, and enters the building on foot. Then he sees that a large man in a sweatshirt leans over the railing at one balcony and watches him walk toward the door. After that, he always bears it in mind. Then he pushes the button, and the buzzer sounds, and he steps back to the door and enters. He climbs the stairs slowly, stopping to make a rest briefly at each landing. Taking this into consideration, we will feel that he is on the wrong side of forty. At that moment he feels a sudden pain in his side, imagines his heart, imagines his legs folding under him, imagines a loud fall to the bottom of the stairs. So he waits for his heart to quiet. Clearly he fears his heart attack. He stops at her door, and knocks lightly. In her room, there is a plump little girl in pajamas waiting there. The girl says that her mother "went to the drugstore for some syrup and aspirin."[13] Having a talk with the girl, he looks around :

> The room was lighted by a gold floor lamp that had a large ashtray and a magazine rack affixed to the pole. A television set stood against the far wall, the picture on, volume low. A narrow hallway led to the back of the apartment. The furnace was turned up, the air close with a medical smell. Hairpins and rollers lay on the coffee table, a pink bathrobe lay on the couch.[14]

Here he does not feel comfortable, and raises his eyes toward the kitchen. As the glass doors that give off the kitchen onto the balcony opens slightly, he remembers the large man in the sweatshirt, and a little chill goes through him. The girl says that her mother will come back soon, but he tries to go away. Then the door swings open, and a small, pale, freckled woman enters into the room carrying a paper bag, saying, "Arnold ! I'm glad to see you ! "[15] After this simple greeting, the woman walks to the kitchen with the bag. When she comes back, she says suddenly, "Are you a doctor ? "[16], which is the title of this short story. From the beginning she seems to be convinced that he is a doctor. Then some awkard conversation continues between them. As for him, he himself is amazed at the irrationality that he is in her room, but at the same time he is aware he is gesturing feebly, though he says he must go. "I'll put on tea water," the woman says, "Then I'll give Cheryl her medicine, and then we can talk."[17] And she gives a medicine to her daughter and tells her to go to her room. He nods to the daughter and then follows the woman to the kitchen. He does not sit on the chair she indicated, but the chair "that let him face the balcony, the hallway, and the small living room."[18] It shows that Arnold exercises precaution. They sit across from each other waiting for the water to boil. Then he hears the sound of the television. The only topic they can converse with each other is how she has got to know his telephone number. Even about it, she does not have more details than she had a talk with him through telephone ; there is a high probability that Annette, her sitter, misheard the number for his. When the woman made tea and handed it to him, he says, "You said it was urgent that I come."[19] And she only says, turning away, "I don't know what made me say that. I can't imagine what I was thinking."[20] At this point, he knows that she is in a very unhappy situation, and that she becomes almost frantic. When he says that he must go because it is unusual, she stands up from the chair as if she were trying to detain him :

> Her eyes were a pale green, set deep in her pale face and surrounded by what he had at first thought was dark makeup. Appalled at himself, knowing he would despise himself for it, he stood and put his arms clumsily around her waist. She let herself be kissed, fluttering and closing her eyelids briefly.[21]

Looking her into the face carefully, he finds "her eyes a pale green, set deep in her pale face," and also notices that there are dark rings around her eyes, which he at first thought to be dark makeup. Perhaps her dark rings were caused by her hardships and physical or mental exhaution. Thinking how much misery and uneasiness she is suffering from, he is carried away by a strong, compassionate emotion, and embraces her to give her a kiss. In doing so, however, he is conscious that he will despise himself later for his unexpected sentimentalism, as is often the case with the intellectuals. After that, he says good-by to her at the door, and the woman asks if he will come again. But he answers in the negative by shaking his head. Here again he hears the television, and he notices the

volume is turned up. And he remembers that she said she was afraid for the boy when she had a telephone call this afternoon. He wonders where the boy is. Parting with her, he looks at her expression carefully, "but she is gazing past him" as if she were trying to remember something"[22] just as his visit to her apartment house was an incredible happening to him, so it may have seemed to her like a dream. Saying "strange," he goes down the stairs, and takes a long breath when he reaches the sidewalk. But looking back at the building, he finds again the large man in the sweatshirt moving slightly against the railing and looking down at him. When he comes home, he hears the telephone ringing. Though he thinks it is from his wife, he waits till the ringing stops. Then he feels, through the layers of clothes, his heart beating. Just as he went into the bedroom, the telephone came alive again. Thinking that it is from Mrs. Holt, he answers it this time. However, the telephone call is from his wife ;

> "Arnold ? My, aren't we formal tonight ! " his wife said, her voice strong, teasing. "I've been calling since nine. Out living it up, Arnold ? "[23]

He listens to her without saying anything. Perhaps it seems to her that his voice was a cheerful and light-hearted one, but Arnold seems to be thinking about another woman's voice, that is, Clara's. Therefore, his wife says, "You don't sound like yourself."[24] At this point this story ends. Here we cannot help thinking what story it is. In order to clarify Carver's intention of this story, we will investigate not only Clara's real nature but also Arnold's character in the following chapter.

II

Arnold, hero of this story, seems to be a very lonely man, as is seen from the sentence, "it was good to hear a voice, even his own, in the quiet room." Indeed his wife is apt to stay away from home because she is a buyer, but his loneliness also may be brought from another reason. Conjugal relations between them may continue only in the form of her telephone call to him from the place where she makes a business trip, but bonds of affection between the couple may be cut off. At the same time, he seems to have a sense of crumbling about his own body. Considering that he usually wears spectacles, carries a briefcase, he seems to be one of white-collar employees. And he seems to be so gentle and sincere as to be taken for a doctor, but he is beginning to be conscious of his physical weakening peculiar to middle age ; he often looks in a mirror, and he is afraid of heart attack ; he seems to feel a decline in sexual appetite, and at the same time to be unable to satisfy his sexual desire because his wife often stays away from home. Contrary to his name Arnold meaning "strong as an eagle," he has a sense of physical weakening like this. For example, when the woman telephones him by mistake and asks if they can meet somewhere, he refuses to be so, saying that he is an old man.

As for Clara, Carver does not say clearly what kind of occupation the woman engages in, but she may possibly be a woman of a certain character as he had a suspicion about her occupation. At any rate, she is a woman who puts her feelings into words without trimmings ; in her first telephone call to Arnold, she goes so far as to judge him only by his voice and say, "You sound like a nice man," though she has never seen him before. As Arnold had a suspicion about her, a woman of a certain character could say such a thing. In the second call to him, she even says, "I implore you to come,"

which touches his heart greatly. So Arnold repeats her words and decides to visit her while he is looking at himself in the mirror. As his family name "Breit" shows, he may be a broad-minded man. However, he seems to have felt like satisfying his sexual desire somewhere in the background of his mind by receiving the woman's temptation, because he checked even his nail when he made a decision to see her. Indeed he must have feared that her husband may appear when the woman and Arnold meet in secret, and that her husband may threaten him for it, but it seems that he made a decision to visit her because he felt sympathy for the fact that she was in helpless condition and was stricken by a serious panic. It will be much to the point if we say he decided to go, as it were, by his manly spirit. Thus he goes to see Clara, but he can never forget the large man in the sweatshirt against the railing, and the sound of the television reaching his ear from the bedroom ; if there should be a scandal between Clara and Arnold, it would lead to his mental and economical destruction, and that of their conjugal relations as well as his physical destruction. But after all, he goes to see her and gets such a great shock as makes him change his character ; in fact it will be illustrated by the fact that his wife says, "You don't sound like yourself." at the end of this story. His wife's words are quite interesting as compared with Clara's words "You sound like a good man."

Arnold is such a man of type as feels oppressed by a sense of solitude all the time and is plunged in grief, but he is a man who has never sunk into the depth of misery nor has been driven into any dangerous situation. Conversely speaking, his comfortable and abundant life in some measure causes him to burn imperfectly. In consequence, he has fallen into a melancholy disposition and ennui attendent upon self-abhorrence. But what he saw tonight was the face of a woman driven into a tight corner. The dark rings around her eyes, which he thought to be dark makeup, were caused by her hardships and physical or mental exhaution. The woman with two sick children is trying to heal them with medicine bought at a drugstore. She cannot take them to hospital or go and fetch a doctor. Therefore, when she meets a kindly-looking man, all she can do is to appeal to him for mercy, saying "Are you a doctor ? " So his visit must have been a dreamy happening and temporary peace of mind to her, as is easily supposed from the fact that she fixes her eyes on the air in parting with him. All things considered, this woman's words, as is shown by her first name, are the real words without any flattery and rising out of her heart of hearts. In short, she can do nothing but express the misery and unhappiness of hers and her children's with all her might by the words "Are you a doctor ? "

III

We ordinary people are protected rather safely and comfortably from the real misery of our life. We are like, as it were, flowers in a hothouse. Thus those who are protected in such happy circumstances are apt to increase wearisomeness to real life and to lose a sense of reality. And there is nothing that sharpens our sense of reality about our life more vividly than poverty and illness, as is shown by this woman. On the other hand, most people will want to lead a safe and comfortable life, even though they pay an indemnity of losing a sense of reality about their life. Therefore, this story seems to reveal a rather comfortable life in a middle-class family, and the contradictory phenomena or dilemma ; the loss of a sense of reality about our life and a sense of wearisomeness to our life, caused by the happy and comfortable life. At the same time, Carver seems to suggest that very few people in this modern society use plain and frank words ; as we have seen, in face of some

dangers, it was by the Clara's simple and frank words that Arnold felt like going to see her.

Carver often uses a telephone as a small gadget for his stories. When we come to think of it, it is a very useful and convenient invention in our modern society, but it sometimes worries us ; it intrudes into our private life, so to speak, without taking off its footgear. It is often said that modern world is, in a sense, composed of the society of anonimity which means the society where they do not let others know their own names on purpose. One of the typical gadgets in such society of anonimity is a telephone. Only through this gadget can we express our joy, sorrow and trouble, and by telephone men and women are bound together. In other words, Carver may suggest in this story that the medern world is composed of such strange and weird society in which most people are quite lonely, and where they can have some contacts in their neighborhood, and also reach an understanding with each other, only by telephone.

Carver uses a passage in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera as epigraph for *Where I'm Calling From* :

> We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come.[25]

However petty our life may be, we are living only one life. Indeed, fixing his eyes on our only one life affectionately and sadly, Carver describes it. Furthermore, Carver says about Isak Dinesen's story-writing : "Isak Dinesen said that she wrote a little every day, without hope and without despair."[26] And also in *Errand*, Carver lets Chekhof say like this : "I'll have to limit myself to the description of how my heroes love, marry, give birth, die, and how they speak."[27] Such kinds of story writing will be true of Carver himself ; he "wrote a little every day, without hope and without despair," which enables him, it seems, to find the significance of the everlasting existence in the simple daily life of ordinary people.

In Carver's stories, man's daily life is seen through by one writer as if he were a clairvoyant ; Carver can show us weirdly the everlasting nature of man, such as man's sorrow, tenderness and malice at which we are startled in our daily life. This is the very characteristic of his story.

To our great regret, Carver passed away in August 2, 1988. Now we will finish our argument by quotationg a passage in *Errand* as his epitaph : "There was only beauty, peace, and the grandeur of death."[28]

NOTES

1. See *The Rising Generation* published by Kenkyusha Co., Ltd. (Tokyo, January 1988), p. 470.
2. Raymond Carver, *On Writing* in *Fires* (Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1983), p. 17.
3. *Ibid* ., p. 15.
4. Raymond Carver, *Are You A Doctor ?* in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please ?* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1978), p. 29. Subsequent quotations from *Are You A Doctor ?* will refer to this edition.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p.30.

7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p.31.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 34
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Raymond Carver, *Where I'm Calling From ; New and Selected Stories* (The Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1988), Epigraph.
26. Carver, *On Writing*, p. 14.
27. Carver, *Errand* in *Where I'm Calling From*, p. 383.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 388.

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