

A Comparison: Raymond Carver's "Distance" and "Everything Stuck to Him"

94E105 Kumi Tanaka

CONTENTS

- I. Introduction
- II. A Comparison: Raymond Carver's "Distance" and "Everything Stuck to Him"
 - 1. The distance of the characters in "Distance"
 - 2. The distance of the characters in "Everything Stuck to Him"
- III. Carver's intention in each of the two stories
- IV. Conclusion
- Notes
- Bibliography

I. Introduction

Raymond Carver was born in Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1938. He lived in Yakima, Washington, when he was a boy. He often hunted and fished with his father and younger brother. After he finished high school (he was the first to graduate from high school in his family), he worked at the sawmill in California where his father worked, but he soon returned to Yakima. At nineteen he married and had a daughter. One year later he had a son. His children had the greatest influence on Carver's decision not to create a novel. He wrote in an essay: "In those days I figured if I could squeeze in an hour or two a day for myself, after job and family, that was more than good enough.... I couldn't see myself working on a novel in such a fashion, that is to say, no fashion at all."¹

Since the family was also weak financially, all had to work hard. Carver went bankrupt twice until he met Tess Gallagher. In 1959, he enrolled in Creative Writing 101 at Chico State College in California, where he was instructed by John Gardner, who also influenced Carver, for the famous Gardner taught Carver the importance of vocabulary.

Carver then transferred to Humboldt State College in California, which conferred on him a degree in English in 1963. In 1967, he met Gordon Lish, the fiction editor who would be taking charge of *Esquire* later and who advised him in writing the same as John Gardner had. Though Gordon Lish published "Neighbors" in *Esquire* in 1971, "What Is It?" was chosen as one of William Abraham's annual *Prize Stories* in the *O. Henry Awards*, 1973. In 1976, the National Book Award nominated *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Yet the more Carver succeeded, the more serious his alcoholism became. His characters are often poor and alcoholic. His stories are

based on his experiences.

He was hospitalized to cure his alcoholism in 1976 and recovered in 1977. That same year he met the poet, Tess Gallagher, and the following year he separated from his wife (they would divorce in 1982). Carver began living with Tess Gallagher. His fame increased with *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) and *Cathedral* (1984). Although the critics called him a “minimalist,” he did not like the term.

While he taught at Syracuse University from 1980 to 1983, he received financial support. That is, he received the prestigious Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award from the American Academy and the Institute of Arts and Letters. His situation became better, but he still had troubles. His family—his mother, his former wife, and others—asked him for money, a common event in his stories. In his fiftieth year in 1988, he died of lung cancer.

II. A Comparison: Raymond Carver’s “Distance” and “Everything Stuck to Him”

1. The distance of the characters in “Distance”

Raymond Carver is a unique writer. Since he thinks nothing of rewriting, he composes at least two stories in the same form (one is a short version, the other long). “Distance” is a work of this sort. It was published in the *Chariton Review*, 1, No.2, Fall 1975. Then the story was rewritten in a shorter version, called “Everything Stuck to Him” in his collection of stories entitled *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). He had rewritten “Distance” for *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*, 1983. The story was rewritten on the basis of the longer version, but the title remained the same. The story is as follows: a father talks with his daughter about an event that happened when she was a baby.

We can find different versions of the two stories when we read them carefully and contrast them. As a result, these parts cause divergent impressions due to the two versions. I wish to show the essential difference between the two stories “Distance” and “Everything Stuck to Him.”

First of all, I want to investigate how the writer set up the situation in each story.

She’s in Milan for Christmas and wants to know what it was like when she was a kid. Always that on the rare occasions when he sees her (underline mine).

Tell me, she says. Tell me what it was like then. She sips Strega, waits, eyes him closely.

She is a cool, slim, attractive girl, a survivor from top to bottom. That was a long time ago. That was twenty years ago, he says. They’re in his apartment on the Via Fabroni near the Cascina Gardens (underline mine).²

This is the opening in "Distance." She, the once-baby now an adult, comes to her father's apartment in Milan for Christmas. They had seldom met. On the other hand, "Everything Stuck to Him" opens as follows: "She's in Milan for Christmas..." (the underlined parts in the previous passage are omitted). We see only this sentence. That's why, in "Distance," we clearly realize the father and his daughter rarely see one another, and they live away from each other. This we do not necessarily understand in "Everything." Douglas Unger makes the point that although "Distance" has a frame, "Everything" does not.

In *Understanding Raymond Carver*, Arthur M. Saltzman refers to Carver's frame technique: "'Distance'... employs the frame technique that stabilizes the reader's perspective on the story..."³ Since the writer covertly describes the scene where the father and his daughter meet, we can predict the future of the young married couple whom the father talks to his daughter about in "Distance."

We also see clearly that this story is not only the married couple's parting but also the distance between the father and daughter because the story of "Distance" is more gloomy than that of "Everything." I am certain of this idea due to the flashback where the boy—the father—talked to his wife about the episode of the pair of Canada geese. Only "Distance" has this scene in it. The episode concerns the boy's saying that a mated goose will never take up with another goose if the mate is killed. The boy and his wife say:

Have you ever killed one of those? she asked. You know what I mean. He nodded....

...And it didn't bother you? she said.

Never, he said. You can't think about it when you're doing it. You see, I love everything there is about geese. I love to just watch them even when I'm not hunting them. But there are all kinds of contradictions in life. You can't think about the contradictions.⁴

When reading the story, I was conscious that there was a gap between the boy who is not bothered by killing a mated goose and the girl who feels unpleasantness about it. I want to prove the reason behind their parting in this passage. It suggests their future parting and the difference in their thought. In *Understanding*, the critic says: "...this discussion intimates a kind of distance between the two of them..."⁵ I realize the importance of the critic's language, "a kind of distance." It includes the word "distance," which is the title of the story. The story is about distance on several different levels. Note the following:

Driving, the boy looked out at the stars and was moved when he considered

their distance.

Carl's porchlight was on, his station wagon parked in the drive with the motor idling. Carl came outside as the boy pulled to the curb. The boy had decided.⁶

The boy has promised Carl Sutherland, a friend of the boy's deceased father, to go hunting. Nevertheless, the boy's baby had continued her mysterious crying toward daybreak. The boy had said to his wife, "I really don't think there's anything wrong with her.'" He wants to go to hunting, but the other hopes to prevent him from going. After a while they have a quarrel. The girl urges him to choose his friend Carl or their family. At last the boy goes out. But finally he chooses his family. Both "Distance" and "Everything" have this event. The boy is permitted by Carl to stay away from the hunting in "Distance." On the other hand, the boy goes into his house soon and is not permitted not to hunt in "Everything": "He turned off the motor and sat awhile. And then he got out and went back inside."⁷

Takaki Hiraishi suggests the following: "...a house evidently implies a device for protection in Carver's works."⁸ I would interpret the two works as being based on the boy's intention. The boy intends to carry through his resolve to go hunting and goes to Carl's house. But the boy does not really intend to because he makes a fresh resolution to return home, and Carl permits it in "Distance." While it seems to me the boy does not stick to hunting in "Distance," I read the other version as his choosing his home in "Everything." In the former story I can obviously see the boy wants to go hunting from the scene of looking at the stars. Saltzman writes: "On the way to meet Carl, he envies the 'bright distance' of the stars, for they maintain a privileged distance from the tension, the noise... and the guilt that he wants to escape."⁹ To put it more concretely, he wants to escape from his wife and baby who disturb his mind. His family is unstable—it is often linked to thin ice—and the boy and the girl do not know when their home will be broken up. Therefore, the boy has to sacrifice himself to maintain his home life. But still he sticks to his hope, and that links up with his envy of the bright stars. Though he could easily call Carl Sutherland on the phone, he goes to Carl's house. But he does not have to go there just to decline the hunt. I presume his behavior expresses a modest resistance. "Distance"—it is also the title—shows the distinctions between the boy's mind and the girl's, the space between him and his family that he wishes for, the escape from his home and his wishes, and the causes distant from Carl's house.

2. The distance of the characters in "Everything Stuck to Him"

Although I observed the boy soon selects his family, he does not choose easily. Since Raymond Carver uses "outside," this means "not in the building, but not

y far away from it.”¹⁰ When the boy leaves his house, this is a protective device by Carver in his work. For this reason I know the boy refuses to protect his family at least once in “Everything.” “Distance” in one scene describes the “upstairs” and means “towards or on the highest floor or floors of a building”¹¹; nevertheless, the boy never looks at the light in Carl’s house. The boy is desperate to resolve his family dispute. He is so unfriendly and urgent that he cannot even by telephone tell Carl of his absence, which is a means of communication to “outside” in Raymond Carver.

He looked down at the syrup that covered the front of his woolen underwear, at the pieces of waffle, bacon and egg that clung to the syrup.¹²

—“Distance”

The boy looked down at himself, at everything stuck to his underwear.¹³

—“Everything”

In this scene the episode is as follows: the boy begins cutting into the waffle with a knife; then he upsets the plate on his lap by mistake after he and his wife patch up their quarrel. Whereas “Distance” uses the names of foods —waffle, bacon, and so on—, “Everything” uses only one word, “everything.” What is more, whereas “Distance” uses “covered,” “Everything” uses “stuck.” “Cover” means “to put or spread something over (something), esp. in order to hide or protect it, or to lie on the surface of (something)”,¹⁴ and “stick” means “to (cause to) become fixed (as if) with glue or another similar substance.”¹⁵

Let us look at these quotations based on these definitions. In “Distance,” the lines signify the foods, which are waffle, bacon, etc., spread over his lap. In “Everything,” the lines signify everything clinging to his lap, and he cannot get around at all. I would keep my eyes on what the word “everything” points to. In context it indicates the foods which stick to his underwear; however, I do not consider he cannot move merely because of the foods adhering to him. Then what does “stick to him” mean? It must be the girl and the baby, namely his house, his family. “Stuck” is intentional for this young person, who only looks at the light of his own house and keeping up his home, something difficult. Such being the case, through divergence of the two titles these are major differences between him and anything surrounding him, and the truth is that these express the great distinctions between the two situations.

III. Carver’s intention in each of the two stories

Between “Distance” and “Everything,” I can feel there was a sense of difference which provokes something in the way of the boy’s thinking. Still, I must remain aware that Raymond Carver is a story writer who dislikes directly revealing

profound meanings. That is to say, I can say Carver indirectly wants to state the theme of what he first refers to.

But he stays by the window, remembering.¹⁶ They had laughed. They had leaned on each other and laughed until the tears had come, while everything else — the cold, and where he'd go in it — was outside, for a while anyway.¹⁷
—“Everything”

The two stories have the same last scene: the father remembers the boy he was and the wife had a laugh. Readers are free from tension at this moment.

Motoyuki Shibata says at that instant the character remembers those former days in which he was probably happier than he is now. (According to Shibata, we feel as if at one stroke we are blowing into the air breath which we have been storing up.¹⁸) Surely, “Everything” holds true perfectly. The boy who thinks his home is the most important thing succeeds —the short story writer ironically says ‘for a while anyway’— to protect the moment because their laughter implies a measure of relief from their earlier argument.

On the contrary, I think “Distance” was not created for saving the past because the episode of the Canada geese weighs on the story throughout. In his explanatory notes on *FIRES*, Haruki Murakami writes: “As a summary, in a few words, this is a story about a boy who cannot go hunting, and there is a Canada goose shot dead as the basis of the story.”¹⁹ The critic in *Understanding* comments: “‘Everything Stuck to Him,’ distinctly implies that ‘Distance’ isn’t salvation but only a confirmation of his ‘sad fate.’”²⁰ The “sad fate” suggests that he lives alone like the mate of the Canada goose. I do not know how the boy separated from his wife; he does not live together with wife, and he almost never sees his daughter. That is to say, he is really solitary. In this story he should be saved by the scene of reconciliation; however, I think there is no relief for his “sad fate.” Even more, the episode of the Canada geese foreshadows the father’s loneliness. Under such conditions I am forced to answer I am very doubtful when I am asked if readers can feel relief.

IV. Conclusion

Raymond Carver says in his essay:

...language used so as to bring to life the details that will light up the story for the reader. For the details to be concrete and convey meaning... if used right they can hit all the notes.²¹

Each story, “Distance” and “Everything,” grounded on this intention, arranges its language exactly. After all, the writer succeeds in impressing on the reader the

dissimilarity in spite of the same frame. "Distance" impresses us with its anxiety, dissatisfaction, and rigid state in that the boy is held by fate not only in his present condition but also in his future. While "Everything" impresses us by the fact that the boy sacrifices his will, he yet manages to protect his thin ice.

We can be aware of dark shades connected to his present situation. Certainly, these two stories cannot make use of the textured and deep emotions of Carver's short story "Cathedral." What is more, the rewriting of the two stories is not as dramatic as those of "A Small, Good Thing" and "Bath." Nevertheless, when I contrast these two stories in my thesis, I find Carver puts emphasis on communication with his readers, and he pursues good sentences so necessary for good communication. By reading his works, the reader understands and discovers again the sensibilities—the vague strain in everyday life, the release which comes from strain, and the fear which lingers further—of these emotions are very ambiguous, and we are unconscious or forgetful even if we are conscious of them. All of these signs are a feature of Carver's work at that time.

Notes

1. Raymond Carver, in "Fires," *FIRES: Essays, Poems, Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p.35
2. Raymond Carver "Distance," in *FIRES: Essays, Poems, Stories* (California: Capra Press, 1983), p.186.
3. Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), p.80.
4. "Distance," p.189.
5. *Understanding*, p.82.
6. "Distance," p.193.
7. Raymond Carver, "Everything Stuck To Him," in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1994) p.126.
8. 平石貴樹, 『ユリイカ』 6月号, 「レイモンド・カーヴァー: 失敗の衝動」, (東京: 青土社, 1990), p.171.
9. *Understanding*, pp.80~81.
10. *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.1004. Illustrative sentence: Since it's such a nice day shall we eat/sit/go outside.
11. *Cambridge*, p.1600. Illustrative sentence: The people who live upstairs are very noisy.
12. "Distance," p.196.
13. "Everything Stuck To Him," p.127.
14. *Cambridge*, p.316. Illustrative sentence: The bandages were covered with/in blood.
15. *Cambridge*, p.1423. Illustrative sentence: Elli stuck to (=stayed close to) her mother like a leech.
16. "Distance" has the sentence, "But he stays by the window remembering *that life*." p.197.

17. "Distance," p.197; "Everything," p.128.
18. 柴田元幸, 『ユリイカ』 6月号, 「無名性の文学」, p.166.
19. レイモンド・カーヴァー, 『ファイアズ(炎)』 (*The Complete Works of Raymond Carver 4*) 村上春樹訳, p.425 (東京: 中央公論社, 1992).
20. *Understanding*, p.99.
21. "Fires," p.27.

Bibliography

- Carver, Raymond. *Carver Country*. Trans. Haruki Murakami. Photo by Bob Adelman. Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1994.
 (レイモンド・カーヴァー著、村上春樹訳、ボブ・エーデルマン写真『カーヴァー・カントリー』中央公論社、1994).
- *Carver's Dozen: Raymond Carver Kessaku-sen*. Trans. Haruki Murakami. Tokyo: Chūkōbunko, 1997.
 (レイモンド・カーヴァー, 『レイモンド・カーヴァー傑作選』 (*Carver's Dozen*) 村上春樹訳 (東京: 中公文庫, 1997)).
- *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989.
- *The Complete Works of Raymond Carver 4 FIRES* (Honoo). Trans. Haruki Murakami. Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1992.
 (レイモンド・カーヴァー, *The complete works of Raymond Carver 4* 『ファイアズ(炎)』 村上春樹訳 (東京: 中央公論社, 1992)).
- *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1994.
- *Where I'm Calling From*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989. *Raymond Carver ni tuite katarutoki...* Sam Halpert. ed. Trans. Nao Konasi. Tokyo: Hakusui-sha, 1993.
 (サム・ハルパート編, 『レイモンド・カーヴァーについて語るとき…』 小梨直訳 (東京: 白水社, 1993)).
- Saltzman, Arthur M. *Understanding Raymond Carver. Yuriika*. Tokyo: Seidosha (『ユリイカ』 6月号, (東京: 青土社, 1990)), 1990.

(卒論指導教員 北嶋藤郷)