

Anatomy of Alcoholism: Reading Raymond Carver's "Where I'm Calling From"

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In Western history—dating back to the ancient Greek times—can be found numerous documents about the amorous relation between alcohol and literature. In America, there have also existed a great number of legends concerning the intimate relationship between alcohol and men of letters. It could be said that those who do not drink much have been, as it were, minorities in the literary world.¹ In short, alcohol has long been adored as Muse by many writers, and the act of drinking has been regarded as a privilege conferred on artists, though in many cases it might be actually nothing but Death.

The existence of alcohol, however, has a completely different meaning for Raymond Carver. In this writer's case, alcohol bears only a negative sense as an illness—alcoholism. This ailment has long been a kind of Carver's trademark. Indeed, we can easily find several memorable stories dealing with the subject: in "Gazebo" a couple in a marital crisis desperately continue to drink and in "Why Don't You Dance?" a drunken man spreads all his belongings in his front yard and eventually starts dancing with a young girl. The protagonists in "Chef's House" and "Elephant" are both ex-alcoholics. That the issue of alcoholism was the crux of the writer's interest is indicated in the fact that he named the collection of his newly selected stories—*Where I'm Calling From*—after the title of the story with the same name, whose setting is at a rehabilitation center for alcoholics. Carver repeatedly said that he had been a serious alcoholic in the past, and that the recovery from it had been a great turning point for his life, adding that a number of his works were based on that experience.²

The frequent occurrence in Carver's stories of alcoholism has sometimes invited rather unfavorable criticisms; indeed, his works' reputation seems to have, to some extent, depended on the way critics regard that distinguishing characteristic.³ One of the most typical criticisms among them is delivered by Alan Wilde, who, in referring to "Chef's House," another famous story dealing

with alcoholism, argues that Carver's protagonists "in the face of frustration and misery, the eroding of pleasure and the all too evident spectacle of the waste of their lives, demonstrate a terrible blankness that suspends the activities of the self and, except in fantasy or violence, betrays its effective lack of control" (112). That kind of criticism seems to interpret too literally what the narratives convey, paying little attention to how they are delivered. They sometimes seem to even regard the lack of self-control and the complete passivity which they think are seen in many of Carver's—mostly, alcoholic—characters directly, as the defect of the work itself.⁴

As long as we read his stories within such a frame of reference, however, we would miss the very essence of the uniqueness of Carver's works. The question is why Carver gave such a great significance to the completely negative and personal problem of his illness. In general, most writers in the literary world—especially those who work in a less commercial field—would wish their works to acquire universal reputations. There is, of course, a possibility that it is just because he had no other material to write about; this being so, how should we explain the fact that such stories have attracted a number of readers who must not have had any experience of alcoholism? Is there some connection between the crux of alcoholism and the very essence of our lives? In my view, Carver's major interest lies less in merely making an accurate report about the lives of alcoholics than in analyzing the social and psychological conditions in which some people develop the illness. In this essay, I will make a close investigation of "Where I'm Calling From," one of the most famous stories among his—and all the contemporary—works dealing with the subject, thereby clarifying the writer's unique insight into the relation between some aspect of the human condition and the mechanism of alcoholism.

The Structure of "Where I'm Calling From"

It is fairly generally accepted that several of Carver's later stories bear a sense of hope, which can be rarely seen in the stories before *Cathedral*, and that behind such a shift of his literary mode toward a slight optimism lie several drastic changes in the author's own life⁵: his recovery from alcoholism, a new life together with his new partner Tess Gallagher and separation from his editor Gordon Lish, who had a great influence on editing Carver's early works⁶. Critics also seem to have reached a general consensus that this positive mood is clearly seen in the scenes where the suffering characters find others who

listen to their stories and succeed in establishing some verbal communication with them.⁷ "Where I'm Calling From" can also be read as one of those stories; the setting for the story is a rehabilitation facility for alcoholics, which is presumably based on Carver's own experience.⁸

The narrative structure of "Where I'm Calling From" is very complicated; the two main narratives are recounted by turns: the past life of J. P. who has made acquaintance with the narrator in the facility and the present events which occur there. In addition, the episodes of events which occurred there in the near past and of the narrator's past life are inserted in between the main narratives. As several critics have already mentioned, the central point of the story lies in the dialogue between J. P. and the narrator, which brings them a kind of therapeutic effect similar to the "talking cure" in the psychoanalytic therapies.⁹ However, few of them have discussed why only J. P.'s narrative among other people's stories in the facility has such an impact on the narrator.¹⁰ It is generally recognized that several facilities for rehabilitation have actually contributed to helping a great number of patients' recovery from alcoholism, but there is no assurance that every participant in such a program succeeds in quitting drinking.¹¹ Indeed, it is the second time that the narrator stays at the facility: the first stay ended in failure. Is there any dividing line between success and failure at all? To consider these questions, we should examine the individual episodes, each of which at first sight seems to be fragmentary and to have little to do with each other. Indeed, several critics have already made the attempts, but they seem to, almost uniformly, have difficulty in bridging the gap between the seemingly deterministic and pessimistic mood in several of those episodes and the air of hope in the entire story. As I will refer to later, those arguments by and large underscore either the open-endedness of the story or the meaninglessness of those individual stories. As a result, they seem to neglect a strong emotion which seems to continuously run throughout the story. It is, in my view, not impossible to find an overall pattern in those seemingly disparate threads.

Why Do They Need Alcohol?

The narrator feels much interest in J. P.'s story, recurrently encouraging him to keep on talking. Why does he have such a strong curiosity toward J. P.? The likely reason is that J.P. reminds the narrator of himself in the past. J. P. talks about how happily he lived with his family, and how he eventually

destroyed it. It seems obvious that the narrator had a similar experience. As Cochrane points out, by listening to J. P.'s story and observing his behavior the narrator begins, consciously or unconsciously, to look for a new perspective from which he can see his own experience. His sympathy toward J. P. is most clearly seen in the following scene:

J. P.'s in his mid-twenties by now. He's buying a house. He says he was happy with his life. "I was happy with the way things were going," he says. "I had a wife and kids I loved, and I was doing what I wanted to do with my life." But for some reason—who knows why we do what we do?—his drinking picks up. (*Where I'm Calling From* 284)

Only in this passage in this section of J. P.'s reminiscence does the narrator directly quote J. P.'s words. This suggests that he feels a strong sympathy for these two quoted sentences. He also inserts his own idea only in this passage: "who knows why we do what we do?", and in the following passages the narrator repeats the similar phrases such as "for some reason," "he doesn't know why" and "for no good reason" (284). Judging from all this, it can be presumed that in this passage the narrator is virtually talking about his own view of what happened in his own life.

At this point, just like J. P. and the narrator, we are confronted with a fundamental question: Why did they ruin themselves though they were happy? To this question we can give two possible answers. One is that they are destined to do so "for some reason"—J. P. and the narrator (and also many critics) seem to have taken this standpoint. The other is that the premise we assume may be false in the first place: that is, "in fact they were not happy from the beginning" or "they were really happy in the beginning, but they gradually became unhappy." Facing this question, we are forced to make a decision either to choose determinism or to doubt their premise that "they were happy" and were doing what they wanted to do with their life.

To explore this question further, Gregory Bateson's study on alcoholism is helpful. In examining the concept of Alcoholics Anonymous, which Carver had joined during the period of his rehabilitation, Bateson gains several insightful ideas. In "The Cybernetics of 'Self: A Theory of Alcoholism," he mentions:

If his [an alcoholic's] style of sobriety drives him to drink, then that style must contain error or pathology; and intoxication must provide some—at

least subjective—correction of this error. In other words, compared with his sobriety, which is in some way “wrong,” his intoxication must be in some way “right.” (310-311)

What is interesting here is that he raises an objection to a generally accepted view that a sober state is absolutely “right” and an intoxicated state “wrong,” presenting the opposite view that in alcoholics’ unconscious the sober state may be “wrong” and their intoxicated state “right.” Moreover, he argues that for an alcoholic drinking is a kind of attempt to escape from “his own insane premises, which are continually reinforced by the surrounding society” (311). To put it more plainly, alcoholics need alcohol as a means to escape from some sort of ideology which oppresses their own selves in their sober state. Therefore, even if alcoholics temporarily succeed in being sober with their family’s and friends’ help, they are likely to turn back to drinking since the society itself in which they live continues to reinforce their “own insane premises.” To cure their alcoholism completely, they have no choice but to abandon their “own insane premises.” However, needless to say, it is a very hard decision for them, since these constitute the very faith that they have long kept as their own guide to the future. Consequently, it is not until they actually face the danger of death that they can bring themselves to make the decision to abandon their past way of life absolutely or to keep on drinking until they die. Of course, my intention is neither to emphasize the possibility that Carver may have applied the concept of AA to his writings nor to argue that Bateson’s theory can be applied to every case of alcoholics including those who are described in Carver’s stories, but it seems helpful in reading Carver’s works.

To return to “Where I’m Calling From,” there is a passage in which the narrator recalls the time when his wife brought him to the facility the first time, while he and she were “still together” and “trying to make things work out” (288). What is interesting in this scene is that he has a strange conflict in his mind. He thinks: “I didn’t know if they could help me or not. Part of me wanted help. But here was another part” (288). Following Bateson’s idea, we can interpret his conflict in this way: “Part of” him wants to be cured of his alcoholism, but “another part” does not want to, since if he is cured he has to go back to the very life that drives him to drinking. To escape from this dilemma, he has no other choice than to change his past view of life, but it is very hard for him since at the core of the view is his own premise that he should be happy with his family he loves and a worthwhile job. In his mind,

doubting the premise virtually means admitting that he can no longer love his family in the way he used to love them, or that he is no longer satisfied with his job. Of course, he could have chosen other ways: he could have admitted it earlier. If his will had been strong enough to admit that his love had changed in some ways, he might have left his family earlier before he developed his alcoholism, or he could have maintained his family life whether he thinks he loves them or not, as many other husbands and fathers would do. In any case, it would have been better for the sake of his family's life. Or, if he had been capable—and of course lucky—enough to easily find another fulfilling job, he might have continued to live a satisfying life. It is because he could not choose such a flexible way of life that he developed dependence on alcohol.

Both the narrator and J. P. still seem to believe that they were "happy" with their family and job, but in their unconscious they seem to have already felt the very life that they thought was "happy" to be painful. Of course, I do not mean by this that every person who feels his or her everyday life to be painful suffers from alcoholism, but with these two men that was probably the case. Judging from his story, before getting into the bad habit of drinking J. P. seems to have been a dependable person who had a strong sense of responsibility. Because of the very responsibility, however, he could not probably admit his desire to abandon his way of life. In this respect, the narrator, who feels sympathy toward J. P., also seems to be a man of similar character. In brief, he is now at the crossroads of his life: whether to cling to his way of life which he has believed in for years and which he has built up through years of hard work, or to abandon it entirely. If he gives it up completely, he will probably recover from alcoholism. In his position, however, he may well think that he would rather die than make such a hard decision. If he thinks so, he will keep on drinking. If he wants to live, he will naturally quit drinking. This is a matter of life and death: alcoholism is, as it were, a suicide which is performed sluggishly and calmly.

Similarly, we can see another meaning in the trembling and seizure of an alcoholic's body recurrently described in this story. In medical terms, the shaking is diagnosed as a kind of withdrawal symptoms, which indicates that the body still needs alcohol against its owner's will. In other words, it means that the alcoholic is still bound by "his own insane premises," and that he unconsciously wants to escape from it—to escape to death. The narrator, seeing J. P.'s hands shaking, thinks: "I tell him I sympathize. I tell him the shakes will idle down. And they will. But it takes time" (278). However, he seems to be thinking that when the shakes completely die down, J. P. may be already dead.

He, having failed in his first attempt to quit drinking, seems to stay calm compared to J. P.; indeed, he is also observing his own signs of seizure rather calmly. However, his apparent self-possession means only the depth of his despair. Actually, the signs of seizure are described as if Death is about to possess his body:

. . . every so often a nerve—maybe it isn't a nerve, but it's something—begins to jerk in my shoulder. Sometimes it's at the side of my neck I know something's about to happen and I want to head it off. I want to hide from it, that's what I want to do. Just close my eyes and let it pass by, let it take the next man. J. P. can wait a minute. (278)

He seems to realize that it is no use resisting; he is probably prepared for his own death. The phrase "J. P. can wait a minute" is also suggestive; it seems to imply that he thinks J. P. is also destined to death even if J. P. still has enough energy left to survive several seizures. In the next section, he recounts a scene he saw in the morning: a man called Tiny, suddenly going into a seizure at breakfast, fell on the floor. He imagines himself lying on the floor like Tiny: "So every time this little flitter starts up anywhere, I draw some breath and wait to find myself on my back, looking up, somebody's fingers in my mouth" (280). In this scene, he seems to be picturing the sight of his own death.

From the Bottom of the Well

In the next section, however, the same gesture of "looking up" implies the possibility that the narrator may turn in the direction of "life." The narrator is listening to J. P.'s story of having fallen into a dry well and been rescued from there when he was twelve years old.

He'd suffered all kinds of terror in that well, hollering for help, waiting, and then hollering some more. . . . He'd sat there and looked up at the well mouth. Way up at the top, he could see a circle of blue sky. . . . In short, everything about his life was different for him at the bottom of that well. But nothing fell on him and nothing closed off that little circle of blue. Then his dad came along with the rope, and it wasn't long before J. P. was back in the world he'd always lived in. (281)

Arthur F. Bethea, reading a sense of hope in this passage, notes: "The darkness and the depth of the dry well correlate to the descent into the hell of alcoholism, while the 'little circle of blue' symbolizes hope for recovery" (150). This argument seems to be reasonable; true, the narrator seems to identify himself, who will be recovering from alcoholism, with the young J. P. who was rescued from the well. The image of the young J. P. "hollering for help" also seems significant. In the earlier section, the narrator imagines himself lying on the floor and "looking up" with "somebody's fingers" in his "mouth" (280); he is in danger of being suffocated with his own tongue. The message here is that if he cannot move his own tongue, he will die. However, in imagining the young boy crying for help, he now seems to be gradually recognizing the necessity to ask aloud for help. This is most clearly seen in another memorable scene of his asking J. P.'s wife for her good-luck kiss. At that moment he articulates his need for help, saying: "I need some luck. . . . No kidding. I could do with a kiss myself" (294). It is also notable that J. P.'s wife used to be—and J. P. is—a chimney sweeper. As Bethea has already pointed out, both the image of the young J. P. and that of the chimney sweeper imply a sense of ascent.¹² He seems to find in those images of ascent the vision of his own escape from his desperate situation.

According to Bateson, AA thinks much of a phenomenon called "hitting bottom" and "regards the alcoholic who has not 'hit bottom' as a poor prospect for their help." AA also "explains their failure by saying that the individual who goes back to alcoholism has not yet 'hit bottom'" (329). The experience of "hitting bottom" often "provides a favorable moment for change" (330). Following this explanation, we can say that when the narrator pictured his own death vividly in his mind, he saw the symbolic image of himself having "hit bottom"; in other words, at that moment he fully realized that he would have died if he had continued to drink.

In that case, when and how did he "hit bottom"? What encouraged him to take a turn in the direction of life? It seems unreasonable to think that a drastic change happened during only a day between the morning when he witnessed Tiny's seizure and the next morning when he sees J.P. and hears the episode of the well. Rather, we should think that the change had already started slowly and gradually. What is significant here is that this time he voluntarily makes a decision to come to the facility, while his wife did all the procedure for his hospitalization the first time. Before he decides to go back there after Christmas Day, his girlfriend receives the result of her Pap test,

which is “not cheery” (289). He and she start drinking and continue to drink until he finally tells her that he had “better go back to Frank Martin’s” (289). This episode is the most hopeless one in the story; if we dare to specify the time when he “hit bottom,” it is probably during this period. It is also seen in the description of his loss of appetite that he was then on the verge of death. For example, he drinks “a bottle of wine with the soup” (289) in the restaurant on Christmas Day. “For the next couple of day,” he does not “eat anything except salted nuts” and drinks “a lot of bourbon” (289). On the way to the facility, he and his girlfriend buy champagne and “a bucket of fried chicken,” but he does not “eat any” (290).

Why then did he voluntarily decide to “go back to Frank Martin’s”? The inner workings of the narrator’s mind are not clearly explained in the text, but it may be possible to infer them to a certain extent. The fact that his girlfriend does not make a phone call to him after his hospitalization means that she is expecting nothing from him. On the other hand, he does not call her either, saying: “Anyway, I don’t want to talk to her. I hope she’s okay. But if she has something wrong with her, I don’t want to know about it” (292). This sounds his frank voice—from which we can imagine his state of mind when he determined to return to the facility. His girlfriend, the person whom he has depended on, may possibly die earlier than himself. Naturally, she can no longer take care of him. For his part, however, he has no power to help her now. All he can do is just to stop himself from being her burden. From that time on he must deal with himself, whether he lives or dies.

Furthermore, it seems also not unnatural that he should have the same feelings toward his own family—and all he can do is probably the same thing. He says: “But she [his girlfriend] has my car, and I have things at her house” (290). In the next section, when he tries to call his wife, he says again: “Something had to be done about my stuff. I still had things at her [his wife’s] house, too” (290). We can interpret these “things” as the narrator himself. Likewise, the phrase “Something should be done about my stuff” can be read as the expression of his feelings that he must end his present state of being a mere burden on them, that he must cure his alcoholism by any means. In the next scene, he tells of a man who says “he goes to Europe and places” (290). The man “says he has his drinking under control and he doesn’t have any idea why he’s here at Frank Martin’s,” insisting that “he’s not a drunk” and “that’s a serious charge to make” (291). There is a touch of irony in the way the narrator describes the man. It is probably because the narrator has told the same kinds

of words to his wife many times in the past. Watching the man, he seems to be now starting to admit that "he cannot have his drinking under control" and that "he is a drunk"—these are probably the very words that he wants to tell her on the phone.

However, it might be better not to give a hasty answer to the question "what encouraged him to take a turn in the direction of life." When he decided to return to the facility, alcohol must have impaired his judgment to a great extent; it is indeed after he enters the facility that he starts recognizing his own situation correctly and feeling compassion for his girlfriend and wife. For example, there was a possibility that he and his girlfriend might be killed in a car accident on the way to the facility because both of them had been heavily drunk since she received the result of her Pap test. As Bateson notes, some alcoholics actually die before they reach the turning point to life.¹³ Therefore, we should not forget that it may have been by the merest chance that he survived the crisis.

In fact, it is said that Carver himself talked about his own recovery from alcoholism in the same metaphor as the one used in this story. James D. Houston, one of his old friends, notes:

He had spiraled all the way down, he told me, drunk himself into the final coma, which he described as being at the dark bottom of a very deep well. "I was almost coma, I see that now. I was ready to go out. I could have. But I saw this pinpoint of light, so far up there it seemed an impossible distance. It seemed completely beyond my reach, and yet something told me I had to try and reach it. Somehow I had climb up toward that last tiny glimmer. And by God, I managed to do that. What do you call it? The survival instinct? I climbed out of that hole and I realized how close I had come, and that was it. I haven't had a drop from that day to this, and I've never felt better in my life." (Stull and Carroll 19-20)

There is no doubt that vagueness and exaggeration of memory are somewhat included in this passage. There must have been a more complicated process of treatment in the actual course of his rehabilitation.¹⁴ My intention here is, however, not to discuss the accuracy of his biography. The point is that he describes his own recovery by using phrases: "something told me," "Somehow I

had climbed up,” “What do you call it?” and “The survival instinct?” In other words, he narrativizes what encouraged his turn in the direction of life as an inexplicable experience, a kind of miracle. Considered in this light, it is presumable that in “Where I’m Calling From” his persistence in representing the sense of “miracle” he felt in his own experience inevitably brings about the ambiguity of the story. Why do we live? Nobody could give a perfect answer to such a question. The reason why this story leaves ambiguity cannot be fully explained in terms of the uncertainty of his recovery from alcoholism or the indeterminacy of the post-modern world: the ambiguity of the story mirrors the contingency fundamental to our lives.

Go on, Sonny, Go Back to Bed

If alcoholism is a kind of suicide, we can also read the process of recovery as a story in which a man survives a suicide attempt and gradually begins to understand what drove him to it and what he must do to prevent himself from getting into the same situation again. This is probably the essence of the optimism that critics and readers have felt in the story. However, we should not overlook the fact that at the back of the optimistic air is, as I have already discussed above, a sense of abandonment. The narrator’s hope and despair are two sides of the same coin. It is only from this standpoint that we can fully understand the significance of another significant episode.

Just after the narrator received J. P.’s wife’s good-luck kiss, he remembers the time when he and his wife lived together. When they are in bed early in the morning, the landlord comes to paint the wall of their house. Surprised at the sound outside, he opens the curtain and sees the old landlord.

I push the curtain away from the window. Outside, this old guy in white coveralls is standing next to his ladder. The sun is just starting to break above the mountains. The old guy and I look each other over. It’s the landlord, all right—this old guy in coveralls. But his coveralls are too big for him. He needs a shave, too. Goddamn it, I think, if he isn’t a weird old fellow. And a wave of happiness comes over me that I’m not him—that I’m inside this bedroom with my wife. (295)

By and large, critics who discuss this scene have argued, in paying attention to the ominous image of the old landlord, that it adds uncertainty to the sense of

optimism permeating the ending. For example, Bethea points out: "The symbolic implications . . . are positive, yet some ambiguity persists. The old man is at the end of life, not the beginning. . . . While the narrator has begun to transcend his alcoholism, he can still go back" (151). Kirk Nessel, arguing that the contrast of the image between the secure "inside" and the insecure "outside" signifies the precarious state of the narrator, notes: "'Outside,' as in the form of a strange, skinny old man, are reminders of toil and old age, and, as before. . . . 'Inside,' there is . . . the recognition of his circumstances as being as secure as then they were . . ." (61). It is, however, obvious to us from the beginning that the narrator, who is staying at this facility, is in a precarious state in the course of recovery from alcoholism. Therefore, there is little necessity for Carver to use "symbolic implication" to inform the readers of it. The point here is why the narrator suddenly starts to recount a seemingly irrelevant episode of an old man, who was just a landlord of the house where he and his wife used to live. In other words, what we need to do here is to explain what significance this episode has in the inner workings of the narrator's mind.

What has been overlooked by critics is that it is not the narrator in the present but he in the past, who feels "a wave of happiness." The sentiment that arises in his mind when he remembers his past happiness is probably a mere disillusion with his present state. In this passage, it is not on his old self but on the old landlord whom the narrator in the present keeps his eyes; in other words, he identifies himself with the old man who he once thought was completely different from him. It is when he recognizes that he has now become the same as the "weird old fellow" that he becomes ready to deal with his present state. The narrator once thought that he was happy because "I'm not him"; now he realizes that "I'm him." This episode ends as follows:

I let go of the curtain. But I keep standing there at the window. I can see the old fellow nod to himself like he's saying, "Go on, sonny, go back to bed. I understand." He tugs on the bill of his cap. Then he sets about his business. He picks up his bucket. He starts climbing the ladder. (295-296)

In this passage, it seems not clear which "I" is seeing the old fellow—the "I" in the past or "I" in the present. Of course it may be natural to think that the past "I" is watching through the gap between the curtains, but it is also possible to think that the present "I" is picturing in his mind the old man after the curtain

was closed. In any case, this episode is from the beginning all in his memory, his imagination; actually, the phrase “like he’s saying” is totally his creation. The question is why the narrator concludes this episode with the description of the old landlord.

The moment “I let go of the curtain,” the narrator’s focus is thoroughly turned to the old landlord. At this point, the narrator in the present seems to thoroughly identify himself with the old man. On the other hand, “I” who still remains “inside this room” is the reminder of his old self. In the room, his wife, laughing at him, repeatedly tells him to “come on back to bed” (295). This image can also be regarded as a symbolic expression of his state of mind: he is being pulled back toward the past. However, as long as he clings to the past, he will not get any hope for the future. His survival depends on whether or not he can completely abandon his past life. Therefore, we should regard the words “Go on, sonny, go back to bed. I understand.” as a farewell to his past self: by putting himself in the old man’s position he is saying good-bye to his old self. Then, the old man—that is, the “I” in the present—“starts climbing the ladder”; this is, needless to say, a metaphor of the narrator’s future.

The Fire Goes Out

When the narrator is thinking about calling his wife and his girlfriend near the end, he remembers the contents of the story “To Build a Fire” by Jack London. He remembers the story: “The guy in the Yukon is freezing. Imagine it—he’s actually going to freeze to death if he can’t get a fire going. With a fire, he can dry his socks and things and warm himself” (296). In the next paragraph he goes on telling the story: “He gets his fire going, but then something happens to it. A branchful of snow drops on it. It goes out. Meanwhile, it’s getting colder. Night is coming on” (296). Immediately after this paragraph, he brings “some change out of” his pocket to call his wife and his girlfriend.

As in the case of the episode of “the old landlord,” little has been written about why the seemingly hopeless episode—the protagonist of London’s story is destined to die—urges the narrator to bring some change out of his pocket to call his wife and his girlfriend.¹⁵ However, this episode can also be interpreted as a symbolic expression of his state of mind. To return to the earlier pages, we can see several episodes about Jack London referred to. Frank Martin, the manager of the rehabilitation center, tells J.P. and the narrator that Jack

London, who "used to have a big place on the other side of this valley" (288), was killed by alcohol, adding, "Let that be a lesson to you. He was a better man than any of us. But he couldn't handle the stuff, either" (288). In the narrator's mind, the episode where even such a strong man could not control alcohol seems to be parallel to the ending of the story "To Build a Fire," in which the protagonist cannot keep a fire going and dies, and both stories seem to encourage the narrator to admit that he cannot "handle the stuff" as London and his character could not. As I have already mentioned, the admission paradoxically can give him a new perspective from which he can reexamine his past and consider his future.

Nevertheless, at the same time, this episode seems to completely lack the logical connection in the development of the story and also to be absolutely disconnected from the frame of interpretation I have made in this essay. It seems to imply something crucial, but no hint can be seen in the story. In an interview, Carver explains the ambiguous nature of his stories: "It's important for writers to provide enough to satisfy readers, even if they don't provide 'the' answer, or clear resolutions" (Gentry and Stull 111). However, can we say that this ending "provides enough to satisfy readers"? My view is that this ending may be too ambiguous to satisfy readers even if they read it with the greatest care. Contrary to the writer's own remark, the narrator—or the writer himself—seems to forget, consciously or unconsciously, to say something significant. What does he mean by the episode of "a fire going out"?

It is helpful here to take his other texts into account. In fact, the image of "a fire going out" is used in another important text by Carver. In his autobiographical essay "Fires," he looks back on the influences he received in the course of his becoming a writer. He uses the similar image near the end:

I couldn't go anywhere, couldn't back up or go forward. It was during this period that Lish collected some of my stories and gave them to McGraw-Hill, who published them. For the time being, I was still off on the siding, unable to move in any direction. If there'd once been a fire, it'd gone out.
(*Fires* 39)

The image of "a fire going out" seems rather out of place for a phrase written at the end of the essay on how he became a writer. A phrase such as "catch a fire" might be more appropriate. Another unusual characteristic of this essay is that the word "fire" is found only in the passage above except the title. We can see

the importance of the word in that the title of the essay is applied to that of his collection of writings: *Fires*. These examples mean that the image of fire may assume significance only as “a fire going out” in his writings. Indeed, similarly in an interview titled “After the Fire, into the Fire: An Interview with Raymond Carver” by Michael Schumacher, he also uses the same image to talk about his experience:

You know the flame went out: I think it was flat-out extinguished there toward the end of my drinking days. But, yes, I survived. . . . I just felt like I had a second chance at my life again. . . . [A]nd then, suddenly, I began to write again. And that was just a great gift, and everything that has happened since then has been a great gift. (Gentry and Stull 236)

The meaning of the metaphor of “the flame” is not clearly explained either in this interview. In this light, it could be said that he hesitated to say something when using the metaphor of “fire” both inside and outside his texts. It is, probably, only in the essay “Fire” that the meaning of the metaphor is rather clearly seen.

Just after he starts telling of what had influenced on his life as a writer in the beginning of the essay, he immediately turns his focus on the deterioration of his past life. He mentions that he and his wife once had “a belief that if we worked hard and tried to do the right things, the right things would happen” (33) and “tried and build a life” on the basis of such virtue as “hard work,” “goals,” “good intentions,” “loyalty” (33) and so on. He proceeds with the story of his past life: “Up to that point in my life I’d gone along thinking . . . that everything in my life I’d hoped for or wanted to do, was possible. But at that moment, in the Laundromat, I realized that this simply was not true” (33). These remarks sound almost the same as J. P.’s words cited earlier. In brief, we can say that the image of fire is a symbol of his belief, hope and dream with which he had tried to build up a happy family life. He struggled to maintain such a life, but he gradually developed his alcoholism and slowly went down to the verge of death. In the end, he completely abandoned his whole life: the fire went out.

If the image of fire was a metaphor for Carver’s past dream, at the center of it was the existence of children. Indeed, he ends the essay “Fires” as follows;

Influences. John Gardner and Gordon Lish. They hold irredeemable

notes. But my children are it. Theirs is the main influence. They were the prime movers and shapers of my life and my writing. As you can see, I'm still under their influence, though the days are relatively clear now, and the silences are right. (39)

However, in few of his stories children are actually described. Moreover, even in the few cases, those children are by and large kept in the background: for example, in "A Small, Good Thing" the story revolves around a child in danger of death, but the main focus of the story is on the parents. The only story in which the conflict between a father and a child is depicted as the central issue is "The Compartment": a father and a boy have a violent quarrel and the father slams the boy into the wall, threatening to kill him (*Cathedral* 47-48). This scene, however, is also narrated only as an episode in the beginning. As a whole, the story tells about the father who is going to visit the boy for the first time in eight years but changes his mind and decides not to see him. It is also notable that the story is not included in the collection of his selected stories. While conflicts between a husband and a wife are recurrently described in detail in many of Carver's stories, we can rarely see those between a parent and a child. Why didn't he write about stories of children while he said his children were "the main influence"? The likely reason is that the discord between him and his children was such a painful and traumatic experience to him that he kept himself from touching on the topic even in the form of fiction. Of course, it is a mere supposition, but he may also have had some violent quarrels with his own children as described in "The Compartment." The protagonist's state of mind in the story is described as follows: "It came to him that he didn't want to see the boy after all. He was shocked by this realization and for a moment felt diminished by the meanness of it. . . . But the fact was he really had no desire to see this boy" (*Cathedral* 54). If we dare to interpret the metaphor of "a fire going out" particular to Carver's vocabulary, it could be translated as the realization that "he no longer loves his children."

Considering in this light, we can now begin to understand the lack of the context in the episode of "the fire going out" in "Where I'm Calling From." In fact, it is not clear whether the narrator has children or not. There is indeed no concrete evidence that he has any children. Even so, it seems reasonable to think that he has some since otherwise he would not feel such a great sympathy for J. P.'s story. Every time he tries to make a phone call to his girlfriend, he thinks that he does not want to get her teen-age son on the line,

calling him “her mouthy kid.” This may be interpreted as a kind of displacement: actually, it may be his own child whom he does not want to get on the line. Of course, this hypothesis can be set up only on condition that he actually has some children, but it is also presumable that the complete deletion of the evidence of the narrator’s having children reflects Carver’s own unconscious desire to keep silence on the issue of his own children. J. P. says: “I told her she should keep the kids at home. Can you imagine? My God, I don’t want my kids up here” (292). These words can also be interpreted as the evidence of the author’s self-censorship: he may have, consciously or unconsciously, avoided writing about the miserable state of children because the issue is too distressing for him to talk about even in the form of fiction. As the fiction writer who visits his ex-wife and is harshly accused of his having exploited her life in the story “Intimacy,” Carver must have had a sense of guilt for exploiting his family’s life by writing stories.

“The mouthy kid” screams at the narrator and his girlfriend: “The hell with you! I hope you never come back. I hope you kill yourselves!” (290). If the narrator had his own son, he might have been told the same kind of words—and Carver, too. Perhaps the most painful experience of “hitting bottom” is hidden behind the blank which Carver left in the text.

Notes

¹ For the studies of the relation between alcoholism and American literature, see, for example, *Alcoholism and the Writer* by Donald W. Goodwin and *The Thirsty Muse* by Tom Dardis, though my argument in this essay has little to do with either book.

² Carver repeatedly refers to his experience as an alcoholic in interviews. He also admits that he attended AA meetings many times in the past in an interview by Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory (Gentry and Stull 115).

³ For example, John W. Aldridge, in reading “Gazebo” whose protagonists are also an alcoholic couple, argues: “Except for the shroud of chronic dispiritedness that hangs over them,” Carver’s characters “do not seem responsive to much of anything” (52).

⁴ For example, Frank Lentricchia argues on the trend of the contemporary American literature: “[in America] the comforts of stability require a minor, apolitical, domestic fiction of the triumphs and agonies of autonomous private individuals operating in ‘the private sector’ of Raymond Carver and Anne Tyler, the modesty of small, good things” (2-3).

⁵ One of the famous examples referring to Carver's "change" is the high evaluation Irving Howe set on the stories in *Cathedral*. He writes: "In *Cathedral* a few stories move past Mr. Carver's expert tautness and venture on a less secure but finer rendering of experience."

⁶ For example, Nessel mentions: "In *Cathedral*, and in *Cathedral* only, we witness rare moments of near self-disfranchisement, occasional bright openings in closed-down lives, however temporary those openings may be" (52). Marc Chenetier also argues that the later stories shows "a movement away from threatening ambiguity, a working towards hope rather than horror, and the abandonment of features Carver may have come to consider akin to the narrative 'gimmicks' he has always denounced" (170).

⁷ Typical examples can be seen in the relatively famous works such as "Cathedral" and "Fever."

⁸ We can see photographs of the rehabilitation center where Carver stayed on two different occasions. See pp. 96 and 99 in *Carver County*. Douglas Unger talks about Carver's situation when he was trying to become sober in an interview by Sam Halpert. According to Unger, Carver actually had seizures several times like the character Tiny in "Where I'm Calling From." (Halpert 88-96)

⁹ For example, Arthur M. Saltzman argues: "By recalling how conditions decayed, J.P. demonstrates a 'talking cure' for impacted personalities" (147). Peter J. Donahue also argues: "By having launched his narrative and by having grafted the stories of his fellows in the treatment center to his own, he has begun to redefine himself" (62). Similarly, Hamilton E. Cochrane points out: "listening to J. P., paradoxically, seems both to take the narrator away from his own pain and, at the same time, to offer a paradigm that brings him back to his own experience with new understanding" (82). In the end, the narrator who was only listening begins to talk about his own experience. There is no doubt that this therapeutic effect, caused by listening to others' stories and talking about their own experience, is closely connected with the sense of hope, which a number of critics and readers have found in the last scene of this story.

¹⁰ For example, Cochrane develops a convincing argument on "the restorative power of the narrative" (80) in Carver's later works by analyzing the structural coherence between his fiction and "AA stories," though he does not fully discuss the relation between the therapeutic effect and the contents of the individual narratives of J. P. and others.

¹¹ For the explanation of the system and concept of AA, see Bateson (309-337). He refers to a personal communication from an AA member that "some may be dead" (329) before they reach the turning point to recovery.

¹² Bethea points out "[t]he symbolic implications of climbing and in the image of pattern of darkness (the well/chimney) leading to light (the painter dressed in white working at dawn) are positive" (151).

¹³ Bateson writes: "AA says that 'bottom' is different for different men and some may be dead before they reach it" (329).

¹⁴ Unger gives a detailed account of Carver's recovery process (Halpert 88-95). According to him, Carver learned at a rehabilitation facility "how to taper himself off with reduced danger of seizures" by having "time-controlled shots of liquor" (92) and practiced it. From this, we can see that his recovery was indeed made little by little contrary to Carver's own explanation.

¹⁵ For example, Donahue argues: "The narrator recalls this drama [by London] almost as if it is analogous to his own life-and-death predicament with alcoholism. If he can keep the flame of his recovery going, he can 'dry out'" (60). This interpretation itself seems to be reasonable, but nevertheless it does not seem to succeed in fully explicating the reason why the narrator recalls not the scene in which the fire gets lighted up but those in which it goes out. Indeed, there is no doubt that his remembering the episode of the fire going out plays a role of catalyst for his action. Inevitably, Donahue's interpretation leads to the conclusion that "the content of the narratives produced in the story is not as important as the fact that language is always being generated" (60).

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