

# “Less is More”: Simpleness and Richness in “Why Don’t You Dance”

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**Abstract.** In 1981, the publication of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, a famous collection of short stories by Raymond Carver, saddled him with the term “Minimalist”. Based on former academic achievements on Carver’s minimalist writing, this research analyzed the minimalistic techniques in “Why Don’t You Dance” in order, namely omitted narration, line drawing sketch and repetitive narration and decoded their textual effects and author’s intention. Under minimalistic and detached narration of the story, Carver reveals implicitly the situations of lower working-class lives, expressing deep empathy for those who lost in alcohol, vulgar culture and indifferent humanity.

**Keywords:** Minimalism; “Why Don’t You Dance”; Line Drawing Sketch.

## 1. Introduction

It is acknowledged that most critical written materials about Raymond Carver focus on two observations: He is a minimalist, and he writes about working-class people. Even when the critic is sympathetic enough, this dual categorization tends to stigmatize Carver as a minimalist writer talking about little stories of little people in his little world. In his famous essay “*The Philosophy of Composition*”, Edgar Allan Poe wrote that he wanted an image that would be “an image of mournful and never-ending remembrance”(117). Carver, however, would not be satisfied to merely highlight the haunted and lingered impression on readers. Instead, he is ambitious enough to take a step forwarder to depict a real raven perched on a real statue vividly. Truthfully, Carver was indeed a minimalist by preference and by necessity.

However, the very emergence of Carver’s works attracted fierce critical voices. Within the minimalist short stories, the omission, critics believe, simply went too far. In James Atlas’s critical review on Raymond Carver’s short stories, he proposes “a self-explanatory theme in this respect—in the case of the minimalist story, less is simply less” (97). Enrico Monti also describes the entire atmosphere of this short story as being “so stark, despaired, and thin” (60). Another critic, John W. Aldridge, also doubts that “Less Is a Lot Less” (49). Indeed, he states that, there should be underlying meanings in the narration of minimalists.

Minimalist writers, in their literary creation, abandon traditional narrative style in realistic literature and their stories are spare and clean with omitted and simple narration. They firmly believe that “Less is more” in their writing. However, the earliest minimalist stories, published in the late 1970s, seem to be out of place for it was still a period marked by the return of realism. But as Meyer proposed that, at that time, “the great extravagance of Baroque, the craftsmanship of Gothic and even all types of traditional realism writing are out of style” (24). Indeed, many short stories, at this time, as well as novels, are carried ahead by a spirit of experimentation to depict the deformed world as it really is. While these minimalists, as the successors and rebels, are on the surge of the literary trend with their rebellious attitudes fighting against the traditional European aesthetic mechanism in their new form of minimalistic expression.

Thus, minimalism is born to depict the reality in its new way. It is a “bare” realism, a successor to follow realistic spirit as well as a rebel against it in experimental and minimalistic narration. Among them, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* by Raymond Carver is a good example. Then, in the following analysis, more attention would be paid to the minimalistic techniques as form applied in “Why Don’t You Dance”, the first short story in the collection.

## 2. Simpleness and Fullness in Omitted Narration

As Carver mentioned in *Cathedrals* about his aesthetics that “It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things in precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power in recreating a chaotic, contradictory but real world faithfully.” (50) It also displays his strengths: powers of description and ability to characterize people through what they do and what they say. Then, in the following analysis, the story would be analyzed to reveal the omitted narration in the text, the simpleness and richness created in the story.

For Carver, the focus should be the untouched, unsaid and unknown part which is like the iceberg under the sea. In the “Less” form, minimalist short stories do create “More” in their meaning and lingering effects. And the minimalistic narrative voice shows itself with the same minimalistic style that readers meet in the very first paragraph of this story.

At the very beginning of the story, a man who has never been given a name is placing all his possessions into cartons, which are scattered everywhere in the house. “In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard”, “he considered this as he sipped the whiskey” (Carver 23). Throughout the text, the narrator’s reference on him is also entitled “The man”, “He” and so on. Readers know nothing about his characters, reference, image or even his name. Similarly, “The Boy” and “The Girl” also appear repetitively throughout the passage. Carver breaks the rules of literary writing by using the pronoun “he” to refer to the hero throughout the passage, who has never appeared before, and omits everything about him.

Interestingly still, necessary background information is also omitted and veiled to readers. Thereby, in the minimalistic omission, the story begins abruptly enough with a series of minimalistic actions in an atmosphere of departure. Ironically, everything seems to come to an end at first paragraph of the story. The Man seems like the survivor after some great catastrophes in hopelessness and after that everything comes to great silence, which brings an effect of depressed atmosphere of departure without any vigor and emotion for the whole passage. “Nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side. His side, her side” (23). By now, readers are told nothing but the fact that The Man is going to somewhere and now he is packing up his possessions. They can feel the depression too but might be hard to say what “it” is and why “it” is. “That morning he had cleared out the closets, and except for the three cartons in the living room, all the stuff was out of the house” (24). Then, it becomes probable that there may have been a divorce or separation, likely accompanied by financial difficulties often associated with such circumstances. The man's actions and emotions further emphasize his troubled situation. Therefore, in the less form of simpleness in narration, Carver do means more.

Similarly, the story also tells us nothing more except that the young couple’s shopping in the yard sale and the man’s drink and dance with them. Instead of detailed and delicate description of character’s inner world, Carver actually tells nothing more in the story but only slices of working people’s lives. Similar to the abrupt beginning, the story also ends suddenly with the girl’s attempts to express the indescribable emotions and her final compromises. She feels depressed, and finally ends by saying, “All his things right there in his yard. No lie...oh, my God. Don't laugh...will you look at this shit?” (Carver 30) A strong but rather ambiguous impression is everything that is left for us. In this way, readers are expected to contribute more to textual meaning in a growing way, culminating in a richer knowledge of what is exposed rather than revealed. No two readers would agree on what the story means. If anything, it demonstrates Carver’s talent for characterization through dialogue and action, which was his greatest asset.

Such a minimalistic ending may also, whether purposely or not, free the story and these characters from a strict adherence to the traditional concept of given conclusion and stiff model, like bad people ended in his return or kind couples ended with a happy ending. Instead of being limited in a pattern that can be charted, as it were before, the story is narrated in a way, which is more universally concerned with Every Man and Couple instead of The Man and The Couple in this story.

### 3. Modern Reality Reflection in Line Drawing Sketch

Line Drawing Sketch is originally a painting technique, which demands to abandon colorful depictions but to apply concise lines to catch the spirit of the target. In literary world, similarly, it refers a style of concise writing. Writers usually outline obscure images of characters in refined colloquial tone like a journalist. It stresses minimalistic figurative descriptions instead of piles of florid rhetoric, unadorned sketches instead of imaginative elements of overstatement. It reveals the real life as it is. The simple dictions and sentence patterns take their roles in line drawing sketch employed in the story. The story is composed without any complicated words as far as possible. The detachment of its tone still goes on with the narration. "A potted fern was on the table, along with a box of silverware and a record player, also gifts. The desk was pushed against the garage door. A few utensils were on the desk, along with a wall clock and two framed prints" (Carver 27). Any redundant and delicate adornment for images is omitted. In this regard, the narration and information are clean and concise enough.

At the very beginning of the story, everything is in a great mess. Mattress, sheets, pillows, reading lamps and all kinds of other odds and ends are scattered everywhere. But The Man is portrayed to be undisturbed and indifferent and even continues with his whisky: "He poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite. He considered this as he sipped the whiskey" (Carver 25). Here, nothing more is revealed to readers but the suspicion that his excessive drinking may hint a potential link between his alcoholism and other problems, which could either be the cause or the effect of his struggles. He is drinking whiskey alone and totally indifferent to the amazement and curiosity of his neighbors. What one feels the most terrible seems insignificant for him. He has nothing and he also cares about nothing. "Things worked, no different from how it was when they were inside. Now and then a car slowed and people stared. But no one stopped. It occurred to him that he wouldn't, either" (25). The indifference of the man towards others as well as neighbors' concern toward him is revealed delicately.

Nothing more appears in the story. It was just Carver's practice to go through his stories trying to delete all superfluous words and even a punctuation. He draws readers into the story by forcing them to conceptualize all missing details. In this way, Carver applies the form based upon his minimalistic aesthetics subtlety, the principle of restraint and omission. Concrete objects and trivial actions are inserted into slices of life. In his description of ordinary objects and application of symbolic images, bare truth of humble life of working people is revealed.

What's more, the grammar structure is also simple and straightforward. An abundance of short sentences, along with minimalistic use of rhetorical devices, ensure that the work poses no reading obstacles on its surface at all. Within the framework of the article's grammar structure, readers frequently encounter simple sentences pattern of SVO and SVP, without any redundant rhetorical device.

"You found the recorder. That's good." the man said.

"Would you take forty?" the girl asked.

"I'll take forty," the man replied. (26)

"It's a pretty good TV," the boy said.

"Ask them how much," the girl said. (26)

"It's okay," the man said. "It's my place," he said.

"Let them watch," the girl said.

"That's right," the man said. (26)

And as the story goes on, the minimalistic narration does not change either. It goes further on characters' actions and conversations. The man who is narrated to have lost all hopes now finds solace in observing others, particularly a young couple symbolizing the possibility of a fresh start in life as they gather furniture for their newly rented apartment. Most of time, the story is narrated in the form

of dialogues. Except for the description of the setting of the front yard in the opening paragraph, the rest of the text is almost entirely driven by the protagonists' conversations and physical actions. In the line drawing sketch, no abundant diction and complicated rhetoric is applied to the dialogue between the boy and the girl. It was just brought out abruptly, which definitely would not stir the monotony and stillness of narration.

“It must be a yard sale,” the girl said to the boy.  
This girl and this boy were furnishing a little apartment.  
“Let's see what they want for the bed,” the girl said.  
“And for the TV,” the boy said. (26)

The indifference of human relations with each other in modern society goes on in their dialogues. With the narrator's peaceful storytelling, everything happens in the great silence. However careful readers can still detect the reality more or less. The girl giggled suddenly as she spoke, but stiffened in the next second. The boy laughed too, but for no reason neither.

“Come here. Try this bed.” she said.  
“How is it?” he said. “Try it,” she said.  
He looked around. The house was dark.  
“I feel funny,” he said. “Better see if anybody's home.”  
“Kiss me,” she said. She closed her eyes. She held him.  
He said, “I'll see if anybody's home.”  
But he just sat up and stayed where he was, making believe he was watching the television. (Carver 30)

There is nothing about love in their talks. The passive and motionless communication between the boy and the girl together with their heartless and indifferent physical interaction are described accurately in the minimalistic narration without any redundant information. Instead of sweat interaction between lovers, they ignore requests of each other cruelly.

The deterioration of interpersonal relationships in modern society and the alienation of people from each other are revealed vividly in the text. In this regard, under the veil of simpleness, Carver conveys a sense of unspoken meaninglessness and indifference in reality in his narration of *The man* and *The couple* in his story.

#### 4. Humanistic Concern in Repetitive Narration

“Repetition” is a rhetorical device in literary creation, which is applied to emphasize powerful emotions and render atmosphere. It is also known as the “repetitious narration” proposed by Gérard Genette, which is in fact “a mental construction, an abstraction which eliminates everything that is peculiar to itself, in order to preserve only what it shares with all the others of the same class” (Genette 115). J. Hillis Miller also noted that every novel is “a complex system of repetitions and repetitions within each other, which make up textual structures and determine the complexity of the connection between the text and the outside world” (23). In this regard, these scholars propose to discover deeper meaning under repetitive narration to reveal the theme of literary works. Miller also argues that “repetitive forms can never be analyzed in its isolation from the use of linguistic materials” (23).

In addition to exclusively concise descriptive sentences, Carver also arranges many repetitive images into his stories to reveal the reality of blue-collars' lives beneath the veil and furthermore conveys his sympathy towards them. A glance at the titles of Carver's stories reveals his penchant for finding external minimalistic symbols to illustrate real states in the mundane society and trifle lives in a kind of humanistic concern. Divorce, financial worries, alcoholism and low culture symbols, as substitutes for intimacy or heroism, live long throughout his stories. For example, in “Why Don't You

Dance”, in the description of characters’ indulge in alcohol and repetitive mention of TV, powerful and sympathetic emotion towards working people’s lives is revealed vividly. From the very beginning of the short story, the images of “whisky” come to our eyes. And it is repeated for more than 20 times throughout the story, which is composed of 1600 words or so.

In the description of slices of the man’s life, alcohol is an important element. Throughout the story, he has never been away from it. Carver reveals that alcoholism was a part of working people’s lives and a microcosm of their poor living conditions. In Carver's novels, “alcohol” is not a choice for people to relax and enjoy, but a symbol of confusion, emptiness and helplessness. It is, however, not in Carver's imagination but a true depiction based on his own experience. In his early life, Carver suffered a lot from early marriage, alcoholism, and poor life, which allowed him to depict blue-collar’s life like his own. Carver had been indulged in alcohol for 13 years. In this period, his life is full of suffering and distress. Surely, the previous experiences would leave him indelible marks and became the main source of his writing materials. The very details of The Man's tragedy are never explicitly disclosed. However, attentive readers can easily piece the story together from the subtle clues provided and the authentic slices of working people’s lives, with their indulge in alcohol and struggling existence, can be revealed vividly. Carver talks his regular theme of working-class people’s lives and their troubles, describes alcoholism, separation and indifference among characters in his story.

Television, as another image, appears constantly and repeatedly in Raymond Carver’s short stories. The aesthetic purpose of “television” by Raymond Carver, however, is different from those of mass media culture study and consumerism study. According to him, television is the symbol of blue collar’s life. Television brings more difficulties for them to care about each other, and in the end lead to communicational and social problems. In this story, the couple are looking for needed furniture in the yard sale originally. The boy had a lot of things to buy at first, but as soon as he saw the TV, he chooses to do nothing but to lie down and watch TV. In *Why Don't You Dance*, Carver depicts the importance of television to their lives through the dialogue between the boy and the girl:

“Let's go see how much they're selling that bed for.” The girl says.

“And the television.” The boy says....

The girl picked up a pot, the boy turned on the TV....

The boy sits down on the couch and starts watching TV.

“It's a pretty good TV,” the boy said. (Carver, 30)

In Carver's novels, watching TV is a normal, usual but essential part of blue-collar’s lifestyle. And it has become a unique symbol of the working people and a label to distinguish them from other people. Furthermore, they are even controlled by the TV in loneliness and hopeless alienation. They are always watching TV. If there is a TV on, they can do nothing but watching it, which impedes every communication and progress of them. Here, the fullness of the text meaning expressed in minimalistic narration is revealed in his sympathetic tones and complicated emotions towards working-class people. The process of Carver’s own abstinence is also the course of pursuing hope in despair. Carver suggests in his story that if these people want to develop themselves for better life, they have to escape from the control of alcohol and low culture.

## 5. Conclusion

It is known that most realists in their stories take their focuses on the portrayal of human relationship problems and cruel truth about real life. While Carver’s short stories served as an instance of a simple and detached narration to reflect the more trifle and mundane aspects of everyday life than Realism, ending in an absolute truth of modern reality in their writing. In the skillful and right

use of simple grammar structures, omitted references and detached action descriptions, his stories are still concerned about real situations of common working people.

The Less is definitely The More in Carver's minimalistic writing with its techniques including Line Drawing Sketch, Omitted Narration and Repetitive Narration. The More represents a richness of its effect, the bare truth of working people's humble lives in the poetics of minimalistic writing. The More is created in the form of The Less in minimalistic restraint, its tendency towards reduction and its dependence upon absence for known part of the story. In his narration, he creates an interpretative indeterminacy which asks the readers to make a growing contribution to its meaning, culminating in an awareness of what is revealed, rather than resolved. Regularly, what is not reported in the text, namely the connotative meaning, conveys more emotion than the actual one on the pages. Thus, the unknown part is also The More created in his fictions.

In the capture and transmit of post-modern spirit, Carver applies the necessary understatement to make his stories less sentimental and sensational. It is the essence of his minimalism that reflects the modern reality and the expresses his humanistic concern towards working people. Nonetheless, it also introduces a great level of intricacy in its writing. As such, it represents the notion proposed by T. S. Eliot that "Literature should become more difficult in order to more accurately represent the complexity of the modern world." (Kermode 136) In this regard, Carver's strengths of description are delicately displayed in the detached narrative voice of modern reality as it really is.

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