Some Considerations on Carver's *Neighbors*

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A group of writers called "New American Writers" has taken an active part in American literature till quite recently. They are known as the writers with *avant-garde* styles and parody, and also as recondite writers. As the representative writers we can list Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon.

But the defeat of America in Vietnam War (1954-73) gave American society a great shock, and at the same time it brought an indescribable sense of humiliation and frustrations to American people who had not ever tasted defeat. It also gave rise to degenerating tendency in the society combined with the economic depression in the country and as a result it revealed the shameful sides of America like the increase of crimes and drug abusers. Jay Mcinerney writes a life story in which the hero gives himself up to drugs and sex in *Story of My Life*. In addition, the works revealing Vietnam War are published one after another. On the other hand, reconsidering "What on earth was Vietnam War to the Americans?," young writers came to pay attention to the aftereffect of the war. Especially the writers after Vietnam War in 1970's, such as Tim O'Brien, Bobbie Ann Mason and Ron Kovic, depict the mental state of sufferings of American young people dealing with Vietnam War and the picture of young people trying to overcome the aftereffect of the war.

The Americans have taken notice of overseas, but after the war they began to take notice of their home country. In 1980's, the ordinary daily life in America began to be depicted. Such writers as Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Jayne Anne Phillips and Perri Klass commenced "Minimalism Movement" and were called "Minimalists." They depicted with much simpler and easier style the subject matters—conjugal crisis or divorce and collapse of love between both sexes, and mysterious disappearance of one's spouse—which John Updile had handled.

On the other hand, as writers like Hemingway, Faulkner, John Dos Passos, and Malcom Cowley, who went to Europe from America to get their literary training after World War I and began to write the novels with their main theme of the young people who wandered about without finding any acceptance with their own country, were called "Lost Generation" writers in those days, so the writers of "New Lost Generation," which David Leavitt advocated, did appear and drew a clear line of demarcation against minimalists. The representative writers are Susan Minot, David Updike and Laurie Colwin. They are called "New Lost Generation" writers.

Thus, at present there are three groups of writers in American literature: "MTV Generation" whose representative is Jay Mcinerney, "Minimalism" whose representatative is Raymond Carver, and "New Lost Generation" whose representative is Suson Minot. However, they have something

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in common with each other, so indeed it is rather difficult to distinguish one group from the others.

Neighbors we will deal with in this paper is included in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*(1976). It is with this collection of short stories that Carver took the critics by surprise and established his claim to national notice for the first time. This collection of short stories includes twenty two stories from *The Father* (1961) to *Collectors* (1975). *Neighbors* was printed in *Esquire* (in June 1971). For the first time, Carver succeeded in making an inroad into a market of slic magazines with this story, and it was Gordon Lish, editor of *Esquire*, who adopted this story. It is said that Lish was once Carver's neighbor and encouraged Carver to go on writing stories, and that Carver continued to send stories to him one after another and Lish selected *Neighbors* from the sent ones.

This story, like the rest of his stories, is written in very simple style. Moreover, tones are restrained and flat. As Frank Kermode says, "Carver's is a fiction so spare in manner that it takes time before one realizes how completely a whole culture and a whole moral condition are being presented by even the most seemingly slight sketch."[1] Therefore by paying attention to his simple and precise words with various images and implications and considering seemingly restrained and flat tones, we will investigate Carver's real intention of this story.

I

In the opening scene, Carver lets one couple make their appearance;

> Bill and Arlene were a happy couple. But now and then they felt they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow, leaving Bill to attend to his bookkeepintg duties and Arlene occupied with secretarial chores. They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison with the lives of their neighbors, Harriet and Jim Stone. It seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life.[2]

Bill and Arlene Miller are deemed a happy couple until they compare their ordinary lives with those of the Stones, whose jobs afford them travel opportunities and who fondle souvenirs in front of the Millers. Meantime, the Millers, Bill is a bookkeeper, Arlene a secretary, suspecting that "they had been passed by somehow," feel a spiritual vacuum and envy the Stones, thinking that the Stones live a fuller and brighter life because the Millers know that the Stones are always going out for dinner, or entertaining at home, or traveling about the country somewhere in connection with Jim's work."[3] The Stones live across the hall from the Millers. Jim works for a machine-parts firm as a salesman and often manages to combine business with pleasure trips.

One day the Stones go on a ten-day trip by car, and the Millers are asked to keep watch over the Stones' vacant apartment and feed their cat, Kitty, and water the plants. In seeing the Stones off, Bill says, "Well, I wish it was us."[4] and Arlene envies them, saying "God knows, we could use a vacation."[5] At night when the Stones started, Bill goes to their apartment. When he enters it, he takes a deep breath feeling that the air is already heavy and vaguely sweet.

> Leaving the cat to pick at her food, he headed for the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror and then closed his eyes and

then looked again.[6]

Selecting one of the stacked cans from the gleaming drainboard, Bill feeds the cat and looks at himself in the mirror. This is the first time that Bill looks at himself in the mirror, but we must pay attention to the fact that he often does so in this story. In Carver's world, the ordinary daily life of the ordinary people seems to be peaceful at first sight though it is the track they have established with much effort, but that is laid on thin ice, and there is so much water going at their feet; so much water like a quarrel, divorce, unemployment and alcoholic poisoning is surging upon their daily life. So their self has to protect itself in order to maintain its minimum stability. This self-defence in Carver's world, is presented in the form of windows and telephones which are so often used in his stories. These windows and telephones can be said devices for lightening mentally the setting up of communications and relations to the outside world by restricting it in the regions of eyesight and audition. Indeed *Are You A Doctor?* begins at the calling up and shows a prudent approach between man and woman through a telephone. On the other hand, the window opened to the outside world is television, and the window for looking at oneself is a mirror. All of these can be said the devices for protecting one's self.

Then Bill happens to open the medicine chest and finds Harriet's container of pills, slipping it into his pocket. After finishing watering, he opens the liquor cabinet, taking two drinks from the bottle of Chivas Regal. Switching off the lights and slowly closing and checking the door, he leaves the neighbor's apartment. But Bill has the feeling he left something, which means his mental loss. Filled with sexual vigor by peeping into the private life and rooms of the neighbors, he has sex with his wife that night. This sexual vigor goes on; the next day he cuts down the break alloted for the afternoon and leaves his office early in the evening, going home just as Arelene returns. Before following her inside, he looks at the door across the hall and suggests that they should go to bed. Arlene is much surprised, saying "Now? What's gotten into you?"[7] But grabbing for her awakardly and unfastening his belt in a hurry, Bill has sex with his wife. After the sex, they send out for Chinese food and devour it without speaking, listening to records. Then urged by his wife, Bill heads for the Stones' apartment. After feeding the cat and going to water, he opens all the cupboards and examines everything such as the canned goods, the cereals, the packaged foods, the cocktail and wine glasses, the china, the pots and pans. Moreover he opens even the refrigirator and takes two bites of cheddar cheese, and chews on an apple, walking into the bedroom. The bed seems enormous, and he pulls out a nightstand drawer and finds a half-empty package of cigarets, stuffing them into his pocket. Then he steps to the closet and is about to open it, when there is a knock at the front door. On his way to the front door, he disguises his act by flushing the toilet. When he goes to the front door, he finds his wife there. Arlene complains at his having been over there more than an hour. Here Arlene as well as his husband is eager to know the private life of the Stones. In response to Arlene's question, he makes a bad excuse, saying that he had to go to the toilet as he could not wait. After they return they make love again.

The next morning, Bill had Arlene call in for his absence from his office, and makes a light breakfast after showering and dressing. As he does not feel like reading a book, he goes out for a walk, feeling better. After a while he returns home, but he stops at the Stones' door because he feels anxious about the Stones' house. Then he goes to their apartment with the key in his hand. When

he enters the apartment, it seems cooler and darker than his apartment. Looking out of the window, he moves slowly through each room, examining everything carefully, one object at a time; he sees ashtrays, furniture, kitchen utensils and the sunburst clock. When he enters the bathroom, he finds the cat at his feet and carries her into the bathroom, confining her there.

> He lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He lay for a while with his eyes closed and then he moved his hand. He tried to recall what day it was. He tried to remember when the Stones were due back, and then he wondered if they would ever return. He could not remember their faces or the way they talked and dressed. He sighed and with effort rolled off the bed to lean over the dresser and look at himself in the mirror.[5]

Lying on the bed, he tries to remember what day it is and when the Stones will come back, and cannot remember their faces or the way they talk and dress. Finally he goes so far as to come to the terrible conclusion that the Stones will not return. Here we will notice the tendency of Bill regarding himself in the same light with Jim whose daily life Bill is envious of. Then awaking from reverie, he gets out of bed with a sigh and looks at himself in the mirror again. Opening the closet he could not examine the previous day, he finds a Hawaiian shirt and Bermudas, he sheds his own clothes and slipps into the shorts and the shirt, and looks in the mirror. Then he goes to the living room to pour himself a drink, sipping it on his way back to the bedroom. This time he tries putting "on a blue shirt, a dark suit, a blue and white tie, black wing-tip shoes."[9] Seeing the glass is empty, he goes for another drink and goes back to the bedroom again. Sitting on a chair and crossing his legs and smiling, he looks at himself in the mirror. This is the fourth time that he observes himself in the mirror. David Boxer and Cassandra Philips, referring to the mirror and window in Carver's world, say that if the mirror symbolizes the mental detachment peculiar to Carver's word, then the window is the symbol of voyeurism which forms a counterpart to it. Then the telephone rings twice and stops ringing. Then he finishes the drink and rummages through the top drawers, finding a pair of panties and a brassiere. He steps into the panties and fastens the brassiere, then puts on a black and checkered skirt and tries to tip it up. Then he puts on a burgundy blouse buttoning up the front. Though he tries to put on Harriet's shoes, he gives up putting them on, thinking that they will not fit. Thus for a long time he looks out the living room window from behind the curtain. Now Bill, putting on Harriet's clothes and substituting himself for Harriet, looks outside, and at the same time it seems that he feels as if he were looking at herself in such an outfit through the window. In short, he is "obsessed with vicariousness,"[10] and is also voyeuristic. Soon returning to the bedroom, Bill puts everything away and goes back to his apartment. Here Carver depicts the behavior of the couple minutely:

> He was not hungry. She did not eat much, either. They looked at each other shyly and smiled. She got up from the table and checked that the key was on the shelf and then she quickly cleared the dishes.[11]

At dinner in the evening, he is not so hungry, and she does not eat much, either, but the couple "look at each other shyly" and smile as if they were Adam and Eve who ate the forbidden fruit in Eden; Bill is already guilt-conscious. As for Arlene, she lets her heart leap with expectations that she will

get a peep at the Stones' private life. So she wastes no time in doing what she has in her mind; after super she insists on going across the hole, saying that he is looking tired, and leaves home. Left alone at home, Bill, reading the newspaper and turning on the television, tries to concentrate on the news, but in vain. His patience is worn out at last, and when he goes across the hall, he finds the door locked. He calls Arlene, and she appears after a while, making an excuse "I guess I must have been playing with Kitty."[12] Studying her, she looks away with her hand still on the doorknob, saying "It's funny. You know —to go in some one's place like that."[13] Her word reveals both her guilty conscience and pleasant sensation that she has peeped at the private life of others. And the fact that her hand still rests on the doorknob indicates the "psychic losses"[14] on the part of Arlene just as Bill had "the feeling he had left something" inside. Furthermore he notices one thing after they come back home:

> He noticed white lint clinging to the back of her sweater, and the color was high in her cheeks. He began kissing her on the neck and hair and she turned and kissed him back.[15]

Noticing "white lint clinging to the back of her sweater" and her cheeks become reddish, Bill knows that his wife also has enjoyed inside. Here both the couple has held pleasure, and sexual titillation in common. So when he kisses her on the neck and hair, she kisses back. In a sense, both of them, at this point, have become literally Adam and Even who ate the forbidden fruit. Perhaps she may have lost herself in examining the private life of the Stones, so she comes home forgetting to feed Kitty and water the plants. Then the couple go together to do what they should do over there. On the way, in the middle of the hall, she tells her husband that she found some lurid pictures in a drawer. Perhaps they are pornographic pictures. Here too we know why "the color was high in her cheeks." And suddenly she says that maybe the Stones will not come back, and is at once astonished at her words. In response to her words, he says, "It could happen. Anything could happen."[16] It may be that the couple want the Stones not to come back so that the Millers can lead a happier and brighter life. Perhaps fully understanding another's feelings, they hold hands for the short walk across the hall. Then Bill tells his wife to give him the key, and Arlene says gazing at the door:

> "My God," she said. "I left the key inside."
> He tried the knob. It was locked. Then she tried the knob. It would not turn. Her lips were parted, and her breathing was hard, expectant. He opened his arms and she moved into them.
> "Don't worry," he said into her ear. "For God's sake, don't worry." They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves.[17]

This is the final scene of this story. So far the Millers have tried to imagine themselves as their neighbors whom the Millers are envious of by peeping at their private and inner life and at the same time they have tried to lead "a fuller and brighter life." But their absurd hope that the Stones may not come back because "Anything could happen." is clashed as Arlene accidentally locks the key inside the Stones' apartment. This final scene where they cling to one another as if they were trying to resist a severe wind reminds us of Adam and Eve cast out of Paradise.

As we have seen, Bill and Arlene Miller are a happy couple, but they are somewhat envious of their neighbors, Harriet and Jim Stone because it seems to the Millers that the Stones are living "a fuller and brighter life." One day the Stones ask Bill and Arlene to watch over the Stones' vacant apartment and feed their cat, and the key is given into their keeping. They come to stay all the time at the Stones' vacant apartment. Bill drinks the Stones' whisky and puts on their clothes and eats the food in the refrigerator while he feeds the cat and waters the plants. Indeed he begins such conducts out of a mere curiosity, but it gradually develops into deeper and distorted conduct. And the Millers experience sexual titillation in the home of their neighbors by continuing such conducts. Soon they cherish the absurd and terrible hope that the Stones may not return, but Arlene, leaving the key inside the apartment, locks the door. So they cannot enter the room, and the story ends where the pleasure of the couple snaps off.

II

In the preceding chapter we have taken broad view of the plot and metaphors of this story. So we will investigate the theme and implications of this story more minutely in this chapter, and at the same time we will consider Carver's real intention of the story.

As we have seen, *Neighbors* is a tale of marriage in the process of regression. Like so many stories about Carver's fictitious marriages, this story deals with the remarkable absence of love and the symptoms of love's regression rather than love or passion itself. Indeed this is a story of Bill and Arlene Miller who are very happy, but in fact the original love of their marriage life seems to diminish. In the home of their neighbors whose apartment they keep watch over, they happen to experience sexual titillation. However, they are a pair of figures who are "obsessed with vicariousness" because the early vitality of their marriage life begins to fade gradually, so they are doomed to look outward "imagining themselves as others, and seek in the process alternate, more attractive selves."[18] "[N]ow and then," we knew in the opening scene of the story, "they felt they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow." So by "planting themselves amid the articles and regidual energies of their vacationing friends,"[19] they go through a "fuller and bright life" vicariously. By the plants and possibly pornographic photographs, and by strangely exotic clothes they try on, such as the "Hawaiian" shirts and "Bermudas" and brassieres and panties, the Stones' apartment becomes for Bill and Arlene as William Stull puts it, "psychosexual rumpus room."[20] As the time they spend in the Stones' apartment grows longer, their energy is united together and revitalizes their married life. Urged by this new life, i.e. the life of vicariousness kindling the flames of sexual desire, Bill and Arlene become, as it were, a coconspirator and try to know the sexual life of the Stones whose life seems to be much fuller and brighter. Therefore, the fact that Bill had "the feeling he had left something" inside the apartment when he left it after his first visit, in fact, reveals his mental losses which lead to miss out on erotic gains. What both Bill and Arlene leave in the apartment, is indeed themselves—fragments of the identities which they have been striving to promote in their daily visit at the risk of self-destruction—fragments which have gone to wrong direction by their daily visit. Eventually locked out of their new Eden, they are, as Boxer and Phillips put it, "in limbo,"[21] that is, in a place for persons who are forgotten, neglected or no longer

wanted. In short, they are detached from both lives, and they have only each other. In other words, they brace themselves against the consequences of unreal passion, a false kind of love which lives on the attractive possibilities of the outside world and the lives of others at the sacrifice of their own self. Toying with borrowed versions of love, they conspire to bring ruin upon themselves both sexually and spiritually. Therefore it is no coincidence that they refer to "God" when they embrace at the end of the story. When Arlene realizes that they are locked out of their new world, "which represents for them not just paradise but also, ironically, Eden, the lost innocence of their early married life,"[22] she shouts, "My God. . . I left the key inside." Bill, trying to encourage her, says, "For God's sake, don't worry." Until now they have not a single strong verbal exchanges in the story, but with a sudden verbal explosion, they cling to one another and indirectly call on God which is the keeper of the larger keys for them. But their strong verbal exchanges and embracement will represent a great blow and a sob. Their unconscious invocations of abstract authority reveal that they are really powerless in the face of decided circumstances. Thus, not only are they shut out from the possibilities of "fuller and brighter life" in the future, but also they are robbed of their happy past. In short, cut off from both their old life and new one, they embrace against the wind under the halfway situation. In fact, all they can do is to reach out and hold on, divert themselves as much as possible while they can do.

III

The characters which Carver depicts are rather bluecolor Americans than otherwise, and those who are not necessarily happy though they are not at the bottom of fortune's wheel, and man and wife who do not get on well with each other. All of them are those who cannot have unalterable view of life and spend their daily life for the sake of subsistence. Carver seizes the moments when his characters feel intangible spiritual vacuum because their ordinary daily life is cracked from mere trifles. Such spiritual vacuum can be just felt, but it cannot be seized reasonably. It is the act of seeing or peeping in most cases that causes such spiritual vacuum in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* By the act of seeing, we can find ourselves in a safe position as far as others do not know that we see their acts. Peeping is the most refrangible form which makes use of such advantageous position. This act of seeing or peeping can be said "voyeurism" as D. Boxer and C. Philips point out. It is not merely sexual peeping, but it means longing identification with self which is in the distance and cannot be obtained. In short, self is divided between actual self and ideal one. In other words, separation of self means that we feel we are removed from our own identity or life, and it can also be the sensation that we are not we or spiritual vacuum. The above-mentioned critics state in brief that two threads weaving *Will You Please Be Queit, Please?* are voyeurism and separation of self or mind. In this sense, *Neighbors* is the most typical example in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

NOTES

1 . Graham Clarke, *Investing 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), p.103.

2. Raymond Carver, *"Neighbors"* in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1978), p.7. Subsequent quotations from *Neighbors* will refer to this edition.
3. *Ibid.*, p.7.
4. *Ibid.*, p.8.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p.9.
8. *Ibid.*, p.11.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver* (University of South Carolina, 1988), p. 22.
11. Carver, *Neighbors*, p.12.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p.13.
14. Kirk Nesset, *"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.296.
15. Carver, *Neighbors*, p.13.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p.14.
18. Nesset, *op. cit.*, p.295.
19. *Ibid.*
20. William Stull, "Raymond Carver," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook; 1988*, ed. by J. M. Brook (Detroit: Gale, 1989), p.207.
21. See Nesset, *op. cit.*, p.296.
22. *Ibid.*, p.297.