

УДК 82.091

Raymond Carver as “The American Chekhov”

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Received 10.01.2017, received in revised form 18.12.2017, accepted 09.01.2018

Raymond Carver was first called “the American Chekhov” in the late 20th century, and since then discovering affinities between Chekhov and Carver has become an important aspect in Russian-American comparative studies. However, though several scholars drew general parallels between their realistic narrative methods, text-focused analyses are less frequent. The present paper compares six thematically parallel short stories to reveal similarities and differences in their poetics. It also emphasizes Carver’s last short story, his open tribute to Chekhov, as the epitome of the American author’s impressionistic realism. Like Chekhov, he strove to portray accurately the colors, sounds, smells, and laconically create the narrative atmosphere, both in his short stories and in poems. This gift, alongside with the sincere, non-sentimental sympathy towards his characters, makes Carver’s honorary title ring true.

Keywords: Chekhov, Carver, impressionism, minimalism, realism, neorealism.

DOI: 10.17516/1997-1370-0201.

Research area: philology.

Introduction

Since the early 20th century, it has become a tradition in many literatures to award a master of short fiction with the title of national Chekhov. In the 1920s, Katherine Mansfield was often called “English Chekhov”, and James Joyce was sometimes referred to as “Irish Chekhov”. Almost a century later, the press congratulated the 2013 Nobel laureate in Literature Alice Munro as “the Chekhov of Canada”. Sherwood Anderson was one of the first among many “American Chekhovs” of the 20th century, but

since Peter Kemp’s obituary in *The Sunday Times* (Kemp, 1988: 1), “the American Chekhov” has become a commonly accepted title of Raymond Carver. Carver often acknowledged his affinity with the Russian author, and several scholars have drawn general parallels between their narrative methods (Boddy, 1992; Kelly, 1996; Zverev, 1992). However, examples of text-focused analysis are less frequent (Amir, 2010; Clark, 2012, 2014), so the present paper attempts to add to this important aspect of Russian-American comparative studies.

From Chekhov's Impressionism to Carver's Impressionistic Minimalism

From the onset, the comparison of Chekhov and Carver strikes with similarity, starting with their life frames: they were both born into low-class families and died quite young (with the age difference of six years) of a lung disease. Both authors began writing short stories out of need for immediate income to support their families and then discovered this genre to be the most appropriate medium to tell of ordinary people and their drama of the quotidian. However, for the literary perspective, their rootedness in kindred artistic movements is more important.

The infamous over-editing of Gordon Lish (see, for example, Kovarik, 2010) made Raymond Carver "hyper"-minimalist, whereas the initial, longer and more poetic, versions of his stories show more clearly a legacy of his life-long admiration of Chekhov: that of literary impressionism. This aspect begins to attract scholarly attention: for example, Robert C. Clark compares Chekhov's "The Grasshopper" and Carver's "Cathedral" as stories of "perceptual and epistemic limitation" in estranged married couples (Clark, 2012: 111-112). Ayala Amir focuses on a visual element of framing that constitutes a shell/case motif in Chekhov's "A Man in a Case" and Carver's "Careful", as well as in some other stories (Amir, 2010: 110-140).

The shell theme is central to Chekhov's work, as all his scholars acknowledge, and seems to be equally important for Carver. One of the manifestations of this theme is the burden of communication, as denounced by Ivan Ivanovitch, the listener to "the man in a case" story: "And our spending our whole lives among trivial, fussy men and silly, idle women, our talking and our listening to all sorts of nonsense – isn't that a case for us too?" (Chekhov, 1999). This brief article discusses Chekhov's and Carver's impressionistic

depiction of (mis)communication in three groups of stories joined by the following themes: the death of a child ("Enemies" vs. "A Small Good Thing"), the mystery of love ("About Love" vs. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love"), and the fragility of life ("Champagne" vs. "Careful" and "Errand").

Robert C. Clark traces the roots of American minimalism to literary impressionism and imagism (tellingly, he calls a chapter on Carver's most famous story "Cathedral" a "Chekhov-Hemingway amalgamation"), and quotes Hamlin Garland's conception as the crucial definition of the new movement: "The fundamental idea of the impressionists, as I understand it, is that a picture should be a unified impression. It should not be a mosaic, but a complete and of course momentary concept of the sense of sight. It should not deal with the concepts of other senses (as touch), nor with judgments; it should be the stayed and reproduced effect of single section of the world of color upon the eye. It should not be a number of pictures enclosed in one frame, but a single idea impossible of subdivision without loss" (Clark, 2012: 106). This passage clearly emphasizes the unity, immediacy, visuality, and authorial objectivity of representation as the main principles of impressionism. The subjective should belong to the character, not the author. Garland formulated his concept in 1893, and a few years later Arthur Symons, discussing impressionism and symbolism as the two main branches of decadence, similarly defined the ideal of the first movement as a strive "to fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul" (Symons, 1896).

Alexander Chudakov believes that Dmitry Merezhkovsky was the first to call Chekhov an impressionist in his lecture of 1892, and notes that year Chekhov wrote "The Grasshopper", the only story where he mentioned new French

painting (Chudakov, 1983: 221). In the 20th century, numerous works were devoted to impressionism in Chekhov. Peter H. Stowell in his book-length study relates to impressionism the dreamlike nature of Chekhov's world and, as Todd K. Bender notes in his review, "suggests a framework which may prove useful for analyzing in greater detail in future studies" (Roth, 1998: 640). Kerry McSweeney uses Carver's impressionistic metaphor of a glimpse (he, in turn, was developing V.S. Pritchett's image) to discuss the evolution of the short story and emphasizes that both Chekhov's and Carver's pieces "have more in common with lyric poems than with novels" (McSweeney, 2007: 2).

One of the features of literary impressionism is the process of a trivial object becoming the focus of a character's intense emotional perception and eventually a symbolic detail. Such symbolic details organize many of Chekhov's and Carver's stories, including those of grieving parents who are forced into communication with unsympathetic strangers immediately after their sons' deaths. In Chekhov's "Enemies", doctor Kirilov responds to pleas of rich landowner Abogin to treat his wife, and on arrival they discover she had simulated a heart attack to escape with Abogin's friend. Kirilov believes it is a rich man's cruel trick on him, and two objects in Abogin's room add to his feeling of a farcical show he has to witness: the violoncello case (mentioned twice and perhaps not containing the instrument) and a "stuffed wolf as substantial and sleek-looking as Abogin himself". Both objects are covers, or shells, devoid of content.

Two more shells that accentuate the two characters' different paths in life are the vehicles they are going to use to leave Abogin's house: the landowner orders his servants to bring the victoria round for the doctor and the closed carriage for himself. The men wait for those in silence, full of hatred and anger, and the narrator comments that

for Kirilov his "conviction, unjust and unworthy of the human heart, will not pass, but will remain in the doctor's mind to the grave." Chekhov characters' total failure in communication occurs partly due to their class differences and partly to his belief that "unhappiness does not bring people together but draws them apart, and even where one would fancy people should be united by the similarity of their sorrow, far more injustice and cruelty is generated than in comparatively placid surroundings" (Chekhov, 1999).

Carver both confirms and contests this statement in "A Small Good Thing". In this story, parents lose their son a day after his birthday, and the baker, angry about the uncalled-for cake, molests them with unnerving phone calls. He does not express his complaint directly, but keeps repeating the question "Have you forgotten about Scotty?" and hangs up. For distressed parents this question does sound like the cruelest possible trick, and when it dawns on the wife who the caller is, they rush to the bakery almost ready for murder. When the truth is revealed, the baker apologizes sincerely and tries to explain himself, "You got to understand what it comes down to is I don't know how to act" (Carver, 1995: 331). Finally, he breaks his bread for them in an almost biblical gesture and tells of his loneliness and childlessness, and "although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say" (Carver, 1995: 332). As Michael Wm. Gearhart remarked, they listened letting the baker "use the language in a cathartic sense" (Gearhart, 1989: 445). In the end, they all felt "it was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light" (Carver, 1995: 332). This sad but beautiful story gives hope and affirms the possibility of human understanding even in sorrow.

The metaphor of light is powerful both in Chekhov and in Carver and is very important for their famous stories on the mystery of love ("About Love" and "What We Talk About When

We Talk About Love"). Both texts start with tales about violent passions some people take for love. Chekhov's narrator Alehin tells his guests of his cook Nikanor, the "ugly snout", who beats "the beautiful Pelagea" for not wanting to marry him. It makes Alehin and everybody else wonder why Pelagea loves this rude drunkard and lives with him "in sin". In Carver's story, one of the hosts, the wife, tells her guests in annoying detail about her first husband's jealous attempts to kill her, which led to his own suicide. Both authors implicitly express a regret towards women who seem to enjoy the cruel passions they evoke and thus put themselves (and others) in danger. But the core of both narratives are the stories of true love. Alehin tells of his own deep feeling to a married woman, of their hesitation to change their lives and belated realization of their irrevocable mistake. Carver's character, Mel, tells of an old couple, who suffered terrible injuries in a car accident and were both in casts and bandages, but the husband was depressed only because, as Mel puts it, "he couldn't turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife" (Carver, 1995: 149, emphasis in the original).

Although Mel often sounds rude and even menacing in remarks to his wife, and heavy drinking of all four characters does not really create a romantic atmosphere, light fills this story and gives it beauty. Sunlight is first mentioned at the very beginning and in the middle it is "like a presence in this room, the spacious light of ease and generosity" (Carver, 1995: 143). Towards the end, "the light was draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from. Yet nobody made a move to get up from the table to turn on the overhead light" (Carver, 1995:149). Finally, the narrator says, "I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark" (Carver, 1995: 150).

The ending is ambiguous, and this heart beating can perhaps be read as the sound of a "menacing biological substrate of love" (McSweeney, 2007: 108). On the other hand, the characters' trance, though partly an alcoholic numbness, is also their overwhelming with strong emotions that naturally required silence and darkness. Chekhov ends his narrative, where the characters listened to an impressive love story, with a brighter stroke, "While Alehin was telling his story, the rain left off and the sun came out". His two guests went out on the balcony and looked at "the garden and the mill-pond, which was shining now in the sunshine like a mirror" (Chekhov, 1999). They felt sorry for Alehin who wasted his life, but the surrounding beauty and the story of deep love filled them with luminous sadness. Both stories show the power of silent communication after emotional astonishment.

Trivial Object as the Epitome of Chekhov's and Carver's Impressionistic Realism

Finally, Chekhov and Carver have stories about the life's fragility, which they embody in the symbol of champagne. Chekhov does so in an eponymous story, where the narrator is stuck in an unhappy marriage and in a dull job at some remote station, his only entertainment being "vile vodka". Amidst this misery, the couple was able to reserve two bottles of Veuve Clicquo for the New Year, and they "were awaiting midnight with some impatience". Unfortunately, the narrator recalls, as "the cork flew up to the ceiling with a bang, my bottle slipped out of my hands and fell on the floor". His wife turns pale and pronounces this incident a "bad omen". The husband calls her a silly woman in his thoughts and leaves for a walk. On returning, he is to meet a guest: his wife's aunt escaped her spouse and came to visit. He immediately recognizes her as a "dissolute creature" and, proving his impression,

she "did not scruple to drain a full glass" of champagne as the second bottle is opened. After that, the narrator rounds up his confession with a brief summary, "Everything went head over heels to the devil <...> It lasted a long while, and swept from the face of the earth my wife and my aunt herself and my strength. From the little station in the steppe it has flung me, as you see, into this dark street" (Chekhov, 1999).

A constant state of drunken insensitivity to the value of life links this nameless character to Lloyd from Carver's "Careful". Lloyd separated with his wife and spends days drinking warm champagne from the bottle. The falsely "festive pop" of the released corks marks his existence, and after wax clogged his ear one morning, he seems to become "a man as a bottle" (Amir, 2010: 109). This detail manifests his unwillingness to listen, so as his wife comes to talk, "they speak 'at' each other and not 'to' each other" (Ravey, 2010: 21). However, unlike Chekhov, who left his protagonist in "the dark street", Carver lets in a beam of hope at the end of his story. Lloyd "lowered his head to peer out the window. Judging from the angle of sunlight, and the shadows that had entered the room, he guessed it was about three o'clock" (Carver, 1995: 223). This observation signals that he is not totally oblivious to the outside world. Also, the darkest hour has not come yet, his wife was able to unclog his ear with warm oil, so there is chance of a more successful communication for this couple.

The champagne cork structures Carver's last, the most complex and most discussed, story, "Errand", which is his final and open tribute to Chekhov. Claudine Verley, in her sophisticated analysis of the story narrative technique, even states that Carver's realism "can be summed up in a champagne cork" and titles her paper accordingly (Verley, 2006: 147). This cork marks the border of reality and surreality in Carver's narrative. It pops out of Chekhov's last bottle

of champagne and remains on the floor noticed only by the nameless bellboy. Then it becomes the focus of his attention as he returns to the room in the morning with flowers, not knowing yet about the death of their famous guest. In contrast to the situation, "bright sunlight flooded through the open windows" (Carver, 1995: 427). At that moment, Olga Knipper starts to explain her errand to the bellboy (maybe even in Russian, since she repeatedly asks if he understands and he does not really indicate his comprehension): he must go to "the most respected mortician in the city" (Carver, 1995: 429). Being an actress and a playwright wife, Olga gives him stage directions: "he should imagine himself as someone moving down the busy sidewalk carrying in his arms a porcelain vase of roses that he had to deliver to an important man". However, through all her monologue, "the young man was thinking of the cork still resting near the toe of his shoe. To retrieve it he would have to bend over, still gripping the vase. He would do this. He leaned over. Without looking down, he reached out and closed it into his hand" (Carver, 1995: 431). The champagne cork, a tangible piece of reality and a symbol of professional duty well performed by a "little man", whom Chekhov and Carver devoted most of their stories, indeed sums up well the narrative of impressionistic realism in the two authors.

Conclusion

In his tribute story to Chekhov discussed above, Carver emphasized that "unlike Tolstoy, Chekhov didn't believe in an afterlife and never had. He didn't believe in anything that couldn't be apprehended by one or more of his five senses" (Carver, 1995: 421). This principle became the basis of the American author's impressionistic realism: it was equally important for him to convey accurately the colors, sounds, smells, feelings and laconically create the narrative

atmosphere, both in his short stories and in poems. Carver also shared Chekhov's sympathy without sentimentality, which is possible when the writer knows the life of his characters very well and not imagines it from some higher point of view.

Besides the focal details often found in their stories, both authors employed the visual power of light and dark to reflect the emotional state of their characters, especially as they

struggle to communicate with each other. Despite the common opinion that Carver's world is predominantly dark, this brief analysis of his four stories shows that even the saddest ones have light in them and are sometimes even lighter, literarily and figuratively, than Chekhov's stories on parallel themes. This focused comparison gives a glimpse into the further possibilities of establishing connections between Chekhov and his 20th century American admirer.

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Реймонд Карвер – «американский Чехов»

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В XX веке во многих литературах стало традицией награждать мастера короткой прозы титулом национального Чехова. С 1920-х годов в англоязычной прозе формируется «чеховская школа», и наиболее значительными ее представителями на раннем этапе считаются Кэтрин Мэнсфилд, Джеймс Джойс и Шервуд Андерсон, которых не раз называли «английским Чеховым», «ирландским Чеховым» и «американским Чеховым» эпохи модернизма. Современным «канадским Чеховым» считается Элис Манро, лауреат Нобелевской премии по литературе 2013 года. По ироническому замечанию Джона Чивера, он оказался в числе по крайней мере десятка писателей США, в разное время удостоенных титула «американского Чехова». Однако в конце XX века этот титул закрепился за Реймондом Карвером (1938–1988), которого так назвал автор некролога в «Санди Таймс» Питер Кемп. Реймонд Карвер неоднократно выражал восхищение Чеховым и воплотил некоторые художественные принципы импрессионистического реализма в своей прозе. В статье эти принципы рассматриваются на примере трех тематических пар рассказов и последнего текста Карвера, «Поручение», его эпитафии Чехову.

Ключевые слова: Чехов, Карвер, импрессионизм, минимализм, реализм, неореализм.

Научная специальность: 10.00.00 – филологические науки.
