
Some Considerations on *So Much Water So Close to Home* (II)

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In the preceding chapter, we have seen Carver depicts the crisis of the conjugal relations after Stuart found the dead body at the place where he went camping, and that his wife, Claire, becomes a narrator and tells us the story through her own eyes; that is, Carver uses a female first-person narrative voice. In order to clarify this story, first of all we will reconsider the true picture of Stuart and then examine Claire's mental condition in the second chapter.

II

Stuart sometimes enjoys playing pocker and bowling and fishing with his three intimate friends, who are decent and family men and take care of their jobs. One day these four men go fishing in the Naches River and happen to find a dead body of a girl, but instead of reporting the accident to the sheriff, they leave the dead body as it is for two days (Friday night and Saturday), on the ground that she is already dead and isn't going anyway, and that they are too tired to go back to the car five miles away, and that it is too late at night. Deciding so and leaving the body as it is, they set up the camp, build a fire and drink their whiskey, spending two nights playing poker and fishing. On their way back home on Sunday, they report the accident to the sheriff, and the inspection of the scene of the accident is done. Thus serving their responsibility in a way, they return back. After that Stuart ascillates between sexual advances and denial of wrongdoing; indeed he has some guilty conscience for his behaviour to the dead girl, and tried to have sex with his wife in order to forget the compunction to some extent, but even after the sex, he stays awake overnight. At least Claire thinks so. As she also notices in the opening scene of this story, Stuart "eats with a good appetite" though Claire does not think "he is really hungry." He "stares at something across the room" and asks his wife what she is staring at him for. In fact she does not stare at him. The fact is that he is afraid of other people's eyes. Therefore the destination which his eyes reach is not his wife nor anything in the room. What is reflected in his eyes is only images, not a definite meaning and substance. Through such an act, he seems to see nihility lying behind images. Apart from images, telephone is often used in Carver's world. It may be said a kind of softening installation for defending one's own self by way of restricting in the domain of auditory sense the establishment of the communication with the outside world. Indeed in the opening scene, Stuart tells his wife not to

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answer the call, but he stops eating and listens to her when she answers it. In addition to telephone, beer and whiskey are also used in this work. In fact we see Stuart often drink beer and whiskey. They will be considered as a means on the part of him for defending his own self under the influence of drink. The day after having had sex with his wife, Stuart gets up before she can get out of bed, and reads the newspaper to see if there is something in it. As soon as the telephone begins ringing after eight o'clock, he gets excited, saying "What are you staring at me for?" and "What is it?" in the opening scene and "Go to hell!" Perhaps they were telephone calls from his neighbours reproaching him, so he shouts "Goddamn it, why can't people mind their own business? Tell me what I did wrong and I'll listen!" Moreover, he only lifts his head and does not move even when Claire breaks the dishes, though she thinks he ought to have heard the noise. Now he shows quite a negative reaction to hearing. When Claire asks him if he can go for a drive, he gets to his feet and touches her on the hip, saying that they should pick up some beer. In this way, he worries about the compunction to his own behaviour, and tries to defend his own self desperately by way of sexual advances, drink and negative reaction to hearing. In addition, when his wife tells him the murder case of a young girl in Claire's childhood, he says, "You're going to get me riled" and refuses to listen to her. On the other hand, he feels anxious about his wife's attitude. For example, on their way back home from driving, he tries to concentrate his nerves on the road, but he cannot but keep looking into the rear-view mirror and pay attention to her attitude. And the next morning, he lets her sleep and gets his son off for school, leaving for work. Before he leaves home, he looks in the bedroom twice and clears his throat to win recognition, but she ignores him with her eyes closed. So he gives up and goes out. It seems that here too he is nervous about her attitude, and tries to get reconciled with her, if possible. As for Claire, that night she makes her bed on the sofa, not in the bedroom, and the next morning whenever Stuart looks at her, she ignores him by asking her son "if he wants more milk, more toast, etc." In spite of his saying that he will call her later, she flatly refuses, saying that she does not think she will be home. When she returns home from the funeral, she finds him drinking whiskey. Suddenly she fears something may have happened to her son, and feels relieved to know that he is outside. Stuart, draining his glass and standing up, says "I think I know what you need... First things first." Claire accepts his offer and finishes the buttons herself. In this situation, he seems to have got reconciled with his wife, but is it really the case?

Next we will examine Claire's mental condition. The word "Claire" is the variation of "Clare," and the original meaning is "clear." Claire, as her name shows, talks with an air of a clear and fair judge. She agonizes by regarding the pain of the murdered girl's as that of her own. It is the fact that Stuart cannot receive the girl's pain as his own that brings estrangement between the couple. In fact, she answers back, "That's the point" when Stuart says, "And I am as sorry as anyone else. But she was dead," in order to justify his own behaviour. She visualizes the scene of the murdered girl and the four men's words on the spot; "No clothes on her at all. She wedged into some branches that stuck out over the water." "They took their flashlights and went back to the river... He took her by the fingers and pulled her into shore. He got some nylon cord and tied it to her wrist and then looped the rest around a tree," and "Gordon Johnson said the trout they'd caught were hard because of the terrible coldness of the water." And at once she deeply sympathizes with the murdered girl, because she thinks that the language has somewhat sexual undertones: "The lamps play over the girl's body as her naked state is made openly available to the voyeuristic gaze of the men's eyes.

Similarly the way her body is tied up and touched suggests a prurient form of male fantasy”¹ and associates the hard trout with the young girl in terribly cold water. As soon as she visualizes such scenes, she puts herself into the girl’s place and holds on to the sink with her eyes closed and breaks the dishes raking her arm across the drainboard. After sweeping up the broken dishes, she goes out into the backyard and asks her husband to a drive. On the way, they stop a car at a roadside market for beer. She finds a great stack of papers just inside the door. At the sight of it, her mind seems to be filled with the article of the newspaper which she read a little while ago and with the scene of the murder case. At the same time, when she sees a licorice stick is held out to a little girl, her mind seems to go back to her childhood which she has half forgotten so far, by association of the stack of the newspapers and a young girl at the market. When they enter the picnic grounds, the creek runs into a large pond a few hundred yards away, and there she sees some men fishing. At the sight of the scene, she says to herself, “So much water so close to home.” This phrase is the title of this story, and at the same time shows her mental condition, that is, bleatings of complaints and howls of protest by her; if he had come here instead of the Naches River, she thinks, they could live a humdrum life as before. About this we will think more minutely in the final chapter. When they sit on a bench in the sun, perhaps from the above-mentioned association, she remembers the murder case in her childhood when the Maddox brothers killed a girl named Arlene Hubly and “cut off her head and threw her into the Cle Elum River.” Furthermore, looking at the creek, she visualizes herself being “right in it, eyes open, face down, staring at the moss on the bottom dead.” From now on, Claire empathizes with the girl murdered near the Naches River. She thinks her husband knows her feelings, but their dialogue is still parallel, and the situation goes on to the lack of dialogue between them. The next morning she is awake long before the alarm goes off, and is in deep thought, “lying on the far side of the bed away from his hairy legs.” Though she has thought nothing of his hairy legs, now she hates to see them. Then she continues to refuse her husband and does not like speaking to him. Even when her husband looks in the bedroom and clears his throat to win recognition from her, she ignores him with her eyes closed. After breakfast she reads the newspaper reporting the protocol of on-the-spot inspection, her empathy with the girl or her fancy moves on further. Then suddenly she calls up to get a chair at the hairdresser’s, and has her hair fixed up for the funeral. From that night, she makes her bed on the sofa, and the couple sleeps in separate rooms. The next morning she gets up earlier than her husband and fixes breakfast, and the three of the family eat breakfast. Every time Stuart looks at her, however, she speaks only to her son and ignores her husband. After he leaves home for work, she dresses carefully and looks at herself with a hat on. In Carver’s world, the window is used as an apparatus for defending one’s own self by way of restricting the communication with the outside world in the domain of eyesight, and the window for looking at one’s own self is the mirror, and the window open to the whole world is television or newspapers. Before going to the funeral, she writes out a note for her son, but now she cannot understand if the word “backyard” is one word or two. And she begins to doubt not only her own self identified through the married life, but also the confidence in the married life itself. Out of either morbid curiosity or her desire to face her own fancy directly, she drives a car to the funeral for the murdered girl all by herself. From now on, her mind becomes confused and falls into such a condition as she cannot become a reliable witness of this story. On her way to the funeral, a pickup driver comes up to her, but she cannot judge why he approaches her and what his real motive

is, because she has lost her judgement now, and her mind is filled with the death of the girl killed and thrown in the Naches River and that of the girl named Arlene Hubly. After all, she obsesses with the idea that the driver has come up to her to look at her breasts and legs. After that she manages to go to the funeral. She has come to the funeral impulsively, partly because she decided to repair her husband's irrevocable error, and partly because of her compassion and sympathy for the dead girl, and partly because of an inexplicable sense of urgency "to find for herself a defensible place in the grief of strangers."² After the funeral, a limping woman ahead of her says to Claire, "They arrested him this morning. I heard it on the radio before I come. A boy right here in town." In response to her, Claire says, "They have friends, these killers." Here the death of the girl in Claire's childhood also overlaps with that of the girl for whose funeral she came. Whether or not she has relieved her pain for attending the funeral, she returns home, but suddenly she is obsessed with the fear that something may have happened to her son when she finds her husband drinking whiskey. However, Claire willfully gives up her continual resistance to Stuart's sexual advances, and this story ends. Seemingly Claire and Stuart will get on well with each other from now on, but their married life cannot be said hopeful, because it is not her remission or pity for her husband but her fear that puts spurs to her at present. The sound of the water she hears in the last scene will bring welcome oblivion for her and reduce her insight, but even if she has been relieved temporarily from consciousness by the sound of the water, there is still a hangover, that dead girl's ghost which "will discredit her pleasures and scuttle her dreams."³

III

As we have seen, this is a story depicting a gulf or a gap between the conjugal relations that has appeared suddenly through the finding of a dead body of the young girl's; the wife agonizes by regarding the pain of the murdered girl's as that of her own, while the husband, though he cannot regard it as his own, has some sense of sin or a little guilty conscience and tries to divert his mind by having sex with his wife and drinking beer and whiskey. However, Carver avoids giving a deep significance to her agony throughout the whole story. Both an everyday happening and a tragic one are depicted dispassionately in the same way, but the seemingly peaceful daily life, which this couple have built up little by little, is no more than the track running on a thin coat of ice. The original meaning of the word "Stuart" is "steward." The mountain of husband playing a part of a control tower in the family, and the mountain of wife Claire with "clear" and sound mind, both mountains of man and wife give rise to their son Dean (its original meaning is "the dewller in the valley") intermediating between them and so far have lived an uneventful life in the valley of the family. Such a track of theirs, however, is now filled with "so much water" leading to a quarrel, divorce and alcoholic poisoning into which they are liable to fall. At least Claire is aware of the fact in the final scene. In this work, Carver has some obsession with water ("He hated the word 'theme'"⁴). In fact water is often used with symbolic meaning by poets; in William Blake's poems, water symbolizes "the sterile waters of materialism and (spiritual) death,"⁵ while in T.S. Eliot's, it symbolizes "fertility (through 'death' by water, killing the burning thirst of lust), also providing the oblivion which is

necessary for rebirth ('The Waste-Land').⁶ In this story, it seems, the use of water is akin to Blake's. Therefore the future life of this family, though it seems peaceful and uneventful at first sight, is plunged into a crisis of collapse as above-mentioned. The man and wife who want to maintain a track of a peaceful and uneventful life and to adapt themselves to the community, are betrayed by something in their inner world all the more for wishing so. They are not victims of the community or insurgents to it, but they are, as it were, self-punishing people who cannot devote themselves single-heartedly to obeying a norm, though they try to do so. It is said that Carver's motif is fundamental solitude human existence possesses in itself, and the men's violence which is used in trying to have to do with others or in trying not to do so. No doubt this work has such motif; the fact that Stuart left the dead body as it was, is felt the use of violence by his wife, and brings forth her morbid fancy and the mechanical and superficial dialogue between them, and finally causes the severance of the conjugal relations. What they have thought could be understood in the same way is really a sham, and what they have thought is conjugal affection becomes what is heterogeneous and incomprehensible by a sort of accident, however hard they may talk with each other. This is "what we talk about when we talk about love." It is at this very moment that the everyday life depicted by Carver becomes mysterious and weird threats. As a result, does the world appear where the ordinary life becomes an enemy of ordinary people, as Irving Howe puts it.

The title "So Much Water So Close to Home" shows, for one thing, the voice of Claire's discontent and complaint to her husband's behaviour, and for another, it means that, as Claire is aware of it in the final scene, there is so much water going near their house; so much water like a quarrel, divorce and alcoholic poisoning is surging upon their family life. In other words, their love life and material one are plunged into the greatest crisis and stand on the brink of collapse. In this way, Carver contains a double meaning in the title, but he seems to emphasize the latter meaning rather than the former.

NOTES

1. Graham Clarke, *Investigating the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence in The New American Writing Essays on American Literature Since 1970*, ed. by Graham Clarke (Vision Press Ltd., England, 1990), pp.112-113.
2. Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver* (University of South Carolina, 1988), p.89.
3. *Ibid.*, p.91.
4. Kirk, Nessel, "This Word Love": *Sexual Politics and Silence in Early Raymond Carver in American Literature*, Volume 63, Number 2, June 1991, (the Duke University Press, 1991), p.293.
5. *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* ed. by Ad de Vries (North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1976), p.494.
6. *Ibid.*