

Spiritualism in Raymond Carver's Work

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Abstract

Raymond Carver's work provides the opportunity for a spiritual reading. The article that offers the greatest insight into spirituality is William Stull's "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver." ¹ In it we can notice the darkness which is dominant in Carver's early works with the optimism that is an essential part of Carver's work "Cathedral". A careful reading of "A Small Good Thing" and "The Bath" can give the idea that they are based on the allegory of spiritual rebirth which can be interpreted as a "symbol of Resurrection". Despite Stull's insisting in Carver's stories allusions based on the Bible, it cannot be proved that the writer has made use of Christian imagery. Therefore, it can be concluded that spirituality in Carver's work is one of the most confusing topics so far in the literary world because on one hand literary critics find a lot of biblical elements and on the other hand Carver himself refuses to be analyzed as a Christian writer.

Keywords: spiritualism, allegory, rebirth, Christian imagery, darkness.

1. Spiritualism in Cathedral

The spirituality in Raymond Carver cannot be defined very easily as it is not based on any specific religion or doctrine. If we take into consideration one of the best works of Raymond Carver "Cathedral" the spiritual characteristics become clear especially by focusing on the concept of God but not in the traditional sense but on the way Carver understood God. For example, in the story, a blind man who happened to be an old friend of the narrator's wife comes to pay a visit, the narrator confronts his prejudices regarding blindness. "He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eyed dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I was looking forward to".²

In fact, the narrator is an aloof person, somebody who has no friends and who has broken up all the connection with his wife and probably with the whole world. Strange as it may seem, the narrator depends on the blind man whose vision can go much further than expected. One evening, the narrator and the blind man are watching a program about the church and the Middle Ages. In a particular moment, the blind man leans toward the TV screen in order to hear it better since he cannot see what is going on. He listens to the presenter who describes cathedrals and their symbolism. At this time the narrator understands that the communication between the two is not working. Then, the questions that continue reveal the truth. "Do you have any idea what a cathedral is? As it can be imagined the blind man does not know that because he has never seen one before. Moreover, the narrator cannot describe in words what a cathedral is like something that could be really easy for people who see. Since he fails to find the right words he just says that: "in those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be closer to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone's life."³ The blind man's following questions say a lot about the philosophy behind the story: "Hey, listen. I hope you don't mind me asking you. Can I ask you something? Let me ask you a simple question, yes or no. I'm just curious and there's no offense. You're my host. But let me ask if you are in any way religious? You don't mind me asking?" I shook my head. He couldn't see that, though. A wink is the same as a nod to a blind man. 'I guess I don't believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it's hard. You know what I'm saying?' "Sure, I do," he said. 'Right,' I said".⁴

¹ Stull, William L. "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver." *Philological Quarterly* 64 (1985): 1-15.

² Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

³ Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

⁴ Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

2. Silence as an Important Element of Spiritualism

By focusing on this dialogue one can definitely notice a kind of silence that is frequently broken. This should not be interpreted as a technique used by Carver rather than as a spiritual element. According to Martin Buber: "It is not necessary for all who are joined in a genuine dialogue to actually speak; those who keep silent can on occasion be especially important. . . . No one, of course, can know in advance what it is that he has to say; genuine dialogue cannot be arranged beforehand. It has indeed its basic order in itself from the beginning, but nothing can be determined, the course is of the spirit, and some discover what they have to say only when they catch the call of the spirit".¹

Again, there is silence between the two of them but it does not last for a long time because the narrator feels that he has to clarify his ideas and therefore adds: "The truth is, cathedrals don't mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They're something to look at on late-night TV. That's all they are. It was then that the blind man cleared his throat. The blind man begins directing the narrator to gather up some heavy paper and a pen. After they clear a space to draw, the blind man closes his hand over the narrator's and politely orders, "Go ahead, bub, draw . . .

Draw. You'll see. I'll follow along with you. It'll be okay. Just begin now like I'm telling you. You'll see. Draw".²

The fact that the blind man uses the word "see" twice is really ironical. The blind man cannot see. "You'll see"³ in the given context means that he will see how things work. Despite this, the final part of the story tells us that though the narrator does not believe in cathedrals or religion or God near the end he starts seeing something. He does what he is told to do, he draws. This continues even after the program was finished. The blind man continues to instruct the narrator that does what he is told without questioning, just like an obedient student. The dialogue continues like this: "Put some people in there now. What's a cathedral without people? . . . Close your eyes now"⁴ At this moment he sees something he cannot define. The story continues:

So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now. Then [the blind man said] 'I think that's it. I think you got it,' he said 'Take a look. What do you think? But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do. 'Well?' he said. 'Are you looking?' My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything. 'It's really something,' I said.

The narrator remains silent, with his eyes closed claiming that he sees something without being able to define it. It can be interpreted that this "something" that is repeated so frequently can be a "supreme force" and therefore it can be concluded that here there is another moment of elements of spirituality. This can take us to an early moment in the story. When the narrator was asked if he had any religious conviction or if he believed in anything, he replied that he didn't believe in anything. However, towards the end the narrator admits that he really can see something.

The narrator, while trying to draw the cathedral actually draws a box which can be interpreted as the symbol of an icon. It encourages reflection and meditating since it bears the qualities of an icon. And this "something" illustrates a spiritual reality. This idea is further developed if we take into consideration the way characters are treated. In certain cases it looks like Carver is judging his characters. However, due to Carver's tendency to revise his characters they have continuously developed.

3. Other Elements of Spiritualism

¹Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage, 1989

²Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage, 1989

³Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage, 1989

⁴Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage, 1989, pg.(227-228)

Language has a certain spirituality which is not an excess but it is a way to introduce the reader to a new world, a world that passes all the limits of our real world. This is obvious especially in "The Cathedral" in which the narrator for some moments is placed in another world

Carver has written "Meditation on a Line from Saint Teresa" in 1988 which is the last published work he left to the world. It starts with a quote by Saint Teresa: "Words lead to deeds.... They prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness"¹. Not only does Carver make a comment about the great truth of the quotation but he also states that unfortunately these words will not have any significance to the young generation who do not consider words as bearing any particular meaning. He is able to admit that the words "tenderness" and "soul" have a tremendous effect on him. According to Carver: "There is something more than a little mysterious, not to say – forgive me – even mystical about these particular words and the way Saint Teresa used them, with full weight and belief". Then, he provides a concluding passage that gives the impression of a benediction that reminds the one of Apostle Paul's charge to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling":

"Long after what I've said has passed from your minds, whether it be weeks or months, and all that remains is the sensation of having attended a large public occasion. . . try then, as you work out your individual destinies, to remember that words, the right and true words, can have the power of deeds. Remember too, that little-used word that has just about dropped out of public and private usage: tenderness. It can't hurt. And that other word: soul – call it spirit if you want, if it makes it any easier to claim the territory. Don't forget that either. Pay attention to the spirit of your words, your deeds. That's preparation enough. No more words." The power of words in Carver's works is profound and based on Geoffery Wolff: "that Ray believed in the power of language, it was so sacred to him, that he understood, as few people understand, that words are loaded pistols. Sometimes to say something, to name it, is to enact it. So there were certain words he would not say".

Since the language has such a mystical power it can be concluded that Carver's spirituality depends more on symbols rather than words. The majority of these symbols are related to nature and this leads the author as well as all his characters in a state of transcendence. According to Tess Gallagher *rivers* in Carver's short stories have lost the meaning that the word in itself has and has acquired a new one which is very spiritual as Carver perceives them as "*places of recognition and healing*". For instance, in "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" water is presented as a healing power:

"the persistent use of meditation and prayer . . . did open the channel so that where there had been a trickle, there now was a river which led to sure power and safe guidance from God as we were increasingly better able to understand Him". Another meaningful example can be found in "*Where Water Comes Together With Other Water*" in which Carver pays special attention to the water of the springs, creeks, rivers and seas: "*The places where water comes together / with other water. Those places stand out in my mind like holy places.*" For Carver, the river is "like" a holy place. Though it is a poem and not a short story it captures the idea of the author perfectly.

The water becomes a guiding symbol for Carver's characters. This is especially obvious in the story "Kindling" in which a nearby river is more than mentioned. The character, Myers is a man whose existence is becoming a futile one and a man who desperately needs to be inspired and brought back to life again. At this particular moment *The Little Quilcene River* which "*rushes down through the valley, shoots under the highway bridge, rushes another hundred yards over sand and sharp rocks, and pours into the ocean*"² There is something mystic about that river and this becomes obvious when it speaks to Myers. If we recall a moment from the story, we will understand that the river has a spiritual value. At the very beginning of the story Myers rents a room in the town. While the owners are showing the room to him he hears the sound

¹ No Heroics, Please, Uncollected Writings: New York, Vintage Contemporaries

² Carver, Raymond. Call Me if You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose. William L. Stull, ed. New York: Random House, 2001.

of the water. "Was it his imagination, or did he hear a stream or a river?"¹ Being not so eloquent he just says "I hear water"² The owner answers that the sound comes from the Little Quilcene River but Myers remains silent. Later on he pays full attention to that sound.

"He opened the window all the way and heard the sound of the river as it raced through the valley on its way to the ocean".³ Myers shifts the furniture in his room and moves his desk in front of the open window, then stares at a blank page and writes: "Emptiness is the beginning of all things." Cursing his own foolishness, he turns out the light and stands in darkness – listening to the river's purposeful movement. It is a purpose that he needs. And he finds it in the most unusual place and in the most unusual way. He cuts wood. The owner, Sol teaches Myers how to do it by explaining how to use a saw and everything else. At the end of the day he writes: "I have sawdust in my shirtsleeves tonight . . . It's a sweet smell".⁴ That night he couldn't sleep and at one particular moment he hears the sound of the water and jumps out of bed. "When he raised the window the sweet, cool air poured in, and farther off he could hear the river coursing down the valley"⁵. Here, water is not a symbol used alone but in combination with the wind, which is a renowned symbol of spirit it can be concluded for a certain kind of spirituality. It is spirituality because it surpasses the limits of this world. It is something related to nature while the cool air pours in he feels that he is being healed. He writes about the recovery: "The country I'm in is very exotic. It reminds me of someplace I've read about but never traveled to before now. Outside my window I can hear a river . . ."

At this point, Myers experienced something that is indirectly related to transcendence. He admits that he feels as if in an "exotic" place, a kind of Eden, a Paradise. Just like people who have read the Bible and know about the existence of the Paradise but have never experienced it, Myers has read about this place, even about the river but never seeing it until then. This is the reason he stays another night in such a place, not because he is in need of it but simply because it feels so good to be there.

Conclusions

Carver has paid certain attention to spiritual elements which are worth an analysis. However, spiritualism in his work is not so evident. It is rather hidden in his stories, rather implied than stated. However, the opportunity for a spiritual reading is there. One needs to focus on stories such as "Cathedral", "A Small Good Thing" which are based on the allegory of spiritual rebirth in order to fully understand them. Several critics have noted that in Carver's stories, the allusions are based on the Bible. Despite these claims, it is really difficult to prove that he has made use of Christian imagery.

What makes Carver's spiritualism difficult to be defined is that it is not based on any religion or doctrine. For instance, in one of his best works "Cathedral" God is present. In it, the narrator says: "In those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be closer to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone's life." However, God is described as a power, a feeling and sometimes even a sensation. It appears as a revelation to the most non-religious character, who still can't define it but feels it all over his being though incapable of naming the source. In fact, instead of God, the word "something" is used with all its indefiniteness.

¹Carver, Raymond. Call Me if You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose. William L. Stull, ed. New York: Random House, 2001.

²Carver, Raymond. Call Me if You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose. William L. Stull, ed. New York: Random House, 2001.

³Carver, Raymond. Call Me if You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose. William L. Stull, ed. New York: Random House, 2001.

⁴ Carver, Raymond. Call Me if You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose. William L. Stull, ed. New York: Random House, 2001.

⁵ Carver, Raymond. Call Me if You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose. William L. Stull, ed. New York: Random House, 2001.

Silence is one important spiritual element in Carver's works. It is frequently broken as in dialogues quite unexpectedly the characters decide not to speak and this silence at cases is more important than words. During those moments, the characters try to look inside their souls and discover who they really are and to find out what connects them with a divine source as well.

Language is the other significant spiritual element in Carver's work. The spirituality in the language is not farfetched but it is a way but it is a way to introduce the reader to a new world, a world that is different from the one we live in. According to Carver, "*Words lead to deeds... they prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness. Unfortunately, these words have no importance at all to the young generation who don't even consider words as bearing any particular meaning.*" However, in Carver, the power of words is so profound because the writer believed that language is sacred and that words are loaded pistols.

Since language is so important in Carver's works it can be concluded that Carver's spirituality depends on symbols rather than words. The majority of these symbols are related to nature, therefore leading to a state of transcendence. For instance, rivers in Carver's short stories have lost the meaning the word itself has acquired a new spiritual one since Carver perceives them as "*places of recognition and healing*". The water becomes a guiding symbol for Carver's characters. However, it is very rarely used alone. It is usually combined with other meaningful symbols that create the harmony that accompanies Carver's work.

In "A Small, Good Thing" can be noticed the presence of spiritualism which is very different from the one defined by other religious people. Even though Carver might have never aimed to be somebody who tries to influence his readers positively, his work actually conveys a message of hope. Therefore, Carver can be seen as a humanist more than a religious writer.

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