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Raymond Carver's Narrative Poetics: An Analysis of the Narrative Functions of "Key" and "Cat" in *Neighbors*

LIU Qiwen^{[a],*}; TANG Weisheng^[b]^[a]Foreign Language College, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China.^[b]Professor, Foreign Language College, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

In Raymond Carver's *Neighbors*, why does Bill, the protagonist, always have a sudden high sexual desire? What's the use of frequent and large numbers of cats, keys and other objects? So far, almost all the relevant discussions have ignored the narrative function of "object" in the novel. In fact, the "object" as an "actor" radiates its mysterious and powerful power all the time, arouses a series of illusions and desires of the characters, affects their thoughts and actions, and finally highlights their "ontology" because of the sudden disappearance of the object, smashes the dream of the protagonists, and causes the characters and readers to think deeply about the relationship between people, objects and real life.

Key words: *Neighbors*; Agency; Actor; Object; Ontology

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INTRODUCTION

Neighbors is a classic novel written by Raymond Carver (1938-1988), a famous contemporary American short

story writer. It tells the story that Bill and his wife Arlene pry into the privacy of their neighbor's apartment and finally get into trouble because the key is left in their apartment. So far, most of the discussions on this novel focus on the theme of the novel, such as peeping, gender, identity and so on. For example, Robert Miltner analyzes the architecture of emotion in the novel, namely "disappointment (Miller's apartment) - jealousy (stone's apartment) - fear (corridor)", in order to show that the protagonist cannot get rid of the cultural identity crisis of emotional paralysis (caught between being themselves and being imitation Stones) (Miltner, 2007). In addition, Kirk Nessel pointed out in his monograph "The Story of Raymond Carver: Critical Study" that the Millers suffer from their own dissociation—that "sense of disengagement from one's own identity and life, a state of standing apart from whatever defines the self, or of being unselfed." (Nessel, 1995). However, the analysis of objects is far from enough, although some scholars have discussed the apartment, such as Abigail Bowers, who thinks the apartment is the "Garden of Eden" for Bill and his wife, they can have all kinds of their own fantasies in it, and play their role as neighbor Jim (Bowers, 2008). However, he did not further analyze the specific function of apartment or any other "object" in the novel, nor did he make a deep study of why all kinds of objects, including apartments, can cause the Millers abnormal behaviors.

It is not difficult to find that the above discussion ignores an obvious problem, that is, the inexplicable sense of strangeness in the novel, such as why Bill and Arlene have frequent sexual behaviors out of no reason (four times in total)? In addition, the interpretation of the cat is not thorough and full-scale enough, and there is little discussion about the key. As a minimalist writer, Carver adheres to the writing principle of "trying to avoid describing any unnecessary details and cherishing words to the bone (Gentry and Stull, 1990)". If he does not pay enough attention to any description of objects in the

novel, it is hard to say that Carver's ingenious works can be interpreted objectively and fairly. Of course, because the existence of objects is too obvious, it has also attracted the attention of some critics. For example, Kevin Keane discusses the psychology of place in the novel and thinks that the apartment exposes the psychological state of the characters and changes their actions. Unfortunately, although he found the characteristics that the apartment can change the character's action, he only discussed its role and did not point out its essence, so he largely ignored the agency of "object" as an actor.

THE MYSTERIOUS POWER OF SILENCE: CAT AS "ACTOR"

Cat appeared 13 times in the novel. Nicholas Saunders believes that the cat in the novel is a symbol of silent and mysterious transforming power and knowledge (Saunders, 1998). For example, Bill goes to bed with Arlene after playing with the kitten. After Arlene admits that she also plays with the cat, Bill starts to kiss her. It's not hard to see that cats, as Bruno Latour's "actors", connect and strengthen the couple's feelings here. Latour insists that objects have agency (Latour, 2005). Obviously, the cat plays such a role in the story. As actors, the appearance of the cat often affects the thoughts and actions of Bill and his wife, such as "Kitty rubbed her face against his slippers and then turned onto her side, but jumped up quickly as Bill moved to the kitchen and selected one of the stacked cans from the gleaming drainboard". As a female animal with vitality, cat here exudes gentle and disturbing charm, nibbling Bill's rationality bit by bit, arousing Bill's sexual desire, making Bill ready to start wriggling, with all kinds of impulses, impatience and restlessness surging in his heart. For Bill and his wife, the cat not only changed their behavior and state, but also made their relationship have a new sublimation and a new understanding and thinking of real life.

Many of Carver's "objects" seem lifeless on the surface, but in fact they are full of mystery, and contain great and infinite power, such as the bed, clothes, apartments and so on. Perhaps Ben Highmore's theory of "Everyday Life and Culture" can help us clarify these connections. Highmore pointed out that the most common and humble elements in daily life can bring strange and mysterious changes and transformations. If we carefully observed, we will find those unnoticed and unobtrusive features, behaviors, objects and experiences in daily life can show a revolutionary and magical power (Highmore, 2002). It is in the most ordinary things that Carver sees the power of surprise. In Ayala From Amir's point of view, all kinds of things seen by the characters in the story reflect the fuzzy self-consciousness of the characters, and all kinds of food, furniture, bed, women's clothing and other indoor space constitute the externalized "supplement

of the characters' body, a passive space to describe the outline of the characters from the outside, and an empty" shell of existence" (Amir, 2010). But in any case, Bill's actions have shown that the power of things is infinite.

In addition, it needs to be pointed out that when the agency of things plays a role, its ontology also exists, which depends on the author's rhetorical intention. In Carver's "object" narrative practice, sometimes both of them exist. As the "key" to be discussed below, on the one hand, as an actor "going in and out of the apartment", it has its own track movement and nature, and hinders the action of the characters after its absence. Like Jane Bennett said, she refers to the "agent" with "thing power" (Bennett, 2010). At the same time, in Marco Caracciolo's so-called "Object-Oriented Plot", objects have obvious agency (Caracciolo, 2020). The key in the story is undoubtedly properly explained here. On the other hand, the narrator shows the "ontology" of key through its absence after "being locked" (More analysis will be given below).

TURN THE WORLD AROUND: "KEY AND APARTMENT"-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

"Key" appears eight times in the novel, but this seemingly ordinary small object plays a crucial role in the story. It is when the key is locked in the room and cannot play its function of "unlocking and opening the door", which is used by human beings, that the "ontology" of the key as an object is really highlighted, which is what Graham Harman called "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer". As a real thing, the key conflicts with its perceptual characteristics, showing a huge gap. Just as Harman mentioned "Weird Realism", the author tries to allure readers through "things" and its explicit characteristics, as well as the huge gap between "things" and the feelings it leaves to people, to explore the mysterious "things" with ontology, and to achieve the weird literary effect (Harman, 2012). In *Neighbors*, Carver skillfully uses this huge gap to create a shocking and reflective literary effect. For the protagonist and the reader, they may be able to see the unfathomable reality behind the "key" temporarily, which helps them to think about the reality of things in a non-relevant way.

Before the key "disappeared", Bill and his wife, who peeped into their neighbor's life, were very excited. They were looking for their passion in their neighbor's home. A bottle of medicine, comfortable bed, clothes and their neighbor's private photos became their coincidental interest while looking for fresh excitement. They even started their "sex volcano" eruption mechanism. However, there is a dramatic change in the ending:

"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. (29-30).

Just when they were expecting that the Stone would not come back, they suddenly found that the key had been left in the room, thus the ontology of it, which was independent of human reason, was immediately revealed. As a result, they suffered a heavy shock and their excitement disappeared suddenly. Bill said something which seems inappropriate. "Don't worry." It's like Carver's words of consolation to Bill. With the disappearance of the key, indescribable emotions emerge instantly, and the relationship between things and people makes people reverie. Carver once mentioned the subtle connection between objects and himself: "I always see things. My writing begins with objects, such as a cigarette extinguished in a can of mustard sauce, or the remains of dinner on the table, or a can in the fireplace. There was a feeling that came along, and that feeling seemed to bring me back to that particular time and place, and the atmosphere at that time. But it's the images and the emotions that come with them that matter (McCaffery, Sinda Gregory, 2012). For Carver, "things" can bring people emotional return. Therefore, after being abandoned by the "key", Bill's emotions and desires are gone. Emory Elliott believes that "the change of material leads to changes in our values, feelings of love and hate, and even the way of time and space we get along with the world around us" (Elliott, 1994). Obviously, the change of the key "from something to nothing" makes the whole situation or the Miller's world changed. It brings Bill and his wife back to the cold reality from the daydream that "the Stone may never come back". Their beautiful illusions are broken, and they are full of confusion and anxiety about the reality and their future.

In addition, apart from the key, if we broaden our perspective, we can easily notice the "object" world in the mysterious and unknowable apartment. The apartment appears six times in the novel. In Kevin Keane's view, apart from being a place of fantasy, the apartment also has erotic attraction for Bill and his wife. For example, they are all fascinated by some private photos found by Arlene (Keane, 2004), but he only focuses on the perceptual characteristics of objects, and does not point out their reality. In fact, when the narrator first describes Bill entering the Stone's apartment, the mysterious power of apartment is revealed. "Bill took a deep breath. The air is a little cloudy and seems to have a sweet taste" (24). The apartment made him escape from the hardship and bitterness of life temporarily, and let him smell the breath of relaxation and freedom. Therefore, after entering the apartment, he can't wait to get to know and integrate into this environment full of all kinds of "things". "he slowly goes through every room, ponders over everything he

sees, and looks at it very carefully, one by one. Ashtray, all kinds of furniture, kitchen utensils, lights and so on, everything has been seen "(27). Bill is so careful that he is afraid to miss the endless enjoyment brought by any kind of things. So "he opened all the cupboards and looked at canned food, cereal, packaged food, all kinds of wine glasses, plates, cans and pots" (26). It is not difficult to find that Carver presents the existence of objects by "Listing" many times. In Ian Bogost's view, no matter how fluent the system operates, the individuals in the list always remain completely isolated and are weird to each other. It not only cuts off the connecting ability of language, but also cuts off the connecting ability between ontologies (Bogost, 2012). Alan Weisman, on the other hand, believes that "Listing" rejects traditional techniques, but simply implies everything in an ordinary way (Weisman, 2008). Secondly, by listing these things, Carver created a "reality effect". Obviously, by listing all kinds of "things", Carver indeed achieved the goal of "abandoning the previous human centered narration and turning to many secular details" (Chen, 2020). On the other hand, the rich material list also sets off the material and spiritual barrenness of low-level characters like Bill in Carver's works. Carver himself, like them, also struggles with the broken "American Dream".

CONCLUSION

In *Neighbors*, the rich and mysterious material world not only makes the characters get lost, but also shows the power of "things" independent of human existence. As the speculative realists believe, things have life and activity independent of human beings, and are completely equal with human beings in ontology (Yin & Tang, 2019). On the one hand, the objects in the novel, as "actors", influence or act the actions of the characters and advance the narrative process; on the other hand, as "ontological objects", they transcend the language and cultural representation of the characters and show their mysterious power, thus perfectly interpreting Carver's narrative poetics of "object". On the writing level, Carver reflects the "ontological things" by "listing", which is called "The Ontological Writing Methods". He never described too much, so as to create the ultimate sense of reading experience to the greatest extent, and make the readers feel like a lump in the throat, which cannot be calmed down for a long time. It can be seen that the "Ontology" has infinite power. It is by using these mysterious and obscure "power of things" that Carver skillfully creates an insurmountable huge gap between the things themselves and the feelings left to the characters, so as to achieve a shocking and reflective literary effect, so that the protagonist and readers can have a deeper thinking about the relationship between reality, objects and people, and gain a brand new self-awareness.

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