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Raymond Carver and the Architecture of Emotion

Raymond Carver's short stories are often discussed, under the limited banner of dirty realism or minimalism, as verbal portraits of working class, working poor, hardly working characters who hover in or around the fringe of "Hopelessville," the same place "beyond" the middleclass marker of literate readers who see Carver's characters, and their tales, as representative of the culture of the poor(er) others who live, figuratively, "on the wrong side of the tracks" from those same readers. Such a perception is "logical," for "[i]t is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond"[1] writes Homi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture. Yet, in the idea of a beyond, it is implicit that here, where we stand as readers and writers, is oppositional to there, that place beyond, which Carver's characters inhabit as they act to claim their "identity in the modern world."[2] Logic constructs such binaries, based upon cultural differences—here/there, us/other, middleclass/working poor—yet the easy lure to construct simple binaries undercuts clear thinking since rigid polarities merely frame, rather than augment any discussion.

promising, metaphoric spatial designations may help to illuminate cultural identities present in Carver's work.

The use of architecture as a means of expressing intimacy, secrecy, and the private life goes back to the traditions of Renaissance poetry, for "architectural metaphors were essential for delineating a private sphere since the Renaissance did not have another vocabulary available...for depicting the inner self."[7] The architectural metaphors, however, were more often drawn from the sumptuous palaces of the nobility rather than the small dwelling places of guildsmen, tradesmen, and farmers, largely because literacy was characteristic, at least at first, of the nobles and their world. Interestingly, the nouveaux riches began to decorate their emotional and intellectual view of the world with architectural references which they appropriated from the ruling class. As a result, cultural critic Jean Baudrillard concludes:

> It is in the Renaissance that the false is born along with the natural. From the fake shirt in front to the use of the fork as artificial prosthesis, to the stucco interiors and the great baroque theatrical machinery. … Theater is the form which takes on the social life and all of architecture from the Renaissance on. It's there, in the prowess of stucco and baroque art, that you read the metaphysic of the counterfeit and the new ambitions of Renaissance man—those of a worldly demiurge, a transubstantiation of all of nature into a unique substance, theatrical like social life unified under the sign of bourgeois values, beyond all differences in blood, rank, or of caste.[8]

What is false, then—or inconsistent, inappropriate, if one prefers—is the use of architectural metaphors for emotions that are inconsistent with one's social standing or cultural identity

business travel that includes spouses, as we see the Stones doing. All of this offers the Millers the appearance of a “fuller and brighter life” without the attendant support for such an assumption. What is evident is the Millers’ envy of the Stones’ lifestyle, evident in Bill’s comment to Arlene, as the Stones drive away, that “I wish it was us” (87).

The envy becomes manifest when Bill crosses the hallway, physically to the Stones’ apartment and metaphorically to the other side of the fence where the grass, like envy, is greener. When Bill takes “a deep breath,” it is as if he is diving in to Jim Stone’s life, an enchanting, Eden-like exotic world where “the air was already heavy and … laughter sweeter” (87). During his visits, Bill eats their food, trian divind ur-s977 Tc 0 Td (w Td)-12(”

worker, bourgeois to proletarian, patriarch to woman, colonizer to colonized. Moreover, her means of address is not unexpected, for as Franz Fanon observed,

> The colonist and the colonized are old acquaintances. And consequently, the colonist is right when he says he "knows" them. It is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject. The colonist derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system.[19]

Duane's new economic status, as a white male in California, configures him as a colonist by a system which both validates and empowers him; through that lens, in his assumption of the Mexican maid's cultural identity, he fabricates a counter-identity for himself, one that parodies the literary figures of the nobility in eighteenth-century English novels who viewed their right to have sexual relations with the maid as entitlements of the position in the social hierarchy.

Moreover, Duane, in his economic ascendance both to and ahead of man behind and to manager/boss, can see from the higher rung only the view that is so limited that Duane reports, "I can't really say I'd noticed the little things about her, though we spoke when we saw each other." In that instance of nebu30.6 .3 Td [(-2.3 T(one)4(i))4(l)4t2]TJ 0 TcTe4(t)

on the social life," so that in effect, Holly further locates her identity between performance and stasis as she "just sits there on the bed with her glass". (146)

In reality, Holly is positioned between staying at the hotel with Duane in a state of emotional indignity that is "hurtful" (142), where love is "dead" and "everything is dirt" (141) and her dream of dignity that she associates with an old house they had stopped at years ago:th Du-29.69T-1.15rgc3 0 Td [(,")4P <</M

Readers are left to assume that, like the cat, Holly and Duane, one after the other, begin their difficult transition from their specific situation toward opportunities for transforming their identities Duane's false action—transgressing the boundaries of his marriage to Holly—

[1] Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., 2.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 4.
[7] Wendy Wall, quoted in Kleppe, "Raymond Carver's Poet-Voyeur as Involved Spectator," Sandra Lee Kleppe, Unpublished essay, in Sandra Lee Kleppe and Robert Miltner, eds., New Paths to Raymond Carver: Essays on His Life, Fiction, and Poetry (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, forthcoming 2008), 12.
[8] Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 87.
[9] Raymond Carver, Where I'm Calling From (New York: Vintage, 1988), 86.
[10] Raymond Carver, "On 'Neighbors,'" No Heroics, Please (New York: Vintage, 1992), 103.
[11] Baudrillard, 85.
[12] Bhabha, 4.
[13] Charles E. May, "Why Short Stories Are Essential and Why They Are Seldom Read" in Per Winther, Jakob Lother, and Hans H. Skei, eds., The Art of Brevity (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 12.
[14] Boxer and Phillips quoted in Kirk Nesset, The Stories of Raymond Carver (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), 18.
[15] May, 22.
[16] Bhabha, 4.
[17] Carver, Raymond, Carver Country (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 73.
[18] Bhabha, 41.
[19] Franz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 2.
[20] Carver, Carver Country 109.
[21] Arthur M. Saltzman, Understanding Raymond Carver (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 108.
[22] Baudrillard, 4.
[23] Ibid., 12.
[24] Bhabha, 5
[25] May, 23.
[26] Quoted in May, 15.